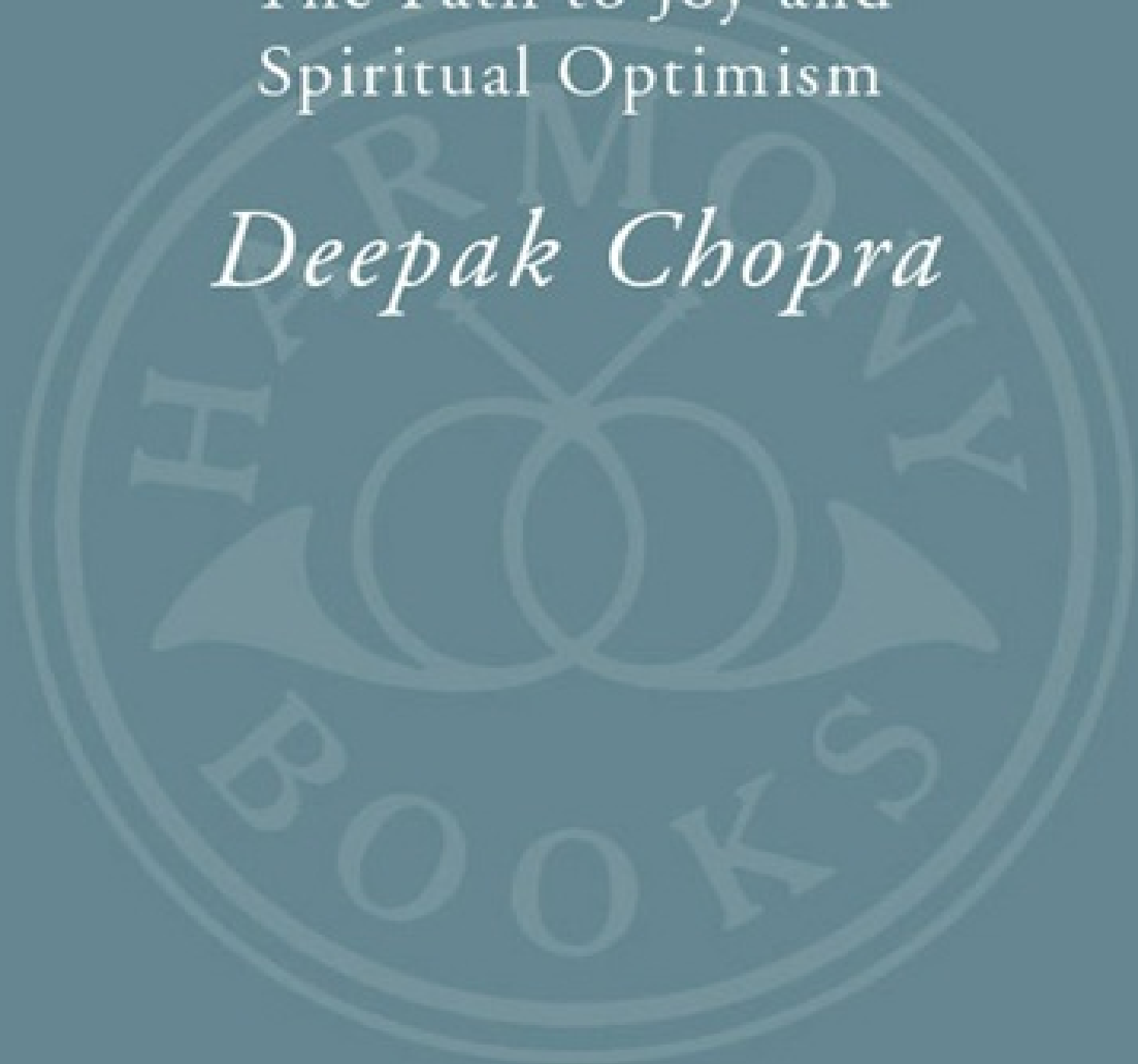


WHY IS GOD LAUGHING?

The Path to Joy and
Spiritual Optimism

Deepak Chopra



DEEPAK
CHOPRA

WHY IS GOD LAUGHING?

