

The Upside-down World

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One hour before. . .

The apartment blocks opposite had been shedding bricks and tiles and air-conditioning units for several hours before finally one of them, with a tremendous roar and shudder, wrenched itself out of the ground and toppled downwards into the sky. Barrett crouched by the bedroom window and watched it tumbling slowly and endlessly into the blinding brightness until it disappeared from sight completely. The remaining three blocks in the phase would not last much longer, and his own would fall soon too. Any chance Leilani might have had of surviving, if either of them had ever had such a chance, was now gone. He wondered where she was now, and hoped it was somewhere better than this place.

Two hours before. . .

Barrett stumbled through the front door of his apartment, gasping for breath. He slumped against the sofa, which was resting on its front like an overturned statue. Gradually, he began to breathe more easily. It was like altitude sickness—or what he had read about altitude sickness—except that now, on the twenty-eighth floor, he was at a lower altitude than when he had been on the ground floor. Perhaps there was no altitude any more. Perhaps there was just less oxygen.

He stood up and walked carefully towards the bedroom, treading near the walls where the plaster was stronger. All around him were their ruined possessions—heaps of wreckage on the ceiling, remembering their original places on the floor in a sort of sad, surreal mirror image. The wide-screen television and home cinema system, scarcely

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a year old, were wrecked and useless now, their utilitarian undersides contrasting with the sleek matte black of their front panels and buttons. The glass-fronted display cabinet, containing the smashed remnants of souvenirs from the different countries he and Leilani had visited together, was listing at a wild angle, not designed to stand on its head. The curtains lay in piles by their rails, inert and useless, and the windows were shattered, but intact. The floor tiles above had started to bulge in the centre of the room. Everywhere there was a kind of spectral mist—in fact the dust released from the disturbance—which allowed Barrett to distance himself somewhat from this perverse tableau. The dust marked out the shafts of searing light that sliced into the room from the sky infinitely far below, and everything was under-lit and difficult to discern.

Barrett stepped over the high threshold of the living room onto the ceiling of the hallway. The bathroom was immediately to the left now—it had been on the right—and it was a hideous mess. Several gallons of water had flowed out of the plugs and toilet and mixed with endless lotions, perfumes, aftershaves, bleaches and powders to form a toxic-smelling reservoir that swirled slowly about, held back only by the eighteen inches of wall beneath the door. To the right, the kitchen was also partially flooded. The fridge had flattened the drinking glass cabinet and was oozing defrosted water and liquid food. The microwave and toaster hung from their plugs, high in the wall, still moving slowly like pendula, marking the countdown to some unknown fate.

He reached up to the door handle, which was now at head height and had to be turned upwards to be unlatched, and opened the bedroom door for the first time since the morning. Everything was as he had left it, five or six hours before. While the previous rooms had been disturbing in their perversity, in how they exhibited a comfortable life so easily capsized, the bedroom somehow disquieted him more. There was less inside this room, just the bed, a wardrobe, a dresser and an all-in-one desk and shelving unit with Barrett's computer; but now that everything was upturned and unsealed, the last vestiges of privacy that exist between a married couple had suddenly been cast away. There, for example, sitting on top of the upturned bed

in the storage space with the suitcases and ski clothing, were Leilani's diaries: enough volumes to cover their entire relationship and perhaps some time even before they had met. He had known of them, but not where she kept them, nor had he ever attempted to find them or look at them. He had been curious, of course, but in some implicit way understood that their privacy was maintained mutually, one for the other, and that now with nothing to prevent him looking, his responsibility was greater. Here, in a lockable drawer awry from its runners, was Barrett's pornography, now just so much magnetic tape and plastic casing without electricity or a computer to load it. His credit card statements had poured out of the upended wardrobe and covered the ceiling beside him. Her feminine medicine was visible in the bottom drawer of the wrecked dresser. There was his 'Leilani Box' of little trinkets and mementos associated with their relationship. Here were her photo albums that she had never shared with him . . . and so on it went. The room, in turning upside-down had turned them inside-out.

