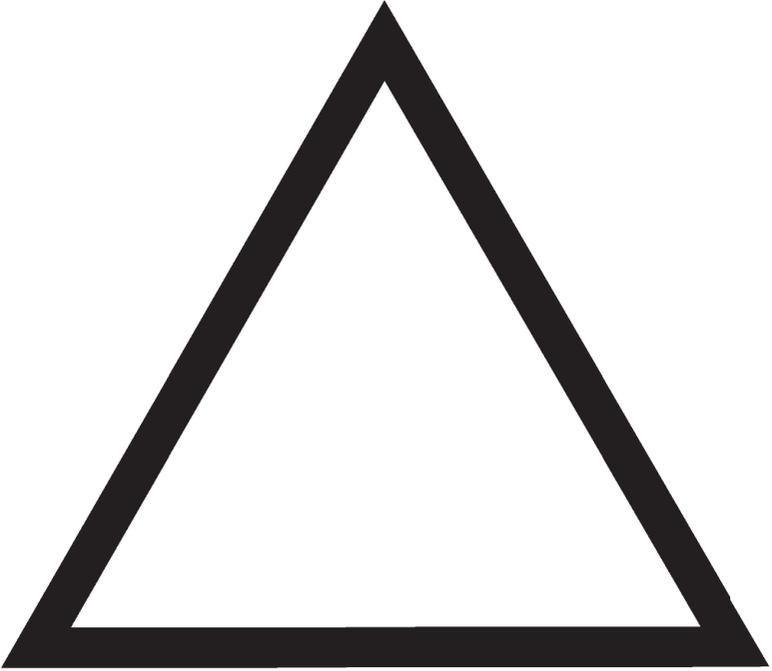


FIRE



I
GET THEE TO A NUNNERY

It's 9:36AM AND MY HOUSE IS ON FIRE.

My name is Levi. Welcome to the ruins of my life. This is the beginning of my story, which is the only thing I have left. If you're looking for a story filled with romantic intrigue, muscle-bound heroes or international espionage, then put this down with all the desperate urgency of an adulterer clambering into the closet at the sound of keys rattling in the door. This isn't a story to read at the airport. This is a story about death, love, redemption, perception and all the little things that go in between that don't matter but seem like they do. Now, where were we? Ah yes. My house is on fire.

Take a moment to imagine, if you will, a glorious blaze enshrouding your home and all your possessions contained within. Every piece of overpriced furniture, every unwanted Christmas gift you never removed from its box. Every pair of underwear and socks worn threadbare that you meant to throw away but never did. The flames take all of this and more. They feed, they feast, on everything you own in all the world.

Your flatscreen television: gone. Your brand new MacBook: gone. Every love letter you ever received: (which is not as many as you would have liked) gone. Every book that sat read or unread on your shelf: gone.

Every photograph.

Every nick-nack.

Every keepsake, memento, t-shirt, collectible. Gone daddy gone.

All that's left is the heat and the light blazing. Fiery tongues licking at the shoes of heaven. There is nothing left.

Nothing.

Now I'm standing in the light of the flames and I'm joined by

a chorus of 'oh my gods!' and the mobile red light disco of the fire brigade. This is not, by anyone's standards, a good start to the day. Want to hear the worst part? This isn't the beginning. Let's go back exactly 56 minutes.



The first thing I think when the phone rings is 'Who the hell calls home phones anymore?' Assuming it to be a telemarketer of some description, I elect to let the answering machine deal with it. If only I had some sort of equivalent electronic device to help me evade people trying to sell me credit cards in the street.

As I duck out the door I hear my own tinnily recorded voice say, 'it's Levi. The machine beeps, you leave a message, you know the drill.' I'm expecting the voice of a call centre worker from India, and to my own surprise I'm actually half right.

