

George Marshall

Pay attention:

You could learn something here.

George Marshall was not a smart man.

If George Marshall were an animal, he'd be a gazelle, though not by choice—not like he'd ever voice his opinion. As the other gazelles would flee the watering hole after the first roar of the Savannah King was heard on the wind, George Marshall would wait around, gently lapping at the clear water until he was suddenly disemboweled. He would look down at his glistening innards, his button eyes blinking, and he would wonder why his intestines were pink and red instead of, say, yellow and orange, and why they flailed like dying snakes. A flame would suddenly ignite in his mind, but would be extinguished just as quickly, like the sudden gust of wind that keeps you from smoking that last cigarette.

His stupidity would lead him to his death. Stupidity always seems to lead to death. It seems inappropriate to point this out now, rather than later... but believe the author when he says you would have seen it coming from a mile away. It's better to get it out there now and let you mull it over a while. Besides, I'm sure you hate surprises—I know I do. I was surprised myself, but with a little bit of embellishment, I've managed to make it more obvious.

The circumstances of George Marshall's death are... odd, to say the very least. It is not a conventional way to die, but there is a certain beauty in it. By being a stupid, gullible person, George Marshall dies in a way that non-stupid, non-gullible people may easily avoid, as a gazelle can avoid a lion by simply running, but at the same time, his actions denote change... and despite

dying, he grows up. He grows up in a way I never would have expected. I explained the situation to my successor, who shrugged and said this:

“At least the puppet died without his strings.”

I’m glad he said that. It made me proud. It made me happy to have created George Marshall because in the end, I felt like everything had changed because of him.

Because a single puppet decided to pull his own strings, the puppets of the world became real people.

“I’m leaving you, George. This time, it’s for good.”

George Marshall sat down on the wooden chair in the small foyer, watching his wife rummage through her bags. Her normally pale cheeks were red, and no amount of blush could keep that rosy color from peeking through. With her short stature and round figure, and the way she fussed about, she resembled a frustrated tomato.

“I don’t think I can take it anymore. And I don’t think you can support me any longer,” his wife said, zipping up the last bag and setting it on top of her pink suitcase, which bulged and shook as if ready to explode. The sleeve to a tattered blue sweater was poking out like a flower from the dirt.

“Do you really need all of these clothes?” George asked, scratching his head. His hair was thinning on top, and what was left felt wiry on his fingertips.

“Yes, *George*. Unlike you, I actually wear more than a cardigan and a pair of slacks around. Besides, I’m *leaving* you. That means I’m not coming back. I’m not going to give you the satisfaction of throwing my beautiful clothes out. You spent good money on them.”

“It looks like you packed a Goodwill into your suitcase, Miriam.”

“Oh, stop being *yourself*, George. I swear, you’ll never change. I’m leaving you. I’m fed up with you. Now, grab that suitcase and bring it out to the car, will you?” She threw open the door and walked outside, purse in hand.

He sat up, grabbing the time bomb of a suitcase with both hands and lifting it with a mighty grunt. His arms burned, his eyes bulged, and his chest heaved. After a few measly seconds, his arms shaking from the weight, his hold gave way and the suitcase clattered back on its metal feet.

“George! Be careful! You’ll put another hole in the tile. I swear, I tell you that every time.”

With another grunt, George heaved on the suitcase, swinging his body forward. He looked like a gorilla performing vaudeville—minus the hat—the giant suitcase swinging in an arc, its feet scraping the floor as it went up, and again as it came back down. This motion continued out to the car, Miriam at his back, nagging the whole way.

“You’re going to scrape up the floor! You’re damaging my suitcase! Watch the flowers! Don’t hit the car door, George, I just had it waxed.”

George shook his head. Miriam was a woman that was independent in every way, but still depended on others to do her dirty work. She had a forceful personality, which is what attracted George in the first place, but in the thirty years they had been married those alluring traits had begun to resemble old tubes of paint. Once vivid and vibrant, coloring the canvas with beautiful pictures, the tubes were now rusted and could only be mixed together to form a muddy brown.

