

## WALKING AMONG RUINS IN BABYLON

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'Help,' said the person at the end of the line. 'There is blood everywhere.'

'Right,' I said. I was still more or less asleep.

'Do you hear me?' came the voice. 'I am sitting in a pool of blood.'

'I think you have the wrong number,' I said.

'For God's sake,' the voice said to me. Then the line went dead.

'Who was it?' Marian asked as soon as I set down the phone on the bedside locker.

'I'm not sure. I think it was a crackpot,' I said, sitting up a little in the bed.

'A crackpot? What's a crackpot doing ringing us?'

'I'm not sure. Something about blood. It sounded like there was lots of blood.'

'What? Whose blood? I don't like the sound of this.'

‘Me neither. I’m fairly sure it was a crackpot.’

We then looked at each other, and as soon as we did, the phone started ringing again.

‘Jesus Christ,’ said Marian.

‘I’m not answering it,’ I said.

‘Answer it, for God’s sake,’ Marian said—just like the caller had—and I leaned over and lifted the phone.

‘You’ve got to help me,’ the voice said.

‘That’s enough out of you,’ I said and hung up.

We both sat up in the bed. Marian had one hand covering part of her face. I was frowning at the phone.

‘One of these days we need to think about changing our phone number. Or going ex-directory. Or getting rid of the phone,’ Marian said.

‘We hardly ever use it any more,’ I said, rubbing my eyes.

‘Exactly,’ Marian said.

‘The only time we use it is to answer somebody calling us at four o’clock in the morning.’

‘That’s right,’ Marian said.

‘I can throw it away right now if you want,’ I said, but Marian didn’t reply to that. Instead she removed the pillow from around her head, bunched it up and placed it lengthways behind her back, against the headboard.

'Is it really four o'clock?' she asked.

'Yes it is,' I said, glancing at the digital clock.

'Four o'clock. Jesus. I have to be up in three and a half hours.'

'Well, let's snuggle down again,' I said. 'If we're lucky we can get right back to sleep. No harm done.'

'Did you not hear what I said? I have to get up soon. I can't go back to sleep now.'

'I did hear you. But I don't see how it should interfere with the few sleeping hours available to us.'

'What if the person rings back? What if I have just slipped back into a dreamy sleep and the phone goes off again.'

'Do you want me to put it on silent?' I asked.

'It doesn't matter. I'm awake now. I don't think I'll go back to sleep. I think I'll have a cup of coffee. You could make it for me.'

'I don't want to make coffee,' I said. 'I want to go back to sleep.'

'Fine. I'll get it myself.'

But she didn't move. She just sat up a little more, puffed up her pillow again, reached over to her side and switched on the lamp. Then she reached for her nail file and started stroking her nails.

'I wonder who it could have been,' Marian said, as she moved the file across her nails.

‘Who knows,’ I said. ‘At least it wasn’t your mother.’

‘What was that?’

‘Your mother,’ I repeated. ‘It could have been her on the phone. I’m saying it wasn’t her, thankfully.’

‘Leave my mother alone. She isn’t well.’

‘Exactly, and all I’m saying is it could have been her calling, or someone calling on her behalf. You know, to say that there is a problem—maybe. But it wasn’t like that. It was only some nut job out there in the world, somewhere, with nothing better to do than bother people with prank calls. I wasn’t trying to sound uncaring. Ok?’

‘You know I get a little spooked when the phone goes off in the night,’ Marian said.

‘I thought you were going to get some coffee,’ I said, deciding it best to rewind the last moment or so, and to my surprise, Marian set down her nail file, whipped off the duvet, swung herself out of the bed and felt about the floor for her slippers. Only she didn’t make her way downstairs. She didn’t even leave the bedroom. She headed for the bathroom, the ensuite, and closed the door behind her. I started to have a bad feeling about getting back to sleep, and I was sorry I had dragged Marian’s mother into it.