The
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To Mike Myers,
who showed me that true spirituality means
not taking ourselves too seriously, and to lovers of
laughter and wisdom everywhere



Photo by Mark Seliger

FOREWORD

I'VE HAD MANY HEROES IN MY LIFE. MY FATHER WAS the first; Deepak Chopra the most recent. There was one hero in between who taught me about laughter. His name was Del Close.

Del Close was one of the founders of the Second City Theatre in Chicago in 1959. He is the father of modern improvised comedy as we know it, a leader of the American satire boom, the inventor of the “happening,” a philosopher, a theorist, a great teacher, and most important he was funny—and he knew funny. Bill Murray, John Belushi, Chris Farley, Stephen Colbert, Amy Poehler, myself, and many others have all benefited from his teaching and his philosophy that comedy equals truth and truth equals spiritual growth. Plainly put, “ha-ha” is related to “ah-ha,” the sound one makes upon the realization of truth.

They say that the truth may set you free, but I find that the truth can be very painful at first. As Lenny Bruce once said, the equation for comedy is “laughter = pain + time.” Del would call the plus time “distance” Deepak would call it “detachment.” Both would agree that to be enlightened you must travel lightly.

Laughing feels good. In a fast-paced and entertaining form, *Why Is God Laughing?* lays out the spiritual/healthful nature of laughter as well as the mindset of detachment, gratitude, and brave truth-seeking that fosters such laughter and the inner peace that results.

My first hero, my father, used to say, “Nothing’s so bad that it can’t be laughed at.” An intense man, he still found humor in the darkest moments. My father lived through the Depression, the “Phony War” in 1939, World War II, the Cold War, and ultimately his own war with Alzheimer’s. But even in his dementia he could find humor in his own condition: so strong and innately human is the need to laugh.

Henri Bergson, in his essay *Laughter*, said that laughter is an autonomic response from deep in the reptilian part of our brain, and that it is triggered by the realization of our own mortality. In these pages Deepak has managed to dramatize this brilliantly in the form of Mickey Fellows, a comedian forced to face his darkest fears. Deepak shows us that there is darkness in the world and that comedy is a candle; he encourages us to meditate on the candle and not the darkness.

Why is God laughing? He gets the joke.

—MIKE MYERS

WHY IS GOD LAUGHING?

1

GRACE SHINES LIKE A SLIVER OF LIGHT. IT PENETRATES the universe, undeterred by distance or darkness. You won't see it, but it knows where it is going. At any moment someone may be touched by its mysterious power.

Even Mickey Fellows.

On this particular day Mickey was speeding through the Valley in his black Cadillac Escalade, keeping half an eye out for police. The L.A. sun glared off the freeway, but for Mickey, sitting behind his tinted windows and wraparound shades, it could have been twilight.

"Say that again," he muttered into his cell phone.

"The club owners aren't happy. They say the new material isn't funny. They want the old Mickey back." It was Alicia, his agent.

"Screw 'em. They should kiss my derriere that I even bother to show up."

Mickey Fellows had movie offers from two studios. His last divorce had made the cover of *People* magazine. The only reason he worked the comedy clubs at all was to keep his feel for the audience.

Alicia didn't back down. "You don't want to play it that way. You may need those clubs some day."

"God forbid." Mickey lit up another menthol Merit.

God has the advantage of witnessing every lifetime at once, erasing all differences. If you could look down on the human race from an infinite distance, you'd see Everyman was on the freeway that day. Like the rest of us, Mickey gave little thought to his soul. He didn't want to face painful truths, so he managed to distract himself almost every waking hour.

At this moment, Mickey figured it was time for a laugh. "I've got a good one for you," he told his agent. "My grandfather's eighty years old, and he still has sex almost every day. He almost had it on Monday, he almost had it on Tuesday, he almost had it on Wednesday."

Alicia was silent.

"I think I have another call coming in," said Mickey.

“No, you don’t.”

“I’m not kidding this time,” Mickey said. “Hold on.” He pushed a button. “Hello?”

“Is this Michael Fellows?”

“Who wants to know?” Strangers were always getting his number.

“I’m calling from Cedars-Sinai Hospital.”

