

LORD OF THE CLOUDS

G.S. Lewis

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For my mom and dad

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PART I

HOTEL CALIFORNIA

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GOLGOTHA

Albus Cake sat in his brown leather-bound office chair; the plump, familiar armrests of which were beginning to deteriorate from innumerable years of use, nylon stitching splitting apart at the seams. Creamy cottony batting imprisoned within the upholstery sent wispy white feelers shooting up through the cracks, attempting to escape back out into the wild.

Mr. Cake absently flexed and flicked his fingers through the fleeing fibers, his eyes closed. Dimpled at regular intervals into the aged leather of his chair were a number of tarnished brass tacks, serving some purpose that escaped him, decoration perhaps; most had fallen out over time.

Albus could easily afford a new chair; he just happened to really like this one. It could rock back and forth, its springs squeaking and creaking at just the right frequencies when he got anxious or needed to think deeply about something. *Can a new office chair do that?* he mused, *No, definitely not.*

There he sat in welcome solitude on the highest floor of his one-thousand story tall obsidian monolith; the back of his chair pivoted towards the entryway to his chambers. He turned to face the plate-glass windows that stretched from floor to ceiling, windows that came together at a right angle, orthogonally form-

ing the corner of his office. Albus was overseeing the operations below; his eyes remained closed.

It really didn't matter to Albus if it was the thousandth floor or the millionth floor; to him—it was all the same. Thousandth just had a particularly commanding ring to it. If he were to tell an associate at a cocktail party that he worked in an office on the *one-millionth* floor of a monolith he had designed and built himself, they might accuse him of fibbing or hyperbole. But, if he said the thousandth floor, while that still seemed highly unbelievable—one could imagine it.

He rocked and he rocked, occasionally stopping to twist from side to side, then back to rocking. The *squeak squeak squeak* of his chair provided a rhythmic and repetitive droning to his otherwise gravely silent chamber. Albus Cake was thinking.

“Sire, your appointment...” chimed Victoria, his personal assistant, interrupting his reverie in her thick accent that was from *somewhere other than here*. Victoria was tall, very tall, as tall as she wanted to be. It was part of her contract. She had black skin, not dark brown skin. Pitch-black skin, skin so dark not even *light* could escape its gravitational pull if it made the mistake of getting too close to her. The striking darkness of her skin was incongruous with her perfectly blue eyes, no whites, no pupils, just blue, but strangely pleasant.

Albus turned slowly round in his chair to face her; each tip of his fingers pressed in tension against its opposing digit, like the cables of a suspension bridge. “Everything okay, sire...I mean, Mr. Cake?” Victoria asked in her unplaceable accent.

Long ago, Albus had abandoned his attempts to enlighten Victoria that she needn't refer to him as *sire*. He could only assume that she must just enjoy saying the word at this point. Albus leaned forward resting his elbows on his desk. His desk, like his chair, was ancient.

“Yes, Victoria. Just thinking,” replied Albus. Victoria had known Mr. Cake for eons, just long enough to know when her boss was itching to pontificate on some obscure notion, but was waiting for the invitation. In some sense, it was the purpose of

her existence.

“What about?” she asked.

“Just wondering if I made the right choices.”

“Right? Choices?” The words were totally foreign to her. She laughed, “You crack me up, sire...err—Mr. Cake. Did you ever think about becoming a comedian?”

“No.”

Victoria laughed even harder, “See!” She composed herself, shuffling the papers needlessly on her clipboard. “Your appointment, sire?”

“Send them in.”

Albus leaned back in his chair clasping his hands together behind his head; he greatly admired the transcendent job his wife had done in decorating his office shortly after he had completed construction of the monolithic edifice. An interior decorator by trade, his wife spared no expense embellishing the quarters.

Dark granite walls formed the boundaries of the chamber; walls which grew upwards beyond visible recognition, fading away into a starry sky-field. Swirling celestial players drifted endlessly in the vaults. Flocks of cherub-like beings flitted about the upper echelons, occasionally breaking into song. They weren't very good at singing, because they were babies. Mr. Cake appreciated their efforts anyway.

