

TWILIGHT OF THE DAWN By Dean R. Koontz      SOMETIMES YOU CAN BE THE BIGGEST JACKASS WHO EVER LIVED," MY wife said the night that I took Santa Claus away from my son. We were in bed, but she was clearly not in the mood for either sleep or romance. Her voice was sharp, scornful. "What a terrible thing to do to a little boy." "He's seven years old-" "He's a little boy," Ellen said harshly, though we rarely spoke to each other in anger. For the most part ours was a happy, peaceful marriage. We lay in silence. The drapes were drawn back from the French doors that opened onto the second-floor balcony, so the bedroom was limned by ash-pale moonlight. Even in that dim glow, even though Ellen was cloaked in blankets, her anger was apparent in the tense, angular position in which she pretended to seek sleep. Finally she said, "Pete, you used a sledgehammer to shatter a little boy's fragile fantasy, a harmless fantasy, all because of your obsession with-" "It wasn't harmless," I said patiently. "And I don't have an obsession." "Yes, you do," she insisted. "I simply believe in rational-" "Oh, shut up." "Won't you even talk to me about it?" "No. It's pointless." I sighed. "I love you, Ellen." She was silent a long while. Wind sougled in the eaves, an ancient voice. In the boughs of one of the backyard cherry trees, an owl hooted. At last Ellen said, "I love you too, but sometimes I want to kick your ass." I was angry with her because I felt that she was not being fair, that she was allowing her least admirable emotions to overrule her reason. Now, many years later, I would give anything to hear her say that she wanted to kick my ass, and I'd bend over with a smile.

\* \* \* From the cradle, my son, Benny, was taught that God did not exist under any name or in any form, and that religion was the refuge of weak-minded people who did not have the courage to face the universe on its own terms. I would not permit Benny to be baptized, for in my view that ceremony was a primitive initiation rite by which the child would be inducted into a cult of ignorance and irrationality. Ellen - my wife, Benny's mother - had been raised as a Methodist and still was stained (as I saw it) by lingering traces of faith. She called herself an agnostic, unable to go further and join me in the camp of the atheists. I loved her so much that I was able to tolerate her equivocation on the subject. Nevertheless, I had nothing but scorn for others who could not face the fact that the universe was godless and that human existence was nothing more than a biological accident. I despised all who bent their knees to humble themselves before an imaginary lord of creation: all the Methodists and Lutherans and Catholics and Baptists and Mormons and Jews and others. They claimed many labels but in essence shared the same sick delusion. My greatest loathing was reserved, however, for those who had once been clean of the disease of religion, rational men and women, like me, who had slipped off the path of reason and fallen into the chasm of superstition. They were surrendering their most precious possessions - their independent spirit, self-reliance, intellectual integrity - in return for half-baked, dreamy promises of an afterlife with togas and harp music. I was more disgusted by the rejection of their previously treasured secular enlightenment than I would have been to hear some old friend confess that he had suddenly developed an all-consuming obsession for canine sex and had divorced his wife in favor of a German-shepherd bitch. Hal Sheen, my partner with whom I had founded Fallon and Sheen Design, had been proud of his atheism too. In college we were best friends, and together we were a formidable team of debaters whenever the subject of religion arose; inevitably, anyone harboring a belief in a supreme being, anyone daring to disagree with our view of the universe as a place of uncaring forces, any of that ilk was sorry to have met us, for we stripped away his pretensions to adulthood and revealed him for the idiot child that he was. Indeed, we often didn't even wait for the subject of religion to arise but skillfully baited fellow students who, to our certain knowledge, were believers. Later, with degrees in architecture, neither of us wished to work with anyone but each other, so we formed a company. We dreamed of creating brawny yet elegant,

functional yet beautiful buildings that would delight and astonish, that would win the admiration of not only our fellow professionals but the world. And with brains, talent, and dogged determination, we began to attain some of our goals while we were still very young men. Fallon and Sheen Design, a wunderkind company, was the focus of a revolution in design that excited university students as well as longtime professionals. The most important aspect of our tremendous success was that our atheism lay at the core of it, for we consciously set out to create a new architecture that owed nothing to religious inspiration. Most laymen are not aware that virtually all the structures around them, including those resulting from modern schools of design, incorporate architectural details originally developed to subtly reinforce the rule of God and the place of religion in life. For instance, vaulted ceilings, first used in churches and cathedrals, were originally intended to draw the gaze upward and to induce, by indirection, contemplation of Heaven and its rewards. Underpitch vaults, barrel vaults, grain vaults, fan vaults, quadripartite and sexpartite and tierceron vaults are more than mere arches; they were conceived as agents of religion, quiet advertisements for Him and for His higher authority. From the start, Hal and I were determined that no vaulted ceilings, no spires, no arched windows or doors, no slightest design element born of religion would be incorporated into a Fallon and Sheen building. In reaction we strove to direct the eye earthward and, by a thousand devices, to remind those who passed through our structures that they were born of the earth, not children of any God but merely more intellectually advanced cousins of apes. Hal's reconversion to the Roman Catholicism of his childhood was, therefore, a shock to me. At thirty-seven, when he was at the top of his profession, when by his singular success he had proven the supremacy of unoppressed, rational man over imagined divinities, he returned with apparent joy to the confessional, humbled himself at the communion rail, dampened his forehead and breast with so-called holy water, and thereby rejected the intellectual foundation on which his entire adult life, to that point, had been based. The horror of it chilled my heart, my marrow. For taking Hal Sheen from me, I despised religion more than ever. I redoubled my efforts to eliminate any wisp of religious thought or superstition from my son's life, and I was fiercely determined that Benny would never be stolen from me by incense-burning, bell-ringing, hymn-singing, self-deluded, mush-brained fools. When he proved to be a voracious reader from an early age, I carefully chose books for him, directing him away from works that even indirectly portrayed religion as an acceptable part of life, firmly steering him to strictly secular material that would not encourage unhealthy fantasies. When I saw that he was fascinated by vampires, ghosts, and the entire panoply of traditional monsters that seem to intrigue all children, I strenuously discouraged that interest, mocked it, and taught him the virtue and pleasure of rising above such childish things. Oh, I did not deny him the enjoyment of a good scare, because there's nothing essentially religious in that. Benny was permitted to savor the fear induced by books about killer robots, movies about the Frankenstein monster, and other threats that were the work of man. It was only monsters of satanic and spiritual origins that I censored from his books and films, because belief in things satanic is merely another facet of religion, the flip side of God worship. I allowed him Santa Claus until he was seven, though I had a lot of misgivings about that indulgence. The Santa Claus legend includes a Christian element, of course. Good Saint Nick and all that. But Ellen was insistent that Benny would not be denied that fantasy. I reluctantly agreed that it was probably harmless, but only as long as we scrupulously observed the holiday as a purely secular event having nothing to do with the birth of Jesus. To us, Christmas was a celebration of the family and a healthy indulgence in materialism. In the backyard of our big house in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, grew a pair of enormous, long-lived cherry trees, under the branches of which Benny and I often sat in milder seasons, playing checkers or card games. Beneath those boughs, which already had lost most of their leaves to the tugging hands of autumn, on an unusually warm day

