ESSAY

The meaning of a disaster

Making sense of random events

Sidney Dekker

'NO rush.'

The obstetrician sounds dead tired through the phone.

Shaving foam is clinging to my cheeks, and I bend the handle away from my face to prevent the white fluff from clogging the speaker holes. Behind me, a wet trail of hasty footsteps leads into the kitchen, to the bathroom, out of the bedroom.

There, one side of our bed lies untouched – my wife is in hospital after a traffic accident yesterday.

'How are you?' he asks politely.

He doesn't want to know. Around five that morning my anxiety had finally surrendered to a dozing landscape of softness and a depthless sky, and limbs heavy and filled with liquid mud. Now sleep is draining thickly from the bottom of my brainpan, the lint and fuzz of it clinging to the back of my eyeballs and my upper gums.

My face is getting cold and hard from the aborted shave.

The little sleep has done me no good. The frazzle has settled too deeply even for the pounding of a hot shower. The top of my head gives off a crackling, brittle sensation, like dried paper, something I know can be washed away only by more sleep. Or lots of caffeine. Or by not having picked up the damned phone.

WE HAD ARRIVED in this Scandinavian land a year earlier. It had been summer, then as now. The sun had been shining obscenely, unreservedly. The grass was high, the air thick and golden and filled with light and laughter and mosquitoes. My wife and I had been flown up for job interviews, and mine was conducted in a little restaurant overlooking a canal, a bit out of town. I was told that the canal was dug a century and a half earlier by enlisted men, but overtaken by the railroad a few years after the digging was done. The canal now seemed mainly to keep German tourists

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afloat. Recreational vessels (always with the man on the wheel, always) of all kinds floated by. It would have made for a fine vacation, judging from the big bellies and lazy movements onboard. The canal slowly meandered past the restaurant and on through a swath of countryside and locks, setting its own pace, so bucolic, so pastoral, so rustic you couldn't keep a heart rate over 30 bpm while sitting next to it.

Another glass of fine red wine was poured, and we looked at blond girls hopping into the canal a few steps down the towpath.

The evening lasted forever; the sun simply would not go away.

I signed the contract there and then.

Later, I learned that this was the finest summer that they'd had in *tjugofyra år* – twenty-four years.

We got married, packed up in grimy Northern England and, with the last few hundred quid in our pocket, found that we could afford a miserly walled-off portion in the bowels of the ferry across the North Sea. It was a paper-thin excuse for a cabin. A dictionary entry for steerage. It felt lonely and forgotten, and entirely plausible that we would never find our way out again, the way the staircases seemed to disappear up dark holes. The thumping and shaking of the ship's engines reverberated in my chest cavity for three days after we stepped ashore on the other side.

When we arrived in the harbour, where almost a quarter of the country's population had decanted for better shores about a century before, we were greeted by snow. It was wet and thick and blew in all kinds of directions. It was also getting dark.

It was not yet three in the afternoon.

Our first encounter with a Scandinavian winter was grim. And winters would forever stay grim. 'There is no such thing as bad weather,' soothing Scandinavian voices confided to us. 'There is only bad clothing.'

They were all wrong.

There *is* such a thing as bad weather. And it would persist through the next few years. The once-in-24-years summer had relocated to Brazil and taken all the mosquitoes with it. But winters were the worst. They shut people in; they shut them up. Talk to your neighbour in the street and risk saliva freezing against the roof of your mouth.

THE PROMISE OF a new land, new positions, a new future pulled us through, though. And soon enough the promise got brighter still: a baby was moving around in almost grotesque waves and bobbles in my young wife's belly.

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And then it was spring, and it was summer, and then one day I got stuck at work and I phoned my wife to ask her to come pick me up.

She hesitated, was working on the baby room. Cleaning out stuff, getting things ready.

But I had no other options, I said.

This, for the record, is patently false. There are *always* other options. Today, I would pay an infinite sum of money to take a cab. Today, I would walk. Hitchhike. Steal a car. Sleep on the floor and try again the next day. There are always other options.

Okay, she said. She would come over.

Then, not much later, she called me. Her voice trembled. She had been on her way to pick me up, but there'd been an accident. She was all right, but the baby, she was worried about the baby.

Eight months pregnant.

