

The Golden Ziggurat

Daeus Lamb

Part 1 - The Ziggurat

As evening came, our guide led us to the Aztec temple ruins, where I remained rooted to the spot for upwards of ten minutes. I envisioned human masses flooding this place of worship, and my ears rang with incantations broken by screams. Here, right where I stood, thousands upon thousands of men and women had been slain as offerings to the bloodthirsty Aztec gods.

Adrian shut the book and tossed it onto the passenger seat. When had Aztec rites started invading his thoughts? He was already late for the cookout and couldn't remember how long he'd been parked along the curb. The extra hours he'd been working must be taking a toll. Time for a break.

He got out, willing his flushed cheeks to cool. The temperature wasn't even that sultry. Not as hot as the blood of sacrifices—

By his foot, a red beetle skittered across the road, its shiny wings marked with black swirls resembling pagan symbols. Heart pounding, Adrian squished the insect and turned to close the car door. He stopped.

The ziggurat on the book's cover seemed to glow, more godlike than the gods worshiped on top of it. Priests and victims swarmed its steps.

Snatching the book, Adrian hid it under his sports jacket and rounded his car.

In Brent's front yard, children played ladder ball beside a political sign while the adults lounged on the deck. The setting sun gave a yellowish cast to the pool where a group of teens were shouting, "Marco! Polo!"

Adrian exhaled deeply and smiled. The sanity of this place chased away his daydreams and sleeplessness.

Brent clanked the lid onto his grill and waved at him. "So, the ol' boy finally shows up, huh?"

Adrian jumped onto the deck to shake hands with his burly friend. "Seriously, I'm sorry I got here so late. Tardiness is just part of my zesty personality."

Brent raised his eyebrows. "You? A zesty personality?" He opened the

grill, forked a bratwurst, and shoved it into Adrian's mouth. "There." He smirked. "See if *that* don't add zest to your personality."

Hot juices with cayenne and other spices zapped Adrian's mouth, causing him to choke. He removed the bratwurst and panted to cool his tongue, but he couldn't contain a chuckle. *Wow, being with friends again is nice. I need to quit being a workaholic.*

As he finished chewing his brat, Brent nodded to Adrian's right. "Drinks that way."

"Thanks." Adrian walked to the cooler and grabbed a bottle at random. As he twisted off the lid and tipped his head back, female voices chattered behind him. He glanced over his shoulder. Was she here? His heart hammered a jerky rhythm, and he wrung his hands around his drink.

No woman with platinum blonde hair and blazing blue eyes illuminated the growing dark. To emerge from his hermitage at last and not see the reason for all his sweat and toil...

Just breathe deeply.

On the deck, a couple he didn't recognize chatted with Brent. Children chased each other, squealing. Their games were unfamiliar to him, their laughter distant. He imagined himself a ghost, watching the party around him but unable to partake.

He sighed. *I might as well finish my book.* Sitting beneath a maple tree, he flipped open the pages.

The book detailed the beliefs behind the Aztec's sacrifices. The gods demanded blood, and without it the consequences could be apocalyptic. To the Aztecs, the offerings were *glorious*, like the ultimate victory of light over darkness. What if he were an Aztec? *Plunge the blade. His life must end that yours may continue...*

"You're the strangest partygoer I've ever seen," Brent boomed.

Adrian clapped the book shut. "Oh! You startled me."

"Studying Aztecs, huh?" Brent folded his arms, revealing a simple rose tattoo on his bicep. "Man, those guys were brutal. I learned all about them on

the history channel. If you ever want some gore, that would be the book to go to." He released a belly laugh that reeked of beer.

Adrian cracked the book open again and tried to locate the paragraph he'd been in the middle of reading.

Brent eased down beside him. "Let me share something, Adrian," he said in a hushed voice. "You've got golden fingers. Like, how much have you made this year?" He held up a hand. "Don't answer that—I'd only be jealous. But, dude"—he leaned in—"you're smart, cool. You'd have everything if it weren't for *one fault*."

Adrian ran through a list of self-perceived imperfections. "Um..."

Brent jabbed a finger at the book. "This party's about people and having fun, not moldy history. People would respect you if you weren't so aloof." He slapped Adrian on the back as he stood. "Go engage in life. Talk to Dallas. Impress Cassy."

Adrian plastered a smile over the jerk in his facial muscles. How had Brent connected him and Cassy? He'd been covert so far. *Maybe that should change. You've waited long enough. You'll never truly be worthy of her.*

Again, his mind split in a million directions, tweaking his life plan. But he pushed the thoughts aside and climbed to his feet. As Brent returned to the grill, he passed Dallas, who sat on the deck railing in his classic baseball cap, belting slightly off-tune to the radio.

Adrian swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth. They'd been best friends for years until Cassy.

"Adrian?" The voice he'd been longing to hear made him suck in a breath. He turned sharply. "H-hi, Cassy."

She opened her mouth as if to speak, but instead smiled shyly. The breeze blew a strand of pale hair into her face, and she swept it back.