in early October of his seventh year, as we were playing Uncle Wiggly, Benny asked if I thought Santa was going to bring him lots of stuff that year. I said it was too early to be thinking about Santa, and he said that all the kids were thinking about Santa and were starting to compose want lists already. Then he said, "Daddy, how's Santa know we've been good or bad? He can't watch all us kids all the time, can he? Do our guardian angels talk to him and tattle on us, or what?" "Guardian angels?" I said, startled and displeased. "What do you know about guardian angels?" "Well, they're supposed to watch over us, help us when we're in trouble, right? So I thought maybe they also talk to Santa Claus." Only months after Benny was born, I had joined with like-minded parents in our community to establish a private school guided by the principles of secular humanism, where even the slightest religious thought would be kept out of the curriculum. In fact, our intention was to ensure that, as our children matured, they would be taught history, literature, sociology, and ethics from an anticlerical viewpoint. Benny had attended our preschool and, by that October of which I write, was in second grade of the elementary division, where his classmates came from families guided by the same rational principles as our own. I was surprised to hear that in such an environment he was still subjected to religious propagandizing. "Who told you about guardian angels?" "Some kids." "They believe in these angels?" "Sure. I guess." "Do they believe in the tooth fairy?" "Sheesh, no." "Then why do they believe in guardian angels?" "They saw it on TV." "They did, huh?" "It was a show you won't let me watch." "And just because they saw it on TV, they think it's true?" Benny shrugged and moved his game piece five spaces along the Uncle Wiggly board. I believed then that popular culture - especially television - was the bane of all men and women of reason and goodwill, not least of all because it promoted a wide variety of religious superstitions and, by its saturation of every aspect of our lives, was inescapable and powerfully influential. Books and movies like *The Exorcist* and television programs about guardian angels could frustrate even the most diligent parent's attempts to raise his child in an atmosphere of untainted rationality. The unseasonably warm October breeze was not strong enough to disturb the game cards, but it gently ruffled Benny's fine brown hair. Wind mussed, sitting on a pillow on his redwood chair in order to be at table level, he looked so small and vulnerable. Loving him, wanting the best possible life for him, I grew angrier by the second; my anger was directed not at Benny but at those who, intellectually and emotionally stunted by their twisted philosophy, would attempt to propagandize an innocent child. "Benny," I said, "listen, there are no guardian angels. They don't exist. It's all an ugly lie told by people who want to make you believe that you aren't responsible for your own successes in life. They want you to believe that the bad things in life are the result of your sins and are your fault, but that all the good things come from the grace of God. It's a way to control you. That's what all religion is - a tool to control and oppress you." He blinked at me. "Grace who?" It was my turn to blink. "What?" "Who's Grace? You mean Mrs. Grace Keever at the toy shop? What tool will she use to press me?" He giggled. "Will I be all mashed flat and on a hanger when she's done pressing me? Daddy, you sure are silly." He was only a seven-year-old boy, after all, and I was solemnly discussing the oppressive nature of religious belief as if we were two intellectuals drinking espresso in a coffeehouse. Blushing at the realization of my own capacity for foolishness, I pushed aside the Uncle Wiggly board and struggled harder to make him understand why believing in such nonsense as guardian angels was not merely innocent fun but was a step toward intellectual and emotional enslavement of a particularly pernicious sort. When he seemed alternately bored, confused, embarrassed, and utterly baffled - but never for a moment enlightened - I grew frustrated, and at last (I am now ashamed to admit this) I made my point by taking Santa Claus away from him. Suddenly it seemed clear to me that by allowing him to indulge in the Santa myth, I'd laid the groundwork for the very irrationality that I was determined to

prevent him from adopting. How could I have been so misguided as to believe that Christmas could be celebrated entirely in a secular spirit, without risk of giving credence to the religious tradition that was, after all, the genesis of the holiday. Now I saw that erecting a Christmas tree in our home and exchanging gifts, by association with such other Christmas paraphernalia as manger scenes on church lawns and trumpet-tooting plastic angels in department-store decorations, had generated in Benny an assumption that the spiritual aspect of the celebration had as much validity as the materialistic aspect, which made him fertile ground for tales of guardian angels and all the other rot about sin and salvation. Under the boughs of the cherry trees, in an October breeze that was blowing us slowly toward another Christmas, I told Benny the truth about Santa Claus, explained that the gifts came from his mother and me. He protested that he had evidence of Santa's reality: the cookies and milk that he always left out for the jolly fat man and that were unfailingly consumed. I convinced him that Santa's sweet tooth was in fact my own and that the milk - which I don't like - was always poured down the drain. Methodically, relentlessly - but with what I thought was kindness and love - I stripped from him all of the so-called magic of Christmas and left him in no doubt that the Santa stuff had been a well-meant but mistaken deception. He listened with no further protest, and when I was finished he claimed to be sleepy and in need of a nap. He rubbed his eyes and yawned elaborately. He had no more interest in Uncle Wiggly and went straight into the house and up to his room. The last thing that I said to him beneath the cherry trees was that strong, well-balanced people have no need for imaginary friends like Santa and guardian angels. "All we can count on is ourselves, our friends, and our families, Benny. If we want something in life, we can't get it by asking Santa Claus and certainly not by praying for it. We get it only by earning it - or by benefiting from the generosity of friends or relatives. There's no reason ever to wish for or pray for anything." Three years later, when Benny was in the hospital and dying of bone cancer, I understood for the first time why other people felt a need to believe in God and seek comfort in prayer. Our lives are touched by some tragedies so enormous and so difficult to bear that the temptation to seek mystical answers to the cruelty of the world is powerful indeed. Even if we can accept that our own deaths are final and that no souls survive the decomposition of our flesh, we often can't endure the idea that our children, when stricken in youth, are also doomed to pass from this world into no other. Children are special, so how can it be that they too will be wiped out as completely as if they had never existed? I've seen atheists, though despising religion and incapable of praying for themselves, nevertheless invoke the name of God on behalf of their seriously ill children - only to realize, sometimes with embarrassment but often with deep regret, that their philosophy denies them the foolishness of petitioning for divine intercession. When Benny was afflicted with bone cancer, I was not shaken from my convictions; not once during the ordeal did I put principles aside and blubber at God. I was stalwart, steadfast, stoical, determined to bear the burden by myself, though there were times when the weight bowed my head and when the very bones of my shoulders felt as if they would splinter and collapse under a mountain of grief. That day in October of Benny's seventh year, as I sat beneath the cherry trees and watched him return to the house to nap, I did not know how severely my principles and self-reliance would be tested in days to come. I was proud of having freed my son of his Christmas-related fantasies about Santa Claus, and I was pompously certain that the time would come when Benny, grown to adulthood, would eventually thank me for the rigorously rational upbringing that he had received.