Except, she had gone away, and now he was left with things he would never have seen, had she still been here. At their most honest moment, they were not together.

Barrett was still exhausted from his short journey up to, and down from, ground level and so he sat on a pile of laundry and gazed out of the window across the communal gardens to the blocks opposite. Where could she have gone, really? he wondered. Nowhere. Nowhere is safe any more.

Five hours before. . . .

Barrett was gingerly making his way up the twenty-eight floors of emergency exit stairs to reach ground level. The stairwells were strongly built—there was no longer any risk of plunging a foot through thin plaster—but the sheer slopes of the ceilings were treacherous, slick with water from emptying tanks on lower floors. The block rumbled deeply, almost sub-aurally, as it found equilibrium with the reversed influence of gravity. Pipes and struts shrieked and groaned under new pressures, bricks and concrete structures ground against

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each other, supporting new loads above and below. The air was faintly acrid above the dank smell of the damp concrete, something like burning refuse. He saw some evidence of residents having moved about the building this side of what had happened, but not the people themselves. He came across a dog, and two cats, and innumerable cockroaches, all of them feasting on the contents of the scattered bins and emptying rubbish chutes.

It took Barrett less than half an hour to reach the ground floor lobby but he found it was a dead-end. The emergency exit stairs led to a doorway, tucked in a corner opposite the lifts. The lobby was stylishly designed with enormous glass panels that spanned from the floor to the ceiling of the expansive atrium. The ceiling was over fifteen feet below him. If he dropped down it would be difficult to get back up again; he could be marooned. There was no sign of the concierge, but his desk was still in its place, not smashed on the ceiling like the pot plants and junk mail bin. The large, marble-effect desk must have been built into the floor structure as it had not moved at all. It looked strangely normal, up above him, on the floor. Only the computer monitor was misplaced, twirling in mid-air on a single, tough lead. Despite the potential danger, Barrett dropped down into the lobby and approached the main entrance doors, which were impossibly high above him. Beyond were the gardens and swimming pool, but no ceilings to walk on, just the quiet, all-consuming sky.

The acrid smell was stronger here in the lobby and Barrett noticed a shimmer of heat across the gardens. He moved over to the lifts, one of which served the car park above him. For the first time he saw a small jet of black smoke at the bottom of the door seal, spewing constantly into the room and dissipating immediately. It was easy to guess that the car park was on fire, burning with little oxygen and producing toxic fumes. It was easy to guess the fate of those who had climbed towards the foundations of the building for safety.

Leilani could not have escaped here, thought Barrett. There is nowhere to go.

Twelve hours before. . .

Barrett and Leilani were asleep in their comfortable bedroom, sleep passing over them like waves. It was quiet, and dawn was breaking after a moonless night, but already something was happening. The bed covers, being of light fabric for the humid climate, registered it first, continuing to drift unnaturally after every movement of the couple beneath. Within an hour the clothes on the drying frame were hunched up angrily, and a pile of papers on Barrett's computer desk had started to concertina upwards. Birds outside the window flew more easily and people inside slept more soundly in the beginnings of weightlessness. The clouds disappeared from the sky creating a bright, fresh morning. In another hour, the water from Barrett's bedside glass had risen beyond the rim in a vast, bloated meniscus, and Leilani's cosmetics were hovering in mid-air. The arms and legs of the couple were held up from their bodies, as if suspended by infinitely delicate threads.

After several more hours there was a yield point, beyond which the objects with the greatest inertia finally left their positions. The wardrobe left the floor and scudded against the wall, waking Barrett, and the massive bed lurched towards the ceiling. Barrett dived to safety, but could not save his wife, Leilani. Within a few seconds she had been smothered, and within a minute she was being crushed by the weight of the bed, the suitcases, the ski clothes, the photo albums and the diaries. A horrifying cacophony echoed around the building as thousands of people and all their possessions landed on their ceilings. Barrett took the hand of his wife and, with agonising remorse, wondered whether he could have saved her, whether she could have escaped, but she was already gone, already lost to him. As the atmosphere leached away outside the window, unmasking the burning rays of the sun, he had less than a day to speculate.