

Stanley Patrick Stocker

The List

Not long after the accident, my sister Claire and I took a walk down by the river when the leaves were just beginning to turn. This was back when my wife Eunice was still barely getting out of bed in the mornings, and Claire had come down from Ohio to help out. As we walked, she said the soul drops down into the body anywhere from six months before birth to one month after. In the latter case, she said, it often hovers above the child, trying to decide whether to come on down. I just gave her a look, and we walked on in silence, the leaves crunching beneath our feet.

To be fair, she's been into that kind of thing since we were kids. When my friends and I were in the basement smoking weed and listening to the latest Earth, Wind, and Fire, she was up in her room with her girlfriends, trying to figure out what it meant if your rising sign was in Cancer. Later, after college, she became a serious metaphysician long before it was popular: crystals, a miniature pyramid in a corner of her living room big enough for her to sit beneath and "listen to the vibrations of the earth." Now she's got a decent real estate business with a reiki practice on the side. Anyway, it sounded like so much mumbo jumbo to me. I'm a college professor, for God's sake.

That night I drove her in the rain to the bus station in a rundown section of northeast D.C. for her trip back to Cincinnati and her husband and two pimply kids. When I got back, I went down to the basement and tried to work on my long overdue book on Melville. In it I argue that *Moby-Dick* is a marvelous and variegated outward journey: Ahab shaking his fist at God and Fate and the smallness of the soul in the face of an overwhelming cosmos. "Call me, Ishmael," the narrator says, but what is his real name, and what is he running from? From what crime real or imagined? I contend that Melville veers away from a yet-untold story in allowing Ahab to take center stage so that Ishmael becomes a bystander in his own tale. What might Ishmael's journey have looked like, if he were the hero? What was the source of that "damp, drizzly November" of the soul? Why was there nothing to interest him on land? Where was his mother when he was put to bed for sixteen long hours for some household infraction by a "stepmother"? I've tried to answer these questions, but for the past year I've been hopelessly stuck. Already the book was six months late and

getting later by the day.

Instead of working on the manuscript, I opened my computer and paged through a couple of Melville monographs, then clicked open a folder with my name on it that Claire must have created before she left. In it I found a link to a website called *The Philosopher's Stone*, and among the topics was a discussion of how *The Odyssey* was a coded record of the journey of the soul. But there was also a discussion of how a child can come into your life for a lifetime or a few years for its own experience or for the experiences of its parents. Six hours later I was deep in the rabbit hole, devouring articles about how the 47th problem of Euclid, the Pythagoras Theorem, is a metaphor for the making of a child as it takes something from the mother and something from the father to create a new being. Who knew that's what we were talking about in tenth grade geometry with Mr. Schwartz chomping on an apple and flexing his buttocks as he declaimed the beauty of $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. You know, Pythagoras supposedly died at the hands of his enemies rather than escape through a sacred bean field? The poor bastard. He's tortured thousands of high school students with his theorem, but two thousand years ago they ran him through because he'd rather die than trample a bunch of beans.

We came close to divorcing, my wife and I. Everyone thought we would. So did I. What's left after something like that? Each day's a reminder of what was. She tried to deny it, but I know she blamed me. And I blamed her some, too. You picked the babysitter, I would say, over coffee that sat cold in the kitchen. You told her it was okay to take her to the playground when I said she should stay in, she would say.

After a while what's left to say? Nothing, I thought. I didn't see the point in bringing it up. What's done is done. And Eunice had long ago given up on trying to get me to talk about it in any real way. She went to stay with her sister in Baltimore, the one that's a nurse. She had an old beau there from her high school days, too, but I pretended not to remember that. I stayed at the house and, after the two months off the Department gave me, I went back to work, teaching critical theory and the early modern poets at the college. My TAs treated me like the walking dead, and my colleagues, especially the ones with kids, were super solicitous, at first at least, taking me to lunch and offering to help out with my course load. Then sure as shit they asked just enough questions about the particulars to assure themselves that it couldn't happen to them. I listened and told them what they wanted to hear. Why not? I knew they could be me in a flash. Hell, they *were* me except for a handful of contingencies, none of which they had a rat's ass' control over: a left turn instead of a right, one drink more, one second less.

