

# Transubstantiation

By Stephen Woodworth

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Marcus squeezed the ball in his hand until his fingernails dug into its rubber surface, as if to pump every drop of blood in his body into the little plastic bag connected to his arm. A white-coated Red Cross matron with flat-topped granny glasses hurried over to the cot where he lay.

"Whoa! That's enough!" She pulled the needle from his arm and placed a square of gauze padding over the hole in his arm. "If you could hold that for me a moment . . ."

He placed his left hand over the gauze and lifted his right forearm.

"Ah, I knew you were a pro at this!" She sealed and labeled the bag, which now bulged with burgundy fluid. "Sure filled that one fast." Nudging his fingers off the gauze, she taped the pad to his arm. "Now, you go ahead and lie here for a few minutes--"

Marcus sat up and swung his legs off the cot. "I'm okay."

"Are you sure?" She quickened her steps to keep up with him as he stalked toward the exit. "You know, you shouldn't drive until the dizziness passes."

He smiled at her. "I'm fine, really."

"Well, here." She bustled over to a table and dug some items out of an ice chest and a paper grocery bag. "At least take these along to fortify you." She handed him a half-pint carton of orange juice and a little package of chocolate-chip cookies.

The thought of drinking orange juice again nauseated him, but he accepted the gifts graciously. "Thanks."

Once outside the clinic, he dropped the juice and cookies in the nearest trash can, then ripped the tape and gauze off his arm and added them to the garbage. There wasn't even a scab left on his skin.

He checked his watch: half past three. If traffic wasn't too bad on the Santa Monica, he could make it to the collection center downtown before they closed. That would make it four pints today.

He used a different name, of course, but the routine was the same -- the paperwork, the needle, the bag, the gauze. An hour later, Marcus found himself back on the street, chucking another helping of juice and cookies into a garbage can and thinking about dinner.

He'd developed a passion for corned beef sandwiches recently, so he made his way to a little Jewish deli he'd discovered off Fairfax, stopping at a newsstand on the way to pick up the most recent papers. It amused Marcus to sit among the sandwich shop's older patrons and eavesdrop on their kaffeeklatsch, which they spiced with a sprinkling of Yiddish. He relished the irony, for most people thought he was a Jew. But he wasn't. He had never been a Jew.

Pausing occasionally to take a bite of his sandwich, he scanned the pertinent sections of each of the newspapers he'd bought, generally skimming past the major headlines to survey the smaller, marginal articles. The *L.A. Times*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *National Enquirer*, the *Weekly World News*. He liked to pick up the *London Times* or *Le Monde*, too, when he could find them, but so few vendors carried them here in the States.

Nothing in the newspapers caught his eye, and he grew despondent. His appetite gone, he abandoned his half-eaten sandwich, tossed a tip on the table beside the rumpled papers, and shuffled back out onto the street.

Gray in the day's twilight, the boulevard mirrored his melancholy. The streetlights hadn't come on yet, and shadows blurred the features of buildings and faces. Perhaps that was why the young woman strolling past on the opposite sidewalk looked so much like Julia.

Marcus had long ago become accustomed to these cases of mistaken identity. He'd met so many people in his life that nearly everyone he saw resembled someone from his past. After all these years, he believed himself immune to such self-deceptions, but the acute sense of defeat and desolation he felt that evening left him vulnerable to the comforting allure of a familiar face -- particularly the face of his first wife.

Though his parked car was in the opposite direction, Marcus moved to parallel the young woman as she and her female companion made their way up the street. Hastening his stride to keep her in sight, he gazed with longing at the ringlets of black hair tied up on the back of her head, at the hands which fluttered like doves when she spoke, at the full lips which parted in a carefree laugh as she conversed with her friend. Each facial detail, each gesture so much like Julia's that, for an instant, Marcus succumbed to the fantasy that this girl was his love

reincarnated, her soul returned to him from the depths of Time's abyss.

Then her blond companion leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially in her ear, glancing in Marcus's direction. Before Marcus could turn away, the dark-haired woman peered across the street at him, rolled her eyes, and put a hand over her mouth as she and her friend exchanged looks of mock horror and giggled. The reaction shattered Marcus's illusion. She was only a callow American girl, barely out of her teens, who took him for some pathetic, aging lecher.

