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## Fire from the Realm of Grace

*...Very little is clear at this point on the actions Washington plans to take in order to stabilize last week's global economic downturn, however, an emergency United Nations conference has been confirmed to address this issue on a global scale. This morning, New York Senator David Lancaster explained that-*

“Turn off the damn TV!” Thomas shouted to the back of the small, four cubicle office. His co-worker, Andrew, ignored him, eyes dumbly fixated on the flashing screen in front of him.

*Who is this guy,* wondered Thomas. The Andrew he knew was an intellectual. He wrote blog posts each night about the corruption in the news media and the unadulterated idiocy of the American people. He was the last person he expected to see take any of the major news networks seriously. Of course, he thought, Andrew was the last person he expected to see wearing polo, and this man looked like he'd just crawled out of the casual ad for Ralph Lauren.

Slightly annoyed, Thomas threw a ball of wadded up paper at his friend who swatted at his shoulder as if pushing away a fly.

“I'm serious Drew, I don't want to hear any more of that idiotic, one-sided, right-winged paranoia. Cleaning this place out is giving me enough grief as it is.”

“Yeah yeah,” said the other, eyes still fixed on the screen. “I'll turn it down.”

Thomas dropped another stack of papers carelessly into the brown box on his desk, the top page marked with the distinct letterhead of Streamline Communications. He'd been a hard worker, devoted to their company so much that he had given up countless other job offers to stay with it. Only now was he beginning to realize just how much he'd actually given up.

“It's not just us you know,” Andrew's voice said from the back.

This time Thomas withheld his reply, in part to spite his friend, but also because he knew it to be true. Thousands of others like him were losing their jobs.

He heard Andrew take a bite of an apple, and the sound reminded him of the food he had left in the back fridge. *Just one more thing to take care of.*

“Seriously Tom, you should watch this. Its a pretty big deal. I mean, idiots or not, there is a lot of pressure on Washington right now.”

He heard Andrew take another bite of the apple.

“No kidding.”

“...”

“We have enough to concern ourselves with here, don't we Drew? I mean seriously, its not like the world's coming to an end or anything. The media feeds on this kind of stuff. Remember what happened when Palestine was bombed?”

“...”

“The whole world entered the second frickin' Cold War, and then what? What was all their anxiety for? Nothing.”

Andrew turned off the TV, and stood up, stretching as he did. “Come on,” he said, “lets get the rest of this stuff packed up, so we can get ourselves something to drink.”

Thomas cast him a leery glance. “But its not even three yet,” he said stoically.

“Well we don't have much time left with the end of the world coming,” his friend mocked. He raised up an imaginary glass to Tom, as if he was proposing a toast.

Ha ha.

“I swear,” said Tom, “I don't know why I ever convinced Jay to hire you.” He heard Andrew say a few indiscernible words under his breath in response.

As Andrew left the room with a couple of boxes, Thomas removed the last few items from the bottom drawer of his desk. Among them, he found a photograph of a woman. The glass in the simple frame was cracked down the middle, a blemish etched across her nearly flawless face.

*This sure brings back memories,* he thought.

Her name was Anna. They had met one evening at a local coffee shop, a small, lesser-known place called Café Shiloh. He had been working late that particular night, and stumbled in on impulse for a dose of caffeine - something to get him through the piles of paperwork back at the office.

He recalled seeing her behind the counter, a beautiful girl with elegant proportions, whose long waves of black hair mimicked those of water within a darkened sea. What had really captured Thomas' interest though, was her face, blessed with a subtle, innocent beauty. He remembered likening it to the statue of the Virgin Mary he had seen at the front of Saint John's Cathedral. *How appropriate,* he mused.

At the time they met, Anna had just become Catholic. Thomas on the other hand, was not a very religious man. He had abandoned religion long ago, dismissing it after a college education and eighteen years of unanswered prayer. He didn't mind the fact that she was religious; thought it silly, but was willing to over look their difference in belief. As time passed, Anna realized that she was not.

They had dated for almost a year. Frequently, though with no success, Anna tried to get him to come to Sunday Mass. At one point, in a last, desperate attempt, she had even bought him one of the more liberal study-bibles on the market. Inevitably, this would be the breaking point of their romance. One day she left him for some other guy named Dan. Said she couldn't be with

someone grounded in the world.

*As if reality wasn't something to believe in.*

“Comin' atcha,” said Andrew as he tossed Thomas a set of keys to the truck outside.

“Let's get out of here.”

Thomas shook his head. “Sorry buddy, but I promised the boss I'd stick around until he could make it out here.”

“Tonight then. Blake's.”

“I'll be there before seven,” said Tom, sitting down in front of the television. He immediately changed the channel.

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The crowded Manhattan streets were in a deadlock. Thomas sighed. He wondered if it would have made more sense to walk than take a taxi. Thirteen blocks was worth the pain.

“What a mess,” mumbled his driver, a darker-skinned man with a slight middle-eastern accent.

*How typical.* Thought Thomas.

He looked outside to see a group of protesters passing by, shouting out robotic phrases while raising up crudely fashioned signs.