She was an old lady now, more or less immobile, and, thanks to the millions of cigarettes she’d smoked throughout her long life, her lungs had

just about given up the ghost. There was a good chance she was starting to lose her mind too. Not two days ago we'd visited her at the nursing home and she'd thought I was her long dead husband. 'Barry, could you make me a hot water bottle,' she had kept saying to me. At first I'd thought she was trying to wind me up—she knows well my name is Paul, not Barry. Then it became apparent that something was going on with her mind, something really heartbreaking. 'Barry, could I borrow a cigarette off you,' she asked me, even though I haven't smoked in years. 'Barry, could I trouble you for a light. Barry, remember the time we went to see Johnny Cash. Barry, I want you to hold me,' she said, making room beside her in the bed.

She did not let up for the entire duration of our visit. Marian even asked me to play along, which I was happy to do—I was feeling sorry for her—but as soon as that *hold me* request came my way, I thought it might be time to play a different game. 'What is all this about?' I asked Marian when I thought her mother had gone to sleep, but my wife just put her finger to her lips and sent me off for a packet of Majors.

Most days she was fine, the carers had told us some time ago. She knew exactly who was who, and where she was, and where the rest of us were all at. She would ask for us on these days, even go so far as to ask one of the carers if she could put a call through to our house so that she could speak with her daughter. That's why Marian bought the mobile. It was one of many

gestures she thought might make life a little easier for her mother. The mobile had large buttons and Marian spent an afternoon showing her mother how to make a call by pressing just a couple of these buttons. And so, from time to time, her mother would think of the mobile and make a call to our house. Usually she called to ask Marian to come and see her. And to bring her something: a blanket she had a particular fondness for, some fresh flowers, certain newspapers she had gotten it inside her head that she would like to read. Marian was only too happy to oblige. She was glad she could help her fading mother, glad to have this time with her so close to the end.

Soon, the calls were coming through at any time. Early on a weekend morning. During the course of a busy work day. Right smack in the middle of the night. And, once she'd gotten it inside her head to make a call, Marian's mother wouldn't let up until someone had answered. In next to no time, it seemed, she was constantly jabbing the mobile's buttons, had figured out its system of short cuts, was becoming very fond of the redial button. Her quick ability to use it and desire to do so at any time, it seemed to me, had given her a new lease of life. I said as much to Marian in our kitchen one evening. And just then, as if by way of confirmation, our landline went off and Marian had to skip dinner and make a trip in to her mother.

The upshot of it all was that Marian was in big demand. Her mother would call with her inventory of requirements and Marian would drop what she was doing and make a trip down town to hunt for what was needed. In no time her mother's room had become cluttered with an assortment of items. Rugged slippers to withstand the nursing home's shiny floors. Boxes of Jaffa Cakes to spice up the nursing home's unending supply of Rich Tea biscuits. A locker full of remedies to combat, at various times, barbaric doses of heartburn, constipation and other unannounced discomforts.

By and large, Marian had no problem with these calls. Neither did I. Who wouldn't want to help out an old lady in distress? But sometimes she called up for no obvious reason, and at a bad time. Once recently, into the early hours of a Monday morning, Marian hadn't answered the phone—she hadn't been able to because she was exhausted after having had to work through the weekend nights, she'd been on call—and her mother had become really upset at the nursing home, so much so that Marian had had to take the Monday off work and spend it trying to placate her mother and reassure her that she would always be at the end of the phone. 'I depend on you,' her mother said many hours later, when Marian had finally managed to subdue her mother's anxiety.

'I could do with a break,' Marian said the Sunday evening after. She had spent the entire weekend running errands for her mother and was not

looking forward to the work week ahead of her. ‘Well then, let’s go somewhere,’ I said. ‘Ok,’ said Marian and we made plans to get out of town the following weekend. We received a blessing from Marian’s mother too. ‘Have a wonderful time, bring me back something nice,’ she said to us. We even nearly made it. We were only about ten miles from our destination when the call came through. I could hear her cackling away inside Marian’s mobile, slowly starting in on whatever it was that was bothering her, and before the conversation had ended I was swinging the car around for the journey back.

During the drive, I suggested to Marian that she should let her sister Imelda know what was happening with their mother and that maybe Imelda could consider coming home for a visit. That way she too could have some time with her mother. Maybe the two of you could work out a sort of time table I said to Marian, take turns visiting. But Marian reminded me about the time she had once before tried suggesting such an arrangement to her sister and, in particular, the response her suggestion had received, and I thought better of pushing on with my idea, and so held my peace.