So worried about the baby.

The tremor of her anxiety played all the way through the phone line, setting off in me a fear and uncertainty that rode my spine like a cold finger. I tried to shake it off, hold it at bay, appear stable and strong while still on the phone. I told her there was nothing to worry about. I mean, if she was walking and talking and all, what could possibly be wrong with our child inside of her? I told her things would be fine, we'd check it out, but she'd see – there would be no problem.

I rushed out on foot to find her, and when I had I commandeered a colleague's car to take her to the hospital. Where she had to stay for observation.

Deep into the night I'd finally left to get some sleep. Indications about what might be wrong with the baby, if anything, had been vague and uncertain, but also stable. There had been little to no change throughout the evening.

'There's nothing to be afraid of,' I'd said.

But of course there was.

THE WINDOW BLINDS in our apartment kitchen are open, and I cower from the hard slices of morning sun coming through them.

What the doctor says to me on the phone hits me like the blast of a jet engine.

'We've had to get the baby.'

The way he tells it, my wife is fine. Well, she hasn't woken up yet after the emergency C-section, so he doesn't really know, but all indications are good. The accident pretty much spared her: a haematoma on the abdomen is all. What

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happened inside is a different story. Hard to say. He's been on shift all day yesterday and all night. He's done the operation and is going home now, but before he does, he just, you know, wants to put in a little courtesy call…

'You know, before going home. Tell you how things have developed.'

They've had to get the baby.

There's no rush, he tells me again. Things are stable now. Under control.

They've had to get the baby.

My heart climbs higher.

'*Hur mår barnet?*' I ask in a tender rendition of a language that is new for me. My voice feels feeble and squashed. *How is the child?*

The line is silent for a little while, the hiss of its static merging with the throbbing in my ears, the frazzle in my head.

'*Inte så bra*.' *Not so good*. The words come out in a whisper, an apology, a wish that things were different.

A cold fear closes around my throat. A terrible sense of prickling, tingling foreboding crawls all over my skin, from my toes up through my legs and torso and neck, and all the way up over my scalp from back to front. The skin in my face goes hot, then cold.

My chin juts up involuntarily and I find myself looking up at the ceiling, biting my lower lip. My eyes sting, then fill rapidly. A layer of normalcy, of fairness, of predictability crumbles away from the world I know. I stand there, the blue plastic handle of the cheap phone clutched and sweaty in my hand, in the kitchen of a new flat, a new town, a new country.

They've had to get the baby.

This is not how I imagined my induction into fatherhood. Over the phone, with a baby that hadn't been due just yet, who was not doing so good, and with my wife anaesthetised, out cold in the hospital. I'm not ready: don't they recognise that? My wife isn't here – how can we even finalise our deliberations on the name?

'*Vad blev det?*' I say quietly.

'*En flicka*.' *A girl*.

A block of ice settles at the core of my gut.

Then my legs give way. I slump, slide down past the slivers of sunlight that are stacked against the cupboards, and sit on the cold floor, breathing hard into the phone.

A girl.

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A baby girl.

Can pain travel by phone?

The obstetrician seems to get it. There is little more to say. Or perhaps he knows, from years of bringing bad news and good news, that platitudes create distance, that real sympathy nestles in the silences in between.

'I'm going home now,' he says softly. 'Come when you can. *Ingen bråska*. No rush.'

I scramble up from the floor and dress as quickly as I can. Not much later I'm running through hospital corridors and up the zigzag of stairs and through wide doors that open too slowly. The dash through the neon world feels endless, my legs like never before, limp, mushy, scarcely gliding under me, reaching for a future I desperately want to avert.

AS I BARREL past the nursing station a woman ducks out. She grabs me by the arm and leads me into a room down the corridor, one of the big red doors to the right, a room where babies get delivered. We go in.

'I am the father of…' I start, out of breath.

Yeah, of…?

'I know,' she says softly. She looks down at her sandals, as if to share a secret. 'Why don't you sit down.' Her hand sweeps to one of the chairs at the foot of the empty bed.

I look at the woman, keep standing.

'The doctor will be with you shortly.'

I don't move.

She is short and has maroon hair cropped closely around her cheeks. Her scrubs are ample with Scandinavian wholesomeness, her hands pink and hard from washing and lifting and more washing. She puts them on her hips and studies me with her head cocked.

