

Fasting to a Comfortable Death

by gerard varni

He reached his decision just as the plane entered a pocket of turbulence. The moderate buffeting jiggled the flesh of his stomach, a common if uncomfortable occurrence, which he attempted to remedy by clearing his throat and tugging his shirt outward so that the involuntary mambo of his breasts (*mammaries*, he called them) would not be noticeable beneath the fabric. Booze sloshed over the rim of the annoyingly small airline cup, producing a stain on the thigh of his pants that resembled, well, Madagascar.

Each day of his life, it seemed, he trudged from one battlefield to the next only to encounter the same two combatants: compromise and capitulation. To this point, he had been compromise's staunchest ally. But he was ready to cede his loyalty. And this decision, the ultimate manifestation of his will, was just the thing to prove it.

The act would be slow and dignified, even peaceful. That way, there would be ample time for meditation, for examining the measure of his devotion to a life he no longer desired. After all, he was no wavering suicide, no waffler whose rash embrace of violence simply masked an appalling cowardice. There would be no bullets, no pills, no rope. No indiscriminate flashing of life's terrible and tender moments. No. His would be a sweet and gentle passage, a mere languorous forgetting. Leaning forward gingerly in his seat, he stowed the tray table, closed his eyes, slurped the remainder of his vodka tonic and crushed the ice between his teeth. Douglas J. Klug, Doug Klug, and yes the names rhymed, had resolved to gradually discontinue all nourishment and hydration. He would fast to death.

He'd done it before. Not the dying, but the fasting. Under a doctor's supervision, he'd fasted in order to reduce his considerable

weight and balance the out-of-kilter composition of his blood, with its elevated fats and sugars and pressures. He'd consented when his doctor, Marmelzot, assured him that morbid obesity -- a grim euphemism appended to the unequivocal *fat ass* -- had dreadful pathological consequences. Cardiovascular disease, of course, but was Doug prepared for the constellation of other gruesome maladies? Allergies, degenerative and painfully inflammatory illnesses of the joints, glaucoma, malfunction of the kidneys, liver disease, tension and migraine headaches, skin diseases? Not to mention the attendant social isolation and spiritual malaise.

No way at all to live, so we're going to vanquish those toxins, Mr. Klug, said Marmelzot. A skillful scientific fast is precisely the course I recommend. As your doctor, I assure you it's just the thing. Stimulate a bit of autolysis, just enough to burn all the old damaged cells and diseased tissues.

Auto what?

Lysis, Mr. Klug, *autolysis*, Marmelzot chirped, devoting a full second to each of the four syllables. He was the physician who came with the HMO, which came with the insurance plan, which was part of Doug Klug's remuneration package at BadDog-NoBone Advertising. Marmelzot hove in close and Doug, helplessly supine and squirming atop the crinkly sanitary table cover, had a keen view of the doctor's face. The tiny pocks and divots bore a smoky bluish hue, as if they'd been tattooed there.

The body is brilliant, Mr. Klug. It will live on its own stored substance, autolyze. Put simply, it will self-digest all of the impure materials and metabolic wastes -- all of the fat deposits and abscesses, the bumps and protuberances, the calluses, neoplasms and other morbid accumulations. You will be rejuvenated in both mind and spirit, for when the body fasts, the soul feasts. Trust me.

So for the next 10 days, Doug ingested nothing but juices -- pulpless fresh fruit and vegetable concoctions, with the occasional alkalizing vegetable broth tossed in for biochemical balance. And indeed the weight began to decamp. By the end of the first full week

he was 17 pounds lighter, descending from the high-280s to the mid-270s.

But there were difficulties. He hadn't experienced the euphoria Marmelzot had promised. His soul was not feasting. Rather, he suffered headaches and dizzy spells. He had horribly violent dreams that seemed to last all night. As a result, he was uniformly fatigued and irritable. At work, his boss literally herded Doug into a supply closet and asked whether he had suffered some trauma or emotional crisis.

Small spots erupted on his skin, the result, according to Marmelzot, of bodily poisons bubbling to the surface and bursting free. It was a *good* thing, he counseled. But the worst consequence - the symptom that ultimately caused Doug to reject the fast and the unctuous Marmelzot -- was the hideous transformation of his tongue. Like some kind of organic Chia Pet, it developed a thick yellow fur coating. Despite vigilant scraping it would grow back even denser, until it felt like the stubby tail of a terrier wagging in his mouth. And of course there were odors.

