

Intersections

The first three chapters

The Ceiling

Ever since he first noticed it over his head, Larry Kincaid couldn't stop thinking about the suspended ceiling.

It was sturdy enough. It didn't look as though it would come down. It wasn't preventing him from going anywhere he wanted to go. In every way, it was a totally unremarkable ceiling. There was really no reason to pay any attention to it except for the perfect intersection of two cross members with a supporting tie, all within reach above his desk. It was ideal for his plans.

The ceiling belonged to that class of objects that was willing to be taken for granted and consigned to an inconspicuous role until selected for a special purpose. Then, once identified for that purpose, it seemed as though it was designed for it, even though you knew that the designer had no such intention.

The panels of the ceiling, with their acoustic pits and yellowing color, were irrelevant to Larry, worthy only to be popped out and brushed aside to make room for the stout extension cord he had brought from home. The cord also belonged to that extraordinary class of objects. Ostensibly, its purpose seemed to be to power a CD player currently filling the office with the warbling of a Lilith Fair songbird, but secretly, it could be fashioned into a noose.

The CD he had playing was another one of those perfect disregarded objects. It had been left behind by a brittle woman who previously had his shift and lost her taste for empowerment. The songbird's voice possessed the same peanut butter smoothness of his ex-wife's before she became crunchy, ideal for putting Larry in the mood for suicide.

Larry pulled the plug on the voice and it died out in the third refrain of complaints. He began to twist the cord into a noose. The very object that gave the voice its power would choke his off forever.

When he finished tying this knot everything would be complete. Really, nothing in his life had been so perfect since his ex left him some twenty years before, but it was perfect now in his preparations to end it. Perfect both practically and symbolically, although he shouldn't care about such things moments before stepping off his cluttered desk into the empty abyss.

No, the knot didn't seem right. He sat down to search the internet for how to tie a noose.

Larry had written no note to leave behind. His body hanging over his desk should say it all. Anyone who knew him and knew the circumstances of his life ought to be able to put two and two together.

Moreover, why should he care what people thought of his act after he was dead? If he cared so much, then he should stay alive. Finally, he had seen many suicide notes in his day and felt that what they generally managed to say was redundant. Then, for all their redundancy, none of them ever really answered the questions survivors had, anyway. The loved ones left behind all wanted to know why, why, why; when they ought to be asking, why not?

On the other hand, while leaving a suicide note behind was pointless, writing one for himself made perfect sense. He needed to secure the idea in his mind. Without a document in his hand as he prepared to jump, he might forget why he was doing it and lose his resolve.

So, he typed:

I'm in a dwindling middle age. I live in a mid-sized city that has rotted out in its core. My apartment is a garden apartment with no garden. I have no friends and my family of origin have all fled from where they originated. My ex-wife has likewise fled, and taken my children, not from any violence on my part, but from what I suppose is my lack of magnetism. I spend most of my time silent, for the garden apartment is very quiet, and the TV shows that I watch whenever I'm home, once they are done, at the end of every hour achieve a conclusion and there is nothing more to be said about them.

As my life has gotten smaller, I have gotten larger. My quiet lifestyle and the fact that my only companion when I watch TV is a bag of chips has not done my health any good: for I am morbidly obese. My doctor made such a fuss over it years ago that I stopped going to the doctor. I suspect that my arteries are almost completely plugged and my heart is about to give out, but I am long past caring, for a long life is valued only by those with a life to live, or those who have not paid much attention to it and value life by habit.

I, for my part, have paid attention to the quality of my life, and, not seeing any likelihood of improvement, have resolved to end it and put it out of its misery.

Larry Kincaid

Larry printed out his document, checked the noose, and, with no small effort, hoisted his three hundred and some pounds up on his desk. He brushed aside the panels just as he imagined and performed a clove hitch that he still remembered from his Boy Scout days. With the noose tight around his neck, Larry read through what he had written. He enjoyed the ironic turns of phrase, the image of him with his bag of chips, the poetic use of the word *dwindling*. It was all good and all right and he was ready to jump, but he stopped short during the second reading when he came to *my family of origin have all fled*. It should be *has; my family of origin has all fled*.

