

*MORE ENDURING
FOR HAVING BEEN
BROKEN*

AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

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Black Lawrence Press

“An ending that confounds more than it concludes...
our reaction is to grip it closer.
To make our own connections and conclusions
where there is no material provided.
Our impetus is to find the satisfactory ending that has eluded us,
to walk away with an answer.”

—CHRIS JAYNES, FROM MAT JOHNSON'S *PYM*

AMARNA

I live in a god's city, but apparently, it's the wrong god. Mother says it's blasphemy to be here, and that god lives in churches, but father says god lives wherever he damn well pleases and if mother hasn't actually met him, maybe his vacation home just happens to be the place we take care of. This place is Amarna, and it's falling apart. Down, rather. I guess *apart* makes it sound like it's coming undone.

But it's okay that Amarna looks weathered, because it was built to look old. I tell the tourists that the city has stood for 3,346 years, but really, it's only been eleven. Father completed it the year I was born, and when I tell the tourists that the city is on the bank of the Nile river, I have to ignore the BillyBurger sign that's eight feet taller than our wall and whisper to them that this year the advisor has predicted the river will rise higher than normal and there's a chance the city might flood. The tourists drink out of plastic water bottles and smile politely. They feel sorry for the boy who's also a tour guide and they know, just as much as I do, that the only river Amarna is near is I-37 and that the bellows of the hippos I point out are actually honking car horns. I don't blame them for not believing. God appears only at sunrise, and we don't even open until ten.

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You could say I work here, but I prefer the term "volunteer". There are pictures of me on the living room wall and I'm a year older in each of them, dressed in a white linen shendyt and smiling next to the sign that

reads, *Live the Past! Experience the home of Egypt's most infamous pharaoh, the heretic Akhenaton, here at AMARNA*. I only go into the details about how he wasn't *really* a heretic if someone is learned enough to know the history. There's one every few days or so, and they think they're really smart and bring it up like I don't know, but I shoot them down like an Ethiopian archer and say, in a voice that's too grown up for my skinny legs and lack of body hair, *People are often confused about the concept of advertising*, and then they ask how old I am.

I tell them I am eleven and a sophomore in high school and at first, they think I am lying. But then when I explain that I am homeschooled they either nod, like it's a sad thing, or open their eyes wider, assuming I'm too smart for public school, silently comparing me to their kids who complain about homework and demand cars when they turn sixteen. You know what I do for homework? Last week I made a pipe bomb that my mom actually helped me disassemble, and then I wrote a short story about a mathematics professor who came to think of real analysis as a type of philosophy. Sometimes I daydream about being a regular kid with a normal life, putting wires into potatoes and making light bulbs glow, or getting dropped off at the movie theatre then giving my parents angry looks when they don't drive off fast enough. But really, I like my life, and I love my parents. I tell them almost everything, but not how God comes to me in the morning and tells me his secrets.

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I get up at 5:30 and fulfill my physical education requirement with my morning run. The circumference of Amarna is two miles, and when I'm done, I climb up the ramp into the ruins of the Small Aten Temple, flanked by columns made of mesh and fiberglass, constructed to look like stone, and I sit cross-legged facing East, waiting for Aten to appear.

He rises over the complex wall, sometimes weak and diluted by clouds, sometimes strong and hot and violent. He speaks to me as the last of his body clears the horizon, and every morning it's a small piece of knowledge, a koan for me to consider during the day. Sometimes I can't figure it out at all, but sometimes I come up with an answer. My favorite days are the ones in which I come up with an answer, but it *changes*. Those days, I really think I'm learning something.

This morning I am thankful for the breeze because it's already in the eighties and as the sun comes up I hear his voice like water rushing out of the tap, and though it's fierce and quick, it pools in my mind where it becomes clear and still and I wait until the water is tired and its surface is at rest and it whispers again and again until I commit the koan to memory. Today I hear, *when you can do nothing, what can you do?*

Like most days, I cannot comprehend what this could mean when I first hear it, but I repeat the question and whisper it to the breeze, and when I am sure I won't forget it, I walk back to our home in the King's House, where inside, instead of stone walls and dim, cloudy light, there is drywall and stiff Berber carpet and air fresheners called "Ocean Breeze" in white outlets against sage walls that make our home smell too strongly of coconut.

