

‘Spinning into Oblivion’

*Oh God, help us. We know your ways are mysterious and that you have a plan for each of us as we begin our descent into our next life. Stay with us, Lord, and guide us toward your light. Give each of us the strength to endure this rapture with grace. Stay, stay with us Lord...*

As I hold the sweaty hand of my brother Jim, Mother is praying loudly as the countdown creeps anxiously closer. The entire neighborhood stands inside of our home, waiting for the end. The feeling of helplessness flows through every fiber of my being as the earth spins faster with every tick of the grandfather clock in our living room. It’s funny though, how everyone has come together in these final moments. Prejudice, pride, and hate have now been replaced with fear, faith, and regret. Everyone believed there would be more time. I feel like my life was just beginning. Whenever my life seemed to be stuck in reverse, Mother would say “God has a plan for you, baby. Just be patient and He will put happiness into your life when you least expect it.” Why would this be His plan for me? For all of us? My chance at happiness will now crumble like the rest of the world.

Fresh out of college as of four weeks ago, my life was supposed to be an open road which I am about to explore. I didn’t have time to fill out job applications when the news broke out. The earth, which was once stable, has been disturbed by unknown actions in the universe and is on a downward spiral into obliteration. The human race has only hours before the earth spins uncontrollably to the point where gravity is thrown off its balance and our skulls will be crushed by the absolute pressure from the weight of the world. Great plan, right?

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You know what's funny? People always say "this world will kill you!" I never assumed they meant literally. Everything that I know and love will be completely destroyed in a matter of minutes or hours. No more music, no more chances to travel this great wide world, and no more imagining my life with her, Sally. The only girl I ever wanted, though I never possessed an ounce of courage to approach her. She's my biggest wasted regret among a sea of minor disappointments. Life is supposed to be filled with endless possibilities for happiness and for some reason all I ever wanted was her. And at this moment I only pray for her. I pray that she is okay, wherever she was.

*Lord, please forgive our trespasses against you as we begin to walk down the...*

I've loved Sally Jenkins since the moment I saw her standing idly outside of my tenth grade English classroom, looking like a tourist in a foreign land. No one really paid her any attention as she held onto a newly purchased pink spiral notebook, searching for room 213. Later that day, I'd overhear the other guys she was "okay" and "needed a bigger rack" to be ranked higher on the "bang-able" list. I never thought of her in that way. Mother always insisted to never allow impure thoughts cloud my judgment. But, at that moment, all I could think about was going up to her, pulling her tiny waist inward toward my stomach, and kissing her. It would be just a gentle kiss, like consoling a small child who fell down and scraped her knee. I wanted to comfort her and tell her everything would be okay. She had that look about her, the look of someone who had been abandoned in a sea of chaos. When she finally made her way inside the classroom, I swear she looked right at into my eyes as she flashed a quick smile before walking up to Mr. Donaldson, and handing him a crumpled schedule. As she took her seat toward the front of the room, I couldn't help but stare at the back of her head in bewilderment. Something about her was different, something I quite couldn't put my finger on. Since the day I first saw

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Sally, standing outside of my classroom door waiting for someone or something to safely guide her, she never left my thoughts.

*Go forth, Christian soul, from this world in the name of God the almighty Father, who created you, in the name of Jesus Christ, Son of...*

I didn't have one conversation with Sally that junior year, or senior year, or even at graduation (though she stood in line exactly three people ahead of me as I marched up to the stage to receive my diploma). No, I never got the courage to say anything to her except maybe an awkward "hello" or "good morning." Even those mumblings were rare. She would always smile sweetly for an instant as she nodded her head, which filled my stomach with fluttering butterflies. *It could have been worse*, I always told myself, *and she could have completely ignored my existence*. It's hard to explain why I fell for her, but I think it was when she would read aloud in class. It sounds weird, I know, but there was something about her voice that tugged on my soul. Her voice commanded my attention. It had the ability to transform all of my nerve endings into soothing electric tingles, which spread like cool water flowing across my skin. Senior year we studied *Frankenstein*, a book she clearly enjoyed. She always volunteered to read aloud when Mrs. Pewter asked our class of constantly uninterested participants. She spoke each sentence aloud with such emotion and care, like the words were dear to her. I hadn't felt such a sense of tranquility in years. I had felt trapped in a constant loop of anxiety since the death of my father when I was six. My father would read me passages from the Bible every single night, though his voice weakened as the cancer progressed. The impending death of my father scared me and consumed my every thought, until it was story time. I would lie in bed, with my soft red blanket wrapped around me, as his words transported my thoughts of the terrifying certain future into a land of unlimited and hopeful possibilities. His voice had the kind of effect on me as

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Sally's had. Hearing Sally read the words of a man-made monster, expressing his human emotions and thoughts aloud made me feel like that pure child again. I had been given an escape from the realities of the world. Her voice gave me the dream of a better life, especially a life with her. It would happen, one day. At least I hoped it would. Like I said, you always figure there's more time. What a joke.

