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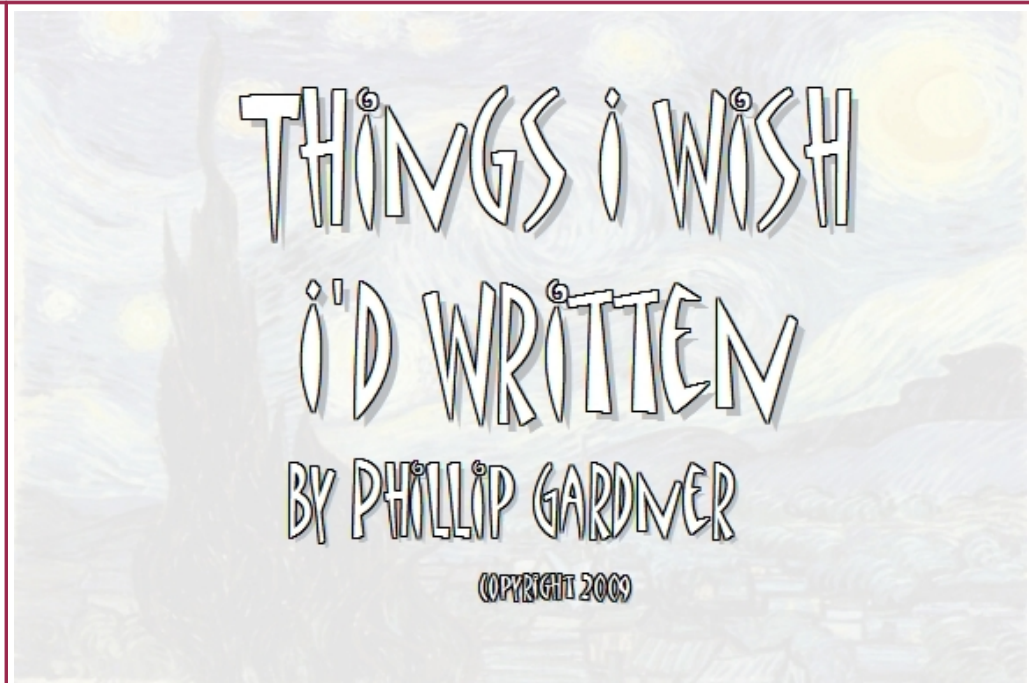
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This was early on a Friday morning. My wife Linda and I were having breakfast. Eggs, soft scrambled. Link sausage. I looked up from my newspaper. Her eyes were shut tight. She held her fork suspended like a Geiger counter over her soft egg.

“You okay?” I said.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” she said.

“What is it this time?”

“I just remembered,” she said. Her eyes rolled beneath the twitching lids, making soft waves. “I dreamed that a woman, a stranger wearing a Candy Striper’s outfit, was giving birth in the backseat of my car.”

“What?”

“I was pumping gas at the Sav-Way. After filling up, I opened my car door and there she was, in the backseat of the Honda, her knees tucked up and wide apart, her sexual stuff looking back at me like the opening of a cannon barrel. The red nursing stripes didn’t help.” Linda paused as if she were awaiting incoming footage. Then, “Her face was all swollen and screwed up, tight as a dried prune and purple as an eggplant.”

I didn’t know if I should whisk Linda’s plate away or leave it there just in case.

“Are you going to eat that sausage?” I asked. Sometimes I have a snack on the loading dock at our ten o’clock break.

“You can have it,” she said, eyes still shut. “I’m done.”

We recycle Ziploc sandwich baggies, keep them in the drawer beside our cigarettes. So I put the sausage and a slice of toast into the used baggie for my

snack. I filled my thermos with sweet tea. Still, Linda sat at the kitchen table, eyes wide now, like she was seeing past where she could see.

“There’s meaning there,” she whispered.

“Meaning what?” I said. I looked at the clock.

“Meaning meaning,” she said.

“Are you going to be sick?” I asked.

“I’m already sick.”

“How?”

“Of what is the question.”

“What?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Can I get you something, Linda?”

Her far away eyes zoomed in on me. “You’ve already given me something,” she said.