Sally from administration came over one afternoon just after

the New Year, when it was unseasonably warm and you could imagine that spring was just around the corner. We had gone out a couple of times when I first started at the school—this was before I met Eunice—but it never really took. Well, after a few drinks and some talk about how piss-poor the office of administration was and how she really wanted to go west and help open up a medical marijuana dispensary, we went up to the bedroom and did what grown folks do. You could tell it was out of pity or something that looked like it, devouring me with those great big eyes of hers as she bounced up and down, as if she were trying to impart something that would stay with me after she left. You know: fragments to shore against my ruin. But all I could think about was that little baby hovering in the air, trying to decide whether to come down or not. Then there was Mr. Schwartz flexing his ass cheeks at the front of geometry class, and I started to laugh right then and there with Sally's lovely breasts bouncing up and down above me. The next time I saw her at the office, she told me it was her last day. She had accepted a position as the registrar at a college in Portland, her hometown.

I fell into a routine: teaching classes in the mornings and afternoons and then going down into the windowless basement to pretend to work on the book. After a while I couldn't even pretend. I printed out the manuscript and stacked it high right next to my unpublished novel. I put the Melville manuscript on a shelf close enough to my desk so I could see it, but not so close that I felt compelled to actually pick it up. Instead, I read everything I had resisted touching in the early days of educating myself. Books that could have come straight off my sister's shelf like Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, or Rilke's *Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*. Anything I could get my hands on having to do with myth. Sometimes I read straight through the night, or else I'd pass out at my desk. Then I got up, showered, and started all over again the next day. This went on for months.

I had no great love of critical theory, and the Melville book was an attempt to move closer to what truly interested me while remaining true at least in name to my literary focus. At heart I'm more a poetry man, modern or old, it didn't much matter, but poetry Ph.D.s are a dime a dozen. Critical theory was simply the most logical path to tenure, though that didn't make it any easier. According to Eunice, choosing such a literary focus was like asking the girl you weren't particularly fond of to the dance because you think she's more likely to say yes, instead of the one you really want to take but were too afraid to ask. After a while you get so used to that way of thinking that you forget what it was you really wanted in the first place.

It was Eunice many years later who reminded me of the

Melville idea when I was casting about for a subject for my book. It was something I had shared with her at a café downtown on 11th Street on one of our first dates. Afterwards, we went to a play and then sat on a bench at Freedom Plaza beneath the statue of that Polish military commander Kazimierz Pulaski and talked for hours, about her upbringing out in California and my growing up in Jersey. Then we walked the two miles north to her place near U Street and stood outside her building as I waited in vain for her to ask me up.

We met at a “fix-up” dinner in which friends invited other friends who they thought might be a good match for someone else in the group. I was paired with a young math professor who sat to my left while Eunice, an economist at the World Bank, sat to my right. It wasn’t until after dinner when we all went bowling that I really noticed Eunice. I was standing in those ridiculous shoes they make you wear, about to take my turn, when I felt a heat at my lower back. Right then and there I thought, Whoever is behind me digs me, so I turned and there was Eunice about twenty feet away, talking to one of the other women. She turned and looked at me for a moment. Afterwards, I went up to her, and we started talking. That night a friend gave us a ride home, and we exchanged numbers after learning that we worked two blocks from one another.

It was maybe two months into our courtship that I thought maybe it wouldn’t work out. More and more it began to bother me that she would never let me pay for her during our dates. Whether it was dinner or a movie, she was always quick to pull out her wallet. We were at a little French restaurant for lunch in Georgetown when once again she reached for her wallet, insisting on paying for herself. By then I knew it was her way of not letting me get too close, and I sat in silence as I ate and denied that anything was wrong when she asked. As we walked past Dumbarton Oaks gardens, I told her I was upset because she never let me pay for her. We went back and forth for a while, but finally, she said she never let me pay because she was afraid of getting hurt and burst out in tears. “I don’t know if love is real,” she said. “Whether it can last.” I told her it could, that I knew it could, but we’d have to open ourselves up to it. That night we went to bed together for the first time and got engaged at that park two years later.

Eventually, Eunice came back from Baltimore and her sister’s. I came home one day after grading papers at the neighborhood coffee shop, and her hatchback was sitting in the drive with the “Baby On Board” sign that I always hated. Or used to, at least. She’d found the sign at a garage sale when she was six months pregnant. Why are babies any more precious than grown-ups? I said, as she paid the man with wadded up bills from her wallet. Why not “Human Being On Board”? Or “Used to Be a Baby On Board”? Eunice said I was

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overthinking it, and babies are babies, and we should take care of them. Still I argued the point, but I sang a different tune after my own baby came along, that was for sure.