But that was four years ago, when he was still jousting under the colors of Compromise. And the thing Doug recalled most vividly about his fasting experience, aside from the hirsute tongue, was that he hadn't craved food. The actual cessation of nourishment was not a problem. It was only the constellation of revolting side effects that made him stop. Now he would welcome the physical decay, the unpleasant odors and eruptions, as the insignia of a crusade to slough the skin of his miserable life.

These, then, were the facts. Doug Klug, single, 31 years old, 5 feet 9 inches tall, weighing 373 pounds, employed as an assistant account executive, perched forward in his broken airline seat, empty plastic drink cup in hand, awaiting final touchdown, at which time he would disembark and initiate preparations for the second and final fast of his life.

The precipitating incident -- the horror show on the plane -- wasn't unique. It was no more or less humiliating than the many other times in his life when his weight had foisted him upon a

sagging center stage. But the accumulation of these events -- the sheer number of times he'd been taunted, leered at, or simply broken something in public -- had become suffocating. The camel, poor damn put-upon beast, could bear no more straw.

The commotion had begun the instant he stumbled from the jet way onto the aircraft, tripping over something he couldn't see and lurching into the arms of an unsuspecting stewardess. He apologized, knowing there would be bruises, and proceeded up the impossibly narrow aisle, briefcase in one hand, jacket wedged in the other.

He walked crablike, as if negotiating a beam across a deep gorge. The briefcase in his lead hand repeatedly thumped the shoulders of seated passengers, while the unfurled jacket in his trailing hand dragged over seats and tousled the hair of those who didn't duck. He had a window seat, of course, which required two people, one a thin man wearing a rumpled linen suit, to stand and move into the aisle in order for Doug to acquire his seat.

Reaching up to stash his briefcase, Doug was acutely aware of the heat. His cheeks and forehead were pink with exertion, wet, and his face looked like a boiled tomato. There were visible half-moons of perspiration on his shirt beneath his breasts. Farther down, in the area of his navel, there was a moist circle. And beneath his belly -- which overlapped his belt considerably -- he knew there was another stain, a wider half-moon, although it wasn't visible. He knew this because it happened all the time. He also knew that when he removed his shirt and hung it up the sweat stains would reveal the grotesque image of a smiling face. The Shroud of Tubby, he called it.

He looked around, people were staring. He wedged himself into the seat.

'It's hot in here. Isn't it hot in here?' he said, turning to the thin man in the rumpled suit.

'Sure is,' the man replied.

And in truth it was warm. But Doug looked like he'd just ambled out of a Turkish bath. A rivulet of perspiration sang down his cheek from a wellspring hidden in his sideburn.

The other passenger in his row, the guy in the aisle seat, had a face like a coconut. His parched brownish skin was thick and creased with deep vertical striations. Too much sun, thought Doug, melanoma waiting to happen. Still, he would have gladly traded maladies.

As the flight attendants began slamming overhead bins, Doug wiggled and groped for his seatbelt. He managed to wrestle both halves out from under his thighs but realized the buckling itself would be an unattainable objective. The halves looked like two tiny climbers on opposite sides of Mt. Everest.

He began to struggle, failing in his first attempt. He yanked on the buckle, taking out all the slack there was to be had.

'Jeez,' he chortled, 'Who was sittin' here, Karen Carpenter?'

He was under horrible duress.

He leaned back, inhaled deeply and strained to bridge the ample gap. The color in his face mutated from pink to red and got darker as the belt and the buckle crept closer together. He increased his exertion, grunting audibly. And he almost had it, he had almost achieved that glorious *click*, when the unthinkable happened. Doug broke wind.

It was a loud, staccato burst. The thin man and coconut face pretended not to notice. Immediately, Doug ceased his efforts and feigned a coughing jag, hoping to divert attention from his inopportune flatulence. But, as they say, you can't unring a bell. The coconut man's hand shot out. Doug thought he was going for the barf bag, but he only grabbed a magazine and began flipping through it nervously even though it was upside down.

The plane was being pushed back now. Doug was desperate. With feet set firmly against the floor, he leaned back hard against the seat for a final try. He strained mightily. But he was one luckless bastard. Not only was this ultimate attempt fruitless, but it was also punctuated with a loud SNAP! He'd ruptured some vital part in the seat, which flew back forcefully against the legs of the woman behind him. She squealed, though more out of fright than pain, Doug thought.

