

## Adrimus

### Chapter One

Benjamin Mendel looked at Sarah. She was sitting across the breakfast table, eating her cereal with slow deliberation. He felt his frustration boiling up inside. He wanted her to scream at him, to hurl that bowl of cereal in his face, to bang her fists on the table! If only she would openly accuse him of the terrible crime he had committed, give voice to the awfulness they both knew was between them. If only she would tell him, just once, “You are a murderer, Benjamin! You killed our son!”

Instead, “Would you like some more cereal, dear?” she asked in the same toneless voice she had used in all the torturous months that had passed since the accident.

“No, thank you, sweetie,” he said quietly, fighting back tears.

When the doorbell rang, they looked at each other like rats whose hiding place has been exposed. It had been months since they’d last heard that sound when they were both at home. Once their friends, relatives, and well-wishers felt they had done their duty of comforting and condoling, they had simply stopped visiting. It seemed as if they feared death might be contagious.

“Go see who it is,” Sarah said. Her voice retained its monotonous quality, but her eyes were wide, wondering who could be braving the silent, emotional desert their home had become.

Benjamin subdued the urge to say, *I know who it can't be. It can't be Daniel, because Daniel is dead. Because I saw his head crushed like a watermelon, his eyes popping out of their sockets as he bled to death in my arms.*

The doorbell rang again.

“Benjamin,” Sarah repeated, more urgently this time. “Go see who it is.”

Benjamin nodded. He rose from the table and walked slowly out into the hall. “Who is it?” he called.

There was no answer.

Benjamin opened the door. At first he didn't recognize the boy who stood on the doorstep, smiling. He was about twelve years old and looked at Benjamin through deep brown eyes under thick eyebrows. His hair curled all the way down to his shoulders, and his skin was neither black nor white, but olive-colored.

“Who are you?” Benjamin demanded, then realized his tone was too harsh. That was no way to address a child; it was certainly not the way he would have liked people to address his Daniel.

Despite his harshness, the boy's smile widened, and he held up a small photograph in his right hand.

“Who is it, Benjamin?” Sarah cried out from the kitchen.

Benjamin stared at the photograph, perplexed. It was a photo of himself and Sarah taken years ago, right after Daniel was born. Sarah held Daniel in her arms, smiling. It was a picture taken in a different life, a different era, a time when there had still been hope.

“Where did you get this?” he murmured. He studied the face of the smiling child. Then, suddenly, he realized who the child was, and his legs seemed unable to support him.

“My god!” he exclaimed.

“Benjamin, who is it?” Sarah's voice was now tinged with panic.

He went on staring, open-mouthed, but when the child advanced toward him, his arms closed around the boy in an embrace. He heard a breakfast chair being pushed back and the sound of Sarah's feet shuffling slowly toward them.

“Benjamin?”

The child disengaged himself from Benjamin and gave Sarah that same charming

smile, revealing even, pearl-like white teeth.

Sarah was still holding the empty bowl; now she let it fall from her fingers. It shattered on the floor.

This was the sound that Benjamin had yearned to hear through all their silent breakfasts since the day of the accident, and its effect on him was immediate. “Stay calm, Sarah,” he said. He knelt and stared at the boy’s face, admiring the beauty of his deep brown eyes. “How did you find us? How did you get here?”

The boy showed Benjamin the photograph again and began to speak in an odd-sounding language. It didn’t resemble any dialect Benjamin was familiar with.

“I know this picture,” Sarah said in the voice of a somnambulist. “We mailed it to that boy in—what was that place, Benjamin? But how did...?”

She began to laugh, softly. It was a sound Benjamin had not heard for a long, long time.

The child went on speaking in his unfamiliar tongue, showing them the photograph as if all the answers to their queries were hidden in it if they only looked hard enough.

“Are you alone here?” asked Benjamin. “Where are your parents?”

Sarah stopped laughing. “Of course he’s alone. Why are you pestering him with silly questions? Can’t you see he’s hungry?”

Before Benjamin could react, she ushered the child into the house. The boy followed her with easy familiarity, as if he had known her for years, as if he were stepping into his own home.

For a moment Benjamin stood by the threshold, unsure what to do next. Then he followed Sarah and the boy into the kitchen.

The boy—*Adrimus, that was his name*, thought Benjamin—had already sat down at the table, looking happily at Sarah as she fussed about with a fresh energy that disturbed

Benjamin even more than her recent silences and apathy.

