

Jason M. Jones

A NERVOUS TIC MOTION

1.

It isn't long after an earthquake strikes your city, shortly before your thirty-second birthday, that you begin acting skittish at the slightest vibration or noise. Your heart flutters with fear. Your legs strain. And you have to employ every ounce of will to resist rushing for an exit, plunging through fire doors, stumbling down steps. You've always been sensitive to sounds and tremors, but they've never before inspired such intense reactions. You work on the twelfth floor, not far from street level, but the earthquake has made you realize that during a disaster you'd have seconds to determine a course of action—take flight to ensure your survival or let the building crumble around you.

When it happens, this earthquake, you're training a new employee at your desk, and the floor starts shaking. "Did you feel that?" the woman asks. But you're already on your feet, looking out the window. You think maybe a small plane has crashed into the building or a gas main exploded underneath. A few coworkers have stood, and they look at each other in confusion. "What should we do?" one of them asks. Your eyes meet hers, and you wave your arms. "We get the hell out of here," you say, leading them to the stairwell, trying to avoid trampling the people fleeing below you.

"We get the hell out of here."

It isn't your most professional moment. But then, does such a moment call for professionalism? The earthquake measures 5.2 on the Richter scale, and its epicenter is two hundred miles away, but you didn't know this at the time. You sensed a threat and reacted. If the threat was genuine, you tell yourself later, your actions would have given you all a chance to live, and each day after this, whenever a helicopter or jet passes and the windows rattle, you shift in your seat, plant a foot, and get ready to run.

2.

When you were eight years old, your cat Max was hit by a car in front of your house, and you learned that everything that lives eventually has to die. You cried yourself to sleep for a week, but you wept into your pillow.

You didn't want to draw attention to yourself. No one else seemed to have a problem with what you just learned. Your mother and father were sad the cat died, but you didn't see them carrying on about it. You asked them questions in hopes of quelling your fears. "How often do people die?" you said. Then one day your father, concerned you were developing an unhealthy obsession, told you: "You can't live your life in fear. You'll never enjoy anything if you do." You've tried to carry this advice into adulthood, but as you grow older, it takes a greater effort to balance your anxieties with the risks involved in relishing day-to-day existence.

The earthquake that caused you such distress occurred in October. You married your girlfriend of four years a month before this, and so many things are going well, you have more to lose than ever. You and Kristine are planning for the future. You've bought a house in the suburbs where the school district is good, and you've started to discuss having kids.

"If we have a boy," your wife says, "what should we call him?"

"Sherlock. There aren't enough people calling their children Sherlock."

"I thought you were partial to Miles."

"Sherlock Miles then. He can go by his first initial and middle name."

"Smiles Jones?"

You both laugh, but later that night, as you lay in bed with Kristine, you wonder if you *should* have children. You like the idea of being a father, but having children seems selfish. As long as the child only exists in your mind, it's healthy and happy, but once it enters the world, it'll learn of suffering, mortality. It'll have pets that die. It'll get scared by earthquakes, and when there aren't deaths or disasters, it'll have to grapple with its limitations, question existence. Perhaps, you think, this is a reason for the fundamental tension between parents and children. Parents, no matter how loving, are at root the cause of their children's sorrows by giving them life, and you wonder how many people, if given the choice with some foreknowledge of what they'd have to endure, would opt to come into this world.

Each year around Christmas, you watch *It's a Wonderful Life*. You enjoy George Bailey's odyssey, the angel Clarence arriving to show him how much better the world is for his having lived in it. You like the notion that each person has influence on another and without one person the world would be dramatically different. You don't mind buying into this sentiment during the holidays, but you can't uphold its optimism the rest of the year, and once you enter the cold stretch between New Year's and the spring solstice—that stretch of low light and little festivity—your hope disappears.