The minute she would walk into the classroom, I couldn't help but watch her every move. I grew to know Sally more than anyone. If she came into class and her hair was curly, it meant she had gone to bed late because of her hours spent writing and she didn't have the energy to straighten her thick hair. If she folded her hands on her desk during lectures, it meant she was interested and was paying attention. But, if she ever came into class and wore her favorite pink polo shirt with matching pink Converse, it meant her father was drinking again and she needed someone to talk to. I wanted to be that person for her, but I was a coward. Well, I still am a coward.

*..The living God, who suffered for you, in the name of the Holy Spirit, who was poured out upon you, go forth, faithful Christian...*

The ground begins to violently shake as I snap out of my Sally Jenkins daydream and grab the disheveled couch beside me. Lamps crash to the floor sending shards of glass everywhere, Mother's bookshelf looks as if it's violently throwing up its stained collection onto the now muddy carpet. Everyone, including Jim, who was always braver than me, is panting uncontrollably and releasing unnatural rapid shrieks. He sounds like a child cowering with fear, desperate to avoid the hard leather belt of his abuser. My body tenses up tightly, like it's preparing for the unavoidable drop on a roller coaster ride. Finally, after what seems to be the longest thirty seconds of our lives, everything stops. Everyone releases their physical bracing

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from the impact of a skull crushing death. We all take our place back in the prayer circle, locking hand in hand and begin to pray once more, even louder this time. Everything around the room feels lighter, like a weight has been lifted, including all of us. It's as if the entire world is beginning to weaken with each passing tick tock of the now cracked grandfather clock. I feel the rush of blood to my head as gravity begins to fade more and more. Looking around the room, I realize that the power must have gone out while we were praying because there are beams of light from flashlights and camping lanterns surrounding the room. Beads of sweat drip off Mother's forehead, landing onto her now damp pink blouse. The men have large sweat stains under their pits. The room now smells of piss, but no one dares acknowledge their accident. When you're about to die, peeing yourself is the last thing you worry about.

I let go of Mother's hand and begin to walk toward the large front windows of the house. As I step forward to peek through the broken front door window panel, glass crunches beneath my shoes. That's when I see her. I rub my eyes instinctively, just like a child would when trying to open his sleepy eyes on Christmas morning. But, no matter how hard I rub, her image remains. Sally Jenkins is walking down my street. My gaze on her holds as she turns off the street and walks up my driveway, her hair curly and prominent dark circles under her eyes. She passes the yard sign my mother put up as soon as news broke about the world ending, which states in bold red hand painted *WELCOME TO ALL CHRISTIANS WHO WISH TO BE SAVED*. Before I can walk to the front door, let alone comprehend what to do or say, she knocks and pushes on the halfway open front door. I am frozen as my heart begins to pound out of my chest and into my ears. Here we are, face to face. For what is probably the last time. I can barely breathe as I realize she's holding something, something familiar. It's the book I gave her. The same book that she's holding against her chest as mother commands me to move aside and ask Sally the only thing I

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can think to say, “Do you want to come and pray with us?” Sally nods and we both join the circle. Sally looks toward my mother and grabs my hand as we nod our heads in unison. If this is it, God, so be it.

*May you live in peace this day, may your home be with God in Zion, with Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, with Joseph, and all the Angels and Saints...*

Up until a few days ago, I hadn't seen Sally since our high school graduation. But, I was still able to find out about her through mother's connections in town. Mother knew everyone in town and everything that happened. When you're a large, redheaded, Jesus-loving woman preaching in front of the only major congregation in a small southern town, you become popular quickly. It didn't bother me though. I didn't do anything that make talk for the church or for Mother. I always kept to myself and everyone just thought I was shy. The truth is, I just didn't want to be a part of it or mother's way of life and was lucky enough to get out for four years to go to college. I believe in God, but going to church every week was out of respect for Mother. Something about it always felt false to me as I sat in the pews listening to the preacher speak the “word of God.” The same words my father spoke many times. After my father died, something died within me. I could no longer sit and listen to the word of God, the same God that took my father away from me. I didn't want to hear about how it was “God's plan” and how my father “is in a better place.” His place was supposed to be here, on earth, with me, Jim, and Mother. Not hanging out on a cloud.