Mickey felt a bead of sweat roll down his neck. He gripped the wheel tighter. “Yes?”

In the few seconds between an impending disaster and its crash to earth, an amazing number of thoughts can race through your mind. Mickey saw himself at his annual physical the week before. His wife’s face flashed before him, as clearly as if they hadn’t been divorced for five years. Cancer, AIDS, a car accident. Fate’s wheel was spinning, and the arrow was about to stop.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Fellows. It’s your father.”

“Did he fall? Someone’s supposed to be watching him,” Mickey said. He had hired a full-time housekeeper for his father, a placid Guatemalan lady who knew little English.

“Your father got the best care in the ER. Everything possible was done to revive him, but he couldn’t be saved.”

Mickey didn’t hear those last words. As soon as the voice said “everything possible was done,” a roar in Mickey’s ears drowned out everything else.

“When did he die?”

The voice on the phone, a woman’s and probably a nurse, started to explain, but the roar kept blocking it out.

“Wait a second,” said Mickey, pulling off onto the shoulder of the road. He breathed deeply, and shook his head, like a swimmer knocking water out of his ears. “Could you repeat that?”

“He was brought in unconscious by EMS. It was a massive coronary. Your name was in his wallet as next of kin.”

Mickey felt faintly nauseous. “Did he suffer?”

The voice tried to sound reassuring. “If it’s any comfort, this kind of heart attack is usually quick, less than a minute.”

A minute that felt like hours, Mickey thought. “All right, I’ll be right there. Will I find him in the ER?”

The woman’s voice said yes, and Mickey hung up. He pulled back out into traffic and raced to the

next exit. The news had come as a shock, but he didn't cry. He didn't know how to feel, really. Larry the old man. Mickey's mother had died young, of breast cancer. Her side of the family was prone to it. His father on the other hand was tough as nails. A joke popped uninvited into Mickey's head.

A middle-aged woman drops dead of a heart attack. When she gets to Heaven, God says, "There's been a terrible mistake. You're not due to die for another forty years."

The woman wakes up and goes home. She figures she's got such a long life ahead of her, she might as well look good. So she goes in for plastic surgery—face-lift, boob job, tummy tuck, the works. Two months later she's crossing the street and a bus hits her.

This time when she gets to Heaven, she says to God, "What's going on? I was supposed to live for another forty years."

And God says, "Mabel, is that you?"

Usually Mickey found comfort in his own jokes, but this one was followed by a wave of guilt. There was no time for humor, yet that was how his mind worked. He couldn't help it.

The ER waiting room was a tense place, the air heavy with suffering. Desperate faces glanced up at anyone passing by, hoping it might be a doctor. Mickey marched up to the admitting desk. When the nurse heard his name, she said, "I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Fellows. This way, please."

She led him through a set of swinging doors and down a corridor lined with gurneys. On one of them a boy with his head swathed in bloody bandages sat upright, softly moaning. They stopped at the swinging doors at the end of the hall, and the nurse stood aside.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"Give me a moment, will you?" said Mickey.

"Take your time. The doctor will be right inside whenever you're ready," she murmured.

To settle his nerves, Mickey tried to imagine how Larry's face would look in death. Instead, another joke popped into his head.

God and the Devil were arguing about the fence that separates Heaven and Hell. "Your side is falling down," said God. "Just look at it."

"So what?" said the Devil.

"We're both responsible for keeping up our side. Mine is perfect."

The Devil shrugged indifferently. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"If you force me to, I'll get a lawyer and sue you," said God.

The Devil only laughed. "Give me a break. Where are you gonna find a lawyer?"

Mickey chuckled, then he caught himself. “Jesus, why can’t I act normal?” he muttered.

“Pardon me?” said the nurse.

“Nothing. I’ll go in now. Thank you.”

Somehow, in his entire thirty-seven years, Mickey had never seen a corpse. The lights in the room had been dimmed. A shape lay under a sheet on a table.

Jesus, Dad. You couldn’t give me a heads up?

It was amazing how death stilled the air around it. Mickey pondered that and tried not to shiver. The smell of disinfectant made the room feel colder than it was. Minutes passed. Mickey pinched himself, trying not to think of another joke.