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When Hal Sheen told me that he had returned to the fold of the Catholic Church, I thought he was setting me up for a joke. We were having an after-work cocktail at a hotel bar near our offices, and I was under the impression that the purpose of our meeting was to celebrate some grand commission that Hal had won for us. "I've got news for you," he had said cryptically that morning. "Let's meet at the

Regency for a drink at six o'clock." But instead of telling me that we had been chosen to design a building that would add another chapter to the legend of Fallon and Sheen, he told me that after more than a year of quiet debate with himself, he had shed his atheism as if it were a moldy cocoon and had flown forth into the realm of faith once more. I laughed, waiting for the punch line, and he smiled, and in his smile there was something - perhaps pity for me - that instantly convinced me that he was serious. I argued quietly, then not so quietly. I scorned his claim to have rediscovered God, and I tried to shame him for his surrender of intellectual dignity. "I've decided a man can be both an intellectual and a practicing Christian, Jew, or Buddhist," Hal said with annoying self-possession. "Impossible!" I struck our table with one fist to emphasize my rejection of that muddle-headed contention. Our cocktail glasses rattled, and an unused ashtray nearly fell to the floor, which caused other patrons to look our way. "Look at Malcolm Muggeridge," Hal said. "Or C. S. Lewis. Isaac Singer. Christians and a Jew - and indisputably intellectuals." "Listen to you!" I said, appalled. "On how many occasions have other people raised those names - and other names - when you and I were arguing the intellectual supremacy of atheism, and you joined me in proving what fools the Muggeridges, Lewises, and Singers of this world really are." He shrugged. "I was wrong." "Just like that?" "No, not just like that. Give me some credit, Pete. I've spent a year reading, thinking. I've actively resisted the urge to return to the faith, and yet I've been won over." "By whom? What propagandizing priest or-" "No person won me over. It's been entirely an interior debate, Pete. No one but me has known I've been wavering on this tightrope." "Then what started you wavering?" "Well, for a couple of years now, my life has been empty ... ." "Empty? You're young and healthy. You're married to a smart and beautiful woman. You're at the top of your profession, admired by one and all for the freshness and vigor of your architectural vision, and you're wealthy! You call that an empty life?" He nodded. "Empty. But I couldn't figure out why. Just like you, I added up all that I've got, and it seemed like I should be the most fulfilled man on the face of the earth. But I felt hollow, and each new project we approached had less interest for me. Gradually I realized that all I'd built and that all I might build in the days to come was not going to satisfy me because the achievements were not lasting. Oh, sure, one of our buildings might stand for two hundred years, but a couple of centuries are but a grain of sand falling in the hourglass of time. Structures of stone and steel and glass are not enduring monuments. They're not, as we once thought, testimonies to the singular genius of mankind. Rather the opposite: They're reminders that even our mightiest structures are fragile, that our greatest achievements can be quickly erased by earthquakes, wars, tidal waves, or simply by the slow gnawing of a thousand years of sun and wind and rain. So what's the point?" "The point," I reminded him angrily, "is that by erecting those structures, by creating better and more beautiful buildings, we are improving the lives of our fellow men and encouraging others to reach toward higher goals of their own - and then together all of us are making a better future for the whole human species." "Yes, but to what end?" he pressed. "If there's no afterlife, if each individual's existence ends entirely in the grave, then the collective fate of the species is precisely that of the individual: death, emptiness, blackness, nothingness. Nothing can come from nothing. You can't claim a noble, higher purpose for the species as a whole when you allow no higher purpose for the individual spirit." He raised one hand to halt my response. "I know, I know. You've arguments against that statement. I've supported you in them through countless debates on the subject. But I can't support you any more, Pete. I think there is some purpose to life besides just living. And if I didn't think so, then I would leave the business and spend the rest of my life having fun, enjoying the precious finite number of days left to me. However, now that I believe there is something called a soul and that it survives the body, I can go on working at Fallon and Sheen because it's my destiny to do so, which means the

achievements can be meaningful. I hope you'll be able to accept this. I'm not going to proselytize. This is the first and last time you'll hear me mention my religion, because I'll respect your right not to believe. I'm sure we can go on as before." But we could not. I felt that religion was a hateful degenerative sickness of the mind, and I was thereafter uncomfortable in Hal's presence. I still pretended that we were close, that nothing had changed between us, but I felt that he was not the same man as he had been. Besides, Hal's new faith inevitably began to infect his fine architectural vision. Vaulted ceilings and arched windows began to appear in his designs, and everywhere his new buildings encouraged the eye and mind to look up and regard the heavens. This change of direction was welcomed by certain clients and even praised by critics in prestigious journals, but I could not abide it because I knew he was regressing from the man-centered architecture that had been our claim to originality. Fourteen months after his embrace of the Roman Catholic Church, I sold out my share of the company to him and set up my own organization, free of his influence. "Hal," I told him the last time that I saw him, "even when you claimed to be an atheist, you evidently never understood that the nothingness at the end of life isn't to be feared or raged against. Either accept it regretfully as a fact of life ... or welcome it." Personally, I welcomed it, because not having to concern myself about my fate in the afterlife was liberating. Being a nonbeliever, I could concentrate entirely on winning the rewards of this world, the one and only world.

