

THE BOOK OF DEATH

Part I

Margaret brushed the stray hair from her face and looked out over the washing line. Her tired arms drooped on to the thick line and rested there for a second. Hanging washing always hurt her arms and today it was worse than ever. With a groan, she bent over and tried to pick up a peg that she had dropped on the damp grass. Her toes gripped the earth as she tried to balance, but to no effect. She tipped forward from the weight of her body and landed on her knees.

“You should squat, it’s much better for you than bending”

The interfering voice cut through Margaret's wet maternity shirts that hung haphazardly to the line and moved slowly with the light breeze. The voice jumped over the fence and parted the damp washing. “Here, come on, up you get”.

The young man from next door put his hands under Margaret's arms and heaved her on to her feet in one swift movement. It was too fast for Margaret, causing her to become dizzy. She clung onto him, trying to stop herself from swaying. How dare he tell her what to do and then stick his hands in her armpits. Her face reddened with embarrassment and the cursed panic crept upon her.

She felt sick. She did not want to throw up in front of this idiot, so she clung to him, gulping for air.

“Excuse me for asking, but how far on are you? You look pretty big, are you carrying twins?”

That finally cured Margaret of her nausea. She wanted to launch into him for being so rude, but she knew she would not be able to pluck up the courage. Deep within her she knew that he was just trying to be friendly, and he had helped her. What had gotten into her just lately? Everything annoyed her, everything frightened her, everything made her want to scream. Her chin jutted out as she looked up at the bright teen face that smiled back at her.

“I'm 35 weeks, 5 more weeks to go, and no it's not twins, I'm just big”. Her voice had just a tad too much venom in it as she spat the defensive words into his face, something she regretted immediately.

The young man became uncomfortable. He slowly realized that he had probably insulted her by saying that she was big. It was beginning to dawn on him that women did not like things like size pointed out to them. He had often wanted to talk to her, not for any, well, sexual reason, but because she always seemed so alone.

Her husband only seemed to come home one or two days a week and even then he would arrive, park up his large truck and then go out in his car. He never seemed to take her anywhere and she never seemed to go out very much. As he looked closer at her face, it became clear to him that she was not that much older than him. Probably only a year or two. She looked around twenty and his eighteenth birthday was only a month away.

“Well, I'll leave you to it then. Please call over the fence if you need anything.”

The young man smiled awkwardly before jumping back over the fence and vanishing into his house. Margaret placed her hands under her armpits where he had gripped to lift her. Now that she had recovered from the indignity of being a beached whale flapping about on the ground, she savoured the moment of human contact.

That night, as in all nights just recently, her dreams came harsh and unrelenting. She tossed around in her bed, entangling herself in the soft blue cotton sheets and her black hair mingled with the blue in the still silent darkness. Her arms twitched as she recoiled away from something: a dark fear slowly tiptoed towards her, taunting her. Beads of sweat and panic broke out on her forehead as she inched away from the unseen, her closed eyes darting this way and that in an effort to find safety. The sound of her breathing punctured the silence as it became more urgent, her breath labouring against the inner terror.

She lay ridged and motionless for a few seconds before her hands flew to her face, her fingers trying to fight something off. Margaret's voice called out into the darkness and her eyes opened suddenly. Her body was paralyzed. Her hands were still by her face, unable to move. The darkness took shape and moved towards her. Her body prickled against the fear as the presence moved ever so slowly to her side. She could not turn her head, nor could she cry out.

It approached her, growing until it extended beyond the ceiling. Each hair on her body told her to run. The droplets of sweat that ran down her face and breasts told her to scream. But her body lay motionless against the horror that moved slowly in a deliberate path towards her. She struggled to move her eyes from side to side. The being had filled the whole room and she knew in her heart it was something that she could not escape. Its hand reached out to touch her.

It was aiming for her forehead. She knew she had to stop it but she did not know how. The child in her womb lay motionless, as though waiting for the inevitable. Her instincts were to put her arms around her swollen belly and protect the little child snuggled up within her, but her arms remained glued around her head.

Just before it reached her forehead, she knew, from somewhere deep within her, that if it touched her she would die. She did not want to die. She wanted her baby. She began to cry helplessly, for herself and her unborn child. The tears touched her face and something snapped within her.

Her eyes opened and an inrush of air to her lungs made her jump: when she thought she had been awake, she had actually still been dreaming. Sleep fell away from her as she sat up in bed, covered in sweat and tears. Her hands cupped her face as she wept, unable to cope with yet another night of the same nightmare.

Part II

“Ok, that's it Mrs. Kingsley, is there anything you want to ask?”

The doctor stood smiling at Margaret but she could see from the look on his face that he really did not want her to ask anything. But she knew she had to say something. Margaret smiled at the nurse seated beside the doctor, who had done her weekly observations, checking Margaret's blood pressure, urine and a mountain of other seemingly useless things.

“Well... there is one thing.”

Her voice was unsteady as she began to redden. She felt overpowered by this professional man who held life and death, and her health in his hands. The doctor looked briefly at the ceiling and then back at Margaret before smiling. He had spent three minutes with this woman and now it was time for her to go. He hated women who asked questions. Why could they not just come in, be examined and get lost? His words came out with thinly disguised impatience, making Margaret go even redder.