A Catholic, a Protestant, and a Jew die and go to Heaven. At the pearly gates St. Peter says—

Somebody coughed softly next to him. “Mr. Fellows? I’m Dr. Singh.”

The joke flew out of Mickey’s mind. He turned to the Indian man in green hospital garb with stethoscope around his neck.

“I didn’t mean to intrude,” the young doctor murmured. He looked like he could be twenty, except for his bristly black beard.

Mickey felt a twinge of guilt. *He thinks I was praying.*

The doctor made a reassuring motion with his hand. “You can come closer, if you want,” he said. Neither of them spoke as the young doctor pulled the sheet back.

It wasn’t nearly as hard to look as Mickey had feared. His father could have been sleeping. Larry’s color wasn’t pale yet. Even at seventy he was a demon for keeping a good suntan all year.

“He looks peaceful.”

Dr. Singh nodded. “Do you want to know exactly what happened? I wasn’t on duty when he came in, but I’ve reviewed his chart. Sometimes family members want details.”

“Just a few,” Mickey said. He wondered if most sons would be reaching under the sheet to grasp their father’s hand. Larry’s hands were folded over his chest. Would it be creepier if the flesh felt warm or cold?

“It was an acute myocardial infarction. A massive heart attack, at around two this afternoon. Paramedics showed up inside of five minutes. But your father was probably dead before he hit the floor.”

Mickey said, “So it was quick.”

“Very.”

Maybe that accounted for the expression on Larry’s face, which wasn’t really peaceful, Mickey observed, but slightly surprised. If your heart was exploding and all you felt was excruciating pain, would you just look surprised? Suddenly Mickey had a new idea that caught him off guard.

I’m not dead, you chump. I’m just fooling, and I went to a lot of trouble here. You get the joke, don’t you? You, of all people.

Mickey had to fight his sudden impulse to kick over the table and knock his old man onto the floor.

That’s not funny, you sick bastard, he’d shout. And Larry would explode into one of his big belly laughs as he got up and dusted himself off.

Then Mickey caught the doctor’s expression out of the corner of his eye. Was that nervousness Mickey saw? The young doctor might be green—maybe he hadn’t seen that much death himself. Mickey couldn’t tell. But one thing he knew for sure. The situation definitely wasn’t a joke.

THREE DAYS LATER Mickey went to close up his father’s apartment. It was a small one-bedroom, part of a retirement complex in Culver City. He paid off Lupe, the Guatemalan housekeeper. She was the one who had found Larry’s body.

“There, señor,” she said, pointing to Larry’s favorite chair, a Barcalounger that Mickey remembered from when he was a boy. It had been through the wars, the dark blue leather arms worn and cracked.

So that’s where you bought it, Mickey thought.

After Lupe left, giggling with embarrassment—he had slipped her an extra hundred and hauled her battered vacuum cleaner out to her car—there was no reason to stick around. Mickey pulled the blinds, shutting out the last feeble rays of twilight. He turned the thermostat down and looked around.

Anything else?

He found a half-empty whiskey bottle on his father’s bedside table. The label read “Jim Beam,” but it screamed loneliness. Mickey wondered if his father had completely given up toward the end. He had always sounded upbeat on the phone.

“Naw, you don’t have to run over here. Your old man’s fit as a fiddle and tight as a drum,” Larry would say. “Or maybe just tight.”

Mickey swirled the amber liquor around absentmindedly. Tight was right.

When he drifted through the shadowy living room, bottle in hand, Mickey plopped down in the beat-up lounge, unscrewed the top, and took a long swig. He held the bottle up, imagining a toast to the departed.

Here's to Sally, who dresses in black,

She always looks hot, she never looks back.

And when Sally kisses, she kisses so sweet,

She makes a thing stand that never had feet.

As toasts go, it was old-fashioned and a little salty. Larry would have approved.

“God bless,” Mickey mumbled.

He wasn't aware of falling asleep where he sat. Twilight surrendered to night. The whiskey bottle nestled in his lap. No tiny creatures stirred in the woodwork because there was no woodwork. In any case, the management had been very good about spraying.

WAKE UP, KIDDO.