My mother is making breakfast and my father is on the phone with who I assume is Willa, the woman who runs the concession stand in what's left of the coronation hall where we sell lunches with prices the tourists complain about. But they can't resist the "Marinated Roasted Crocodile" (chicken), "Clay-Baked Hippo" (pork), and the popular "Amarna Dog," which is the cheapest thing on the menu and is clearly just a hot dog.

Father is sitting with his elbows on the kitchen table and one hand has the phone to his ear and the other is pressed over his eyes. *I know*, he says, *but maybe this isn't going to work.*

I know Willa is strange. She's in her forties and her hair is pink, a color that father has told her isn't authentic for the time, but Willa won't dye it a natural color and I wonder if father is finally going to let her go. Willa is what father calls an "independent contractor" and at night he stays up late and marks spreadsheets in red pen and he always has the checkbook out but never writes any checks.

Father looks up and sees me and is saying *yeah, yeah, yeah*, and then he hangs up and without a word leaves the room.

I sit across from where he was, and mother puts a plate in front of me: bagel and cream cheese and canned salmon and scrambled eggs. Next to this, she places a book.

What's this for? I ask her, fingering the crushed velvet cover with a name plate sewn onto the front. It's the book I see her reading every night in her bathrobe.

It's a bible, she says, stating the obvious.

I fork eggs onto my bagel. I don't like to eat food separately. *But what's it for?*

I think it's time we start doing things the right way around here. She's fingering the lace edge of her apron and trying to gauge my reaction.

Did you know that Christ is a representation of Horus? I ask her. *He's basically the same thing. I think the Christians copied the Egyptians.*

She frowns hard at me.

Solar deities are popular in many religions—

This place is poison, she says, and I'm surprised by how angry she sounds. I know mother would rather be in a regular house in the suburbs with a lawn to water and flowers to plant; father won't let her have a garden here. He says it wouldn't be authentic. But she never tells *me* how much she doesn't like it. She doesn't say it now, either. She says, *Your new class is Religious Studies and we're starting with Christianity.*

I am already doubtful that this class will study anything other than Christianity, but this week we're going to make a solar panel in science and so I'm willing not to argue about this one thing. *When you can do nothing, what can you do?* I think about the question and decide that when I can do nothing, I will accept it and not complain. It seems like the right answer. An adult answer.

But it also annoys me.

It's too easy.

While I eat, mother bangs the pan loudly in the sink and the front door closes. I open the bible blindly and read Proverbs 29:25: *The fear of man bringeth a snare, but whoso putteth trust in the Lord shall be safe.*

I don't want to make my mother angry by telling her that I don't believe in her god. Maybe learning more about Christianity might be a good thing. Any knowledge is productive.

I close the bible and see that I've left a white cream-cheese fingerprint on the aged velvet. I quickly rub it off, but it leaves a milky smear. *We're out of toothpaste*, I remind her, and she becomes very still.

Her back is to me and she says, *Today's history lesson is how the ancients used to make toothpaste.*

Will it work? I ask, rubbing my tongue over fuzzy teeth.

I don't know yet.

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You can see by these reliefs that the Egyptian canon of art was modified during Akhenaton's reign. I am showing a group of tourists the elongated bodies of the royal family with their hands outstretched towards the solar disk.

They were aliens, a man says.

I turn towards him, still smiling. *It's true that the representations of*

the human form are altered, I explain, but many experts believe that this was intentional and that Akhenaton wanted to distinguish his new way of life from the old by offering alternative depictions.

Aliens built the pyramids too, he says, as if he's an Egyptologist and studied in Cairo.

I know his type. He is scared of foreign ideas and he's wearing a black shirt with a bald eagle clutching an American flag in its talons and his fanny pack is unzipped to reveal a crushed box of Marlboros.

I'm not saying it was aliens, a woman next to him declares, *but it was aliens.* She is smiling to herself and trying not to laugh and I smile wider at her. She's making fun of him, and he doesn't understand exactly how she's doing it, but he knows he's being challenged and frowns at her.

When you can do nothing, what can you do? Keep smiling and let the stupid be stupid, I think.

We have a wonderful book on Amarna period art, I say to the crowd, eleven people: two families and two single adults. *Our souvenir shop has great resources if you're interested in continuing your learning experience at home.*

The eagle-shirt-wearing-man's daughter has her arms crossed and I know they won't be buying any books.

With that, I pronounce, *our tour is concluded. Please visit our snack stand and enjoy the authentic taste of ancient Egyptian cuisine.*

The group doesn't ask any questions, and they leave the temple through the front doors. Only one woman remains behind.

