

*"Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death."*

*-Werner von Braun*

## **The Ordinary Life and Extraordinary Death of Josh Turner**

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### Chapter One

Drip, drip, drip... Transfixed, I watch the drops of morphine fall steadily into my IV tube. Senses dulled, my lower lip droops lazily. In (drip), out (drip). My breathing assumes the unhurried rhythm of the translucent drops, and this heightens the sense of euphoria; a velvety veneer of swarming insects seems to be gently massaging the top of my head, and the undulating sound of their humming rocks me on a wave of ticklish bliss. In (drip), out (drip) – like the metronomic ticking of an antique clock. The TV's on, as usual, with the volume down. Its endless flow of kinetic images wash over me, accompany me as I cross over to – where exactly?

"Hello-o." A nurse bustles in and I grin at her like a demented Walmart greeter. She goes about her usual routine – thermometer, pulse, blood pressure – her business-like demeanor tempered by an exaggerated sympathy I suspect only the terminally ill elicit. "How are you today?" she inquires brightly.

"I'm fine," I reply, slurring only a little.

"That's good," she singsongs. "Are you having pain?"

"Mmm, sometimes."

She pauses momentarily, frowning. "You need to see the doctor?"

"No, no, it's not too bad." I wave my left hand dismissively and let it flop onto the sheet.

"You're sure?" I nod. Then she leans in and fluffs my pillow. "Well, you let me know, Mr. Turner, if the pain gets to be too much, OK?" She straightens up, leaving behind a trace of musky scent, and smiles.

"Josh. Call me Josh." At this very moment, I am deeply in love with this woman. I can barely contain the profound feeling that wells up inside me.

She is a squat, oldish Filipino woman with a round fleshy face. I want to take her hand and bring her to me. In my mind, I see us sharing our lives together in a little apartment. Maybe a two-bedroom in Santa Monica or Venice Beach. – she with her small yapping dog, doing needlepoint, me with my cancer, adoring her for the rest of my days.

"If you need anything —" she points to the call button next to the bed, "— you use this, OK?"

I look at it dumbly, as if seeing it for the first time. "Oh... yeah. Sure."

She smiles and nods several times, then leaves to continue her morning rounds. I plop my head back on the freshly-fluffed pillow, feeling a slight pang of betrayal. Before long, though, the TV gathers me in like a shepherd retrieving a wayward sheep. There's a daytime talk show on and a young actress I recognize being interviewed with relentless cheerfulness by the female host. All smiling teeth and styled hair, the actress responds to the host's questions with good humor and the requisite touch of self-deprecation. Now she's laughing animatedly, rocking back and forth in her seat. I'm filled with the desire to buy hundreds of tickets to the movie she's promoting.

The show goes to a commercial. A flaxen-haired little girl squeezes half an orange over a patch of dirt, and a full-grown tree magically springs up. Little silver packets of fruit drink sprout from the branches. Now a group of children is gathered around the tree and in slow motion the juice packets fall from the branches and into their hands. They look so happy sipping the juice, I want to cry. The commercial ends with a close-up of the little girl, pink-cheeked and smiling, as she drinks from a straw. I sigh contentedly for her.

Then, without warning, the endorphin center in my brain begins sputtering to a halt, choking off the flood of chemicals coursing through my body. As the tide of joyous well-being recedes, I swallow repeatedly, straining to slow its retreat, to stay for just a moment longer in that narcotic nirvana. But it's no use. The circus has packed up and is moving on, leaving behind a sky full of dark, ominous clouds.

I consider pushing the button on the trigger-like device hanging from the IV stand and giving myself another dose, but instead heed Dr. Yang's warning regarding overuse of the pain medication. Besides creating an addiction to it – not really an issue – overuse causes a tolerance for the drug. And that is an issue. Reluctantly, I allow my mood to darken while the pain, for the moment at least, is behaving itself. Better to suffer the mood swings of the rebound effect, I figure, than the sharp teeth of the beast that's tearing up my insides.