“I’m late for work,” I said. “What can I do for you?”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” she said. She stood slowly and took my face into her hands. She kissed me, and I wanted to kiss her back, to really kiss her, but I was afraid of what might happen if she opened her mouth. So I gave her a little smack on the lips. She turned without speaking. The bathroom door closed behind her. Driving to work, I read the new Easter message on the sign in front of the First Baptist Church: Christ Is Aloose and Alive, it said.

I have a job in a hospital supply warehouse. I used to be a forklift driver, but something I don’t want to talk about happened, and so now I’m a picker. I started out as a picker ten years ago. I pick up orders and fill small plastic crates with everything from enema solution to microscopes. I first look at the order and then organize my picking route. Dallas Haze, the big boss, has a term for what I do: economy of movement. He likes saying things like that to us. He nods a big uh-huh when he says things that please him.

Unless somebody screws up majorly, we have only two warehouse meetings with Mr. Haze each year, one in July when we do inventory and one at Christmas. But sometimes someone screws up majorly. My buddy Scottie and I always have a bet on the table going into these meetings. I pick economy and he picks efficiency and we count the number of times Mr. Haze uses those words. The winner takes five bucks from the other. At home I pick my fights, the ones Linda sometimes wants to have. Usually, though, I pick up the remote and pick a channel.

I’ve spent the first two hours picking beakers and bedpans, when suddenly I think

about my wife and about kissing her. I hurry into the men's room, shut the stall door. I don't lift the toilet seat. I unroll some tissue because I know what is about to happen. Whenever I think too much about how deeply I love my wife, the thought makes me cry. I wish I knew why. It hasn't always been like this. But some things happened. When my love for her rises inside me, it just keeps going up and up like the mercury in a thermometer, and it doesn't stop until it gets to my eyes and they just flood out. I really don't understand this. I should be happy. My tears should be happy tears. I love my wife so much that my love makes me cry. Nobody knows this. I am a man. Who could I tell? It's not always been like this. Sometimes, although she has never said it, I know she wonders if she made a bad pick. With this knowledge, I have no choice but to love her more, to hold her tighter, and even as I do it, I know I'm making myself harder to love. I'm a failure at economy of movement.

My face is in a ball of tissue and I'm blowing my nose when I walk out into the warehouse. I almost collide with Mr. Haze, who sometimes spot-checks the men's room for guys who are taking an extra break in there.

"What's with the red eyes?" he says.

"Pine pollen," I say.

I'm not allowed to work in the chemical room anymore. Some of the chemicals in there are so strong that even behind thick brown glass, their labels peel. The corrugated boxes that hold them turn to brown flakes. There was an accident in there once. Louise, who a few years later learned she couldn't have children, was my friend when she worked here.

"You sure? Vomiting? Dizziness?" Mr. Haze says, looking now at the chemical room entrance.

"I've got to pick these," I say, pulling the orders from my shirt pocket. As I'm walking away, I say in a voice he can hear, "I haven't been on a forklift in years."

Scottie likes to talk about buying stock in the company. He is my friend. He is a forklift operator. He says that the future is in bedpans. He hopes to retire in ten years when he hits sixty-five. For the past fifteen years, Scottie has kept a graph in black Magic Marker on the cement wall outside the chemical room. He coughs a lot. We both do. Mr. Haze knows about the bedpan graph, of course, but he lets it slide.

Scottie and I sit on the edge of the loading dock. He smokes while I eat my sausage sandwich. Then I smoke.

"The future is in old people," he says.

"The future is in the young," I say. "Always."

"Wayne," he says, offering me a second cigarette, "You don't know shit. Look at my graph. Bedpans are at an all-time high. No end in sight. The old keep living longer and longer. Consider the modern advances in health care."

I pretend to consider.

It's only ten-fifteen in the morning, and already the windshield of every car in the warehouse lot is a hazy yellow color. Pine pollen. "Can't stop sickness," I say, looking out at the lot. "Some things are just wired to die."

“Eventually,” he says. “Yeah.” We smoke. I count the wooden pallets stacked on the dock.

“What do the really, really old do with all their memories?” I say. “Those stacks and stacks of memories from so many years?”

“That explains why their memory goes, you know, to make room.”

“What if they can’t forget?” I say.

“Then if you’re lucky the good ones outnumber the bad ones, I reckon.” I draw a tic-tac-toe game in the dust of the cement loading dock, make Xs and Os. “If you’re not lucky,” Scottie pulls hard on his cigarette, “you’re screwed,” he says just as the warehouse buzzer signals that break is over.