Hung from the many stone cross beams, held aloft by massive iron chains, were enormous bowl-shaped censers smelted from precious metals like rhodium, iridium, and osmium. The hanging censers slowly burned coils of roasting frankincense and other unusual compounds, wafting electrically charged tufts of blue and pink smoke that would pirouette out of their metallic bowls like cotton candy. Occasionally, the crackling billows of galvanized, bubblegum-scented haze would converge into rain-clouds dawdling about the upper reaches of the office chamber, puncturing open with little showers that would lightly sprinkle on Albus, dampening whatever he happened to be working on, though usually nothing of major importance.

Cut into the dark granite wall furthest from his desk, a

huge fireplace with an eternally roaring inferno cast its runs of yellow, orange, and red tongues, expertly bouncing the rays at right angles off the highly reflective surface of the office's black marble floor. Unfortunately, to maintain its elegant sheen, the marble floor had to be polished nightly to remove the smoldering embers expelled by the never-ending blaze, that would drift through the air helplessly turning to splats of dust on impact with the cold black marble.

Albus' desk was positioned too far away from the sputtering fireplace to garner any of its warmth-giving energy; he often found himself quite cold. His wife insisted he wear the wool sweater his mother-in-law had knitted him to combat the problem, though it never seemed to do him any good.

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Mr. Cake glanced over at the ever-ticking clock hanging from one of the dark walls; his appointment was taking their sweet time. He could hear a loud voice flirting with Victoria right outside the door. Looking back towards the entryway, Albus thought, *This can't be good*, as a large man, with an even larger belly, and the head of an elephant sauntered into his office, in no particular rush at all. Golgotha hadn't paid Mr. Cake a visit—in the flesh—in centuries.

The mammoth man with the head of an elephant half-heartedly picked up the various baubles, curios, and idols from the shelves around Albus' office. He examined the objects, poorly feigning that they held some interest to him, setting them back down in slightly different orientations and positions from which he found them, leaving the tchotchke's dusty footprint naked and exposed.

As Golgotha turned, one of his long ivory tusks snagged on a porcelain figurine of a grieving woman holding a dying man in her arms, lopping the delicate head of the porcelain woman clean off, offering no apology. Albus cringed, but knew better than to call attention to the now decapitated figurine; he'd get Victoria to sweep up the shattered pieces later. It wasn't that the ham-fisted man ignored the incident, Golgotha was completely

unaware that he had done it, as if it never happened.

Cake rose from his leather chair situated behind his desk to greet his guest. “Don’t get up! Don’t get up!” proclaimed Golgotha. Mr. Cake halted his upward motion in a half-standing half-crouching position, leaned over his desk, and extended his arm to shake his visitor’s meaty palm. The large man enveloped the smaller man’s hand tightly with both palms and squeezed; his pointed nails slathered in bright-yellow polish dug into Cake’s wrist, though not intentionally, nor maliciously.

Golgotha’s neon-pink skin radiated in stark contrast to the dark tones of the surrounding office. Like some jellyfish discovered on a deep-sea dive, beads of electricity and multi-hued light shot about his veins. A terrifyingly complex crystal, said to possess a truly infinite number of facets, sat between the eyes of his elephant head. Steadying himself, he wedged his portly frame into a wicker chair in front of Cake’s desk that buckled some under the immense load. The two sat opposite each other. Golgotha reclined, folding his hands together on his exposed belly and extended his trunk, resting it lazily on Mr. Cake’s desk with a dull thud.

“Peanut?” offered Albus.

Golgotha roared with laughter, flapping his ears, pounding his trunk against the inlaid ebony and ash finish of the desktop, with a little too much enthusiasm. Albus’ ‘World’s Best Dad’ coffee mug trembled and bounced, splashing droplets of cold coffee across the desk’s checkered surface, becoming agitated to the point of diving off the edge towards the ground. In a bolt of lightning, a cherub-like being swooped down and rescued the mug moments before being dashed to pieces against the polished marble, setting it gently back in its rightful place.

“How the hell are you, Albus!?” trumpeted Golgotha.