‘I’m afraid,’ Marian’s mother said to us at the nursing home. ‘Afraid of what,’ I was going to ask her, but it was late and I was tired and disappointed that we hadn’t got away, and I was afraid myself that if I did open my mouth I wouldn’t be very pleasant, and so I didn’t say anything. Later again that

night, in between answering three more phone calls, one of which was a request for a set of nail clippers, I had a dream I was strangling Marian's mother.

I heard the toilet flush, and a moment later Marian stepped out of the ensuite. She padded around the room, kicked off her slippers and got back under the covers.

'Are you coming with me in the morning?' Marian asked, resuming her finger work with the nail file.

'I can't,' I said. 'I have some work to finish for Monday.'

'You always say that.'

'That's because it's true.'

'It's nothing that can't wait.'

I didn't say anything to that. And we were both silent for a moment or two. During the silence I considered reminding Marian about accompanying her to see her mother a couple of days ago, and how I had spent much of last weekend at the nursing home, and had given up lots of work time on several other occasions in the not too distant past. I was about to voice my thoughts, but one or two recently misworded and badly thought-out protestations came into my mind, and so I said nothing. Instead my thoughts turned to the coffee she had been talking about making, and how I was

warming to the idea after all. Now there was a tension in the air, however, an unwelcome atmosphere in the room, something that should never have been let out.

Next thing the phone started ringing again. It was enough to make Marian jump. My own heart leapt a bit at that. I was sorry I hadn't silenced the thing.

'Are you going to answer it?' Marian said.

'Ok,' I said a little too quickly, and I snatched up the phone.

'Help me,' the voice said straight away. It was the same voice as before.

'Quickly, before it's too late.'

'Get lost,' I said loudly into the receiver and let the phone fall out of my hand. It landed on the floor with a dull thud. I leaned over as though I needed to see what the phone was now up to, then I dragged the bed clothes up around my chest. All the time, Marian was looking at me, as though I should be behaving in a more grown-up way.

'Well?'

'It's the nut job again,' I said. 'They really have it in for us tonight.'

'What did they say?'

'They just keep asking for help and say that time is running out.'

'What sort of help? What do they sound like? Who is ringing us? Will you please start making sense. I'm getting a little freaked out.'

‘It’s nothing,’ I said, ‘please don’t worry. Obviously someone has got our number and is determined to have some fun at our expense. Whoever it is will soon get tired of their little game. So don’t worry. Ok. Look on the bright side, it could have been your sister. At least it wasn’t her.’

‘What the hell is that supposed to mean?’

When I gave no answer she whipped off the duvet and sat out of the bed. She stretched her arms, stood up, and walked to the wardrobe and reached for her nightgown. In the dim light she felt about for her slippers. Then she padded out of the room. By now, I was fairly certain I wasn’t going to get back to sleep.

It was true, though. If it wasn’t Marian’s mother calling us up for no obvious reason, chances are it would be her sister Imelda calling with some crazy experience in her life she wanted to spend ages talking to Marian about and then ask for advice she had no intention of heeding. These calls could arrive at any time too, because Imelda was living in Africa or South America—I wasn’t sure where, she was always on the move—anyway somewhere remote and poor, where there were no clocks, and so she never knew what time it was when she called. The call usually arrived via an operator who would first of all ask could we accept a reverse charge call at some crazy rate per second. ‘Of course I’ll take the call,’ Marian would say, and wait for her sister’s voice.

Often she called when she needed something she didn't know how to get hold of herself. So far this year we had posted off a multi-bandwidth transistor, a digital camera, a three-tier Swiss army knife with a built-in altimeter, a compass, mosquito netting, malaria tablets, a second digital camera after the first one was stolen, two sets of binoculars, three sacks of cheese and onion flavored Taytos and a tent. 'Can she not get any of this stuff herself?' I had asked when we were shopping for the tent, and I received a look that would have sent shudders through a giant oak.

We were supposed to go and visit her when she first moved away to Africa. But she wasn't a month gone out of the country when she was calling up with instructions for us not to make any hasty plans. 'I don't want anybody interfering with my settling in,' she said when Marian asked why not. 'I will let you know when I'm ready for visitors,' she told her sister. That was seven or eight years ago.