\* \* \* The night of the day that I took Santa Claus away from Benny, the night that Ellen told me that she wanted to kick me in the ass, as we lay in our moonlit bedroom on opposite sides of the large four-poster bed, she also said, "Pete, you've told me all about your childhood, and of course I've met your folks, so I have a pretty good idea what it must have been like to be raised in that crackpot atmosphere. I can understand why you'd react against their religious fanaticism by embracing atheism. But sometimes ... you get carried away. You aren't happy merely to be an atheist; you're so damn eager to impose your philosophy on everyone else, no matter the cost, that sometimes you behave very much like your own parents ... except instead of selling God, you're selling godlessness." I raised myself on the bed and looked at her blanket-shrouded form. I couldn't see her face; she was turned away from me. "That's just plain nasty, Ellen." "It's true." "I'm nothing like my parents. Nothing like them. I don't beat atheism into Benny the way they tried to beat God into me." "What you did to him today was as bad as beating him." "Ellen, all kids learn the truth about Santa Claus eventually, some of them even sooner than Benny did." She turned toward me, and suddenly I could see her face just well enough to discern the anger in it but, unfortunately, not well enough to glimpse the love that I knew was also there. "Sure," she said, "they all learn the truth about Santa Claus, but they don't have the fantasy ripped away from them by their own fathers, damn it!" "I didn't rip it away. I reasoned him out of it." "He's not a college boy on a debating team," she said. "You can't reason with a seven-year-old. They're all emotion at that age, all heart. Pete, he came into the house today after you were done with him, and he went up to his room, and an hour later when I went up there, he was still crying." "Okay, okay," I said. "Crying." "Okay, I feel like a shit." "Good. You should." "And I'll admit that I could have handled it better, been more tactful about it." She turned away from me again and said nothing. "But I didn't do anything wrong," I said. "I mean, it was a real mistake to think we could celebrate Christmas in a strictly secular way. Innocent fantasies can lead to some that aren't so innocent." "Oh, shut up," she said again. "Shut up and go to sleep before I forget I love you."

\* \* \* The trucker who killed Ellen was trying to make more money to buy a boat. He was a fisherman whose passion was trolling; to afford the boat, he had to take on more work. He was using amphetamines to stay awake. The truck was a Peterbilt, the biggest model they make. Ellen was driving her blue BMW. They hit head-on, and though she apparently tried to take evasive

action, she never had a chance. Benny was devastated. I put all work aside and stayed home with him the entire month of July. He needed a lot of hugging, reassuring, and some gentle guidance toward acceptance of the tragedy. I was in bad shape too, for Ellen had been more than my wife and lover: She had been my toughest critic, my greatest champion, my best friend, and my only confidant. At night, alone in the bedroom we had shared, I put my face against the pillow upon which she had slept, breathed in the faintly lingering scent of her, and wept; I couldn't bear to wash the pillowcase for weeks. But in front of Benny, I managed for the most part to maintain control of myself and to provide him with the example of strength that he so terribly needed. I allowed no funeral. Ellen was cremated, and her ashes were dispersed at sea. A month later, on the first Sunday in August, when we had begun to move grudgingly and sadly toward acceptance, forty or fifty friends and relatives came to the house, and we held a quiet memorial service for Ellen, a purely secular service with not the slightest thread of religious content. We gathered on the patio near the pool, and half a dozen friends stepped forward to tell amusing stories about Ellen and to explain what an impact she'd had on their lives. I kept Benny at my side throughout that service, for I wanted him to see that his mother had been loved by others too, and that her existence had made a difference in more lives than his and mine. He was only eight years old, but he seemed to take from the service the very comfort that I had hoped it would give him. Hearing his mother praised, he was unable to hold back his tears, but now there was something more than grief in his face and eyes; now he was also proud of her, amused by some of the practical jokes that she had played on friends and that they now recounted, and intrigued to hear about aspects of her that had theretofore been unknown to him. In time these new emotions were certain to dilute his grief and help him adjust to his loss. The day following the memorial service, I rose late. When I went looking for Benny, I found him beneath one of the cherry trees in the backyard. He sat with his knees drawn up against his chest and his arms around his legs, staring at the far side of the broad valley on one slope of which we lived, but he seemed to be looking at something still more distant. I sat beside him. "How're you doin'?" "Okay," he said. For a while neither of us spoke. Overhead the leaves of the tree rustled softly. The dazzling white-pink blossoms of spring were long gone, of course, and the branches were bedecked with fruit not yet quite ripe. The day was hot, but the tree threw plentiful, cool shade. At last he said, "Daddy?" "Hmmm?" "If it's all right with you ..." "What?" "I know what you say ...." "What I say about what?" "About there being no Heaven or angels or anything like that." "It's not just what I say, Benny. It's true." "Well ... just the same, if it's all right with you, I'm going to picture Mommy in Heaven, wings and everything." He was still in a fragile emotional condition even a month after her death and would need many more months if not years to regain his full equilibrium, so I didn't rush to respond with one of my usual arguments about the foolishness of religious faith. I was silent for a moment, then said, "Well, let me think about that for a couple of minutes, okay?" We sat side by side, staring across the valley, and I knew that neither of us was seeing the landscape before us. I was seeing Ellen as she had been on the Fourth of July the previous summer: wearing white shorts and a yellow blouse, tossing a Frisbee with me and Benny, radiant, laughing, laughing. I don't know what poor Benny was seeing, though I suspect his mind was brimming with gaudy images of Heaven complete with haloed angels and golden steps spiraling up to a golden throne. "She can't just end," he said after a while. "She was too nice to just end. She's got to be ... somewhere." "But that's just it, Benny. She is somewhere. Your mother goes on in you. You've got her genes, for one thing. You don't know what genes are, but you've got them: her hair, her eyes .... And because she was a good person who taught you the right values, you'll grow up to be a good person as well, and you'll have kids of your own someday, and your mother will go on in them and in their children. Your mother still lives in our memories, too, and in the memories of her friends. Because