“Oh, I’m sure you know, Golgotha, just *sublime*.”

The portly elephant slowly wrapped his trunk against the ancient desktop studying the man’s expression for any sign of sarcasm. Nuance and delicacy were not his greatest strengths. Over the eons he had come to realize he often missed a small in-

flection or evasive enunciation, failing to recognize when Albus was mocking him, which infuriated Golgotha beyond belief. However, he was experimenting at getting better. “You weren’t at the Ascension Festival this year,” said Golgotha with a shade of purple disappointment tinging his voice.

“Was feeling a bit under the weather for this one,” replied Albus, adding a perfunctory, “your Grace.”

Golgotha laughed again. “Oh Albus, you are a riot!” The elephant-headed man continued to yammer on about how utterly rapturous the Ascension Festival had been—a raucous, raging, and completely mandatory festival that he had commissioned in his own honor. Golgotha lauded the otherworldly, orgasmic lights, the supremely serene sounds, the floats, the pageantry, the endless celebrating. He divulged to Albus he had almost canceled the event one year, but people’s heads would have literally exploded. He went on to claim that they enjoyed the celebration even more than he did, clamored for it, demanded it. “It’s their absolute *favorite*,” said Golgotha, pronouncing the word favorite with learned affect.

“My apologies,” Albus genuflected. “It won’t happen again.”

Golgotha clicked his tongue. “No need to apologize, Albus, shit happens.”

“Indeed, it does,” said Cake.

The gaze of Golgotha’s deeply set elephant-eyes focused out the window directly behind Albus. The gentle flapping of his ears eased then halted, hanging limply at the sides of his massive head. Absentmindedly, he picked at a fleck of gray lint from his gaping pink belly button and flicked it onto Albus’ coffee-stained desk; he didn’t enjoy his dependence on Albus.

Golgotha knew a great many things; for instance, he knew that he was quantifiably more omnipotent than Albus, and let’s not forget more omniscient and exceedingly more omnipresent to boot. Still, there were things that Albus Cake could do that he could not; this apparent paradox irritated the elephant to no end.

Of course, Golgotha would never reveal his frustrations to

the man sitting across from him at the mundane desk in the crummy, brown leather chair. Although, he suspected Albus was aware of his ire, based on the man's less than deferential attitudes towards him, and Golgotha's ability to know everything, which only frustrated the elephant further. A pregnant pause gestated in the air. Albus decided to induce.

"Is that it then? Have you come all this way to chastise me about my truancy?"

Golgotha returned his attention away from the window to Albus, staring the man directly in the eye. Slowly, he unfolded his fat, pink fingers from his rotund, naked belly and placed his hands flat out, fingers spread wide, onto Albus' desk.

Every digit was adorned with a treasure trove of precious gemstones. Facets of quixotically cut lapis lazulis, rubies, emeralds, and ambers all glinted in the light radiating from the windows behind Albus. Straining to maintain their structural integrity against bloated fingers, the rings' platinum bands ballooned to their near breaking point. A preponderance of gold chains hung heavy around the elephant's neck, dangling with every sign, sigil, and symbol imaginable. The chains shuffled and clanged together as Golgotha leaned in, his pink belly jutting over the desk's edge. "Unfortunately...no," he said, his voice hushed to a low growl, "it seems we have a *small* problem."

Albus leaned away. The news of a problem was alarming, perhaps even morbidly exciting. Problems rarely, if ever, occurred. Golgotha ran a tight ship; there just weren't room for them anymore. Albus couldn't recall an *actual* problem occurring in ages, which only made this news that much more problematic. Golgotha continued, "We have discovered a child in the Low Place—"

"The Low Place?" spasmed Albus, interrupting. "A child!?" Doubly alarming. Albus had been under the impression that the Low Place had been vanquished; subdued for all intents and purposes. In fact, he was almost sure of it; he had been instrumental in its subjugation. The Low Place was something that they rarely spoke of these days, choosing instead to ignore the

fact that it had ever existed to begin with.

Golgotha, not used to being spoken over, cleared his throat, shifted his trunk slightly to his right and continued, “—A child that will lead to the destruction of our world. Our eternal utopia that we have labored so heroically to birth.”