I'm not sure what exactly she has been up to since. Over time she had hauled herself from one continent to the next, involved herself in various do-good projects, snippets of which she told us about whenever she put through one of her urgent-request calls. One time we got a postcard from Somalia. There was a picture of a circle of men sitting around a smoking stone. One or two of the men were holding long pipes to their mouths. 'Look how colorful everything is,' Marian said and stuck the postcard to the fridge

with the aid of a Buddha magnet that had previously arrived from somewhere in India. Later, though, I pulled the postcard off the fridge and took another look at it. What's so colorful about it, I wondered. Then I wondered what Imelda was up to in Somalia.

She was supposed to come home at Christmas a couple of years ago. We drove up to the airport to welcome her home. So as to quickly spot her sister wheeling her luggage through, Marian took up position in front of the arrival gates. That way, upon spotting her, she could let out a big whoop and rush through the waiting crowd and throw her arms around her sister. 'I want to hear everything,' Marian practiced asking her sister on the drive to the airport. 'I can't wait to hear what she has been up to,' she said to me in the car. If she said it once she said it a hundred times.

Imelda never made it that Christmas. We waited four hours at the airport, maybe seven. It turned out she'd had to change her plans. 'A last minute crisis,' Imelda told Marion a couple of days later, among other things, when the call explaining her no-show had finally come through. She couldn't make it the following Christmas either. Or the one after that—last Christmas. By then, she was busy helping forest-clearers and seed-planters in central Africa. That's what she'd said when that call came through. By then, you could also add a pair of adjustable walking boots, two night-lights and a gas cooking kit to the list of requests for the post bag, as well as various pills to

help ease constipation and diarrhea, which essentially meant tossing extra boxes into the trolley when out shopping for Marian's mother. She'd even asked for a batch of axe handles to be sent out. 'Why don't we just show up and clear the forest for her,' I said to Marian, and was I sorry.

Then she became some sort of freedom fighter. She was on World Report on the radio talking about the hell on earth innocent people were going through. Some eejit in Dublin wrote an article about her in the paper. I couldn't understand a word of it. Even the six o'clock news mentioned her. I couldn't believe it when I arrived in from work and saw her being interviewed by Sharon Ní Bheoláin. Marion was glued to her chair and waving me into the room and gesturing with her fingers, first on her lips for me not to say a word, then pointing to the television which she had cranked to full volume.

'What is the current situation over there, Imelda?' I heard Sharon Ní Bheoláin ask, and then the television camera was pointing at Imelda who was wrapped up in a white sheet and standing beside a camel. Then she was off into a long lecture about human rights and abuse and narrow escapes in the desert. Next thing she was dragging another freedom fighter into the camera shot. He was very tall and lean and his black skin was glistening and, as he fidgeted with the bandoliers that criss-crossed his torso, Imelda was introducing him to the world as the bravest, most noble man on earth. She

couldn't keep her eyes off him. Sure enough, when the call came through, she was telling Marian all about the new love of her life. 'How was I on television?' she began, and got quickly into freedom talk and the hero in her life. Then she asked if Marian could send out another pair of boots and more Taytos. 'Are they for the camel or the freedom fighter?' I asked and Marian almost sliced me open with the look she gave me.

Late one night not so long ago she called—via the reverse charge operator—and I picked up the phone. 'Marian is at the nursing home,' I told Imelda. 'Is there anything I can do?' 'Well, Paul, the way I see it the only thing you have to do is look after Marian. Make sure she is happy. Give her a little something every once in a while. Bring joy into her life.' She went on like that for a few minutes and I had to remind myself that she was living in a different time zone to the rest of us and that it would be impossible for me to strangle her there and then.

I took another look at that postcard with the smoking stone and wondered some more about Imelda's unconventional career path. Purifying water. Eradicating cholera. Chopping down a forest to plant seeds. Fighting for freedom.. I didn't know. When she got back from the nursing home, Marian didn't seem to know either. It was a mystery. Think of all that she has given up, was all Marian had to say. Think of all the suffering people she is helping. And so, once again, I tried my best not to say what I really thought.

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‘I wouldn’t mind but I was in the middle of a great dream,’ Marian said. She was back in the bedroom, under the covers, yawning a bit. ‘I was really enjoying myself—if you know what I mean.’