she was kind to so many people, those people were shaped to some small degree by her kindness. They'll now and then remember her, and because of her they might be kinder to people, and that kindness goes on and on." He listened solemnly, although I suspected that the concepts of immortality through bloodline and impersonal immortality through one's moral relationships with other people were beyond his grasp. I tried to think of a way to restate it so a child could understand. But he said, "Nope. Not good enough. It's nice that lots of people are gonna remember her. But it's not good enough. She has to be somewhere. Not just her memory. She has to go on. So if it's all right with you, I'm gonna figure she's in Heaven." "No, it's not all right, Benny." I put my arm around him. "The healthy thing to do, son, is to face up to unpleasant truths-" He shook his head. "She's all right, Daddy. She didn't just end. She's somewhere now. I know she is. And she's happy." "Benny-" He stood, peered up into the trees, and said, "We'll have cherries to eat soon?" "Benny, let's not change the subject. We-" "Can we drive into town for lunch at Mrs. Fosters restaurant - burgers and fries and Cokes and then a cherry sundae?" "Benny-" "Can we, can we?" "All right. But-" "I get to drive!" he shouted and ran off toward the garage, giggling at his joke.

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During the next year, Benny's stubborn refusal to let his mother go was at first frustrating, then annoying, and finally intensely aggravating. He talked to her nearly every night as he lay in bed, waiting for sleep to come, and he seemed confident that she could hear him. Often, after I tucked him in and kissed him good night and left the room, he slipped out from under the covers, knelt beside the bed, and prayed that his mother was happy and safe where she had gone. Twice I accidentally heard him. On other occasions I stood quietly in the hall after leaving his room, and when he thought I had gone downstairs, he humbled himself before God, although he could know nothing more of God than what he had illicitly learned from television shows or other pop culture that I had been unable to monitor. I was determined to wait him out, certain that his childish faith would expire naturally when he realized that God would never answer him. As the days passed without a miraculous sign assuring him that his mother's soul had survived death, Benny would begin to understand that all he had been taught about religion was true, and he eventually would return quietly to the realm of reason where I had made - and was patiently saving - a place for him. I did not want to tell him that I knew of his praying, did not want to force the issue, because I knew that in reaction to a too heavy-handed exercise of parental authority, he might cling even longer to his irrational dream of life everlasting. But after four months, when his nightly conversations with his dead mother and with God did not cease, I could no longer tolerate even whispered prayers in my house, for though I seldom heard them, I knew they were being said, and knowing was somehow as maddening as hearing every word of them. I confronted him. I reasoned with him at great length on many occasions. I argued, pleaded. I tried the classic carrot-and-stick approach: I punished him for the expression of any religious sentiment; and I rewarded him for the slightest antireligious statement, even if he made it unthinkingly or if it was only my interpretation of what he'd said that made his statement antireligious. He received few rewards and much punishment. I did not spank him or in any way physically abuse him. That much, at least, is to my credit. I did not attempt to beat God out of him the way my parents had tried to beat Him into me. I took Benny to Dr. Gerton, a psychiatrist, when everything else had failed. "He's having difficulty accepting his mother's death," I told Gerton. "He's just not ... coping. I'm worried about him." After three sessions with Benny over a period of two weeks, Dr. Gerton called to say he no longer needed to see Benny. "He's going to be all right, Mr. Fallon. You've no need to worry about him." "But you're wrong," I insisted. "He needs analysis. He's still not ... coping." "Mr. Fallon, you've said that before, but I've never been able to get a clear explanation of what behavior strikes you as evidence of his inability to cope. What's he doing that worries you so?" "He's praying," I



said. "He prays to God to keep his mother safe and happy. And he talks to his mother as if he's sure she hears him, talks to her every night." "Oh, Mr. Fallon, if that's all that's been bothering you, I can assure you there's no need to worry. Talking to his mother, praying for her, all that's perfectly ordinary and-" "Every night!" I repeated. "Ten times a day would be all right. Really, there's nothing unhealthy about it. Talking to God about his mother and talking to his mother in Heaven ... it's just a psychological mechanism by which he can slowly adjust to the fact that she's no longer actually here on earth with him. It's perfectly ordinary." I'm afraid I shouted: "It's not perfectly ordinary in this house, Dr. Gerton. We're atheists!" He was silent, then sighed. "Mr. Fallon, you've got to remember that your son is more than your son - he's a person in his own right. A little person but a person nonetheless. You can't think of him as property or as an unformed mind to be molded-" "I have the utmost respect for the individual, Dr. Gerton. Much more respect than do the hymn singers who value their fellow men less than they do their imaginary master in the sky." His silence lasted longer than before. Finally he said, "All right. Then surely you realize there's no guarantee the son will be the same person in every respect as the father. He'll have ideas and desires of his own. And ideas about religion might be one area in which the disagreement between the two of you will widen over the years rather than narrow. This might not be only a psychological mechanism that he's using to adapt to his mother's death. It might also turn out to be the start of lifelong faith. At least you have to be prepared for the possibility." "I won't have it," I said firmly. His third silence was the longest of all. Then: "Mr. Fallon, I have no need to see Benny again. There's nothing I can do for him because there's nothing he really needs from me. But perhaps you should consider some counseling for yourself." I hung up on him. \* \*

\* For the next six months Benny infuriated and frustrated me by clinging to his fantasy of Heaven. Perhaps he no longer spoke to his mother every evening, and perhaps sometimes he even forgot to say his prayers, but his stubborn faith could not be shaken. When I spoke of atheism, when I made a scornful joke about God, whenever I tried to reason with him, he would only say, "No, Daddy, you're wrong," or, "No, Daddy, that's not the way it is," and he would either walk away from me or try to change the subject. Or he would do something even more infuriating: He would say, "No, Daddy, you're wrong," and then he would throw his small arms around me, hug me very tight, and tell me that he loved me, and at these moments there was a too apparent sadness about him that included an element of pity, as if he was afraid for me and felt that I needed guidance and reassurance. Nothing made me angrier than that. He was nine years old, not an ancient guru! As punishment for his willful disregard of my wishes, I took away his television privileges for days - and sometimes weeks - at a time. I forbade him to have dessert after dinner, and once I refused to allow him to play with his friends for an entire month. Nothing worked. Religion, the disease that had turned my parents into stern and solemn strangers, the disease that had made my childhood a nightmare, the very sickness that had stolen my best friend, Hal Sheen, from me when I least expected to lose him, religion had now wormed its way into my house again. It had contaminated my son, the only important person left in my life. No, it wasn't any particular religion that had a grip on Benny. He didn't have any formal theological education, so his concepts of God and Heaven were thoroughly nondenominational, vaguely Christian, yes, but only vaguely. It was religion without structure, without dogma or doctrine, religion based entirely on childish sentiment; therefore, some might say that it was not really religion at all, and that I should not have worried about it. But I knew that Dr. Gerton's observation was true: This childish faith might be the seed from which a true religious conviction would grow in later years. The virus of religion was loose in my house, rampant, and I was dismayed, distraught, and perhaps even somewhat deranged by my failure to find a cure for it. To me, this was the essence of horror. It wasn't the acute horror of a bomb blast or