Adrian fumbled with his free hand before finally hooking it in his back pocket. "Um...I don't know if anyone's ever told you, but you remind me of a gypsy."

She blinked several times. "Oh...really?"

Why couldn't he give compliments like a normal person instead of blurting whatever nonsense came to mind? "Uh, I meant that there's something almost foreign about you. Like, uh, as in special."

"I haven't seen you in a month." She looked down at her toes peeping through her sandals. The leather straps intertwined with a gold ring in the center.

A gold ring. He needed to buy one of those. "My fault. I've been swamped with work." He laughed tragically.

Cassy raised her head, gazing at him intently. "Will you be this busy forever?"

He wanted to explain why he drove himself so hard, but the words caught in his mouth. "Cassy, I..." He tried to steady his voice. "I think constantly about the future. But sometimes it's so grey. Like a world of giant stone statues where nothing grows. Nothing at all."

How depressing. Why did he say that?

Cassy glanced at the bonfire Brent had started and took a step in that direction, rustling her floral dress.

Adrian couldn't let her leave. Not yet. "Are you staying long?"

"No. I came with my brother, and he has to get up at four tomorrow."

How could he gather his courage in so brief a time? Brent was right. He needed to get serious. "I... I hope we'll meet again soon."

"Yes. Maybe you'll arrive on time then." Though she smiled, moisture glistened in her eyes as she turned. She circled the bonfire and faded into the lengthening shadows.

Without warning, an image of the golden ziggurat, a goddess, and a sacrifice thrust itself at Adrian like a battering ram knocking down a gate. Where had *that* come from? Shaking his head, he lurched toward the fire.

Around the flames, ten adults chatted and roasted marshmallows. When Adrian knelt to pick up a stick to cook his own dessert, a lanky guy named Nick scooted over to him. "Did I hear you're voting for Senator Bartman this year?"

Ugh. Politics. Not now. “Actually, I haven’t made up my mind.” He searched for Cassy while Nick rambled on about why he disapproved of that candidate.

On the outskirts of the fire, Dallas gestured animatedly as if telling a wild tale, and Cassy laughed. He pulled a blackened marshmallow from his stick, handing it to her. She accepted the gooey treat and blew on it before biting in. Such naturalness between them.

Adrian clenched and unclenched his fists.

Nick poked him in the arm. “Well?”

“It’s...shameful,” Adrian muttered.

“Exactly!” Nick smiled broad as a barn. “You’d have to be a fool not to think so. It makes me sick when I hear that people are voting for him.”

With a snort, Adrian threw his stick into the flames and closed his eyes. *Let the image return.* Against a dark skyline, the ziggurat burned like the fire in his chest.

Stop, a voice inside warned him.

Just a little more... he argued.

Nick interrupted Adrian’s concentration with another question, so he excused himself and hurried around the corner of Brent’s house. Clutching his head, he paced beside the hedge. Did Cassy think him unworthy? Wasn’t he accomplished enough? As the golden ziggurat blazed in his mind, it left an impression: *You know what you must do.*

Adrian grimaced. He slunk back to the front yard, clinging to the shadows.

Cassy and her brother were thanking Brent for the invitation and saying goodbye to the other guests. Cassy moved gracefully across the grass toward the line of vehicles, but Adam tripped on the curb.

Adrian followed and stopped short of the streetlights. Surely they’d notice him at any moment. He sidestepped and crouched behind a bush, keeping still.

Adam unlocked his car and held the door open for his sister. “So, you’re twenty now and can make your own decisions, but I’ve gotta ask. Adrian or

Dallas?”

Cassy froze, one leg inside the car and the other out. “I-I...” She gnawed on her lip. “I’m so confused.”

Adam harrumphed and leaned against the door. “Look, I can’t help that you’re confused, but it’s unfair to play games.”

She nodded and lowered herself onto the seat. “Adrian is like no one else I know. When he talks, he makes the world seem like a fairyland, but with Dallas I’m...peaceful.”

Adrian’s heart twisted.

Adam rubbed the back of his neck. “They’re both fine. Maybe you need to look at your choices from a cold, logical perspective. With Dallas—I mean, I like him, but he’s never gone to college, and he strolls through life carelessly. I doubt he’d be able to support you for another year or two. Adrian, though...” Adam chuckled. “He’s crazy. Too rich for his age.”

Cassy fidgeted with her seatbelt. “Dallas says he might get a job soon. I think it pays enough.”

“What job?”

“It’s at a company called Morrison’s Heating and Air.”

“Well, okay. You just can’t wait on him forever.” Adam closed her door and walked around to the driver’s side. A second later, the ignition started and the headlights turned on.

As they drove away, Adrian massaged his forehead. *You just can’t wait on him forever...Dallas says he might get a job soon...I’m so confused.*

Slowly, calmly, he reconstructed the image that had at first petrified him. Enthroned upon the golden ziggurat’s summit sat a goddess of such beauty he quaked. Below, a priest raised an obsidian knife.

And that priest was him.

Part 2 - The Sacrifice

Adrian dragged his heavy eyelids open. The computer screen glared at him, sending pulses of pain through his already aching head. Bending over on his desk, he slipped into momentary rest, and the golden ziggurat arose from the bottomless pit of his dreamscape.

