

UNDERTOW

Michael Prescott

For Arthur J. Ellison

†††

HE WAS IN HIS SIXTY-FIRST YEAR when he was caught in the undertow. He didn't know it at first. He thought it was only a vivid dream.

A lovely dream. The dream of a party, an outdoor celebration, in a city of dancing lights.

Shell boats swanned the waters, delicate vessels in crescent moon shapes with gossamer sails lit up in fantastic colors like phosphorescent lanterns. Two or three or four people rode in each craft, which carried them silently over dark water, leaving no wake, guided by no captain, propelled by no oar, not even by a breath of wind.

The boats traveled along canals beside a riverwalk, a marble promenade of fountains and translucent canopies and great spherical lights, like bubbles, drifting in air. The sky was a sheet of deep purple, empty of moon and stars. It was the sky captured at the precise moment of dawn, before the first appearance of the sun. Dawn indefinitely prolonged, an eternal dawn.

He stood on the riverwalk amid the milling crowd. He had a drink in his hand. He felt mellow and fine.

People he knew appeared now and then in the shifting play of faces. A professor from his college days, a neighbor from the apartment building where he lived as a young man, a friend of his parents. They seemed to recognize him, but they didn't stop to talk. He had no need of conversation anyway. He was content to stand and watch. The air was cool and soothing, and the floating lights danced ...

The dream came the next night, and every night after that. Each time, he peered a little more deeply into its mysteries. He began to wait impatiently for night, for the excuse to sleep.

His days were increasingly unsatisfactory. Small things became exasperating. Tearing strips of packing tape off a roll ... finding the right screwdriver for a Phillips-head screw ... He replaced a defective doorbell; a week later he replaced it again.

It was as though the universe was glitching up, rendering even simple tasks inordinately complex. The laws of physics seemed malleable. He would put something down, and it was gone, just gone. He would drop some small item on a blank stretch of uncarpeted floor, and no amount of searching on hands and knees, probing with a flashlight, peering along baseboards and into corners, would lead to its recovery. Things simply vanished. There was no logic to it.

Sometimes a pot of water would boil on the stove; other times, it wouldn't, no matter how long he waited. Same pot, same burner, everything the same, but opposite outcomes. No logic. A package was left outside his door by the postman; before he arrived home, it disappeared; it was missing for three days, long enough for him to inform the post office that it had been stolen; on the fourth day, without explanation, it showed up, unopened. No logic.

Water at sea level is supposed to boil at a certain temperature. A package is not supposed to reappear out of nowhere like an apparition at a séance. Items that fall on the floor are supposed to stay there, where they can be found, not slip through a gap in the spacetime continuum. Those are the rules, but now, it seemed, the rules were breaking down.

Nothing works in this universe, he would think, and then stop himself. That was a funny way of putting it. *This* universe – as though there was another.

But there *was* another – the universe he visited in his dream. The swanning shell boats, the bubbles of light like Chinese lanterns ...

He was at a table by the waterway. Two people were with him, a mustached man and a smiling woman. He knew them, yet he didn't.

“What’s your name?” he asked the mustached man. “Have we met? Do we know each other?”

“Let George do it,” the man said.

“Is that your name? Are you George?”

The man didn’t answer.

“George it is , then.” He turned to the woman. “Do you have a name?”

She showed him an enigmatic smile.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m calling you Mona, short for Mona Lisa. Is that all right?”

She kept smiling.,

“Silence implies consent,” George said.

That world was so bright, so vivid. The waking world grew dim by contrast. Every day, the colors of his life were paler, the light more faint, the sounds more muffled. There was an unreality to it. He was abnormally aware of his own body; it felt like an alien thing, an unwieldy contraption of joints and rods, pivot points and structural supports, a puppet body. His hands were peculiar objects, reminiscent of an animal’s paws, crude and clumsy, not his hands at all. Even his vision seemed wrong. The world around him was acquiring a certain granularity, like the visible grain of old film stock. Where there had been smooth sheets of light and black pools of shadow, now there were dots, millions of dots, like pixels on a computer screen, or like a newspaper photo viewed through a magnifying lens. Dimensionality, too, was diminished; the world had flattened out, becoming a projected image on a screen. He was surprised when he reached out to touch something and made physical contact. The tactile quality came as a shock, as if, reaching toward a movie screen, he’d found himself stroking the actress’s hair.

God, he thought. I’m tired. Of everything.

Getting up in the morning – or even in the afternoon – was harder than before. Exhaustion dogged him as he pulled on his clothes. No amount of coffee could rouse him. He felt like a deep-sea diver in an ocean trench, moving in clumsy slow-motion, under killing pressure, every step an effort.