Irritated, he yanked open the noose and climbed down to make the correction. A single knock rapped at his office door and the triage nurse stepped in, oblivious to the dangling cord, for her eyes were fixed on the chart in her hand.

"You have a patient. She says she's suicidal."

"OK," he said as he took the chart from the nurse. "Tell her I'll be right out."

Snow

By the time he finished with his last patient, Larry was too tired to commit suicide.

He told Frank, the next shift, “You got two drunks sleeping it off, an addict who ran out of dope, a gambler who ran out of money, and a homeless vet who got cold. And then there’s Shellie, you know, the frequent flyer. She scratched herself, freaked out because it’s Christmas time.”

Theirs was the quiet part of the emergency department of an inner city hospital. No rushing gurneys, no paddles zapping, no monitors beeping, no blaring TV of the waiting room, no impatient patients stiffly holding arms, no shouting doctors, no burdened nurses, no mangled car accident victims, no burn victims with their flesh still charred, no drug dealers bleeding out, no Bloods stretched out next to Crips, sheets over the head, their families grieving together.

This was the psychiatric emergency unit: two offices, one for the guard, a locked door, four patient rooms with beds, and straps on beds, and cameras by the ceiling and not much else. Larry and Frank were psychiatric assignment officers, or PAOs, as insiders called them, as if the actual title was not mystifying enough. They guarded the gates of the psychiatric inpatient unit as St Peter is said to patrol the entrance to heaven, and Cerberus, the gates of hell.

They determined whether anyone was worthy of admission to the loony bin. In an inner city hospital, people actually wanted to get in. Their job, as their supervisor carefully explained, was not to help those in crisis, but to protect the hospital from a loss of revenue. Protect it, on one hand, from giving away free service when the miserly insurance company denied reimbursement, and, on the other, from a lawsuit generated when someone they turned away, succeed in killing herself as she had warned.

“Anyone actually need our help?” asked Frank.

“They all need our help, just not the kind we’re paid to give,” said Larry, sounding more self-righteous than he actually was. “Don’t worry, they’ll all be ready to go by the time they wake up, get breakfast, and go crazy looking at the four walls.”

All Larry wanted to do was to go home and veg out in front of some dumb TV, but he first had to extricate himself from Frank, run the gauntlet through the hallway, and evade the panhandlers in the parking lot. Frank wanted to talk; he always wanted to talk. He invited Larry over for Christmas dinner with his family.

“You’re not doing anything anyway,” was how he put it.

Larry said, “I’m working on Christmas.”

“You’re working Christmas Day or Christmas night?”

“Both,” said Larry, and he left before Frank asked more questions.

He hurried to the supervisor’s office to put himself down for a double shift.

“It’s my Christmas present to the whole department,” he said to his supervisor. “I didn’t sign up for Secret Santa.”

“You’re a nice guy, you know that, Larry,” she said. “Someday you’re going to make some girl happy.” She looked more relieved than happy.

“Wait, before you go, I wanted to tell you before you heard on the news. We’re going to announce it today.” She took a deep breath. “They’re closing the hospital by spring.”

“What’s going to happen to everyone?”

She shrugged, “They’re not saying yet. I think a lot of us’ll get jobs out in the suburban site. They’re adding on out there, you know.”

The doomed hospital was beginning to awaken after a long night’s rest. He threaded his way out, past scores of arriving staff, many soon to lose their jobs. He nodded to the nurses, already too busy to look up from their screens, and to the doctors, too superior to look down their noses. He smiled back at the interns too ignorant to know that he mattered even less than they. He passed through the waiting room, packed with the rejected two thirds of a triaged horde, left over from a long night of shootings, stabbings, and beatings. He stepped through the automatic doors, stood aside for an ambulance crew, dodged rushing relatives, and took a deep breath of the tobacco filled air of the entrance way.

The leaden sky was falling in flakes. He’d have to scrape the windshield. A janitor sowed salt on the sidewalk. A city bus pulled up and let its passengers off in a snow bank. One, in crutches, come to get her cast off, fell in the snow and couldn’t get up. Everyone was in a hurry and left her behind.

