

Condemnation of Fate

Steve Mathys

With the late October sun half an hour over the horizon, peeking in her small eastern window enough to illuminate the coffee maker and half the refrigerator, Katie stood dressed in simple slacks and an off-white blouse. Pretty enough for work, yet casual, so that he might think she wasn't making this trip solely for him. Which, of course, she was, but he didn't have to know that. *Who am I kidding*, she thought. *Of course he'll know.*

"Abby, I'm going over there. I've got to," she said, gripping the handle of her old-fashioned phone (she still thought of land lines as old-fashioned, even though many people had never given them up for a cell phone) a little tighter at the thought of seeing Rick again. *Oh, his eyes!*

The voice on the other end made the sound of a worn-out friend playing along with the charade of trying to convince otherwise. "You can't. You know you can't. It'll be a disaster."

But Katie didn't know it. Abby might think she knew it. But Katie felt different. "It's different, Abby. I'm losing weight, I dyed my hair... I read those books he recommended! He's got to see how much I love him now. If he doesn't, I'll--"

Abby cut her off. "Katie, don't say it. Just shut up. Don't say you'll kill yourself. That won't do anything."

"But if he knows how much I--"

"He already knows, Katie. He just doesn't care."

Katie sighed. "But he's so beautiful!"

“He’s old.”

“You say that every time.”

“We both do.” Her best friend gave a little squeak of exasperation. “Oh, Katie, I gotta go. I’ll be late for work.” They quickly finished their conversation, with Katie promising not to go anywhere. Less than a minute later, with her jacket on and keys in her hand, Abby called her cell phone. Without thinking Katie answered, and heard a short tirade, one that she’d heard dozens of times. She listened and nodded and *um-hmed* in all the right places. Abby was right. If Rick didn’t love her now, he never would. Two years of trying, with nothing to show for it. Not a kiss, not a letter, barely acknowledging her when she showed up. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against her apartment door. *But maybe he could learn to*, came an unbidden thought. And with it the smooth, cool feel of the doorknob turning under her hand, the soft vibration of her phone in her purse against her side, *That’s Abby*, and the quiet stillness of the empty hallway into which she stepped with confidence, focus, and determination.

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Through the first two straight-line neighborhoods and suddenly out into the open suburbs where streets curve but have no identity, Katie drove effortlessly, the turns as practiced as a bedtime ritual, here a left, there a slight brake at the top of the hill so you don’t get a ticket, making her way quickly out of the little sister of Chicago and into gently rolling Illinois farmland. In little more than half an hour she was turning left into Rick’s long driveway, still only gravel, the miniature boulders kicking up into the underside of her sedan. She could care less.

Stopping the car, she glanced at herself in the mirror and saw she was biting her lower lip again, the upper half of her face perky and expectant, like so many times before. She closed her

eyes and said a quick prayer, desperate for anything that would change his mind. Feeling no different, Katie quickly stepped to the front door, rapping the old-fashioned knocker there twice. She surveyed the scene for the hundredth time.

Perched atop a small rise, set two hundred yards back from the road and in front of another thirty acres of farmland that Rick occasionally tended to, the white-sided two-story building was perfectly at home in farm country, with wide rooms, square windows, and real red shutters at their sides. Some simple landscaping, a few bushes and a stone path, had been added to the front to make it look nice, and thirty or so large walnut trees lined one side of the drive way, leaving the other side open for a view of the smooth front lawn gently rising to meet the house, like a king on his throne. *Oh, I wish I were his Queen*, thought Katie. Images of their young children, five in all, three boys and two girls, soon covered the lawn, overflowing it with happiness and laughter. They moved across the green expanse in random, haphazard ways, first throwing sticks, then balls, then wrestling, then playing tag or Ghost In The Graveyard, riding bikes in the summer and pulling sleds in the winter. Katie glanced down at the end of the drive and saw Rick and herself standing, arm in arm, as they returned from a moonlit stroll in the quiet fall air, talking softly as echoes of contentment roll from the back of the house where the children were having the last bonfire of the year with their cousins, staying over in the visitor bedroom on the second floor, the one that had the antique dresser and the extra-wide four-poster bed and the heirloom goosedown comforter that Rick's grandmother had given him before she died, that he had so lovingly presented to her as a wedding present the night before their ceremony, the same comforter that they'd taken back to their room and slipped under after all their guests had finally left and they were all alone as husband and wife and happy and exhausted, hands gently caressing in –