The scramble of my heart makes me reluctant to talk. I feel my words might crumble in my mouth and shatter their way out. And something tells me I won't get answers anyway. I break away from her stare and look past her, out the window, willing my heart to climb down out of my throat.

A chestnut tree reaches up along the outside wall. The Nordic July sun, up for ages, has arched behind the leaves, scattering a thousand golden coins onto the linoleum floor around the woman. I know it won't last long. July has been unseasonably dark and wet. Rain has filled almost every day since the start of summer. A grey slate of low cloud is poised to move in any moment.

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The woman looks up at me and recaptures my glance. Her round face is a conference of bad news. She looks as if she knows what is going to happen.

And eager to get out of this room before it does.

'You sure?' she says.

'I'm fine,' I lie.

Her eyes flicker under the maroon brim, then soften. Something of a sympathetic oh-you-poor-bastard creeps into them. Our gazes linger a moment longer.

'Okay,' she says. She gives her head a little shake, as if to clear it. Her hands fall away from her hips.

She walks past me and squeaks across the linoleum. My eyes follow her. Her scrubs form a square outline in the back. She pulls the large chrome handle and sweeps into the hallway, the door retching on its spring. Then it clicks softly closed behind her.

I stand there, the empty room glaring at me in cold anticipation. Muffled sounds bounce at the door from outside. The screech of tired hinges, the glassy slam of a cabinet door. The rolling of little wheels, metallic, rattling. A smothered command, a man's voice. A baby's cry.

The father of…

Air gasps in through my puckered lips, hobbled, jolting.

Behind the chestnut tree the sun is gone.

IT WAS THE blond ponytail.

To me, the backward dash of it was always the perfect complement to the face in front. Her jaw jutted out slightly further than her forehead, pressing her nose up at a stubborn, cute angle, and spreading it broadly onto her cheeks. The ponytail kept it all in balance, the counterweight on a delicate construction.

I once told my mother that I'd either spend the rest of my life with this gorgeous girl or buy a golden retriever. There was no way I could imagine spending it with any other woman. But she was young, a number of years younger than I. What I needed was patience, and more patience.

She was the eldest of three sisters, two blond ponytails, one red. My older brother pointed her out to me. Giggles and trepidation filled the first meetings. But when we found common love in music, a smoothness gradually settled over us. I delighted and shuddered at the constant challenge of reaching back to an age that I'd left seven years before. Anticipation filled every day I might see her. Devastation followed every one I didn't.

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When I first felt her arm around my waist, a mere glimpse of a moment that lasted forever, she was twelve. I was nineteen, and left for the other side of the world soon after.

The first letter was hers. A folded card, really. It came only days after our goodbye. I ripped it open not a foot from the mailbox, my eyes flying over the billowing, rotund handwriting. Chitchat guided her through the first sentences, like a pussycat padding around hot milk. Then came the last line.

'Of course, I'm going to really miss you.'

My heart leapt.

I spent the day writing back, producing all of a word an hour. Sense and proportion battled with a galloping urge to not lose, to not let this slip away, to grab and cradle and secure it, now and forever.

Sense won.

We stopped counting letters soon after that, and each of us saved every one. Our first kiss would have to wait for years.

When it finally came it was the moist thwack of fresh cherry, of red voluptuousness. A kiss that had my fingertips reaching up to my mouth for hours afterward to make sure it was still there – the tingling hypoxic buzz of it.

On our wedding day, after so many years of suspense, of writing and waiting, of hoping and praying, nervousness only grudgingly made way for happiness. If things were so hard to get, would they be easy to keep? In the hours before I saw her in her wedding dress on that day, Kierkegaard's dread was my companion. That form of fear experienced in the pit of the stomach, the dread of what is not, but which may be. The dread of possibility. I didn't want to lose that face, those lips, that arm around my waist.

And I didn't.

Fate hunted down another girl.

THE DOOR BEHIND me clicks again. I rip my gaze from the window, turn around. A doctor strides in, and another one.

'Hey,' the first one says. She thrusts out her hand. 'I'm Lucia.' A ponytail the colour of mahogany and coffee beans dances on her shoulders.