Feeling bored now, and more than a little antsy, I jab at the TV remote and go through all the cable channels twice. On my third pass I leave it on a nature channel, showing a documentary about porpoises. I start to slumber lightly as I watch, my eyes blinking open, then slowly drifting closed. Soon, I find myself gliding effortlessly through the warm ocean water, my silvery grey skin smooth and shiny in the bright afternoon sun. I'm chattering gleefully, making porpoise sounds, surrounded by my porpoise pals.

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For years ridiculous amounts of money were deducted from my paychecks to pay for a health care plan that I rarely used. But now that I am using it I can't help but feel an underlying sense of guilt. The private room alone, I figure, must run into the thousands each week. Then there are the medications, lab tests, etc. 'Die already!' a voice inside me pleads. 'Don't be a burden to all these nice people.' Never underestimate the ability of a Midwestern upbringing to stay with you to your dying days. You find yourself not wanting to be a burden to others out of sheer habit, even though you have a perfect right to be as much a burden as anyone else.

When I awake the room is aglow in the soft light of dusk. My dinner sits next to the bed on a swivel tray. Without looking, I know its contents – soft, squishy carbohydrates, overcooked vegetables, some sort of creamed meat, and Jell-O or pudding for dessert. They may as well throw everything into a blender and let me suck it through a straw. Eating has dropped precipitously down my list of priorities,

anyway. I came here weighing close to 185 pounds, but looking at the sheet covering me I'd guess that I'm closer to 160 now. I'm disappearing before my own eyes.

Now the evening news is on, but I'm not really paying much attention. Maybe it's the medication, or it could just be the overwhelming sense of boredom. But for some reason my mind fills with hazy images – images from a bizarre dream I had years ago. A dream so real, I sometimes still wonder if it was a dream. I think back to that night, when Beth and I were camping in Oregon. I was having trouble getting to sleep and I left the tent to sit by the campfire. I sat there idly poking at the embers with a stick, feeling the heat of the flames on my face. After a while, I felt the urge to go to the bathroom, so I threw the stick into the fire and stood up. With a loud crackle, the embers burst upward in a zigzagging flurry.

I stepped through the dense undergrowth, looking for a place to relieve myself, my senses hyper-aware of the cacophony of forest sounds that surrounded me. Above me the stars winked good-naturedly while the moon played hide-and-seek with the clouds. I remember now hearing a high-pitched whine, but it just seemed like the wind whistling through the trees, and I paid it no mind.

Then, suddenly, everything turned blindingly white. I found myself bathed in a searing funnel of white light. My nose and throat were smothered by a thick sweetness mixed with the unmistakable scent of almonds. Gagging and gasping, I felt as if I was drowning in Amaretto. The stars spun crazily, like sequined pinwheels. My legs collapsed and I fell to the ground, unconscious.

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I awoke in a pitch-black room, my face pressed against a smooth, cool surface. I waited for the numbness to drain from my arms and legs, and then very slowly raised myself up. I was beginning to wonder if maybe I'd gone blind when suddenly a light came on. Like a raccoon caught digging through a trashcan, I froze in my spot. Mechanically, I swiveled my head from side to side and found myself in my parent's basement. It was fixed up exactly the way I'd had it when I was in high school. There was my waterbed, and next to it the red shag, oval-shaped rug. On it sat the wooden cable spool that I'd spent a weekend sanding and varnishing into a table. Melted into its center was a multi-colored hand-dipped candle, the type you found in head shops back then. On the walls were my old posters – Hendrix, The Stones, and even the one with the caption, "Make Love, Not War," showing two rhinoceros having sex.

And there in the corner of the room was my old stereo, the first one I'd ever owned. It looked like an ancient artifact from a long-lost civilization. I went up to it and ran my hands along the brushed metal faceplate, caressing each of the buttons and knobs. The feel of them brought back long-forgotten memories. Then I looked down, and – holy shit! – there was my old record collection sitting on the floor next to one of the speakers.

All of them were stacked against the wall as if I had just left them. I sat down on the white mushroom-shaped footstool that my mother had bought at K-Mart and began riffling through the records. They were in alphabetical order, and the first one I picked out of the stack was by Aerosmith – Get Your Wings. I hadn't heard it in years.