I stuff a one inch stack of orders into my shirt pocket and walk past the shipping clerk and down the long conveyor where the women packers listen to 103X and sing along. The place smells of spent propane that powers the forklifts. What I see makes me think of the end of the world: racks and towers of hospital supplies beneath a giant grid of fluorescent light tubes, and suddenly I feel that we are all living underground, like this is a secret military installation. My wife says she can’t keep a secret. She says that a lot. I begin counting the sprinkler heads that hang from the steel beams high above. There is nothing flammable about bedpans. The chemical room could blow, maybe any minute. I count sprinklers as I pick. Economy of movement. Soon after we met, Linda recited a list to me. This was a time of love chemistry. This was at a time when you can’t imagine that you could love the other person more, when all you do is laugh and read each other’s mind, and make love like in the movies. I couldn’t have believed then that my love would grow and grow and rise up over time until it flooded from my eyes like water from fire sprinklers. I’m sure Linda thinks about that list sometimes, especially now, thinks about it like it is an order from a long time ago and wonders about how she picked. My wife has a secret life. I can list every hospital, complete with addresses, every hospital in South Carolina; sometimes I help the guys in shipping and receiving make labels for the cartons; sometimes I help load the trucks that deliver from Rock Hill to Beaufort.

Once, Louise, who was my friend, found a dead possum in the back corner of the chemical room.

After the five o’clock buzzer, I call Linda as I walk to my truck. I can’t wait until I get home. I’ve loved the life out of her. I didn’t know it at the time. But that’s what I’ve done. It was a sort of no-fault death. I just couldn’t shut up. I couldn’t foresee the consequences. Over and over I said to her, I never dreamed I could love anybody as much as I love you. I love you more than I ever have. Blah, blah, blah until she wants me to just shut up. What choice did I give her? Twilly willy wit bum-bum. I am Doctor Iron Beard. Just shut up, she thinks. She thinks she’s going to be sick. I’ve never learned what I needed to know about the economy of love.

I look down at the phone as I walk to my truck. I’m just waiting. Linda doesn’t pick up until I leave the message that I’m coming home. Then she picks up.

She doesn’t say hello. “You have to clean up the Honda,” she says.

“It won’t do any good,” I say. By this time, I’m standing at my truck. I make tic-tac-toe on the yellow windshield with my finger. Hugs and kisses. There is a long pause on the other end.

A song my mother sang when I was a baby, maybe even before I was born, this song

suddenly comes into my head: I am Doctor Iron Beard.

“Are you sick?” I say.

“I was wrong,” she said. “About my dream. After you left this morning I remembered that the stranger in the backseat of the Honda wasn’t giving birth. She was having an abortion. I don’t know what to do.”

“On first impression--” I begin.

“I don’t want to be a part of anybody’s first impression. You can’t trust them,” she says.

“What exactly does that mean?”

“Exactly,” she says.

“First impressions. Forget them,” I say.

“Because nobody knows,” she says. “You only think you do because you have an impression.”

“Like speed dating,” I say.

“I’m not telling because you don’t need to hear,” she says.

“Right,” I say.

“Who said I’m listening?” she says.

“Absolutely,” I say.

“You have to clean up the backseat of the Honda,” my wife says. “It’s a mess.”

I shut off my phone and when I look up I see Dallas Haze standing on the dock with his arms hugging his chest. He’s giving me the fish eye as I slowly drive past. I raise my hand and provide him a soft, economic wave. When he sees my lips move, he thinks I’m saying, Good evening Mr. Haze. Have a good night. See you Monday morning. But actually what I say is, Twilly willy wit bum-bum. When I pull into our drive, I see a white envelope taped to the front door.

Fear hits me like a flash fire. I park and sit looking at the envelope.

I have no choice. No choice. The envelope says I’ve given my wife no choice, that’s what I’m thinking. The door is coming at me. You can imagine standing in one place and seeing the door coming at you until you’re there with no place left to go, standing with your nose at your front door. Invisible tape holds the envelope to the door. Invisible. Like a secret. I’m relieved to find there isn’t a letter inside. Even before I get it open I know there’s a key there. The weight, the shape, the amount of room left inside the envelope. For a second, my fear turns to joy. Once, Linda left a key to unlock the door; and when I went inside, there was another key that unlocked our bedroom door; and behind that door Linda stood in her wedding dress. You must know this was years after we’d married. You must know this about my wife. But that was a long time ago and this is the ignition key to the Honda. I’d give anything for the

key to her secret life.