*In your hands, O Lord, we humbly entrust our brothers and sisters. In this life you embraced them with your tender love...*

Ever since my dad died, I felt responsible for making Mother happy. Jim felt the same way, but he was older than I was when it happened and wasn't as affected. I felt bad about leaving Mother when I was accepted to Northwestern State, but I needed to try and make a life for myself outside of this town. I didn't want to be her little boy forever and I sure as hell didn't want to make my life be about the church. If I'm being completely honest, I wanted to leave this town so that I could try and forget the unattainable life I had imagined with Sally by my side. I had reached my breaking point in my hopes of ever mustering the courage to even talk to her. I felt like such a creep for thinking endlessly about a girl who didn't have the slightest notion of my feelings for her. But, even living two hundred miles away, couldn't stop my obsession with Sally. Thinking of her brought me hope of a better life one day. Thinking of her quieted the voices in my head shouting *You're so alone* and *No one will ever understand you!* She had remained single during and after high school. I never once saw her talk to other guys or show interest in dating. I wondered, no--I hoped, this meant all my imaginary scenarios of Sally were not wasted. Maybe God did have a plan for me that involved Sally.

One day I would be ready to work up the courage to talk to her, really talk to her. I would come back to town and we would begin dating, like a normal couple. I imagined afternoon picnics in the park, with my head in her lap watching the clouds float by as she read her stories to me. I imagined long walks where I would pour out my heart and soul on everything I've wanted to say to anyone who would listen. I could confide in her my regrets, fears, and longing to see my father once more. She would nod in understanding, and she would never judge me or my thoughts. Eventually I would ask her to marry me once I had enough money saved for a house that she deserved to call home. She would become a famous writer and I would be working as a teacher. I'd come home from a tiring day at work and we'd eat Chinese take-out, since neither

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one of us knew how to cook, and then curl up in our bed. She would read me her stories aloud, wanting to know my honest opinion, as we both drifted to sleep. She would be cuddling beside me, her tiny hand on my chest as I clicked off the lamp. I knew it was strange to think this way about a girl who didn't even see me or know me. We never had a full conversation and certainly never touched, until the world was ending and I finally had an excuse to hold her hand.

*...deliver them now from every evil and bid them eternal rest. The old order has passed away: welcome them into paradise...*

Last week, I was walking around the mall with Mother, or “escorting” her as she likes to call it, when I saw Sally again after four long years. Sally was with some girls who looked to be about the same age. Sally always wore blue jeans and a purple plaid button down shirt. Her hair had grown out considerably since I last saw her, the thick brown hair stopped at her naval. She was wearing a light coral lipstick, which brought out the green in her eyes. She didn't need a bunch of makeup. She was naturally lovely.

They were shopping inside some hippie store, trying on different sunhats and large beaded necklaces when she turned her head and looked straight at me. I immediately stopped walking and felt my face make an awkward oh- hey- you smile. Mother did a double take as I just stood there, uncertain of my next move. Mother asked, “What's wrong, honey?” I couldn't speak so I just mumbled something unintelligible. I told Mother to go ahead to the next store without me and that I would meet her there in a few minutes because I wanted to look at something in the hippie store. She sighed and said, “Lord have mercy” as she walked away, waving me off. I began to walk toward Sally, but I didn't feel in control of my feet. It was as if someone had tied strings to my limbs, like a puppet, and now they were making my legs stride



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forward. Without any time to think of something to say, or to take a deep breath, there she was standing directly in front of me. I had dreamed of this moment for so long and here we were at last! “Hey” she said, smiling. “Seth, right? I don’t think I’ve seen you since high school. How have you been?”

I just nodded with a small “ha” and said, “Yeah, I, uh, just graduated from Northwestern. How about you? It’s really good to see you, too.” My face flushed hot with embarrassment. Please God, don’t let me ruin my chance.

Sally looked down at her feet, clutched the necklace around her neck and took it off to place it back on the mannequin.

“Oh, that’s really good. I tried the whole college thing, but it just wasn’t for me, I think,” she said, focusing her eyes solely on the mannequin’s plastic face. I obviously hit a nerve and I didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable so I just said the most common thing anyone can say when in this situation, which was “It’s not meant for everyone.” She turned her head back to look at me. I felt like such an idiot.