“Go ahead, ask”.

Margaret fiddled with her thumbs and tried to sound as confident as possible.

“Well, I feel that there is something wrong. The feeling gets stronger every day but I don't know what it is. I just don't feel right.”

She dropped her head and looked at her hands. She felt such an idiot for blurting that out. The doctor looked at the rotund red faced raven haired young woman sitting in a lump before him. He could see that she must have been quite pretty before she got pregnant, but they all faded after the babies started. It was always the same. That, he thought to himself, is why he would never marry.

“Mrs. Kingsley, there is nothing wrong with you. Your blood pressure is a little high, but that's OK. Now stop worrying, it will do baby no good at all if you worry. All will be well.”

The nurse got up and stood by the door with it open and smiled at Margaret.

“Good-bye Mrs. Kingsley”.

The nurse continued to smile until the smile became fixed. Margaret slid from the chair and heaved herself up. Her body felt more than heavy, it felt poisoned. Her whole being seemed to be under a cloud and no one wanted to help or listen. As the nurse closed the door behind her, Margaret heard her voice filter through to the hall way.

“God, some of these women are such hypochondriacs”.

Margaret wanted cry. She felt violated and humiliated, and she could not find within her the strength to challenge these people. Her mother had always told her that when she was twenty-one, she would find her voice. But it had not happened. Here she was, twenty-one, and she dare not say boo to anyone.

She cursed herself all the way home as she trudged back up the steep hill that led to her house. The road was dirty and smelly, full of rubbish that people had thrown from their cars. That was how she felt. Just a piece of rubbish that someone had thrown from a car.

She leaned heavily on the door when she finally arrived home. She had to wait a moment to summon the strength to get the key in the lock and when she finally let herself in, she knew she would have to go to bed for the afternoon to recover from the walk and the insults. Her nights were full of terror and she awoke every morning full of fear and exhaustion. At least she did not dream when she slept during the day.

She lay back on the bed, fully clothed, staring at the ceiling. She placed her hand on her enormous belly and caressed the child within her. Tigger, her secret name for her baby, had not moved in days. The doctor said it was normal. She felt that something was wrong. Tigger was named Tigger because of Tigger's amazing ability to do back flips at the most inconvenient moment. Tigger kicked, squirmed, hiccupped, pushed, stretched and generally gave a little joy and humour to Margaret in her loneliness. But now Tigger had stopped communicating with her. She felt the child was still alive, there were tiny little wriggles here and there, but nothing like what she had grown used to.

Slowly, Margaret drifted into sleep, her body twitching as she descended down into the underworld, leaving her conscious mind behind. The dark stillness swallowed her until her jaw finally relaxed. The sleep was delicious. It drank its way through her body and the softness of the bed became deeper, kinder and full of a warmth that she had not felt in a long time.

When her eyes finally began to open, just as the sun was going down, her body snuggled into the comfort, laying and enjoying as she slowly surfaced from a rest that had not been plagued with terror and pain. In fact, for the first time in a long time, she felt no pain at all. She moved her legs to stretch and became aware that the bed was damp. She moved her leg back, and yes, there was dampness.

She stretched her arm out to turn on the lamp and she sat up in bed. As she sat up, a pain from hell shot through her, causing her to scream suddenly and fall backwards back onto the bed. She lay panting for a moment. Surely it was too early for her waters to break and the labor to start? She eased herself back up, slowly this time, allowing the pain to build rather than to attack. She pulled the bedcovers back, and cried out. The bed was soaked in blood.

Her hand reached calmly for the bedside phone and she dialled the emergency ambulance number. She talked so calmly that she could hear the disbelief in the dispatcher's voice. She replaced the receiver after being assured that an ambulance was on its way.

Laying back on the bed, she felt no panic, no fear. Everything was OK. Everything would be fine. There was no problem, it was all under control. She slowly sat back up and tried to stand. She felt dizzy but not too bad.

Methodically and calmly, she peeled off her bloodstained clothes and looked for fresh ones. The bleeding appeared to have stopped and she began to feel silly for calling an ambulance. Maybe she really did not need one. By the time the ambulance arrived, she had dressed herself, packed a small hospital case and left a note for her husband. She had also left a message on his work answer machine, just in case someone managed to get a message to him.

The ambulance man helped her into the vehicle and an ambulance woman wrapped a blanket around her. There was no sign of blood, no stains, no new fresh blood. Just a tired heavily pregnant woman who was slightly embarrassed at the fuss. They set off and as they travelled to the hospital, the ambulance woman took some details. She looked Margaret up and down, looking for signs of bleeding, shock, anything. Nothing.

“Are you alone, I mean, when will your husband get back from work? Is there anyone we can call?”

Margaret shook her head. The woman nodded and eyed Margaret again. Another lonely one looking for attention. She wrote that down as a side note on the admittance paper and circled it.

At the maternity unit of the hospital, Margaret eased herself on to the bed and retold what had happened as the nurses listened quietly. They nodded without comment and then asked Margaret to undress and put on a hospital gown. One of the nurses picked up Margaret's underwear and stated to the head nurse that there was no sign of bleeding.