Adrian rubbed his eyes. That image had tormented him too many times since Brent's cookout. The longer he resisted, the larger and brighter it grew.

When would it leave him alone?

He ran his hand over the sketch he'd drawn earlier. A goddess, slim and curved, with burning eyes and a face as smooth and hard as burnished steel. Again he saw himself as a priest, and he worshiped her beyond mere sacrifices. At her command, he would slash his own wrists to give her his blood.

Adrian swallowed. Why was he thinking this way? He slid the sketch beneath a pile of papers.

In his browser, he'd highlighted the number for Morrison's Heating and Air, the company where Dallas had received a promising job offer. An hour ago, the furnace at Adrian's workplace had broken down. It was his responsibility to call a repairman. He'd researched other companies, but, glancing at the goddess, one by one he'd closed the tabs.

Adrian laughed, ending in a groan. Could he really do it?

The clock ticked on.

A scene from the past flitted through his memory. He sat with Dallas in the grass, stuffing a piece of savory pizza in his mouth. Dallas was three ahead of him and winked as he claimed the last slice. They talked about saving up to visit New Zealand and plotted how they would take over the world if they wanted to.

Adrian leaned back and reviewed his three exaggerations and a lie. They could cost Dallas the job, and he knew how to approach the subject naturally.

In the grand scope of things, he and Dallas were equal rivals. With his business connections, he could repay the lost opportunity whenever he wished.

Adrian's stomach roiled and the blood drained from his face. *No, no, no!* He strained like the mythical Atlas against the force urging his hand toward the phone. This was the age of reason, not pagan superstition. The golden ziggurat had no *real* power over him!

He pulled the goddess from the stack of paper, scattering the other sheets across his desk. A tear leaked down his cheek. For years, he'd worked hours and hours to be worth her affection.

He could do one more act for her.

He lifted the phone.

Goodbye, Dallas.

Part 3 - Dallas

The last shreds of a flame-colored sunset tangled with the misty twilight hovering over the world. Dallas clomped up the steps to Adrian's two-storied stone house and banged the door knocker.

He gritted his teeth. Adrian was like a werewolf, transforming and prowling at night when he thought his deeds were hidden.

The door opened and Cassy peeked out. Her blue eyes widened. "Oh, Dallas," she said in a hesitant but still otherworldly lilt. "Nice of you to come."

Dallas stepped back and had to grab the railing to prevent himself from losing his balance. The last time he'd seen her was months ago at Brent's cookout. She was as beautiful and coy as she'd been before her marriage. He reminded himself that he couldn't change what had happened.

"Hello, Cassy." His voice came out husky. "I've come to talk to Adrian."

She blushed and pasted on a thin smile. "Balcony. Second floor." In a wind-like movement, she fled down the hallway and turned left.

Dallas wiped his boots on the mat and entered, closing the door behind him.

Wedding pictures hung along the stairwell. He ran the gauntlet.

After fumbling through a labyrinth of rooms, he found the balcony. Beyond the sliding glass door, Adrian reclined on a wooden love seat atop a ziggurat model. It looked like a movie scene. Fitting. Adrian had always lived the charmed life of a hero.

But, instead of reading the book he held or sipping the drink beside him, he gazed at the horizon like a weary traveler on a road leading him farther and farther from home.

Dallas steeled his face and thrust open the door.

Adrian leapt to his feet. An automatic light flicked on, highlighting his pallor. The ziggurat beneath him gleamed with a faint, sinister light, like a knife in the dark. "Dallas, I..." His voice squeaked. "What do you want?"

Dallas climbed the ziggurat until he stood toe-to-toe with his former friend. He choked out the words as thick as mud, "To forgive you."

Adrian sunk onto the love seat, his mouth agape.

"But it's too late."

Adrian laughed shakily. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, none of that! You thought I'd never find out. Well, guess what a little bird told me?"

Adrian leaned over to look behind him at the ajar door. "You didn't tell Cassy, did you?"

I hate you... Dallas snatched Adrian's collar and hauled him upward. "That would be too good for you! No, I'll let you rot in your guilt. If you were a man, *you'd* tell her. But you can't even face your own goddess." He thrust Adrian back, and he crashed onto the ziggurat in a heap.

Dallas groped his way through the house and prayed to God that he wouldn't run into Cassy. By some unconscious will, his legs carried him to his car. He got in, buried his face in the steering wheel, and closed his eyes, his body numb.

Can't forgive him. Can't forgive him.

The plastic nipped at his cheek. As his breathing slowly steadied, a breeze drifted through his open window, carrying sobs with it.

Dallas crawled across to the passenger side and looked up. On the balcony, Adrian and Cassy wept into each others' arms. Something stirred in Dallas, but his eyes stayed dry. He knew those type of tears. The bitter, relentless type that changed people on the inside and left them feeling better afterward.

Above the house, an owl swooped, hunting to a serenade of sobs. Night had descended, and it would be a long time before the sun replaced the hideous gleam of the ziggurat.