Do you have any questions? I ask her.

Not really, she says. She is older, with dark blonde hair put up in a bun, and she doesn't look like a normal tourist. She is wearing a navy skirt suit and her pink lipstick clashes. We stand there, and I am waiting for her to leave so I can go get lunch too. It's noon and I'm hungry.

How old are you? she asks.

Eleven.

And you work here?

My parents own Amarna.

Don't you go to school?

I'm home schooled, I explain.

She nods. *Don't you ever want to go to a regular school? Hang out with kids your own age?*

Not really.

So you don't mind wearing that, she asks, nodding to my costume.

No. I'm told girls like a guy with a tan anyway, I joke.

She laughs and opens her purse. She pulls out her wallet.

Please, ma'am, no tips. If you'd like you can make a donation in the souvenir store.

She takes two steps forward and instead of handing me money she hands me a business card. *My name is Lisa Halpin. I've been assigned as your new case worker.*

I don't understand for a minute, and then I realize what is going on. *You're with CPS?* I ask, taking the card and looking down at it. Her name is printed in boring black font and there's a phone number too. *I don't need a case worker,* I tell her.

I know you don't need one, she assures me, *but if you ever want to talk...*

If you know I don't need one, then there's no reason for you to be here. I am eleven but I am not stupid.

We're concerned about you, she says, as if the whole world has been watching me and is collectively anxious for my well-being.

You should maybe talk to my parents, I say warily. I don't like being confronted this way and I feel like she's being sneaky.

Yes, maybe I should. Can you tell me where I can find the office?

I tell her where my father is, and she smiles. *You can call me any time.*

Okay, I say, but I know I won't.

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Outside, there are a few people milling about. I decide I don't want to eat at home and go to the snack stand to get an Amarna dog from Willa. The man who believes in aliens is there with his wife and daughter and they're sitting on stone benches under one of the white canopies in the courtyard.

Hi Willa, I say, and she opens the metal cart with the steaming water. She knows what I like, and there's already a bun in her hand.

Hey Jacob, she says. I like the way she says my name. I don't know where she's from, but she pronounces the second syllable like "cob," and I appreciate that because it is a short O, not a U. *You talked to your dad today?* She puts the hot dog in the bun and then puts the whole thing in an oblong plastic basket.

No, I tell her, and pump three squirts from the ketchup into a paper cup.

Oh. She seems disappointed.

He should be in his office, but I think he's talking to someone right now. I don't tell Willa about the CPS woman. She looks like she wants to say something more, but doesn't.

Not many people here today, I offer. The hot dog is wet and my bun is a little soggy.

Not many people lately, she complains, and she's right. Seems like the last couple of years fewer and fewer people have been coming. *I think I'm going to have to get a different job.*

But you can't leave, I tell her. *What are the people going to eat?*

She points over the wall at the BillyBurger sign. *Listen, Jacob. I'm going to leave, she admits. I bought a food truck and already paid rent for a spot over at the university. I wanted to tell you myself. I'm just not making it here.*

Does my father know?

I'm going to tell him today, she says. But please let me do it, okay? I owe him that much.

Yeah. Okay. You're still going to come by, though, right? And visit?

She doesn't respond right away, and I know she won't.

Hey Jacob, do you ever think it might be good to, you know, be in school? There aren't a lot of people for you to talk to here.

I look at her, and I can tell by the way she's not really looking at me, but looking at the American alien family, that she might be the one who's been calling CPS. I put the half-eaten hot dog on the cart between us. *Thanks for lunch, Willa. Maybe I'll see you sometime.*

Wait, Jacob.

But I'm already walking away.

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From one to four I do schoolwork. Today my mother has left a list of my lesson plans and a note that she's gone to do errands. I am supposed to read about gene mutation and 3D geometry, and then I'm supposed to work on my Shakespeare paper. We're reading *Hamlet*, but I don't know why because *Hamlet* is so over-studied. I decide I don't want to write about *Hamlet* at all and instead of doing science and math I start to read *As You Like It*. Shakespeare's comedies were always my favorite.

When I am done with reading, I do an activity where I tape an equilateral triangle over our globe and learn that the angles are all 90

degrees. The gene mutation chapter is kind of boring, and I don't have any interest in bean pods. I read ahead and see that next week I'll learn about fruit flies and that I'll get to put them in the freezer, stun them, and look at them under the microscope.