“But there was a lot of blood in the bed, honestly there was”.

Margaret was beginning to despair. It seemed that no one ever believed her. She looked from face to face as they all smiled patronizingly at her.

“Well, Mrs. Kingsley, we will link you up to a monitor to see what's happening and we will listen to baby. You say he hasn't been moving? Well, that's natural at the end of a pregnancy, don't worry about it. We will also do some tests to see what's happening. Just lay back and relax, doctor will be with you shortly.”

Margaret lay on the hospital bed in a long and packed ward, staring out at the other women who all lay staring at her and at the wall. The place was depressing: no one was talking and no one was smiling. She lay there for over an hour and was just dozing when a brusque nudge of the bed brought her back to the gloomy ward.

She groaned inwardly when she recognized the clinic doctor who stood before her. She could also see from his face that he was groaning inwardly too. Another hypochondriac had dragged him away from his golf practice in the doctors' locker room. He sat on the side of the bed and looked her over. He asked why no baby monitor was being used, and the nurse informed him that there was not a low priority one available until the morning. He nodded and asked Margaret to `scoot` down the bed. She looked at him blankly.

“Please lie down and I will check your cervix to see if it is dilating. To see if you are in labor”

She lay down and the doctor pulled the bedclothes back. She did not register his face change at first, nor did she think it strange that the nurse had scurried off. She felt warm, relaxed and comfortable. Another nurse appeared with a large pad which she slipped under Margaret's buttocks. Margaret looked at her in question.

“For the blood”.

The nurse did not elaborate and Margaret peered between her legs. Blood oozed out of her, slowly building into a pool between her legs. ‘Strange’, thought Margaret, ‘I didn't feel it this time’. In fact, as she plopped her hand on her leg to lever herself up, she had not felt that either. She wiggled her toes and breathed a sigh of relief that she could move them, except she could not feel her right leg or foot. Monitors appeared seemingly from nowhere and wires were soon growing out of every nook and cranny of her body.

“I'm going to break your waters and we are putting up a drip to help speed up your labor. We would normally do a caesarean section on you, an operation, but we have no spare operating

theatre for nearly four hours at least. There is no emergency and all is well, the drip will really speed things up and he will be out in no time.”

The doctor tried to sound as confident as possible. He hated working in this inner city hell hole and as soon as he was able, he wanted to leave England for ever, maybe to work in one of the Arab states where all the money was. Margaret caught hold of his wrist and looked into his eyes.

“Is my baby OK? it’s a little early isn’t it?”

Margaret wanted to panic, but she could not. She felt calm and safe but she knew she had to ask. The doctor looked at her wearily. He tried to sound as strong as he could as he answered her searching question.

“No, lots of babies are born at this time, all will be well. Now you relax, you have a busy night ahead of you.”

She lay back on her pillow and smiled at the nurse who had been stationed to watch over her. There was also someone standing behind her. But Margaret was not able to make out the figure who stood silent and unmoving.

She drifted off, unaware of the painless tightening that was stirring in her belly. The bleeding had stopped yet again, allowing everyone to breathe a sigh of relief. The warmth spread around her and pulled her deeper and deeper into a semi sleep, the regular beeping of the machines singing her into oblivion.

The pain rose like a submarine surfacing from deep water, catching her unawares and making her gasp. The monitor sounds became uneven and somewhere, someone was shouting. Margaret opened her eyes and looked through the haze of pain. The doctors face peered back at her, along with the nurses and her midwife, who had just arrived and looked a little flustered. Behind the nurse and midwife stood two other people, but the shadows seemed to hide their features. It never occurred to Margaret that the ward was in full light and that there was no shadows. More and more people pushed around her, whispering to her, coaxing her.

Margaret, Margaret, come see the flowers, come see the lilies, they are so beautiful.

Margaret wanted to tell the voice that she was too busy having a baby to look at flowers, but her lips did not seem to work. The pain rose again, filling the space that she breathed and clearing out of her mind any thought other than pain. Endless ceaseless pain. It got stronger and stronger as she groaned, the noise coming from deep within her. Someone touched her belly and Margaret wanted to pull the hands away but her arms were too heavy to pick up.

Sounds rushed past her, hands touched her, faces peered through the fog in her mind, staring at her intently. Someone told her to roll onto her side, but she did not know what that meant. What is a side?

She felt her body being pushed over onto her left side. The pain grew tentacles and seemed to grab her around her throat. Her breath became shorter until all she could do was grunt. Her thoughts became her world as she bathed in memories punctured only by pain as it passed through her on its way to somewhere.

A pressure began to build up in her head. At the same time, something solid moved down from her belly into her pelvis. The fullness became a centre point for the pain which was now exquisite as she bathed in it. Someone shouted her name, again and again. Margaret, Margaret.

She stood and looked at the chaos that was happening in the room. She found it much easier to breath now that she was no longer laid on the bed. Someone else was laid there. Margaret edged closer and froze when she recognized the woman on the bed. She looked at herself laying there, with her legs flayed and her lower body covered in blood. One of the nurses was crying as she carried something wrapped in a green cloth that the doctor had handed to her.

