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The Burning World

Written by Isaac Marion

Published by Vintage

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ISAAC MARION

The Burning World

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Vintage
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Vintage Classics is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK

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First published in Great Britain by Vintage in 2017

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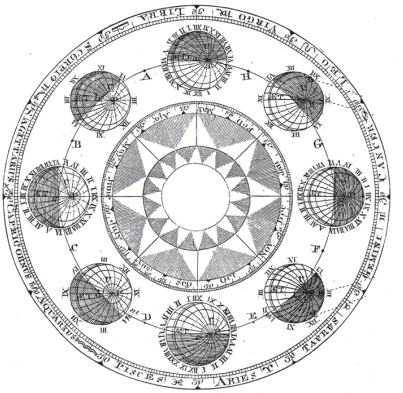
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781784700867

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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WE

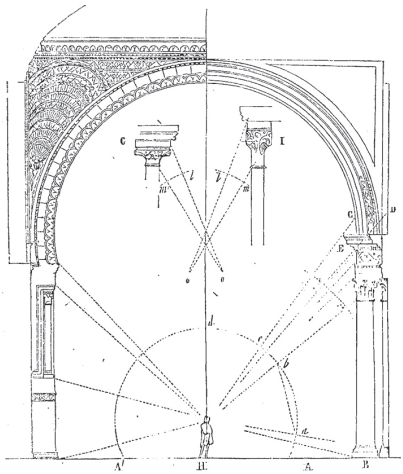
We wait in the rivers and the woods, in the sky and the cities and the sun, but we do not wait patiently. We have been patient too long. We have been told again and again that we can't win, that the best we can hope for is balance, but we will no longer accept this. We feel a new future building beneath us, the magma of possibility pressing against the earth.

We are becoming a mountain.

We will erupt.

ONE

the door



I

My name is R. It's not much of a name, but someone I love gave it to me. Whatever past lives return to me and whatever other names they bring, this is the one that matters. My first life fled without a fight and left nothing behind, so I doubt it was a loss worth mourning. A man I don't remember mixed genes with a woman I can't recall, and I was called to the stage. I stumbled through the curtain, squinting into the blinding light of the birth canal, and after a brief and banal performance, I died.

This is the arc of the average life—unexamined, unremarked, unremarkable—and it should have ended there. In simpler times, life was a one-act play, and when it was over we took our bows and caught our roses and enjoyed any applause we earned, then the

spotlight faded and we shuffled backstage to nibble crackers in the greenroom of eternity.

Things work a little differently now.

Now we duck behind the curtain to find another stage. This one is dusty and cold, thick with cobwebs and reeking of rancid meat, and there is no spotlight, no audience, just a crowd of nameless extras sighing in the dark. I don't know how many years I wandered that stage, performing horrific scenes from a script I couldn't read. What I know is that sixty-seven days ago, I found an exit. I kicked open the door and stumbled out into the daylight of my third life, the one I never expected and certainly didn't deserve, and now here I am, clumsily learning how to live it.

• • •

I lean against the sheet of plywood, pressing it to the wall while I fumble in my pocket for a nail. I pull one out and promptly drop it. I grab another; I drop it. I draw a third nail and with slow, surgical movements, I set it against the wood. Then I drop the hammer.

A few mild expletives bubble in my throat, evaporating before they reach my lips. My body is in no hurry to accept this new life. The hammer is a block of ice in my barely innervated hands; the nails are tiny icicles. My heart beats, my lungs inflate, my blood has bloomed from black to red and rushes through me with desperate urgency, trying to wake my tissues from their long sleep, but I am not a normal man. I am not a tanned and toned youth ready for summer baseball. I am death warmed over.