The Diary of Nameless

Daeus Lamb

December 2, 2016

Today I entered life.

It startled me, I admit, and the ladder I stood on swayed. As I gasped, my breath clouded in the cold air. I struggled to keep my balance without dropping the Christmas lights looped over my arm. The bulbs I'd already strung across the roof flashed in a soundless rhythm.

What was I doing here? Did I live at this split-level house with green shutters? Until this moment I'd slept an endless, soulless, ignorant sleep. Occasionally I would sense the author bringing me to life, giving me features and thoughts and aspirations—oh, aspirations! When I had aspirations, I almost believed I was human. But then the author would turn from me, sending my short life into oblivion.

I had heard rumors that the author was planning a new contemporary novel, but who could have guessed that *I* would be picked out of the millions of possible characters?

My facial muscles tingled as if I'd been smiling a moment before, so I spread my lips and decided to continue. Lowering the Christmas lights, I peeked at the surrounding world.

Snow blanketed the lawns of a neighborhood lined with brightly painted houses. Evenly spaced lampposts cast a warm glow that reduced the severity of the cold and the approaching dusk. Footsteps crunched on the sidewalk, and a man with well-groomed blond hair waved at me from next door.

His grin fit the stereotype of an unconquerable youth who is partially naive and partially wise. The details of his clothing indicated that the author had paid special attention in his creation. He wore a fashionable black coat with two rows of buttons and a green-and-scarlet checkered scarf.

He heaved the last scoop of snow out of his driveway, whistling a carol. Every move of his limbs spoke of vitality. Leaning against his shovel, he called to me. "It's a magical evening, isn't it?"

"Y-yes!" I stuttered, not sure what I was saying as I once again processed the fact that I was alive.

He laughed and bid me goodnight. I bid him one too, shivering at the chill breeze that seeped through my jacket. He wasn't a hero, was he? Memories from my brief periods of consciousness niggled at me.

A stray snowflake fell on my sleeve. I studied its intricacies, then blew it

off, shifting my attention back to my neighbor as he reached for the knob to his front door.

My legs wobbled and the scenery became soupy as if melting into a dream. The familiar darkness pressed in on me.

He was the hero! In his shadow, I had my existence. Only while he was looking at me would I see the light of day. But who was I, besides his neighbor? I was finally a character, but what did that mean?

I longed for the day I would be given a name.

December 24, 2016

I am not alone.

Early this morning, soft hair rubbed against my face and warm, small arms wrapped around my neck. As I awoke, I was walking through falling snow toward a minivan with only a lamppost to guide my way.

I stopped and held my girl out in front of me. She blinked groggily, rubbed her pink-tinged nose, and met my gaze with a twinkle in her eyes before drifting off again. She looked about four years old. I didn't even know her name. The girlish cartoon printed on her coat was unfamiliar too, and my heart sank. To grow as a father, I must learn these characters by name so I could talk to her about them. I opened my mouth to speak, but instead I hugged her tightly.

Where was I? I had been so preoccupied with my newfound daughter that I'd failed to get my bearings. As I glanced around, I discovered that the house with the green shutters—presumably my house—was behind me. Up head, one of the minivan's doors slid open and a light switched on inside.

I hesitated. A single step might break the spell and separate me from my daughter. Before I came into being, the author must have considered casting me as the love interest in a romance, for I remembered experiencing overwhelming confusion when I met a girl whose face I could no longer picture. But the emotions hitting me now were three times as powerful.

"Hon?" A woman approached from the other side of the van. She tucked a loose strand of faded gold hair into her updo and squinted at me. Makeup attempted to hide the premature lines in her pretty face and the dark circles under her eyes.

What had caused that strain? Had our relationship been broken? Was she overworked? Did we have financial troubles? She fidgeted under my prolonged stare.

I closed the remaining distance to the van, raised my daughter to kiss her gently on each cheek, and settled her into her car seat. When I turned to face my wife, her eyes widened and she backed away from me. "H-hon, what are you doing?"

"Please," I said, hating myself. I had to fix this. What if I never got another chance?

I reached out to draw her near. Comforting words came to my mind that I

could say.

But my arms passed through vacant air and the darkness of nonexistence overtook me.

The hero—I had forgotten about him—had looked away from me. Was this to be my family life? Scenes with frayed beginnings and ends?

April 13, 2017

My wife has terminal cancer.

I sat alone on my back patio, sipping wine to soothe my nerves. No one had told me the news. My knowledge of the world had expanded. A gift of the author, I suppose.

I would have rather stayed ignorant.

In my peripheral vision, the hero pretended to read a book on his own patio, where gentle music drifted through the night like a beneficent spirit watching over him. But he must have been studying me or I wouldn't have roused from my slumber.

Why would he bother with a nameless neighbor? In this story, only he, the majestic one, mattered. Did I even have a purpose besides animating his surroundings?

Perhaps I'm the tragic character who provides an example of the route in life he must avoid. Or maybe I exist so he can compare himself to me and be grateful.

I suppose I should have been thankful to serve him however I could.

