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ADDING UP AND TAKING  
AWAY

ON FRIDAY NIGHTS MOLLY SITS at the living room table, crouched over the big ledger. George stands behind her, a cigarette in his fingers, the ash dangling, about to fall. George speaks slowly, thoughtfully and Molly transcribes names, figures, places. She moves her fingers down, back up and down again, writes a figure each time she comes to the bottom of the page. Casting it's called. That's what bookkeepers call adding up. She thinks, what do they call taking away?

George sucks on the last of the cigarette and the ash falls. A railway crash in Croydon, a flood in Sedgemoor, a girl in Bolton under a bus. Lives that have to be lost, all on the tip of his tongue before it goes down on the page, before he decides it has to be.

Matthew, runs a toy car along the carpet, a 1955 Humber Hawk, the latest model, and makes a buzzing noise. He knows nothing about it, the power his father has. In life, Molly thinks, there may be few states of grace but this is certainly one of them. God works in mysterious ways. She has never known love like she has for Matthew. It continues to both hurt and surprise, the burden she has to bear. The love her parents taught her was a distant love for her fellow men. They couldn't get closer than that. Love, they called it, but duty was a better word. Matthew buzzes, a noise coming from his throat. She wants to hug him.

George Conway puts his hand onto his wife's shoulder. It's not a grip that adds anything, all it does is take away.

"Damn," George says. Molly closes her eyes, touches the page of the big ledger, her fingertips on the thick creamy paper. Turning the page on Fridays is a big thing in her life. George makes no attempt to touch the ledger as she writes. He only handles it when it's closed. That's when he picks it up and locks it away. After that, nothing can be changed.

George can do the register, he would, if he were forced, but it's best that he keeps away. When he writes he can't stop himself and the figures

get out of hand. Molly puts her pen down and touches George's arm. It's a consoling gesture, but will he recognise it as such? The last of the cigarette between his fingers, the last lungful gone, George coughs and moves away.

"It's all right, George," Molly says.

"The kid," George says. "Does he always have to be here, under our feet, when we're doing this?"

"Not if you don't want it," she says. "You only have to say." She stands up and goes to the boy.

"Come on, Matthew," she says. "I'm taking you to bed."

"But, Mum," the boy says.

"No buts, you're going." The window in the boy's bedroom is cracked and the rain comes in. It's too cold for a boy his age but there is nothing she can do. They don't have the money to make a difference. She married beneath her. The damp smell of the house reminds her. What a difference it would have made. A television, a new thirteen-inch Ferguson, a car perhaps, for trips to the coast. When the boy is in bed, she kisses him and sighs. Matthew hugs her.

"Don't go, Mum," he says.

"I have to, Matthew," she says. "Be a good boy and sleep the sleep of the righteous." She knows the boy will shiver, she knows he has nightmares, but there is little she can do. She has to go back downstairs to her husband. She still has figures to write.

"He's OK," she says to George and she remembers cold breath upstairs, punctuating her son's words.

"I thought you were staying up there all night," George says, lighting another cigarette.

"Oh, George," she says.

"Don't you 'Oh, George' me." He moves across to her quickly and slaps her on the cheek. It is not unexpected. Better her than the kid.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'd thought we'd finished."

"I tell you when we've finished," he says.

She puts her arms around him, squeezes him tight. In her head, there is a frozen window, a little boy, and the white empty sheet of a ledger. Further away, at the back of her mind, there are other things she does not want to think about now.

"I'll make you a cup of tea," she says. "Then we can start again." George puts his hands on his hips, juts his fat stomach out. Funny to have a fat stomach when he is so thin a man.

"Tea, George," she says. George sucks on his cigarette.

"Make it quick," he says.

A small victory, she thinks, and she goes out to the kitchen. Not a thing out of place since she tidied up after tea. It's the way he likes it, the way it's got to be. A piece of chocolate cake from the cupboard she bought and against her good nature she hid this afternoon. Matthew

likes chocolate cake but that's neither here nor there. She slices it thick and puts sugar into George's tea.

"What took you so long?" he says.

"There," she says. "Just the way you like it, George."

George has his hands in his trouser pockets, his cigarette in his mouth, his eyes closed when the smoke rises. She knows what will happen now. She can guess the number of fatalities from each and everything he does. He is bared wire, a cat's whisker, a seismic needle. Sometimes he shakes.

"Chocolate cake, George," she says and she holds out the plate. He will not even remove his hand from his pocket to take hold of it, will not bother himself for this.

"The pen," he says.

She sits at the table and waits for the worst. God needs the deaths and chooses George. His disposition, she supposes. God needs a pessimist, a spiteful someone to carry out his work. Each week God sends a cheque to George's company. That's why they pay him. He doesn't do enough to get the money any other way. In fact, United Insurance want to be shot of him but God keeps him on the books.

"A bout of flu in Bolton, kills only three," George says. Molly writes it down. She can tell he's beginning to work up to it now.

"Three people in Totnes, under a lorry."

