

DOUBLE ON-CALL

By John Green

God is weak and powerless in the world and that is precisely the way, the only way in which he is with us to help us.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The chaplain is just a boy, just a shock of unwashed hair and a pair of glasses and a poorly tied tie. He's been awake for a couple days.

If the door to the meditation room were not glass, then he would lie on the carpet and sleep. He would lie alongside the diagonal *qibla*, a yellow arrow dyed into the thick shag of the carpet, pointing towards Mecca. Mecca is mostly east, a tad south. He would lie in the direction of Mecca and leave the pagers outside somewhere and sleep. He gazes across the chapel at that glass door, praying fervently that the force of his stare will render it opaque.

But the door is glass, and besides, the chaplain has company.

The man across from him is all biceps, rippling as he clenches his fists, all clear tears dribbling down the clear skin of his face. He hunches forward in a chair, facing the chaplain. The chaplain's best attempts to correct his bad posture in pastoral situations are failing with the onslaught of fatigue. The man is whispering, praying.

The chaplain tries to remember what to do. He sees his supervisor, a Unitarian who believes deeply in absolutely everything. He sees her in the way people see apparitions, the way they see the faint reflection of the Virgin Mother in a parking lot pool of motor oil. The chaplain is well

acquainted with visionary hallucinations. He has studied their importance, from peyote-induced spirit quests to Paul's vision on the road.

"She didn't fall," the man says. His name is Joseph, and his fists clench and unclench, his biceps undulating like pond water in an earthquake.

The chaplain lived the previous summer, the last summer of college, in Alaska with a girl. He had seen pond water ripple in an earthquake, as if a sudden gust of wind came from beneath the water's surface, and then the ground shook lightly beneath the A-frame gift shop where he worked alone. It was the chaplain's first earthquake, and he ran for a doorframe, but it was over before he got anywhere. A woman came into the gift shop a minute later, and the chaplain said, "Did you feel that earthquake?"

"Is that what it was?" the woman replied. "I thought it was something."

The baby, Joseph's daughter Z, had a fractured skull. It was fractured in three places, a triangle of fault lines that came together in the upper left part of her head, just behind the temple. The area of the triangle—that piece of skull was gone. When she came in, alone, ahead of her family, red-gray matter was visible, bulging from her skull. Her brain leaked out of her little head. It pulsed like a tiny heartbeat, like hummingbird wings. The chaplain thought, for some reason, that it might explode, that it might blow onto his powder blue chaplain jacket and that he would go home the next morning and hang up his jacket and crawl into his girlfriend's bed and she would say, "Is that blood?" and he would say, "No, it's brain." But it didn't happen like that. It never did.

"We're really fucked," Joseph says. "I mean, we are *really* fucked."

"You must be feeling pretty scared." That is his job, to name the feeling. Say what the person is feeling, validate it, and allow them to feel it.

Joseph begins to cry very hard, and the chaplain knows he has nailed it. Joseph is letting the grief in, acknowledging his fear with tears.

He killed his little girl. Two years old, with beautiful pale skin as clear and perfect as her nineteen-year-old daddy's. The women—mother and grandmother—had gone off to Church, and he had stayed home to look after the baby.

He was not much for Church, Joseph. Never made him feel any better.

The story comes out from Joseph in bits and pieces, staccato gunfire. He told the paramedics that she fell out of the high chair. He told the Mom that she fell out of the high chair. But everyone knew that she had not fallen. Clearly, he is fucked.

He cooked breakfast. An omelet with just cheese. And the baby would not stop crying, screaming for her Mommy. The baby never wanted anything but the mother. She had breast fed the baby for too long. She had never given Joseph enough time with the baby, and the baby didn't like him, didn't give a shit about him.

He picked the baby up. He sang to it. To her. He put the baby back in her high chair. Still, she cried. "Fine, Z," he said, "Fine. Just sit there and fuckin' cry. See if I give a shit." He left the room, watched TV, came back, held her, played horsey with her, bouncing her up and down in his immensely safe arms. She cried. He sat her down, and she wailed. Mommy. Mommy. Mommy. And so he picked up the frying pan—still hot—and he smacked her.

The cops come, as they always do. It takes them a bit, even after all this practice, to find the interfaith chapel on an administrative wing of the hospital's third floor.

"I don't want to interrupt," one of the two says, interrupting. "But we need him as soon as you're done. We'll be outside."

They stand a foot outside the chapel's door, effectively ending confidentiality. The chaplain whispers, "I don't suggest you talk to them without a lawyer." There is a brief prayer. The prayer part is not the chaplain's specialty, and he only does it when asked, or when compelled by the drama of a situation. He is Episcopalian, and Episcopalians pray from the Book of Common Prayer. They

do not extemporize. Still, he comes up with something. He says, “we” a lot, and “Joseph” a lot, as he’s been taught to do. Make your presence felt, Lord. Bring comfort where there is fear. Bring hope where there is despair. Nothing new. He should offer to sit with Joseph for the questioning. He should give unqualified love and support to this suffering man.

But the poor chaplain is tired. He thinks that perhaps it would be nice to have a cigarette before anyone dies.