Margaret peered to see what it was. The body of a still born infant lay in the nurse's arms. Margaret was confused. She did not know why she could see herself on the bed when she was standing up and she did not know why they had a dead child. She hoped her child would not be born like that. She shuddered and thought about her own child. Should not she be busy with her labor?

With that thought she found herself back on the table and felt a warm wet cloth being wiped over her face. The warmth of the cloth punctuated the deep cold that had rolled into her body like a spring sea tide. She heard beeping and alarms. She heard conversations and regrets. Margaret wanted to comfort the nurse who had been crying. She wanted to say, "don't be sad, my baby will be born soon and you will see how beautiful she is. She will make you smile".

But she was too cold to speak. It had crept quietly upon her and wound its way into her bones, lodging itself there. The warmth from the cloth that was washing her down did not seem to penetrate her cold and she wanted to ask a nurse for a blanket. But her lips would not work. She tried to lift her arm to catch their attention, but she could not move. So she lay there while she was washed and thought about her child to come.

The daydream was shattered by a voice that cut through her cold and her thoughts. The doctor was speaking into a tape machine. He mentioned her name. He mentioned haemorrhage and torn placenta. He described the condition of the dead child. He listed a date and time of Margaret's death. Feb. 14th, 3.45 am. Margaret screamed. The cry rolled through her body yet it could not escape. So it turned inward, digging deep into her soul and tearing her in to shreds. It dug and dug until there was nowhere else to go. And then came the blackness.

Part III

Margaret moved in the darkness. Her thoughts reached out through the nothing and yet that nothing was full of everything. Someone called her. They did not use her name, or so she thought. But it was a sound that identified her and, in her fear and loneliness, she moved towards that sound.

The sound got louder until she found herself before a door. There seemed to be no door, but she knew it was there. She also knew that she had to go through that door. And yet, she was not sure as to who or what she was. What part of her was going to go through that door?

The urge to move forward grew stronger and stronger until, using thought, she passed through the doorway and felt a power of transition, a shift, as she crossed the threshold. It was like waking from one of her terrible dreams. Her eyes scanned the horizon of a seemingly never-ending desert shining in the noon day sun.

In the far distance was a range of mountains and Margaret set off walking. The sun tore into her flesh as she walked, her feet stumbling as her legs got heavier and heavier. At first, it did not seem strange to her that she should be in a desert. But the further she walked, the more memory of the hospital bed came back.

She remembered the pain and her child. She remembered her ever absent husband and she remembered, finally, the voice of the doctor dictating his notes into a tape recorder. Margaret Kingsley, date and time of death: Feb14th 3.45am. What a shame, he had said, to die birthing your first child on Valentine's day. The knowledge of her death washed over her and she began to weep. Her feet dragged over the dry earth and her tears fell, joining with other tears to form a stream that trickled on into the distance.

Without noticing, she had come closer to the mountains, and Margaret looked up into the distance. The stream of tears ran ahead of her and joined into a river that sliced through the landscape. Up to now, she had felt no thirst. But on seeing the river, her throat began to burn with the fire of the desert: thirst consumed all of her thoughts.

As she came close to the river, she realized that she was not alone in the desert. People wandered about at the river's edge - some stared into space while others lay weeping with their hands covering their face. The sorrow of the people blew past her like the wind; the strength of their emotions caught her off guard. The emotions of the people flowed through her like a never-ending river, joining with her own deep sorrow and creating a deep pool of pain within her heart.

The loss of her own child began to swell within her and instinctively she placed her hand on her abdomen. Her husband's neglect of her rose to greet her along with the scorn that her father had always directed at her. Memories of her childhood surfaced, memories of pain and of joy. Things that she did not want to let go of rose into her mind: her cats and her house paraded before her, and Margaret began to feel homesick. She wanted to go home.

Immediately she found herself standing in her lounge. But it was full of people. Her husband sat in his usual armchair with his head cradled in his hands. Beside him sat his mother with her arm, as always, protecting her son. Margaret felt instant overwhelming jealousy. His mother always had to interfere, always had to side with him to protect him, even when he had done wrong - *Mummy would always make it better*. The bitterness simmered in Margaret as she stared at the plump overdressed woman.

Another man walked into the room, her husband's brother. He had hated Margaret on sight and the feeling had been mutual. He walked up to her husband and squatted on the floor beside him.

"We all will miss her, we all loved her."

His voice quivered as his younger brother looked up in thanks for the kind words. Margaret wanted to be sick. Not only did she know he was lying, but she could see the lies floating out of him. She saw the smugness nestled next to his heart and she wanted to tear it out for all to see.

Someone sniffled behind her prompting Margaret to turn around. There, sat in black with deep rings under her eyes was Tanya, her best friend. Tanya had been working abroad and had flown back for the funeral. Margaret felt the horrendous pain that Tanya carried within her. She could hear Tanya's thoughts as she mulled over the fact that Margaret would probably be alive today if she had not moved away, but had stayed close to be with her friend during her pregnancy. Tanya had, right at the beginning of Margaret's pregnancy, a premonition that something was going to happen, and she had ignored it. The guilt tore in to Tanya and Margaret wanted to ease that.