"Levi. It's Jim. It's been a long time. Call me as soon as you get this." Jim calling all the way from India when he knows I'm on my way to work? He always checks the time difference. Strange, but not strange enough for me to worry about right now. I slam the door shut behind me and head out into the street. Within moments India is as far from my mind as it is from my present geographical location, and then it's back to the onslaught of traffic and breakfast radio. A continuous cascade of red lights. Roadworks. Stupid-as-hell 'got my licence from a cornflakes packet' drivers cutting each other off and swearing. It's a standard Monday morning and normally I would be deep within the grim jaws of despair. This morning, however, is an exception. By all accounts I've had a great weekend, which included rest and relaxation, beer and attempting to play the guitar. I'm feeling good and thinking positively. I'm unfazed by the irritations surrounding me. I pull into the car park and for once I'm actually able to find a decent space.

I'm whistling in the elevator and as I walk down the hall, I think I may actually be strutting. Yes, strutting.

"Good morning, Rick!" I sing out to the coffee boy.

“Good morning, Levi!” he returns. Everyone’s so cheery it’s like a goddamn musical in here. I’m half expecting everyone to burst into synchronised dance and unleash a kaleidoscopic whirl of coloured umbrellas. I sit down at my desk and check my inbox. It’s empty. Best. Morning. Ever. I wish everyday were like today.

“Levi, can I see you in my office?” Here, it would seem, is the cloud that intends to defiantly rain on my parade.

“Sure thing.” I try to strut as I follow Mr Evans to the office but it just doesn’t happen. George Michael once said that ‘guilty feet have got no rhythm.’ Slightly intimidated feet appear to have a similar problem. I close the door gently behind me and try to lighten the mood.

“How was your weekend, Steve?”

“Cut the B.S., Levi.”

“Um...what?” Calm, cool and collected. That’s me all over.

“What the hell is this?”

He throws a stack of paper over the table at me. Printed on the sheets of paper are men and women (mostly women) doing things that would make their mothers very, very unhappy.

“Um...I’m not entirely sure how to go about answering that, Steve...” I mean I could explain to him the mechanics of a ménage a trios or recite a few paragraphs from the Karma Sutra but somehow I don’t think that’s exactly what he’s after.

“Don’t piss me off any more than you already have. These are printouts from websites that have been accessed on your computer in the last month. We’ve started a new policy of inspecting company hard drives for illicit material. We were very unimpressed to find this on your computer.”

“This is bullshit. I’ve never seen any of these pictures before...” (Okay that’s not entirely true, I do actually recognise one of the images sprawled before me. However, it was viewed on a lonely weekend several months ago in the privacy of my own home.) My mind spins with conspiracy theories. Maybe someone was after my job...no that’s pretty much impossible. No one could possibly want my job badly enough to go to such great lengths. People would go to extremes to get *fired* from my job, not to attain it.

"We're letting you go, Levi. We can't have this kind of thing smearing the company's name."

"I had nothing to do with this, I swear!"

"No one else except upper management has access to your PC. I'm sorry, unless you can provide us with some kind of plausible explanation..." Evil pixies? Really bored hackers? Rupert Murdoch? "Well, I'm afraid that's it then."

"I'll sue you for unfair dismissal..."

"Please Levi, you know we have the best lawyers in the country. You'd be tied up in courts for years. Don't make this any worse than it already is."

Furious, I search for some final words of retribution.

"You are wearing the ugliest tie in human history!" Wow, I'm a regular Oscar Wilde. "And I had sex on your desk once!" Much better, albeit only partially true. I had sex on my desk but afterwards I did borrow a pen from his when I was still only half dressed, so it almost counts. With this rather sharp parting remark, I leave Steve to his wide-eyed incredulousness and storm out to my desk to collect the handful of possessions therein that have any value to me.