With a start Katie realized she was dreaming again. She looked at her watch to see that nearly ten minutes had passed since she knocked. Rick wasn't home. *Maybe he's just not coming to the door.*

"Rick? *Rick!*" She stepped off the porch and moved around the corner of the house to the barn where he had his metalworking shop. As a retired mechanical engineer, Rick still liked to tinker and fix the occasional broken TV. Maybe he was in there. "Rick?" She heard the faint sounds of metal scraping across metal coming from the open door to his shop. *He's here!* She skipped a couple of steps before calming herself enough to walk, not run, walk, to the door and knock. "Hi," she said, when he stopped but did not turn around.

"Hi, Katie," she heard. As often as he addressed her, she wished he would *say* it rather than just using that machine. It was convenient, yes. It communicated, yes. But it wasn't speaking, no, not really. She glanced at his left hand again, saw the web of slender electrodes from his fingertips, the ones that picked up the movement of each individual finger, snaking back to the silver disk near his wrist, a slightly thicker wire running from there along the back of his arm to the small voice box at the base of his neck, watched his hand move again, that single hand move and fall silent, waiting for the slight motions to be processed as typing, waiting for the voice box to register what modifications it needed to make to the air around his throat in order to present the almost-reality that was his artificial voice, waiting and finally hearing "I was expecting you."

She stepped inside the work room, carefully avoiding a few small shards of metal littering the floor, glancing absently at the screwdrivers and awls, ohmmeters, small hammers and pliers covering the walls and the work bench, reaching to touch his shoulder but pausing, knowing he had never returned her touch, wondering how she would feel about another rejection.

Too late, and she let her hand fall gently, giving a slight squeeze even as she could see him tense, then stand quickly and turn in the same motion to face her.

“You were expecting me?”

“It’s been about four days.”

Am I that predictable? “I read that book you suggested. I had no idea mythology was so interconnected between the Greeks and Romans.”

Rick didn’t say anything, just stood there looking sexy in his blue jeans and brown work shirt. His short-cropped brown hair had only the slightest hint of gray, but his piercing blue eyes, set deep inside his slim face, so perfectly matched to his tall, slender body, told her that he didn’t really have anything to say. His fingers twitched quickly. “It’s not going to work, Katie. Don’t you see that?”

She bit her lip to suppress a moan. “I can get over the age difference, Rick. Don’t you understand that by now?”

“Katie, I’m a hundred and thirty-three years old. Let it go. Let me go.”

She shook her head. “I still say you faked that birth certificate. You don’t look a day over fifty.”

“And you’re not a day over thirty.” His face sagged a little, as if he were tired, too. “Why would I fake that, Katie? Why would I want to make myself that much older? To make myself a freak?” She’d heard it all before, he’d said it all before, but, still, she knew that some day he’d end this joke and crack a smile. And then he’d kiss her and everything would be all right.

She stepped closer, reaching out to take his right hand in her left, she still couldn't think of touching that left hand, all cobwebby-looking, but she'd deal with that once he spoke and told her how much he loved her. He pulled away and moved to the side, out of the workshop and back across the short span of thin grass to the main house. The bleakness on his face told her too much, and at the same time nothing at all.

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Katie hurried into the small coffee shop that smelled of steamed milk and laptop cases, glancing around at the comfortable chairs and comfortable people, finally spying Abby in one of the back corners. When their eyes met, Katie knew that the beaming smile she felt on her cheeks was a surprise to Abby. She mouthed a little "Oh?" and waved her over. Moving quickly, Katie landed onto the two-seat couch and dumped her shoulder bag on the floor, still clutching the leather-bound volume in her hands. She would never let it out of her sight. It was her joy, her beauty, her *raison d'être*. It was a gift from *him!*

"So," Abby was trying to sound nonplussed. "What'cha got there? Little light reading?"

Katie held it out for her to see. It was a brown leather journal, about an inch thick, relatively new, filled with pages and pages of thin writing, very neat, very methodical. She had clutched it to her chest for hours, not even able to believe that it existed, much less that it was for her, and she had it and was going to read it! Rick had filled it, he told her, because there was too much he needed to tell her, more than could be said face to face. Abby pointed to one of the yellow rectangles, small sticky-notes, spread along the edge. "What're these? Bookmarks?"