Albus scoffed. He took no credit for their world’s existence; moreover, he was no longer so certain it was the paradise he was promised. Golgotha, already running late for his afternoon tee time, had grown weary of the man and ignored the slight. “Anyway...you will descend to the Low Place and kill the little punk before it becomes a *big* problem,” demanded the tyrant with the flippant sympathy of a mosh pit.

Albus’ mind raced. Two toy cars, one red and one green, with friction engines went round and round on a slotted piezo-electric track, sometimes flying off at the hairpin turns. Albus knew, rather intimately, what the Low Place was like and despised it. *There has to be some way out of this*, he thought as he wracked his brain, *Why not ask one of the others, Dr. Blue? Or even that dirty rat Mr. Molehill?* They were far more qualified for this type of thing.

“Why me?”

“Because I said so.”

It was hard to argue with that. Once the stubborn bull elephant had made up his mind on a matter, there was little use trying to dissuade him. Mr. Cake stalled for more time.

“And how do you know of this? This child? The destruction of our world?”

“A prophecy.”

Here it comes, thought Albus. He restrained himself from rolling his eyes; his efforts were of little use. The thought had already percolated up to Golgotha’s all-knowing awareness. “It is coming,” riposted the elephant. “My magi have foretold it,” adding with assurance, “and they are never wrong.”

Golgotha employed a vast legion of seers, soothsayers, and fortune tellers to advise him; their abilities had been critical in his rise to power and the elephant trusted them without question. It wasn’t that Albus doubted the providence of the magi’s

eerily predictive algorithms. No, he had witnessed them work first hand; it was just that after the Ascension, the future was already known. It was just *this*—for the rest of eternity. Albus eyed the fortunes and prognostications of the magi with a great deal of skepticism, wondering if they might not invent quandaries just to keep themselves gainfully employed.

Albus continued to contemplate the elephant's unsavory wishes. The request was absolutely ludicrous in a sense. There was no way (that he knew of) back to the Low Place. And even if there were some way back, it would most surely be a suicide mission. Besides, the murderous demand was far outside his purview; nowhere in his contract did it state that he had to be Golgotha's axeman, his executioner. *I'm not some heartless, cold-blooded killer.* This wasn't what he signed up for—callously murdering a hitherto innocent child. *No way.*

"I won't do it."

"So be it." Golgotha extended his pink, chunky arms for emphasis, the fat jiggling and swaying, bronze bangles jangling together. The beads of electricity pulsating just beneath his skin quickened. As he turned his head away, the horrifically complex, prismatic jewel in the middle of Golgotha's forehead grabbed hold of the singular white light-beam emanating from the window behind Albus; the crystal sprayed the beam back out in a mutilated rainbow splayed across the reflective marble floor.

The self-styled deva placed his hands on his knees and slowly rose from his seat, his lumbering frame playing catch-up. As he pivoted towards the door, he cocked his preposterous elephant head and said, "Look what I have become." With that, he turned his back on Albus and left.

Squeak squeak squeak. Mr. Cake rocked in his chair. *Shit.*

Victoria popped her head back into the office. "Everything okay, sire?" The cherub-like beings began softly cooing a song that sounded something like a funeral dirge.

"No Victoria, nothing is okay."

ELIXABETH

Albus Cake, being who he was, was entitled to a certain number of privileges that not all beings in his realm shared—free will being among them. He was more than allowed to refuse Golgotha's bidding and had, in fact, defied the all-powerful elephant's wishes many times throughout their complicated, eons-long relationship. It was almost a running joke between the two at this point. Although, that did not necessarily shield Albus from Golgotha's wrath.

Once again though, Albus being who he was, there was not a whole lot Golgotha could really do to punish Mr. Cake for his insubordination. Golgotha would often resort to minor annoyances to express his displeasure with the man that he relied so heavily upon. He would do things such as order gremlins to fill Albus' shoes with sand, or replace all the complimentary Oranginas in the break-room of Albus' precious monolith—with more sand. Golgotha's pranks, for some inexplicable reason, always seemed to involve sand. Albus had given up long ago on trying to pierce the inner workings of the elephantine tyrant's mind.