‘I think I was dreaming too,’ I said. ‘But I can never remember them anymore—unless they’re upsetting or contain scenes of violence.’

‘Like the one about strangling my mother.’

‘Did I tell you about that? I don’t remember. Jesus, I must be losing it.’

‘You’re getting old, that’s all.’

‘Sometimes I wake up and I know I’ve been dreaming. I can almost reach out and touch it. Then, just like that, it’s gone. I used to have a great memory. I was proud of my memory. I can still remember things I did when I was a boy. I can remember details and all the names involved and the places and colors. And my dreams. I can remember dreams I had when I was a boy. Some of them must be over forty years old at this stage. Think of it. Tell me about your dream.’

But Marian didn’t answer. I looked over and saw that she had fallen asleep. I’d been waffling on about fading memory and getting in touch with the distant past and showing off my childhood stories, and Marian had fallen asleep listening to me. I looked again, and closely. She *had* fallen asleep. After all her talk about coffee and having to get up soon and everything she

had to do, she had fallen asleep. I wasn't surprised, though. She'd been working hard recently at the accommodation complex she managed, putting in long evenings, too many if you ask me, and weekends too. I reached over and, as delicately as I could manage it, removed a strand of hair that was inching its way towards the tip of her nose. She murmured at my touch, but she didn't wake up. I smiled and watched her for a minute. You're exhausted, I thought.

It made me think of another recent addition to the night callers. Marian's boss. How could I have forgotten about him? As soon as I'm finished strangling Marian's sister I'm going to start in on this joker. He's a developer and his idea of doing business was spending lots of time getting friendly with old people before they died. Before he made friends with them he made sure that they owned something—like forty or fifty acres of undeveloped land—and that they had nobody to leave it to when they died.

No building contractor was too cheap for this joker. No tradesman too unqualified. No security firm too sloppy. Marian had been working for him for seven years before he started calling her up in the middle of the night. In that time she had progressed from life as a wages clerk to manager of an accommodation complex near the university. The Village it was called. All year long The Village was full of students, and never a week passed without

some idiotic incident that required Marian dropping everything and offering immediate assistance.

The cameras are down, Marian, can you go in and take a look. The guards have caught some one breaking into the convenience shop, Marian, can you go in and assist with the details. There's a fire in one of the apartments, Marian, can you go in and see if it's under control. These are some of the things Marian's joker boss had said upon calling in the middle of the night. Why can't you go in, joker, I felt like telling him the last time he called. I was all set to, but Marian grabbed the phone off me and listened to his sorry voice telling her the coin machine for the laundry had stopped working and asking if could she go in.

One night I had to get up and drive her in. She'd had a couple of glasses of red wine to calm herself down after receiving two other calls, one from her mother who had called up in a terrible state because Marian hadn't been in to see her in two days—you could hear her mother's tears spurting out of the phone at our end, she was that upset, and the second from her sister pleading for some quick cash to be wired to somewhere in Afghanistan or Turkmenistan—I don't know, one of those places that ends in Stan—because she had been mugged and needed to catch a fast plane. Anyway, whatever the crazy details were, by the time her boss phoned in his request Marian had had some wine and was afraid she would be over the limit.

‘Who’ll be out checking at this time of night,’ I said to her, trying my best not to wake up. But out of bed I got, like a fool, and across town and over the misting bridge as far as her work place I drove her, like a fool, and damn it if all hell wasn’t breaking loose at The Village.

At first, it looked like some sort of fancy dress-up party. Youngsters, hoards of them, dressed up as superheroes. Only they weren’t the kinds of superheroes who went around rescuing the world. They were the kinds of superheroes hell bent on causing as much destruction as possible. I spotted Spiderman pelting paint bombs at car windows. Batman and Robin were trying to set a skip full of rubbish on fire. Iron Man was standing on top of the abandoned security hut, simultaneously swigging from a flagon of cider and relieving himself. Then, out of the mist, appeared a lad with several layers of toilet rolls wrapped around his body with masking tape. He was carrying something that looked like a car battery and he ran towards a bunch of youngsters, stopped when he was among them, pressed a button on the battery he was carrying and let out an almighty roar. All at once the bunch of youngsters dropped to the ground. Some of them lay on the ground, as still as corpses. Others started shaking arms and jerking their legs and other parts of themselves. Meantime, the lad with the toilet rolls strapped to his body was running towards another bunch of youngsters, and when he reached them the exact same thing happened all over again. ‘Who is he

supposed to be?’ I asked Marian. ‘I think he’s a suicide bomber,’ she replied and we both looked at each other and we laughed. Then I drove us the hell out of there.