“Be a dear, Ben, and clean up the mess I made at the front door while I fix breakfast for Adrimus.”

“You remember his name?”

She looked at him in surprise, holding a carton of pancake powder. “Of course I do.” She started opening kitchen cabinets, taking out dishes and pans that had not been touched for months.

Benjamin took out a mop and a broom and walked slowly, unwillingly, to the front door. As he picked up the pieces of the broken bowl, he heard Sarah laughing and then the boy, also laughing. It made him angry. What right did this child have to laugh when Daniel couldn't?

He returned to the kitchen and saw Adrimus holding a cereal bowl in both hands, gulping hungrily, milk dripping down his chin.

“Isn't it funny, Ben? He doesn't know how to use a spoon! I guess that's not how they eat where he comes from.”

Benjamin felt his rage build into fully fledged fury. He tossed the broom and mop to one side. “Can I have a word with you, Sarah?” he said tightly, trying to control his shaking body.

“Can't it wait?” asked Sarah. “I don't want the pancakes to burn.” She hurried back to the stove as the aroma of fresh pancakes filled the room.

“No, Sarah, I'm afraid it can't wait. It has to be now!”

She ignored him, humming a song in an off-key tone.

“Sarah!” Benjamin shouted.

She flipped the pancakes before looking at him. “Yes, Ben?”

It pained him to see traces of the beautiful woman he had once loved hidden behind

that confused face, eyes staring from some distant, nameless place.

“I need to speak with you privately for a moment,” he repeated slowly, patiently.

“All right,” said Sarah. “No need to get excited, especially not in front of a child.” She turned the stove off, took a plate out of a cabinet, and piled pancakes on it. “There you go,” she said to Adrimus, placing the plate in front of him. “I already put the maple syrup on the table, and I’ll be right here in the next room with Benjamin, so if you need anything just holler, okay?”

The boy stared at her with the eyes of a lamb, and she brushed his hair with her pale fingers, the movement sending chills down Benjamin’s spine.

“Now what was so important?” she asked, as she and Benjamin stepped into the living room.

Benjamin struggled to keep his tears in check. He placed both hands on Sarah’s shoulders, a sailor clinging to the last piece of driftwood. “Listen, Sarah. I know we’ve been through a lot lately, but try to figure this out with me. Where did this boy come from?”

“It’s Adrimus,” said Sarah. “We adopted him, don’t you remember?”

“Yes, it’s Adrimus. But Adrimus is a child from some third-world country at the other end of the world!”

“Are we done here?” she asked angrily. “I want to go back to him.”

“Adrimus can’t be here!” Benjamin’s voice rose, his self-control waning. “He’s just a name on our credit-card statement. We joined an organization that collects funds and gives them to children in needy countries. We pay them \$35 a month, and they give it to him, or his family, or God only knows which local organization that supports him. Adrimus is supposed to be at the other end of the planet! I don’t even remember which continent, and neither can you. Sarah, he can’t be here!”

The phone rang.

“Be a dear and answer that, won’t you, Ben?” Without waiting for his reply, she walked back into the kitchen.

Benjamin clenched his hands into fists and crossed to the telephone table. In the background, he could hear Sarah and Adrimus laughing again.

“Hello?”

“It’s me, Esther, your mother-in-law. May I please speak with my daughter?”

Benjamin sighed. She always added the explanation “your mother-in-law,” as if he could ever forget. “Yes, hello, Esther. It’s Benjamin, your son-in-law. Hold on.” He put the phone down. “It’s your mother!” he shouted, louder than he had intended.

More laughter came from the kitchen. There was no response to his call.

“Sarah, it’s your goddamn mother on the goddamn phone!” he screamed. The blood rushed to his face as he banged his fist against the table. Too late, he realized that Sarah’s mother—his mother-in-law—must have heard his scream loud and clear.

The joyous sounds from the kitchen ceased, and Sarah, anger flaring in her eyes, appeared. “I’ll deal with you later!” she muttered to Benjamin, and picked up the phone.

“Hi, Mom!”

The forced cheerfulness in her voice sickened Benjamin.

“I’m glad you think I sound better,” she said after a few seconds.