As I burst out of the front door there is not a trace of strut left in my stride. My parade has been cancelled due to unexpected torrential rain. Rain that would make a Scotsman very nearly pissed off, rain that would make Noah raise an eyebrow. In search of consolation I climb into my car, fire up the ignition and pull violently out into the street in the direction of Rachel's house. The road seems ridiculously long, the red lights comically drawn out. My hands grip the wheel with white knuckles. I can't think of anything but Rachel, having her hold me, crying on her shoulder, venting in her ear. She'll make it better. I know she will. She'll make me a cup of herbal tea with unpronounceable ingredients and sit me down on the couch and everything will be just fine. Maybe I'll splurge some of my minimal severance pay on a fancy dinner for us both. Who knows, this could be the beginning of a brighter and more beautiful future for the two of us.

I pull into her driveway behind a car I don't recognise. Nine-fifteen seems a little early for a social visit? I open the front door and walk inside. The first sign that there's something definitely wrong here is the sound of Nina Simone playing upstairs. Nina

Simone is Rachel's favourite 'bedroom' artist, if you follow me. I start climbing the stairs in great leaps and can now hear the sound of the shower running. I burst into her bedroom and bang madly on the ensuite door.

"Rachel! Rachel! Open up! It's me!"

There's no answer from inside the bathroom, but from behind me an unfamiliar (and definitely male) voice says, "She's having a shower, you'd best leave her be." I swivel around with all the grace of Wile E. Coyote being pummelled by an anvil and see a man in his fifties reclining comfortably on Rachel's double bed. He has a jaw shaped like an old brick and eyes the colour of your favourite blue t-shirt after it's been in the wash with your favourite brown one. He has traces of stubble peppering his brick shaped jaw and a relaxed, smug grin that I instantly want to remove from his face. Preferably with a chainsaw.

Between gritted teeth I spit the following words: "Whothefuckareyou?" He sits up and looks at me as if I'm a child who's been enraged by a dropped lollipop or some such triviality.

"Rachel hasn't told you about me? She's been seeing me for some time now."

"Seeing you?" I can't believe she's been seeing this guy behind my back. He's nearly old enough to be her dad! I admit I'm no Leonardo DiCaprio, but THIS guy? This guy is a joke, this guy is like William Shatner on a bad day after a few too many pieces of banana cream pie, this guy is...

"This is Father John Abrams," Rachel says as she emerges from the shower clad in a simple but elegant white dress and a bright and joyous grin.

"FATHER John Abrams?" I repeat incredulously.

"Pleased to meet you, Levi. I've heard a lot about you." He grasps my hand with a firm and confident handshake whilst I respond with a hand that is limper than a wet fish passed out from an LSD overdose.

"Rachel? Can I talk to you in private for a second please?"

"Yes of course, Levi, I need to talk to you too."

I wrench her outside the bedroom door and into the hallway and start spitting, "What the hell is going on?"

"Oh Levi, the most wonderful thing has happened. I've found Jesus!"

"You...found him? What is he like a remote control or something? There's a church five doors down the road that you've never so much as set foot inside!"

"I know, I know. That's why I've got so much to make up for, so many sins to repent..."

"Okay, sure, you and me both, but what is Father Josh Abrams..."

"John Abrams..."

"Honey, I honestly wouldn't care less if the guy's name was Adolf Muhammad Methusala JRR Ghandi. What the hell is he doing here while you're taking a shower?"

"Helping me pack."

"Helping you PACK? What there aren't enough churches in this town you gotta drive interstate for the weekend to see another one?"

"He's helping me pack for the convent."

"You're going to be a nun? You? You're going to wear nothing but black and white until your dying day? Christ Rachel, you've got more pairs of shoes than the cast of *Sex and the City*."

"Don't use the Lord's name in vain, please..."

"It's not in vain. I'm trying to make a point."

"That's very disrespectful, Levi. Listen, it's time for me to give all that up. I see how foolish it is now. I'm sorry I haven't been telling you about my spiritual journey but it was something I had to do on my own, and now I've finally realised what I have to do. I know this seems like a rushed decision but I've been thinking about it for a long time. I'm moving there today. I was going to send you a letter. Y'know to make it easier..."

"Well gee, Rach, that's swell. I appreciate your concern. Excuse me while I go home and spend the next two hours contemplating your spectacular ability to 'make things easier.'"