Larry pulled her to her feet, but she was too exasperated to thank him.

The fresh snow covered it all, so clean and white. It would be dirty by Christmas.

By spring, it would all, all, be gone.

Phone Calls

Larry had two telephone numbers: a cell phone number that he never gave out and a land line that he never answered.

He kept the cell phone for the sake of the games, the music, and an emergency that never happened. He kept the land line because every time he called the phone company to cancel it, he couldn't get through the menu of options.

He might have just stopped paying the bill, but it was on automatic payment and he couldn't get through the bank's menu of options, either. As for online banking, that was another story. He lost his online banking password and lost his patience halfway through the help page.

Thank God he knew how to operate the TV remote, at least the important buttons.

Every now and then he would play his answering machine. The tape would rewind, and start and stop for a while, and finally recite his messages. It was never anything but telemarketers, although buried deep in the tape he still kept his mother's last call, the one he never listened to until after he got home from her funeral.

He had still been in his dark suit, he hadn't struggled out of his trench coat, he had just put his car keys on the counter, when he had pushed the play button and her voice came on, as from out of the grave.

"You're breaking my heart, Larry. Why do you never call me back?"

That's all it said. Soon after she called, she had died of a heart attack.

The only thing that made him feel better was the fact that she always said it. Since he was a little kid, she was always saying he was breaking her heart.

Yes, he rarely checked his messages. But today, the incessantly blinking light annoyed him, as if it was a dripping faucet. It blinked at him when he got his first bag of chips from the cupboard. He threw a dish towel on it. It still blinked, whether he could see it or not, when he got his second bag of chips. By his third bag, he had forgotten about the blinking, but he needed the towel to wipe the grease off his hands because he couldn't tear the bag open. It was still blinking. He played the messages.

He listened through fourteen robo calls from the last election, three surveys, six charities, his alumni association, and, although he was a renter, a persistent salesman of aluminum siding.

In the middle of all that, there was a message from his daughter. Amidst a flurry of electioneering, it must have been almost two months old.

"Hi, Dad, it's Naomi. I have some really, really great news to tell you, but I don't want to leave it on your voice mail. So call me. Soon, please. I miss talking to you."

Larry made out a man's voice in the background.

"Yes, I'm coming," he heard her say. "He's not home. I'm leaving a message."

She continued, "Oh, Dad, I can't wait to tell you; I'm GETTING MARRIED! So, call me, all right? Please. I want you to give me away."

The chips he ate must have all had sharp edges still, because they stabbed him in the pit of his stomach. He rewound and played the message several more times, getting oil all over the buttons.

The last time Larry saw his daughter, she was grinning in a mortarboard and gown. She had a smile that might've reached all the way to the back of her head. The corners of her mouth might've waved Hi to each other and kept on going. That must've been, when? Could it be? At her college graduation?

With her call still not answered two months after leaving it; she wouldn't be smiling any more. She might be smiling about her wedding, but not about her father. As she met her new in-laws and they asked her about her father she would be saying, *he abandoned us at an early age and we haven't heard from him since*, even though it was not strictly true. The future in-laws would regret asking and would delicately move on to another topic.

He couldn't call her now. She might be in the midst of wedding planning, turned into a bridezilla and ready to snap at the least complication. She might've found another father to walk her down the aisle, like that smarmy man her mother married and couldn't possibly love. The sleaze ball might be getting a tux fitted now, trying not to get turned on as the tailor measured his inseam.

She might be already married. She hadn't said when the wedding was, after all. The wedding guests must have already whispered about the absent father. *Poor dear, at last she has found a man that would stick around*, they'd be saying. She might already be on her honeymoon, asking her groom to hold her close, as if that could really compensate for parental neglect.

No, no, no; he couldn't talk to her this way, for it was clear she had not tried to contact him again. There were no more calls on his answering machine, no wedding invitations in his mailbox, no emails, no telegram messengers at his door. She had already given up on him.

One way or another, just as his mother always said, Larry was still breaking hearts.