“Not in the backseat, George! Put it in the trunk! You’re going to scuff the leather.”

A muddy, *muddy* brown.

“I’m leaving you, George. I’m deeply sorry for this.”

It was early December, some fifteen years previous, I think. There was a light blanket of snow on the ground, tucking in the earth for its long sleep until the following spring, when it would arise with the same old face, but a completely new and improved attitude, like the sudden appearance of a friend’s twin brother, who’s nicer and more fun to be around than the original.

George was clutching a small, pink suitcase. It was small in relation to the bags he had already carried out, which were stuffed with all sorts of trinkets and clothing. It was everything Miriam owned, meaning it was everything George owned. He still had, then, thick and full head of hair. It peeked out from beneath his fedora, which matched the fabric on the chair in the foyer.

“Miriam…” George started.

“I’m not going to hear it, George. We’ve been through this *twice*. I’m tired of making idle threats. I’m tired of hoping you’ll grow up and assume your role as my husband.”

“Miriam, what is this?”

Miriam sighed. She was wearing her church dress, a somber brown outfit that hugged her curves tightly, including the ones George liked to pretend she didn’t have. She was getting on in years, and certain areas of her body were becoming disproportionate. George wasn’t one to talk, though: he had a gut all his own.

“Pay attention, George. I’m going to tell you something,” Miriam said, in a voice that was both hers and not hers. “I’m changing. I’m getting old. The world is changing. The world is getting old. You, George, are the same person you were twenty years ago, when we first met.

“I can’t take it anymore. Unless something changes, George, I’m not coming back.”

She had come back, though. George and I both knew that much. You also know that much. She was the type of person that always came back, no matter what she did. I’ve always

thought that who we are, as people, was something static: something that would never change. I've learned otherwise.

An hour later, Miriam was gone, again, and George Marshall was sitting in the regal chair in the center of the living room, a television remote in one hand and a bracelet in the other. The chair was flower-print with large brown legs and arms that made it look more like a throne than anything else. The bracelet belonged to Miriam; she had left it on the front table, in the foyer, when she had left. It was a diamond-studded bracelet, a gift George had given her for their first anniversary, all those years ago. The living room was spacious, set out exactly as Miriam had wanted: the television against one wall, with its shelving stocked with books, VHS movies, and trinkets she had picked up from various antique stores in the area: a cross here, a leprechaun statuette there, and plastic flowers everywhere. The chair sat in the center of the room, with the matching davenport and loveseat on either side, facing each other. There was a single coffee table, its wood as polished and reflective as the chair's; a single bowl of rocks, with a lit candle in the middle, decorated its top. Against the far wall, near the doorway to the foyer, were bookshelves loaded with romantic mysteries, with such titles as The Jack-Thief of Hearts and Manslaughter, She Wrote, and reference books on arts and crafts, like The Art of Paper and Quilt Design: 1, 2, 3!

George Marshall looked at the bracelet, letting his fingers run over it and feel its varying grooves and ridges; there was a rerun of Seinfeld on the television; it was one of my favorite episodes, the one where a co-worker of Elaine's thinks her name is Suzie. Elaine decides to play the part of author, fabricating a story about Suzie and making her real. Elaine's creation, the imaginary Suzie, goes on to become incredibly successful, even to the point of stealing the

promotion Elaine wishes to have. In the end, Elaine kills her off. It's one of those episodes that sticks with you. I know it's influenced me a lot.

George Marshall only got up once, to grab a snack of stale saltine crackers from the back of the cupboard in the kitchen. The kitchen was small, like one in a studio apartment; it was fridge, stove, sink, and little counter space. There were a few cupboards, but they were mostly empty, except for stale crackers and spices; shopping day was on Friday.