'What a cool dream,' I kept thinking to myself. 'I can't believe how real everything seems.' I took the black vinyl platter out of the jacket sleeve and stared at it for a moment in my hands, enjoying its flexible give as I turned it over. I placed the record onto the turntable then lowered the needle into the lead

groove. The familiar pops and crackling sound gave way to the opening riff of One Way Street. Instinctively, it seems, my arms assumed air guitar position and I began playing along. Dum-da-da, da-da-dum.

So completely did I feel seventeen-years-old again that I leaped up, went over to my waterbed and put my hand down into the space between the bed pedestal and the wall. My hand grasped the familiar rectangular object. I pulled it out, went back to my seat and placed it on my lap. The hand-carved brown wooden box had been, for a brief time in my youth, the center of my very limited universe. I opened it up and shivered a bit for old time's sake when I saw the pack of rolling papers and the tightly-rolled baggie. A few moments later, I was holding in my hand a fairly well-rolled joint. It was a little lumpy in the middle, but otherwise, definitely smokable.

I lit it up and took a few drags, then sat there enjoying the moment. It was a kick to be back in a time of my life when there were so many pleasures and so few worries. Then, slowly, all the familiar old feelings started flooding back – chief among them paranoia. Smoking pot in my parent's basement had always been risky, and the possibility of being busted was as palpable as the smell and taste of the weed I was inhaling.

Just as the memory of that fear was crossing my mind, I felt a light tap on my shoulder. I must have jumped a foot straight up into the air. I turned around, panicked and wild-eyed, to find my dad standing there.

"What the hell?" I shouted

"Hello," he said.

"Um, hi." Reflexively, I'd cupped the joint in the palm of my right hand.

"Do you have any idea where you are right now?" he asked.

"Well, dad, right now I would have to say that we're in our basement." My voice took on the sarcastic tone of a seventeen-year-old talking to a clueless parent.

"Right, right," he said, gazing around the room. "Fascinating." Then he looked down at his hands, spreading the fingers and appraising them. "And I'm your father, you said?"

I just nodded. Something in his manner caused me to relax. I took a small hit of the joint and dropped it into the ashtray.

"And to you this is all – a dream?" He spread his arms and turned his head from side to side.

"Yeah, that's pretty much what I was thinking," I replied, feeling giddy then from the pot, as if I were part of some surreal scene – like the Hieronymus Bosch poster on the wall.

"What if I informed you," he said, leaning in close to me, "that at this very moment we were on a space vessel traveling through your galaxy at faster than two-hundred light years per minute?" For some reason, this made me start to giggle uncontrollably. "It's true," he continued, his expression veering

between mild amusement and mild irritation as I tried unsuccessfully to control my fit of laughter. His eyes blinked rapidly and his posture stiffened.

Maybe it was the effect the pot was having on me. Or, maybe it was just the sheer incongruity of it all. Whatever the reason, I decided that appeasement was probably the best of my options. "OK, OK, I believe you. We're in outer space."

"But you don't really, do you?" he said, shaking his head. "Oh well, no matter. But perhaps this will convince you?"

With a whooshing sound, my parent's basement shimmered, then winked out. We suddenly were standing inside of a large glass dome approximately fifty feet high and one hundred feet in diameter. The vast depths of space yawned before me, filled with the naked brightness of celestial objects. I staggered back a few steps, my mouth gaping.

"Welcome to the universe."

I looked at him. "Who are you?"

"I'm from a galaxy you've never heard of. Out there..." He pointed to a constellation of stars.

"So you're, you're a –"

"Extraterrestrial is the word you're looking for, I believe."

I was speechless. Dream or no dream, this was some heavy shit. Somehow, I'd managed to leave my tent in the middle of a state campground to go to the bathroom, and ended up on a spaceship in the middle of the galaxy talking to an alien who looked like my father.

"As for my appearance," he calmly stated, gesturing toward his body, "what you are seeing is a projection from your memory. My actual physical form exists in the infrared range of the light spectrum, which unfortunately you aren't able to detect. Observe." His features blurred into a pool of static, then disappeared altogether. Alone, I suddenly felt very naked in that upside-down glass bowl.

A few seconds later, to my great relief, he reappeared. "You see?"

I nodded, starting slowly to comprehend.