Katie sighed. "Rick said that if I don't have time to read it all I can just read those parts." She felt her smile widening. "I'll bet those are the places he says he loves me!" She looked down and saw that each little tab had a number on it. "Ten little tabs," she said. "Ten ways to

tell me that we'll be together forever!" She clutched the journal to her chest again, smelling Rick's deep woody smell that permeated the binding. She felt foolish, but she didn't care. He loved her! And he would tell her so! Opening her eyes to find Abby staring at her, Katie blushed. She tried to hide her excitement behind a hand, but couldn't avoid giggling, and when Abby saw it, they were quickly leaning against each other, with tears in their eyes and sides aching. Friends since college, ten years or more, and this was the best they could come up with? Laughing in a coffee shop about a journal that some guy who said he was over a hundred years old had written with his own hand, not even using a typewriter or anything? No witty comment, no secret glance shared knowingly, no desperate grab for the book and short tussle over who would get to read it first, no long-winded speeches about true love and its magical effects? *Nope*, Katie thought. *This is all we get. A few laughs here and there to break up the monotony of the everyday, and then it's back to it.*

She gathered her thoughts and her things quickly, made a sad apology for breaking her promise, but did point out that this treasure proved her vindication. Abby, always the methodical, investigative one, reminded her to read it from front to back, even if she did skip to the tabs. Katie promised, but the slight roll of Abby's eyes and shake of her head meant that they both knew better. With a quick goodbye, Katie darted out the door, leaving behind a fine friend and the warmth of the coffee shop, heading as fast as her beat-up car would take her through the punishingly slow snarl of traffic that is city life.

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I was born on January 3, 1894. My mother and father were Elsie and Jacob Wagner of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. We lived in a small apartment down the street from the foundry where my

father worked. Our neighborhood was filled with families just like ours. Their fathers worked at the foundry and their mothers spent afternoons hanging washing out on the line. The children played in the streets and in the yards. We went to school two blocks away on the corner that was taught by Miss Morgan and went to the church on the other corner that had Reverend Preston as our pastor.

My brother and sister before me were both stillborn. I was the only child to survive, named Richard for my father's father. My parents put all of their hopes and dreams on me and when I-

Katie stopped. She flipped through a few more pages and saw it was much the same – rote repetition of Rick's life, growing up in rural America. She had expected him to be writing about how much he loved her. But this was... well, disappointing. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples, sinking a little lower into her couch, alone in her apartment. She stood and stretched, then went quickly to the kitchen – *kitchen nook*, she reminded herself, a junior investigative journalist salary barely paid for this tiny place, much less one with a real kitchen – and poured a glass of wine. Settling back into the couch, she opened again at random and read.

But the Depression was very hard on my wife. We had to move a lot, and she never felt happy. She always wanted some security. I always felt bad that I couldn't give it to her. I took whatever jobs I could find, picking tomatoes or sweeping floors.

That was no better. Katie found herself biting her lip again, and willed her mouth open and her lip back in its right place. The anticipation was killing her. Giving in to her impetuous side just a little, Katie flipped to the end and hoped to find something more interesting.

<10>

I think it's only fair to you, Katie. I hope you've read this far. I hope you've read everything. I don't think you did. I bet you just jumped right to the end to see what I'm saying. Well, I can't repeat myself again. If you really want to know you have to read and do the hard work like I did. But I will say this: that what I have told you again and again is true, that we are not right for each other. There is something else, and that is that I really do care for you. I know your feelings for me. I accept and understand that. But I hope that you will also accept it when I say I never want you to come see me again. The pain is too much. You are a pretty, young woman who deserves to be told so. I can't do that for you. I have seen your reaction when I use my glove. I won't apologize for it. It's the way I have come to accept my life these days. It's what I have to do. And you have to simply let it go.

Katie, please believe me. I like you too much for you to be upset by this. But I don't love you like you love me. Okay, I love you a little, but like a father loves a daughter that he sees making a big mistake. Please listen to these words. Please don't come back.

