

# Firmament

by  
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*From out of the firmament, how does it foment?*

He is standing on a bridge in winter. It is near Christmas. Christmas figures in the story. But the story is not about Christmas. It is about the absence of Christmas. It is about a last minute order, a gift. Another man had come into the shop to pick up a radio... as a present... for his family. Such pauses. Such delays. And then, he (not the other man, but the he that this story is about) had sat there in silence, all the radios turned off, not a hint of static, as he listening to the rain... drop... in the distance. That is what this story is about. Well, that, and later, when he is standing on the bridge, wondering what to drop, throw off the bridge... whether it be his keys, his hope, his life... well, that, too, is what this story is about.

I like the bridge, standing there. He is in the distance... near the end. I am here... near the beginning. Or

I could be him. You could be him. We all could be him... and just skip this whole stupid mess...

On the bridge, he wears nice gloves and practical boots. While underneath a ratty jacket, not quite old, certainly not new, he wears workman's clothes... while his hands are gripping the railing, cold steel, turning fingers white, cold as ice, as large puffy snow flakes fall into the river below.

It is a city bridge. That probably doesn't matter. Maybe I just want to set it off, this story off, from that other story: *It's a Wonderful Life*. You may have heard of it. But have you ever stood on that river? Jumped into that river? Had your own private conversation with an angel... or the devil... deep down inside? I know... I haven't.

It's easy to feel the snow on my tongue, the cold on my cheeks, the icy sting of the wind on my ears. He, the man, the who that this story is about, wears a styling black hat. It is just this side of the Second World War. See how long it's been? I feel the need to qualify the war, spell it all out, which war, specifically. In time, they will forget. We will forget. In time, all wars are forgotten, except for those who fought in them...

He grew up with stories of the war, playing in vacant fields. If you want to know the truth, that is what this story is about. It's about a snow covered field, on the outskirts of town, two brothers at play, lying in the cold, hiding behind the tall brown grass, dead in the winter; and in the distance, the other side of the field, the pretend machinegun nest, imaginary bullets flying, the German advance, friends

dying, soldiers dying... he liked to get hit, back in the day, he liked to get hit and pretend to be dead... from charging a machinegun nest.

But he has already pulled out of the memory. And he is back on the bridge. But it has become clear, the purpose... of the plot... this story. Or, that is, has it become clear? So, maybe I should make it clear. That he would have taken a bullet. 'I would have taken a bullet,' he says to himself, standing on that bridge, making it all the more clear, as once more in his mind, he is charging across an imaginary field, through nonexistent gunfire, falling victim to a deadly bullet 'that I would have taken for you.'

These things make no sense. It is the mystery of life that these things make no sense. That endless trial, travail, traveling through time, coming ever closer to the end, the mystery revealed, much the same as the beginning, it is, often, the only difference, perhaps, being that the words, if one is lucky, eventually, make some kind of sense...

Snow falls on his face, his glasses... his lips. He opens his mouth and turns to face the sky. City lights illuminate the sky, cool towers rising silently overhead, and the snow falling... endlessly.

It could be ash. Yes, it could be ash...

He did not take the Christmas present when he departed. He left it unwrapped, the wrapping paper nearby, a card newly completed. He had been wrapping the gift. What should the gift be, you know, in the story? These concerns of the plot that matter not, what should it be? A toy gun? And off in the distance someone remarking with

comedic delight, ‘You’ll poke your eye out?’ No, that is a different story, a happier story. The object that was to be the Christmas present, the gift, matters not. It is a void, a hole, an object unwrapped, never to be wrapped, left behind, never to be made whole... or a part of the present.

*What has been cast asunder can never be made whole.*

That is the point of this story.

As he worked on a radio, dialing in static, conducting repairs, such an honest man, such honest work, easy to understand, to relate to, a customer had come in, presented his ticket, and paid for the repair... of a radio. Have I said this? Am I repeating myself? A simple matter, a simple concern... he did not usually concern himself with the books. Reading, writing, arithmetic, these were not his domain, but the stories to be told in the wiring, of bands worn thin, dials worn out, cords torn, cabinets dented, and cooling vents clogged with dust from disuse, these told stories, stories with a plot, maybe not much of a beginning, but at least, they had an end, a clear, very clear, fixable end.

What was repaired? Who knows? Who cares? Perhaps, those who miss the point of this story, well, that’s who cares. Perhaps those who read a story for the details, the points, the particulars, maybe that sort of person cares. But certainly not the sort of person who writes this sort of story, let me assure you, he does not care...

For you see, it had been an easy repair. The on-again off-again switch, call it a toggle, had been clicked back and

forth one too many times... likely late at night... they had a child, you know... their son, details revealing, slowly revealing, and in the dark of the night, late at night, their son, perhaps before he had gone off to war, but no, that's a different story, for in this story, all the son would do is sneak downstairs and listen to the radio, during the war, click it on, *what was that*, so best to click it off, look around, and listen.