'Aw, shit!' Doug groaned. He was practically supine, staring at the ceiling, arms and legs flailing helplessly like a big bug.

There were giggles from the back of the plane. A little girl across the aisle whispered to her mother, 'Look, mommy, the fat man broke his chair!' The mother, clearly embarrassed, pretended not to hear, so the kid shouted, 'Mommy, I said the fat man broke his chair!' Then there was laughter, and soon genuine plane-wide hubbub.

The flight attendants prowled the aisle checking seat backs and tray tables. The woman behind Doug fought desperately to press him forward, but his limbs were still fluttering ineffectually, working against her efforts.

Suddenly, the thin man took hold of Doug's arm and tugged, managing to rock him into an upright position just as a flight attendant walked by.

'Excuse me, miss,' mumbled Doug, 'There seems to be a problem with my seat.'

'Well, see what you can do, sir' she said indifferently. 'I'll be back in a minute. But we can't take off with a passenger in a broken seat. FAA rules.'

There were agitated groans all around. The little girl across the aisle had given up prodding her mother for a reaction and began a sing-songy refrain of *the fat man broke his chair* to the irksome tune of Na-NaN-NaN-NaN, before her mother leaned down and delivered a frantic 'Shh!'

For a moment it appeared as though Doug had begun to cry. But it was only a globule of sweat rolling down his cheek. The rumpled thin man told Doug to stuff his jacket between the broken seat and the bulkhead and to lean forward slightly. This way the seat closely approximated the full-and-upright position. Then, Doug's benefactor tilted his own seat back a notch and had coconut face do the same, so all three seats lined up. Doug took the seatbelt halves and snaked them under the overhang of his belly, creating the illusion of buckledness.

The flight attendant came back, looked the situation over, said everything seemed fine. 'It's okay now,' Doug muttered. 'I think I was just pushing the wrong button.'

He was noticeably out-of-breath, his wet face a canvass of distress; but the flight attendant simply nodded and moved on.

Somewhere over the Heartland, Doug ordered a vodka and soda. In fact, he asked for three of the miniature booze bottles. He turned to the thin man. 'Thanks for your help back there,' he whispered. 'Thought we were fucked for a second.'

'No problem,' the man replied, seemingly uninterested in carrying the conversation any further.

Doug leaned awkwardly forward, stomach resting atop his knees, keeping his weight off the jury-rigged seat. It was in this position, after twenty minutes and two of the tiny vodkas, that he reached his decision to fast. He laughed to himself, eyes closed, shaking his head and exhaling forcefully through his nostrils. It was a grim irony, a fatso doing himself in by not eating, but an irony nonetheless. And there's humor in irony, he thought, yes? Or was it the other way around?

For ten years, ever since the fire that swallowed up his childhood home, ingesting both his parents and his dog, Moxley, Doug had lived in the fissures between grief and work and the awful verity of his physical expansion. There was nothing, and no one, outside this triangle. He had simply grown weary of his life's geometry.

Outside the terminal, a dishwater sky concealed the tepid afternoon sun. Herds of taxis and shuttles wheeled around in peristaltic fits -- tires squealing, horns blaring -- belching noxious fumes that swirled and muffled the whistle blasts of agitated traffic cops. Doug ambled toward the parking structure, perspiring freely but not caring, still winded, gulping oxygen as if he were at altitude or sucking air through dirty gauze. He had a moonish face, which is to say round and pale and utterly featureless from a distance. Jaw line, cheekbones, all distinguishing physiognomy really, rendered indiscernible beneath the burden of flesh.

When he reached his car, an old brown civic mummified by layers of dust and grime, Doug threw his briefcase and jacket onto the front seat, plopped down behind the wheel, drew in an enormous breath and exhaled forcefully. He loved being in his car. It was a hallowed chamber; in fact the holiest place in his life. He would spend hours driving aimlessly around town listening to talk radio, slurping big gulps through triple straws, a torn-open bag of extra-cheesy Cheetos wedged between his thighs. And when the callers to the talk radio shows annoyed him, he'd punch off the power and pray. He thought of it as prayer, anyway, his lengthy conversations with God, his dead parents, even his old dog Moxley. He'd tell them about his life, lamenting his job, his weight, his prospects. He'd ask God to maybe help him lose a little weight, perhaps strike him with a lightning bolt of will power; told his parents he missed them, and that he didn't blame them for the sorry way he'd turned out. And often he'd chat with Moxley as if the dead mutt were a passenger strapped in right beside, relating tales of malediction and the dreariness of being Doug. All the harangues he slung poor Moxley's way.