The door opens quietly and Matthew walks in. His hair is frowzy, his lips blue, his pyjamas too small and it is this that tears her heart the most. The fact that she can't provide. George looks at the ceiling.

"Five hundred somewhere," he says, "but I can't see where, not yet, but it's coming, I know." It's the anger in his voice that scares her, not the possibility of deaths.

Matthew walks over to his mother, catches hold of her hand. She tries to pull away, ready to write the figures but the boy will not let her. She has to let go of the pen.

"What the hell?" George says. "You know the rules. What's going on?" He catches hold of his son's neck. Matthew squeals. *Five hundred*, Molly thinks, *five hundred deaths tonight*. George looks down at Matthew.

"Can you see what you do to me?" he says.

"Please, Dad," Matthew says.

"Please Dad, what?" George says.

"Please, Dad, I'm sorry," Matthew says. Still George holds on for what the moment gives him, the rush. It comes from somewhere and it goes. Molly wants to pummel her husband, to shout and to scream. But it's not what she does at times like this. God chose a spiteful man, one quick to anger. He knows what He does. The world has to go round.

George releases Matthew and the boy stands there crying, his hands by his sides. Molly knows her son is in a place that he will never leave, that small spot he stands in now. She should get up and console

him but she has a greater concern. It is something she has learned. Her love for her fellow men.

Matthew stands, George stands, and Molly sits where she is. There is no sound in the room. They are all in place, separate people, detached but bound together by who they are. Somewhere inside the house a pipe creaks, somewhere outside a car brakes. Molly knows she should put her arm around her son and take him upstairs but instead she waits to see what will happen, to see how it will turn out in the end. The clock ticks on the wall, a stupid electrical click. Next door's telly blares.

Suddenly it's all over. George tousles Matthew's hair.

"What are you doing down here, you rascal?" he says. Matthew smiles, tears on his cheeks, grateful for every last crumb.

"Here," George says and he hands him the plate with the cake, the cup of tea."

"Thank you, Daddy," Matthew says.

"Back upstairs," his father says. Molly listens to the creak on the stairs, the boards as they bend on the landing, the noise Matthew makes.

"Thank you, George," she says.

George stands behind her, his hand on her shoulder and he sighs. It's the sound she wanted to hear. He lights another cigarette and exhales.

"How many did I say?" he says. She shrugs, *five hundred*, loud in her head.

"Let's make it five," he says.

Molly thinks of Matthew shivering in bed as she writes down the figure, as she adds up the page. Everything in life can be counted. That's how we understand. It's called casting. What do they call taking away?

The following Friday she sits at the table and she writes in the ledger. For George it has not been a good day. His double hernia inhibits the way he rides his bike, how he goes round to collect the small insurance premiums the people pay. George is still wet from his journey but he will not stop to dry off. He is working up to it, the tragedies, the deaths that have to be. It's going to be one of those weeks. A thousand here, perhaps, from some disease as yet undiagnosed, a plane wreck, a car crash, they're all on the cards. She thinks of God as a coward, who gets someone else to do His dirty work. God is smiling that nasty smile.

She dips the fountain pen in the bottle and siphons up the black ink. Sometimes she wants to ask Him why it happens, what is the bloody need. She knows some things are cosmically necessary. Yet this does not stop her from hating God.

Matthew is on the carpet playing with his car. George goes towards the fire to warm his hands but he trips over his son. Matthew wails and holds his hands over his head. George starts to hit him. Molly watches, it's her duty to watch. She sees her parents in a room with bare boards on the floor, a weak sun through the window. Her mother smiles at her father. It is a milk and water smile that takes a lot to give, a lot to receive.

The pen, it's in Molly's hand, it's what she knows. George hits Matthew, hits him again and again. God is a nasty little man with a nasty smile who watches from the corner of the room. Smiles like that come easily to Him. God is adding up and taking away. So many like this, so many like that, either way, it's all right with Him.

Molly puts down the pen. She doesn't care. She grabs her husband's arms, pushes him off and gets him away from her son. Takes Matthew upstairs and hugs him. They lie together on the bed in the cold room and listen to what's happening below. George and God together, George really working up to it now, God goading him on in turn.

"A mysterious illness in Southampton," says George, furious inside. "Carries off three hundred just like that, women and children, doctors and nurses too." God rubs his hands with glee. Takes one of George's cigarettes. Doesn't even have to ask. George writes it down. In Southampton a doctor picks up a phone, an ambulance dashes down a street.

"A crash at Heathrow," says George. "A 747 ploughs into Terminal Three. Accounts for one thousand and fifty-two." This, too, goes in the book. Somewhere an air controller sees a blip that veers off course.

Upstairs Molly cuddles Matthew. She strokes his hair. It is beautiful hair, soft and full of longing to her touch. She kisses her son on the forehead. She closes her eyes. None of it, none of it matters at all, not so long as she's with her son. Casting, it's called, she thinks. Just what is it they call taking away?