His face hot with humiliation, he turned and marched back to his car, muttering inaudible curses in Latin. Wallowing in an unwelcome tide of nostalgia, he drove around for more than an hour, vainly searching for a wine shop or liquor store that carried Cecubo. He finally settled for one of the better Chiantis and returned to his hotel room to sulk.

With the muffled roar of the planes at LAX in his ears, Marcus consoled himself as he slouched in his room's sole chair and sucked wine from the bottle. Another day or two as productive as this one, and he could move on. San Francisco next -- he hadn't been there in months. Then on to Seattle, Detroit, Chicago, New York, London, Paris. With any luck, he'd circle the globe again within a year.

He lifted the bottle to eye level and contemplated the dark dregs of the wine as they swirled inside the green glass. *For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.* He'd memorized that bit -- in eight different languages, no less. Sometimes he recited it to himself when he had trouble urinating in public restrooms.

That night, he had another version of the dream, its most awful incarnation yet.

The dying sun stretched from horizon to horizon in the sky above him, red and boiling in its final, furious glory. It had swallowed two of its children whole, and now it licked the Earth with tongues of flame. The crimson glare was brighter than the blast of a billion hydrogen bombs, yet he did not go blind. A sea of molten glass that had once been a beach engulfed him, its searing, viscous fluid a grotesque parody of the evaporated ocean. He clawed toward the sky with his arm, and beads of glowing glass dripped from his immortal flesh.

*Is this it?* he wanted to scream. *Are you coming back now?* But no sound emerged from his scalded throat. The atmosphere had dissipated eons ago.

Marcus writhed in his sheets and awoke, whimpering.

*Five billion years.* Two millennia are like the flap of a hummingbird's wings compared to such a span.

Even then, it wouldn't end. The sun would shrink and shut down, leaving him on a frozen black rock to watch and wait for every star in the sky to wink out. Only human arrogance made people believe the Universe would end with their fleeting existence. The true Apocalypse, he knew, would not come in the year 2000, nor even in the year 2,000,000; it lay instead across a vast, vacant desert of Time.

Though it was barely three a.m., Marcus clambered out of bed and groped his way to the bathroom. Flicking on the fluorescent lights, he bent over the basin and ran cold water over his face, which still burned from the silicate lava in his dream. He glared at his pallid reflection in the mirror. Here was the ultimate indignity -- to walk through eternity in a perpetual state of encroaching middle age. Kingdoms would crumble, galaxies would dim and disperse, but his balding crown and bloated paunch would remain just as they were, forever.

As soon as he'd shaved and dressed, Marcus drove directly from the hotel to a newsstand to pick up the morning editions of the daily papers. Even after all these years, he craved reassurance, needed further evidence that his efforts were not in vain. With only the dome light of his rented Cadillac to read by, he passed the hours until dawn hungrily searching every sheet of newsprint. He found what he was seeking on page three of the *Times's* Metro section:

*Shopkeeper, Shot Five Times, Survives*

*Medicine: Doctors call Ramon Torres's recovery remarkable.*

*By Maria Tanner, Times Staff Writer*

*Yesterday, he lay in a pool of his own blood with five bullets lodged in his torso. Today, he's sitting up in his hospital bed to receive a bouquet of flowers and a kiss from his wife Susan.*

*"Jesus pulled me through," affirms Ramon Torres of Gardena. Torres, 54, was shot five times in the chest during a gang-related holdup at the downtown liquor store he owns and operates. The doctors who attended him upon his arrival at Memorial Hospital gave the critically wounded man little chance of survival.*

*Nevertheless, Torres's condition began to stabilize immediately following a four-hour operation, during which surgeons removed the slugs from his body, sutured wounds in his lungs and stomach, and replaced the massive quantities of blood he'd lost before medical assistance arrived at the crime scene. . .*

Marcus removed the page containing the article, neatly folded it, and set it on the passenger seat beside him. The rest of the newspapers he stacked and carried to the nearest garbage can. With a renewed sense of purpose, he returned to his car and steered it toward the I-5 Southbound.