So I went on and said, “It wasn’t that great and definitely overpriced. Didn’t you like writing? I remember hearing about you winning some national writing contest a few years ago. You always wrote the best stories for English class.” I smiled at her like a fool.

Sally smiled as she looked downward and I freaked out at her interpreting my words as me basically saying I am a stalker. “I mean, my mother, she told me that you had won. It was in the newspaper” I said, quickly.

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“Oh. Well, yeah I did win one contest. I got a thousand dollars. I was going to save it for my trip to New York City that summer. But, my dad got sick and I ended up having to take care of him. So I stayed.”

This is why she looked different to me. She was carrying the weight of grief upon her broad shoulders. “I’m sorry, that’s hard to go through. Is he okay?” I said, already knowing her response.

“He’s alright. Luckily he gets help from the government so that takes care of the bills, but I still have to look after him.”

Clearly wanting to change the subject, she said “What about you? What are you doing back here in this little town? I’d give anything to get out of here and never look back” she said. She combed her bangs with her fingers.

“I guess the only answer I have is to get a job. I thought about applying at the newspaper. Or, if that doesn’t work out, maybe applying at our old high school? I’m sure they could use another Journalism or English teacher now that Mr. Donaldson has retired. I really want to start my life now that I’m back for good. Just so you know,” I said.

An awkward silence filled the air. I felt like an idiot who said way too much. She was looking at me like she knew. She definitely knew I was in love with her. I just blurted out the first thing that popped in my mind.

“You shouldn’t give up. You know? On your dream of being a writer I mean,” I said, waving my hands like Moses parting a massive sea.

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Sally just smiled and turned her face away, obviously embarrassed by my enthusiastic opinion. I was such an idiot. “I mean, only if you want. I know how hard it is to lose a parent, but there’s got to be something to hope for, otherwise what’s the point?”

“You’re right,” Sally said, cutting off my desperate response. “I just need inspiration I guess. It’s hard to do anything when all you feel is lost. Do you know what I mean?”

I nodded and touched the mannequin’s lifeless face. This was it, my moment of courage to finally say something. But just as I took a deep breath in, preparing for the words to come out finally, I heard a loud “Sally!” from outside the store. Sally’s friends were calling out to her and motioned for her to follow them.

I looked toward her friends and blurted out, “Oh, well I should let you go. It was nice to see you again, Sally.”

The next moment completely blindsided me. Sally actually looked disappointed. Or maybe offended that I cut off our conversation?

She half smiled and just before she turned on her heel to walk out the store, she touched my shoulder and said, “Goodbye, Seth. Maybe I’ll see you around now?” My heart almost burst from excitement. I stood there watching her walk out of the store, but I hoped this meant she would be walking into my life once again.

*...where there will be no sorrow, no weeping or pain, but fullness of peace and joy with your Son and the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.*

*Okay God, I thought, I know what I need to do.* Then the best idea hit me. I needed to inspire her. She needed someone to believe in her. She even said so herself. This was my chance

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to prove to myself and her that I could be there for her the way she deserved. I walked into the large bookstore and began pacing up and down the bookshelves, looking for something, anything that jumped out at me. Then, I saw the one. It was a leatherbound book of classic short stories. It was old and it was filled with pages of mysteries, adventure, and romance. The cover read *Great American Short Stories for Aspiring Writers*. I purchased the book and carefully held onto the plastic bag containing my one chance at happiness as I met Mother at the food court.

“What did you buy, Seth? That book looks older than dirt” she said. I laughed and began to feel something entirely new to me. For the first time, I felt true and unwavering hope as I remembered our moment together inside the store, recalling the moment when she said “I’ll see you around.” I had no more need of my imagination, life was much better than a fantasy.

I went home that night and made my game plan. Tomorrow I would go to Sally’s house, dressed nicely but not too nice, and I would give her the book. “Sally,” I would say as she opened the door, surprised to see me standing there, “I think this should help inspire you.” As I handed her the book, she would be so overcome with happiness that she would hug me, and then invite me in so we could talk. We could finally get acquainted. All of my imaginary moments spent together would become reality.

