

Joseph Michael Fitzsimons, male, Caucasian, aged 34, blood type O-positive, Professor of English and lapsed Catholic came to slowly. A wild party roared noisily upstairs. *Someone should tell them to stop*, he thought. The din grew terrible. The pounding shook his head for all it was worth. He tried to get up off the gurney. A firm hand pressed his chest, forcing him back down.

“Stay put!” The heavy Polish accent of Mr. Stolczyk was unmistakable. The affable retiree from Milwaukee lived across the street from Joe. Recognition that should have been instantaneous, took Joe long seconds.

Joe finally spoke. He meant to say, “Is that your party? Turn it down.” But it didn't come out clearly. It sounded as if Joe was talking in his sleep or drunk. “Wha happened?” He finally managed.

“You fall off ladder. You know where you are?” Mr. Stolczyk seemed genuinely concerned. “Can't find your missus.”

Joe swore unintelligibly. Mr. Stolczyk leaned closer.

“I'll pay you \$5.00 to throw up for me.” Joe's words started forming better. He tried to get up. Now his body joined his brain in a chorus of pain. Joe closed his eyes, confused, “I'm going back to sleep.”

“I'm afraid you're not, Mr. Fitzsimons.” A new voice spoke—an authoritative one. “You've got a concussion. Do you know where you are?” Someone forced each eye open and shined a bright light in.

“Late cretaceous period?” Joe winced.

“You'll have them in stitches in X-ray. I'm just debating whether to do your head first or your shoulder. Oh, by the way, I'm Dr. Young. I'd shake your hand, but that isn't advisable right now.”

“Great.” Joe opened one eye, surprised to see Dr. Young, an Asian—perhaps Korean, looking no older than one of his students. “Wha happened?” he repeated.

Mr. Stolczyk looked at Joe, disturbed. “You fall off ladder. I just tell you.”

“Don’t worry.” Dr. Young assured the old man. “That’s common in these cases. With a concussion, he’ll have a very poor recollection of anything that happened today, maybe even this week. Looks like an MRI first.” Dr. Young wrote something on the chart and called out, “Has he been cross-matched?”

“O-positive,” the ER nurse replied. “No known allergies,” she added.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Fitzsimons, we can’t give you anything right now. Your vitals are already pretty shaky. We need you awake and what passes in your situation for alert.” Dr. Young touched Joe on his good shoulder and leaned into his ear, “You hang in there, Mr. Fitzsimons. An orderly will be here to take you to radiology shortly.”

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But Joe is gone. Joe is somewhere else. *Is this a dream?* he wonders. He doesn’t hurt. He is sitting at a table in a strange kitchen. What is odd is how small he is in comparison to the table. It seems he can barely reach his chin over the edge. He is playing with his cereal, and looking at another child in a high chair—his sister. *How does he know that?* he wonders. She is Korean, too. He wonders how he came to be Korean, but it seems natural in this dream. A woman turns from a sink at the window, coming towards him. She is fair and blond. He knows she is not his mother—not his birth mother, anyway.

“David, eat your Maypo! You want to grow up strong don’t you?” She smiles.

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Joe pulled back out of the room as if drawn through a dark tunnel. The throbbing nausea rushed back.

“...take you to radiology shortly.”

“David, eat your Maypo,” Joe mumbled. Dr. Young gave him a puzzled look and turned to Mr. Stolczyk.

“I’m afraid he may not make sense for the next several days. You have to expect that in these cases.” A nurse poked her head in the treatment room and called the doctor on to the next crisis..

Mr. Stolczyk frowned at the door and turned to Joe. “Look what they make doctors these days.” He poked Joe’s good hand. “In my day, they don’t have yellow-”

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Joe is gone again. His first visit to the gray place. Marlowe greets him: *“The jaws of hell are open to receive thee.”* A sea of pale, gaunt faces. Dark circled eyes staring at him. Staring with a mixture of fear and hate. Gray clothes. Gray sky. Smoke. Thick smelly smoke that clings to everything. Sick feeling. They are shouting orders in a strange language, yet he understands. “Keep the line moving. Everyone stay in line. You’ll all get your turn.” He smiles. No one in line joins him in smiling. It is a great joke, but only to him. He is not like them. He is there for a different reason.

Then darkness, merciful darkness. No memory.

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Joe spent a week in the hospital from the accident. He saw Mr. Stolczyk more than his wife. But then again, Mr. Stolczyk didn't have a wife, either—dead a little over a year ago. Joe wasn't sure of what. Janice made a cameo appearance a couple of days into his stay. He knew she found more than drinks up in Eau Claire. It was odd. He could picture the guy and what his apartment looked like. Somehow he knew it wasn't a first for her either. He didn't care. Joe saw no point in arguing or even bringing it up. Their marriage was over and it didn't matter. He was looking for the nearest exit. Joe returned home to find she had already moved out.

He had more immediate pain to deal with. Joe was lucky to get off with a broken collar bone, dislocated shoulder and a concussion; fortunately it was Christmas break and he had no classes to teach. He was still mending when the students came back. Until he recovered, Joe would have to choose his fights carefully. In the mean-time, he left all combat to his divorce attorney.

Back in his car, Joe's happy reminiscences were cut short by a wave of nausea. *This is new and refreshing*, he thought. He sat staring blankly ahead in a strange neighborhood. *You're going to cause an accident one of these days, Bud*, he warned himself. *You are going to be on the six-o'clock news. Man plows car into school yard, killing six. It's time*, he moped, trying to find the energy to put the car in gear. Joe sighed, "It's time to make that appointment."