Inside, I call for her but she's not there. We only have my truck and the Honda. I dial her number. She doesn't answer.

I can't explain things. Sometimes I have these thoughts. Such thoughts. Nearing the Honda, which is parked in the yard, I'm overcome with the knowledge that when I get there I'm going to find Linda in the backseat, sick—or worse. I'll cure your ills with healing art, I think. The low afternoon sun is mirrored in the car's yellow windows. I can't see inside. I know the name and address of every hospital in South Carolina. I pull the handle. The door is locked. She never locks the car doors. This is a small town in South Carolina. Not a town where strange women give birth or receive abortions in the backseat of your 1998 Honda. We don't even live in Darlington. We live three miles out in the country. There are some things you should be able to count on. I step back, just stand there, maybe ten feet from the car.

I've lost count, but there are more than five hundred sprinkler heads in the warehouse where I work. In case of fire. She's not really lying in the backseat, I say to myself. Linda is coming home to me. She left me the ignition key. Otherwise she would have left the house keys too, not just the one key. Or she would have taken all of the keys. She would have inserted the ignition key into the ignition. There would have been a moment of fire. Tiny explosions would have occurred inside the engine. Explosions that nobody asks about. Like secrets. The fire inside the engine would have powered the car as she drove away, and nobody would have taken notice. With this, I step closer. It would have been like any other day. I turn the key in the lock, and it moves with ease. There is no sound. I take a small step back as I pull the handle.

The backseat looks as new as the day we bought the car. Linda and I have no children. The chemical that illuminates blood that the eye can't see is called Luminol. It may go by another name, a scientific name. It may be stored in the chemical room where I once worked.

Before I shift into reverse, I light up. I play it safe. I don't smoke while I'm pumping gas. Linda's dream that she gassed up the Honda was just that. The needle is to the left of empty. I'm not much of a risk taker. I make mistakes. Sometimes bad ones. Some things have happened. But my mistakes, the awful ones, the ones I'd do anything to undo, were never the result of foolish risks. Love is always a risk. It is no major risk to assume that I'll make it to the Sav-Way on the gas that's left in the tank. Three miles. Six minutes. You can't measure love in miles or minutes. You can't always tell when the tank will run over. Or run dry.

There is a carwash at the Sav-Way. A tide of happiness waters my eyes. I'll fill the car with gas and get a discount for the carwash drive-thru. Then I'll vacuum. I'll buy one of those green Christmas tree-shaped deodorizers that hangs from the rearview on account of the cigarette smell. And I'll buy a lottery ticket, maybe two, because you never can tell. Sometimes you just can't tell. In twenty minutes I'll return home with a clean car, no trace of a crime anywhere, not even a dusting of pine pollen, and Linda will be at home waiting for me. I am Doctor Iron Beard.

This was late on a Friday afternoon. The sky is going from pink to purple. This is the time when wild animals stir, those that take cover at night, those that come out only at night. There must be at least one moment when the two feel a sort of disorientation, confusion. This is South Carolina. This is a country road that takes me to the Sav-Way on the edge of a small town.

A pulpwood rig with its headlights shimmering passes me at eighty miles an hour on its way to the paper mill. Wood chips float out the back of the open trailer like brown corrugated flakes. Eighty miles an hour equals road kill at any hospital in South Carolina. I can't see the driver, the passenger. The trailer has a South Carolina tag. I think the state's plate should say, South Carolina, Nation's First in Road Kill. But that's just me.

At the Sav-Way, I stand looking into the backseat of the Honda as I pump a highly flammable chemical into my wife's car. Accidents can happen. If my friend Louise were still alive, she'd tell you so. The drive-thru carwash, which is about the size of the chemical room at the warehouse, is dark and empty. The green Christmas tree-shaped car deodorizers near the cash register inside are packaged in thick clear plastic so that the chemicals remain intact. The pine smell is artificial. I choose one and then hold up two fingers and nod toward the Power Ball lottery tickets.