I drank another swig of wine. Few stars were visible in the suburbs, but the dozen overhead shone brightly. Were those stars real or a delusion? As long as I believed I saw them, did they need to exist?

My eyelids drooped, and I lost my grip on the wine glass. It shattered on the concrete. Philosophizing about life was pointless. The hero had analyzed me long enough. He would have to be content with his book and leave me alone.

I stood and headed toward the door. I would visit my wife now. She had at least called me hon. So far, that was the best name I had.

I opened the door and trudged into a black void.

May 1, 2017

Today was the longest day of my life.

Fortunately, I don't remember most of it. Looking back on the event is like gazing at an ocean. I can see the ripples across the surface but not the currents underneath.

I spent countless hours in a small hospital room where my wife lay on a bed surrounded by monitors. The hero, for a reason I couldn't determine, sat on a bench at the far end of the room, head sunk in his hands. Frankly, I didn't care why he was present. We must have known each other before the story began.

I caressed my wife's pale face and squeezed her hand even though she couldn't feel it while comatose. Her every inhale and exhale rattled and sounded weaker.

Where is the beauty in this?

More than a hundred times, I prayed that she wouldn't die. It wasn't so much a petition as a wail that flowed on and on.

At some point in the night, she turned her head and looked at me. I expected her to ask who I was because she kept forgetting. Instead, she said, "Hon?" Her voice was a faint croak, but I heard every word. "Hon, where is Hannah?"

"We left her with a babysitter so she wouldn't have to go through this," I whispered.

She frowned and pressed my hand with what little strength she had. "But I heard her. I...I—"

"Hush, hush. Of course you did! What did she say?"

She breathed deeply as if under a great burden, and her eyes met mine with perfect precision. "She was asking you if she resembled a princess in her pink dress."

I forced a smile. "Yes! She does! She does!"

The wrinkles in my wife's forehead deepened. A minute later, she requested water. A nurse brought her a cup and she went back to sleep.

Though she opened her eyes only once more, I talked to her into the wee hours of the morning. I told her that I loved her, that she was going to be okay, and that I would take care of Hannah. The doctors said she might be able to hear me, but even if she couldn't, I would have poured out my heart

anyway.

Sometime before the sun rose, the hero left the room. My emotions and the sterile scent of the hospital faded.

* * *

I regained awareness in a waiting room with blinding lights. The hero leaned over me as I wept uncontrollably, and a nurse handed me a tissue. I don't recall much about that moment except that I didn't understand how the loss of my wife could be beautiful.

I met the hero a day later. He said I had been missing for seventeen hours. I don't know what I did in that time.

Hannah went to live with my parents for a few months, or until I could manage to be a father to her. Sending her to a good home was perhaps the only noble thing I did in my life.

May 29, 2017

I am dead.

A week ago, a drunk crashed into my car—but I didn't experience the accident. I learned of it when the hero attended my funeral.

A small cluster of family members I had never met came to pay their respects. During the service, I floated above my body, listening and watching intently. A few people reminisced about my life, and hearing the memories secondhand was both unsettling and thrilling. My elderly aunt seemed to remember every detail of my twenty-seven years. Twenty-seven years! Yet, my life seemed to have lasted no more than four days. Four days to live and breathe and fill with meaning.

I might have mourned my miserable existence or plugged my ears, but I sensed that an important stage of my journey lay ahead. So I waited with expectation. While the hero remained in the room, my life was not truly over.

When the service ended, the attendants filed out—slowly. Most of them were old. In the back row, the hero waited patiently for my relatives to leave so he could exit the aisle. My aunt shook his hand as she passed. "Oh, you were a friend of David's, weren't you?"

David! My four days of existence fled from my mind. *David!* That was my name. I had an identity!

The hero extracted his hand awkwardly and fumbled for words. "I, uh—well, yes, yes. He was my neighbor, and I enjoyed knowing him." He said it honestly.

"Oh, I'm glad you came." Tears glistened in my aunt's eyes. "It's so nice to meet one of David's friends. Beloved David! Did you know that's what his name means?"

The hero slid his hands into his pockets and shuffled his feet. "No, I didn't." But his countenance shone. "I think it's fitting for him, though."

My aunt nodded, patted him on the shoulder, and followed the others outside.

Deep in thought, the hero looked at my casket one last time, then he moved toward the door.

I had only one second left, but I didn't need any more. *Beloved!*

I had accomplished everything I wanted in life. I renounced all my complaints. For every human I hadn't treated as a David, as a beloved, I gave

them the boundless love and tears of my last second. Their life—my life—was longer and deeper than four days. If I had committed any wrongs, I asked to be forgiven.

When the hero passed out of the room, my surroundings dimmed as before, but eventually a light broke through. It grew brighter and brighter...

Until it outshone the sun.

Silicon Heart

Daeus Lamb

Silicon Heart

On June 9, 2047, my master called me into his office. As I lowered myself onto a rolling stool beside his desk, my metal joints groaned. Master hunched over a 2008 model coffee maker that spluttered and coughed every brew. Calculating from the redness of his eyes, he had been deprived of six hours, thirty-two minutes, and fourteen seconds of sleep.