I pick up the hammer and raise it. *Swing and a miss!* This time a few curses make it through my lips, "damn" and even "shit," nothing especially bold but enough to release some pressure. I clutch my hand, watching the flesh beneath the fingernail darken—one more bruise for my rich tapestry of wounds. The pain is distant. My brain hasn't yet remembered that my body is valuable, and it barely bothers to notify me when I damage it. I am still a tourist

in the land of the Living, snapping pictures of their struggle from my hotel balcony, but I want nothing more than to join them in the dirt. Numbness is a luxury I'm eager to lose.

The plywood slips and falls on my foot. I hear one of my toes crack. I don't even have the energy to swear, I just sink onto the couch with a long sigh and stare through the scorched, splintered rift in the living room wall. We are a new couple and this is our first house; it's a fixer-upper. A little putty will take care of the bullet holes, but grenade damage is an all-day project, and we haven't even started on the bloodstains. At least Security was kind enough to clear out the bodies—the ones with flesh, anyway. We've done our best to dispose of what they left behind, but we still occasionally find bone fragments in the carpet, a few phalanges twitching on the kitchen table, a faintly buzzing cranium glaring from under the bed.

Why are we here? In a world where all anyone dreams of is comfort and safety, why did we choose this haunted house in the middle of a war zone? I know there's a reason we rejected the stadium's thick walls, something lofty and grand and profoundly important, but I find myself drifting back to the simpler explanations, the small, delicate, human concerns that are the soil for this tree.

I lean back into the prickly cushions and remember the first time I sat on this couch. A cold night. A long drive. Julie on the staircase in her soaking-wet clothes, inviting me upstairs.

There are prettier places to live. There are softer and safer places. But this place is ours.

• • •

I hear her coming before I see her. A loud, sputtering roar with occasional backfires that echo through the neighbourhood like gunshots. The old Mercedes was in parade condition when I found it, but it's had a hard life since joining our family. Its engine rattles and coughs up smoke and there is no place on its bright red body that isn't dented, but it keeps running.

Julie cruises into the cul-de-sac and skids to a stop with one wheel on the curb. Her blue plaid shirt is stained with paint, putty, and a few black splotches of zombie blood—I hope it's old and dry, not some fresh setback. She starts to open her door, then she sees the Security team rushing toward her from their van on the curb and she drops her head against the headrest. "God, you guys. This is so unnecessary."

The team manager, whose name I've forgotten again, looms over her, gripping his rifle. "Are you okay? Did you encounter any Dead?"

"I'm fine."

"Rosso ordered you a twenty-four-hour escort. Why do you keep doing this?"

"Because we're trying to remind them they're human, and a bunch of guys pointing guns at them isn't helping. I keep telling Rosy but he—"

"Julie." The soldier leans in, adding more gravity to his question. "Did you encounter any Dead?"

It started with an E . . .

Julie gets out of the car and throws a bag of painting supplies over her shoulder. "Yes, Major, I encountered some Dead. I stopped and talked to them for a minute, they stared at me like lost little kids, I told them to keep fighting and went on my way." She waves at the bullet-riddled bungalow across the street, its door gone, its windows shattered. "Hi, B!"

A groan emanates from the shadows inside.

"I meant hostiles," the major says with strained patience. "'All Dead.'"

"No, sir, I did not encounter any All Dead, Boneys, bandits, or Burners. Your concern is touching, but I'm fine."

He nods to one of his men. "Check the trunk. They hide in trunks sometimes."

Julie gives up, waving him away as she backs toward the door. "You watch too many horror movies, Evan."

There. I rope it down and lock it in my vault before it can escape again. Evan Kenerly. Muscular arms. Pockmarked brown skin. Seems to enjoy pretending he's still in the Army. *Evan*.

"When you're done cavity searching my poor car," Julie adds, "would you mind grabbing those paint cans for me? Oh and watch out for the coffee table in the trunk, it might be hostile."

She turns her back on the soldiers and finally sees me, and her annoyance melts into a smile. I love to watch her transition from their world to ours. It's a change as profound as a spring thaw.

"Hi, R."

"Hi, Julie."

