

Bradley

For amusement, Bradley wrote a suicide note. After reading it over halfway, he folded it twice and tucked it into his breast pocket. The wind blew in through the window, giving the bedroom a crisp atmosphere that reminded Bradley of autumn, even though it was only late spring. He stood up from the desk and pulled down the window. It shut with a slight creak and a thump.

Last autumn Bradley believed his life was on the up, as he might have said of it. He was a college graduate with a new job in the computer software industry. His prospects were good. The same connection that led to the position exercised a strong enough influence to promise rapid promotion. Within a year Bradley might become a senior programmer. Perhaps more. Perhaps he would convince the new acquaintance from his senior year in school to marry him, as he fantasized. Perhaps. . .

Bradley caught himself daydreaming again and shook his head a few times as if to ward off the unwelcome spell. This technique worked, revealing the kitchen to Bradley. He inhaled deeply at the sight of dirty dishes overflowing the sink. On the counter, an egg carton contained yellowing fragments of shells. Bradley walked to the refrigerator and opened it, hunting anything to cut his deep thirst. He found a sideways carton of orange juice on the lowest shelf with only unwrapped cold cuts on the shelves above it. He removed the carton and set it upright between his hands, which opened its brittle mouth. Lifting it to his own mouth, he pulled a meager final swig.

For the last two weeks, Bradley's thirst had attained a ferocity and persistence he could not make sense of. When he went to the bathroom, his throat became instantly dry, as if all fluids were leaving his body in one mad dash. When he drank water, it seemed to disappear before he swallowed it. One afternoon, while walking home through a residential neighborhood, he bent down at a sprinkler and interrupted probably its first frenzied gyrations of the season to take long, breathless gulps, and eventually, inexplicably, remove his shoes and fill them too. A girl stood at the nearby screen door and watched him. When their eyes met, goose bumps crawled across Bradley's arms and legs and he shivered violently, and threw up.

The same thing happened as he swallowed the juice. Within seconds, it streamed from his mouth to the floor, where it glistened before Bradley's feet like shards of a broken sun. He leaned over the spill, as if to find reflections of himself within its pieces. There weren't any. Bradley knelt to make certain. He extended his forefinger and rummaged within the larger puddles. Still nothing. He stood up straight again. An expression of calm comprehension came across his face.

Bradley occasionally indulged the belief that he did not exist. At first the proof was blunt in nature. For example, he did not succeed in his fantasy to marry the new acquaintance from his senior year in college. On the contrary, she let him believe he might succeed so as to maintain his affection, which arrived in the form of frequent gifts and daily handwritten letters, ranging in topic from emotion and love to philosophy, satire, and puns of all kinds. However, these efforts flagged as Bradley learned about the marriage of their object to a

man ten years his senior with firmer business connections and a much larger bank account. Yet Bradley acquired this knowledge far later than etiquette texts prescribed, and so questioned his existence, which moments ago had appeared so fervently irrefutable. He wondered why wasn't he told sooner, and why isn't he told now as he extends every gracious opportunity to break the news without having explicitly to state it or own up to prior or present duplicity? At last, the notion of any now, here and now, as some momentous axis of his or any personal history faded away, and Bradley stopped sulking.

The brighter side of his not existing emerged, and he explored it with a liberated energy. For what was he if he did not exist? Was he a ghost? He concluded that ghosts were clichés, and he was not of their ranks. Besides, a ghost could remember its death, and usually resented it, stalking its assumed agent. Bradley connected with none of these sentiments. Nor, despite his regular consumption of related publications, did he find his foundless state on constructions from science fiction, where young men such as himself slip helplessly and unpredictably from one parallel reality to another, and so disappear in certain worlds. On the contrary, to Bradley, the world was still the world; he was neither lost to it, nor found elsewhere. What had happened to him was more like the evaporation of an illusion, the central misunderstanding of which was the original belief in any existence. That was the tiny bead of moisture that suddenly evaporated.

Bradley carried the empty carton to the sink and stacked it on a leaning pile of dishes. The weight disrupted the pile's balance, crashing dishes across the mess on the adjacent counter. Two dishes broke, and one lone fragment fell

to the floor, bouncing twice before wobbling to a convex silence. Bradley kicked it with his sneaker. It was a gentle kick, like a nudge. The piece shuffled forward and again came to a rest. Following it, Bradley arrived to its new position in such a way that his other foot might kick the piece. Again the piece slid forward slightly and stopped, wobbling for a moment. Finally, Bradley crushed it beneath his heel and kicked the resulting dust violently into the air and across the kitchen to many haphazard locations.