"Since it would be awkward for you to carry on a conversation with an empty space, I'm taking on the physical appearance of whomever you conjure in your mind's eye. That person can be someone close to you – or, it can be someone you've never met. Apparently, at the time I approached you," he said, glancing down, "you had a strong mental image of this person."

"Well, yeah. I just happened to be thinking of him when you snuck up on me." I circled around him, looking closely now at his features. It began to dawn on me that this was not the same sixty-five year-old man I had just seen nine months earlier when I'd gone home to visit for the holidays. The hairline was fuller, the sideburns longer, and the face less wrinkled. He looked about the same age as me, actually.

As if sensing what was going through my mind, he put his finger to my forehead. "Every person you've known, every place you've been, sensation you've felt," he tapped my forehead, "is stored right here. The being I resemble is from a time in your past."

"That's because I was in a place from my past." I looked around the cold, sterile space we stood in. "At least, I think I was."

"That, too, was a projection from your memory. I chose it from your subconscious at random when I first picked you up."

"Picked me up? Wasn't it more like abducted?"

"Such an unfriendly-sounding word," he said distastefully. "Here, let me show you what I'm talking about. Think of somewhere that you've been at some time in your life."

Any place at all. Then close your eyes and concentrate on nothing but that place."

Feeling like an unsuspecting rube who'd been called up on stage to assist a third-rate dinner club magician, I reluctantly closed my eyes. After giving it a moment's thought, I pictured myself seated at a window table of a restaurant that Beth and I often went to on the Redondo Beach Pier, watching the waves roll in from the ocean.

"OK," I said. "Got it."

"Now open them."

I opened my eyes and found myself sitting at a table by the window of a restaurant. Outside the window, waves were crashing on the beach. Redondo Beach. Seated across from me, my benevolent captor smiled beatifically. I let out a low whistle, then looked him squarely in the eye. "OK, who are you?"

"I can tell you my name, but you'll find that it doesn't translate well."

"Try me."

He tilted his head back slightly and made a shrieking noise, like a teapot spouting off inside of a cement mixer. "Vrebellamax!" is what it sounded like, although the vowels seemed to take a few U-turns.

"Vr – vree –" I tried saying it back, but couldn't shift my larynx into the proper gear.

"You'll hurt yourself," he cautioned.

"OK," I said, rubbing my throat. "How about if I just call you Max?"

He shrugged his approval. "Very well."

As I sat there looking out at the surf, a macabre thought slowly crept into my head. I tried to push it away, but it kept looming over me like a giant balloon float in a Thanksgiving Day parade. A sickening wave of anxiety churned inside me, pressing against my chest. My eyes flitted around the restaurant while my fingers nervously drummed the tabletop. "Listen, Max," I finally said. "What exactly is this all about?"

Did something happen to me back there in the forest?"

"Happen? Like what?"

"Like did I fall and smash my head on a rock? Or did I have a massive coronary?" I was becoming a little hysterical and had to force my constricted lungs to take slow, deep breaths.

"Are you asking me if you've died?"

"Yes, that's what I'm asking. I have a right to know, don't I?"

He let out a short, piercing yelp, but quickly regained his composure. With a reassuring smile, he gave me a patronizing pat on the shoulder and said, "You have not died."

"How would I know that? I mean, one minute I'm walking through the woods looking for a place to take a leak. Next thing I know, I'm on a guided tour of my past life with a ghost who looks like my father. If that's not some kind of afterlife, I don't know what is."

"You are not in the afterlife, trust me," he said.

"Trust you. Uh-huh." My eyes narrowed as I resisted the urge to punch him in the mouth.

"You know, it's your species irrational fear of death that's responsible for all of this Sturm und Drang that you're experiencing."

"Well nobody should want to die."

"Dying is the one absolute thing that we were born to do. If you fear death, then you may as well fear breathing."

"You sound as if life doesn't mean anything to you – or your species."

"On the contrary; life means everything to us. We just know how to let go and move on. You won't find us acting like children who need to be pried from the monkey bars at the park when faced with our demise."

"So how exactly is it," I said between clenched teeth, "that your people do face death?"

"Why, with a smile," he replied. "And a cheery 'Toodle-oo!'"