

Building Heaven (Novel Excerpt: First 3 Chapters)

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The ancient Egyptians postulated seven souls.

Top soul, and the first to leave at the moment of death is Ren, the Secret Name...

Second soul, and second one off the sinking ship is Sekem: Energy, Power, Light...

Number three is Khu, the Guardian Angel. He, she, or it is third man out...depicted as flying away across a full moon, a bird with luminous wings and head of light...

Number four is Ba, the Heart, often treacherous...

Number five is Ka, the Double, most closely associated with the subject. The Ka, which usually reaches adolescence at the time of bodily death, is the only reliable guide through the Land of the Dead to the Western Lands...

Number six is Khaibit, the Shadow, Memory, your whole past conditioning from this and other lives...

Number seven is Sekhu, the Remains...

*The Western Lands,
William S. Burroughs*

REN (The Secret Name)

Morning. I'm awake. I'm still here. Intravenous feeding time. The plump white nurse adjusts the feeding tube without a glance in my direction. The overhead fluorescent lights are still flickering... flickering...*flickering*...

...ignore it, ignore it, *think*...

Fives. Five fives. 5:55:55.

I can't move. Okay.

...hello?

...*HELLO*?

...I can't speak...

...what's happening? What happened? Okay, *think*...

...hospital room. Private room. The plump white nurse – Mary. Her name is Mary...I've seen her twice...three times. Just now, last night, yesterday morning. And before that...

Fives. Five fives. 5:55:55.

Dancing, digital, yes...

...*I remember*...

SEKHU (*The Remains*)

There were two Marys on the coma ward at Cedars-Sinai: Big Mary, the ward administrator, was all thin lips and petty tyranny, while Little Mary resembled nothing so much as a cartoon mole: sweet and nearsighted, timid and sexless, muttering “Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear” whenever she felt overwhelmed or under the gun.

“So, I hear ol’ Herlinger woke up.”

Little Mary chirruped in surprise, startled from her reading, and looked up to see the tall black orderly Ray leaning across the counter of the sixth floor nurse’s station. “Oh, what? Yes,” she replied, capillaries flushing pink as she tucked her book away a little too quickly. “Well, actually, no.”

“No?”

“I mean, he spoke, but it didn’t make sense.”

Ray shifted his weight, trying casually to steal a glimpse of Little Mary’s book. “So what’d he say?”

“Mr. Herlinger?”

“Yeah.”

“He said *five*.”

“Five?”

“Mm-hmm. Yep.”

“That’s it?”

Little Mary adjusted her thick glasses, pushing them tight against the bridge of her nose.

“Well, he said a few other things, but that was the only word I could really understand.”

“You were there when it happened?”

Little Mary’s head bounced a quick nod. “His vitals went haywire yesterday just after you left...y’know, like a seizure or whatever? Anyway, I got there first and he was muttering something, as if he was talking in his sleep. Then he said, very clearly, ‘*Five*.’”

“Huh,” Ray said, yawning like a cat. “What’d the doc say?”

“He wasn’t sure *what* to think...I guess it’s pretty unusual for patients to speak after so long in a vegetative state.”

“How long...”

“Since he came in? Well...” All at once, Little Mary lowered her voice dramatically, so Ray was compelled to lean closer. “...that’s kinda the *weird* thing. I checked his file, and *guess* how long he’s been here?”

“Tell me.”

“Five years, five months and five days *exactly*.”

Ray smiled. Weird hospital stories and gossip were a shared currency between them, a hobby to break up the monotony of their days on the ward. “*Five*, huh?”

“Yeah. Kinda spooky.”

“I hear that,” Ray mimed a shudder, only half playacting: Herlinger gave him the creeps, for real. Not so much the scarred wreck of the man himself, but what he represented – a lightning strike of tragedy Ray didn’t care to think about.

“So what else been goin’ on?” he said, eager to change the subject. “What’s the word around the campfire?”

Little Mary shrugged. “Nothing much exciting.”