She moved next to her friend and placed her arms around her. She whispered in to her ear while stroking her hair. How would she ever let go of her deepest love, her friend from childhood. All that remained of her memories of childhood happiness was Tanya.

At first, she did not notice the man who stood silently in the corner of the room. He was dressed strangely with a black hat and a long beard. Margaret wondered if he was a vicar. She did not recognize him. Then he looked straight at her. Margaret was startled. How could he see her? He stared and stared at Margaret until she spoke to him.

"Who are you, how can you see me?"

The man did not answer but walked towards her and when he got to the table, he walked through the table and straight to Margaret. She tried to run.

"Daughter, you have no legs, how can you run? and where to? Come, follow me, I want to show you something."

He held out his hand and she grasped it without question. They were back at the side of the river and Margaret became angry with the man.

"Why have you brought me back here? I don't want to be here, I want to be with my friend."

She struggled against him but her held her firmly with his eyes.

"You do not belong there, that is not your world anymore and that is no longer your friend. It has all gone and will never return. You must let go and cease to be Margaret Kingsley. You must now be yourself."

Margaret cried out through her fear: "I *am* Margaret, what are you talking about?"

She wanted to flee, but she could not move and she did not know where to flee to. Instead, she flopped down to the ground beside the river, putting her head in her hands. All around her, people sat with their heads in their hands. Fear swam around them, lapping at their feet and refusing to go away.

Whenever she was in pain, Margaret always remembered her mother and the pain would go away. Her mother had died when she was a little girl, but Margaret had clung to the threads of memory that had remained with her.

Instantly she found herself back in her old childhood bedroom with her mother perched on the end of the bed, her golden hair shining from the hall light that reflected around her. Her mother

smiled and Margaret snuggled down into bed. At last she was safe and warm, no one could harm her.

But something was wrong. Her mother did not change her expression and did not read her a story like mothers are supposed to. She just sat and smiled the same smile that Margaret had always remembered: the only memory that she had of her mother. The memory played itself over and over until Margaret finally understood that she could not hide in her memories.

She was back again, by the river, with her head in her hands. She looked up and scanned the desert with her eyes. People were constantly arriving out of the wilderness and sitting down by the river. Most ran to the river to drink, throwing the water over themselves and laying down to sup their fill. But Margaret did not want to do that. Yes, she had been thirsty, but something within her drove the thirst away.

People panicked around her as they reached the river: some cried out, some curled into a ball like terrified children, and others became violent. But the man who had frightened her with his words sat without emotion, looking out over the river with an expression of peace on his face. Margaret was intrigued. She walked over to him and sat quietly down beside him.

He did not react at first, but just allowed Margaret to be still with him as he watched the mountains. Finally, she turned to look at him. Margaret wanted to introduce herself properly, but for the moment, she could not remember her name.

“That is good”, said the man.

“What is good?” said Margaret.

“That you do not hold to your name. It is time it was no longer with you. It was just a tool and now you have finished your job, you no longer need the tools”.

The man’s voice was beautiful, but she wasn’t sure she understood what he said. She tried to change the subject.

“Who are you, and how come you are not so afraid?”

Margaret was curious, this man was like no other she had seen anywhere: he was full of peace and his face seemed to shine like a thousand lamps. And yet, he just looked like a rather crumpled old man.

“Oh, I am myself. I remember this place, it holds no fear for me, and you will remember next time around, because you were wise enough not to drink of the river.”

Margaret opened her mouth to ask about his answer, and then shut it again. Maybe she should not ask.

“So, what did you do, you know, before, well, before you died?”

She tried to be polite, but the question came out sounding rude and she wanted to be angry at herself, except she could not remember how to. The old man smiled and pulled on his beard thoughtfully as he looked out over the mountains.

“Hmm, well, I was supposed to be recognized. But no one recognized me, so here we all are and here we go again. They say, when you recognise a Tzadik Nistar, it is because that potential is also within you, and that when two come together and join, then our world becomes the Garden again.”

Margaret frowned in confusion. She had no clue what he was talking about and yet, something deep dawned within her. Rather than ignore it like she would normally do, she allowed it to rise in to her thoughts.

She saw the man in a beautiful city, like the pictures she had seen of Jerusalem. He was walking the streets and he shone like a full summer sun. But no one seemed to notice. Everything he touched became beautiful, every word he spoke took shape and travelled around him, echoing sacred sounds out to the world. But no one heard. No one recognized the grace that poured from this simple rather crumpled man. Therefore no one could partake of that grace.

“I see”.

Margaret felt sadness for the man, that no one had recognized him. But then, she felt that he had no sadness so why should she? What purpose would it serve? Why would it have a place here?

“You learn quickly!” Said the man as he smiled at her.

“Come, come with me and we will walk through some of this together. I can show you some wonderful things on the way. It’s much better than walking on your own”.

For the first time in a long time, Margaret was happy. She really wanted to be near this man and she knew that it would be very good for her to walk with him. He held her hand as they walked along the river bank. He asked her about her life, her family and friends. As she talked about them, they seemed to get further and further away until she could no longer understand why they were talking about them.

They began to feel like distant characters from a book that no one wanted to read anymore. Eventually, she told him that she did not want to remember anything else because it all seemed so pointless.