plane crash, mercifully brief, but a chronic horror that went on day after day, week after week. I was sure that the worst of all possible troubles had befallen me and that I was in the darkest time of my life. Then Benny got bone cancer.

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Nearly two years after his mother died, on a blustery day late in February, we were in the park by the river, flying a kite. When Benny ran with the control stick, paying out string, he fell down. Not just once. Not twice. Repeatedly. When I asked what was wrong, he said that he had a sore muscle in his right leg: "Must've twisted it when the guys and I were climbing trees yesterday." He favored the leg for a few days, and when I suggested that he ought to see a doctor, he said that he was feeling better. A week later he was in the hospital, undergoing tests, and in another two days, the diagnosis was confirmed: bone cancer. It was too widespread for surgery. His physicians instituted an immediate program of radium treatments and chemotherapy. Benny lost his hair, lost weight. He grew so pale that each morning I was afraid to look at him because I had the crazy idea that if he got any paler he would begin to turn transparent and, when he was finally as clear as glass, would shatter in front of my eyes. After five weeks he took a sudden turn for the better and was, though not in remission, at least well enough to come home. The radiation and chemotherapy continued on an outpatient basis. I think now that he improved not due to the radiation or cytotoxic agents or drugs but simply because he wanted to see the cherry trees in bloom one last time. His temporary turn for the better was an act of sheer will, a triumph of mind over body. Except for one day when a sprinkle of rain fell, he sat in a chair under the blossom-laden boughs, enjoying the spring greening of the valley and delighting in the antics of the squirrels that came out of the nearby woods to frolic on our lawn. He sat not in one of the redwood lawn chairs but in a big, comfortably padded easy chair that I brought out from the house, his legs propped on a hassock, because he was thin and fragile; a harder chair would have bruised him horribly. We played card games and Chinese checkers, but usually he was too tired to concentrate on a game for long, so mostly we just sat there, relaxing. We talked of days past, of the many good times he'd had in his ten short years, and of his mother. But we sat in silence a lot too. Ours was never an awkward silence; sometimes melancholy, yes, but never awkward. Neither of us spoke of God or guardian angels or Heaven. I knew that he hadn't lost his belief that his mother had survived the death of her body in some form and that she had gone on to a better place. But he said nothing more of that and didn't discuss his hopes for his own place in the afterlife. I believe he avoided the subject out of respect for me and because he wanted no friction between us during those last days. I will always be grateful to him for not putting me to the test. I am afraid that I'd have tried to force him to embrace rationalism even in his last days, thereby making a bigger jackass of myself than usual. After only nine days at home, he suffered a relapse and returned to the hospital. I booked him into a semiprivate room with two beds; he took one, and I took the other. Cancer cells had migrated to his liver, and a tumor was found there. After surgery, he improved for a few days, was almost buoyant, but then sank again. Cancer was found in his lymphatic system, in his spleen, tumors everywhere. His condition improved, declined, improved, and declined again. Each improvement, however, was less encouraging than the one before it, while each decline was steeper. I was rich, intelligent, and talented. I was famous in my field. But I could do nothing to save my son. I had never felt so small, so powerless. At least I could be strong for Benny. In his presence, I tried to be cheerful. I did not let him see me cry, but I wept quietly at night, curled in the fetal position, reduced to the helplessness of a child, while he lay in troubled, drug-induced slumber on the other side of the room. During the day, when he was away for therapy or tests or surgery, I sat at the window, staring out, seeing nothing. As if some alchemical spell had been cast, the world became gray, entirely gray. I was aware of no color in anything; I might have been living in an old black-and-white movie. Shadows

became more stark and sharp edged. The air itself seemed gray, as though contaminated by a toxic mist so fine that it could not be seen, only sensed. Voices were fuzzy, the aural equivalent of gray. The few times that I switched on the TV or the radio, the music seemed to have no melody that I could discern. My interior world was as gray as the physical world around me, and the unseen but acutely sensed mist that fouled the outer world had penetrated to my core. Even in the depths of that despair, I did not step off the path of reason, did not turn to God for help or condemn God for torturing an innocent child. I didn't consider seeking the counsel of clergymen or the help of faith healers. I endured. If I had slipped and sought solace in superstition, no one could have blamed me. In little more than two years, I'd had a falling out with my only close friend, had lost my wife in a traffic accident, and had seen my son succumb to cancer. Occasionally you hear about people with runs of bad luck like that, or you read about them in the papers, and strangely enough they usually talk about how they were brought to God by their suffering and how they found peace in faith. Reading about them always makes you sad and stirs your compassion, and you can even forgive them their witless religious sentimentality. Of course, you always quickly put them out of your mind because you know that a similar chain of tragedies could befall you, and such a realization does not bear contemplation. Now I not only had to contemplate it but live it, and in the living I did not bend my principles. I faced the void and accepted it. After putting up a surprisingly long, valiant, painful struggle against the virulent cancer that was eating him alive, Benny finally died on a night in August. They had rushed him into the intensive-care unit two days before, and I had been permitted to sit with him only fifteen minutes every second hour. On that last night, however, they allowed me to come in from the ICU lounge and stay beside his bed for several hours, because they knew that he didn't have long. An intravenous drip pierced his left arm. An aspirator was inserted in his nose. He was hooked up to an EKG machine that traced his heart activity in green light on a bedside monitor, and each beat was marked by a soft beep. The lines and the beeps frequently became erratic for as much as three or four minutes at a time. I held his hand. I smoothed the sweat-damp hair from his brow. I pulled the covers up to his neck when he was seized by chills and lowered them when the chills gave way to fevers. Benny slipped in and out of consciousness. Even when awake he was not always alert or coherent. "Daddy?" "Yes, Benny?" "Is that you?" "It's me." "Where am I?" "In bed. Safe. I'm here, Benny." "Is supper ready?" "Not yet." "I'd like burgers and fries." "That's what we're having." "Where're my shoes?" "You don't need shoes tonight, Benny." "Thought we were going for a walk." "Not tonight." "Oh." Then he sighed and slipped away again. Rain was falling outside. Drops pattered against the ICU window and streamed down the panes. The storm contributed to the gray mood that had claimed the world. Once, near midnight, Benny woke and was lucid. He knew exactly where he was, who I was, and what was happening. He turned his head toward me and smiled. He tried to rise up on one arm, but he was too weak even to lift his head. I got out of my chair, stood at the side of his bed, held his hand, and said, "All these wires ... I think they're going to replace a few of your parts with robot stuff." "I'll be okay," he said in a faint, tremulous voice that was strangely, movingly confident. "You want a chip of ice to suck on?" "No. What I want ..." "What? Anything you want, Benny." "I'm scared, Daddy." My throat grew tight, and I was afraid that I was going to lose the composure that I had strived so hard to hold on to during the long weeks of his illness. I swallowed and said, "Don't be scared, Benny. I'm with you. Don't-" "No," he said, interrupting me. "I'm not scared ... for me. I'm afraid ... for you." I thought that he was delirious again, and I didn't know what to say. But he was not delirious, and with his next few words he made himself painfully clear: "I want us all ... to be together again ... like we were before Mommy died ... together again someday. But I'm afraid that you ... won't ... find us." The rest is agonizing to recall. I was indeed so