'Hey Mox, here's a good one. I can't put my fucking shoes on anymore. Even when I'm sitting down, I can't get at my feet for my damn belly. Tried for ten minutes this morning, rolling around on the floor thrashing and cursing until I thought the old ticker was gonna blow. Finally just stood up, jammed my feet into 'em, even though they were still tied, and kicked like hell at the floorboard until my heels finally sunk in the back.'

The only drawback to spending so much time in his car was the need for regular realignment and tire rotation, what with the sagging left side of the vehicle being sorely taxed. Doug considered these expenses offerings, like tossing an envelope into the basket each Sunday at church.

From the airport Doug drove to the University library, looked up passive euthanasia, mulled over the myriad offerings before settling on *The Natural Death Handbook* and a religious treatise from the Terapantha order, part of the Jaina Digambara community from

India. cursory examinations of both books confirmed what he had hoped: fasting was a slow, dignified and painless way to die. Another advantage, according to the *Handbook*, was that fasting peacefully to death -- unlike active methods involving pills, guns and ropes -- allowed for second thoughts. Doug hadn't considered this, but he was certain there would be no second thoughts. He'd done all the thinking there was to do, told God, his parents and Moxley of his plans. Second thoughts were for people who hadn't thought things through in the first place.

By the time he reached his apartment, it was dusk. The sun, having renounced the day, squatted oblong on the horizon, a wounded eye swathed in red-stained cloud strips. Doug gathered his books, the briefcase, left the jacket in the car and noted the sunset as he walked toward his building. He wondered how many more of those he'd see? And then he determined the answer was none. The windows of his apartment faced east.

He ascended the single flight of stairs, fumbled with the key in the lock, distracted as always by his throbbing heart and the staccato cadence of his breath. Inside, he let the briefcase fall to the carpet, kicked it into a corner, then snapped on the light and lurched toward the couch, falling onto his back, his head propped against the well-worn armrest. The small apartment was strewn with the detritus of an overfed bachelor: socks and sweatshirt on the floor, a triple-XL bathrobe thrown over a chair, crumpled fast food bags, spent ketchup packets, crushed soda cans and crusty dishes on the card table along with spent pints of Chunky Monkey and Cherry Garcia, and beneath the table desiccated Cheetos and crumbs too large for transport by the resident population of ants.

Tomorrow was cleaning day he told himself. Everything would be evicted -- food, dirty clothes, all the squalid evidence of his existence. Tossed right into the dumpster that sat below his second-story bedroom window. Now, though, it was time to read. He picked up the *Natural Death Handbook*, read the introduction, which argued against active euthanasia on the basis of its 'slippery slope danger.' It didn't say what horrible danger awaited at the bottom of

the slope, but Doug didn't care, he moved on to the advantages of passive euthanasia, particularly death by fasting.

There were stories told by the partners of those who had peacefully fasted to death. Mostly, they were the spouses or lovers of people who had contracted hideous untreatable diseases like cancer, AIDS, cerebral palsy and the one named after Lou Gehrig. They used words like *dignity* and *serenity*, and spoke in weepy (Doug's interpretation) reverential tones of discovering essential spiritual truths in the final moments. One man recounted the vivid experience of attending his wife, who had been scorched by cancer, in her final moments, swearing that he had witnessed her pneuma (which Doug took to mean *soul*) as it left her body, all brilliant and wispy and shot through with Jesus-is-a-comin' light.

Doug thought the stories were fine but not really for him because, after all, he had no partner and was about as close to believing in spiritual truth as he was to his ideal weight. He picked up the book about the religious sect from India. Here, he found what he wanted. Details. Just the essential unromanticized facts of doing the thing. What to eat at first, how to taper off, when to expect that final peaceful breath.

In chapter one, Doug learned that the ethic of voluntary death, even if one is in reasonable health, is perfectly acceptable, even desirable, in certain Indian religious sub-groups. A person who decides to fulfill his life's journey through a dignified yogic death should be celebrated. Like Dev Digambara, who withdrew from his worldly commitments and, with due acclamation, took a vow of terminal fast.

As he lay there on the couch, yawning, eyelids at half-mast, Doug took the same vow, or at least a close approximation: He whispered, I, Doug Klug, initiate myself into the vow of eternal, I mean terminal, fast. Starting tomorrow.