“Why do you think it is pointless?” Asked the man.

“Well, I’m not sure, but that is how it feels. I suppose that just before I died, I had pulled away from people, I don’t know. I do miss the feeling of the child within me though. It was wonderful having someone so close whom I could love”.

“Although I do remember the anger and love I felt when I found myself back in my house and they were all there for my funeral. And yet, I cannot feel those feelings now. Why is that?”

Margaret posed the question to herself and the man waited for the answer.

“Maybe”, she continued, “It’s because they are there and I am here and `there` doesn’t really matter anymore. Does it even exist anymore?”

She looked at him intently and he smiled.

“Not for you. It does for them. Love, anger, hate, joy, these are all things unto themselves. You have to learn that they are not yours to give and take. The love you had for your friend is never lost, ended or to be wept over. Every face that you see is potentially your lover, child, mother, or friend. You have all, as souls, interacted at one time or other. The love that you shared must be itself, unconditional and timeless. It flows through all being.”

Margaret scanned the horizon silently. She was confused about many things, and the more she talked, the more confused she became. She turned back to the man, a question itching to be asked.

“Ok, one last question. Where is God? And Jesus? I don't see any of the stuff we were taught about at school. Where are they? Do they exist?”

The man laughed loudly and then turned Margaret around. She did not know what she was supposed to be looking at for a second. She watched a man walking towards the river and he was weeping uncontrollably. She could see pain all around him. Loss and regret fell as tears into his hands as he walked.

He reached out in all directions for something, anything to guide him. A being, like a thread of light appeared and began walking towards the man. As the being got closer, it began to take human form. It formed itself into the image of Jesus and held out its arms for the man. The man saw Jesus and ran weeping towards him. The being enveloped the man and held him in compassion until the man was ready to be released.

Margaret blanched. She had not led a religious life, not really. But she had been raised a Catholic and here she seemed to be seeing that Jesus was just a masquerading being? Her new friend heard the thought and shook his head.

“No, Jesus was a person who lived in time and then did not live in time. He was who he was, a Justified One, a Righteous One, but he was not a crutch as people would like to wish that he was. But when people die, they often die in fear and they cling to whatever memory they have of something greater than themselves. So the beings who are responsible for the transition of life and death, the doorways, often have to appear in a form taken from the human mind”.

“These doorways, you know them as angels. Not long blond-haired men with wings, but beings who are a part of the Divine order – they are doorways, thresholds, enablers.”

His words made sense to Margaret, and yet thought was becoming difficult for her. She did not want to learn, or think. She wanted to do something, to move forward. She had started to feel uncomfortable, as though she did not fit anymore. Her body shape had started to break up and she was finding it harder to think of herself as a human shape.

She turned to ask the man about this feeling but as she formed the question, she already knew the answer. Her earthly body had been cremated. She had no material pattern left that she could connect to in solid form.

In the distance, a bridge appeared over the river. It was a bridge of light, shape and movement, like a strong shimmering rainbow that drew Margaret instinctively towards it. She wanted to

ask about the bridge, but the man had vanished. She turned, looking all around her, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The bridge pulled harder and harder until she could not bear it any longer. She broke into a run, pulled by a deep urge that coursed its way through her, driving every other thought out of her mind. On reaching the threshold of the bridge she stopped suddenly. Something blocked her. She leaned against it, trying to break through.

The sound of a whirlwind whipped around her pushing at her from all directions and she became frightened. Out of the whirlwind peered many eyes, focused intently on her and probing deep into her thoughts. Memories flooded into her mind. Memories of her childhood, her early love affairs, her night terrors, her baby, and finally her death. But somehow, these memories did not evoke anything within her anymore. They seemed like lead weights that pulled her farther and farther away from the bridge. She did not want them, she no longer needed them, so she let the whirlwind take them.

It tore into her, dismantling her of everything that she knew. It tore at her thoughts, her ideas, the concepts she had learned with the man on the river bank. It pulled away all her emotions and beliefs until she stood naked before the eyes.

The whirlwind stopped. All was quiet. It felt so wonderful to be rid of all the baggage she carried for so long, and with that lightness, she stepped forward on to the bridge. The moment her foot touched the surface of the bridge something powerful and beautiful passed through her. For each step she took, she felt a joining with something, a communing, as though she had become aware of her presence within a huge web that spread into infinity.

It felt good, it felt natural, as though this was her real self. The crest of the bridge drew her onwards and passing over the centre of the bridge, a nothingness enfolded her. The nothingness had all the potential of everything in it. Every thought, deed, word, and universe were held like a breath in that nothingness.

She knew she had a choice. Stay in the nothingness, or move on. The nothingness beckoned to her. She could drink of the union with all that is Divine, being at one with the void: the source of all creation. But something else pulled her in the opposite direction. Service. To be in a world, in a life and to allow life to flow through her. The act of being within substance. She chose substance.

Immediately she was back on the bridge, stepping through the connections of all worlds as she journeyed towards the other side of the bridge. With each step that she took, her awareness expanded to enfold each soul who had ever walked the path she was now walking. She felt the deep connection with each individual as they passed through and over the bridge in their own time and space. Like the web, they were all one being.