“Yeah? How ‘bout you? What’s up? What you readin’ there?” Ray probed, hand striking with sudden precision to snatch the book she’d been hiding in a quick, casual motion. “*1001 Baby Names?*”

Little Mary’s lowered gaze and violent blush instantly told Ray he’d miscalculated. Sometimes he’d catch her reading gooey romance novels, and he liked teasing her about it – but this was different, more personal. It was no secret she loved babies, and was forever angling for a transfer to the maternity ward. But whether she’d ever have a child of her own, he knew, was a different, more painful subject.

Fortunately, she had a ready response: “Oh, well... Elphaba just had puppies, so...”

“She did? Congratulations!” Ray smiled, feeling the awkwardness pass. “You’re a grandmother!”

Little Mary laughed, feeling it too. “Yeah, right, some grandma...I’ll be giving most of ‘em away...”

“Oh, yeah? Maybe you could hook me up with something for Baby Joyce...what are they?”

“Dachsund-beagle. I call ‘em deagles...they’re supposedly real good with kids.”

“How many you got?”

“There were nine in the litter, and I’m keeping two.”

“Emiko and Erzsebet,” Ray suggested, opening to a random page in the baby name book.

“Hey, I like those...what do they mean?”

“Let’s see...Erzsebet is ‘consecrated to God,’ and Emiko...‘blessed, beautiful child.’”

“Ooh, that’s a good one. *Emiko*,” Little Mary said, committing it to memory. “And how’s about *your* beautiful child? Joyce?”

Ray flipped to the “J” section. “Joyce...*merry*.”

“That’s so perfect!”

A big grin of tiny teeth flashed in the mental photo album Ray carried everywhere. He loved his daughter so much it was almost painful to think of her when they were apart, separated by the hours of his long hospital shift at Cedars. Every morning he dropped her at Happyland Day Care was a desperate act of faith, every night when he retrieved her a joyful thanksgiving. He wasn’t a religious man, but he *was* superstitious, which accounted for his dread of Herlinger, as if tragedy were contagious.

“Let me see,” Little Mary said, reclaiming her book, flipping it to: “Ray, *wise protector*...”

“More like blind piano man,” Ray replied, modest. “Or anyhow, that’s where Mama Wyatt got the name. How ‘bout you? What’s it say for Mary?”

Little Mary turned to the appropriate page, read and scowled. “Bitter.”

Ray just laughed in surprise. “Oh, now, that can’t be right...” – but before he could reach for the book again to check, the elevator bell rang at the far end of the hall, causing both their heads to snap instinctively towards the sound as sliding doors revealed Big Mary and Dr. Ku, stepping onto the floor.

“Now *there’s* a bitter Mary,” Ray whispered, winking to Little Mary as he made himself scarce, heading away from the elevators towards the employee lunchroom.

No one used “Big” or “Little” around the Marys – it was, rather, just a handy way of distinguishing them in third party conversations or lunch orders, as in “I’ve got Little Mary down for a tuna melt...does anyone remember what Big Mary wanted?”

In person, Little Mary was always just Mary, while Big Mary was usually referred to as ma’am or Ms. Barnes or Nurse Barnes or occasionally Nurse Ratched. And, whereas Little Mary was liked but generally taken for granted, Big Mary had somehow managed to secure a fairly unassailable position in the hospital’s political rigging without being particularly well-liked by anyone.

“...so you basically have no contact information for Mr. Herlinger other than legal, correct?” Dr. Ku was saying as he stepped off the elevator.

“And the insurance reps,” Big Mary confirmed, fingering the file in her hands.

“Would the lawyer know how to reach anybody with more of a *personal* connection? It might help with the cognitive recovery.”

“We’re still waiting for a call back,” Big Mary said, pausing by the nurse’s station to ask, “Anything new on Mr. Herlinger?”

“No change since this morning,” Little Mary reported. Her counterpart continued on without a second glance, quickening her step to match Dr. Ku’s long strides as they made their way to Herlinger’s room.