Then he continued reading about Dev's last days.

Dev Digambara, a member of the Terapantha order within the Jaina community in India, began by withdrawing from all of his worldly commitments. Doug considered this for a moment, decided

that his only worldly commitment was to his job, which he abhorred, so he made a mental note to call first thing in the morning and detach himself from the world of advertising. He couldn't very well cite physical debility and emotional despair as the reasons for his absence, so he settled upon the flu. A bad case, he'd tell them, temperature of 103, could hardly endure anything more than a smidgen of broth. Looked like a weeklong battle.

By the time he began the actual terminal fast, Dev had already reduced his food intake. As each day passed, he cut back on certain vegetables, milk, butter, yogurt, dried fruits. He gave up something every day, retaining only small portions of boiled vegetables and tea for his one meal of the day. Doug thought that carrots would be good for vegetable soup, and maybe hot water with lemon juice instead of tea, which he had never really liked.

Occasionally, Dev would fast all day long and break the fast with broth from a boiled vegetable. At week's end he reduced his fluid intake to nothing more than plain water. Then he set aside water on alternate fast days. Finally, he gave up water altogether. During his last days, he reclined with his body to one side. Apparently, there was no evidence of hunger pangs or pain of any sort. Doug was encouraged by this lack of physical suffering.

Remarkably, even when his internal organs began to deteriorate, Dev evinced no pain. Of course there was some coughing and general mild discomfort while attempting to sit upright, but doubtless that was owing to his frail frame. Doug was certain that even as he approached his last moments his frame would remain stout.

On the final day, Dev exhibited surprisingly acute consciousness and attention. Even as he closed his eyelids and breathed his last. It was a peaceful, reassuring death, far removed from the horrors of more hysterical alternatives.

It was all exactly as Doug hoped it would be. He flipped the book onto the table, stretched his jaws wide and yawned broadly, gulping air and producing a hissing noise. He rolled to his right, off the couch and onto the carpet, and with a fair amount of effort rose to

his knees. Then he braced himself on the coffee table and coerced himself into an upright position.

His bedroom revealed no fewer disharmonies than the rest of the place. There was an old wicker rocking chair, which he'd acquired years ago but didn't recall how. He no longer fit in it, so it had become something of a scarecrow, clothes hung and layered so thickly that its rocking chair identity had ceased to exist. His bed, queen-sized with sheets and covers thrown aside, resembled an excavation site. In its center was a cavity, a depression that had become progressively deeper over the years, like some windblown geologic chasm, the result of Doug's twin propensities to sleep in the same spot and to gradually, if inexorably, gain weight.

There was a time when he exalted in sleep, worshipped its uninterrupted hours of conscious immobility, the sweet forgetting and dreaming, the spectral allure. It was the physical realm he preferred over all others. Until the complications began, rooted of course in the accretion of flesh. Especially the flesh of his neck and throat, which when he reclined and began to relax would loosen up and block his airway. The resulting Richter-scale bouts of snoring were clamorous, but little more than annoying. It was the apnea that really frightened him, those times when he would stop breathing entirely, bolting awake stupefied and gasping for air as if he were underwater. And on the apnea mornings that followed there would be nausea and terrible headaches, followed by near-narcoleptic enervation in the afternoons. Now he dreaded sleep even more than the unbearable hours of daylight.

Hoping to be spared the dread turbulence of night breathing, but not really expecting it, Doug kicked off his still-laced shoes, fell into the pit of his bed and dragged the covers up to his chin. He dreams he is an athlete, tall and sinewy, with muscles so smooth and explicit they seem hewn from some exotic wood. And in the dream he is running -- arms thrusting, legs driving -- the furious in-suck of each breath fueling the symmetry of acceleration. Churning and breathing, he stretches for the tape, mouth agape anticipating the howl of victory. Churning and breathing. Then upright and gasping,

no longer dreaming but panicking, clawing at the blackness with one hand, tearing at his throat with the other, certain he must rip open a gash to let the air in. And then the flesh at the back of his throat stiffens, exposing the passageway and he ceases flailing, swigs the air like a greedy drunk.

Awake and still panting, oozing perspiration, he looked at the clock, which glowed 4:00 a.m. He rolled up from the chasm and out of the bed, queasy and with the seed of a headache already sprouting. 'Fuck,' he muttered, 'Fuck this all to hell.'