On reaching the other side, an angel stood in silence, pointing into the distance. Rising out of the earth was a huge range of mountains. The angel indicated that she must climb the biggest mountain.

Her heart sank. It was so far away and so high, she would never get all the way up there. The angel started to walk with her, placing one foot in front of the other, and she copied. One step at a time. As she walked, she felt things fall off of her, things she had not realised were there.

She did not know what they were, but something deep within her knew it was good to shed whatever it was. She felt lighter, more balanced and with a fuller sense of freedom.

At the foot of the mountain, the angel vanished without any warning or communication, leaving Margaret to stare up at the clouds which covered the summit. A pathway was worn by many footfalls as it snaked up the side of the mountain, vanishing into the mist. Margaret stepped on the path and began to climb. She heard voices whispering and mumbling as she climbed. There was nothing specific said, no words that she could grasp, just noise. But the higher she climbed, the clearer the voices became.

She heard the texts of the gospels being read and the words mingled in with recitations of the Qur'an. Over the top of that was a speaking of the Torah, the Gita, and beyond that a whispering of Fire incantations. Words in languages she had never heard were chanted in the background as she climbed, their sounds dragged at her feet, weighing her down. All the sacred words that had ever been written and uttered whispered around her, making it harder and harder to reach the top of the mountain.

Other voices joined in the chorus, voices raised in political anger, voices speaking out against beliefs, voices calling for war, and voices crying for peace. And then came the loudest: the cry of beings as they were slaughtered: human voices, animals, birds, every creature she could imagine, the sounds of their voices raised in terror in their last moments of life drove itself in to her like sword piercing her soul. The cry broke through all others and imprinted itself on her. It followed her wherever she turned. She could not escape it: the sound of life, of death, the sound of the living world of creation and destruction.

Margaret climbed and climbed in an attempt to escape the noise. As she neared the top, the sounds suddenly stopped. All was quiet, all was peaceful. The mist hid the summit from her and the atmosphere around her had become cold and damp. She knew she had to walk into the mist. She knew she could not turn around and return back down the mountain. There was nowhere else for her to go but into the unseen.

Her thoughts stilled as she prepared for what was beyond the mountain mist. The weight of her previous life had all but fallen away. It had become some dark distant memory that she had managed to finally shrug off like a disease. Now she was herself. Timeless.

With that stillness, she moved into the mist and was immediately enveloped in a dreadful weariness. Her mind forcibly pushed her onwards until she could go no further. The mist had begun to thin ever so slightly; just enough to see back down some of the mountain and to see ahead. Before her lay many people, all fast asleep. Beyond them, the mountain top fell away but the horizon was obscured by the mist. The tiredness ate into her and she fell to her knees. Motionless, she stayed in that position briefly, before finally laying down. Each position that she took felt uncomfortable until a voice passed through her.

Remember, the voice said.

Remember what?

Margaret could not remember, *but the body that she no longer had remembered*. Its human imprint, that was stored deep within her, remembered. The memory played out through her and she shifted into the remembered position. On her stomach, left arm outstretched, right arm

behind her back. Right leg outstretched, left leg bent and tucked behind right leg. Finally, she knew she was in the correct position. With that knowledge came sleep.

The keepers of the dead wandered in and out of the sleeping bodies, maintaining the sleepers inner balance as they slept. Some that they came across still had residual patterns from their last life that needed removing: the sleepers bodies twitched from deep nightmares, or moaned quietly as if in pain. The keepers took pity on the sufferings of the sleepers. In their pity, the keepers lay beside those who slept and sang songs that would settle in the minds of the sleepers and guide them during the darkest hours of their next incarnations.

They stroked the sleepers, filling them with balance and power, tools they would need for their journey ahead. And finally, before the dawn broke, the keepers cupped their hands over the sleepers, holding the deep eternal inner flame of each sleeper and giving it temporary sanctuary.

As the dawn broke, the mist cleared and the keepers called to the dawn with a conch shell; the labyrinth of the ocean that carries the wind. The noise awoke the sleepers who looked out in awe as the light and darkness of the void shone upon them.

Margaret turned in the blackness, at one with the nothing. Not wishing to move or be. Silence. Out of the silence, the sound of a loud horn vibrated through her, calling her back to existence. Margaret wanted to fight the call, she wanted to stay within the stillness but the call became more and more urgent.

She awoke to find herself laying on the top of a mountain. She looked up just in time to see someone bend over and push her down the far side of the mountain. She wanted to cry out in panic but her breath was taken as she rolled and tumbled down what felt like a grassy hill. During the rolling, she became more and more aware that she was feeling with senses and shape; with limbs, eyes, ears, even though she had none. The strangeness of such thoughts tumbled with her as she cascaded down the hill.

The scent of the fresh grass and dust awoke her awareness of the world and of being in human form. She ached for such life again and just as the ache became unbearable, something slowed her to a stop.

She unravelled herself at the foot of the hill and stood up. Before her was a large rupture in the ground: the Abyss. Behind her was the mountain. Looking up, she could see others tumbling down, just as she had done.