"And a car wash," I say. The large black woman inks her scalp with a ballpoint pen and punches numbers with her free hand. When the register drawer opens, I say, "Four quarters, please." Then I think about Linda, about the vacuuming job I want to do. "Make that eight, please," I say.

The fake stoplight changes from green to red inside the dark carwash. I shift into park. The storm begins. I feel I'm at the bottom of the sea, the tentacles of some giant spider monster sucking the life from me. The backseat is empty. After a storm like this, the highways are cluttered with road kill. So are the emergency rooms.

When I open my eyes, I see a green light through the dim water. I flip on the wipers and pull ahead. The engine hums as I park beside the tall chrome car vac. Economy of movement, I think. Preparations begin. First, I rip the cellophane, which is made from chemicals, from the cardboard, which is soaked in pine-scented chemicals after the cardboard leaves the paper mill; then I hang it from the rear view. The scent is authentically pine. I feel happy. A clean car runs better, or seems to. The smell inside is a clean smell. Next I prepare to vacuum. I switch off the engine and open the car door. An annoying buzzing sound fills the car. The mats come out first. The car is a four-door, which makes for easier, more thorough vacuuming. We bought the Honda used. Believe it or not, the four-door is cheaper than the two-door. This flies in the face of economy. Four doors are necessary for some. Linda and I have no children.

The buzzing reminds me of the warehouse. I place the mats outside on the asphalt near the vacuum pump. The ashtray, which is never empty, comes next. I dump its contents into the large plastic garbage can provided. Because I want to do something special for my wife, I will also vacuum the ashtray, remove any hint of ash, every sign of trouble. I am Doctor Iron Beard. For another second I feel a rush of happiness. But that feeling is doused by the warehouse buzzing inside the car. I reach for the ignition key to stop the Japanese noise torture, but then think better of removing the key. Clean as a whistle, I think. Then to take my mind from the buzzing, I whistle *I Am Doctor Iron Beard*. I open the glove box, the pocket. Why not? I have eight quarters. I feel for the plastic sleeve that holds the car's insurance card and registration.

There is a small cloth bag on top. Inside the bag is a pair of new red panties and travel size containers of deodorant and hair mousse. One blue earring. I hold these in my hands, then place them and their bag on the dash above the steering wheel. A buzzing fills my head. I remove the ignition key and lay it on the console between the two front seats. Linda's. Mine.

The vacuum hose has the diameter of an industrial strength fire hose. Vandals have cut off its head. Before dropping in the four quarters, I stretch the hose to the extreme right rear of the backseat. I begin. I hold the hose, which is the size of a

bazooka, forcing its barrel into the dark hidden spaces under the seats, where no one can see. The secret areas. My fingers part the folds of the backseat. Forced entry. My every movement is efficient. I have four more quarters, but I know that time is running out.

Up front, I begin on the passenger's side. I'm no longer whistling. I consider vacuuming up the bag that holds the panties, deodorant, and mousse. One earring, the color of a blue eye. I've been a part of a cover-up before. The machine makes an odd sound when it sucks the debris from inside the pocket. I look over at the bag again. As I reach for it, I lower the hose.

From the corner of my eye, I spot something: The ignition key, which appears to levitate from the console, rise up, and wave for a moment. Then it is gone.

I sit looking at the place where the key used to be.

The vacuum is still running when I enter the convenience store, but when I walk out with the twelve-pack under my arm, the noise has stopped. I lay the beer in the passenger seat, pull one free and open it, then dial Linda's number. She does not pick up. I finish the beer. After shifting into neutral, I push the Honda away from the vacuum island and open another beer. I press redial as I drink. I drink and redial and hold the red panties in my hand. I drink and redial and hold the red panties and the deodorant. I drink and mousse my hair. I drink and empty the container of mousse into my hair. I remember the remaining four quarters in my pocket. I drop them into the vacuum machine. I've come to that time in the night when I feel disoriented, confused. Eyes closed, I hold the vacuum a few inches above my wet, moussed head. I feel the tugging at the root of the hair follicles. When I open my eyes, I'm still there. I see people pumping gas. They stare.