His mind was a cave fit for an allegory, but someone had stolen his flame long ago. As he sat in his chair, munching crackers, staring at the bracelet, his wife having just left him, he felt content, as he always did. Their sexual life was nonexistent. George rarely asked how her day had gone. He was just a body in the room, providing no stimulation to her, giving her nothing but material wealth for her to throw away. He didn't see anything wrong with the picture before him. It was as if nothing had even happened. Miriam was playing bridge, as she was on every Wednesday evening. George had just returned home from work, and he was patiently waiting for her to return, so they could eat a dinner in silence and maybe fall asleep in front of the television.

But they wouldn't. He hadn't. She wasn't. There was something wrong with the picture. The television's reception was fuzzy: there was snow on the screen. It'd need a whack to get it jump started again.

But until that point, George Marshall was alone. He didn't care that the picture was out-of-focus. It had *always* been out-of-focus; he had never experienced a life that was clear and crisp, its edges sharp and details vibrant.

He thought about work in the morning, what he should tell his coworkers if they asked about his day, momentarily forgetting they wouldn't. His wife had left him, yes, but things had

not changed. He was still George Marshall. He was still a man, he still had a home, and he was still following his same routine. The only thing missing was his wife.

He didn't miss her much. That much, we all know. He was not the kind of person to "miss" someone else, to truly care about another person's well-being. I hate to repeat myself, but George Marshall was like a gazelle: he was single-minded, with blinders blocking his peripheral vision of the world, and he didn't notice things. He couldn't tell you the color of his wife's favorite blouse, or the type of car the neighbors drove, or what the name of the Reverend at church was named. These details didn't matter to George Marshall. What mattered was getting from point A to point B. He wasn't even sure why. Hell, I'm not even sure why, and look at me: I'm the one telling you about him. You'd think I'd have some insight.

He didn't think about her, even though she was thinking of him. She was thinking about him, and wondering if he'd get along without her. She was worried because that's how she was. It was in her blood. She was filling the role of "concerned wife," and she was perfect for it.

The sunlight filtering through the windows was fading. George got up from his chair, turned off the television, and headed upstairs, turning off lights as he went. He brushed his teeth with his red toothbrush, the bristles worn from months of use, in front of the bathroom mirror, washed his face, and then straightened up his bedroom. With the most recent copy of TIME in his hands, he climbed into bed, and switched on the bedside lamp. Just like everything else in the house, Miriam had picked it up at an antique shop. She was under the impression it was used by Aaron Burr in his study, but it had been made in a plant in Wisconsin, in 1974.

The day turned to night and George Marshall fell asleep, his mind devoid of thoughts, his life devoid of meaning.

George and Miriam had first met in the small town of Ossineke, Michigan. It was on the coast of Thunder Bay. As George and Miriam's relationship was beginning in Michigan, so was my life. I was being born to a woman in Grand Haven, some three-hundred miles across the state. The great thing about living in Michigan is the ability to point to your hand and say "I was born here." If you could see my hand, I would be pointing just below the nail on my pointer finger, toward the middle of my fingerprint: that's Ossineke. I am now pointing at the base of my pinky finger: that's Grand Haven.

Ossineke was one of those places you always saw signs for, but would never visit because it always seemed out of the way (which is exactly what it was). The only thing the town was (and is) known for was the Dinosaur Gardens, a zoo and park started in the 1930s that takes you back to the days of the dinosaurs and cavemen, but which also shows you how Jesus influenced their lives. Yes, it is an exhibit on Jesus riding with the dinosaurs. It was designed to show that Jesus had, in fact, walked with the dinosaurs, and all sorts of creatures that were previously rendered "fictional" by the Christians in charge. Being in that position is overrated, I think. No one listens, and the little control you *do* have is so easily snatched away by minor characters that it's utterly futile to keep things together. I'm surprised the Dinosaur Gardens are still up-and-running.