Baby Z has other family members in the hospital as well. There is a mother who stands to lose a daughter to brain trauma and a husband (three months they’ve been married) to a life sentence. A live-in grandmother, the baby’s primary caretaker. Aunts. Great-Aunts. Cousins. All women, and all wearing large hats, having come to the hospital directly from a Saturday morning Church breakfast. Their vigil is now sixteen hours old. When the mother came in, the chaplain had to restrain her, because security was elsewhere and the woman was trying to get at the bed in the trauma room. He pulled her back to the doorway. The hospital believes it is important for parents to be present for all phases of a child’s treatment, but not too present.

The mother asked, “Is she going to have to spend the night?”

And though he was not supposed to give medical information or advice of any sort, he said, “Yes,” because he had seen the little girl’s brain.

“Is she going to die?”

He copped out on that one. “I don’t know.”

Before his cigarette, the chaplain drops by the PICU to check on the nurse caring for the baby.

“Hey,” he says. She is Irma, married to a man who used to have erectile dysfunction something serious but now pops an effective, if expensive, blue pill twice a week. She recently had

breast reduction surgery and you cannot imagine how painful it is, how long it takes to recover to the point where you can raise your arms over your head to hook an IV bag. She is very talkative, and his job is to listen, so he has learned a lot about Irma.

“How is she doing?” he asks. “Z?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, you know. She may die before they do the brain function tomorrow.”

“Mmm.”

“Her heart rate is dropping. Drops like this—hmm—keeps dropping like this I’d say maybe seven thirty?”

“Okay. And the brain function test tomorrow?” the chaplain asks.

“Yeah, in the morning. If she gets there.”

“Right. Okay. Thanks, Irma.”

“What time you get off?” she asks.

“Eight,” the chaplain says.

“Hope she makes it for ya.” Irma makes a thin-lipped expression. A smile of some kind.

“Me too,” the chaplain confesses. “Long night?”

“No. Well. Yes. Yes, really. Yours?”

“Not so bad,” Irma says. “Just this one. I have two others, but both very stable. So it’s just this one. Get some sleep, kid. You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“Call me if I can be helpful,” he says.

“Sleep.”

“Yes,m,” he says.

He turns, so his back is to Irma when she says, “Oh. Hey. Happy Easter.”

He swivels back toward her. “Oh, right. Yeah. Well, officially I guess, it is. Happy Easter.”

He slams his fist against a blue button. The doors open, and he jogs down the hall, forgetting his cigarette break. There is no stopping him now. A minute later, he sits in a small room, the sleep room. The bed, sheets, and blanket are all hospital issue. The alarm is set for seven forty two. Four hours. Eighteen minutes. He throws jacket, shoes, and pagers on the ground. He lies down over the sheets, so he will not have to remake the entire bed, and pulls the blanket over his head.

He is thinking that he should perhaps loosen his tie when he falls asleep.

There are two pagers. The trauma pager goes off when a child is coming to the hospital with serious injuries. The chaplain and the social worker take care of the families while paramedics, nurses, and doctors work to stabilize the patient. Down there, in the Emergency Department, the name of the game, for chaplains and neurosurgeons alike, is stabilization. The chaplain pager goes off when someone wants him specifically, for a baptism or a prayer or a death. All things being equal, he prefers the trauma pager, because it is more melodious, playing a song that sounds an awful lot like “Dixie.” Also, the trauma pager is some sort of walkie-talkie, so he gets information on the situation. The chaplain pager usually just has a phone or room number. Neither pager portends particularly good news. They never call him to have a look at a beautiful, healthy baby growing up in a deeply communicative and functional family with an abiding religious faith that sustains them in times of trial. One night out of seven, usually, he spends twenty-four hours in the hospital with the pagers. But this night is his second in a row. The dreaded double on-call.

It’s beeping. *Well I wish I was in the land of cotton*, and he is awake. “Level two. Fourteen-year-old male. Nine minutes.” Three-fifty-six. Asleep for half an hour and, if anything, more tired. Nine minutes. If he hurries, he can smoke that cigarette he’s been meaning to bum, and he will smell like smoke, but they won’t notice. They never notice. Jacket, pagers, shoes back on and a quick glance in

the mirror to diagnose and treat a wicked case of bedhead. Down stairs, two at a time. I am still so young, he thinks. My knees are still so good. These knees can take anything.

“Doog!” Lynn cries out. The social worker. Lynn, the late twenties, pre-burnout social worker with hair in tiny tight dreadlocks. Lynn, who hates chaplains but likes him, because the chaplain himself hates chaplains. With Lynn, he acts as he does outside of the hospital, like a recent college graduate who some- times has unprotected sex with his girlfriend, to whom he is neither married nor engaged. There is no pretense of ministry, of pastoral care.

“Hey, Lynn. Do you have a cigarette?”

“Of course. Doogie Howser, boy chaplain, smokes?”

“Tonight he does.”

“Rough with the high chair kid?” “Yeah.”

“Chillin’ with the Dad?” “Till the cops found us.”

“Shame about how he’s gonna die in jail,” she says gleefully.