It is only three miles, I think. In the warehouse, I walk more than three miles every day. Three miles is nothing. Scottie, my friend, is disoriented and confused about the future, I think as I walk. The lights of the Sav-Way have disappeared behind me. He doesn't know his Xs from his Os, I think. Louise, my friend, was very disoriented and confused, especially near the end. She was a definite X. But her eyes were very, very blue. I feel for the lottery tickets in my pocket. The odds are against the South Carolina possum, which is wired for road kill and carries its babies in a pocket on its stomach. The night is dark now, not a star, no moon. Rain maybe. The worst thing you can do is throw water on some kinds of fires. A dry powder, another chemical, is the proper response. If you're there when it happens, does that make you a First Responder? Sometimes you don't want to even know. Linda has a secret life. If I were there and saw it with my own eyes, I can't say what kind of First Responder I might be.

I would leave me if I had the chance.

A slight breeze comes up, a promise of rain. I feel it most in my hair, which stands up like iron quills. I touch it. I think of Linda. "You can laugh if you want to," I say aloud as I walk on a dark country road. "I wish you would." I've said nothing of my wife's laugh. Yes, I have lost the key to the Honda and I must walk home, but only three miles. I still have my truck and another key to the Honda. I am a drunk porcupine walking home to the woman I love. I know that Linda is at home waiting for me. I just know it. Otherwise she would have picked up when I hit redial. But I couldn't stop pressing the button, and the more I press it the more impossible I make everything. So now she is at home waiting, probably in the recliner watching TV. And when she sees me, my spiked head like a floating contact mine, she will laugh until her eyes water. She will point and laugh until she clutches her stomach and raises her knees to her chest. I will smile and say, "You can laugh if you want to."

Before I hear the sound of an engine, I see the yellow center lane reflectors light up in front of me. Then I hear it. I turn. The shimmering headlights appear two stories up. The horn blast sends me sideways. I perform a lovely crossover step, like placing an X in the center of a tic-tac-toe game. Small chips of pine rain down on me. Something happens inside my head. A buzzing. I think I hear my phone. Twilly willy wit bum-bum. I see a speck of light. I don't hear anything. The tiny light grows. I feel that something I've been trying to remember is on its way, that it is just a matter of time. I sing: "I am Doctor Iron Beard, twilly willy wit bum-bum. I'll cure your ills with healing art, twilly willy wit bum-bum. I can make the dumb to walk, twilly willy wit bum-bum-bum-bum. The lame to see, the blind to talk, twilly willy wit bum-bum." The lights are blinding.

"Get in," Linda says, pushing open the passenger door to my truck. She wears a red and white dress and the remains of lipstick on her mouth. When I close the door, I can smell her, the deodorant. The cab is dark now. "What happened to your head?" she says. She touches one of the spikes. "My phone was off." And now she touches my face, cupping my cheek in her palm. Her hand smells of soap. "What happened?" she says.

"You first." I say. Above the dark trees, distant lightening turns the thick clouds the color of Linda's lips. She is driving us home.

"I had an appointment this afternoon," she says.

"Sick?"

"Not now."

"Feeling better?"

"For now."

"How long will it last?"

"Which part?"

"This part," I say, reaching for a cigarette.

"Don't smoke," she says.

"Since when?" I say.

"Since it makes me feel sick," she says. In five minutes, we will be at home, where we live together, where once I had a key and my wife stood waiting for me behind our bedroom door in her wedding dress. You must know this about my wife.

Linda looks straight ahead now as she speaks. "There's something I haven't told you," she says. Her face gives away nothing.

"Good or bad?" I say.

"Not sure yet," she says. Beyond the soft folds, a cloud slowly rolls and turns in the red light.

“Could go either way?” I say.

“Too soon to tell,” she says.

“Give me the odds,” I say.

“I don’t have them to give.”

“What do you have?”

“When I know, you’ll know.”

The clock above the console has stopped. Everything is zeros. I remember the lottery tickets and pull them from my pocket, wave them slowly. “Anything is possible,” I say. But it comes out sounding like a question.

“What happened to your head?” she says.

“I wish I knew,” I say. “I really do.” My wife smiles, I think.

“It looks funny,” she says. She doesn’t look at me, but I think she is smiling.

“You can laugh if you want to,” I say. “If it would help.” The horizon is a deep fiery red now, the color of the first days on earth. Or the last. “You can laugh if you want.”

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