He picked up the empty laundry basket, went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. He propped the basket on a knee below the shelves, then reached in and swept out the contents. Packages of meat, a jar of pickles, mustard and ketchup, mayonnaise, a carton of milk, coffee, eggs, bricks of cheese, rolls of film, old Chinese food, everything went into the basket. Glass containers collided and shattered, coalescing liquid contents that leaked from the basket in great bloody drops. He moved to the pantry, plucked jars of peanut butter, soup, bags of potato chips, crackers, loaves of bread, spices, three, four cans of Cheez-wiz, an unopened bag of snickers candy bars, threw it all on top of the muck in the basket. When it was full, he maneuvered back to the bedroom, tore the screen from the window, looked down at the dumpster positioned perfectly below. He hoisted the seeping basket, its stink oddly pleasant, then tipped it, loosing the detritus of his miserable life into the night. He ran the circuit three more times, until there was nothing edible left in the apartment save the dark sodden trail that wound from kitchen to bedroom.

Exhausted, he stumbled to the couch quivering from anxiety and exertion, runnels of perspiration sang down his cheeks, back, chest. He eased down, reclined, waited for the shallow staccato rhythm of his breathing to subside. Then he slept without dreaming.

It was dark when his eyes fluttered open. He scoured his face with both hands, felt the prickly barbs of new beard, then remembered he hadn't called work. Not that it mattered much, but he'd do it in the morning, tell them his life had been disrupted by

some traumatic event. Suddenly, he realized he'd gone an entire day without eating or drinking. Sure, he'd been sleeping, and he was hungry now, but the bliss of having taken the first step was overwhelming. He felt his stomach rumbling but told himself it wasn't hunger, it was the autolysis kicking in. Chow down, self, he whispered, there's plenty of slop and not much time to choke it down. Soon he would emerge from the dank fissures, the triangle obliterated. And he would exist solely in the interstices between self-deliverance and immutable stillness.

He lifted himself off the couch and began searching for his car keys in the dark room. A silver shaft of street light sliced through the opening in the curtains, dividing the room in half. He stepped through the veil of light, blinking, as if pushing through would cause his body to evanesce, pass into an otherworldly realm. But there was only the Formica-topped kitchen table on the other side, the glint of his keys upon it. He scooped them up, struggled into the jacket he could no longer zipper, kicked into his tennis shoes and left. Two things do before consummating his fast to a comfortable death. Go to the store for some lemons, tea, and a few carrots to boil for soup. And have one last chat with his parents and Moxley. Oh, and the Lord, too.

Walking to his car, he paused, looked up into the clear night. A warm wind from the east had urged the clouds to disappear, laying bare the heavens for intimate examination. He stared at the new moon, at the clipped-toenail moon and the swarm of stars like countless ice-pick stabbings. And he remembered when he was young, eight or nine, and would clamber onto the rooftop of his house to sit and fret and regard this same moon. He was already half again as heavy as most of his classmates. And when he looked at the moon, he didn't think of it as a solid object, as a place where men could land and romp around in slow motion. Rather, it seemed to him an omission, a hole in the sky that led to some place bright and mysterious. Heaven, he assumed. And if fat people died when the moon was full, he reasoned, they would have no trouble passing through to God's side. But on nights when the moon was a mere

slice, he worried that only the thin ones would make it. And he cried sometimes, knowing he wasn't one of the thin ones. And he prayed that if he had to die (a long long long long time from now, he'd say) the moon would be fat and bright and full.

He turned left out of the apartment complex driveway and eased toward the stop sign at the highway. Once there, he paused, punched off the radio and groaned as he reached over to slam the dangling glove box shut. Then he glanced left, accelerated and turned his head toward the passenger seat to begin his monologue with Moxley.

He saw the two burning orbs, like celestial bodies, at the precise moment of impact. (They never registered as headlights.) Then, thunderclap and chaos and the rocket ship roar of gunning engines, cascading glass, twisting metal, his head lolling out the window, through it, then back in. He was rolling -- once, twice, he lost count -- then floating toward the ceiling, weightless. There was no pain, no physical sensation at all. Perhaps a dream, then. He was bursting from the fissures, luminous, hurtling skyward, glittering shards like howling stars tumbling all around him. And as he plunged through the turbid darkness the slight beginnings of a smile creased his pale round face as he imagined the moon, that slender laceration of new moon.