Her mother. Her sister. And her boss. That was three people right there, a cocktail strong enough to hammer anyone into the ground. And that’s before I got started in on our son. I hadn’t mentioned him before because every time I did I wanted to strangle him. I really did. I know he’s my son, and I often think of all the fun we used to have when he was very young, times we would go hunting together for horse chestnuts or mushrooms, and go down to the courts and shoot baskets, and later at night, as best I could, answer his questions about stars. Right now though, I could wring his neck.

Ben. More than anyone it was Ben who kept Marian up nights. He was the biggest reason she always answered the phone in the night; he was the reason the phone was never disconnected. It was Ben she was holding out for. The funny thing was though, of all the people calling up looking for Marian to cancel her going away plans or to send fast cash three-quarters way around the world or to get out of bed at three o’clock in the morning in order to help some eejit insert a coin into a washing machine, our son was the one person who never called.

I never brought him up unless I had to. Mention of his name upset Marian. The rest of them could throw what they liked at her. But our son—that was where she was vulnerable. He was the one person she'd have loved to get a call from. Any time. Morning, noon or night. She'd have loved a call from him in the middle of the night. She'd have loved if the nut job out there who kept bothering us on this night was our son. My luck ran out the day I lost my boy, she often said. The first time I heard that I thought she was being a bit theatrical, a little over the top. He's giddy, I'd said. Let him go see some of the world. But as time passed, and we'd hear little then nothing about what our boy was up to or where in the world he was or if he was planning to come home, it would cut me up when I'd hear her say it.

To tell the truth, it broke my heart. Made me feel useless. And that I'd done a bad job with him. And if I could've made it happen, I'd have grabbed our son by the ear, hauled him to the nearest pay phone or internet café and had him make a call to his mother. I'd have had him calling every minute of the day if I'd thought it would cheer Marian up a little. I'd pay for the calls myself, wouldn't care where they came from, at what time of day, how long they lasted. He could be calling for any reason, to ask for the price of a ticket to Tahiti or for the loan of a VISA card—here, keep the thing I'd say to him. Or he could call for no reason at all. He could call, say hello mum, hello dad, and we'd take it from there—anything to hear his voice. Marian had even

gone to the trouble of buying a laptop computer, setting up an email account for herself, and finding out everything there was to know about Skype. But most of the time her email box was empty, and she never got to wear her Skype headset. One call, was it too much to ask of someone?

He turned twenty two on his last birthday. Or was it twenty three? If it was, that made me exactly twice his age. Time flies. Anyway. By now he'd been travelling for well over two years, no doubt been to lots of places, had sent us the odd postcard, every one of which Marian had spent days staring at. 'I'm on my own personal journey, dad,' he'd said to me setting off all those months ago, carrying little more than a sleeping bag and a pen. Last we'd heard from him was a two-line email letting us know he was on his way to visit Imelda somewhere in Nepal. Good luck to you there, son.

I looked over at her again. She was fast asleep. Dreaming about something or someone, perhaps. Her mother. Work. Our son. Who knew? She was wheezing too, not so gently either, and I knew she had fallen into a deep sleep. To be honest I was amazed she didn't fall asleep more often and not wake up for a month.

But one night her mother rang and Marian didn't wake up. She slept right through the ringing telephone. So I answered the phone and I heard this cackly old voice. 'Hello,' the voice said. 'Imelda, is that you? Imelda, are

you listening to me. I just wanted to call and say thank you for everything you're doing for me and for being there every time I've needed you. I don't know where I'd be if it wasn't for you, Imelda. I just wanted to call and tell you that.'

I thought she was going to hang up then but she didn't. I could hear her breathing down the line. She sounded hoarse and wheezy, and I was sure she had forgotten she was on the phone. Then she spoke some more. 'I'm afraid,' she said, sounding suddenly very frail. 'I'm afraid of something and I don't know what it is.' Then she hung up.