-PUT AN END TO WAR-

-D.C., NO ACCOUNTABILITY-

-THE DOLLAR IS YOUR GOD-

“Attention-seekers,” he thought out loud.

He heard the cab-driver clear his throat. Another minute or so of silence ensued.

“So... you work around here?”

“Used to,” replied Thomas flatly.

He could see through the mirror that the driver quickly regretted having asked the question. “Eh, sorry bud...” He searched for a way to reconcile his mistake. “You know, Wall Street isn't what it used to be. I haven't been doing so well myself. Think maybe I'll be moving away from the city soon – the wife thinks its safer you know?”

Thomas rolled his eyes.

“I think I'll get off here,” said Thomas. “The place isn't too much farther, so I should be able to walk.”

The driver shook his head and stopped the meter. “Nine-thirty five.”

Thomas handed him a ten and quickly stepped onto the sidewalk. *Glad to be out of that mess.*

Walking a few blocks, he was greeted by the neon hum of the sign that marked the entrance to the bar. *Finally*, he thought.

Thomas and Andrew had a long history with Blake's. It was their Mecca, a common watering-hole rooted early on in their careers. For this reason, they often associated it with the city's best pubs, though the quality of the place suggested otherwise. The interior was dimly lit, and the air heavily laced with cigarette smoke. Behind the bar was an old Budweiser sign, discolored by the years it spent hanging in the front window.

He found Andrew in the corner, their usual spot, having already finished a beer.

“Traffic?” Andrew asked.

“Yeah,” Thomas grumbled.

“So I heard. A pretty bad accident down Fifth.”

A younger woman with a low-cut top came over to them as they spoke, and placed another beer in front of Andrew.

“Anything for you?” she asked.

“Something strong. I really don't care as long as it isn't whiskey.”

She stared at him for a moment.

“I'm serious,” said Tom.

Andrew shook his head in embarrassment. “Get him a Manhattan,” he teased.

“Brandy,” Tom interjected.

“Of course,” said the waitress, laughing to herself a little as she walked away, a seductive sway in her hips.

“She's a cute one,” said Andrew, taking a drink.

Thomas quietly looked around the room, thinking to himself.

“Relax Tom. Its not the end of the world. There are still plenty of places for us to find work.”

“No,” replied Thomas, “its not that. I just have... other things on my mind tonight.”

His thoughts were still on Anna. The two of them had come to this place only once, not more than a week or two after they had met, and he looked back on the evening with a great sense of desire. They were deeply attracted to each other at that time, and under the influence of a bright array of exotic drinks, they made their way back to his apartment. He remembered their beautiful, senseless embrace. He longed for the angelic form of her soft, naked body. *That night, he thought, I saw god.*

Thomas thanked the waitress dryly as she returned with his drink, which he readily

brought to his lips.

“Sooo...” said Andrew in a cool voice. “Talk to me.”

Thomas quietly looked down at the table as he ran his fingers through his dark, brown hair.

“Tom. Loosen up. We have beer.”

He smiled, knowing the sincerity behind his friend's prodding.

“Do you remember that time in undergrad when we hot-wired your roommate's car?” said Thomas.

Andrew laughed. “Heck yeah. We were in such deep shit. Though it sounded like a good idea at the time.”

“We were pretty lucky not to get ourselves a couple of DUI's.”

Andrew chuckled. “I guess we cleaned ourselves up pretty good after that.”

“You wish...”

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The morning was cold, and the city saturated with an unearthly silence. With his head still not completely free of alcohol, Thomas stumbled along the sidewalk on his way back to the office, to bid the old building one last farewell. As he walked, a pain slowly grew from the pit of his stomach until, with all the elegance of a hung-over man of thirty-five, he proceeded to vomit in the first city garbage can he could find. After an exhausting minute, he walked over to the nearest building, and rested upon the steps of Saint John's Cathedral, overcast with a shadow from the statue of the Virgin. He looked up at her face, which seemed much colder than he had

remembered before.

*Thats exactly how your religion is, he thought. Cold and empty. Like the rest of this God-forsaken world.*

As the sun began to rise, he allowed his mind to wander. He imagined what it would have been like to be visited by an angel of the Lord, or rather, an entire host of angels, singing their hymns of praise to an unseen God.

“Glory be to God on high,” their voices would ring out. “And on earth peace, good will toward men! We praise Thee! We bless Thee! We worship Thee! We glorify Thee! We give thanks to Thee, for Thy great glory! For thou only art holy!”

He laughed to himself. *Utter nonsense.*

He set his eyes toward heaven and watched the morning fog fade away. Thomas wondered how he might react if the world was to come to an end at this very moment. Helplessly, he would watch as a fleet of terrible war-jets tore their way across the sky, raining down upon the earth a mighty fire of judgment.

For but a moment in time, Thomas would fully understand what it meant to Fear the Lord, and as the world slowly collapsed around him in a torrent of smoke and ash, a voice would brake through, singing with a beauty only expressed by one who has seen the face of God, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty.”

As he heard the church bells ring from behind him, Thomas stood and walked away, wiping a basin of tears from his weary eyes.