"How's it going in here?" She drops her bag of brushes and rollers and examines the hole in the wall, then turns in a circle, looking for signs of progress. She's been gone all day, combing the neighbourhood for supplies and household items—the whole world is a yard sale—and I've been here, diligently doing nothing.

She looks at my right hand and all its purple fingers. Her smile turns sympathetic. "Still having trouble?"

I crack my knuckles. "Numb."

"Two months ago you didn't even know how to breathe, so I'd say you're doing pretty well."

I shrug.

"Why don't you hold the board and let me handle the fine motor skill?" She wiggles her fingers in front of me. "I'm a famous painter, remember? My work's hanging next to Salvador Dalí's." She picks up the hammer and a handful of nails. I hold the board over the hole while she squints one eye and places a nail.

Julie swears better than anyone I've known. She can draw from a vast vocabulary of filth and weave complex structures of inventive invective, or she can say what she needs to say using only variations of "fuck." She is a poet of profanity, and I suppress an instinct to applaud as she stomps around the room, squeezing her hand and spewing colourful couplets. I also can't help noting the difference in our reactions to the hammered finger experience, and it makes my

smile fade a little. Julie is a floodlight and I am a candle. She blazes. I flicker.

She flings the hammer through the hole and collapses onto the couch. "Fuck this day."

I sit next to her and we stare at the ruined suburbs like the hole in our wall is a television. Cratered streets. Tyre-scarred lawns. Houses caved in or burned to the ground. Opening titles for a very dark sitcom.

The door opens and Evan Kenerly enters, but he offers no quips or catchphrases. He drops the paint cans in the entry and turns to leave, then pauses in the doorway.

"Thank you?" Julie says.

He turns around. "Julie, listen . . ." I can't recall him ever addressing me or even making eye contact. I'm a figment of Julie's imagination. "I know you're trying to make a statement by living out here. You want to show people the plague is over and everything's fine—"

"We've never said that. That's not why we're here."

"Your neighbour 'B' is a flesh-eating corpse. You're sharing this neighbourhood with hundreds of flesh-eating corpses, and you don't even lock your door."

"They don't eat flesh anymore. They're different."

"You don't know what they are. Just because they're . . . confused right now doesn't mean they won't suddenly remember their instincts while you're sleeping." His eyes flick toward me, then back to Julie. "You don't know what they're going to do. You don't know anything."

Julie's face hardens and her spine straightens. "Believe it or not, Evan, you're not the first person to tell us the world is dangerous. We've heard about a million reasons why we should be afraid. What else do you have to offer?"

Kenerly says nothing.

"We know it's not safe out here. We're aware of the risks. We don't. Fucking. Care."

Kenerly shakes his head. The door bangs shut behind him.

Julie's steely posture softens and she sags back into the couch, arms crossed over her chest.

"Well said," I tell her.

She sighs and gazes at the ceiling. "Everyone thinks we're crazy."

"They're right."

I'm just being playful, but her face clouds over. "Do you think we *should* move back?"

"I didn't mean . . ."

"Nora's there. She doesn't seem to mind living in a vault."

"Her job is there. Ours is . . . here."

"But what are we really doing out here? Are we doing anything?"

The contrast between these fragile questions and her rousing rebuttal to Kenerly reveals something I'd hoped wasn't true: I'm not the only one harbouring doubts. I'm not the only one wondering what's next. But the correct response appears on my tongue, and I say it. "We're spreading the cure."

She stands up and paces in a circle, twisting her hair around her finger. "I thought I knew what that meant, but after that mess at the airport . . . and B hasn't improved . . ."

"Julie." I reach out and grab her hand. She stops pacing and looks at me, waiting. "No moving back." I pull her down onto the couch beside me. "Move forward."

I've always been a bad liar. I've never been able to say white when I'm thinking black, but the grey sludge of half truth must be within my range, because Julie smiles and dismisses her anxiety, and the moment is over. She tilts her chin up and closes her eyes. This means she wants me to kiss her. So I kiss her.