One morning at work, you even embarrass yourself at the office. A sporting event downtown has requested a flyover of military jets. The jets pass, dipping low, and as they skim the building, their sleek forms break the sound barrier. You imagine missiles heading your direction. You see the instant of impact, vaporizing, heat so high your flesh would melt. You imagine being here and then nothing, knowledge then nothing, something then nothing.

This time, you aren't training anyone, and no one stands to ask for guidance. All you see as you sprint for the stairwell are a few colleagues who rubberneck as you dash by. You're in high gear now, moving too swiftly to stop, and you don't slow until you hit the eighth floor. At this point, the building should have trembled, but it hasn't, and you turn to go back.

"You have the strongest flight or fight response I've ever seen," says one of the women who watched you run.

She'd been among those who followed you down during the earthquake.

"I'm not sure there's much fight in it," you say.

3.

You didn't have a religious upbringing, but you grew up believing in God. For most of your life, you've taken the idea of some kind of heaven for granted, but lately you've begun having doubts. You don't know when the seed was planted or how it grew with such vigor, but it's been building—this nagging suspicion, the belief that you'll die and that's it: you'll exist no more. You've seen people on TV discussing it. You've heard the idea put forth in philosophy lectures you've downloaded online. You've read the assertions of neuroscientists in articles published in the academic journals you edit. And the idea has sunk its teeth in, convinced you. It might be the reason the earthquake has made you so skittish—this sense of finality, an end that seems more genuine than intimations of eternity, an end that could land any moment, catch you unaware and leave you in permanent darkness, permanent not-you.

As the old year rolls into the new, you decide to read the Bible, hoping it holds secrets, truth, wisdom. You search its pages for something to assuage your fears, help you to stop running into the stairwell each time the windows rattle. You devour the text—Old Testament and New, Psalms and Proverbs. Each night you turn to the book and read, and over dinner, Kristine asks how it's going.

She isn't religious either, and she thinks you're reading it for its literary value. She expects you to offer insights over mushroom risotto. You try to speak, but nothing comes. You could pontificate. Point out the usual agnostic objections—its sanction of slavery, its attitudes toward homosexuality, the contradictions resulting from different authors professing to be messengers of God. But these objections bore you. You've heard them repeatedly. They've become worn and trite, and besides, they aren't what bothers you most.

No, what bothers *you* is that the book contains no concise vision of an afterlife. It makes promises, offers a vague outline on how to get there, but it gives you nothing tangible to hold onto. Are we static, stuck in one place with family and friends, the same version of ourselves for all eternity? Or do we continue to grow, develop relationships with the souls around us? And if heaven's so different from our mortal existence that the mind can't comprehend it, wouldn't the self evaporate, change to such an extent we might as well not exist?

You have friends who believe—friends whose opinions you respect, but whenever you broach your concerns, you're met with abstract conversations on faith. And you understand faith, just not theirs. After all, it's intuition telling you that when you die, you'll no longer exist. You don't have proof. If asked to argue your position, you'd have to admit you can't. And while part of you understands it won't matter once you're dead, the idea of your consciousness ceasing to be scares you more than anything.

Silence hovers above the table. You could struggle to explain your despair, how gutted you feel when you think about becoming nothing, but you don't want to set her mind to worry.

4.

For years, you've had a recurring dream you call your Hiroshima dream. In the dream, you're in a movie theater where you realize you've already seen the film. As you walk into the hall to switch screenings, the lights dim. There's a rumbling far off, and the power fails. You recognize what's happening. Someone has dropped a nuke on the city, and you sit on the floor as the blast washes over you. Somehow you remain aware, experience the prolonged disintegration. Your body breaks down. Everything goes black, silent, a resolute finality, and you generally wake, not with a start but a slow drifting up.

You haven't had this dream in two years, but one night in early February, the dream continues. Out of the darkness come tremors, a low roar. Your body reappears, and you leap from bed and run into the hall without opening your eyes. The house is shaking, windows rattling. It takes a moment to realize you're awake, and as you run back for Kristine, the shaking stops. You brace yourself in the doorway and stare at the walls to confirm the quake has passed. Then you crawl into bed and curl against her.