Albus mulled over Golgotha's cryptic last words to him: 'look what I have become.' It was true that the already powerful pink pachyderm had become even more powerful since the As-

cension, standing now unopposed. Regardless, Golgotha could not violate his own rules, the rules of their world; it was demonstrably and empirically impossible. Still, Albus felt it might be wise to finish his work early for the day and head home to his beloved wife, Elixabeth, and the cloyingly bucolic cottage that they blissfully shared. As he shuffled some papers, he looked at the clock ticking away on the wall, trying to recall when he had arrived at the office; the time escaped him.

During his commute, without the distraction of his work, Albus' mind jumped from branch to branch like a monkey, chattering with distracting and unlikely scenarios. Perhaps, Golgotha would inundate his cottage with dump trucks full of sand, or fill in his cherished lake—with sand. Not the worst things in the world, Albus could remove the sand just as easily as Golgotha had placed it. Or perhaps, more likely than not, the elephant would do nothing. Distracted by other matters, he no longer seemed interested in vexing Albus these days.

Albus stepped on it, accelerating. It took him thirteen minutes and forty-eight seconds to travel from his monolithic office on Mars back to his cozy cottage. It felt like an eternity; even when moving at the speed of light, there was still a speed limit.

As he decelerated from light-speed over his cottage, he was relieved to spot his gorgeous wife below, standing at the threshold to their home, awaiting his arrival—no sand in sight. Albus touched down at the base of the rolling green hill atop which their cottage was situated.

Above him, the sky was somewhere between twilight and dusk. It was always somewhere between twilight and dusk when he arrived home; he liked it that way. The orchestra of glittering stars and violet comets had begun tuning up in the firmament, preparing for their nightly performance, while the vibrant orange and purple stains of the setting sun could still be detected reflecting off the ripples of the lake.

Licking off the face of the waters, a cool breeze rustled the overgrown cattails, pickerel weeds, and tall grasses in a shushing rattle that reassured you that everything was going to be okay in

the end. Mockingbirds, robins, and thrushes that had been lovingly tweeting their songs throughout the day, bequeathed their cherished melodies to the chirping of brown crickets (*scientific name: Acheta Domesticus*), as they retired for the evening. The first stanza of the bioluminescent, binary pulse of the fireflies, (*scientific name: Photuris*), began right on cue.

Albus bolted up mottled, moss-covered slate steps that were unevenly spaced so that he always had to pay a little more attention to not slip or stumble on them, running along the curving path cut into the hillside that snaked back and forth leading up towards the red ochre door of his modest three-bedroom cottage that was painted eggshell white, with a thatched roof of tightly bundled twigs and sticks. Poking out of the thick tresses of the roof, sprouted a beige brick chimney that often pooted out lazy, grey clouds in winter.

Safely surrounding the home, a white picket fence encompassed all manner of sunflowers, lavenders, bee balms, and toad lilies. Resting amongst the overgrown floral clumps sat a cement birdbath painted robins egg blue, inviting fowl creatures to bathe, converse, and chirp amongst themselves. The cottage was nestled deep in the deepest woods, woods that reminded Albus of his childhood in rural Maine; it sat squarely on top of a hill, the backside of which sloped down to a crystal lake of the clearest, coldest water anyone had ever encountered. It was his own little slice of heaven.

He rounded the last bend in the serpentine stone path towards his awaiting Elixabeth whose long, luxurious blonde hair, every strand accounted for, was blowing ebulliently in the breeze. She hadn't aged a day, quite literally, since relocating. Her impish smile, that went up a little higher on one side of her mouth than the other, though still every bit as beautiful, showed no cracks, no fissures, no vagaries of the passage of time.

As Albus came around the bend, the red ochre door now in sight, curiously, Elixabeth was no longer there. No sign of his wife anywhere, he would have sworn she was standing there only moments before. Confused, he assumed that perhaps she

had gone back inside to start on supper. He reached out his hand and wiggled the brass doorknob back and forth. The door was locked. The door had never been locked; he didn't even own a key. Albus banged against the wooden red door and peered through the unlit windows, shouting for Elixabeth to come let him in. There was no response. His wife was *just gone*.

