



Sentinels

Sir Edward Downes flew to Switzerland last week with his wife and joined her in drinking a lethal cocktail of barbiturates provided by an assisted-suicide clinic.

—*The New York Times*, July 14, 2009

I slept badly the night before we left—horrible wrenching dreams, screaming and crying—earlier that day I had seen the article and it caught in my chest like a fishhook, ticking against my ribs, ominous and soft. We were stealing across the golden leaf of Kansas, rising imperceptibly to Colorado rock, when the tornado warning shot through the radio and my husband looked up sharply. I followed his eyes to the line ahead—we have to go, he said simply—and the Jeep swiftly circled towards the dark. The sky began to curl around us, the trailing edge of the clouds ruffling dirt against the fields, and as the landscape browned out I wanted to know who had closed their eyes first, who had vowed to stand guard as their beloved moved away. They had joined hands, her papery fingers somehow soft as a girl's in his still robust ones, and lay down side by side, and they died. We were flying now, eyeing the storm, racing towards the front, like the groom bringing his bride to the threshold, and the fishhook scraped again and again like a sickle. He would not let her go alone. I looked at my husband, frowning grimly at the horizon, and as I reached for him our wedding bands glowed with the same steely green of the clouds. It happened so fast—they were gone in ten minutes—and suddenly the sky broke, and we opened the doors and felt the silent rain pulsing down on us. Before us the last cuts of scarlet sun welled up through the clouds, and as we glanced behind us we saw the tornado grinding on, anvil black and unafraid. I felt my husband quietly draw up beside me. In the relief of twilight we held watch as the roiling mass traveled across the ocean of wheat to the south, seeking out that last safe place to fall to its knees and die.

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