Katie shut the journal. There were a few pages more, but that was all he had underlined by tab #10. She raised a hand and felt tears on her face, then flung the leather-bound pages across the room with all her might. The journal smashed against a picture on the wall, knocking both to the floor. Unfortunately, the glass didn't break, she didn't rush over and pick up her treasure to find it had magically transformed into a love letter, she didn't get a last-second reprieve phone call from the Governor telling her that everything would be okay, he didn't really mean it, he was just trying to scare her off and now he was on his way over with a bouquet of flowers and a romantic CD. No, none of that. The journal just lay there on the floor, closed and mocking her, ripping her heart out of her chest one page at a time. She sat on her couch and cried, head in her hands and staring at the floor, not seeing, just crying, and crying, and crying, and by the time she woke up in the morning her tears had dried on the cushion and she wished she was hung over because at least that would mean there was a good reason for the way she felt, but this way it was just plain and simple torture that she would have to endure every day for the rest of her natural life, watching her heart shrivel and melt and bleed out there in the yellow sunbeam on top of the brown leather cover holding thousands, millions of hand-written words that were all just bullshit for all the good they did her lying there on that rotten floor, mocking her, tempting her, destroying her, biting and pulling at her relentlessly one by one until they would leave her an empty shell of a person, withered and decaying, a huddled mass shivering on a cold stone altar begging for the mercy of death.

Katie stood and walked over to the journal, picked it up calmly and set it on the counter. Blessedly, Abby was home on a Saturday morning and they agreed to meet for lunch. Katie considered leaving the vile thing in her apartment, but at the last second she stuffed it in her purse. Maybe Abby would burn it for her.

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With a slight nod of her head, Abby picked up the journal. She flipped it open to the first tab and read quietly, her lips moving slightly in that way that Katie had once found annoying. Katie picked at her salad, and said nothing. There was nothing to say. Abby's voice was quiet. "You didn't read it, did you?" Katie shook her head. "He obviously has something to say, don't you think?" Katie took her beer and gave it a big pull, eyeing Abby around the wide rim. She hoped her expression told Abby to back off. "Can I read it?"

Startled, Katie sputtered out a bit of her beer, then hastily dabbed at herself with a napkin. "No, I don't –" she started, but then stopped. "Okay." Immediately Abby settled back into the booth and continued following the small, slightly slanted strokes. "Do you believe him?" came from Katie's mouth before she even knew she was speaking.

Abby looked up half-heartedly. "Hm? Oh, well, I think I'll see what he has to say about the fifties before I determine that." Abby was quite the history buff. "If he's telling the truth, and he really did live through the whole of the twentieth century, then he should have some ideas about that most pivotal of decades." She grinned. "See, we nerds can sometimes be useful."

Katie was tired of the self-deprecation. "Abby, you're not a nerd. I'm too pretty to be friends with a nerd," she said, though she just didn't have the energy to put up much of a fight. Abby might be another junior something-or-other, but she was quick as a whip at debate.

The rest of their meal passed in silence, Katie dejectedly sipping from time to time, Abby reading and methodically turning pages. The waiter appeared twice, first to imperceptibly top off a water glass, then to leave the bill, and finally, an hour after that, Abby grunted and closed the book with a slight *snap*, a satisfied smile on her face.

"So, what, you know the answer to the mystery now?" Katie asked.

Abby shook her head and gave her a wry smile. “Nope. But I think I believe him. I just have to figure out how he does it...”

“Does what?” The room was nearly empty now, and Katie could hear echoes of their conversation off the mirrors thirty feet away. She glanced at them and cringed at her bedraggled appearance.

“How he stayed alive so long. I mean, he said he’s a hundred and thirty-three, and the birth certificate confirms that, but how? And why doesn’t he look like he’s getting any older?” She threw up her hands in mock exasperation. “All our research, not to mention that of three other companies before us, couldn’t come up with anything. I guess all we can do is hope that he’ll tell you something in here,” she patted the volume tenderly, “that might give us a clue.” She drained her water glass and munched a couple of cold fries. “If we had something to go on, like that he lied, then maybe we could refuse him.”

Katie didn’t really care about Abby’s problems, but she decided to play along anyway. “Refuse what?”

“Renewal of his life annuity.” Katie must have been staring at her like a moose stares at a computer, because Abby quickly continued. “Cash payments for life, every month. We had one back in the, oh, seventies or so, innovative in that increased the monthly benefit every two years based on the remaining life expectancy at that time. A lot of companies sold something similar. Guaranteed renewal after age 100, or so. Pretty quickly the companies that sold them realized they were way wrong about the expected mortality, and they shut it down. But not before a lot of people bought them. People like Rick.” Katie cringed at the name. “The ones that live a long time can really put a hurt on us with something like this. Especially if he’s at a hundred and fifteen years old and our mortality table says he should die tomorrow, so we

basically have to pay him out way too much money, and that is only going to go up two years later.” She sighed. “You know, Katie, sometimes I wish I’d never been assigned this case.”