Lucia. Light.

She exudes something young and soft and pristine, like a basket of fresh fruit. Her lab coat is buttoned up, stretched over the press of her bosom. The man introduces himself. His name never registers. On his head an alarming array of hair sticks straight up, as if someone has pushed it through the scalp from below. Winter stubble on a deserted cornfield.

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Lucia motions to the chairs. This time I offer no resistance, sink down into the yellow shadows of the room, facing her in silence. She leans forward, bathing me momentarily in a waft of coconut and jasmine. She folds her hands in her lap and studies me with hazel eyes before she speaks.

'Your daughter's had a bad night.'

She looks down. The clock above the door gives off three ticks, four. I stop breathing. The male doctor, clearly senior, has propped himself against the foot of the bed, watching over the two of us huddled on the chairs facing each other. Outside, all traces of a sun ever risen have been wiped away. The light in the room has been halved at least, and turned from yellow to gun-metal grey.

Lucia's head comes back up. Her eyes search me even more intently before she speaks again.

'Unfortunately, she died.'

All the sounds in the world disappear.

My jaw drops and my eyes bulge wide.

'I'm really sorry,' Lucia says. Her head swings softly from side to side. She looks up at the male doctor, then back at me.

'Would you like to see her?'

At first I don't understand. I have to remind myself to breathe.

'But…she's dead.'

Lucia ignores my croak. 'I'm sorry,' she says again, and gets up and leaves the room. A minute later she is back and behind her comes the scrub-wearing nurse with maroon hair. The nurse is holding a basket, tightly clutching the hoops and hugging it closely to her breasts.

My heart climbs higher. Again, I forget to breathe.

The nurse puts the basket on the bed, slowly folds down the handles and I try to peer in, anticipation and devastation doing battle in my chest. Wordlessly, surrounded by the two doctors, the nurse reaches in and gingerly folds one of her hands behind the little head, the other around the body.

Suddenly the harsh pinkness of her hands turns into something else. And I fault myself for not seeing it before. Something resembling motherly love, tenderness, radiates from them. The baby is carefully swaddled in cotton. I reach out to the pink hands.

I hold my first child.

The three are standing guard around me, silently. I have to grope around a bit to prevent tiny arms or legs from flopping out. There is no muscle tone. I have to

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firmly hold her little head – her neck won't do it for her. Her skin is still slightly warm from the womb, but cooling rapidly.

Then I see her small face, really see it.

It is beautiful. Angelic and undisturbed in a way only little children can look, her jaws jutting out slightly further than her forehead, pressing her little nose up in a stubborn angle so cute, so recognisable, so familiar.

It threads through my heart like a length of pipe.

My first cry roars out of me as if I have to puke. Violent and involuntary, it doubles me over, all but squashing the small child in my arms. Six arms fly out to me, catching me and holding me up.

I retch and sob and don't know how long I sit there with a little angel forever sleeping in my lap.

It cannot last long enough.

By the time I look up, the maroon-haired nurse has left. I look at my child, again, and again.

As my body sags under a fresh wave of pain I inhale with a violent gasp, then see Lucia press the back of her hand against her nose, dropping it back into her lap. I hear a slurp of air, thick and moist.

'Lucia?' It is the male doctor. Quietly.

'Yeah?' She looks at him.

He puts a hand on her shoulder. Points at her with a nod of his head.

'Really?'

'Feel your face.'

Lucia reaches up and touches her cheeks, pulls her hands back, sees them glistening in the dim light of the spoilt July morning.

'Wow,' she whispers.

'Want to leave for a bit?' he says.

She nods, gets up, slips out of the room.

The doctor turns to me. His eyes are glistening unapologetically. His cheeks are wet. He squats beside my chair, puts an arm around my shoulders. We sit in tears with a cold, dead baby between us.

Outside, rain has started spitting at the window.

AS WE GREW up, separated by oceans, the letters never stopped. The anticipation of slicing open a blue airmail envelope never abated. Hope congealed into something more real, even if at a distance. Reading her news, her wishes and her

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gradual crescendo from 'I miss you' to 'I love you' was immensely satisfying. At the same time, it inflamed a hunger for more, for evermore.

