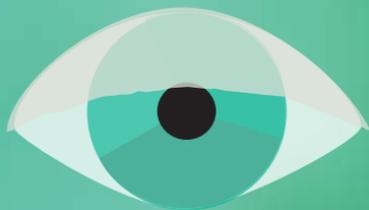


INVOLUNTARY BLISS



a novel



DEVON CODE



FIRST EDITION

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Thus spoke Zarathustra. And he waited all night for his
unhappiness: but he waited in vain.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

IT HAD TAKEN SOME TIME FOR THEM TO GAIN THE clearance necessary to volunteer at the Children's Hospital, said James. A criminal record check had been required, and there had been some minor infraction, some misdemeanour or youthful indiscretion on their respective records, that resulted in delay. It was late September by the time they had established their trustworthiness, said James, and our Cyclopean Studies seminar was already underway.

There had been a need for volunteers to work with the school-aged children, to tutor them so they wouldn't fall behind during their hospitalization. Two bright young men, two undergraduate students at the university, said the nurses, would make excellent role models for the school-aged children, particularly the boys. But no, James and Warren had said. They had no interest in working with the school-aged children. The younger the children, the better, they'd said, their preference being to work with newborns who'd not yet learned to respond to the sound of their own names, children as yet incapable of speech. The nurses replied that the positions in the nursery were customarily reserved for the senior volunteers. But he and Warren remained steadfast in their insistence, said James, and eventually the nurses acquiesced.

There were a number of directives they were to observe as volunteers in the nursery. The first was that they were never to kiss the infants in their care. This was a directive they admittedly sometimes saw fit to disregard, said James, though only with the best interests of the infants in mind. A directive not to kiss an infant for whom one feels affection, James reasoned, is an affront to human nature. Never would they kiss an infant when under the watchful gaze of the nurses. Never would they kiss an infant when, in their opinion, the infant was not robust enough to withstand the fleeting presence of their lips. Their kisses were always administered to the forehead of the infant, James explained, both he and Warren taking great pains to ensure that the coarseness of their respective beards did not aggravate the softness of the infant's skin.

The second directive was to uphold confidentiality at all times. This was a directive with which they took no issue. Not even to me, said James, who was his most trusted and closest remaining friend, would he ever disclose any information that might be used to identify an infant in the nursery of the Children's Hospital.

As I knew, said James, their volunteer shifts had been scheduled so as to directly follow our Cyclopean Studies seminar. When the other seminar participants would adjourn to the pub, he and Warren would make their way to the Children's Hospital. There they would impart to the infants in the nursery what they had discussed that day in seminar, he and Warren agreeing that while within the nursery, they would not converse with one another, but would speak only to the infants. Though they would never condescend to the infants, they would speak in layperson's terms, so as not to confound their audience with abstract terminology. Never did they censor the content of their remarks, no matter how harrowing or upsetting they

might be. Nothing was omitted from their recapitulations of the seminar discussions, said James, not even the account of the Peruvian novella. Explaining the seminar content to the infants had proven to be a fruitful intellectual exercise, for it had forced him and Warren to clarify their own understanding of the complex nature of the discussions. Though the infants seemed stimulated by the sound of their voices and the expressiveness of their faces, they were, of course, as yet incapable of responding to the content of their remarks. Nevertheless, both he and Warren had been certain that the infants understood far more than they let on.

Infants have an entirely unwarranted reputation for being layabouts, said James, when in fact they are hard workers. The natural processes of growth and development are themselves herculean tasks. The very act of eating makes an infant tired, while the very act of sleeping makes an infant hungry, the travails of the unwell infant being exponentially greater than that of his healthy counterpart. The afflictions suffered by the infants were myriad, said James. Sometimes they would be obvious and at other times they would remain unknown, for the nurses were not at liberty to divulge the particulars and he and Warren would have to deduce the nature of the illness for themselves. There were infants with blotchy complexions of unnatural hues. There were infants with respiratory masks, infants with protruding tubes connected to elaborate machines. There were infants born to mothers with addictions, these infants requiring regular injections until they grew strong enough to endure the process of withdrawal. There were infants without the strength to kick their feet or clench their fists, others who would writhe for hours on end. There were infants born prematurely, infants under strict quarantine because they did not possess immune systems. These were enclosed in incubators,

said James, so that he and Warren would have to press their faces against the glass and raise their voices in order to be heard.

There were a number of infants who appeared to have nothing wrong with them whatsoever, infants who, to the untrained eye, appeared healthy in every respect. These, they speculated, were the infants with psychological afflictions, the ones, who in the very first moments of their existence, were gripped by a fear that rendered them incapable of venturing beyond the confines of the nursery to face the wider world.

The infants in need of their attention would vary from one week to the next. Sometimes the infants would be in the care of their guardians, or sleeping or feeding or bathing, or undergoing medical examinations or operations, all manner of procedures which neither he nor Warren were qualified to perform. There was a high turnover of infants in the nursery, and he could not estimate how many he and Warren had encountered in the few short months they'd volunteered. But in the wake of Warren's accident, said James, there was one that came to mind above all others.