“I am awake.”

Prove it. Open your eyes.

It wasn't until that moment that Mickey realized his eyes were closed. A faint glow shone on the other side of his eyelids. When he opened them, he saw that the glow was coming from the TV he had given his father for Christmas. Who had turned it on?

He started to get up, and the whiskey bottle rolled onto the floor with a clunk. Mickey didn't pay attention, though, because the TV was acting strange. The screen was filled with gray snow, but that wasn't strange in itself; he'd canceled the cable service the day before.

The strange part was that the fuzzy snow contained faint shapes. Mickey leaned down and took a closer look. He could make out the outline of a head, then two hands.

Don't turn it off.

He couldn't tell if the outline of the head had Larry's face, but this was definitely his father's voice. Which should have made Mickey jump back in alarm. Instead he was relieved, because it proved that he was dreaming.

“You're in the TV,” Mickey said, raising his voice. If he pointed out the dream's absurdity, it would break the spell and he'd wake up.

I'm not in the TV. Don't talk crazy. I'm in limbo. They're letting me talk to you.

“They?”

God's people.

“You can see them?”

Not exactly. It's complicated. Just listen.

Mickey hesitated. His glance went down to the carpet, where the fallen whiskey bottle was dripping onto the floor. He could smell the sharp alcohol, and that was wrong. One thing Mickey knew for certain: he couldn't smell in his dreams.

“I'm turning this off,” he mumbled.

He punched the power button on the remote, but the gray fuzz didn't disappear, or the shape vaguely visible inside it. The hands now came into focus as they pressed up against the screen from the inside.

I want to help you.

“I don't need your help,” Mickey said. He punched the remote several more times.

Forget the TV. The TV is just a way to reach you. You don't believe in psychics. This was more convenient.

Mickey shook his head. “You can't be my father. First, this limbo business is crap. Second—”

The hands turned to fists and started to bang against the screen. *Shut up. I didn't mean church limbo. It's more like a halfway house. Neither here nor there. Get it?*

“No. How could I?”

One thing about this bizarre apparition was convincing. Larry had always had a short fuse, and so did the voice. It started yelling louder.

Don't blow this, kiddo. Stop being a jerk and listen to me.

“All right, all right.” Mickey sat down in the lounge again.

“I'm listening.”

It's different here.

“I bet.”

You don't understand. You can't. One minute I'm sitting in that chair, the one you're in. The next minute the whole room starts to disappear. The walls fade, and I start to go through the ceiling.

“You had a heart attack. You didn't feel that?”

Pain gets erased from your memory.

“Except when it doesn’t,” said Mickey doubtfully.

Don’t interrupt. I kept going, up and up, until I could look down and see the whole earth, and everyone on it. I saw everybody on the daylight side and on the night side. I saw all ages, all races. I felt incredible, you cannot imagine.

“You didn’t go into the light?” asked Mickey.

Nope. I wondered about that. I kept floating farther into space, and the earth got smaller and smaller. I figured I must be getting closer to God.

“God’s in outer space?” said Mickey.

The voice ignored this. It was getting more excited.

I kept looking around, but nothing. No God. No angels. Then I heard it. Can you imagine, kiddo? I heard the voice of God.

“What did he say?”

He didn’t say anything. He was laughing.

“Who was he laughing at, you?”

No. He wasn’t laughing at anybody. This laugh was everywhere. It filled the universe. It was pure joy.

The voice was now ecstatic, which wasn’t like Larry at all. It made Mickey uneasy. It reminded him of the one time he had found his father crying, the day Mickey’s mother had died. Anyway, what did Mickey care if God was laughing? Comedians make people laugh. It doesn’t mean they’re happy. Laughter is a reflex, like sneezing.

The voice had been quiet for a few seconds. Now it said, *Everyone should hear that sound. Kiddo, that would make all the difference.*

Mickey seriously doubted this, but he didn’t interrupt again.

The voice sensed what Mickey was thinking.

I’m not fooling. Until the world laughs with God, nothing’s going to change.

“Nothing’s going to change anyway,” Mickey said. He leaned down and picked up the fallen whiskey bottle from the floor. He considered taking a pull, then thought better of it.