A small part of Katie wished it, too.

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It would be another week before Katie and Abby could meet again. During that time Katie spent two days lying on the floor, three days lying in bed, and one day walking between the two. Not consecutively, nor exactly, but that’s about how Katie figured it when she was lying in her bathrobe on Friday afternoon staring up at the empty ceiling and wishing that she’d never gone to college, or maybe never made friends with Abby, or never taken the job as junior investigative journalist so she wouldn’t have to be the only one in her circle of friends that was an expert at finding long-lost information. That way she never would have met Rick, she never would have invested so much time and energy into falling in love with him, and she never would have been so thoroughly demolished by only a few simple words.

But maybe he didn’t really mean them, she thought, and realized that it was the first time in the week she’d felt optimistic. That small bit of hope actually inspired her. Not to do anything, though, but enough to sit up and notice that she hadn’t changed clothes in three days. Calling in sick first on Monday, then Tuesday, and finally Wednesday for the rest of the week had left her without any responsibilities. The time had dragged on. Katie tried to think of something she had done, something she had read, something she had watched on tv during the past four days, but it was all a blur. Less than a blur, a haze. No, less than a haze, a nothing. At least with a blur or a haze or a fog there’s something behind it, something that actually did happen and could be reasoned out with a little time and effort. For Katie it had just been a

nothing stretch of time in which she inhaled but did not breathe, she ate but did not taste, she drank but did not thirst, existed but did not think. So did she exist at all? Why should she?

Startled out of her stupor by the ringing phone, Katie managed to get off the couch and answer it. Her machine was blinking 8 – 8 – 8; apparently someone (*maybe Rick!*) had been trying to get in touch with her. Had she been sleeping? Or just ignoring it? Either way, she answered this call.

“Katie, it’s Abby. I don’t have time to talk now, but can we meet for lunch tomorrow? I’ve read all the journal,” *she wrote a journal?* “and I’ve got some news for you. I think,” as Abby paused, Katie heard her hold the phone away a bit and give a moan like she was stretching for something, “I think you’ll be interested to hear. But you probably won’t like it.”

Katie grunted. No, not Katie. Some thing in control of Katie’s body moved her mouth, squeezed her stomach, forced a little air across her vocal cords and made a sound. Katie had withdrawn inside, watching without concern, cocooned in isolation, away from the hurt and pain caused by emotion, deep inside where there was only Katie and no love, no hope, no rejection, no fear, and soon the thing hung up Katie’s phone, moved her back to the couch, then later to the bedroom where it set her alarm, shut the body down, and rested it until the next morning when she, still down deep, watched as it moved around the apartment making a semblance of reasonable appearance with clothes, hair, a touch of makeup, and then Katie rode the slender body down the stairs and out into the street, along for a quick walk to the bakery where it waved to her good friend Abby, seated comfortably in a high-backed plush booth that looked like it would feel good.

“I found it,” Abby said, smiling and leaning over to touch Katie-body’s hand. Katie-mind registered the experience. Katie-mind waited. Abby continued carefully. “I know how he does it. How he managed to live so long.”

Katie-body and Katie-mind waited without changing emotion. At this point neither cared. Katie-body remembered the few times it had managed to touch Rick’s glorious hand, or his strong shoulder, even the little kiss it had given him on the cheek once, but did not wish for any of that back. Katie-mind remembered the joy at seeing him, the trust she had felt in his eyes, the desperation she felt at reading the words *don’t come back*, and she wished for those to all go away. Katie-mind and Katie-body listened to Abby and heard, but could not care.

She picked up the leather journal and opened to the first page, the first tab. “I read everything in here. Everything. And I believe it. Don’t ask me why, I just do.

“The first hundred pages or so are just his life. Did you know he was married? He fought in the Great War, lived through the depression, saw the sixties, hated the eighties, made a comfortable small fortune in tech stocks in the nineties, lost it all when the bubble burst, rode it back up again in the second tech bubble fifteen years ago, and now just lives on his farm, tinkering and doing crossword puzzles. You show up here,” Abby flipped to tab 8, “where your actuarial analyst friend asked you to do your investigative reporter thing on a problem she didn’t have the expertise to figure out. So you went over there and instead of getting to the bottom of the problem of why there was a hundred and thirty-one year old man still alive in rural Illinois and it wasn’t on the news every weekend, you ended up falling in love.