A few days after she was born, she needed a procedure. Nothing serious, just something to do with her skin that they might as well take care of while they had her, but when they didn't bring her back at the expected time? Man, I just knew something had gone bad. Worse, I knew something had gone bad, and they were already in cover-up mode. "Where is she? Why isn't she back yet?" I said, surprising everyone, including myself, by bursting into tears. The nurses just stared at me like they were embarrassed and said they didn't know. That's when this other nurse wheeled her in in her little metal bassinet, and she was fine. Apparently, it was a big weekend for giving birth, coming nine months after that Snowmageddon storm that had shut down the city for weeks, and they just couldn't get her in the O.R. because of the ass-load of babies being born that weekend.

The day Eunice got back from Baltimore, I went inside to find her sitting in the living room, sipping a cup of coffee and watching the news. Well, not watching exactly, more like the news was on, and she was staring in the direction of the TV. Her things were still standing in the entryway, so I took them upstairs and unpacked them. I hadn't changed anything so it was no trouble. And I didn't tell her about Sally either, and also I didn't ask about her six months in Baltimore. What's good for the goose, as my old man used to say. For a couple of weeks, there were calls on Eunice's cell that she always took in the other room, or she would cut them short after a few seconds. I didn't feel it was my place to ask, no matter how curious I was about it. After a while the calls died down, and we pretty much picked up where we left off.

Before it had been hard to find time to make love or space even. Who knew a kid could take up so much room in a bed? At the end of the day, Eunice and I always fell into bed exhausted, and the kid seemed to sleep better with us so we didn't fight it. Pretty soon she refused to sleep anywhere else. Now we have all the time and space in the world and none of the inclination.

Before Eunice left for Baltimore, she used to stop down in the dimly lit room in the basement I used as an office and ask if I wanted anything to eat. Most times I didn't, but I'd go up anyway. That's the way it was between us: she'd ask if I was hungry, and I lied and said yes. It was the only thing we had to say to one another, so we'd sit there and push our food around our plates until it looked like we'd eaten, if you weren't paying particular attention. Then after a while we'd clear the dishes, and I'd wash them.

Don't get me wrong; I put on nearly forty pounds in the

months after the accident, I ate so much, but it was always on the run, between classes, or I'd grab something—a pizza, sometimes two, or a sub—while grading papers, but not at home, never at home. Sometimes I didn't even remember eating or feeling hungry. I just ate like it was a job. Of course, none of my clothes fit, and I'd walk around campus looking like a tramp in these expandable waist slacks and full-cut shirts I picked up at the Big and Tall.

Eunice was just the opposite. She ate so little she'd dwindled down to some distilled essence, as if everything superficial had been burned away and what remained was fierce and raw and naked as an unsheathed sword. Sometimes I'd wonder if maybe she felt that if our kid couldn't be here to eat, then she wouldn't eat either, though it hardly seemed to require much effort on her part, this denial. When I'd ask, she'd just say most times she'd just forgotten to eat. Once I went into the kitchen and found her standing in front of the refrigerator with the door open. I went upstairs to get something I had forgotten and came back down, and she was still standing there. When I asked what she was doing, she said, "Betraying her, that's what." It freaked me out so much that I lied and said I had class, though it didn't start for another two hours. I ended up driving around for over an hour before I steered the car toward campus.

It was Eunice who had pushed to have a kid. I was game in theory. But doing and thinking are two different things, and after a year of trying without any luck, we decided to get some help of the professional kind. My boys were a little on the old side, but in good enough shape generally, though the doctor said a certain percentage had what he called "abnormalities." Apparently, some of them were just swimming around in circles like little idiots, which was a little disconcerting. Eunice and I had a good laugh about that.

"See, that's why we're not pregnant yet," she'd say, "your fellas are running around in circles like drunkards!" Then she'd stagger around the kitchen like she had one too many. Or she'd limp around with an umbrella in her hand like Charlie Chaplin and say, "Who am I? Who am I? Your sperm, that's who!" She always did have a sense of humor.

Eunice herself was solid, being almost fifteen years younger—not that that's a guarantee of anything. But man, nobody talks about how hard it'll be even with the pros involved: the needles, the bruising, the tears, running out in the middle of the night because you've got the wrong size needle and you have to give a particular shot at a particular time or you're screwed. For a long time we wondered, Why us? But in the end I thought, Hell, why not us? Why should this pass by our door and land at someone else's? Melville and his universal thump, that's what.