Benjamin paced back and forth like a trapped cockroach. Sarah’s mother had detested him from the first day she’d met him, a dislike she had never bothered to hide. And after the accident her hatred of him had grown exponentially, growing into something far deeper, far more malicious.

“Yes, of course, Mom. I thought about it too. I just know how busy you are.”

Now, after Daniel’s death, it was as if all Esther’s suspicions, all her hatred, had received a seal of approval from God himself. She could look back with pride on all her past

threats and warnings about how unstable Benjamin was, how bad a choice Sarah had made—a true prophetic of misery. Sometimes Benjamin thought the old serpent was actually happy that Daniel had died, because their son's death had made her right.

“It's a bit short notice, Mom, but you're always welcome here, for a week or however long you'd like to stay.”

The blood that had earlier suffused Benjamin's being with anger now drained from his face. He wished uselessly that he had misheard what Sarah had just said.

“We'll see you tomorrow afternoon, then. I love you too, Mom.” Sealing his fate, Sarah broke the connection and put the phone down. “What the hell is wrong with you?” she spat at him.

Benjamin blinked. With this latest threat to his sanity, he had forgotten his earlier outburst.

“Shouting like that when my mother can hear you, when there's a child in the house!”

“Your mother can't come!” he exclaimed.

“She's my mother, Ben, she can come whenever she wants to. How many times do we have to go through this?”

*We're having a fight!* thought Benjamin, almost with glee. *We're actually having a fight!* How long had it been since they had had anything to argue about? In a way, this new nightmare felt better than the one preceding it. Anything was better than the memories. Like the one, for example, that constantly filled his ears, the gurgling sounds that had come out of Daniel's mouth in the seconds before the end.

“What about Adrimus?” he asked triumphantly. “How will you explain Adrimus to her?”

“What is there to explain? He's come for a visit, that's all. It's not like we don't know who he is.”

The doorbell rang again, harshly intruding. They exchanged a frightened look.

“Go see who it is,” Sarah said in a whisper.

Sighing heavily, Benjamin went to the door, wondering if he was dreaming but knowing he wasn't, because he always saw Daniel in his dreams—Daniel bleeding in his arms.

“Who is it?” he asked through the door.

“Agent Dwight Harris, Mr. Mendel. Open the door, please.”

“Agent Dwight Harris...” Daniel echoed softly. He unlocked and opened the door.

The tall man standing on the threshold was wearing a long coat that made him look like an actor in a film noir. He flashed two rows of white teeth in an alligator smile.

Benjamin felt so confused that he didn't even consider asking the man for ID, nor did he try to determine which agency the man worked for. Before he knew it, Agent Harris was inside, marching into the living room, looking left and right as if seeking clues to some unknown mystery.

“Who is this man?” Sarah demanded angrily, stepping in from the kitchen. Her eyes skewered Agent Harris. “What are you doing in my house?”

“A thousand pardons for the interruption, ma'am.” Agent Harris flashed his alligator smile again.

“Get him out of the house, Benjamin.” Sarah's voice cracked, then became a whine. “I don't like the look of him.”

“I apologize, Agent Harris,” Benjamin said. “My wife is unwell. We've been through a lot lately. Could you perhaps come back later?”

“I'm afraid not,” said Agent Harris, and headed toward the kitchen.

“Don't let him go in there!” Sarah screamed.

Benjamin rushed after the agent, only to discover that the kitchen was empty. There

was no sign of Adrimus. The cereal bowl remained on the table alongside a plate with a half-eaten pancake on it.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave, Agent Harris.” Benjamin’s voice was barely audible.

Agent Harris ignored him. He looked pointedly at the remains of the meal. “Mr. Mendel, I am going to ask you a question, and since you look like a straightforward person, I expect you to give me a straightforward answer.”

Keeping his eyes on the table, he took a photo from his pocket. It was a photograph of a drawing of Adrimus, executed with uncanny skill. The image looked so lifelike that it seemed as if the boy might jump out of the photograph into the real world at any second.

“Have you ever seen this child before?”

Benjamin shook his head. The lie came to his lips even before he understood why he felt the urge to utter it. “Not that I can recall, no, sir.”

Agent Harris’s eyes met Benjamin’s. It was clear that he knew Benjamin was lying.

“Actually, now that I think about it, can I have a closer look?”

Agent Harris nodded and handed over the picture. Benjamin marveled at its skill—the artist had used only a few lines, and yet it was clearly Adrimus, as if the essence of the boy’s soul had been laid out on the page.