They met at a diner. She was a waitress, born in Charlevoix, which is at the tip of my ring finger. George Marshall was born in Alabama somewhere. He was a traveling salesman, going to door-to-door with his car filled up with portable calculators, which were a relatively new invention at the time. Only a few years before that, they were all too big to fit on a side table, let alone in a backpack pocket. Michigan and Alabama were the two biggest markets for pocket calculators at that time, for reasons unbeknownst to George, but reasons didn't matter much:

what mattered was getting from Point A to Point B, all the while selling pocket calculators to whoever would take one. I remember my mother buying a pocket calculator from a traveling salesman in 1976. It was an Adler 81S and it features a fluorescent display. She used it on her math homework, as she was a senior in college at that time.

Miriam served George a bowl of cream of mushroom soup, although it smelled more like cream of potato. What George was really focusing on was Miriam, who blushed as she served him his soup, and curtsied. She resembled a ripe cherry, shiny and bright, dainty and delicate, her curves in all the right places. Her eyes were wide like a gazelle in heat, twinkling and reflecting the world. George was still getting used to being a gazelle, in many ways. He was shy, so Miriam made the first move. They had gone to see *Catch-22*, which was based on Joseph Heller's novel and directed by Mike Nichols. I, personally, didn't enjoy the movie all that much, but George Marshall and Miriam had a great time. I much preferred the book, but liking the movie is nothing to be ashamed of. I think what I really enjoyed about Catch-22 was Yossarian's dilemma about death. Death is something that's inevitable, unavoidable, but it forces a much greater appreciation for life... that is, if you know you're going to die. I certainly don't know when I'm going to die. I don't know when you're going to die.

George and Miriam fell in love. Five years later, George Marshall married. Fifteen years after that, Miriam left for the first time. Fifteen years after *that*, she left for the second time. Five days later, George Marshall died.

"Good morning, George," the receptionist said, her hair done up with too much hairspray, her face done up with too much makeup. She, too, was a gazelle, bounding across the plains, her tail

pricked up slightly as she bounced past the males gazelles of the herd, their necks turning so quickly they almost broke themselves.

George smiled and waved.

It was Monday. An entire weekend had passed, uneventfully, and nothing had changed. His wife was still gone. His life was still the same. He hadn't even thought of her since she had left. George nodded to everyone else he passed in the office, shuffling toward his cubicle in the back. It was the smallest cubicle in the office, at the furthest end of the long room, but George didn't mind. He had decorated it, on Miriam's recommendation, with trinkets and objects that reminded him of home. There was an antique lamp, a calendar with a different colored biplane for every month of the year, and sticky notes plastered around his computer screen, reminding him of accounts he had to double- and triple-check. There was a photograph of George and Miriam, taken many years previous, next to his computer screen. George was smiling. Miriam was frowning. The cubicle walls were brown, with brown shelves for his folios.

I, too, was at work. I was at work writing a book, a story, a piece about change, because I am a person that has not changed a bit in my entire life, which is something I want to change. I am afraid of change, though. I am afraid that change will hurt me. I am afraid that change will kill me like so many people who changed before me and will change when I'm dead and gone, change or not. The book, the story, the piece was my way of showing change through others; maybe I could change if I wrote about change, wrote about someone who changed because of something that changed because of someone that changed because of something that changed. Fiction is the perfect medium for that sort of thing, which is why I decided to write instead of paint or sculpt; art imitates life. Fiction is life with the names changed. I was creating caricatures of you, of me, and of friends and family, like when I used to go to amusement parks as a kid or a

teen and artists would use pastels and chalk to draw me, but a cartoon-version of me: a version of me with a huge chin or an afro, my neck skinny and eyes masked by glasses that were too big.

Work is hard.

But not for George Marshall. The plot said his work was easy.