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CHEAT CODES

In the long, long ago, even long before the Ascension, there existed (for a brief time) a man named Albus B. Cake. Named after his mother's favorite wizard from a beloved and classic children's book and his father's—love of cake. Albus had been employed as a chief architect at the internet technology company Google. He was the first architect to pioneer a dubious process he dubbed relocation; the unprovable, potentially unethical, and arguably supernatural process in which a person's essence—their immortal soul—was uploaded to a bank of computer servers connected to the internet, or the Cloud, as it later came to be known. With the hope or intent of the process being that one could exist in the coalescing, nebulous ether forever.

Albus had become obsessed with his research, unflinching in his belief that he was on the verge of besting humanity's oldest and most ancient nemesis: death. After a slew of failed attempts on lab rats and unwitting test subjects from within his clandestine lab, his superiors at Google began pressuring him to show results or they would pull the plug, terminating the project.

Most of his colleagues derided him as a crack-pot or dismissed the idea as utter lunacy; there was no such thing as souls, they spouted with absolute certainty. Undeterred, Albus began

to postulate that for the process to be fully successful, one's physical body had to first perish, had to die.

His wife begged him to turn away from his feverish dreams, to give up on such foolishness; it was becoming unhealthy—consuming him. Only further inflamed by the naysayers and those who doubted his genius, one late night in his lab, Mr. Cake had a major breakthrough. Surrounded by snuffed cigarette butts and empty liquor bottles—in an effort to prove his point—Albus placed the cold barrel of a gun in his mouth. Without much hesitation, he pulled the trigger, and blew his brains out, splattering his gray matter across silent, brightly-lit computer monitors and open reams of notebooks.

Following the media circus surrounding Albus' untimely and highly publicized death, the Alphabet Corporation (Google's parent company) issued a press release; they promised the public they had put a halt to Mr. Cake's controversial and downright silly research project. Again and again, the mammoth conglomerate assured the public that there were no such things as souls—and even if there were—there was certainly no such way to upload them to the Cloud.

Alphabet further advised the public, warning should they receive any emails from someone claiming to be Mr. Cake, asking for their social security number so they could join him on his ethereal cloud, or begging to send him money to release him from his approximate purgatory, to delete the communications immediately. The communiques were merely scammers or Nigerian royalty attempting to exploit the man's bizarre death for their own personal gain, Alphabet claimed. Albus' suicide even became something of a meme, with hacked together images flippantly mocking the man's death replicating across the inter-webs. Google dismantled Albus' lab, ingested his esoteric research, and hermetically sealed away his reams of notebooks and equipment deep in the annals of their facilities.

However, much to his credit—Albus Cake was able to exist fully within a non-material realm...

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Back at the scene of his cottage, entering through the screened-in backdoor, Albus searched—endlessly—for his absent wife. His mind could not accept that she could be gone. That she could evaporate into nothingness so suddenly and so thoroughly, without even a word or explanation. Not even a dramatic puff of smoke or pillar of salt left in her wake.

People weren't supposed to be able to leave, disappear, or be forgotten here. That would have defeated the whole point. Briefly, he wondered if Golgotha had something to do with it. He immediately dismissed the notion; it wasn't possible. Golgotha was incapable of making people vanish. Albus knew this beyond the shadow of a doubt; nor would the power-hungry elephant ever have allowed it.

Convincing himself that she must only be playing a game of hide-and-seek, Albus meandered between the three tiny bedrooms over and over again; he got down on hands and knees checking under the beds. Lifting the beds' ruffled skirts, hoping they didn't mind the intrusion, he glanced about amongst the poorly lit, long-forgotten detritus: a single tube sock, a bible, a child's top—no sign of his wife.

Yanking on a cord dangling from the hallway ceiling, a wooden ladder creaking forth, he ascended the ladder's rungs and scoured over the stuffy, dusty attic. An overstuffed attic that he knew Elixabeth detested and had been begging him to clean out forever, which he always balked at; he would defend himself, claiming how valuable his useless mounds of knick-knacks and memorabilia would be one day.