“It does ring a bell,” Benjamin said slowly, sweat beading on his forehead. He knew he was a terrible liar.

“Mr. Mendel, why was your wife so apprehensive just a moment ago, when I came into the kitchen?”

“I told you, she is unwell. Anyway, I’m not sure that I have to explain myself to you. What agency did you say you work for?”

“I didn’t,” said Agent Harris. He changed the subject abruptly. “You said the photo

rings a bell. Would you share your insight with me?”

Benjamin searched for a way through the quickly forming maze of lies. He heard Sarah crying in the living room.

“There was a boy we adopted some years ago,” he said. “Well, not exactly adopted. It was through one of those donation websites, the ones that help children all over the world. You donate \$35 dollars a month, and they use it to help the child you adopt. We figured it was a good thing to do, plus it was tax deductible, so...” Benjamin shrugged.

Sarah’s weeping intensified.

“I really need to go to my wife now,” Benjamin said, and turned to walk out of the kitchen.

Agent Harris moved into his path, towering over him, his large nostrils flaring with the anger of a primal god. “Would you like to know, Mr. Mendel, what will happen if I leave this apartment with the slightest suspicion that you are lying, that you are in any way sheltering this boy?”

Benjamin stared at the massive man, mouth open. He shook his head like a child.

“In that eventuality, Mr. Mendel, less than an hour from now, a team of specialists will arrive at this location. You and your wife will be taken away to be interrogated. You will probably never be heard from again, as you will be considered a risk to national security. This apartment will then be taken apart block by block and inspected. The neighboring apartments will also be taken apart block by block, and eventually this whole building will be demolished.” Agent Harris smiled his alligator smile and backed away. “Now, would you like to reconsider and tell me the truth?”

It took Benjamin a good few seconds to find the answer he was looking for. When it came, he surprised himself. “Do you think you can come in here and threaten me?” He laughed for the first time in weeks. “You think I’ll care if you send men in here to take me

away and torture me or even kill me?” Now it was his turn to walk menacingly toward the agent. “I’m living in hell, Agent Harris. I held my son’s dead body in my hands. If you think you can come in here, threatening us, looking for a child who lives on the other side of the planet, then I tell you this—do your worst!”

Agent Harris shook his head.

Sarah had stopped crying. Objects were falling in the living room. Something crashed to the floor.

“That was a very moving speech, Mr. Mendel,” Agent Harris said. “Unfortunately, it can do nothing to improve your situation.”

Benjamin’s momentary resolve had already vanished. He wished his hands weren’t shaking so badly, wished he could stare at Agent Harris with a cold and menacing look instead of avoiding the taller man’s eyes. “Why are you looking for him, anyway?” he asked in a low voice.

“That does not concern you,” Agent Harris said. “We’ll take him to a place where he will be safe. You should not—”

When the lamp smashed down on Agent Harris’s head and a halo of broken ceramics exploded around his face, Benjamin nearly laughed with shock. The sight of the large man collapsing to the floor, brains and blood spewing from the wound in his head, was so unexpected it was almost comical. And Sarah...Sarah who couldn’t even speak during breakfast, Sarah who could barely move since the accident, was standing tall over the twitching body of Agent Harris, the broken base of the lamp still in her hand, an insane David victorious over Goliath.

Understanding belatedly hit Benjamin, and he took two steps back from the agent, who had stopped twitching now and lay still. Blood seeped from his shattered skull.

“I won’t let them take another child away from me,” Sarah said, her voice steady and

unflinching. “I won’t let them take Adrimus away.”

In that moment, Benjamin was terrified of her. He felt like a child who desperately wants to run away and hide in his room. Maybe, he thought abstractedly, that was the trouble with being an adult: you never had a room of your own to hide in and be miserable.

Instead he muttered, “Okay, Sarah,” over and over again. “Okay, Sarah.”

He was suddenly conscious of his own shivering, as if he were in the heart of a winter storm with not a stitch of clothing to cover his body. “We should probably call the police,” he whispered.

“No!” Sarah shouted.

Benjamin took another step back. The blood, Agent Harris’s blood, was slowly spreading across the floor, reaching out to touch his shoes.

“You have to get rid of the body,” she said, putting down the broken lamp.

“I’ll do no such thing! Are you insane?”