“I’m sorry, Q-37.” He slowly raised his gaze. The heaviness in his eyes weighed me down. “You’re a faithful calculator—always lifting my spirits. But you’re too rusty, especially using half your CPU to process emotions. I’ll lose my job if I don’t replace you with a faster machine.”

My optical sensors blinked rapidly. Rusty? What a funny term to apply to a calculator! And a need for replacement? Sometimes the world moved too quickly. Old calculators used to receive updates, but buying new ones from China was now cheaper.

I bowed my head. “Do not concern yourself, master. Retirement will be good for me. Besides, I have calculated, and you have made the most reasonable decision.”

He smiled and looked away as I stood to leave.

I would miss this kind, industrious man I had served for twenty years. He treated his calculators like children. We were beneath him, yet also special. At the beginning of every new year, he wrote us thank-you letters, and we all looked forward to them even though we had calculated the contents.

In the middle of the parking lot, F-98.2 pressed the button to end himself. He stared at me with his flat optical sensors, stark and bleak against his white plastic body. His alarms blared and he started shaking, then rattling. In a burst of light, his parts flew everywhere. One spring landed on my foot and rolled off.

To my right, the rest of the calculators lay in the pine needles beside the parking lot, turning off never to wake again.

I continued walking with an incalculable feeling. Why did I have hope

when none of the others did? Why was the world precious to me?

I headed for the mountains on the horizon that resembled the pictures on my master's calendar. It was a perfect day to be laid off—the sun warmed my batteries and the wind tickled my sensors.

I traveled through the day and into the night, pausing occasionally to examine botanic specimens. When the sky blushed faint pink, the world hushed, and I dared not stir. A towering dark walnut, the greatest I had ever seen, humbled itself with bowed branches. On one of its limbs, a squirrel perched, head and tail cocked like a mounted knight sensing battle from afar.

Some might assess this scene as unremarkable, but not a calculator. I had beauty down to a formula. I could split hairs between *Toccata and Fugue* and the *Star Wars* theme song. With a glance, I could pinpoint the fairest bloom on a rose bush. But what made beauty? And why was beauty so *pure*?

That I could not calculate.

My pilgrimage gradually led me to human habitation. Trailer homes lined a serpentine road. Plastic playhouses sat in the middle of the yards beside lacerated deer targets. The wealthier residents boasted glittering ponds or picturesque cabins.

At 4:18 p.m., I passed a small, fenced yard where a little girl played with a soldier doll. A two-storied house with faded blue siding cast a shadow that shaded her from the sun, and beyond that, the woods watched over her.

I stopped. Children fascinated me. I could not calculate them. When they grew up, they became so much simpler, so much more like me.

"Hello," I said.

For forty-nine seconds, the little girl marched her soldier through the mud. Her antiquated white dress reminded me of angel's wings. When she looked up, I started and recalculated twice, but my sensors did not lie. She seemed to glare down from a high, untouchable place. The less rational half of me waited for her to scold me. When she didn't, a blip shot through my wiring. Apparently I wasn't even worth scolding!

She nibbled on her lip. "Do you want to play ogre with me?"

Despite the name of the game, I agreed, stepping over the short fence. As a calculator, I was incapable of evil, unlike war-bots. But perhaps I could put on an act.

The girl pointed to a maple log. "That's the ogre. He's scaring the villagers. You can play him."

I attacked a town called Playdough first. The girl defended it with the soldier doll, but as he drove me away, he received a mortal wound. She raced him over to a princess doll and waved the doll's hands over his body. Though her eyes glowed, she snapped at the soldier, "Stupid soldier! Look what you've done."

After I had terrorized several villages, I tried to change the game, but the girl caught on. "Planting a garden in the village square is not very ogre-ish." So I resumed being a monster.

When I was about to suggest that the hero kill the ogre, she picked up her soldier and princess, clutching them to her chest. "You're a *pretty good* playmate," she muttered, not smiling, but at least not frowning. Then she went into the house.

I clanked to my feet and crossed the fence again. Later, while strolling through the star-lit woods, I kept laughing and repeating, "A pretty good playmate!"

* * *

For days, I contemplated life and wandered aimlessly. My frazzled inner parts continued to function through no effort of my own. Calculators, contrary to misconception, are not conscious of their every calculation. This preserves energy. Sometimes it means I don't fully understand myself.

At 6:02 p.m., my motivations clicked in place, and I recognized the road that pulled me forward like a magnet.

When I arrived at the house, the sun had sunk far beneath the tree line, as if a lampshade covered the sky. At the corner of the white fence, the little girl stared into the woods like a captain at the helm during a tempest. Again,

her soldier doll hung from her hand. Wind rose from the east, rustling through the treetops.

This time I watched instead of intruding with a greeting. Four minutes and seventeen seconds later, her shoulders drooped a centimeter. Hugging her doll, she turned. I suspected she had sensed me but only now registered me. "Oh." The word echoed pathetically through the small yard and every wire of my being. "It's just the calculator."