By leaving early, he beat most of the rush hour traffic and arrived at the UCI Medical Center in a little over an hour. If he moved quickly, he could visit most of Orange County's major hospitals that day.

The donations began as a form of penance. *For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins*, the King of the Jews had said. Marcus had hoped that, if he shed enough of his own blood to save the masses, perhaps he could expiate the sin that had doomed him to become a deathless vagrant.

It had seemed a trivial offense at the time. The Nazarene was nothing more than the leader of an obscure Jewish cult when they brought him into the hall of the Praetorium. Marcus and his centurions roared with laughter as they made sport of the impoverished prisoner's pretensions of being a King. The soldiers hung red draperies on his emaciated shoulders for an imperial cloak and shoved a reed in his right hand for a scepter.

"And no King should be without a crown," Marcus exclaimed, carrying a circlet of thorns to where two guards had pushed the prisoner to his knees. "Let this be your coronation, King of the Jews!"

As he set the mock crown on the Nazarene's head, the condemned man's bony hand seized Marcus's wrist with disconcerting strength and pressed the flesh of his palm onto the needle-sharp spines.

Marcus recoiled in pain and surprise and stared in shock at his hand, which had started to bleed. Rivulets of blood also dripped down the brow of the Nazarene, who regarded him with a pitying gaze. Enraged, Marcus raised his wounded hand and struck the prisoner's impudent face.

A hush fell over the crowd in the Praetorium. "Take this King away and crucify him," Marcus muttered to the guards.

Silent until then, the Nazarene suddenly spoke to him in perfect Latin. "I go now," he said, his voice grim, almost sad, "but you shall be waiting for me when I return."

The guards led him away. Deaf to the jeers of the soldiers around him, Marcus looked down at his hand, and saw the blood from the Nazarene's face mingle with his own -- a heavier crimson suffusing the thinner, paler plasma. He watched the merged fluid retreat into the puncture wounds in his palm, which sealed themselves and vanished without a trace.

Like stigmata in reverse, he thought, several centuries later. It took several centuries for the concept of "stigmata" to evolve, for the cult of that obscure Nazarene to conquer the Empire. As the parade of history passed before him, Marcus witnessed the death of his family, his nation, his language, and his gods. And he began to have the dream.

Though the landscape of the dream changed from age to age, its essence remained the same. In one scenario, he shuffled through villages littered with corpses whose white skin bulged with red buboes. In another, he wandered through a blasted cityscape whose only residents were silhouettes of ash. Each vision portrayed another version of the same fate: the human race had become extinct, leaving him to confront Eternity alone.

*Alone.*

He'd roamed the planet for nearly two thousand years, searching for some sort of reprieve from this ultimate desolation. He'd married a hundred wives, sired a thousand children, amassed enormous wealth, yet nothing offered him any promise of salvation.

When medical science revealed that a person could share his blood with his fellow humans, though, a new hope took shape in Marcus's mind. He considered how the Nazarene had recovered from a crucifixion in only three days, and recalled how his own hand had healed after his blood fused with that of the Jewish King.

What began as a form of penance soon became an obsession.

It was almost eight o'clock when Marcus returned to his hotel room that night. He notified the front desk that he intended to check out the following day, then called the airport and reserved a seat on an early flight to San Francisco.

Sighing as he hung up the phone, Marcus pulled the folded newspaper page from his coat pocket and reread the item he'd set aside that morning. He laid the article on the hotel room's desk, then opened his suitcase and took out a pair of scissors, a jar of rubber cement, and a large scrapbook.

Carefully clipping the piece from the surrounding copy, he pasted the article on the first blank page he came to in the scrapbook. With the latest addition to his collection secure in its place, he flipped back through the preceding pages and scanned the stories that covered them in a crazy-quilt patchwork of print. The headlines ranged in tenor from tepid to tabloid: "Girl's Leukemia in Sudden Remission"; "Car Crash Victim Emerges from Coma"; "Doctors Baffled by Hemophiliac's Vanishing HIV"; "142-Year-Old Man Alive and Well in Upstate New York."

Marcus stroked the articles' black-and-white photos with his fingertips, smiling wistfully at the faces of his future family. A family he could keep with him forever.

He would not face the Apocalypse alone.