"Y'know, Levi, I really don't appreciate your sarcasm, I thought you'd be happy for me. I know this is hard for you to understand because you're such a fundamentally unspiritual person..."

"I am NOT a fundamentally unspiritual person! I saw

Passion of the Christ, didn't I? I fell asleep halfway through, but still, that's got to count for something..."

"There you go again. Joking around to avoid talking about the important things. You need to look inside yourself Levi. I think you have a lot of exploring to do. I've been praying for you, you know. Maybe you could try talking to Father John."

"I think I'll stick to telephone psychics, at least I don't have to look them in the eye while they're lying to me."

"Levi, I'm sorry that we can't be together anymore..."

"Rachel? This is easily the single worst morning of my entire life. I feel that any further conversation at this juncture would have about as much depth and meaning as a Mills and Boon novel."

With that I'm down the stairs and out the door. There are no words to describe how I'm feeling. Well, there are a few that come close but I'll refrain from using them on the unlikely off-chance that you may someday wish to read this story to your children. I'm driving at nearly twice the speed limit and taking corners so fast my tires are screeching as I hurtle down the road.

Up ahead I can see a column of smoke rising into the sky. I allow my car to speed towards it, if only to take momentary pleasure in witnessing someone's life that is in a worse state than mine. At this point I'm feeling about as cheery and optimistic as a black man in a downtown LA cop shop. As I head towards the towering flames I get the distinct impression that something is very wrong here. Something besides the fire itself that is. It's then that my senses fully re-engage and it occurs to me that the suburb is my own, the street is my own and this house is mine.

It's 9:36am and my house is on fire.

When the fire engine finally arrives and starts spitting jets of water on what was once my home, it finds me sitting cross-legged on my lawn illuminated by the wall of blazing amber. For some reason one of the firies has placed a blanket around my shoulders. I'm not entirely sure why because the flames engulfing my house are providing enough heat to host several dozen marshmallow-roasting boy scouts. Maybe the blanket is a practical and time-effective substitute for a hug. I watch with

distant interest as they run back and forth spraying the flames and yelling instructions.

“Sir? Is anyone inside the house?”

“Oh, just Phaedra, but it’s okay.” His eyes grow wide with shock.

“It’s okay?”

“Phaedra’s the hermit crab my fiancé, or ex-fiancé I guess, gave me for my birthday. I wasn’t that attached.”

“I see. Are you okay? Have you inhaled any smoke? Do we need to get you to a hospital?”

I sigh deeply and reply, “No, I got here just before you did. I’m fine, I guess.”

“Well, in a situation like this I’d have to say you’re very lucky. Be thankful you weren’t inside. I’ll be honest, we’re not going to be able to save much, but just remember how much worse things could have been if you’d slept in this morning.”

As despondent as I am feeling, I can’t help but admit that there is some wisdom in his advice. “Yeah, thanks.” I reply. As I watch my former home and its contents being reduced to a pitiful collection of ash and rubble, I can’t help but wish that I’d spent a little less time and money collecting the various possessions smouldering inside. Did I really need to fork out an extra three hundred bucks to upgrade to a ‘deluxe’ Venetian sofa?

Mixed into the whirlpool of thoughts and emotions currently hurtling around in my brain is Rachel’s cutting statement: ‘you’re a fundamentally unspiritual person.’

What the hell does that even mean? Sure, it’s been a while since I’ve seen the interior of a church of any description and I don’t start madly clapping every time someone says, ‘I don’t believe in fairies,’ but surely that doesn’t warrant the title of FUNDAMENTALLY unspiritual. I mean it’s not like I get up every morning and greet the world by saying: “good morning, world, which was created purely by chance with no divine architect having any part whatsoever in your creation.” If Jesus, Buddha and Muhammad showed up at my doorstep I’d invite them in for tea and maybe a game of Scrabble. At least, I would if I still had a house.

