

## ROBERT C. KNOX

### *THE FIVE A.M. INQUISITOR*

“Morning,” he said.

But I had watched the night forever. I was out of mornings. I was out of everything.

“Morning,” I echoed, doubtfully (suppressing a laugh: it would hurt), turning his greeting into a question.

“What?” he asked. “Do you have something against mornings?”

I glanced at a bedside window full of darkness.

“This is morning? It doesn’t look any different from the last eight or ten hours. . .”

A brief diagnostic glance; was the patient regressing? “What do you mean?”

“I mean the watches of the night are all the same. Dark, solitary, voiceless, indistinguishable one from the next.”

The gray-eyed resident considered his shoes. Had he foregone sleep himself and started his rounds at five thirty in the bleak a.m. for this?

“How are you today?” A different question; the only question.

“I hardly know.”

My reply was not very helpful to medical opinion, and we began the old game of prying, trying to tease the body into giving up its secrets. Was I eating? drinking? Not enough. Hardly anything.

“What’s wrong?”

“In a word? Nauseous.”

“I’m not really in favor in using drugs to counter nausea,” the resident confided, frankly. “We’re just masking a problem. I think maybe you should try to eat through it.”

Eat through it? I pondered the phrase. Like a rodent? An insect?

But how could I eat when I could barely tolerate liquids. Forcing

down a few drops, a few halting sips, after a sustained, conscious effort... Is the citadel still standing? Has the shaking stopped? All right, then, take a few more sips, even though everything tastes like paint remover. *Eat through it?* Easy for you to say, I grumbled silently. It isn’t your cities that will fall, your fields and villages that will lie in ruins.

I shrugged—best I could do—and my five a.m. inquisitor blinked, one gray eye developing a little fit, a little rebellion of sleeplessness all its own. He looked at the clutter of items piled beside the bed; some books, a Walkman, the headset still resting on my lap.

“Music too,” he commented.

Too? Along with all my other resources? “I just listened to Brahms,” I confided. “The Third.”

It was a confession, but a complicated one; part challenge. “So sad,” I added, in case he hadn’t grasped the significance of this disclosure. “So incredibly sad.”

My inquisitor smiled, as if at some admission of weakness, and delivered a mild reproof. “Maybe you should be listening to more upbeat. Something lighter. Mozart—”

“Mozart?” I could not believe my ears. “Mozart is not light.”

“A concerto,” he continued, ignoring me. “Something—happier.”

Let me tell you, I thought, about the clarinet concerto. Yes, I added silently, continuing this satisfying rumination, there is happiness and delight—even light-heartedness—to be found in music. But do you not hear the deeper song? I opened my mouth to speak this last thought aloud, but my inquisitor had departed.

That day I took up a regime of liquids. I had ginger ale for breakfast, ginger ale for lunch, ginger ale for dinner. In the morning—the conventional daylight morning, when the sun had climbed above the neighboring building and filled my window with spattered urban light—the blue-suited food staff brought me a large tray loaded with plastic-covered comestibles. I could not look away; the tray paralyzed me, like the totem of some hostile deity. It contained oatmeal, juice, a ceramic mug of once heated water intended for tea, a small bowl of a greenish liquid that was sweating noxiously beneath its clear plastic covering—something clenched in my stomach at the smell—and several bulkier plastic-wrapped items. I could not bring myself to taste anything, and the untouched idol was still sucking the air out of the room when the resident board of examiners made its collective appearance, gathered

in a circle around my bed as if for a levitation, and delivered a judgment.

“We want you to eat,” said the spokesman, a red-toned fleshy man with a serious face, gentle manner and slow, Plains State style of address (one imagined solid earth, big sky). “But if it’s difficult”—I nodded—“just take a few bites of something. Anything. It’s a start.”

I nodded without enthusiasm.

The plain-spoken leader of the pack turned his gaze on the heap of neglected offerings on the tray. “So what’s with the lumberjack breakfast?” he asked.

Good question, I thought. Took the words right out of my mouth. (If only we could put some food in it.)

“I didn’t ask for any of that stuff,” I said. “The problem is I can’t think of anything I can even imagine eating...” A weird sensation came over me. “Except maybe”—I shrugged—“a pickle.”

The circle of residents looked at me as if I were deranged.

Ginger ale for breakfast; ginger ale for lunch. Here a sip, there a sip. Even the few bites of the team’s recommendation exceeded my powers. The residents wanted to get me going, to launch me on the flight path to recovery. I wanted to survive. The regime wobbled; I felt it shudder. It held by a thread. I did not want to be underneath when it toppled over.

Please, I begged, no violence. I implored invisible captors with fear in my eyes. A kind of dreary, timeless stalemate ensued; like a hostage event on a cop show, with lots of commercials.

The nurses warned me: drink more liquid or we will have no choice but to bind you once more on a cross of tubes. I stared past their warnings, already bound in a land of no speaking. I attended not to well-meaning, though somewhat smirksome night nurse Naomi, transfixed by a vision (invisible to others) of the fierce and horrible belly-god Nausee. Why have you beset me? I whimpered. Why *me*? What do you want? Why do you linger, unsated by my suffering, hour after hour? I begged for relief. I begged for a spell of expulsion: get thee hence, demon.

Some time around midnight, yet another endless night, Nurse Naomi held a hypo high in her hand. Heedless of the teachings of the five a.m. inquisitor, Nurse Naomi spelled relief in her own way.

Later in that long black night of the body, the charcoal executioner appeared in his surgical garb, his head wrapped for battle, his tunic opened across the chest, his face oddly smudged as if he had been trying to start a fire by blowing on ashes. He said his name—Doctor Something—but I missed it. I had never seen this apparition before. He had a distinct, slightly bullying (exhausted, maybe; battle weary) aura; coolly intimidating. With a glance at my prone dysfunctional form, Dr. Something reached for the plastic envelope that dripped the waters of life through the I.V. and shook it, disdainfully. He muttered some figures, looked at me warningly, and shook his head. “That’s not enough to sustain life,” he pronounced, looking on me as if I were the unsatisfactory answer to a long and complicated equation.

“You are in the hands of an angry god,” he—or perhaps his manner—said to me. “Without our benevolent intervention—without *mine*—your transitory existence will come to an end. You will dry up like a withered leaf and blow away with the first cold breeze of winter.”

How do you plead? his black eyes queried.

It’s bad enough, your honor (I tried to reply, though the word refused to be spoken), to be diagnosed with a life-threatening disease, but imagine the insult of waking from surgery to find yourself trapped in the colicky body of a fifty year-old infant. Give me a better body, and I’ll give you a better recovery.

“—milligrams,” the charcoal executioner repeated, shaking the bag. “That’s about two Cokes.”

“I would like to drink those Cokes, doctor,” I replied, speech forming at last, “but I can’t.”

“Okay. I’ll give you this bag, and maybe one more...But after that. . .”

After that I am attacked by terrorists. They sneak up through my dreams, climbing toward my mouth, unconcerned that sleep has been banned by constitutional decree. I try to sleep, going so far as to play the “relaxation tape” that worked so well before surgery. “Find a comfortable position,” the tape begins—okay, so much for erstwhile good advice: no such thing as a comfortable position. The bed goes up and down all night, spreading the stress around the sore spots. The place that holds me together becomes