obsessed with holding fast to my atheism that I could not bring myself to tell my son a harmless lie that would make his last minutes easier. If only I had promised to believe, had told him that I would seek him in the next world, he would have gone to his rest more happily. Ellen was right when she called it an obsession. I merely held Benny's hand tighter, blinked back tears, and smiled at him. He said, "If you don't believe you can find us ... then maybe you won't find us." "It's all right, Benny," I said soothingly. I kissed him on the forehead, on his left cheek, and for a moment I put my face against his and held him as best I could, trying to compensate with affection for the promise of faith that I refused to give. "Daddy ... if only ... you'd look for us?" "You'll be okay, Benny." "... just please look for us ..." "I love you, Benny. I love you with all my heart." "... if you look for us ... you'll find us ..." "I love you, I love you, Benny." "... don't look ... won't find ..." "Benny, Benny ..." The gray ICU light fell on the gray sheets and on the gray face of my son. The gray rain streamed down the gray window. He died while I held him. Abruptly color came back into the world. Far too much color, too intense, overwhelming. The light brown of Benny 's staring, sightless eyes was the purest, most penetrating, most beautiful brown that I had ever seen. The ICU walls were a pale blue that made me feel as if they were made not of plaster but of water, and as if I were about to drown in a turbulent sea. The sour-apple green of the EKG monitor blazed bright, searing my eyes. The watery blue walls flowed toward me. I heard running footsteps as nurses and interns responded to the lack of telemetry data from their small patient, but before they arrived I was swept away by a blue tide, carried into deep blue currents.

\* \* \* I shut down my company. I withdrew from negotiations for new commissions. I arranged for those commissions already undertaken to be transferred as quickly as possible to other design firms of which I approved and with which my clients felt comfortable. I pink-slipped my employees, though with generous severance pay, and helped them to find new jobs where possible. I put my wealth into treasury certificates and conservative savings instruments - investment requiring little or no monitoring. The temptation to sell the house was great, but after considerable thought I merely closed it and hired a part-time caretaker to look after it in my absence. Years later than Hal Sheen, I had reached his conclusion that no monuments of man 'were worth the effort required to erect them. Even the greatest edifices of stone and steel were pathetic vanities, of no consequence in the long run. When viewed in the context of the vast, cold universe in which trillions of stars blazed down on tens of trillions of planets, even the pyramids were as fragile as origami sculptures. In the dark light of death and entropy, even heroic effort and acts of genius appeared foolish. Yet relationships with family and friends were no more enduring than humanity's fragile monuments of stone. I had once told Benny that we lived on in memory, in the genetic trace, in the kindness that our own kindnesses encouraged in others. But those things now seemed as insubstantial as shapes of smoke in a brisk wind. Unlike Hal Sheen, however, I did not seek comfort in religion. No blows were hard enough to crack my obsession. I had thought that religious mania was the worst horror of all, but now I had found one that was worse: the horror of an atheist who, unable to believe in God, is suddenly also unable to believe in the value of human struggle and courage, and is therefore unable to find meaning in anything whatsoever, neither in beauty nor in pleasure, nor in the smallest act of kindness. I spent that autumn in Bermuda. I bought a Cheoy Lee sixty-six-foot sport yacht, a sleek and powerful boat, and learned how to handle it. Alone, I ran the Caribbean, sampling island after island. Sometimes I dawdled along at quarter throttle for days at a time, in sync with the lazy rhythms of Caribbean life. Then suddenly I would be overcome with the frantic need to move, to stop wasting time, and I would press forward, engines screaming, slamming across the waves with reckless abandon, as if it mattered whether I got anywhere by any particular time. When I tired of the Caribbean, I went to Brazil, but Rio held interest for

only a few days. I became a rich drifter, moving from one first-class hotel to another in one far-flung city after another: Hong Kong, Singapore, Istanbul, Paris, Athens, Cairo, New York, Las Vegas, Acapulco, Tokyo, San Francisco. I was looking for something that would give meaning to life, though the search was conducted with the certain knowledge that I would not find what I sought.