“But he never talked to you. He said he’s sorry for that in here,” Katie-mind heard that and realized it might be important; it tried to make Katie-body sit up a little straighter. It did not obey. “He said it was necessary. That’s why he used his *glove*, but it’s not really a glove. Oh, it

was, at first,” Abby flipped to tab 5, “when his engineering friends fitted him with the set of electrodes that would record what motions his fingers did so he wouldn’t have to be strapped down to an external keyboard all the time.” Abby paused and stared Katie-body right in the eye sockets. “Did you know he was able to design a one-handed keyboard so he wouldn’t have to use two hands?” She was obviously impressed. Katie-mind tried again to make Katie-body do something, but it seemed weaker this time. Perhaps with a huge push.

“Anyway, he’s been using that sort of glove-thing for, what, sixty years now or so, and in that whole time he hasn’t said a word. And not just then – for almost twenty years before that. He stopped talking when he was fifty-three, and hasn’t said ‘Boo’ since. Not to anyone. Not to you,” Katie-mind tried to cry at that, but without a body it was simply a hole in the fabric of emotion, “not to the tax man, not to his children, not to the insurance agent. Just wrote stuff down or typed with his one hand and let the voice box speak for him.” She shook her head. “How lonely he must have been!”

Abby paused and took Katie-body’s hand. This time Katie-mind came forward enough to register the sensation of connection, of appreciation. “You want to know why he didn’t speak?” Katie-mind did not. “He thought he couldn’t. He thought his next word would be his last. Apparently,” she flipped to tab 5, “when the Second World War was over, Europe was pretty inviting to the Americans, so Rick and his wife went for a tour. Spain, Portugal, France, Switzerland, and, then, finally, Greece. Where they toured ancient Athens.” Katie-mind remembered the mythology book. Had Rick been trying to tell her something? “One of the temples there was dedicated to the three Fates, the ladies who spin the threads of life. Well, evidently Rick liked it so much in there that he went back later that night and saw something. Like ghosts, or spirits. But they looked like...” She paused, then turned the journal around and

shoved it at Katie-body. Katie-mind listened while Katie-body's eyes took in the sensations that would eventually be translated into information-bearing content that Katie-mind would decode into coherent meanings. In other words, she read.

They looked like all the pictures and statues we had seen for days. They were slender and wearing a toga draped across one shoulder. All of them sat on stools spread across the little platform at the back of the temple. But there were more than I thought. I expected three, like the tour guide said. But there were four - one spinning, one measuring, one cutting, and the last one, wrapping threads around small pebbles taken from one jar beside her and dropping them in another. The first three were all very similar - pretty and young, they could have been sisters. But the last looked like an old maid, wrinkled and with thin, grey hair. She would quietly take a pebble from the jar, wrap the thread, and just as quietly place it in the other jar.

The threads I understood. They were the threads of life. They were the length of time each person had. But I didn't understand the fourth one. So I just stood there and watched, hoping to see something.

After about ten minutes I saw them cut the smallest thread - it was less than an inch long. When the one with the shears handed it to the old lady, I heard her cry. She took the pebble out of the jar, wrapped the tiny string carefully around, and

then gently kissed it. She put it down in the other jar, and then I heard the other three cry a little bit, too. So I felt like crying, and I made a small noise in my throat, I guess they heard it, because they all looked at me with fear in their eyes.

"Get out," one said, the one at the spinning wheel. Clotho, she would have been. "This is not for mortals."

"Get out," said the one measuring the length of the threads. Lachesis. "You have no business here."

"Get out," said Atropos, cutting another thread, this one longer than her own arm. "Many things you should not see."

"Get out," said the last one, who I had no name for. Her voice was as old as her face, very tired and raspy. "Before you find yourself condemned."

Somehow that intrigued me, and I stayed. Their threats were pretty idle, as they didn't do anything to me, just continued with their business. After about another ten minutes, though, the old lady spoke.

"You are condemned," she said. "I am Parameno, the one who assigns." She stood and walked to me. Closer, I could see that her wrinkles were deep, very deep, covering her whole face. All that I could see, I mean. I wanted to look in her eyes, but I couldn't. She was blindfolded. But still, she stared right at my eyes, as if she could see.