The next morning, while getting ready for work, you ask her about it.

"You felt it too, right? I wasn't dreaming?"

She nods.

"I checked the news. But there weren't any earthquakes. I think it was snow sliding off our roof."

You didn't know melting snow could shake a house like that.

"Were you okay?" she asks. "I could feel your heart pounding."

"I thought I was having a heart attack."

"Maybe you should see someone."

"Like a psychiatrist?"

"Maybe," she says. "But I think you should have a checkup. Why don't you call your doctor?"

You hesitate in making an appointment. You're scared the doctor might say you're really sick or have heart problems, and when your wife asks if you've set it up, you lie and say you're going on Thursday.

That night, she asks how it went.

"Clean bill of health. He says I'm in good shape—weight, blood pressure."

She reaches across the table and takes your hand.

"And your *condition*?"

"Stress."

"Does he think you should see someone?"

"I think I'll let it ride," you say, although you already sense that this is a bad idea. Your body has become a coil of dark energy, spring-loaded, ready to burst. You've ignored it as best you can, but over the next week, whenever a truck backfires or a car alarm goes off, you tense and get ready to run. "It's only a sound," you tell yourself. You close your eyes and slow your breathing, but the more you temper this impulse during the day, the more it seeps into your nights.

"You're not sleeping well," Kristine says. "You've been tossing and turning. Were you drinking?"

Sometimes when you drink, you get restless, but you answer honestly and say no. If you're having nightmares, you can't recall what they are. You haven't had the Hiroshima dream since that night the house shook, but you wake sluggish. You have trouble dragging yourself out of bed to shower.

"Maybe cut back on the coffee," she says.

You sense she'd like to push you toward seeing a shrink, but she knows you won't be receptive. Instead, she makes suggestions, and she means well but they don't work. You're still nervous and jittery, ready for another quake.

5.

Everything, at its core, vibrates. This is what science says. At a fundamental level, all matter hums, and you take it as truth, since it fits your experience. At night the bed trembles beneath your body. By day the desk trembles beneath your palms. Everything shakes, down to the last atom and the smallest string.

Kristine often works late, and these nights, you sit at home in your office, staring at the walls. You read about string theory and relativity. You read about reincarnation. You read searching for answers. Some people grow so despondent with life, they end their own, but you're having the opposite problem. You love it so intensely, you fear losing it. You love your wife, and you lied to her and you hate yourself for it, but you didn't know what else to do. You strain to stay sober, avoid giving in to drink. Whenever you used to grow restless, you'd take walks to calm your racing thoughts, but it's too cold, and each time you step from the front door, a chill wind ripples through you.

You glance at the bottle of bourbon you keep on your desk. You consider pouring a drink, but Kristine wants a baby and so do you, and you want to be clear-headed when you conceive. You worry your state at that moment might affect the baby's path through the world. You fear if you're inebriated, you'll have a cowardly child, a child who can't face day-to-day life without a nip to take the edge off, and you hope your child will be better than you, braver. You hope it can face the frightening things this world has in store and not hide away, cowering among its books.

When Kristine comes home, you make love with a clean system, and afterward, you lay nearby. In your mind, you compile a list of the things you take on faith, physical laws science has shown to be true that you've never bothered testing yourself.

The earth orbits the sun.

You've read the reasoning, and you believe it. There's no reason not to. But you've never bothered to check for yourself. It's something you believe without question. Science is based on observation, the measurement of data. It's given the world flight, sent men into space, cured diseases. But it hasn't always been perfect. Newtonian physics was replaced when Einstein had a better idea. But Einstein's theory couldn't explain matter at miniscule levels, so they developed string theory. Still, none of this explains what happens when you die.