“Haven’t seen much of you,” his neighbor Mrs. Markham said when she found him sitting on his patio on an autumn afternoon. “Been busy?”

His smile flickered like a failing fluorescent tube. “Just keeping to myself.”

“Well, don’t be too much of a hermit. It’s not healthy.”

The expression on her face troubled him. It was as if she’d seen something deeply wrong.

He went inside and studied himself in the mirror. He saw what she had seen. His face had shrunk, somehow, skin stretched over bone. His eyes were plunges of shadow. He looked sickly, feeble. He asked himself how much he’d eaten today. He wasn’t certain he’d eaten at all. And yesterday? Surely he’d taken something to eat then – or the day before ...

The truth was, he’d been missing many meals. Neglecting his hygiene, too – wearing the same unlaundered clothes for days at a time, skipping showers, forgetting to brush his teeth or comb his hair. And he’d become sedentary. Where once he’d made sure to go for a walk every day, now he spent his time lounging on the sofa or in an easy chair. Those were the only times when he felt happy, because those were the times when he went away to the other place.

He understood, then, that the dream was killing him, draining him of life. As he spent more of his time in the other world, he lost his commitment to this one. Maybe that was why things were breaking down. Maybe this world only works if you’re committed to making it work. The body, too.

He stayed up late that night. He was afraid to sleep. To sleep, perchance to dream ...

And in that sleep of death – how did it go? – something something the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to ... Then a list: disprized love, law’s delay, insolence of office. Petty things. That was the genius of it. Hamlet recounted all the stupid trivial things that made life tedious, the mundane frustrations, the casual slights. To focus on grand tragedies would undercut his point, which was that life becomes insufferable in its awful normality, its soul-crushing ordinariness. Those are the thousand natural shocks.

The can opener that won't work, the phone call that wakes you from good sleep, the headache with no cause, the insomnia with no solution.

Insomnia. Perchance to dream. To dream ...

The party was winding down. He and his two companions left their table and made their way toward a line of boats. The boats, he understood, were to take everyone home. Like gondolas in the Venice canals, it seemed. The sky was still that lustrous purple, the water smooth in the dim ambient light that glowed from all points in the sky with no definite source. The luminous globes seemed to have multiplied; they floated everywhere, shimmering in many colors, like a flock of carnival balloons lit up on the inside.

His college professor appeared beside him, smiling. "It's very scenic, isn't it?" the professor said. He agreed that it was.

He woke up knowing that he could not escape the dream, and there was no reason to try. The dream was with him always, more real than anything around him. The boats in the canals, the ribbon of shining darkness, the deep purple bowl of the sky. And music. He hadn't heard it at first, but when he and his friends set off down the canal in a boat of their own, the sweet, high, plaintive notes wafted into earshot.

Wonderful music. Mournful, soaked in melancholy, yet with a promise of hope. An anthem and a monody. It was music that contained and resolved all the contradictions of life, the long slogs of boredom, frustration, and unease, the saving bursts of joy, and the settled comfort of contentment that came as a reward to those who persevered.

Music that saluted life while casting it off. Like a hymn to a native country, left behind, not missed, yet not forgotten.

Throughout the day, he hummed that music. It comforted him. He no longer worried about food or hygiene or what his neighbor thought. It seemed he no longer required sustenance. A cracker or two. A sip of water. Anything more fatigued him. He was like those yogis and fakirs who trained themselves to do without nourishment. Some were said to survive even without oxygen. He wondered. If he decided not to breathe, would

his body rebel and force him to draw air? The experiment seemed like a lot of work; he didn't attempt it.

At some point he realized it had been days since he'd watched anything on TV. He switched on a channel at random, out of simple curiosity. Pictures and sounds, colors and tones, movement and talk. It was very much like life. The world inside the box was a whirling cascade of sensory impressions. It was so easy to become immersed in them. But if he sat back and observed from a distance, the show became less urgent, less compelling. Almost silly, really – all the heroics and strife, operatic highs and tragic lows. Viewed with his present detachment, it was only so much pointless confusion. Important things were being decided, matters of life and death, yet they didn't seem important or even particularly diverting. He switched off the TV and refocused on the rooms around him as he wandered through his house. The rooms were not less real than the things on television, but not more real, either. They were only more sensory impressions, not things at all, merely color and texture and shape, tone and tempo and pitch, occupying his awareness in the same way that arrangements of pixels occupied the TV screen. Images. Shadows in Plato's cave. And what threw those shadows? What was their source?