We did allow ourselves to make forays into other territories, other relationships. Perhaps these were little more than conquests of calibration. We both later acknowledged our half-heartedness. Nonetheless, it was not always easy to convince the rest of the world that I was waiting for the most gorgeous girl to grow old enough to marry me – if she still wanted to, of course. That uncertainty, and having nothing concrete to show for it, made me fair game for some.

One of them, a feisty young woman hell-bent on spending the rest of her life in a country other than the one she was a citizen of, and for which I was the ticket, took offence at a picture on my desk.

'How do you know you love her?' she demanded.

I was silent for a while.

'I have known this girl since she was twelve,' I finally said, trying to catch myself for letting too much air escape my lungs. 'I could never imagine living with anybody else. This girl is my everything.'

I searched the young woman's face, but saw only blankness. I turned to the photograph. In it, with her blond ponytail sticking backwards, she squatted on an impossibly large lawn of a Picardy chateau, petting the sweetest black lab, whose name was Art and who belonged to a French baroness. I pointed at her and said, 'I think she's gorgeous. I *am* in love.'

The young woman next to me scrunched up her brow, as if befuddled, as if in agony.

'How do you know that it's not loyalty? That you're not confusing loyalty with love?'

Later, morose and uninterested in getting any more dates pushed upon me by matchmaking friends, I awoke from yet another night I did not spend partying. The door of my little apartment rattled, noisily ending my lonely musings and hopes to stay by myself for a while still.

'Hey, where were you yesterday?' Bob demanded as he swung the door open and stepped through. 'We missed you, man!'

Bob had taken me under his wing soon after my arrival a few years back. He embodied most of the stereotypes of his larger-than-life land. He was hospitable and enormously friendly. He was also parochial and Lord, he was loud. I said nothing, glanced around furtively, as if trying to find the large audience Bob was addressing. He smelled like dust and sweat and a hyperglycaemic breakfast and the fusty whiff of what could have been a wet dog.

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He held still just in front of the opening, looking at me, cocking his head slightly, as if waiting for an explanation. I looked back, quiet. A drastically undersized pair of aviator sunglasses had been pressed into his pink face, like two round pebbles into soft clay. Strands of hair were pulled back over his bald scalp. He held a cinnamon bun in his right hand and a mega-sized plastic cup from some fine fast-food establishment in his left, the drinking straw sticking straight up from its rotund lid, like a feeding tube for the senile.

When he got no explanation, he looked down and tore a bite off the bun and stuck the straw in his mouth, his lips forming a small pouting O around it, his cheeks making simultaneous sucking and chewing movements.

'Met these awesome girls,' he grumbled to the lid of his mega-cup through one unused corner of his mouth. Bob was the only person I knew who could eat and drink and talk all at the same time. 'Awesome, I'm telling you. You would have loved one of them, what's her name again… Anyway, your type, man, exactly your type. You like blond, right? I told them…'

He belched. And then he coughed. And then he wheezed, and had to cough again, and because he was eating and drinking and talking all at the same time he also started choking.

Years later, at our wedding many thousands of kilometres away, Bob was there. He took to the microphone and announced that he had been among the first to see the photograph on my desk.

The photo of what he called my 'childhood sweetheart'.

He told all the wedding guests that the way I'd announced to him who she was, and the way I'd looked at that photograph, it'd turned him into an instant believer.

THE WAD OF paper is large and rough as sandpaper and I'm already having trouble finding a spot on it without snot, blubber, tears. The doctor with the stubble-hair strides next to me, his arm an occasional support. We move in and out of the pale wash of neon lights, and more corridors glide by. The walk is so long that my wife may as well lie in a recovery room in another city. Doors open at just the right tempo this time. My legs are no longer jelly. A leaden apprehension has begun to drive nails through my shoes, adding drag to each step across the linoleum. My stomach seems to have spilled out, weighed down and suspended between my knees like a sagging stoma bag.

Then, at last, into a ward, a yellow crisscross of corridors and green curtains and the quiet hiss of air-conditioning, two nurses silent spectators behind the safe glass of a cubicle.

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The doctor's arm tightens around my shoulders, then lets go. He comes to a standstill and drops behind. The officer staying behind in the trench, sending his foot soldier over the top.

Go ahead, boy. Godspeed.