"I assign this to you. This is your condemnation," she said. "To know." She pressed a pebble into my hand, wrapped with a length of string. "This is yours. You must now bear it." She turned to go, leaving me there all alone, stunned, unable to say anything, unable to move. I simply stood, waiting, for a few more minutes, staring at my hand and feeling a slight coolness of the pebble. Finally I turned to go.

"Watcher," came the tired, raspy voice once more. I faced the group. This time all four of them were standing to face me. Their blank faces scared me most of anything that night. "The thread is not that of life," she continued. I was confused. Not the thread of life? But that's what everything in all the histories has said - that the fates determine a person's life. And how did that blindfold come into it? "The thread is the thread of words," Parameno finished, and as she did, all four raised a silent hand. I left the temple then and went back to our hotel. It would be another six months before I would really understand what it -

Katie-body startled and jerked the eyes away as Abby nudged its shoulder, so that Katie-mind had to stop reading and think. Katie-body stared at Abby, and Katie-mind swam back to the surface, struggling for control, reaching and grasping and finally finding purchase, exploding into herself again, one whole again, with control of mind, body, and spirit, and felt a rush like that on the first drop on a roller coaster, senses fully alive and firing, noticing everything around her, tasting, hearing, breathing, rocketing her into awareness and comprehension.

“Hell-ooo?” Abby said, poking her once again. “You alright Katie? I said your name there about ten times and got nothing.” Katie nodded and mumbled something that might have been thanks. “Did you read it? Did you get to the end of that part, when he told about the blindfold?”

Katie shook her head. “You don’t think he believes that, do you? That if he never speaks again, he’ll never die?”

Abby shrugged. “It seems impossible, I know. But we know he *lives* like he believes it. And the mind is a very powerful organ. There’s parts of our brain we have no idea what they control or why they’re there. So if he believes it, it seems like anything’s possible.”

Katie didn’t buy it. But when she started to open her mouth, something stopped her. A little tickle at the back of her brain – *what if he’s right?* Instead, she simply shook her head.

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Confronting him was easier than she thought. Despite Abby’s pleas, Katie hadn’t said one word more during the rest of lunch, nor had she said anything to herself on the drive out here. When he answered the door at her knock, she said nothing then, either, just showed him the journal, open to the last page she’d read. He nodded and waved her inside. They sat in the living room, sipping coffee. He’d brought a pen and pad of paper, in case she wanted to tell him something, but Katie found herself with, ironically, nothing to say to him after the last two years and so many rejections.

He tried to make small conversation, with his glove, and thankfully asked only yes-or-no questions that she could nod or shake her head to. Finally, when the coffee was lukewarm, she sensed it was time to go. She stood, and held her hand out to shake. Thankfully, he held out his, too, and when his palm touched hers, it was warm, and friendly, but not romantic or loving.

Something deep inside begged her to squeeze harder, to grab on and never let go, but she knew it wouldn't be right. With a final glance in his eyes, so blue they still made her heart weak, she bit her lip in frustration and turned to go.

He went with her to the door, then stood on the porch and watched as she descended the two simple steps and walked to her car. But, once there, she couldn't move. Something still held her back. So she leaned against it, her back to Rick, and let the silent tears flow. And that's when she heard it.

“Katie,” he said, *said!* In a real voice! He'd said her name! He spoke and it was for her! Oh, his voice was sweeter than honey, more powerful than the mightiest thunder! It was Niagara Falls and a nuclear bomb and a 747 taking off all at once, the dazzle of a hummingbird and the grandeur of the Moscow Ballet and the calm of a full moon on a treeless plain at midnight. It was love and it was from him and it was for her! She whirled around and saw him standing at the bottom of the porch, holding his good hand out to her. “Katie, I,” he continued, but stopped. She didn't care. He'd spoken, he truly loved her, that journal was all lies, she knew it, she knew it, she knew it, she would love him forever and he would love her forever, and they would live here and they would have children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and they would die happy and together in each other's arms, *Katie, I*, he'd said, she remembered, she would remember every moment for the rest of her life, she would remember it and imprint it on her mind, her heart, every cell in her body, *Katie, I*, she jumped and sprinted around the corner of the car, shouting, “Rick, I love you!” and he loved her, he did, he loved her, and she loved him, *Katie, I*, and in the delirium of the moment Katie as ran to hold him, “Rick!” she slipped a bit on the gravel driveway, “whoops!”, and only had time to think, while her head was fast approaching the hard edge of the bumper below, *Katie, Katie, I*.