“I’m glad you’re okay, Dad,” he said. “But I’ve gotta go. Have a nice limbo.”

You don't believe me.

“What I believe is that I've taken a little detour into craziness. I'm going home to get some sleep. This has been a rough week.”

Not for me.

“Congratulations.”

This isn't the way to end, son. I have limited access. You need to listen. I can show you what to do. Then you'll hear it, too.

Mickey had already gotten up to leave.

“If God likes to laugh, here's a joke for him,” he said. “A guy dies and goes to Hell. The Devil gives him a tour, and they come across this ninety-year-old codger sitting on a park bench. He's smooching with a gorgeous twenty-year-old girl.

“The man says to the Devil, ‘What's going on? This isn't Hell.’

“The Devil says, ‘It is for the girl.’”

Ha, ha.

The voice sounded discouraged, but Mickey didn't care. He couldn't imagine God laughing, unless he was laughing at the horrible mess human beings had made on earth, in which case it was a cruel laugh. Now the Devil, *he* might wear a grin, and for good reason.

Mickey suddenly felt a sadness in his chest. “I'm disappointed in you, Larry. You never used to preach at me. You made a lot of mistakes, but I gave you credit for one thing. You were never a hypocrite.”

I can make up for everything, kiddo.

“Too late.”

Mickey was already at the door. The fuzzy gray screen went black, and the room was plunged into darkness. His hand hesitated for just a second on the doorknob. The voice had warned him not to block it. What if he just had?

THE NEXT MORNING PAYBACK JUMPED ON THE bed and started licking Mickey's face. Payback was a miniature Doberman. Mickey's ex-wife, Dolores, had named her Daisy, but after Mickey won the divorce in the divorce, he renamed her Payback. That way, when people asked if the dog was a he or a she, Mickey could say, "Payback's a bitch." Anyway, Dolores might be gone, but the Doberman still loved him.

The dog began whining now, her eyes fixed on Mickey's face, demanding her morning walk. Or did she sense something different about him?

"Don't worry, baby," Mickey whispered in her ear. "Nothing's wrong. I promise." Payback whipped around and nipped his hand. She was the nervous type.

A few minutes later Mickey was leaning against the kitchen counter talking on the phone.

"Dump everything from my dad's apartment. Give it away. I don't want any of it."

Alicia, his agent, was on the other end. "What about photos, family stuff?"

"You go through it. I trust your judgment," said Mickey.

He took a sip of espresso. "You know, I've been thinking. I never do God jokes in my act."

"You want to start now?" Alicia sounded dubious. "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing." The eeriness of the previous night had faded. Whatever kind of delusion he'd gone through, it was temporary. Still, it would have been nice to talk to Larry, for real, one last time.

Alicia said, "Get some rest. Take a few days off. I can handle the predators."

"Thanks."

Payback was scratching at the door to get out. One side of the house, the side facing the ocean, was all French windows. Mickey put the dog's leash on, and they stepped out onto the beach. Payback barked frantically at the waves, as if they were thieves creeping in to steal the sand.

"You're a lunatic," said Mickey indulgently. It usually cheered him up to watch her madly charge into the surf, but today he felt glum and restless. He couldn't forget what Larry's voice had said. N

that any of it made sense. Like almost everyone he knew, Mickey was allergic to God. What good ever came from believing in a deity who watched and did nothing about genocide, or AIDS, or children starving? God either didn't exist or was someone to be avoided.

That reminded Mickey of an old joke.

An atheist is swimming in the ocean when he sees the fin of a great white shark. In desperation he screams, "God, save me!"

All at once everything freezes, the heavens part, and a voice says, "Why should I save you? You don't believe in me."

The atheist has an idea. "Maybe you can get the shark to believe in you."

"Very well."

The heavens close again, and suddenly the shark is heading straight for the atheist. All of a sudden the shark stops and puts its fins together. It begins to pray.

The atheist is amazed. "It worked. This shark believes in God."

Just then he hears the shark muttering, "Oh Lord, make us thankful for the food we are about to receive."