Ahead of me, propped up on a bed that sits ninety degrees against all apparent convention in the ward's interior, is no blond ponytail. Her hair is a zigzag of darkened moisture, glued to a small, perfectly oval forehead. Her eyes are closed. I stop walking.

Then I see the belly under the hospital blanket. Or what is left of it. The deflation seems grotesque, its flatness the result of a sudden robbery, a snatch-and-grab, with whatever was in there gone, nothing to show for it.

When my wife was pregnant – that is, yesterday – it was hard to see from behind that she was expecting at all. Her figure held up beautifully, the front-to-back symmetry distorted only by a huge ball on the front, but radiantly, brilliantly so. The little girl inside used to move an amazing amount, setting off strange waves and undulations in my wife's belly. And a luminescence in her face that I had scarcely seen before.

Now I notice that her eyes are studying me from behind a haze of narcotics. They are dull, and worried. I stumble forward and land with my arms on the pillow, on the bed, and with my mouth on hers. The kiss lacks nothing in warmth, in love, in consolation. The soaked salt of my tears tries to press between our lips and I whisper, 'Our baby is dead, she is dead…'

My wife pulls away, dozy and softly. 'Dead?'

I nod, a new surge of tears and pain flowing onto the blanket.

'Dead? Our baby is dead, a little girl? She is dead?' Her head pivots back and forth on the pillow in confusion.

Again, I nod.

'But,' she protests drowsily, 'she was alive yesterday. I felt her moving around in me!'

I have no answer.

Then comes her own realisation.

'The accident?'

Guilt and sorrow and the whole world surge and push into the ward, loudly, inescapably, and crash down on us.

THE LAST TIME we see our daughter we are in the hospital morgue. There are just three of us: the grieving parents and a white-clad attendant. He has lit a large candle in an otherwise clinically harsh, darkened space. The hospital has sent its staff

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photographer. She has taken pictures of us and our first child, an insistence on their part I am eternally grateful for. A footprint is taken too. Some family members have come and looked at our child and cried, and gone.

Then it is time to call it quits. We silently dress our daughter for the first and the last time, in a smock given to us a few weeks ago. She feels cold, a bit stiff. The coffin is of solid wood, white, the size of a laser printer. The inside is lined with white needlework, the only soft edges to our hard inevitability.

My wife has a hard time standing up straight because of the surgical rip in her abdomen. I can't stand up straight either. We lay our daughter down in the coffin together, and the moments stretch out.

I finally summon the courage to pick up the lid, and together with the attendant I lay it in place, catching a final glimpse of the jaws, the stubborn and cute angle of the tiny nose. The closed eyes, the image of peaceful sleep. As the attendant firmly screws down the lid I see hopes and futures crumble. My heart is slit out of its chest cavity, a toilet of tears flushes inside.

In the days that follow I feel as if I have died. Yet my departure is being refused. I feel dead but packed in ice, preserved relentlessly, cold and claustrophobic.

We decide to cremate our daughter, for we do not know whether we will stay in the town or the country. Better to have her carried on the wind with us. In a non-denominational chapel her little white coffin takes centre stage. The handful of friends we managed to assemble in our short time in this new land is there in full complement, in black. On the white coffin lie a red rose and a ruffle of field flowers that I bought in town with my brother. Before the service I sit on the cold floor next to the coffin, rose in hand, willing the white-clad morgue attendant to show up with his screwdriver and undo this whole mess.

My mother, an ordained minister, leads the service. She vividly conjures images of a riot in heaven where my deceased grandmother, who was always full of warmth and piss and vinegar, takes our daughter into her lap and shakes her fist at God.

Before my wife comes home I make sure the baby room is gone. The pram, proudly waiting in our hallway for the last few weeks, goes into the basement, where I put it to rest under picture frames and a box and a bicycle inner tube.

'MEANING? THESE THINGS have no meaning.'

There are only two men in the break room off the main corridor, a few days later. Me and a senior professor, an old colleague and wise guy who'd told me long ago he was a staunch atheist. He is dressed the way he might usually be dressed for work at the university: like a bum. Unshaven, black jeans and a grimy dark-green T-shirt that has egg yolk on it. He wears what is left of his greying hair slicked back.