The boats were farther along now. The city was left behind, the riverwalk lost in distance. The banks of the canal hosted rare, splendid trees, wreathed in a diffuse luminosity that seemed not to emanate from them but to condense out of the very air. Each was misted in a different color, colors impossible to describe, colors that occupied portions of the spectrum unknown to his eyes. He understood about the boats now – why they needed no wind, no motors, no oars. The river itself drew them forward, the long winding circuit of black water uncreased by any ripple. The river pulled them gently on, its urgings subtle, its purpose unknown.

“Where are we going?” he asked his two companions.

Mona bestowed her enigmatic smile and did not answer.

“One door closes,” George said. “Another opens.”

“What door?” he asked.

George began to hum. Not the music from last night, but a different tune, a song for campfires and starry nights.

He knew that song.

Row, row, row your boat ...

“But no one is rowing,” he said.

Mona smiled at that. The boat glided on.

The next day there was a snowstorm. He sat by the kitchen window and watched the heavy white flakes rush down. Each snowflake was unique, or so he had heard, yet they fell together into a common pile, melting and fusing, losing themselves in others, forfeiting their uniqueness without a struggle. But perhaps not forfeiting it altogether. If each was unique, the combination of so many must also be unique – each drift, each mound, distinct from all others. Nothing was lost, not really. He sat there all day and into the evening, not moving even when the snow ceased and night came on.

“We’re getting close,” he said to his companions. “Aren’t we?”

Mona, mute as always, displayed her maddening, beatific smile. George said, “One of these things is not like the others.”

He was getting tired of this mustached man. “What exactly are you saying?” he asked. “Do you mean me? Am I some kind of trespasser?”

“Forgive those who trespass,” George said.

“Am I crashing the party? I didn’t mean to. I didn’t ask to be here at all.”

“They also serve,” George said, “who only stand and wait.”

“What does that mean? Why can’t you talk like a normal person? You’re not making any sense.”

“When the student is ready, the teacher appears.”

He gave up. George was not helpful. His oracular pronouncements meant nothing. And his smiling companion was even less communicative. He wondered if the passengers on the other boats were so hard to talk to ...

But there were no other boats. Not anymore. What had begun as a flotilla had dwindled to a single vessel, their own. The rest must have turned down other branches of

the canal system. How this could have happened without his noticing it, he had no idea. He only knew that his boat was alone on the water, with none of the drifting Chinese lanterns behind or ahead. Utterly alone, no people on the banks, no sign of habitation or enterprise anywhere beyond the trees. Only a dark plain in both directions – in every direction – an immense stretch of blankness, not black but a very dark blue, shining faintly like burnished metal.

The trees were thinning out, becoming widely separated. Soon there would be none, and nothing would be left but the boat and the river, the plain and the sky.

Perhaps this was it, then. Their destination. This great emptiness, this unpopulated void. And he would sail it forever, with a woman who smiled and a mustached man who spoke in riddles.

That day he was troubled. For the first time the dream itself had unsettled him. He remembered that poem by Byron or somebody – “the darkling plain.” That was how he thought of the wasteland beyond the river. He looked up the poem in an anthology of verse – it was by Matthew Arnold, not Byron – and read it aloud. Parts of it disturbed him. It spoke of the loss of meaning, of the creeping advance of nihilism. It said there was no point except the present moment. This qualification didn’t reassure him. He had long since lost interest in the present moment. If there was no meaning beyond it, there was no meaning anywhere.

He was on the boat again. The trees were all gone. Land and sky had taken on the same bluish cast, blending together, erasing the horizon. His companions sat, unconcerned.

“Listen,” he said, “are you dead? Is that what’s going on? Am I having some kind of out-of-body experience, and my – I don’t know – my astral body is interacting with ... with spirits? Is that it?”

Mona surprised him by speaking. “You feel very much alone, don’t you?”

She had a soft, kind voice, a soothing voice.

“I feel alone,” he said. “Yes. Look around. There’s nothing.”

“I don’t mean here. You’ve felt alone all your life.”

He resented this. She had no right to analyze him. Night after night, she'd remained silent, merely smiling, and now suddenly she was playing psychologist.

"You don't know me," he said.

"But I do. And you have never been alone."

He digested this. It felt true, somehow. It felt like something he should have known already.

"Do I know you?" he asked slowly.

She nodded.

"I don't recognize you."

"Look deeper."

He did, and he saw something – or almost saw it – he wasn't sure – and then he was awake on the sofa where he had dropped off to sleep. Awake and staring around at his lighted living room, trying to recapture what he had seen, or almost seen ...

