



COVENANT

by

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I

The apartment walls seemed too white. Rainbows ejaculated off a stained glass transom window and spelled out her first initial out across my ceiling. She was asleep beside me. Carolyn had become another reason to change. Last night she said, “We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality.” I informed her that quoting Iris Murdoch wouldn’t expedite the chances of getting me naked. A new beast had replaced sex. What I thought I could be is not what I wanted to be after all. She had already packed her bags in spirit.

There was no burning bush. Fuck love or friendship. A short list: there is fear of confrontation fueled by lack of trust in life. I have no career goal. Faith is severely lacking, as are community ties; serving God or obtaining personal growth doesn’t get me hard. When I see those

“*This is your brain on drugs*” ads, I always giggle. When I was a child, I read encyclopedia volumes for the fun of it, high on the overdose of words and images, mainlining knowledge.

With the exception of a few problems, everything is going well......but that’s a safe epitaph in case my heart stopped beating, another casualty of the 12-Step Antichrist. The air beyond my heavy wool covers is a lonely kind of cold, the old stones of the apartment building living on memories. Out of bed but dressed *sans* shower, it’s decided a return to some sort of archetypal truth doesn’t assume its identity should necessarily be accepted. Each morning my inner King is losing more blonde hair to the brush. The Class of 1980 valedictorian opts for sunglasses instead of opening a new bottle of Visine.

All this change doesn’t have to be in pain, but it’s the only feeling left. The crack only numbed me so much, as if my dysfunctional family rocked my soul and cut it up into \$20 pieces to sell to all my enemies. Old dreams fly anyway, usually to crash and burn. Then it’s simply child’s play to smoke the carnage away, one hit at a time. Tomorrow could be my last day, considering the brink I’ve pushed myself to. Maybe being afraid of heights was some kind of portent missed along the way. For too many days in a row I’ve ended up lost without a map. The push of clothes against my body signaled work, like cheap reparations.

I used to fear nothing. Carolyn, all Southern gentility and pinched voice, told me that was just my ignorance hailing a cab. There’s no need to look into a mirror anymore to see my strength crumble before its desire to self-destruct. My dreams tell me so, for insanity slept with failure and begat a winsome child of stupidity. I truly am my own best effort. Wisps of smoke filled my nostrils just moments before leaving for work, a parting shot to the cerebellum that can’t be returned for a spiritual refund.

II

There is a whisper in my brain to be born again at 31. My employer put me on a one-week suspension, so there's plenty of time to come to grips with everything. It shouldn't take much to defeat pain, fear, self-destruction, dishonesty, crime and loss of discipline and come up with a business plan for salvation.

First things first: a three-mile walk in the rain with no umbrella to back up some black hash (mailed to me from an old college buddy in the Bronx) with some white rock (from the Louisville housing projects). One of the voices inside said the raindrops were uninvited tears from God. There is absolutely no need to convince His angels of mercy I'm afraid to live or to explain my pathetic weakness in case asked, as if penance were something on the horizon. There are no intellectually stimulating conversations with crack dealers, just the beaten look in their eyes as they silently beg my eventual return to help them feed their own damning ritual. Life takes funny bounces for everyone, so it's never taken personally.

Sometimes you just wake up and it's one week later...

My father used to tell me "You can't smoke the ashes of a cigarette you didn't choose to enjoy." That made sense, especially on the night before returning to work after the suspension. I don't even think it's the drugs, to be honest. Today is just as good as any to call my last. Tomorrow the plan is to wake early, have breakfast, shower and shave, then go to work, later in the day to bring a cache of stolen merchandise to my drug dealers. Then my punishment will be to accept withdrawal. I fell off to sleep once believing something was true...*tomorrow can be my new beginning.*

III

No call, no show at work, another bank withdrawal, and two trips to the projects after pawning the stereo system. At least three weeks of dirty laundry got done somewhere along the

way. I had to remind myself to thank Carolyn for doing that. If God loved me I'd still have a job tomorrow with the Christmas budget hardly intact but not depleted.

This was truly the bottom, so there's nowhere to go but up. Raped by fear. Tomorrow, my destiny will be on its knees. Twenty jobs in as many years, but that doesn't make me an addict, does it? Right now it's the perfect rush of fear in that if I don't go in I'd just have to find another job; it'd probably be like this one or worse.

Life does favors. I got a call late this afternoon—my employment had been terminated. They saved me the trip downtown. Church and classifieds this Sunday...*sound familiar?* My life is an M.C. Escher print that unraveled the mind and left it searching for a perspective that didn't exist, like trying to make love to an escort. I lost a job at a video store. Carolyn, after three years, picked this—of all times—to announce her departure. It seemed the jewelry her grandmother bequeathed came up missing. Her final act of forgiveness is a demand I sign over the pawn tickets to avoid prosecution. She declined my offer of a final sex act as if she felt violated, like my 35-day treatment center vacation of over a year ago hadn't paid off the way it should have. The job I had before the video store was making \$42K a year as a rookie with The Prudential. It's very likely I was high when I took the securities license examinations, but thankfully held my tongue the night I wanted to propose to her. She never knew I sold the ring to my dealer for less than an ounce of pot.

IV

Well, it's a strange place that I've been living in...

Suffice it to say that's the last argument with my dealer over debt consolidation. There is a bone-tired sense of running out of time; it doesn't bother me to have slept through September 11th in a downtown hotel room. It conjures up images of a better hotel room in Atlanta, standing

naked in front of the mirror and swearing Princess Diana was the wrong one to die that night. All those years ago, at times, seem like the lightning flashes of days gone by.

All of this makes sense, like a fire in the belly sort of epiphany that danced away and left nothing more in its wake than a low-dim fright to be alive.

There are things I can do, people I can call. What this feels like is a moment from childhood, sick with fever and pushing back hallucinations after waking up in the middle of the night. The room was washed in freakish shadows, images of aunts and uncles who I knew more from home movies than the real touch of aged flesh. It felt like I would never survive. All I could do was begin to scream in panic and hear nothing come out.

V

My skeleton was prone on the living room couch as my heart fiercely bounced against my chest. It's debatable my flesh and blood would live through the night. The chance someone in the world could actually pray for me loomed as some twisted hope. It pushed a tear from the corner of my eye.

The last hit calmed me down and gave me an opportunity to realize winter was coming and the heat doesn't get used as much because there is no more unemployment to pay the bill. It's nearly Christmas and I haven't done a day's worth of shopping. I lived alone. It's better than the shelter. My sex life resided in cyberspace at the university computer center. Times swing. NA meetings are better than church, sitting around and trying to figure out if anyone else is showing up high. The coffee is better over in AA. I've decided to return to normal tomorrow and paint the apartment walls a Williamsburg blue. Carolyn would've liked that.