His eyes were open, staring, as they entered. Big Mary was unnerved in spite of herself, releasing a tiny gasp as Dr. Ku approached the patient’s bed, seemingly unaffected by the lizard stare, the mottled skin, the frozen expression of horror and despair. “Mr. Herlinger, I’m Dr. Ku, this is Nurse Barnes...can you understand what I’m saying?”

Herlinger was silent for a moment, pupils flicking back and forth, lips quivering, before he finally rasped a single word: “...five...”

“That’s very good, Mr. Herlinger, but I need a more specific response to let me know that we’re communicating. Can you try that? Can you say anything else?”

“...five...”

“Okay,” Dr. Ku continued briskly, removing a penlight from the breast pocket of his white hospital jacket. “I want you to watch the light, follow the light...”

Herlinger closed his eyes.

“Mr. Herlinger...*Pete*.”

Big Mary checked the patient’s vital signs, reported no change. Herlinger’s eyes remained tightly shut, lips pursed, teeth clenched.

Dr. Ku watched him for a moment, then reached for the dense patient file. “He’s been here five years?”

“Going on six...”

“And no eye, ear, nose, or throat trauma in that time, including the original incident, correct?”

“Not to the best of my knowledge.”

“So, no sensory degradation apart from the paralysis, no articulation issues,” Dr. Ku said, delicate fingers skimming the file. “We should get Dr. Jeglinski in to confirm that, and schedule a new CAT scan...”

A sharp intake of breath drew their attention back to Herlinger, and Big Mary was the first to notice the strained expression, the single tear of sorrow or frustration squeezing out from the corner of his left eyelid. “His lips...”

The steady beat of the heart monitor sped its tempo as Dr. Ku watched Herlinger’s mouth quiver and pulse. “He may be aphasic...Mr. Herlinger, can you hear me?”

“...five...sin...”

Herlinger’s voice disappeared again, but his mouth continued, struggling. Big Mary remembered something and shifted to the doorway, calling Little Mary into the room. “You’ve had some experience reading lips, haven’t you?”

“My grandfather was deaf. I’m a bit out of practice, but...”

Big Mary steered her towards Herlinger’s bed. “That’s okay, do your best.”

Dr. Ku stepped aside at Little Mary’s approach. “His speech abilities may have atrophied, but he’s definitely saying something.”

Little Mary leaned close, watching for sibilants and bilabial fricatives, goading her dormant skills to match the faint sounds of the patient’s breath with the motion of his lips and tongue.

“...five...sin...” Herlinger wheezed. “...where...”

“There were...five of us...in the car, where...” Little Mary translated. Herlinger’s eyes snapped open again, staring desperately into the twin windows of her thick prescription glasses as she concentrated on his words and finally understood: “There were five of us in the car...*where is my family?*”

REN (*The Secret Name*)

I know they're gone. I just need to hear the names.

Father. Mother. Wife. Son.

If they were alive, somebody would have mentioned them by now.

I just need to know what happened. I remember only...

...flashes: driving in the rain, digital numbers on the dashboard...

...5:55:55...

...evening, my wife beside me, my parents in back, flanking my son, Pete Junior...

...my eyes flick to the rear-view mirror. Pete, Jr. smiles in reflection. My wife, Karen, screams in terror...

...eyes forward, too late. A black, onrushing form...

...a Humvee in my lane, blinding headlights through the windshield...

...one last moment, all of us together, then...

...IMPACT, airbags – mine “saves” me, Karen’s kills her. Screaming: my son, my parents, Detroit steel. My son, dead. My wife, dead. My parents, dead. My body, dead.

Of course, this part survived, my thinking part, trapped in useless flesh all puckered with bed sores, poked with needles and catheters.

I'm some kind of miracle to them, all the doctors and gawkers who parade by my bed like museum tour groups, poking and prodding and scribbling notes. They tell me it's miraculous I survived the crash in the first place. They tell me it's miraculous I recovered from a vegetative coma with my faculties intact. They tell me I was unconscious five years, five months and five days.

But they won't tell me where my family is.

I wish I knew.