He was an accountant for a small company that sold calculators. Ironically enough, he didn't have a calculator in his office, but his computer had one built-in and it did most of the work for him. All he had to do was find the client's portfolio, type the amount of their order into a spreadsheet, and save it to a floppy disk. The computer did the mathematical equations, and there were other employees that took care of everything else.

At lunch time, George took a break. He had gone through ten or fifteen folders, finding the information he needed and punching it into the computer. In the community break room, he poured himself a cup of coffee and sipped it. He added four packets of sugar and two containers of cream, but it still tasted bitter.

"Afternoon, George."

Quincy, who worked in the cubicle three over from George, poured himself a cup of coffee. Quincy and his wife went to the same church as George and Miriam. On Saturdays, they had barbecues. On Tuesdays, the couple played racquetball at the YMCA. They had a system that both followed to a tee, one that may have wavered and shook, but never lost its true form, like jello cut into calculators, which Quincy's wife made whenever the office got together.

Quincy was his last name. His first name was Alfredo. His parents were Italian. He had been called Quincy since grade school, mostly because with a name like Alfredo, kids tended to make fun of you. Trust me: my parents were of Celtic descent, and if they had named me after a popular Celtic dish, I'd always go by my last name.

“How’s it going?”

“It’s good, Quincy,” George said.

“April and I didn’t see you or Miriam at church yesterday. Is something wrong? I expected it from you, but Miriam hasn’t missed a week of church in ages.”

“Miriam left me.”

Quincy set his coffee cup down and placed a hand on George’s shoulder, looking at George over his glasses. His hair was full and rich..

“I’m sorry, George. Are you all right?”

George nodded. “I’m okay.”

“Did she say why?” Quincy asked, opening a packet of sugar and dumping it into his cup, stirring it with a spoon.

George shook his head.

“Well... again,” Quincy said. “I’m sorry. I hope you’re okay.”

George Marshall said nothing.

Quincy smiled, picking up his cup. “Well, if you need anything, let me know.”

He took a sip, waved with his free hand, and went back to his cubicle.

George looked down at his coffee cup, looked at the steaming, muddy brown liquid, felt the warmth on his face. He slipped a hand into his pocket and wrapped his fingers around the diamond-studded bracelet. He thought about his wife, where she had gone, what she was doing. Was she with another man, sharing an afternoon meal? Or was she alone, going over what was wrong with her life? Was she with her mother, talking about him, arguing about him? Or in a seedy motel room off the highway, its mattresses and walls stained with the remnants of humanity?

George went back to his cubicle and picked up the phone. He flipped open his address book, which was arranged by family, which made it easy to find people that were related to each other, but impossible to find anyone else. He thumbed to Miriam's entry in the address book, scanned the page, and stopped on a name: Natalie. She was filed under "Mother" in the address book.

His address book was like that on purpose, of course. He didn't quite know *why* he filed it in such a way, but I knew. I knew.

"This is Natalie."

"Hello, Natalie. It's George."

There was the sound of breathing on the other line, punctuated by a heavy sigh. He could picture her leaning on the kitchen counter, looking up at the ceiling.

"What do you want, George?"

"Is Miriam with you?" George asked, turning off his computer screen and moving the files he had completed around on his desk, so they'd be ready to work on in the morning. His hands were shaking. "I'd like to speak with her."

"George, she isn't here. Even if she was, I doubt she'd want speak to you."

He stayed silent on the other line. After a short pause, Natalie sighed again.

"This *is* a definite leap for you, though. I never thought you'd call about Miriam."

It was true; in all of his life, he couldn't think of a single moment where he had been concerned about anyone. I can't even think of a time where he was concerned about himself. He was selfless in the most selfish way you could be.

"Is she staying with you, Natalie?"

“I’m her mother, not her shepherd or her innkeeper, George. She’s not staying with me. She’s staying in a local community center.”

“A community center?”

“Yes, George. She’s the member of a club, a club devoted to community service and fostering others. You know, the things Miriam can only talk to *me* about because you are incapable of listening.”