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We went through a boatload of money, consulting different doctors. The first time we saw this one guy he spoke to Eunice the whole time without even looking my way like I was the Invisible Fucking Man when I was sitting right there next to her. I picked up my coat, and we were out. Second place we tried and got pregnant, but it lasted maybe six days? Seriously. I used to use my notebook to keep track of where we were in the process.

It was around then that I started writing down key pieces from literature or music or film that somehow made me feel better, even if just to confirm how truly shitty things could get. A list of greatest hits, if you will. Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" always makes me wonder whether my long-dead mother might just be looking at me now for all I cannot see her. Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" because you have to have some beauty around you at all times. Anne Sexton and her "Awful Rowing to God," with the oarlocks sticking and the sea blinking and rolling "like a worried eyeball." That scene in Fellini's *8½* where Mastroianni's dreaming of his boyhood days bathing with all the other little boys in those enormous tubs. Ellington's "Concerto for Cootie" because if you ever want to forget your troubles and imagine yourself dressed to the nines walking down the street without a care in the world, then that's the piece for you. Heck, if Adam and Eve had a theme song for that time in the Garden before all that unpleasantness began, then that would have to be it.

Those were just a few of the things that made up the list. Somehow having it near me at all times made me feel better. Untouchable even.

Around that time the doctors at that practice started jumping ship like the place was on fire. One after the other. Meanwhile, they were hosing out our bank account. There were always enough of them left to make sure that got done. After a while we asked the doctor, the head of the practice, whether it was time to call it a day and try adoption. "But that's not what you want," he said. "Let's give it another try." And I think he genuinely wanted to help. We had come so close so many times. There were even twins once. That lasted about a week. We went down to the church and lit candles for them. Even named them. But one more shot? We looked at each other and said, Sure, let's give it another try. "Run it on back again," Eunice said.

Then finally everything went well. Too well. There were too many eggs, and they were too big. Eunice had overstimulated, and if he gave her the final trigger shot, it could mean serious health problems. We pulled the plug on that "last final round" at that particular clinic, at least. And you know what the doctor asked at one of the final meetings?

"Do you keep records of all your doctor consults in that

book?” And he pointed down at my notebook like it was a criminal summons with his name on it. “Is that what that is?” he asked.

“No, I’m an English teacher, and most of these are my notes for class.”

Then I thought about all of those rats jumping ship while we were there; maybe they were afraid of getting sued.

I always thought if I had a kid, it would be a boy. I just took it for granted. Then she came along. The IVF finally took. The weird thing is it was Dr. Invisible Man who made it happen after we went back to him. And she was a daddy’s girl almost right off the bat. If she took a tumble or was afraid or angry, it was me she ran to. Me she’d cuddle up next to and near push out of the bed at night, arms all akimbo. It hurt my wife’s feelings that she wasn’t the main one, as if she were lacking something as a mom. But that wasn’t it. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that my mother died when I was a kid, but once she came, boy, I took to her like she was the sun and the moon.

On those long winter nights when Eunice was away, I’d sometimes call my sister to talk about the things I read and thought about when I was down there in the basement. How the pyramids, stretching as they do from four-cornered earth to sky, are symbolic of humankind’s destined unity with God; how some scholars talked about reincarnation and how it just might be right there in the Bible if you knew where to look. She’d listen patiently. It’s a tenet of her faith, and one she honored, not to judge someone who wasn’t as far along on the path as she was. A tree towering in the forest never looks down on the little sapling in the clearing. I’m grateful for that. So when I told her there seems to be story after story of the soul plunging down in a kind of mad blindness and slowly making its way up to the light, I could actually feel her smiling on the other end of the line, as if warmth could be sent like light across a wire.

“I understand,” she’d say. “Yes, I understand.”

And sometimes I’d tell her my dreams, something I hadn’t done since we were kids together in that little house down on Sylvania Avenue that our folks bought two or three years before the world exploded, and our mother died, after which Claire seemed to head down one path in life and I down another.

In one dream, I’m driving and the kid’s in the carseat behind me, facing backwards. (My wife and I had a knock-down drag-out about how long the carseat needed to be facing backwards, by the way. As long as possible, it turns out, given their pencil-thin necks and the driving skills of the average resident of our fair city.) Anyway, the kid and I are taking turns listening to my music and then hers, mine then hers, switching back and forth. That’s it. I’m just listening as she

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laughs and asks me what instrument it is when my music is playing. Or me singing some song or other or telling her that in a little bit on my side of the car there'll be a yellow school bus or one of those construction vehicles she loves so much. In the dream, it's sunny and warm, and we're traveling along the parkway with the windows down.