Now Mickey noticed a stranger coming toward him. He wasn't a jogger or a swimmer or fisherman, the types one usually sees at the beach. The stranger walked slowly and steadily in Mickey's direction. With the morning sun behind him he was only a silhouette. When he got close Mickey could make out a tall, olive-skinned man, maybe midthirties, with a spade beard, dressed in khakis and a blue shirt.

The man stopped directly in front of Mickey. "You have something for me," he said.

Mickey, taken aback, mumbled, "I don't think so."

"I'm usually right about these things," the man said. "Check your pockets."

His physical presence was intimidating—Mickey thought he looked like a Spanish conquistador without the armor—but his voice was reassuring.

"What would be in my pockets?" Mickey asked.

"A clue."

The conquistador waited. Clearly there was no brushing him off, so Mickey reached into the pocket of his jogging pants. He pulled out a folded piece of paper.

"Want me to read it for you?" the conquistador asked.

“No, I can do it.”

As Mickey unfolded the paper, which had writing on one side, he said, “Mind telling me your name?”

“Francisco. I know yours. What does the note say?”

The fact that a perfect stranger would recognize him wasn't surprising to Mickey, so he read what was written on the piece of paper.

*I tell many lies but am always believed
If the worst happens, I'll be greatly relieved
On the day you were born I poisoned your heart
I'll still be there on the day you depart.*

The ominous riddle was penned in small, precise cursive. Francisco nodded, as if it was the clue he had been expecting.

“Now we know where to start,” he said.

“Start what?” Mickey asked.

“The process,” Francisco replied with some satisfaction. “You've been chosen. Not that it shows much for you. Look at you. That's okay. It almost never does.”

Mickey shook his head. “I don't want to be chosen.”

“Why not?”

Because I like my life the way it is, Mickey wanted to say. But he wasn't at all sure that was true, so he said instead, “My father just died. I'm not in a space where I can handle this.”

“You mean Larry?” said Francisco. “Who do you think sent the note?”

Mickey's mouth went dry. “How do you know Larry?”

“Doesn't matter. You've received a clue. That's very, very unusual. You should be grateful.” Francisco fixed Mickey with a look. “Don't faint on me,” he said. “Take some slow, deep breaths.”

Mickey did as he was told. When he was sure he wasn't going to pass out, he said, “Are you going to take me away someplace?”

His trepidation made the tall stranger laugh. “No, nothing like that. First we're going to answer the riddle. Then we'll see where it takes us.”

“I don't have an answer,” said Mickey.

“You're too nervous to think straight,” said Francisco. “Who wouldn't be?” He took the paper from

Mickey's hands and considered it briefly. Then he wrote a word on it with a pencil from his pocket. When he handed the note back, the word turned out to be "Fear."

"That's the answer?" Mickey said.

Francisco nodded. "It fits every line." He recited the riddle, this time with the answer in place.

Fear tells many lies but is always believed

If the worst happens, fear will be greatly relieved

On the day you were born fear poisoned your heart

Fear will still be there on the day you depart.

"Don't look so disappointed," Francisco said. "We're going to make you fearless."

"I don't want to be," said Mickey, regretting that he had ever let the stranger give him the paper.

"You have to give the process a chance."

"Why? Frankly, the thing here that makes me the most nervous is you," said Mickey. At that moment he felt a nudge at his ankle, and he looked down to see Payback staring up at him. "She wants to go home. I'll see you."

Francisco shook his head. "You know what you remind me of? Somebody waiting to see the dentist. Most people in that waiting room don't show it, but they're all afraid. But when they come out they're all smiles. Don't you want to come out all smiles?"

"I'm already Mr. Smiles," Mickey said. He felt a guilty twinge for dismissing the stranger's offer out of hand. "Nobody is totally fearless," he added.

"I am."

The claim could have sounded like an empty boast, but looking into Francisco's eyes, Mickey almost believed it. His eyes were as steady as the stars and totally calm. Francisco saw this moment of hesitation as an opening.

"Just try," he coaxed.

What could Mickey say? He couldn't very well run away—it would prove the stranger's point about being afraid. And Alicia had told him to take a few days off. He might as well play along.



"THE FIRST THING," said Francisco, "is that fear is a liar. Just like the riddle says."