“Oh, yes, you will!” Sarah said vehemently. “You owe me that.”

She did not add *for killing our son*, but Benjamin heard the phrase in his mind loud and clear.

In the living room, Adrimus was sitting on the sofa. He had materialized, as if from thin air, into their reality. Sarah sat beside him and held his hand. Adrimus laughed, a sound like bells that filled the air with a tinkling melody.

Benjamin looked again at the body of Agent Harris. Now his wife was a killer too. In the strangest of ways, they were suddenly even.

“Get rid of the body,” he murmured. He heard Adrimus and Sarah laughing in the living room. “Who is he?” he said to himself. “Who the hell is this child?”

Sarah had turned on the television, and Adrimus clapped his hands in excitement as she switched channels. “Don’t forget my mother will be here tomorrow morning!” she

shouted.

Benjamin tried to think, but his mind seemed unable to hold onto any thoughts; they slipped through his mind without forming any solid notion.

*Don't think!* That was the only way to survive this. Not to view the corpse on the floor as the remains of something that had once been a living, breathing human being but to think of it simply as a mess to be cleaned up, removed, disposed of. He set to work, humming as he did so to drown the sounds in his head, humming because now that he was busy dealing with Agent Harris's body and blood, he could not see Daniel's blood, nor hear his dying screams.

He opened the kitchen cabinet beneath the sink and took out some heavy-duty trash bags. Then he found some tape in another cabinet and, still humming – what song was he humming, anyway? It sounded so familiar, but for the life of him, Daniel could not remember what it was – he opened up the trash bags and placed one over agent Harris's head and another over his feet. He lifted the dead agent's head, groaning with the effort, and wrapped tape around it. Then he proceeded to do the same with the dead man's feet. Finally, he rolled the body away from the pool of blood and wrapped more bags around the head until he was sure he could drag the body to the door without leaving a trail of blood.

When he was finished, agent Harris looked like a trash-bag mummy that had been abandoned by its embalmer mid-job; just the head and the feet having the chance to cross over into the next life.

He cleaned up the pool of blood and splattered brains with two rolls of paper towels. Finally, he washed himself clean in the kitchen sink. He sighed when he was finished and turned to clear the dishes from the kitchen table, the next logical phase in cleaning up the morning mess. Then he remembered the half-shrouded body.

They had a small store room which Benjamin always called the ghost room because he said it contained the ghosts of once useful things that plagued every house. Now the name

seemed more appropriate than ever, as he dragged the body of agent Harris towards it, taking at least three or four breaks to wipe the sweat off his forehead and catch his breath. He had reached the point where all he wanted was to get it over and done with, and he almost screamed in frustration when he opened the store room door and realized that the tiny space would was not large enough to contain the body lying down.

He pondered for a moment, then bent and heaved the body inside. He took a deep breath and, with both arms clasped firmly round the big agent's torso, hoisted the body up onto its dead feet. Breathing heavily, he held it there and realized he would have to fold the plastic-mummified arms and legs in order to close the door. Grimacing, he did that and then slammed the door shut.

That was it; life could go back to normal now. All would be as it had been. He almost felt happy as he ambled into the living room and sat on the sofa beside Sarah and Adrimus. For the first time in months, Sarah looked at him with a modicum of affection. She actually put her arm around him as he leaned back on the sofa. There was a game show on the television. The host was shouting and dancing in feigned enthusiasm around impossibly young cheerleaders who were holding briefcases filled with various amounts of money. Benjamin quickly understood that the contestants had to eat live insects as they crawled around in mud if they wanted to win one of the briefcases.

It felt good to relax at last. Benjamin wriggled gently, digging himself deeper into the sofa. Sarah put her head on his shoulder. She felt warm and soft to him, just as she had before their life had become a nightmare. As she had before the car accident in which he had killed Daniel, their son. Adrimus was smiling at them, and the sounds of the screaming people, crawling and eating cockroaches, that came from the television were strangely comforting. A mad lullaby. Benjamin yawned once, closed his eyes, and fell asleep.

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Benjamin was behind the wheel of his car, heading towards the New Jersey turnpike. He kept twisting the knuckles of his right hand hard into the sockets of his eyes, trying to wipe away the clouds that seemed to be gathering behind them.

“Are you sure you’re all right to drive, honey?” Sarah’s voice, filled with concern, came from the back seat.