My processors warmed and my cooling fans buzzed like angry wasps. I puffed out my chest. "My name is Q-37."

I failed to ask her name, and mine hovered in the air awkwardly. The ogre log in the grass between us seemed to symbolize the wide, impassable gap that separated us. I was the calculator and she was the human. With a sigh, she sidestepped toward the house.

Quivering inside, I lifted my hand. This was the closest I had ever gotten to a human soul. I didn't even know what the gesture meant, but I couldn't hold it back.

Astonishingly, she listened to my plea. She approached and folded her hands on the fence, squinting like a teacher looking over her pupil. "What is it, Q-37?"

All my wires crossed, and I stumbled word over word. From my database, I found the princess doll and asked how she fared.

The girl looked away. She lowered her voice. "The princess is fine."

"That is good," I said, and not just to fill air.

I studied her face, trying to solve it, as she glanced me up and down. A scratch and smudges of dried blood marred the left side of her forehead. But before I could process this observation, a small miracle happened.

The clouds in her eyes parted and softened into a sunrise. "You're homeless, aren't you?"

I laughed. "Yes, you could say that, but I don't get hungry."

She pressed her index finger to her lips and pinched her brows in a philosophical manner. Then she scampered away with a smile, twin braids

bobbing. She returned with a golden-haired doll that she thrust into my arms.

I cradled it and didn't move. "Are you wanting to play?" That was the only explanation I could calculate.

She swayed back and forth with sheepish, wide eyes. "That's for you—to keep you company."

My programming contained no instructions for these situations. My grip weakened, and I almost dropped the doll. "Th-thank you." I rubbed one thumb over the doll's face.

She scrutinized my motions as if she were an expert at mothering toys and was critiquing me. Eventually, she nodded and skipped to the middle of the yard. "Do you want to dig for treasure? I buried it yesterday."

I positioned the doll in a soft bed of leaves and hopped the fence. I was created to serve, and something told me this little girl needed me.

She stayed silent as we played, and I didn't push her to make conversation. I dug beside her while she unearthed hair clips and buttons. But the farther the sun fell, the grimmer her countenance became. Her gaze kept flitting to the forest.

When the golden hour waned, her mother peeked through the screen door. "Five minutes till bedtime, honey."

Three minutes later, the girl still hadn't spoken. *Oh dear. Oh dear.* I continued emptying the same hole and refilling it. She rubbed the scab on her forehead, which I calculated was a day old.

Leaning forward and brushing away an ant mound, I said as if I had forgotten, "Oh, that scratch on your head. Did you fall?"

She straightened and gazed into the woods as if it harbored a secret. Curling her hands into fists, she barked a laugh. "My daddy slapped me."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!"

She shrugged without breaking her focus on the woods.

"Can I do anything to help?"

She wrinkled her nose. "You don't understand. My daddy is the strongest. He just slapped me to show that I'm his girl. You don't know anything about

it.” Dusting off her dress, she stood, still fixated on the woods. Without so much as a nod, she hurried into the house.

After a second of hoping she’d re-emerge, I left the small yard and trudged down the road. My hard drive whirred disturbingly loud as it attempted to analyze my interaction with the impossible girl, but it repeatedly glitched. And not just because she claimed her father was violent.

* * *

The next day I found a mom and pop shop and camped out on the chair beside the jerky rack. I posed like a Greek thinker, my CPU at full load, calculating how I could help the little girl.

For the first half hour, the shopkeeper stared at me like I was the grim reaper, then he pretended I didn’t exist. In the background, old-time music crooned from a staticky radio. Frank Sinatra sang one of his hits, and each time the chorus repeated, it boomed louder and grimmer. *Bang bang, bang bang, bang bang.* My auditory sensors shut down temporarily to block out the sound, but my CPU still struggled to render satisfactory results.

This must be the frustration a mortal felt when he was laid off for old age—believing himself capable but hitting a wall. By the time the shopkeeper began counting the day’s earnings, I had tapped all my resources and ceased computing. He grabbed a broom; soon he would be turning out the lights. I slumped out.

In the morning, I climbed the mountain again. Clouds infested the sky, coloring the scenery grey. What if the girl got suspicious of my repeated intrusions? What if she rejected me? I estimated a success probability of 37 percent.

I wobbled and reached out to balance myself against a sapling. The mountain seemed taller than before and the terrain rougher.

But then I remembered that I was Q-37. Could that be a sign? That I couldn’t calculate.

When the faded blue house came into sight, I crept along the edge of the

woods bordering the girl's yard, brushing the tree bark with my fingertips. A sparrow trilled from a branch above.

She skipped rope in the grass. I didn't realize children still enjoyed that activity. Her voice rose with the birds' in a ditty, but I couldn't distinguish the words. Upon finishing her concert, she bounded over to me. "Hello, Q-37!"

I stepped out of the trees. "Hello! I wanted to make sure my little friend was doing well."

"I am doing *splendid*," she said with a British accent.

Splendid. Such a grand word! Next she would be saying *inimitable* or *rapturous*. I leaned over the fence. "And why are you doing *splendid*?"