How like Miriam, he thought. She was always the type of person to reach out, to share what she had with others less fortunate, or so he had thought. It was true, Miriam rarely talked to him about those sorts of things. He only knew because she received monthly letters from a group called Omniscience Unlimited, a group dedicated to reaching into the lives of those in need and encouraging them to be proactive, or so the pamphlet had read.

“Thank you, Natalie,” George finally said. “I’ll call the center.”

“Don’t blow it again, George. You already had one chance.”

George paused. “Why are you helping me, Natalie?”

“Because it’s nice to see you change. It’s nice to see you concerned. It’s something I’ve always wanted for the two of you.

“Goodbye, George.”

The phone clicked, and then there was nothing.

The phone call had made it final. Miriam was still there, in that town. Whether she was waiting for him or not—I won’t say either way—George Marshall had made a decision. He had seen a path I had not revealed to him; he had seen the set behind the curtain.

I was losing control. There comes a point where your creation starts to outgrow its container. It’s like in Frankenstein, when the Monster begins chasing down Dr. Frankenstein,

ruining everything he has built. George Marshall was ~~Wesley~~ ~~Wesley~~ Monster, but he had no idea. Even the dumbest of dogs find a way out of the backyard eventually. That doesn't mean they all make it back home. George was becoming what's called a rain dog. A rain dog is a dog that leaves home, maybe in the pursuit of a fleeting scent of meat or a car, and loses his way. The rain sweeps in and washes the dog's scent away, making it impossible to find his way home.

As George Marshall stepped down that path, that path I had hidden from him, it began to rain. He had no idea his scent, his trail of breadcrumbs, was being swept away.

The community center was on the edge of town, near the high school. It was all white paint and tan bricks; one story tall, all glass doors and large windows so clear you could see right through the other side of the building and out toward the hills and trees that rolled out to the mountains, though they were now bathed in fog. It looked like an asylum. For all intents and purposes, it *was* an asylum. You could go in of your "own" accord, but once you were committed, that was it. You were certified crazy and there was no way you were going to be allowed back into normal society.

George Marshall sat in the parking lot out front, the engine of his car still running. It was the same type of car that he had owned when he had been a salesman, although much more recent of a model. It was the only car. The yellow lines on the pavement were bright and vibrant against the glossy blacktop. He was dressed in his work clothes. Outside, the rain pittered and pattered on pavement.

He slipped Miriam's bracelet into the pocket of his pants, turned off the car, and got out. The rain crept down his scalp like perspiration. His hair, already weak and thinning, gave way to the raindrops like blades of grass. He moved across the pavement hurriedly, his steps heavy and

awkward. They were awkward because they were full of determination, something George Marshall had never experienced before. Even as a child, he had resigned himself to a predestined fate, laid out by his superiors, his parents, his stars.

The door of the community center swung open easily and George Marshall shook himself off in the entryway, brushing droplets of water from his shoulders. The entryway was relatively typical of any community center: there were wooden benches, fake trees at every corner, seventh grade art on the walls, and a blue-green weave of carpet below his feet. At the other end of the entryway was a set of double doors, which led into the main room of the community center.

At that moment, I was in a smaller, adjacent room. The main room had already been set up for the event of the day: Omniscience Unlimited's Final Outing. Many of the members were heading off on a mission to Africa, while others were heading to Bangladesh. I was getting old. I was getting tired. I was exhausted. I was passing my reins off to another, a man over thirty years my junior, a fan of basketball and J.D. Salinger and turkey burgers.

I was wearing sunglasses. We all were. All forty-two of us. The white robes, white lights, white tables, and white walls made it bright inside the community center. In this adjacent room, we were praying, waiting for the right time to finish.

George Marshall entered the main room of the community center. He made his way around the white chairs toward the long tables covered in white tablecloths and forty-one styrofoam cups. Each cup was half-full of red Kool-Aid. The carpet was the same blue-green as the entryway.