This plan was foolproof. At least I thought it was. The next day I showered, shaved the stubble on my chin, and made an effort to calm down my wild hair. I grabbed the book off my dresser and proceeded to walk down the street to Sally’s house. When I arrived, there was a car in the driveway that displayed HOME HEALTH CARE. I stood at her front door, waiting for the right moment to push the doorbell. But, as usual, I began to panic. My breathing became rapid and I was about to push that white button when the door quickly opened. It was Sally. She was in tears, but not sad tears. Her face was red with anger, which was an emotion I had never seen

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from her before. I could hear her father coughing up phlegm from the living room, which also contained his hospital bed and a large black nurse who stood over him, patting his hunched over back. Sally was wearing latex gloves and a stained white apron. She had a bag of trash in her hand.

“Yes? What are you doing here?” she said as she wiped away the tears on her cheeks with her forearm. I stood there, silent and my hands began to shake. She stared at me inquisitively, her eyes demanding an answer.

“You had said...” I started to say, but couldn’t finish my sentence. I quickly placed the book on the porch step and walked away from her house as fast as I could. I turned back to look at her only once I was safely across the street. She had put the trash bag on the ground and was looking through the book. She looked up at me as she turned and walked back inside her house. That was the last time I saw Sally. That was, I believed, the last time I would ever see Sally. I retreated to my bedroom, slammed the door, and began to cry tears that I had been holding in since the day I watched my father take his last breath. Years of sadness, regret, and longing poured out of me as I sobbed into my hands. I was disappointed in myself for allowing this to go on for as long as it did. For always being such a coward. Why couldn’t I be courageous for once in my Godforsaken life? This could have ended years ago if I only had taken a chance. I decided that I would never again reach out to Sally. This fantasy of mine was now dead, and it would never be alive again. She, like my father, was lost to me forever. Little did I know that in about forty-eight hours, my entire existence and hers would come to a frightening end.

“It’s happening! This is it! The end!” Mother screams as the clock strikes eight and the ground shakes with the intensity of a thousand earthquakes all at once as everything and

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everyone braces for our planet's extinction. With each distorted chime of the clock, our world and everyone in it ceases to exist.

Everyone grabs onto someone or something as we brace for whatever happens. Mother is holding onto Jim, who is holding onto the doorway of our living room. Though I can see the fear in her eyes, she continues to pray aloud for all of us to hear. I turn to Sally and instinctively grab her shoulders as she still clutches the book in her hands. I need to protect her. We look into each other's eyes as what feels like the house beginning to become unhinged from the foundation it once stood upon. But even as our world is crashing all around us, I only see her eyes as they pierce into mine. As our feet begin to lift off of the ground, I feel every bone in my body being crunched like a soda can being smashed. Trees outside break free from their roots and are floating upward toward the sky, every appliance and object is now floating off the ground and beginning to circle the room. Car alarms, the sound of the earth pulling apart from its seams, and screams from every direction fill my ears. Everyone is screaming in agony and clutching their heads in their hands. The pressure begins to come down upon us like a hard and heavy wave of water crashing onto an inexperienced swimmer.

We struggle to breathe as Sally turns her head toward me, grabs my face with her free hand, and kisses me. I keep my eyes open as we begin to rise higher into the air, hitting the ceiling with a strong force, yet we hold onto each other, never letting go. Tears fall out of her eyes and drift into the space around us. Before she has a chance to scream out in pain, I kiss her and hold her tightly as I say to her, "I've got you! I've got you!" Though we are both in agonizing pain from the pressure bursting in our heads and the breaking of our bones, we stare into each other's eyes. God has finally delivered on the start of my future with Sally, but it will be a short one. I grab Sally's book from her hand and toss it out into the debris of the now dying

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world floating all around us. As I kiss her for the last time before it all goes dark forever, I see the note I had written on the inside of the book cover I had given her.

*Dear Sally,*

*You are not alone. I have always been there for you, but never had the courage to speak to you until now. I think you deserve so much more than what life has given you. I'm sorry it's taken me this long to tell you this but I hope I can become a part of your life. I also hope that this book can be your inspiration for you to follow your dreams. You've certainly been my inspiration and always will be.*

*--Seth Morgan*

I had finally found my way toward Sally. She had finally seen that I cared for her and wanted her to be happy. We would never get the fantasy life I dreamed of, but at least we had these last precious moments together. And for that, I was grateful.

It's funny how sometimes you get what you asked for, but not always in the way you expect. But with that last kiss, every expectation dissolved into a world of darkness and weightlessness.

*Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord. And let perpetual light shine upon her. May she rest in peace. Amen. May her soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.*