“So what’s this Level II?”

“Oh, whatever. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, losing consciousness only briefly. God, Doog, you look like a train wreck.”

“I’m on a double.” “How’s your girl?”

“She’s good. Good. Her eyes are getting bluer. How’s yours?”

“She’s okay. She wants to move in. Bluer eyes?”

“Yeah. They’re green. I mean, they’ve always been green. But they’re starting to turn blue. Very strange. You want her to move in?”

“Dunno. I’ve never had a live-in ... whatever. Partner.”

“Me neither.”

“Either.”

“Right. Yeah.”

“Go to bed, Doogie. I’ll get this one. The kid is fine. He’s fourteen. He’ll cuss when they put the catheter in and that’ll be the extent of it.”

“Sold! Call me if you want me.”

The chaplain lets his cigarette fall to the concrete and steps on it to put it out. He steps on like he imagines James Dean doing it, although he has never personally seen a James Dean movie.

Back in the sleep room, he realizes why the pager went off. In his rush to bed, he had failed to take the necessary precautions. This time, instead of throwing his jacket and shoes and pagers willy-nilly around the room, he is careful.

The shoes go perpendicular to the bed, the left one on the right and the right one on the left. The jacket is folded into quarters, and laid on the small end table. The pagers, trauma on the left, chaplain on the right, are aligned parallel to the alarm clock, about four inches behind it. The alarm is set to radio, not buzzer. This is the routine, and the routine needs to be followed.

The routine arose the one night that nothing happened. Twenty-four hours on call, and no child died, no child needed an emergency baptism, no one wanted prayer or healing. He woke up to the radio at seven-forty-two in the morning, with eighteen minutes to dress and fold the blanket. He looked around the room and memorized the precise location of everything. *A Grief Observed* on the nightstand, beneath the chaplain jacket, which was folded into quarters. The shoes, arranged backwards, halfway down the bed.

You are either religious, the chaplain likes to say, or you are superstitious. It did not work, of course, because neither superstition nor religion works. They are not intended to work. But it had worked once, and so the chaplain honored that night with his every on-call.

He is not an Easter chaplain. He's more of an Ash Wednesday or Good Friday chaplain. For him, the only season is Lent and the only gospel Mark. And not the canonical version either, with its Hollywood ending tacked on a century after the gospel's first appearance. The oldest versions of Mark do not end with Jesus' triumphant ascension into heaven. The original gospel ends with three women running from an empty tomb, as scared as anyone would be who's just seen a ghost. The *real* good news according to Mark ends with the word "afraid."

The first gospel in chronology, Mark is an important source for both Luke and Matthew. And John, well John is no gospel at all to the chaplain's mind, because gospels bring good news, and John brings only Baptists.

For him, the last words of Jesus were not "it is finished," (John) or "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," (Luke) but rather, *eloi eloi lama sabachthani*, the only untranslated Aramaic in the entire New Testament. For the chaplain, they are the only wholly true and accurate words of the historical Jesus. My Father. My Father. Why have you forsaken me?

He is no Easter chaplain, and yet it is very nearly Easter morning. The chaplain mourns as he sleeps, grieving the loss of Lent. He wishes that every day might be Ash Wednesday, that he might walk for the rest of his days with an ashen thumbprint of a priest on his forehead. But as he sleeps, Easter approaches. Peter Cottontail hops down his bunny trail. There is no Easter Sunday service at the hospital. They tried one for a few years, but they were badly attended.

Seven-forty-two, and he wakes to a sweet, soft voice of the American Midwest introducing some adult contemporary love song. The chaplain folds the blanket, smooths the sheets, and walks to the pastoral care conference room. He brews a pot of coffee, although he does not drink coffee. He waits.

Gary is coming. It is Easter Sunday and Gary will come and take the pagers and pour himself a cup of coffee, and Gary will be chaplain for a while.

The chaplain will go home and sleep. He will lie in bed with his girlfriend, a woman who loves him very much but may not love him for very long. He will wake up around noon, and perhaps watch television. He will read, maybe. Check his e-mail.

Gary comes at eight-oh-four. Not bad, for Gary.

“The Lord is risen!” Gary greets the chaplain.

“There’s a braindead girl in the PICU,” the chaplain says.

“Sweet,” Gary responds, sarcastic. He is much older than the chaplain, but tries to speak in the boy’s vernacular. Gary is very concerned for the poor chaplain’s soul. They sit down across a conference table from each other, the chaplain leaning on his elbows.

“Her father killed her.”

“On purpose?”

“Is there another way?”

“Lord Mercy.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you pray with him?”

“Yeah. I did.”

“I don’t think I could do it. With a murderer. I should, but I don’t think I could wish him peace.”

“I didn’t have to.” The chaplain slides the pagers across the table, feeling vaguely like he has stolen something, and wishes Gary a happy Easter. He walks down the stairs, not skipping any this time, and walks outside, shocked by the warmth of the day. He gets into his car, finds a single stale

cigarette, and lights it. He pays a machine three dollars for parking, turns the radio up loud, and begins his long drive home east, the risen sun too bright in his eyes.