Now that the initial shock has passed, all I really feel is confused and empty. I guess I’m just in a state of emotional

overload. After all, there's only so much shock and abject misery that the mind is capable of processing in one day...

"Have you got someone that you can stay with – a friend or a partner?" the fireman asks. I know the voice is talking to me, but somehow it seems like an omniscient David Attenborough-style narrator and the words aren't so much directed at me as around me.

Nonetheless I hear myself replying, "My fiancé became a nun this morning."

"She what?"

"She became a nun. You know, penguin outfit, boring meals, lots of praying."

"Well, I guess you don't have to worry about going shoe shopping anymore then, huh?" I laugh and thank him for taking my mind off things. He says, "Listen, I know right now it seems like the end of the world, but y'know something? Houses burn down every day. All the time. I should know. I'm usually there when it's happening. If no one's lost a limb or their life today then that's a lot to be thankful for. You can't take this stuff with you anyway. If I were you I'd be praying to whatever god you believe in to give thanks."

"Yeah, well apparently I'm a 'fundamentally unspiritual' person so that's probably not going to happen, but thanks for your advice."

"No problem. When you spend your working week watching things being destroyed it makes you realise what's really important y'know?"

"Yeah, I'll bet it does." He gets back to turning valves and unloading equipment and I watch him with a quiet and distant melancholy.

The fire is being subdued now. I watch as the jets of water calm and tame the tongues of fire into submission. I become slowly aware of the fairly substantial crowd that has gathered to watch the dance of destruction. Well, at least I've provided the people with some entertainment, I guess.

"Are you okay?" an anonymous bystander asks. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Yes...no," I reply.

"Are you injured? Do you need us to drive you to the hospital? Can I call someone for you?"

“No, thanks.” The questions keep coming and the automatic replies trickle out of my mouth in response. Soon the flames die down, along with people’s interest. One by one they walk and drive and ride away leaving me alone with the fire fighters and what was once my home.

A fire comes over and says, “The fire’s all out. Structurally the building’s quite secure. This kind of house has a pretty strong frame, you can take a look inside and see if there’s anything you want to salvage but...well, I have to be honest, I don’t think you’ll find much that’s worth saving.”

I nod absently and draw myself upright and watch distractedly as my feet move one after the other into what can only be described as a ‘house’ by the loosest approximation of the term. Everywhere I look is scorched and burnt beyond recognition. I pick up a charred mass that smears my hand with black. It had been sitting on my mantelpiece, which means that it was something very important to me. I have absolutely no idea what it is, or was. I suppose it doesn’t matter now. I hurl it to the ground and watch as it disintegrates into the mere memory of an object. My feet walk through the black ashen sludge that coats the ground half an inch deep. I wander abstractedly, disinterestedly through the house like a ten-year-old boy dragged along to a war museum. There’s nothing of interest for me here.

I’m about to leave the remains of my bedroom when I notice the one trace of colour I’ve seen in this whole house. I pick it up and feel a frown move across my face. It’s a photo of Rachel and I that I kept next to my bed. We’re both smiling ridiculously at the camera with our arms and legs madly entangled around one another looking like we never again want to be physically separated. I can’t even remember the last time I felt like that.

A part of me says that it’s coincidence that the one and only thing in this whole house that hasn’t been burnt beyond all recognition is this photo. Another part of me tells the first part of me to shut the hell up. I look at the photo and examine its every detail. I throw my mind back to the time and place it was taken; a year ago at our favourite beach. I feel the sun gently warm my skin, I breathe the salty ocean air deep into my lungs and I feel Rachel’s soft and gentle skin rub against my own.

And then I open my eyes again and there is only blackness all around me. I look back at the photo, the one and only item in my entire house that remains miraculously unscathed.

I pull my lighter out of my pocket and watch the flame it creates with new eyes, now more immediately aware of the power contained within the tiny warm glow. I take the flame and place it slowly against the photo. I watch as the images of our faces char and distort and are swallowed by flame. Then I throw the crumpled burning ball to the ground where it becomes a pile of ash, lost in a sea of black.