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Dawn has never really happened, the sun incapable of breaching the shale of the late-summer sky. The only light in the room is a cold slice coming from underneath the row of cupboards above the countertop. Stacks of smeary coffee cups rise out of the sink, like crooked chimneys stretching for a hand to attend to them. A cloth hangs down from a hook next to the countertop, streaks of black and grey against what'd once been white with blue checkers.

'Random events,' he says. 'No meaning at all. Coffee? Hell, we're here anyway.'

He turns to the countertop, reaches into the sink. His head is in lockstep with his neck, producing the stale motions of a robot. Maybe he has arthritis.

I sit down at a little blond table behind him. 'No, thanks, I'm fine.'

I watch him as he measures coffee out by the spoonful.

'So tell me about the accident,' he says. 'How long ago?'

'Last week. Ten days, eleven?'

He switches on the coffee machine, and it starts gurgling and hissing.

'So why'd things go wrong with the girl?' he asks, and turns to look at me. His butt is resting against the countertop, arms folded across his chest, legs crossed.

'What, my daughter, or my wife?'

'Both, I guess. Start with the daughter.' A shadow briefly crosses his face. 'I'm sorry, by the way.'

I nod. 'They didn't know. Had no idea. I mean, how the accident affected the baby. Turned out the liver ruptured in the accident.'

'The baby's?'

'Hm-mm.'

He whistles and stares at the electrical outlet just off the floor across the room.

'I'll be damned.' He turns around, lets the coffee machine hiss some more, pours two cups and brings them over. The coffee looks so thick you'd need a pair of scissors to cut it off at the spout. He puts the cups down on the table with a clunk. 'How you have this?' He wags his finger at the coffee in front of us. It stares back at me like black oil, a thin blue film shimmering on top.

'I'm fine,' I say. 'Really.'

'What, you don't like coffee?' He keeps standing.

What sits before me looks like crude centrifuged from the Alberta tar sands.

I tell him about the accident, the wait, the many times through the evening and the night on ultrasound to try to figure out what was wrong with the baby, if anything, and he gets it and soon he is doing the talking, most of which makes little sense to me. He is standing next to our little blond table and talking about when the patient's heart rate goes down '…and, well, not really down, but you've got this

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saltatorial pattern, and then you pretty much always get metabolic acidosis, lipemic plasma, and of course it would have been abruptio placentae, you know apart from the oxygen then the syncytial layer's all screwed up, you might get uteroplacental apoplexy or myoglobinuria, can't forget myo… Oh, I got some real nice orange juice,' he says, turning to me, brows arched. 'Want some? Freshly squeezed. Get it from an organic farm out east, Mostorp. Just south of Björnstorp.'

He trudges back to the fridge, bottles in the door rattling when he opens it. He ducks his head down, the grey hair sticking out against the yellow light from inside. 'But foetal liver damage? Pretty damn unlikely scenario, though,' he says, talking into the fridge, 'that's the problem…nobody expects…uh.' He peers intently at the labels on the bottles on the inside of the door. 'So, yeah…unlikely that the liver would…I mean the baby's… Ah, here it is.' He pulls a bottle loose from inside the fridge door and comes back to me. 'You know, garden-pathing and all that. Docs think it's one thing, based on vague symptoms. Because they've seen it before. Happens all *over* the place, man.'

'Cognitive fixation,' I say.

'Or lock-up, yeah. Cognitive lock-up.'

He pours the orange juice, holds it out for me. Something sticky pulls on my skin as I try to reach the glass. It seems my hand is glued to the grimy tabletop. Suddenly, grief and impotence and emptiness boil up inside of me. 'Actually, why do we even care?' I demand as I tear my hand free. 'My daughter is dead. If it is all meaningless, then why do we even care how disasters happen? To prevent them?' I snort, wet and loud. 'Give me a break.'

He pulls up a chair from the table next to me, swings it around, the thin back swivelling on his fingertips. He seems in no hurry. 'I mean, hell,' I continue, 'if the thing that killed her is so *way* out there, so unlikely, so infinitesimal, then what good is it to poke into the messy details of some diagnostic, organisational archaeology? Chart review? Will it bring her back? Will it do anybody else any good?'

He sits on the chair, front to back, leans his chin in his hand, supports his elbow on the chair's back.