Something good? He wasn't sure. He thought maybe good and bad were not applicable concepts. That maybe, in trying to judge and assess, he was making a fundamental error. That this situation was not about judgment but acceptance. That his personal likes and dislikes, comfort or unease, were irrelevant.

Because *he* was irrelevant. He, or the one he thought of as himself, was no more than another bundle of sensory impressions, pixels on a screen.

He moved through that day without effort, accomplishing small things that didn't matter. He thought he understood about George and Mona now. Each was part of him, or perhaps he was part of them. George was something like his subconscious, he thought – a repository of remembered phrases and old memories. And Mona was what he would call his higher self, his oversoul. She hardly ever communicated with him directly. She worked through George. The stock phrases he uttered weren't random. They were hints, not direct statements. Mona's guidance, filtered through the mustached man.

"Is that right?" he asked her, when he was on the boat again.

She nodded, still smiling, always smiling.

"But you *can* talk to me."

“At times.”

“You’re talking now. Why?”

“The time for separation is nearly over.”

He almost knew what that meant, but he needed to be sure. She answered his unvoiced question.

“Our destination is not a place, but an event.”

“Three in one, one in three,” George said. “All for one, and one for all.”

“No more separation,” Mona said.

“Between us, you mean?” He was confused. “Why were we ever separated?”

“You know,” she said.

He wasn’t sure he did.

“I’ve got a job to do,” George said. “Where I’m going, you can’t follow. What I’ve got to do, you can’t be any part of.”

He recognized the words. Bogart, *Casablanca*. His big goodbye speech.

“You mean” — he was still addressing Mona — “to be alive, I had to lose touch with most of myself? Sort of ... dumb myself down?”

She didn’t answer. No answer was necessary. But it seemed wrong. It seemed cruel.

”Absent thee from felicity awhile,” George said.

Yes. Absent thee from felicity. And suffer the thousand natural shocks. And sleep, perchance to dream ...

“You’re almost there,” Mona said. “But you have one thing backward.”

“Tell me.”

She didn’t.

“Tell me!”

He woke with the words on his lips.

There was nothing left for him to do. Despite the cold, he sat on the patio for a long time in the early evening. Mrs. Markham drifted over. She appraised him critically. Was he sure he was all right? He looked under the weather.

Yes, he agreed. He was under the weather. He had been under the weather for some time. His whole life, in fact.

He wasn't sure he said that last part. Actually, he wasn't sure he'd said any of it. He might have merely thought it. The words, if they were spoken, hadn't reached his ears. More sensory impressions, increasingly unreliable.

Mrs. Markham might have said something more, or she might not. He'd lost all awareness of her. She had faded into the twilight, along with the sky and the patio and his own body.

He knew he would sleep tonight, and for the last time. He could put it off no longer. He was ready.

The blanket was warm and heavy on his body, but he scarcely noticed its heat or its weight. Scarcely noticed anything except the gray darkness of his room and the slow, slow breathing deep in his chest and the welcome closing of his eyes.

Row, row, row your boat ...

There was no need to row. Not here. The boat moved without aid. But life — that was different. Life was struggle and effort and grinding it out and slogging along. It was hard, and it was painful, and it was necessary for some reason Mona knew and he could only dimly see.

And now it was over. Caught in an undertow, he had been pulled into this other world, and this time he was not going back, nor did he want to, nor had he ever wanted to.

“This is it,” he said, “isn't it?”

Mona regarded him with her wise, compassionate eyes. “Your heart is weak. Tonight, as you sleep, it will fail.”

His heart. Perhaps that was why his energy had been slowly failing, why he'd become clumsy and listless, why he slept so much.

“Let it fail,” George said, quoting Einstein, who foreswore medical help when his own time was up.

Yes, let it fail. It had served him well enough, the battery powering his physical body, but it didn't matter now.

All around him were pieces of his life, experiences scattered like leaves, a whirlwind of memories. There he was, six years old, playing with his dog Willie, and there he was at twenty-one, in cap and gown on graduation day. He was taking his first steps ... he was mourning his mother ... he was watching the snow fall through his kitchen window ... turning down a job he should have taken ... accepting a job he should've turned down ... forgetting what he should have remembered ... remembering what he should have forgotten ...

A life lived. A story told.

The river was gone. Land and sky were fading. The boat itself was melting away.

He took George's hand in his, and Mona's hand in the other, and the three of them closed a circle that had never been broken.

As they went away somewhere, George's song followed them, merging with other music, other wisdom.

Row, row, row your boat

Gently down the stream

Merrily, merrily, merrily

Life is but a dream

It had been a good dream, he thought, but he was glad, finally, to be awake again.

†††

Undertow, by Michael Prescott

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