I hadn't said a word to any of this. I'd just let her wheeze away for the few minutes and when I thought she was finished I put down the phone and lay back down into the bed. But after that call I hadn't been able to get back to sleep. I couldn't stop thinking about what she had said about being afraid, and I felt sorry for her being so old and having to face something and not know what it was. And, for a moment, I thought I could sense the fear she had been going on about all this time, and I lay there feeling bad that I had lost my patience once or twice recently. I turned over then and I spent the rest of the night staring at my sleeping wife—just like I was doing right now.

I never told Marian about her mother calling to say thanks. She would have wanted me to rehash everything that was said, word for word, as though it was a coded request for something her mother wanted, and I

didn't want to get into any of that. I would have had to mention about the mother getting her daughters' names mixed up, and though it was now a normal mistake for the old lady to make, I didn't want Marian knowing her mother had called her by that other one's name. I could have tried to fib my way through it, but past form let me know I'd have cocked it up and then Marian would see I was trying to cover up something and that would end up making a bigger deal of it than it was and it would all end at the same result—with an upset Marian. And I didn't want to have to report her mother's words about being afraid and not knowing why. That would've spooked Marian and I thought it would be a good idea to spare her that. And so I kept it from her.

It was almost light outside. I looked over at Marian. She looked peaceful, and I was both happy and sorry for her. Happy because she was getting some shut-eye. Sorry because I knew she had a stressful day ahead of her. And right then I wanted to tell her a few things. I wanted to tell her how I thought she was a good daughter to her ailing mother, a good sister and a good mother. I wanted to tell her how I thought she was a good wife to me, a great friend, at times, an unforgettable lover. I wanted to tell her how I thought she still looked good to me, especially in those faded Levis she thought were too small for her. I really wanted to tell her all these things,

but she was asleep now and I didn't have the heart to wake her. Her alarm would take care of that in little over an hour's time.

Instead, I thought about writing her a little note and leaving it by the bread basket I suddenly thought about setting up for her downstairs. A breakfast treat to send her on her way. I thought about some more things I could do for her. Take her out for a meal at the weekend. Buy her flowers. Maybe catch a show. Then I thought about booking us a weekend away some place and this time going through with it. Some place far away even, like Paris or Rome. A city break, staying in one of those boutique hotels. I was thinking about all this and getting really excited and starting to feel full of possibilities, and I was plotting further and further down the line, and everything was starting to look rosy again, and even though Marian had dragged my share of the duvet across her side of the bed, a warm feeling was travelling through me, I mean all the way through me, and for once I didn't mind that I hadn't slept and that I wouldn't get much work done that day.

I was thinking about all this, about where we were going to go and the room we would be staying in and what we would be doing in it, and it wouldn't matter if Marian's mother called us or her sister or her boss, it wouldn't matter at what time of day or night they were calling us, and whatever they wanted would have to wait because Marian and me would be

far away, far away in Egypt worshipping the pyramids or walking among ruins in Babylon or floating up the Limpopo River in a boat made of reeds. Hell, we might even bump into our son along our way—imagine the look on Marian’s face if that were to happen.

And I was smiling myself now, smiling and thinking through all these possibilities when the telephone started ringing. It took me a moment to register that it was our telephone, ringing in our bedroom, and though I lay there and let it ring on, amazingly Marian didn’t wake up. She didn’t as much as stir. I was tempted to let it carry on ringing, and stay right inside my thoughts, right inside everything that lay ahead for Marian and me, but that other needle inside me kept prodding and so I reached over and picked up the phone.

‘Help, please help me,’ the same familiar voice said. ‘Time is running out.’

‘What can I do?’ I shouted down the receiver. ‘Tell me what can I do?’

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**Alan McMonagle** lives in Galway, Ireland. *Liar Liar*, his first collection of stories, was published in 2008. Subsequently, he was one of four Irish authors placed on the long-list for the 2009 Frank O'Connor Award for the Short Story. His stories have appeared in journals in Ireland and North America including *Natural Bridge*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Grain*, *Prairie Fire*, *The Recorder*, *Southword* and *The Stinging Fly*. A second collection is due from Arlen House in April 2013.