*Click it off, look around, and listen...*

The customer had paid his bill, settled accounts, and gone away, delighted the shop was open so late, and on Christmas Eve, no less: details, all, hardly at all important to the story, this particular story. And he, the man, the star of the show, the one who will soon be on the bridge, thought it might be nice, be best, be a bold change of pace if he entered the transaction into the books, as a sort of gift, for Christmas, *'Tis the Season to be Jolly*, don't you know...

It was the first time he had looked at the books in... years, maybe ever. His brother had kept the books. The same brother he had grown up with, played war games with, that he had known in his heart if had ever been called upon... he would have made that charge across the field, likely to be mowed down, a life cut short by enemy gunfire, but for his brother, he would... have.

But bullets did not fire. And wars were not waged. Yet, hearts were still broken. For you see, there was no entry in the books for that particular ticket, record of

receipt for that particular item. He had looked. Oh, yes. He had looked. But he did not find, for it simply was not there. But as he looked, he found others... or that is to say, he did not find others, that should have been, but in the end, they too, were simply not there: the cord, the band, the short in the wire, the cracked case, the dust in the vent... do you care of the details? Do the details matter?

Christmas Eve, like some dimwitted Scrooge, he poured over the books: this repair accounted for; that repair not. It told a story, quite possibly a better story than this one. How could it not? And the story it told was one of betrayal... and of cooking the books.

*It's a simple story of betrayal... and of cooking the books.*

In some other story, in some other time, as the man stands on the bridge, looking across time, he tosses a gun into the river. Why does my mind mention the East River? Or the Fourth Street Bridge?

In many versions of this story, this man, this he, must wipe the gun clean, doing a thorough job with his scarf. And in others, he takes the gun apart, back in his tenement room, barrel from bolt, trigger from guard, and walks through the night, from bridge to bridge disposing of the evidence... the gun. Three in the morning, can you see the police officer, greeting him, questioning him, half jovial, half bored out of his mind, the police man saying, 'Up late?' And the man, shrugging in reply, the last bit, the last bolt, having just been thrown down into the murky depths of the river... or maybe it was the last bullet, unused... or a casing, which, of course, necessitates, some sort of reply, 'I

always wanted to do that, as a child,' throwing a snowball into the night off the East River Bridge... and as cover, for this, that last, gathering snow from the railing, forming a ball, and tossing it over the side, to follow the first. Alas, it would make a different sort of plop... to the well trained ear... of the reading public.

But the gun...

Rest assured, the gun is never used in any version of this story. Bought? Yes. But used? Never. Not even on himself. This man is not suicidal. Still, things get thrown into the river.

Can you see the comedy starting up, as the police officer yells his line, 'You again!' as a load of Christmas presents go over the side. And believe it or not, it was not until right now, this very moment, that I thought of tossing the books, those crooked cooked books, just chucking them all, right over the side, and forgetting the lot.

But this man, he doesn't... think... or do...

Things move quickly in stories, in books, a lifetime in a hundred pages, sometimes more... this time less.

He sat there, that man, the one that this story is about, the radios turned off, the rain failing, symbolically turning to snow. But seriously, you've got me as to what that snow might symbolize. So, the truth is more likely...

I just wanted to sit in the shop, having stared at the books, having come to the unmistakable conclusion that the books had been cooked: one brother stealing from another,

the disappointment, the betrayal... or from another angle, the disgrace.

The thing is, he never knew much about books, about numbers... or the symbolism of rain, slowly turning to snow.

Maybe, there was a second set of books.  
Maybe, he'd made a mistake.  
Maybe, he was seeing it wrong.  
Maybe...

But one could not deny the house, the wife, or the car. Oh, for years, he had chalked it up to lucky breaks, good deals, or frugal living in other ways. After all, he himself lived frugally in almost all ways, so what did he know of... a house... a wife... a car... or living frugally in other ways. But he did know what he felt. He did know what he believed. And that was that the books had been cooked.

Proof?

At a time like that, who cares about proof?

The heart does not care about proof. It only knows what it feels...

Do you see the radio repair shop, inherited from a father, they grew up working on clocks, before the war, those brothers, working away for a lifetime, at a labor of love, not caring, not worrying, not counting dollars, not worrying about the pennies... or the sense... of it all, nose to the grindstone, midday break, sandwich at the bench, listen



to the stories on the radio, music at nine, smile on your brother, his life... and his wife.

It was a life... shared.

And what is shared... can never be stolen.

How can one steal the gift... of a life, entwined?

Until, of course, it is.

And that's, of course, when he sat there, in that shop, wondering, thinking, considering.

And then he left that shop, the sales receipt, ticket for the repair on the counter, next to the money to pay for it all... along with the unwrapped Christmas present... for his brother to take care of... as he would... as he always had... taken care of... everything, it all.

And then...

And then...

Oh, yes, he is pausing, pausing there in the snow, for a very long time, he is pausing.

And then...

And then, he threw his keys to the shop into the river. After which, he walked down the street, into the snow, leaving his heart, his past, and any thought of charging straight ahead into the waiting maw and certain death of a machinegun nest... very far... behind.