You've leafed through neuroscience journals, listened to interviews with experts, and many insist that all we are is a series of chemical reactions in the brain, neurons firing, and once you're dead, this stops so you stop. It seems a logical inference. But who can say they won't eventually realize this is false? Maybe with more sophisticated technology, they can verify some type of existence beyond the brain. You need answers. But there's something in the scientific arrogance you can't abide, and hearing them insist there's no soul bothers you, even if what they're saying makes sense.

Still, the problem persists. You're afraid to die. You've been holding the fear at bay ever since your dad offered his advice, but the earthquake has brought it to the surface. You're fighting against it even now, but this fight is becoming increasingly difficult. In your twenties, you suffered panic attacks. One day you got stuck in a car and got sick when you couldn't find a place to pull over. You vomited from the window, and after that, you started to worry you couldn't control your body. You worried you'd get sick in public places in front of people, embarrass yourself. And yet, you eventually overcame it. You started pretending it didn't matter. Pretending—that was the first step. You'd feel pain coming on, nausea, and you'd tell yourself to go ahead and get sick. It doesn't matter, you'd say. No one cares. And this had quelled the tension, eliminated your anxiety. You bluffed your way back to health, convinced yourself you didn't mind, and now, sitting up at night, you realize the only way to assuage this new fear is to recreate the earthquake, give yourself up to it, let go of what matters so it can matter once more. But how does one recreate an earthquake?

It isn't like you live on a fault line. They don't happen every day. After giving the matter some thought, the only equivalent you arrive at is a rollercoaster, which seems fitting. A rollercoaster, with its jostling and jolting, could simulate the experience. To some extent, with its inevitability and rise and fall, it even replicates the expectation of death. You decide you'll go to

the amusement park and ride all day, back to back, and once you've reached this decision, you fall asleep, satisfied by the brainstorm, certain this solution will cure your ailment, put you at ease, bring you back to life.

6.

Over the next month, you research amusement parks. You're not looking for an ultramodern, loop-de-loop type of ride, but an old rickety wooden rail with a well-worn car whose safety seems questionable. You can't explain why, but you have to do this alone. Whether that's simply to keep your neurosis under wraps or because you worry your wife will tell you it's a dumb idea, you can't say, but you need to figure out an excuse to get away.

One afternoon, when it's almost April, Kristine comes home and tells you they're sending her to Ireland. It isn't unusual for her office to send her overseas for conferences, and though you always miss her when she goes, you're secretly ecstatic, since this gives you the freedom to test your theory. Ever since you came up with this idea, you've been sleeping better, but over the next few days, as she packs her things, the jittery nervousness returns. You don't like her flying alone. You worry if something happens, you won't be there to comfort her, and as scared as you've become about death, you're just as frightened to live without her. You often wonder how you were lucky enough to marry such a woman. Of the two of you, she's more sensible. She doesn't drink to excess. She makes good decisions. She's offered intimations she'd like you to see a shrink, but she does it with tact, so she doesn't push you away. She's gentle, subtle. Yet, soaring in a little metal tube, twenty thousand feet above the sea, she isn't in control. If something happens, you don't know how you'd cope. Your lives are so inextricably linked. You bought this house together, pay bills, spend all your time when you aren't working in one another's company. You have plans for the future—children, vacations, retirement. After she leaves, her side of the bed is empty for the first time since you were married, and you roll over, caressing the sheets where she usually lay.

The next morning you check the news to make sure there weren't any planes that crashed. Then you shower and dress and get ready to leave. You're expecting her to call at two. You arranged this before she left—two for you, eight for her. And you hope to be home by then, home and safe and secure, and if possible, cured. You've been too much in your head with all this. You feel guilty you've been neglecting her, but you plan to change

that once you're better. You'll take her out on dates. You'll plan trips. You'll keep trying for a kid. This is the day. You feel good. There's a chill in the air and the sky is overcast, but this just means the crowds will be thin and you can ride as much as you want. You pull on a sweatshirt, grab the keys, but as you back out of the driveway, your phone starts to buzz. You cut the ignition and see it's her. You hesitate, afraid she'll sense what you're up to. You start to worry about why she's breaking the plan, calling so much earlier than you'd agreed upon, but after the fourth ring, you pick up.