Benjamin looked in the rearview mirror at Sarah and Daniel and saw that there was someone else sitting with them on the back seat. At first, Benjamin didn’t recognize who it was, but then he realized it was Adrimus. For a moment, it struck him as odd that Adrimus should be with them, but he simply shrugged, accepted it, and turned his eyes back to the road to continue the struggle with his driving.

He wasn’t much of a drinker. In fact, he almost never drank, and he certainly wasn’t the type of guy who would drink and drive. No, sir! Benjamin Mendel was the careful type, the kind that never took any risks. Why he had drunk those three glasses of vodka before they left the wedding he could not fully understand.

Daniel was laughing at something Sarah had said, but Benjamin could not hear what it was. *‘Strange,’* he thought, *‘how three small tots could affect you so much, snatch the solid world from under your feet and transform it into something soft, something that lacked any hard edges or corners.’*

And suddenly there was a bright red eye glaring at him. A round, red eye that peered straight into his soul.

He opened his mouth, like a gaping, awestruck child. He stared back at the red eye. It came closer, now looking more like a bloody, scarlet mouth that threatened to devour him. It grew larger and larger until it seemed to fill his world. He heard the sound of screeching tires, and then there was a single split second before the other car hit them. One second of realization when he finally understood what the red eye was. One second of trying to claw

his way back to the solidity of the sober world. One second of trying to regain some measure of control, grabbing at the wheel and plunging a despairing foot down on the brakes. Then a black hammer struck his head and the world went dark.

He was floating in darkness within darkness, and something wet was seeping slowly over his arms and legs. When he finally opened his eyes, the world was no longer soft. It was hard and filled with sharp edges like never before. He coughed and realized the inside of the car was full of smoke. He tried to look in the rearview mirror to see if Sarah and Daniel were all right. There was no mirror anymore. There was nothing but shattered glass and burnt metal and some things sticking out from his shoulder and chest.

“Sarah! Daniel!” he shouted, panic swelling like a huge balloon inside him when all he heard was silence. He reached down, fumbling with the seatbelt buckle, groaning when the two pieces of glass, one embedded in his shoulder, the other in his chest, sent shards of pain, like bolts of white lightning, into his brain, hindering his movements. Without thinking, he grabbed the edge of the glass shard sticking out of his shoulder and yanked it free. More pain, immediate and excruciating. But Benjamin was too panic-stricken to care. As if it was coming from someone else, he heard himself screaming as he pulled out the second piece of glass, the one sticking out of his chest. Only after it had agonizingly been removed did he distractedly realize it had not punctured any major artery.

The seat belt was stuck. He began to cry as he tried to crawl out from under it, trying to squeeze his way out where there was no way. His chest and shoulder were on fire.

“Hang in there!” he shouted, wriggling like a helpless worm but hardly managing to move an inch. Then he remembered the miniature Swiss army knife that was attached to the ring of house keys in his pocket. With desperate hands, cursing his clumsiness, he eventually found the knife. It took him more than five minutes to cut through the thickness of the seat

belt. The sounds of his own cursing and crying filled his ears, but he heard no sounds at all from what had been once the back seat.

Finally, he felt the fibers of the seatbelt part and he was free. He turned around and froze at the carnage he found himself looking at. Sarah's head was tilted back in an unnatural posture, he did not know if she was unconscious or dead. But it was the sight of Daniel that petrified him, froze him into immobility and made him lose precious seconds. Benjamin's lips trembled in a reflexive prayer. Embedded in the center of Daniel's torso was a large piece of glass. It was so big, it seemed somehow unreal. Like it was part of a magician's act cutting a volunteer in half. And then he realized with a start that Daniel was still alive.

The shock seemed to suddenly lifted away from him to be replaced by terrible, consuming emotion. He crawled to the back seat as fast as he could, fighting useless tears.

Sarah was breathing, he saw that at once. *'Thank God for that,'* he thought. She was breathing and he could feel her heart beating as he laid his head on her chest.

"Wake up Sarah!" he cried like a little boy anxious for his mother to wake up and take care of it all for him. Then he muttered the usual trauma-stricken clichés. "I can't do this without you! I need you!"

Daniel's eyes were open, he was fully conscious, looking at his father.

"Don't..." The boy's voice was a tortured gasp.

"Don't try to talk, Daniel," Benjamin said, and cradled his son's head in his hands.