Wedged snugly in their kitchen, their reproduction 1960's style refrigerator shellacked in seafoam green industrial paint, with just the right number of dings and scratches distributed about its exterior to give it character, hummed audibly as it diligently cooled a whole lotta nothing. Albus opened the door to the empty fridge, peered in at the non-existent contents, and closed it—repeatedly.

Snapping back under the force of its stiff spring, the screen door would shudder with a loud *CLAP*, as he walked out the

backdoor and back in from the outdoors, so many times he lost count; expecting her to just be sitting there, her silk robe draped loosely around her body. Sitting there at the rough, round wooden table of their cozy breakfast nook, the yellowed morning light filtering in through the sluggish and uneven glass panes of their cottage's windows exposing the motes of dust attending their own private ballroom dance, a dance that he had not been invited to, a piece of undercooked toast in her hand, a bowl of steel-cut oats getting cold in front of her as the butter from grass-fed Irish cows melted into a greasy pool on top.

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At a loss, Albus sat on the stone bench in the gardens of their cottage for several days, grasping at the bench's cold hard edge with his hands, his shoulders slumped; absently he watched the colorful birds chirp and peep as they ruffled their feathers in the shallow bath, preening themselves. He recalled Elixabeth had bought that birdbath as a crafts project and painted it robin's egg blue in their woodshed. Albus called his wife many times, but the call wouldn't go to voicemail, it wouldn't even ring; he would just hear the same three robotic tones, *bee boo beep*, indicating the call didn't go anywhere, as though the number had never existed in the first place.

His wife vanishing into thin air was inexplicable, this wasn't some errand that ran overlong or weekend girl's trip she had somehow forgotten to mention. She wasn't going to show back up in a few days' time with some wild story about her absence. She certainly hadn't been kidnapped or attacked. Crime was impossible under Golgotha's regime. Additionally, Elixabeth possessed a formidable number of powers, just like her husband—free will being among them.

A frigid sinking feeling grew within him as he wrestled with the notion that she was *just gone* and never coming back, some titanic glitch in the fabric of reality perhaps, and there was nothing he could do about it. Cumbersome clouds coalesced in the heavens above; it began to rain, heavy drops assaulting Albus. He didn't care; he sat there a while longer, catching a chill as the

leaden raindrops soaked through him.

Elixabeth had been his anchor, his root, his mooring. When Albus drifted too far into the madness of this world, she always tugged him back to shore. Mr. Cake walked to the lake. Wading into the shallows, the icy water stirred all around to greet him. "Hello," whispered dampness. "Welcome," wafted wetness. Floating on his back out to the middle of the vast pool, aimlessly adrift, he let himself sink into the engulfing abyss; eventually reaching the bottom, he plopped his backside down onto the sediment-rich lakebed.

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Exhaling his last breath, the carbon dioxide-enriched air bubbles escaped Albus' mouth, competing with one another in a race back to the surface. The bubbles zipped around and past one another in their mad dash to rejoin the atmosphere above. Bubble number three, affectionately named Carla, won. Deeply sucking in his first breath of water, some vestigial panic circled his head like a shark. Albus already knew his plan wasn't going to work; one of the burdens of immortality was being unable to die. Utterly freezing fluid permeated his being as he opened his eyes to the aqueous underworld. A school of fish swam by. *Red fish, blue fish, one fish, two fish*, he thought, as he tried to recall where he had learned that koan.

"20th Century teller of children's tales, Dr. Goose," chimed the voice of a disembodied and (supposedly) omniscient Golgotha, denying Albus the pleasure of coming up with the answer on his own, adding, "and it's One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish—"

"Go away!" yelled Albus cutting Golgotha off. "You did this!"

"You did this," replied the pink pachyderm, mockingly.

"You're bullshit!"

"You're bullshit."

"Shut up! Just shut up!!" shouted Albus in an uncharacteristic outburst of anger that sent sonic shockwaves undulating and echoing through the water; Golgotha leered and was quiet once more. Scattering skittishly, a school of minnows darted in every direction at the unexpected commotion.