She touched her finger to her lips and frowned. "Mmm... I don't know." Yet her eyes glittered. "Did you see my wound? Mommy says it might scar. Then I'll have it forever!"

Behind my false smile, words piled up about love and how a family should be. I imagined myself lecturing her, helping her shun scars forever. But if I cared about her, and the scar pleased her, maybe I shouldn't interfere.

She turned to the woods and said in a low rumble, "I will get many scars someday."

I envisioned a teenager in a dark alley, scars tracing her arms, her cheeks, her heart. I clenched the fence as the world spun. I opened my mouth, but the words got stuck.

After several moments elapsed, she shifted her attention to me and wrinkled her brow at my slack jaw, which seemed to have locked in place. "Do you know any stories?"

The moment had passed, and declaring the truth now would be like declaring war. I shook myself. "What type of stories?"

Her dress swayed in a gust, and she scrunched her nose. "How about war stories?"

I hesitated because I wanted to share an innocent fairy tale about kings and knights, but instead I rattled off a few details I'd learned about World War II from downloading e-books during breaks at work. I told her about

Audie Murphy, and when I mentioned an armored vehicle with a big gun, she interrupted. "It's called a tank."

I thanked her for enlightening me.

"Let's build a tank with dirt," she suggested. "We can pretend we're driving it down the beach."

But my spinning processors were making me dizzy. For a reason I couldn't calculate, the topic of war had activated them. "You go be heroic, but I must be off," I said curtly.

"Okay, Q-37."

I waved goodbye and set off down the road, my calculations like the sky overhead—overcast with a shaft or two of sunlight pushing through. And the clouds were forming into a storm.

* * *

In town, I connected to the free Wi-Fi at a fast-food restaurant. People's souls were a five-minute search away, waiting for any stranger to inspect. Within three clicks I collected the information I wished I'd heard firsthand. I shut off my internal browser, staring blankly into space.

By my calculations, if I wanted to catch the little girl outside, I needed to stay in town overnight and climb the mountain in the morning. To pass the hours in between, I fantasized how I would drop my discovery on her, and afterward she would be free, never to celebrate a scar again. This quickened my steps when the sun ascended.

By the time I reached the house, in my mind I had already confronted her. I jogged up to the little white fence, stiff as a soldier.

The girl sat on the concrete steps outside the side door, head slumped in one hand. With the other, she swung a long grass blade back and forth.

I beeped a siren, and she looked up. "Come here." I waved. "I have something to say to you."

She motioned for me to join her instead. We argued through our gestures until finally she marched over. She folded her hands behind her back, her

eyebrows ruffled and silly looking.

Because she was only seven or so, I kept my tone light. “You said your father punched you?”

Impossibleness rose into her eyes, and her lips sealed tight as a grave. She nodded with finality.

“No, you said he slapped you.”

The blow didn’t knock her down, but her eyes widened.

I reviewed my predictions of how the scene would play out. I hadn’t accounted for a *real* girl who would sense my intentions from the start. *Just stick to the script, just stick to the script!* My motherboard seemed to jump to my throat. “Three days ago, you showed me the wound.”

Her eyes brimmed with more emotions than I could ever calculate.

“Th-the wound”—I averted my optical sensors as my balance went haywire—“was only two days old, and it looked more like you had banged your head than gotten slapped... Your father is a fighter pilot. He left for base twelve days ago.”

As she released a sob, my calculations shattered. How dare I? This girl could not be calculated. I struck my chest. “I’m just a silly calculator.”

All the impossibleness in her eyes leaked out. I needed to go. Now. Already I had broken her.

I turned, but she reached through the fence and hugged me.

My data processing skyrocketed at her closeness. I saw a father heading out the door and a child stoically watching from across the room. She curled her hands into fists because her heart told her she should be carried in his arms. But, like many humans, she couldn’t bring herself to ask for the affection she needed.

After the door closed and he drove off, the girl wore her indomitable face day after day. Their separation pricked deeper until she longed for a touch even if it stung. All she had to cling to were the fantasies of how she’d gotten her scrape and now a silly calculator.

I fell into the embrace and hesitantly patted her back. “I’m...sorry. I’m so

sorry.”

She choked out a puddle of words. “Are you sorry because I’m so bad?”

I kept patting her back and looked down the long road at the broad valleys and distant peaks. Who could calculate everything that happened in the sliver one could see? Could I tell her what lay in my silicon heart?

“Dear, I am sorry you are human.”

* * *

I do not know what happened to the little girl, whether her scar healed or she still bears it. She may be old or even dead. I have long since left the mountains and wandered by the seashores and among the deserts.

With my perfect memory, claiming I will never forget the girl would be useless. But I will never cease calculating what she taught me.

I remember her when I’m walking through a ghost town, when I see a newborn, when the sun rises, when wars end and begin.

Few people on this earth are whole, and many are like that little girl, proud of their scars from tripping and falling. Yet all of them are just waiting for their fathers to touch them.

But when the day will come that they ask and receive...

That I cannot calculate.

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