For a few days I thought I could devote my life to gambling. In the random fall of cards, in the spin of roulette wheels, I glimpsed the strange, wild shape of fate. By committing myself to swimming in that deep river of randomness, I thought I might be in harmony with the pointlessness and disorder of the universe and, therefore, at peace. In less than a week I won and lost fortunes, and at last I walked away from the gaming tables a hundred thousand dollars out of pocket. That was only a tiny fraction of the millions on which I could draw, but in those few days I learned that even immersion in the chaos of random chance provided no escape from an awareness of the finite nature of life and of all things human. In the spring I went home to die. I'm not sure if I meant to kill myself. Or, having lost the will to live, perhaps I believed that I could just lie down in a familiar place and succumb to death without needing to lift my hand against myself. But, although I did not know how death would be attained, I was certain that death was my goal. The house in Bucks County was filled with painful memories of Ellen and Benny, and when I went into the kitchen and looked out the window at the cherry trees in the backyard, my heart ached as if pinched in a vise. The trees were ablaze with thousands of pink and white blossoms. Benny had loved the cherry trees when they were at their radiant best, and the sight of their blossoms sharpened my memories of Benny so well that I felt I had been stabbed. For a while I leaned against the kitchen counter, unable to breathe, then gasped painfully for breath, then wept. In time I went out and stood beneath the trees, looking up at the beautifully decorated branches. Benny had been dead almost nine months, but the trees he had loved were still thriving, and in some way that I could not quite grasp, their continued existence meant that at least a part of Benny was still alive. I struggled to understand this crazy idea- -and suddenly the cherry blossoms fell. Not just a few. Not just hundreds. Within one minute every blossom on both trees dropped to the ground. I turned around, around, startled and confused, and the whirling white flowers were as thick as snowflakes in a blizzard. I had never seen anything like it. Cherry blossoms just don't fall by the thousands, simultaneously, on a windless day. When the phenomenon ended, I plucked blossoms off my shoulders and out of my hair. I examined them closely. They were not withered or seared or marked by any sign of disease. I looked up at the branches. Not one blossom remained on either tree. My heart was hammering. Around my feet, drifts of cherry blossoms began to stir in a mild breeze that sprang up from the west. "No," I said, so frightened that I could not even admit to myself what I was saying no to. I turned from the trees and ran to the house. As I went, the last of the cherry blossoms blew off my hair and clothes. In the library, however, as I took a bottle of Jack Daniel's from the bar cabinet, I realized that I was still clutching blossoms in my hand. I threw them down on the floor and scrubbed my palm on my pants as though I had been handling something foul. I went to the bedroom with the Jack Daniel's and drank myself unconscious, refusing to face up to the reason why I needed to drink at all. I told myself that it had nothing to do with the cherry trees, that I was drinking only because I needed to escape the misery of the past few years. Mine was a diamond-hard obsession.

\* \* \* I slept for eleven hours and woke with a hangover. I took two aspirin, stood in the shower under scalding water for fifteen minutes, under a cold spray for one minute, towed vigorously, took two more aspirin, and went into the kitchen to make coffee. Through the window above the sink, I saw the cherry trees ablaze with pink and white blossoms. Hallucination, I thought with relief. Yesterday's blizzard of blossoms was just hallucination. I ran outside for a closer look at the trees. I saw that only a few pink-white petals were scattered on the lush grass beneath the

boughs, no more than would have blown off in the mild spring breeze. Relieved but also curiously disappointed, I returned to the kitchen. The coffee had brewed. As I poured a cupful, I remembered the blossoms that I had cast aside in the library. I drank two cups of fine Colombian before I had the nerve to go to the library. The blossoms were there: a wad of crushed petals that had yellowed and acquired brown edges overnight. I picked them up, closed my hand around them. All right, I told myself shakily, you don't have to believe in Christ or in God the Father or in some bodiless Holy Spirit. Religion is a disease. No, no, you don't have to believe in any of the silly rituals, in dogma and doctrine. In fact you don't have to believe in God to believe in an afterlife. Irrational, unreasonable. No, wait, think about it: Isn't it possible that life after death is perfectly natural, not a divine gift but a simple fact of nature? The caterpillar lives one life, then transforms itself to live again as a butterfly. So, damn it, isn't it conceivable that our bodies are the caterpillar stage and that our spirits take flight into another existence when our bodies are no longer of use to us? The human metamorphosis may just be a transformation of a higher order than that of the caterpillar. Slowly, with dread and yet hope, I walked through the house, out the back door, up the sloped yard to the cherry trees. I stood beneath the flowery boughs and opened my hand to reveal the blossoms that I had saved from yesterday. "Benny?" I said wonderingly. The blossomfall began again. From both trees, the pink and white petals dropped in profusion, spinning lazily to the grass, catching in my hair and on my clothes. I turned, breathless, gasping. "Benny? Benny?" In a minute the ground was covered with a white mantle, and again not one small bloom remained on the trees. I laughed. It was a nervous laugh that might degenerate into a mad cackle. I was not in control of myself. Not quite sure why I was speaking aloud, I said, "I'm scared. Oh, shit, am I scared." The blossoms began to drift up from the ground. Not just a few of them. All of them. They rose back toward the branches that had shed them only moments ago. It was a blizzard in reverse. The soft petals brushed against my face. I was laughing again, laughing uncontrollably, but my fear was fading rapidly, and this was good laughter. Within another minute, the trees were cloaked in pink and white as before, and all was still. I sensed that Benny was not within the tree. This phenomenon did not conform to pagan belief any more than it did to traditional Christianity. But he was somewhere. He was not gone forever. He was out there somewhere, and when my time came to go where he and Ellen had gone, I only needed to believe that they could be found, and then I would surely find them. The sound of an obsession cracking could probably be heard all the way to China. A scrap of writing by H. G. Wells came into my mind. I had long admired Wells's work, but nothing he had written had ever seemed so true as that which I recalled while standing under the cherry trees: "The past is but the beginning of a beginning, and all that is and has been is but the twilight of the dawn." He had been writing about history, of course, and about the long future that awaited humanity, but those words seemed to apply as well to death and to the mysterious rebirth that followed it. A man might live a hundred years, yet his long life will be but the twilight of the dawn. "Benny," I said. "Oh, Benny." But no more blossoms fell, and through the years that followed I received no more signs. Nor did I need them. From that day forward, I knew that death was not the end and that I would be rejoined with Ellen and Benny on the other side. And what of God? Does He exist? I don't know. Although I have believed in an afterlife of some kind for ten years now, I have not become a churchgoer. But if, upon my death, I cross into that other plane and find Him waiting for me, I will not be entirely surprised, and I will return to His arms as gratefully and happily as I will return to Ellen's and to Benny's.

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