She notices the hesitation. "What?"

"Nothing." I kiss her again. Her lips are soft and pink and they know their business. Mine are stiff and pale and have only recently learned what they're for. I press them against hers and move them around, trying to remember how this works as she leans into me with escalating ardour. I love this person. I've loved her since be-

fore we met, years of stolen memories stretching back to our first glance in a crumbling classroom. Julie dug me out of my grave. Being near her is the greatest privilege I've known.

So why am I afraid to touch her?

She pushes harder and kisses deeper, trying to jump-start my passions, and I know I'm supposed to keep my eyes shut but I steal a glance. This close, she's just a blur of pink and yellow, an impressionist painting of a beautiful woman. Then she pulls back to catch her breath, and her face comes into focus. Her short blond hair, choppy and wild like windblown feathers. Her fair skin lined with thin scars. And her eyes—blue again. That impossible golden gleam is gone.

I remember the shock of it as I pulled away from our first kiss in that mystic moment on the stadium roof. An unearthly, inhuman hue, bright yellow like sunlight, a visible confirmation of whatever had happened inside us. We never once spoke of it. It was too strange, too deep, like a truth from a dream that dissolves on contact with words. We kept it inside, but it faded anyway. We watched it go over the course of a few days, standing in front of a mirror together and wondering what it meant. Hers returned to blue; mine shuffled colours for a while before settling on brown. There is very little evidence of whatever magic changed me, and there are days when I'm not sure anything really happened, nights when I expect to wake from this pleasant daydream and see a piece of meat lying next to me, eat it like I eat everything, and wander back into the dark.

I fight the urge to push her off me and run to the basement. There's a dusty bottle of vodka down there that has an extinguishing effect on the wildfire of my thoughts. But it's too late for that. She unbuttons her shirt. I slide it off her shoulders. I listen to her rapid breaths and try to read the emotion in her eyes as I prepare for another attempt to be human.

The phone rings.

Its piercing squeal sucks the lust out of the room like an open

airlock. A ringing phone is not the dismissible annoyance it once was. The phone is an intercom, routed directly into the stadium's command offices, and every call is urgent.

Julie hops off me and runs upstairs, throwing on her shirt as she goes, and I trudge behind her, trying not to feel relieved.

"Julie Cabernet," she says into the bulky receiver by the bed.

I hear Lawrence Rosso's voice on the other end, his words indecipherable but tense. I was supposed to meet him this evening for another of our little chats—he has questions about the Dead and I have even more about the Living—but Julie's darkening expression tells me tonight's tea will go cold.

"What do you mean?" she asks, then listens. "Okay. Yeah. We'll be there." She hangs up and looks at the wall, twisting her hair again.

"What's going on?"

"Not sure," she says. "Traffic."

I raise my eyebrows. "Traffic?"

"'Disconcerting traffic' around Goldman Dome. He's calling a community meeting to talk about it."

"Is that all he said?"

"He didn't want to go into it over the phone."

I hesitate. "Should we be worried?"

She considers this for a moment. "Rosy's not paranoid. When we were on the road he was always the one inviting strangers to share our wine while Dad waved his gun and demanded IDs . . ." She wraps her hair into a tight ringlet, then releases it. "But he *has* gotten a little more protective since . . . what happened." She forces an easy smile. "Maybe 'disconcerting traffic' is just some Goldman kids drag racing the corridor."

She snatches the car keys off the dresser a little too fast and descends the stairs with the tempo of a tap dance. I shouldn't have asked the question. I have plenty of worries inside my own head; I don't need any more from outside.

I glance back at the house as we approach the car and feel an-

other wave of guilty relief to be leaving it. This is my home, but it's also my wrestling ring, the site of all my trials and humiliations as I stumble toward humanity. Whatever is happening in the city, at least it won't be about me.

"I'll drive," I say, crossing in front of her.

She eyes me dubiously. "Are you sure?"