She'd been the only infant in need of their attention on that particular day, which was the last time Warren would visit the nursery. On this occasion they'd deviated from their usual routine, and Warren had brought his mandola into the nursery. The nurses handed the infant to James, who held her so that she faced outward, in Warren's direction. The infant, who was unusually light, felt unsettled in his arms. Through her flannel hospital gown, he could feel the tension in her limbs. Her gaze was unfocussed, saliva dribbling from her chin. Beneath her hair, which was thin and dark, her scalp was covered with a complex network of scars, an indication, James surmised, of cranial surgery performed in the first few weeks of life.

As James held the infant, Warren took his mandola from its

case. After he had tuned the strings, he began to softly strum and sing a wordless tune. As soon as Warren started singing, the infant became alert. Her eyes darted around the room, seeking out the source of the music. Then her gaze came to light on Warren and she became transfixed. A smile spread across her face, as if she were delighted to be the object of his attention. Warren could not help but smile back at her, said James, and he found himself smiling at the infant as well, the three of them smiling together. He had not recognized the melody, said James, or the chords that accompanied it, and suspected that the arrangement had been spontaneous in its invention. As the infant watched and listened, James felt the tension drain from her body; her breathing slowed, her limbs relaxed and she focused intently on Warren for more than half a minute.

Then, without warning, her face contorted and her eyes rolled back in her head. Her entire body convulsed and spittle gathered in the corners of her mouth. For several seconds it was as if she'd become electric in his arms, said James, as if a powerful current was shooting through her, the fit ending almost as soon as it came on. The nurses had warned them of the seizures, which had occurred with regularity every few minutes since the infant had taken her first breaths. There was something seemingly ecstatic about her paroxysms, said James, painful as they were to behold.

Though the seizures never ceased to startle James, Warren remained unfazed. Each time one of the infant's fits ended, she would regain awareness, always her gaze coming to rest on Warren, who continued to strum and sing. As she watched and listened, she would again become relaxed, her focus intent on the sound of Warren's voice and the strumming of the strings. In this manner, the three of them spent the better part of the evening, until eventually the infant dozed off in James's

arms. Only in sleep, said James, did her seizures finally abate. They then returned the infant to the care of the nurses and went their separate ways, for the end of the semester was fast approaching and deadlines were accumulating. In particular, said James, there'd been the paper on the Peruvian novella.

He did not return to the Children's Hospital until after Warren's accident. The nurses, who were well acquainted with death, were nevertheless genuine in their expressions of compassion at the news of Warren's passing. So evident must his grief have been, said James, that they'd encouraged him to wait before he volunteered again. But James was adamant that the infants should not be deprived of companionship. To deny the infants what comfort he could provide, said James, would only compound the tragedy of Warren's death.

At first the nurses were reluctant. But there was an unusual number of infants in the nursery that week, the nurses unable to provide them with the individual attention they deserved. All the more reason, said James, that he should do his part. He asked about the infant for whom Warren had played his mandola. Was she in need of his attention? he asked, and the nurses said she was no longer in the ward. What had happened to her, asked James. Had she been transferred or discharged, he asked, but the nurses were not at liberty to say. There were others in need of his attention, they said. Start with this one, they said, and they placed in his arms a plump infant who appeared healthy in every respect. The infant, who was alert, looked back at him with an expression of anticipation, and James realized he'd not attended seminar for several weeks. Always, said James, had he relied on the seminar content in his interactions with the infants, the only exception being his previous visit, when Warren had performed his song. Though Warren's mandola was now in his possession, he'd not thought

to bring it with him. He could still sing for the infant, he thought. He tried to remember the tune Warren had sung several weeks before. He'd since remembered how it went, said James, but at the time the melody had eluded him. The song had no words, said James. He stood there, unsure how to proceed. The infant in his arms grew increasingly unsettled and began to squirm. He felt warmth emanating from the infant's rump, and breathed in an unwholesome odour. He pressed the button to summon the nurses, but no one heeded his call. He found the soiled infant repugnant and did not know what to do. The infant's squirming intensified, said James; its whines crescendoed into wails. He bounced the infant in his arms but to no effect. He looked through the glass walls at the adjoining rooms, which were full of infants in incubators and cribs. He listened intently, and along with the sounds of the infant he held there were innumerable whimpers, murmurs and moans. The sadness of the nursery impressed itself upon him in a way it never had with Warren at his side. They'd come to the nursery to provide comfort and hope, to introduce the infants to the Cyclopean world view before their intellects were fully formed. But now Warren was dead, and James did not know what to do. He found an empty crib and lay the screaming infant down, he said, and he left the hospital for good.

In retrospect, he wished he'd invited me to join him and Warren in volunteering. I would have been able stay the course, he said, after Warren's accident, for I'd never been as close to Warren as he had been. The infants could have used me, he said. I could have been there for them when he and Warren could not. But I'd been so committed to my studies, said James, and he could not fault me for this. So much had happened since then. It was good that I'd finally come to Montreal, he said, so that we could catch up.