Bradley picked up the telephone and rang his friend Michael at work. Michael and Bradley knew each other from their shared time in a computer programming class about object-oriented languages. In that kind of language, data and programming code can be joined together into objects. An object not only facilitates programming by diminishing the amount of redundancy in the overall code, but also violates earlier industry standards, which prescribed absolute separation of code and data. Thus, Michael and Bradley met on the forever transforming cutting-edge of information, and knew enough of their privileged position to make fun of it regularly by pretending they were oblivious kings on the eve of revolution. In other games, they referred to each other as objects.

Michael picked up the phone, and his voice squeaked.

"Eat your mouse?" Bradley asked.

Michael growled playfully.

The line went dead. Bradley jostled the plunger, but nothing happened. Soon a dial tone popped to life. Bradley re-dialed, but Michael's phone was busy. Bradley hung up and rolled his eyes. He scratched above his ear.

The phone rang and Bradley picked it up.

"Moron," he said.

"Bradley?"

"Um, yes."

"It's Monica. Look, there's something I wanted to talk to you about. Do you have time?" As Monica asked the question, the call waiting on Bradley's phone clicked. "Do you have another call? I know you must be terribly busy."

"No. I mean yes. Yes and no, Monica."

"Maybe you should come over. Are you free?"

"Is something wrong?" The call waiting clicked its third series of signals.

"Well, yes," Monica admitted. Bradley heard her voice alter, as if restraining a breakdown.

"This is odd," Bradley commented, regretting the remark immediately.

"Oh, everything is. Everything." The call waiting clicked again and Bradley said he would be over to Monica's house as soon as he finished his other call, which he promised to handle quickly.

"Don't you worry," he said.

"About what?" blared Michael.

"Wait a second." Confused, Bradley looked at his finger, which rested on the phone's holster. His brow wrinkled. The tension around his mouth smoothed and went away. Had he already pushed the plunger and transferred to his second call? Had the first one really happened? Things were moving with a speed too rapid to assimilate, it now seemed. Against the background of a pace

altogether phlegmatic lately, this gust of activity in Bradley's life struck like lightning, leaving no comforting trace.

Daunted, Bradley pushed the plunger, as if to restore a former world of regularity and sense. At once a dial tone chimed through the receiver, at which Bradley stared. He moved it closer to his eyes and withdrew it. He replaced it in the holster. It rang and he picked it up. He said nothing, holding it against his ear like an alien and unrecognizable discovery.

"Hellooooooo. King Braaaaaaadley. This is Michael the Great in the neighboring province. Bradley? Are you there?"

"I am King!" Bradley declared.

"And always will be, sir," remarked Michael.

"And always will be."

"And always will be. Except what's going on? You forget how to use the phone?"

"You hung up on me, Your Highness."

"Not true. Were I less kind-hearted, I would order your head cut off for such libel."

"No, Michael, not today. I need my head. Or maybe I already lost it. I think Monica just called me."

"And?"

"And. So. I need my head."

"Two heads are better than one, Good Bradley."

"Cut yours off and send it to me."

"Touché."

"En garde. Gotta go." Bradley hung up the phone and ran to his room to change his clothes. When he was done, he wore the same button-down shirt, but with new olive pants, brown leather shoes, one to two ounces of cologne, and a necklace he took off the day he found out Monica was married. It was a sign of the zodiac--not his sign, but Monica's. In dark pewter it depicted a small crab staring sideways, watching either the steps to be taken or the ones left behind. Bradley squeezed it in his thumb and forefinger. When he realized the similarity of this gesture to the crab's larger claw, he slinked sideways a few paces and left the room, looking both ways before shutting the door.

During the half-hour drive to Monica's house, Bradley's mind helplessly indulged a wide variety of scenarios for Monica's current distress: one, the new husband was dead. His body was mangled and lost, but not lost before some horrified witness could take note of how mangled it was. Only then did it disappear and the witness return to confirm the tragedy amid violent shudders of disgust. In the second scenario, the husband's lechery overcame him, and he ran off with one of his many extramarital floozies, defaulting his thick but hollow portfolio of stocks, bonds, credit cards, and annuities.