"Hey, what's up?"

You sit in the driver's seat, staring into the yard—the sycamore, the climbing hydrangea that scales your back deck. You glance up at the red brick building, your home. You're building a life here, and now it's getting warm and spring's in the air and it seems more real. You're happy to hear her breathing on the other end.

"Hi," she says. "I made it safe and sound."

Yet there's a strange flutter in her voice.

"That's good," you say, "how was the flight?"

She says it was rough.

"Lots of turbulence," she says. "It was kind of scary."

And then, the flutter's gone. It must have been your connection.

You sit, searching for something to say, caught between the need to go and relief at hearing her voice. You're worried it'll rain, that they'll close the park and she'll get back to the states and you'll still be a mess. You can't let that happen. You need to fix this. You can help yourself. You consider getting off the phone, but you can't pull away from the sound of her voice.

"Am I interrupting something?" she says. "You seem preoccupied."

Again, you're surprised how perceptive she is. Even in another country, across phone lines, she knows you. You check the rearview mirror, gaze at the hedges, the butterfly bush. You're about to come clean, admit what a ridiculous notion this is, but as you open your mouth, she chimes in.

"I'm late," she says.

"Then I'll let you go."

You figure she's checking in before she sets up for the conference, that this call is a courtesy, a prelude to the latter conversation you've planned for the day. It's all right, the interruption. Her presence and voice reaffirm the reasons why you're heading off to submit yourself to a day of body-jostling, headache-inducing, nausea-inflicting activity.

"That's not what I mean," she says.

"Are you sure?"

“I’m sure I’m late. I’m not sure what it means.”

You’re both silent, as you ponder the implications. A child. You might be having a child. It didn’t seem real before, just an abstract notion. You never saw beyond trying until now. You never really believed she’d conceive and her belly would grow and a whole new life would come from that. You’re bewildered and yet pleased. For all your ideas about whether it’s right to bring another kid into this world, the news is welcome. You just wonder why she didn’t tell you before now.

“How long have you known?”

“It’s day five,” she says. “I wasn’t planning to say anything, but I don’t know. You just sound like you needed to hear it. Maybe I couldn’t wait. Either way, it’s nothing certain.”

“You didn’t take a test?”

“No. I want to wait ‘til I get back. I want to be near you.”

“Well, it’s good news. I think...”

“I think so too.”

As you hang up, you put the car in gear and ease into the street, heading toward the highway. You aren’t sure how to decipher the call, yet the news makes you yearn for her presence, her body. She still has to get home, and that makes you nervous. You want her with you. One more flight, and she’ll take a test, and you’ll know for sure. You think of the day ahead, and your heart’s no longer in it. In light of the call, it seems a stupid fancy—the rollercoaster earthquake! All your strange, uncomfortable thoughts originated with the ground shaking, with life’s uncertainties, and a quick visit to the amusement park won’t fix that. Still, you don’t turn the car around.

When you hit the turnpike, it starts raining, but you don’t stop even then. You just need to drive, and you turn on the wipers, careful to keep your speed constant and slow. You have no idea where you’re heading, but after your wife’s news, the soft murmur of the engine and patter of rain are soothing, and you feel an odd sensation you haven’t experience in months: calm. You watch the drops beat down on the windshield in thick beads. You watch the gale rip through the grassy verge at the side of the interstate. You suspect they’ve closed the park for the day, but you keep driving. You drive through wind and rain. You let the storm wash over the car, gusts shaking its side. Your hands grip the wheel and hold it steady and you smile. Right then, you understand you’ll never fully assuage your fear, yet it seems okay. You don’t have much choice in the matter. From now on, you have someone else to take care of. And you hope to do it as well as you can.