Mickey found it a little hard to hear him, because they were standing on the shoulder of the highway.

that ran beside the beach. Six lanes of cars and trucks roared by.

“Why are we here?” asked Mickey.

Instead of answering, Francisco said, “What would happen if you walked into traffic right now?”

“I’d be killed.”

“See, that’s a lie. Try it.”

“Are you crazy?”

Francisco shook his head. “Step off the curb. You’re safe. It’s a parking lane.” Two cars were parked in front of them, with a space between their bumpers wide enough to walk between.

Mickey stepped off the curb, but he felt uneasy. “Where is this going?”

“Don’t ask questions. Keep walking.”

Mickey edged closer to the stream of traffic. He stopped at the edge of the parked cars.

“Go on,” Francisco urged. “Walk around to the front door as if you were going to unlock it. Mickey did as he was told. “Now face the traffic, and walk into it.”

This guy is crazy, Mickey thought.

“You’ll never be fearless until you try,” said Francisco.

What the hell. Mickey waited until he saw a gap in the traffic, and then he stepped into the road. As he braced himself for another step he heard the sound of a blaring horn. Out of nowhere a panel truck was barreling down on him. Instantly he jumped back, and the van whooshed by. The driver glared at him as he passed.

Mickey hurried back to the curb. “So what was that supposed to prove?”

“It proved that you couldn’t get yourself killed. You jumped back just in time. Why? Because your body acts on instinct. Where there’s danger, it moves to escape.”

Mickey’s heart was pounding from his close call, and it was hard to listen to what the tall stranger was saying. “I still could have been killed,” he insisted.

“No, that’s just your fear talking. Try again. Make yourself walk into traffic. You won’t get hurt. Your body won’t let you. It knows how to take care of itself.”

Mickey certainly wasn’t going to step into traffic again. But he imagined himself edging into the stream of cars, and knew Francisco was right. The impulse to jump back would be overwhelming.

“What if you’re right,” he said. “I don’t see what this has to do with fear being a liar.”

Francisco said, "Fear tells you that you aren't safe. But you are. Thinking that you aren't safe is an illusion. If you believe in an illusion, you're buying into a lie."

Francisco didn't give Mickey a chance to object. "You're going to tell me all the reasons I'm wrong," he went on. "Try to think of why I might be right."

This was harder than it looked. Suddenly Mickey's mind was filled with all the things he worried about most. Cancer. The drunk driver swerving into Mickey's lane and hitting him head-on. The gangbanger on a spree, spraying the street with bullets. Carjacking. Home invasion. He forced his mind to stop.

"See what you're doing?" said Francisco. "You're imagining things."

"They're not so imaginary," said Mickey.

"Yes, they are. Fear's main tactic is to make illusion seem real. But imagined pain isn't the same as real pain. Imagined death isn't real death. When you give in to fear, you are either projecting into the future or reliving the past. Here and now, you are safe. While fear is trying to convince you that it's real, what's really happening is that you lose touch with the present. The world turns into one big dentist's waiting room with everyone anticipating the next thing that hurts."

"Sometimes the dentist does hurt," Mickey said.

"So you're saying that fear helps it hurt less? I don't think so. If everybody is afraid in the waiting room but only five percent wind up feeling pain in the chair, then fear is pointless ninety-five percent of the time. Fear is a terrible predictor of the future. In fact, nothing is as unreliable as fear, and yet people rely on it over and over again."

Francisco saw that he was making an impression. "That's good. Your mind is beginning to relax," he said.

"I don't know," said Mickey doubtfully. "There's still that five percent."

"If the local weatherman was right only five percent of the time," said Francisco, "he'd get fired tomorrow. It's time to fire your fear. Let's go."

He started to walk away from the highway. In the near distance a new row of beach condos was going up. "We need something from that construction site," said Francisco.

After a moment he pointed to Mickey's pockets. "Read the second line of the riddle."

Mickey pulled out the paper. "If the worst happens, I'll be greatly relieved."

"That's how fear works," said Francisco. "Anytime one of your fears comes true, you give fear the credit for having protected you until that moment. Which only encourages you to spend your whole life anticipating disaster."

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