"In fact, he never had any job," Bradley said to himself as the road curved under the long hood of his Green Buick Town Car.

Bradley's fingers coiled around the steering wheel like vines. A deep line appeared beneath the length of each of Bradley's biceps, demonstrating the rigidity of his posture. Outside the windshield, blooming green country passed like a metaphor of rebirth and the victory of life over death. Because in the past Monica had deepened Bradley's appreciation of Greek mythology, he began to

sing himself a meandering song about Persephone, whose yearly return from a marriage of captivity in the underworld restored life to the Earth. However, Bradley fixated on one refrain and soon honored it as the chorus: "Husband from Hell. Well well. Do tell. Husband from Hell. Well well. Well well."

Bradley pounded the steering wheel with his palms as he pulled into the long, overhung driveway. He was surprised by the need to put on his headlights to make his way. At the bottom, he flashed his brights once and cut the engine. He was nervous all of a sudden. He wondered what it would be like to comfort Monica, and for what ailment? In their last year of college, when they met, they were both so foolishly gleeful and giddy to be approaching the end of their academic responsibilities that comforting each other was never necessary. In fact, their relationship developed on a basis exclusively of cynicism and contempt about their last four years of learning, and that attitude provided an armor over a wider range of emotion.

The strength of these cascading insights overwhelmed Bradley as he stepped to the cool black pavement, which looked new, and felt that way beneath his feet. He walked away from the car in a haze, leaving the driver's side door open, although the passenger light was not on. The keys hung from the ignition on a Simpsons key chain.

Bart did a wheelie on a red-and-white skateboard.

Bradley smacked his lips, searched his gum line with his tongue for a drop of moisture, but his mouth was entirely dry. He became self-conscious about his breath and the unexpected flow of perspiration in his armpits. He sniffed at his shoulders to make sure cologne was the predominant aroma.

Before ringing the bell, Bradley experienced a great wave of pain in his stomach, and turned from the door in just enough time to direct his vomit into the nearby shrubbery. It splashed with a distant sound, as if the receiving earth were already saturated from sprinklers or other sick callers. Bradley remembered his earlier remark that Monica's call was odd, he had said. The adjective reminded him of The Odyssey, as did the situation of calling on a married woman while her husband was who knows where. Bradley was tossed between conflicting intuitions that he ought not go further, but also ought to. He felt himself pinned by this predicament, like a butterfly on a collector's board, dreaming in death of the lost caterpillar state and humility's warm cocoon.

Bradley recovered his wits and rang the doorbell, which played an ascending scale of chimes. He somehow felt he had booted up his computer, which complemented such actions with a wide variety of sound bytes. The door opened slowly. Monica stood at the end of it with one hand remaining out of sight on the knob. She wore a short-sleeved white shirt with a collar and button neck, and light blue shorts appropriate for athletics. A heavy blue band held back her blonde hair, which flared into a thick plume behind her head. She was a slender woman with a spare neck. She stood on the threshold before Bradley with her head tilted slightly to the side. She searched him gently with her eyes.

"You look awful," she observed.

"It's nothing," Bradley said, "that a little water wouldn't make better. Do you have any?"

"No, Brad, we gave it up."

"We?" he wondered.

"Oh, come in," Monica said, reaching forward and dragging him by the arm. Bradley crossed the threshold and trailed Monica to the kitchen, following closely enough to preserve the contact of her hand on his arm. It was hard to say who was responsible for this extended gesture. It seemed Monica was not terminating it any too quickly, while Bradley was not forcing the issue by slowing down. At a mutual pace, they passed from the entranceway with its large, exotic, probably Egyptian and Babylonian icons, masks, and statues, through the dining room, around an architectural right angle bearing on one flank an expressionist portrait of Monica holding a glowing iris before her lips and on the other flank a triptych of the Trojan War's most portentous scenes, and into the kitchen, where the abundance of clean, white Formica and tiling mixed with sparkling stainless steel faucets and fixtures gave the impression of a giant bathtub fit for parloring deities.

"Your house is beautiful," said Bradley.

"Drink," instructed Monica, turning away from the sink with a goblet of cold water in her hand. She handed to Bradley and he stared at it in his possession. He looked over the rim....