The others were praying. I pushed my sunglasses up, ran my hands through my long hair, and put on the largest grin I could muster. If my hair had been brown, I would have looked like Jesus.

As George Marshall turned and looked around, I opened the door and slipped out into the main room. The door closed behind me with a slight click. Behind my sunglasses, I watched George Marshall turn and stare at me. He stared into the face of his creator.

“I think we need to talk, George.”

I motioned to one of the chairs in the front row. George chose one in the middle, sat down, and folded his hands in his lap, his head cocked, his eyes distant and dark, as if he wasn't even there.

“What do you think you're doing here, George? You're not supposed to be here. That's not part of the script.”

He sat there quietly, twiddling his thumbs. I could look right through his eyes into his head. It was empty. The only things that remained were messes of cobwebs and the carcasses of spiders. The wind tried to whistle but coughed and sputtered and choked on the stale air of ignorance and predetermination.

“Look, George. I understand what you're trying to do,” I said. “But it's too late. I gave you *all* free will. Miriam decided to use hers; you shelved yours and expected *me* to do the work for you. What do you expect?”

Still, George Marshall said nothing. His head was empty. His tongue was gone. There was still no spark. After everything.

“Look, George. I don't make the rules...” I started. “Well, I mean... I *do* make the rules. But I can't change them for you. That'd make me a hypocrite. It'd make me a bad narrator. It'd ruin my credibility. It'd make me look stupid in front of my audience and every high school English class that sat down to close-read my work. Have you ever taken a high school English

class, George? They have enough trouble understanding the basics, let alone things like the Theory of Omission. Do you really want that?"

"I suppose not," George Marshall said, his voice fading like an echo.

"You see, George? You *suppose* not. That's what happens. That's what happens when you let the colors run. Your life was reds and greens and purples and yellows, but now it's brown. It's a shitty, shitty brown, George."

"Who are you?" George Marshall asked.

I was slightly shocked. This was a first.

"I've never had anyone ask me that question before... and I never expected *you*, of all people, to ask me that..." I pondered a moment, running my fingers through my white beard, and then wiping them on my white gown.

"You can call me Tom Jansen. Don't ask me why: I just chose it out of the blue. It has a certain ring to it, doesn't it? It doesn't exactly instill fear into the hearts of wannabe converts, but it has a certain charm.

"But honestly, that doesn't matter. What matters is what *you're* doing, George. You shouldn't be here."

"I came to see Miriam."

I smiled. "I told you, George. She's gone. She *left* you."

"Why?"

Now *that* was a question. Why indeed?

"George, I don't think you *get* it. You're a character. You were *designed* to be who you are. There's no changing that. Miriam was also designed to be who she is. Her storyline continues on without you... and yours without her.

“But... I care about her...” George Marshall said.

I laughed harder than I’ve ever laughed. I laughed until my sides hurt, spittle dripping down my chin and onto my white robe. My laughter filled the whole of the room, echoing from ceiling to floor, wall to wall. Tears ran down my cheeks. I held my sides.

“Care... about her?” I managed to say between laughs. I quieted down, gasping for breath, and wiped my face off on the sleeve of my robe.

“George, I’m a weak person. I surround myself with weak people... the people you see at this gathering, for instance,” I said, motioning to the door behind me, where the congregation stood, eagerly awaiting my grand plan. “You, for instance. I do it so I can feel strong. I do it so I can feel better about myself. I do it because if I see them cower or see their eyes glaze over as their mind tinkers with the idea of choosing another path, I’m right there with them, changing.

“I want to change, George, but I don’t want to die. No one wants to die, George. Do you want to die?”

That’s what I wanted to say to George Marshall. That’s what I wanted to tell him. I wanted to tell him all about me, about what I was doing, and what his role was. He was fulfilling a plot point. He was making my story better. He was changing.