'See, that's the puzzle.' He lifts the cup to his mouth, takes a swig of tar sand. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows coffee. 'We can do all kinds of forensic work on accidents, on deaths. But we do a crap job explaining suffering. These are meaningless coincidences of space and time. And then we make up some god who is behind it all…'

He swivels the cup away from his face, puts two fingers in his mouth and makes a puking sound. 'I mean, what's the whole childish script that the Judeo-Christian tradition can come up with?' His cup is wagging in front of my face now, coffee fluttering over the edge, angry and challenging. He inhales savagely. 'We invent some god who then invents rules, spells them out. People violate them, they

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disobey, and wham, they get punished for their transgressions. Check out the stories. You'll see. Rules, disobeying, punishment, suffering.'

The coffee cup lands on the table with a wooden bang. Up close, his face is a rumpled piece of wax paper. He looks like an artist on a smoke break from kneading a clay sculpture, the guck of it jellied and smacked across his chest. 'You get what that means?' His eyebrows fly skyward. 'The whole idea of suffering is that it's your own damn fault. You're made to suffer? Well, feel guilty, damn it – don't feel sorry for yourself.' He pushes back from the table, stomps off to the counter to refill his cup.

On the blond table he leaves behind a furious Rorschach of dark coffee stains.

I am silent.

In my mind I can see nothing but the shocked crumble of my wife's face, the puckered agony that has squeezed out all her pretty features.

The accident?

My gut contracts sharply, bracing for a new torrent of guilt, the wet prickle of pain that pushes behind my eyeballs.

'Think I want to be an atheist too,' I mumble.

I sip some of the orange juice.

It is divine.

THE RAIN COMES.

First it is a soft hiss through the forest to my right. From the sound it seems to move along the narrow road, soon to arrive in spatter and dribble. The sky above the trees is low, a depthless grey. Light from the waning evening is diffuse, landing everywhere and nowhere.

My search for why my daughter died has led me here. I stand at the bend where two people met some weeks ago. Where they crashed into each other, killing a third. I peer among the trees, study the dead quiet of the road, no skid marks, no debris, nothing.

A life snuffed out, nothing to show for it.

No clues, no traces.

I stand there a long time, sucking in the saturated air, willing the bend in the road to yield something. To give me at least the hint of an answer. The road lies there, gaping back at me in stupid ignorance, with all the innocence of an imbecile. As Kierkegaard might have put it, it is existentially indifferent.

Random coincidences of time and space…

Indeed, there is something inescapably random, something existentially indifferent about the death of my little girl, of the trajectories intersecting the way they did, of her being positioned in the womb the way she was. Why not a second

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earlier or later, why not a few degrees off to the left or right? The chances of all the pieces coming together like they did are so mind-numbingly small, infinitesimal. The arbitrariness is so riling, so intractable. Why was it my daughter who died and not my neighbour's?

Rain has made it to the bend now. Black splotches on the tarmac merge and become a shiny, slick surface.

Does disaster have meaning? All my probing here on this corner of a forested road yields no answer to the question I most desperately want an answer to. Why? Why her? Why us, why me?

I look at the bend again. None of the forensic clues that I could generate from what it yields, about closure rates and vehicular vectors, will do me any good. The epistemological question of what happened is a lousy stand-in for the existential one of why I am made to suffer.

What is the meaning of disaster?

AT THAT MOMENT I have no idea that thirteen years later my wife will have become an expert in gestational disease and difficult pregnancies. That one day, out of many like them, she is confronted with the devastation of a patient, a would-be mum of thirty-nine, with six miscarriages, and now with a forced abortion because of the seventh foetus' neural tube deficiency, the husband crying alone in an anonymous lobby downstairs.

Nor do I know that, by that time, I will have written my umpteenth book on disaster, error, failure and suffering, translated into languages and reaching into corners of the world I do not even know.

Decades from now I might see that we ourselves are the hinge between disaster and meaning. That we, ourselves, evoke some kind of order, some significance, to colonise areas of intense chaos and turn them into pockets of bivouac.

But not that evening.

Not yet.

I look up at what passes for the sky. I turn to leave. The rain has let up; the evening is aching to shut down.

Nothing is left but stillness and the steady drip of wet leaves.

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