"Don't cry, Dad," Daniel whispered, blood flowing with the words.

*'How could this be?'* Benjamin wondered; his mind fractured with grief. They were a happy family, a marriage forged in love, a perfect couple who had, together, given birth to, and raised, the handsomest, smartest kid anyone had ever seen. Terrible accidents like this belonged in the nightmare world of the news. Ordinary people like them, watching from afar

in their safe, warm living rooms against the background music of tongues clucking with empathy - and hearts secretly happy that it wasn't them, and never could be.

But the blood went on flowing from Daniel's mouth, rapidly becoming a torrent. His head drooped and lolled to one side. The light in his eyes, that wonderful, spirited light of his young life, dimmed and went out. He was dead, and Benjamin knew it. He took his son's lifeless head in his hands and tried to pull it closer. "I killed you," he moaned as he stroked the gory, bleeding head. "I killed you."

But surely, there must be something he could do. There must be a way to turn back time and go back to that stupid wedding filled with women sporting ridiculous hairdos, and men smiling drunken smiles, and children wailing, and relatives reeking of old age. If he could just go back to the wedding - he would simply not drink those three glasses of vodka and all would be well again. It was that simple. Why did time move only forward to constantly bring grief? Why couldn't it go backwards, just this once, just so he could save his son?

But Benjamin, merely an insect, was stuck in the web of the present and the grief-stricken future that awaited him. He heard sirens in the distance and looked at the still unconscious, but alive – thank God for that, she was still alive – Sarah.

He knew that was the moment when she was supposed to wake up and start screaming. He remembered that much. But she didn't wake. Everything seemed to freeze. The sound of the sirens disappeared. The smoke in the car had gone, the blood from Daniel's wounds stopped flowing ... and someone opened the door of the car. It was Adrimus. He was smiling at him with the same soft smile that nothing ever seemed to affect.

"This is not the accident, is it?" Benjamin said slowly.

Adrimus shook his head.

“This is a dream of the accident, and that’s why you are here, why I saw you earlier, in the backseat with Sarah and Daniel.”

Adrimus nodded and reached a hand out to Benjamin.

Benjamin gently rested Daniel’s head on Sarah’s chest and began to drag himself out of the car.

Adrimus took his hand in his. The world around them was washed with light. The cars, the road, the sun burning away to the west, falling towards the horizon and another spectacular sunset. It all suddenly appeared fresh and new. Benjamin looked at Adrimus, but the boy shook his head and pointed ahead where the gray road kissed the horizon, and from that horizon something else stretched away into the afternoon sky. A bridge. A gleaming white bridge made of a vast collection of bones.

Adrimus wanted Benjamin to come with him, to go with him towards that bridge made of bones. The cars around them were all frozen in mid-movement. Daniel stared at the people who had thrust their heads out of their vehicle windows to look at the accident in front or behind them. Adrimus and Benjamin passed the ambulances and police cars on their way to the accident; blue and red lights washing over them like seawater and blood.

Benjamin did not want to look back. He did not want to see the smoking car with Sarah and Daniel still in it. And it was good to finally have a destination that took him away from the accident, even if he did not have the slightest idea what that bridge of bone was. Even if it was only a dream.

They walked for hours, slaloming their way through and among the cars until the bridge towered above them. Craning his neck, looking up at the impossible height of the bridge, Benjamin saw that it looked like a human spine leading beyond this world and into the skies. A spine held together by red, pulsing ligaments that glistened like a living thing.

Adrimus pointed at a sort of curved stairwell that led from the road to the bridge itself. But then he motioned for Benjamin to stop and wait.

A shadow appeared above them, a huge cloud that blotted out what remained of the light cast by the setting sun. Then there was a roar and a whoosh of wings, and the monster landed between them and the bridge, baring the teeth in the bloody mouths of its hundred heads, all of them licking their chops. Adrimus shouted something, to the monster, perhaps?

In the second before he woke, Benjamin looked up and saw Daniel at the top of the bone bridge. His lips were moving.

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Benjamin and Sarah woke together and shared a gasp and a bewildered look. Adrimus was gone. They were sitting alone on the sofa.

Sarah took Benjamin in her arms and hugged him, and he responded immediately, holding her tightly to him. Then, for the first time since the accident, they made love.

When they were done, Sarah began to cry.