Instead, I said this:

“You are stupid.”

George Marshall was silent. He did not blink. He simply watched me. In his hand, I saw the glint of gold and diamonds.

“Everyone is afraid to die, George Marshall. If others die, or confront death, something happens to them. They start to appreciate the world more. They start to enjoy their lives. Do you see what I’m saying, George? Sacrificing my creations are my way of saving myself. When

someone dies, or comes close to death, everyone around them grows up. Do you get that? Do you understand?"

"Mr. Jansen..."

"Call me Tom."

"Yes, Tom," said George Marshall. "I... I want to change. I want Miriam to be happy."

It was my turn to be silent. I watched George Marshall watch me from within his own head.

"Then what do you want from me, George?" I yelled at him, flailing my arms, pointing at him. "Change! Become a different person! Grow up! Try the punch! Drink deep! Quit your job! Beg your wife to take you back. Cut your strings and stop dancing!"

"For God's sake," I screamed at George Marshall, my face red, my fingers ripping at my hair. "Do it! Do it!"

George Marshall smiled, then. It was the first legitimate smile I had ever seen on his face, the only smile I had not personally put there. It was a smile of defiance, a smile that silently mocked me with how wide it grew. He stood up, brushed his hands off on his cardigan, and shook his head.

By God, George Marshall was *glowing*. He was radiating positive energy. I could feel my script being torn into a billion tiny shreds. I could feel his fate slipping away from me. I could feel him becoming independent.

I turned away, threw up a hand, and turned my back.

"Leave, George Marshall. Leave and never come back."

"No."

I felt like crying. I had never been so happy or so depressed in all my life. I couldn't tell left from right, up from down, orange from blue. Everything was a haze. George Marshall's life was no longer mine to worry about. Behind that door, forty-five people in ceremonial white robes. Their eyes were full and their faces were eager.

George Marshall stared at the bracelet in his hand, the bracelet I had made Miriam forget on that hall table, the catalyst for his change. It felt lighter, as if a piece of it had broken off, or a piece of him had gained strength. Everything around him was vivid and colorful. The world was no longer gray and dark gray; he could see the blues and greens in the carpet under his feet, the difference between the beige on the walls and the creme-beige on the ceiling. George Marshall took a styrofoam cup in his hand, sniffed the red liquid in it, smelled each individual fruit in the punch, from the oranges to the pineapples. Only I knew the secret of his newfound love for life, of the change that swam in his cup.

A smile crossed his face. He was finally alive. He had changed. Now, he simply had to ask Miriam to come home. In the other room, Miriam was waiting to talk to him. She wanted to tell him that she loved him and that she was sorry. She was going to. I had made sure of that. Her bags were already in her car, ready to be taken home. She had checked out of the Motel 8 early that day. Her ceremonial gown was cream-colored. Her lips were red.

George Marshall held the styrofoam cup to his lips, his smile wide and full, and he drank deep, emptying the cup, his normally pink lips stained red for a brief second. A flame ignited in his head.

The door swung open.

Moments later, the color drained from his face.

Miriam stood across the room, a smile on her face, her lips glistening as rosy red as her cheeks. George Marshall looked at her with wide eyes. The gears in his brain were turning, but I no longer knew what he was thinking. Miriam crossed the room, her white gown twirling with each light step. She looked as she did on her wedding day, her eyes full of life and joy, her husband looking at her with love, and the two gripped hands.

I turned from them and entered the door. The lights in the main room clicked off behind me, and the world turned black. Outside, the rain was still audible. It was faint, but it was still there.

I felt faint myself. I closed the door. I looked upon my congregation.

“Go home,” I said.

They turned their heads toward one another, confused, oblivious.

Outside, George Marshall left a corpse on the floor of the community center. His new body fit better, suited his mind well. He was a new person, a better person, one who had come close to death and survived, but had become another person in the process.

I think I might go to the amusement park.