At five, I am supposed to walk the complex, check the buildings to make sure there aren't any stragglers, and then lock the gate. I keep my costume on while I do this. I don't want to ruin the authenticity of Amarna.

The food cart area is closed up, and I see that Willa has taken her Amarna dog cart and the chip display rack. I swing by the front office and my father is inside on the phone. He's arguing with someone and so I grab the keys, wave at him, and make my rounds. At the end, I stop at the Small Aten Temple and think about my koan.

When you can do nothing, what can you do?

I don't know what the answer is. Some days it's like this. I can come up with *an* answer, but don't feel like it's *the* answer. I decide that maybe there isn't an answer, that the koan is circular and that maybe the answer is something like, when you can do nothing, you think about what you can't do, like answer a koan.

When I get back to the king's palace at six there is no dinner, but my mother is in the kitchen, and she is sitting at the table with a suitcase on the floor beside her.

What's going on? I ask her.

We're going to grandpa's house, she says.

Why?

She looks uncomfortable and shuffles her feet under the table. *Because it's not working here.*

What's not working? I get a feeling in my stomach, like a hot walnut is in my gut, and I refuse to step any farther into the room. My mother looks old and worn and for the first time I really see how tired she must

be, because she's not wearing any makeup and there are dark circles under her eyes.

This. This, she says, gesturing to the room. *Everything.*

It's great, I protest.

No, it's not. She says this the way the man in the eagle shirt said that aliens built the pyramids. *Go change your clothes. We can talk about this in the car.*

No! I say, and I realize she's gotten louder and I'm getting louder too. *I'm not leaving!*

We are leaving, she says, and she stands up. *Go change your clothes.*

I'm not going! I yell.

Stop being a child.

I'm not a child! I work and I go to school and I teach myself stuff and I'm smarter than you.

I said it. I said what I've been thinking for the past year and I can tell by the way her face is pale that she knows it's true.

You know what? she asks, and she says it quietly. *You're not a child. And that's my fault. You talk to your dad tonight. If you're not a child you're old enough to know what's really going on. When you talk to him, you call me at grandpa's, and I'll come get you.*

Is this about the CPS lady? I ask, and I'm almost crying now because I don't want my mother to leave, and I've just said something mean, but I'm not going to take it back because I know it's the truth, and I don't want to leave Amarna.

Partly. She picks up the suitcase. It's grey and purple flannel and I remember that the last time I saw it was when we went to Washington to see the museum complex. *Talk to your dad.*

She is walking out and I yell at her, *We don't have any toothpaste!*

We don't have any money for toothpaste, she says.

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Hours later, father doesn't come home, and when I go to the office he is at his desk and papers are everywhere. I don't want to talk to him, yet, I decide.

I go to the closet where we keep our camping gear and pull out my sleeping bag. I get the pillow off my bed and don't feel like changing into my pajamas.

On the way to the Small Aten Temple it is quiet and dark and the stars are dim. Last week, I learned about different types of stars and even though I knew already that our sun is a star, I was kind of angry that it was lumped in with all the others. It's a special star. And not just because it's the closest one to our planet. It's special because God lives there, and I know he does because he talks to me and gives me mysteries to unravel and it's unfair that other people will never be able to know this.

All other stars besides the sun are puny. Twinkle is a stupid word and these stars do that stupid thing. They don't blaze and heat like the sun. Maybe somewhere in outer space they're boiling and exploding, but I can't tell that. I've *seen* pictures of the sun, solar flare magma arcing across the surface, and that is real and powerful.

I unroll my sleeping bag in the ruins and look up at the sky. I wait for the sun to come up.

*

I don't remember falling asleep but when I wake up, I am stiff and my right shoulder hurts from where I've been laying on it. My shendyt is rolled up around my waist and no one's around to see me in my underwear, but for some reason, I'm embarrassed anyway. My father has

clearly been here. There's a water bottle and some cookies on the stone altar next to me. I don't know if they're for me or Aten.

I sit cross-legged on my sleeping bag as the sky lightens. I don't know if I should call my mother or not. I don't know if I should talk to my father. I know I'll have to do both, but I am waiting for Aten to speak to me first.

When the sun breaches the horizon, I wait for the water words, but none come. The only thing I hear is my own voice asking, *when you can do nothing, what can you do*, and I think the answer is *wait*.