They all slowed, seemingly of their own accord until something nudged her from behind. The nudge seemed to alter her vision and she slowly became aware of a giant hand reaching out to each person and carefully slowing them down. She turned back to look at the abyss and before it stood a being that made Margaret very afraid.

Before the abyss stood an angelic being that reached up to the stars. She had many arms and wings that stretched out to prevent people from falling into the abyss. Many other arms reached out to slow those who tumbled down the hill. Her hair flowed in all directions, scooping up those who had lost their way. Her eyes turned to each person as she looked at them intently, one by one.

Her eyes finally looked into Margaret and Margaret began to cry. Every failing that she had, became apparent to her. Every cruelty, ignorance, indifference, stupidity and thoughtlessness

paraded before her. Behind it came every goodness, every drop of love that she had shed for others, every hand she had outstretched, every gift she had given.

The angel weighed it all in the palm of her hand. The balance was presented without judgment back to Margaret and Margaret became aware of what she needed to achieve to better that balance.

The angel turned her head to look out over the abyss to the desert beyond and Margaret's gaze followed. In that desert beyond the abyss Margaret saw many lives paraded in front of her, all happening at once, all lives that would give her the skills to achieve what she needed. Some were more tempting than others, but Margaret could see that the tempting ones might not yield all that she needed in a balanced way.

She saw one life that she felt she recognized. It was a difficult life and yet was rich in learning. Her heart lurched towards it and Margaret followed. The angel withdrew the protective arm from Margaret's centre and Margaret pitched forward into the Abyss. A whirlwind came up to greet her and whipped her into its centre. Her thoughts were flung around and around the directions as she fell, its wind flowing through her and adjusting her for what was to come.

Part IV

The angel stood impassive as the couple joined in love. The emotions that they released for each other joined and created a rising vortex, spinning throughout the worlds. The vortex connected with a whirlwind that whipped down out of the abyss and the roar of the whirlwind echoed around the room where the couple lay. Still the angel did not move.

At the moment of connection between the vortex and the whirlwind, a light shone through the darkness and the angel began to awaken from its stillness. A soul tumbled through the worlds, twisting and turning within the whirlwind as the soul passed from wind to vortex. The whirlwind withdrew and the soul completed its journey into the world as it slowly passed, guided by the angel, into the body of the woman lying in the arms of her lover.

On contact, the soul spread out, joining with the soul of the woman and the angel took its position by the woman's head. A beautiful web pattern appeared, the pattern of human shape. The angel gently teased the newly arrived soul into the pattern and wove it in deftly within the pattern of the mother.

The woman's body shone with the intricate connections as her soul upheld and gave sanctuary to the new being that would eventually be her child. When the angel was satisfied that the connection was complete, it withdrew and vanished into the void.

Margaret turned in a swirl of warmth and love. A regular heartbeat punched out a sense of rhythm for her as she lay in silence and light. She was at one with being in substance and yet she was in the stillness, in the deep. The stillness was full of Brightness, a light that was home. It was a place she did not want to leave, ever.

But there came a time, a turning within her. The sense of connection was lessening, and her sense of being was growing. She became aware that she was not her surroundings, that they were separate to her, and yet were still a part of her. At that point, the moment of awareness of separate, something shifted with her. She knew she had to leave. But to where?

The urge for a journey became overwhelming. It tore at her, forcing her to make the move to leave. Once the thought was accepted, her world began to contract and change. Pressure built up all around her, forcing her, squashing her into a battle for life.

She tried to fight back at times, until a deep knowing within her surfaced, telling her to relax. She felt herself leave the safety and comfort of her world. There was only forward into the unknown, there was nowhere else to go. It was terrifying. Her mind reached forward as her body was propelled on until she broke free of the warmth and safety, and was pushed into a dull light full of external noise and coldness. She took a breath as her thoughts vanished with the Brightness, and the loneliness of separation and dull light hit her without mercy.

The angel hovered around the woman's body as she arched her back against the pain. Other beings that were connected with the process of birth and death hovered, ready to be of assistance, their presence unseen by the people assisting the woman with the birth of the child. The child's head appeared and rotated. All the beings waited in silence as the woman screamed. And then came the final push.

The child slithered out and immediately the angel bent over the woman and cut the inner cord that passed from mother to child. The child's pattern became locked in its separateness at that moment, no longer integrated with that of the mother. The angel then stroked its fingers through the mother to rebalance her before turning to the child. As the other beings, and the humans in the room tended to the mother, the angel focused on the new life before it.

The child lay still and silent as the angel looked into the eyes of the child. In the communion, the Angel sought the thread of the child's soul and when he found it, he tied a knot in it. A small delicate knot of remembrance. The child and the angel passed visions of recognition before the angel bent over and listened to the child whispering something on its first breath. The child then turned its gaze to a bright harsh lightbulb hanging above it: all the child could remember was the Brightness, and the child longed to be within that Brightness once more. It searched for the Brightness in the lightbulb, but could not find it.

The angel went to the mother and whispered in the mother's ear. He whispered the words spoken by the child, the Divine breath made word and the word was in flesh. The words travelled around the mother before settling deep in her heart. The words transformed themselves into sounds and joined with the mother's thoughts. They, together, became a name. The mother bent over and whispered the child's name in her ear. And the angel withdrew.

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