When I woke up, I turned to my daughter in the bed between us, it felt so real. Then I ran to the window to look out at the car, even though I knew I had put the carseat away in the garage along with that other stuff boxed up there gathering dust.

I knew at that moment that if I didn't tell Eunice everything about the dream, I would die. Not actually die, of course, but in that slow inexorable way that men die daily, the kind of death that leaves families broken and marriages empty. So I told her the dream as we lay there in bed: what our daughter was wearing; how her voice sounded; how warm it was outside. Eunice asked for an ever-increasing level of detail: Did she seem happy? (Yes); Had she eaten? (She had a bag of sour cream chips, I think); Did she have on her cream-colored jacket? (No, a jumper, blue with some kind of animal on the bib. I can't be sure). Some of the details I supplied without knowing whether they were real or whether I was making them up as I went along.

Then for a long, long time we just lay there with a breeze coming through the window. It was late spring by then; the warm weather had arrived for real. Then, I can't say why, but I reached out and touched her arm with the tips of my fingers and, I don't know, just waited. A lot of people think once you're married it no longer takes any kind of courage to express your desire, but sometimes it can be just as scary as the first time: I didn't have the slightest idea how she'd react. Or exactly what it was that I wanted. But eventually she put her hand on mine, and our hands slowly intertwined, moving together and letting go and intertwining again, as if we were circling some invisible thing between us.

It was like that first time we went to the movies together on our first date, sitting there in the darkness. Not long after, she told me she had thought it was corny at first, the way I caressed her hand, but then she said everything else fell away and it was only our hands, moving together in the darkness. It was like that again now, except it was her body and mine, slowly moving, intertwining and reconfiguring in the half-light of early morning.

Like a knife, she cut through the layers of fatted flesh down to where my wounded heart had hidden itself and, once exposed, oh, I wailed for my lost little one, and Eunice, she burrowed into that flaccid flesh, and I covered her naked grief as best I could as she wept, and we spoke her name over and over again: *Veautiful, Veautiful, Veautiful*. Then sleep—long and hard and dreamless—descended upon us and

relieved us of our names.

When we woke in the late afternoon, I was the one who asked if she was hungry. She said she was, and I knew she meant it. And I was too and keenly aware of it. I'm no cook, but growing up in Jersey my dad was famous for the breakfast he'd make. It was one of the things he passed on to me. So I fired up the stove and made hickory-smoked bacon, scrapple, eggs sunny side up, grits, pancakes, Belgian waffles, real whole wheat biscuits from scratch, fruit salad, and a side salad with dressing. Hot coffee and fresh-squeezed orange juice. As I cooked something, I put whatever I had finished in the oven to keep warm. Then, after everything was done and the table was groaning under the weight of it all, we eyed each other across the table and dug in as if it were for the first time ever, or maybe the last, sopping up the bright yellow yolk of the eggs with the biscuits until they were dripping, washing it down with hot coffee, wolfing down the fruit with our hands, stuffing slabs of pancakes in our mouths.

Our hunger was inexhaustible, bottomless, with neither beginning nor end.

When every plate was empty and piled one on top of the other, we sat there in silence, happy for once. Then after a while Eunice looked over at me and said, "Run it back again, Charlie Chaplin. Run it back." I looked at her to see if she was serious and she gave me a look, and I knew she meant it, so I turned on the stove again.

Seven months later, we were back in the same hospital as before, and Eunice gave birth to a healthy baby girl. Yeah, I know what you're thinking. I can do the math. But it doesn't matter. Like my old man says, What's good for the goose is good for the gander.

When the baby was three months old, we took her to Baltimore to meet Eunice's sister. Steven, the old beau, was there, too. He stood with his hands in his pockets, waiting it seemed for someone to tell him it was alright for him to be there, even though Eunice had expressly said she wanted him there. When she lay the baby in his arms, he cradled her like a little doll.

"She's light as air," he said smiling, then repeated it, "She's light as air." Then he passed her back to Eunice, still smiling, and shoved his hands in his pockets and hopped lightly from foot to foot, saying, "She's as light as a feather."

One day we'll explain it all to her—how long ago an old man would rather die than cross a sacred bean field, and how a baby decided to come to us, to her old man and her mama, in this time and this place and in this manner, to spend a little while or all of our lifetimes by our side. In the meantime, I hold her in my arms and devour her with my eyes.