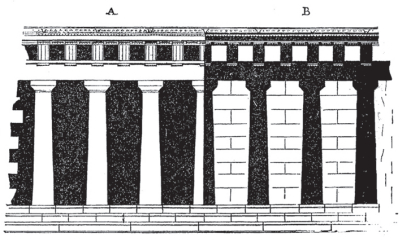
Her reaction is fair—I still have a habit of using other cars for parking brakes—but after this latest disappointment in the bedroom, I feel a need to recover some manhood.

"I'm getting better."

She smiles. "If you say so, road warrior." She tosses me the keys.

I start the car and put it into gear, and after a few jerks and sputters and minor fender benders, I drive us out of the cul-de-sac, ignoring the soldiers' laughter. Embarrassment is just one of the many perils I accepted when I made the choice to live. Living is awkward. Living hurts. Did I ever expect otherwise?

Once upon a time, in a short-and-sweet fairy tale, I might have. I was a child then, a newborn baby piloting a man. But I am rapidly growing up, and the Frank Sinatra fantasies are fading. I do not have the world on a string and Julie is not my funny valentine. We are an asthmatic orphan and a recovering corpse driving a rusty car into a rabid world, and Evan Kenerly was right: we don't know anything.



WE

We feel the currents flowing in the earth. We see the movement beneath the stillness. We watch the people sitting alone in their homes, and we hear the molten rivers in their heads.

A short man sinks deep in his recliner. He has not moved in sixteen days. This would not be unusual if he were simply dead, but he is also Dead, a condition of much greater interest to us. The dead have evaporated and we have breathed them in, but the Dead remain weighty and agentive. To be dead is to be gone from this world. To be Dead is to be marked with death's brand and conscripted into its army, but still *here*, still blessed and cursed with a body, and thus still awash with choice.

When asked his name, the Dead man presses his lips together and produces a percussive stutter. His neighbour, a small Living female, has dubbed him "B." But this is the extent of his interaction with this woman and her pale friend with the baffling scent—the electric sweetness of life with a note of death's smothering null. And under this . . . something else. Something very distant but very large. When B smells this third scent, he feels motion beneath his

feet. He feels a vastness opening up around him. He feels awe and terror, so he stops breathing until his neighbours go away and the scent fades.

Who are these creatures? What do they want? Why aren't they afraid? Do they know the turmoil inside of him? The thousand opposite urges throttling each other in his head? They visit him every few days, tiptoeing into his living room and attempting conversation as he sits in the dark, staring at their reflections in his television screen, trying to understand why he isn't eating them.

He remembers a day when something changed. He felt a shift in the breeze and an interruption in gravity, a cool, clean stream flowing into his dust-crusted soul in the form of a simple question: *Why are you here?* That was the day he stood up from the warm corpse he was chewing and walked out of the airport. He found this house. He sat in this chair. He continues to sit in this chair, thinking but not quite doing. Wanting but not quite taking. Waiting and watching television.

He glances away from the endlessly looping feed of disjointed imagery—a tense football game cuts to a woman in a bikini emerging from a pool, then a sunset and a soothing voice reciting an inspirational quote, then a pulled-pork sandwich—and looks through his open front door as his neighbours drive past in their sputtering junk heap of a car. His eyes don't move when the car is gone. They rest lazily on the grass of his lawn, which is wild and gone to seed, yellowing in the summer sun.

Other eyes watch the Mercedes as it works its way through the neighbourhood and out onto the open highway. B has many neighbours. New ones arrive every day, some from the airport, others from elsewhere, stumbling into town and squinting at streets and houses with traces of recognition, faint remembrances of something lost.

Death's army is large and strong and deals harshly with desert-

ers, but there are rumblings. Uncertain corpses sit in their houses and stand in the streets, thinking, watching, waiting. And they hear a noise in the distance. A low, pulsating drone.

In the blue-brown haze of the eastern sky, three black shapes are growing larger.