As he watched the incredible abundance of aquatic organisms passing through his vision like a watery slide show, Albus adjusted to his new life on the bottom of the lake, thinking that he may just stay there forever in self-centered exile. Mundanely minding their own business, oblivious to their new visitor's sorrow, the plethora of marine creatures went about their days: tiny fish were eaten by small fish, small fish eaten by big fish, big fish eaten by even bigger fish, and so on and so on. At some point, an opportunistic clan of zebra mussels moved into the lake and began colonizing Albus, along with algae, and various kelps using him for anchoring, while hordes of red and blue crabs dug into the silty muck beneath him, utilizing the immobile man as shelter.

Bobbing into view, *A flock? A school?* of impossibly tiny, translucent jellyfish *boing - boing - boinged* their way past the man. Albus cracked a smile, a few zebra mussels crusting off him as he did. A dim memory of the jellyfish, like flipping open a high school yearbook rotting away in an attic, flickered in his mind. He had seen them before, on a class field trip to some aquarium. He had tried to hold Anna Potato's hand on that trip; she promptly pulled it away. *Clione limacina. Sea Angels*, thought Albus, recalling the scientific name of the jellyfish.

The sea angels had cutesy little wings on each side of their translucent bodies that fluttered as they swam. Their luminous, internal organs were visible to the outside world; as to what role the glowing organelles played in keeping the jellyfish alive, Albus had no idea, but they resembled pulsating fuchsia hearts cribbed off the cover of a sappy Valentine's Day card.

The overwhelming permutations of purpose, form, and color of the lifeforms moving through the waters, was at the very least *impressive*, thought Albus. Leaning in a little closer, crabs scuttling out from under him, Albus could hear the flock of sea angels gloriously singing as they swam; their teensy voices raised up a chorus praising all of creation.

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Around this time, another curious creature was floating across

the aqueous membrane of the lake. The orange and black speckled cheetah-man, Cheshire Cheato, (or just Chet for short), decked out in nothing but jet-black shades, lazily backstroked across the water's surface. Much to his own amusement, Chet would siphon gulps of cool, microbe-rich water into his mouth; pursing his lips together, he would then spurt the water out spraying little fountains into the air. As Chet ejaculated another fountain, he happened to spot a mollusk-encrusted man sitting cross-legged on the lakebed beneath him. Seizing on the opportunity, Chet hollered a piercing *AAA-OOOWWGA* like a submarine announcing its descent, as he leapt into the air with a swan dive, plunging beneath the surface, cheetah paddling his way towards Albus.

"My radical bro-man dude!" exclaimed Cheshire Cheato, appearing in front of Albus. Chet's voice took on the timbre of Macho Man Randy Savage, crowing, "Have a little *taste* of my gnarly Scaldin' Hot, Chicken Nugget Cheese-Os bursting with Ranch Sprinkles, Chipotle Flavor Nards, and Signature Honey Smoked Semen Sauce™!" Chet offered, popping a few of the Cheese-Os into his own mouth, tilting the open sack of snacks towards Albus.

Albus had never met Chet in-person; however, he knew who he was. The cheetah-man was another one of Golgotha's lackeys, his Archduke of Advertising, his Herald of Hype, that ruled over the vast marketing and sales dominion of the almighty elephant's ever-growing empire. The cheetah prided himself on two things: crafting tantalizing treats and always sealing the deal.

Shaking his head as zebra mussels clacked together, Albus politely declined Chet's cheesy offer. Flustered by the refusal of this barnacle-bedecked chump before him, the cheetah-man growled, "These Cheese-Os are lit!" baring his formidable incisors one by one as his lips curled upwards into a supine smile.

Determined to get his slightly curved snack inside this bivalve bro's mouth, Chet pressed his crinkled foil bag into Albus' chest, as water-logged Cheese-Os floated freely into the abyss.

Even snack foods obeyed the rules. Ranch sprinkles studded about the Cheese-O sparkled unnaturally in the dim light as the signature semen sauce dissolved into a milky-white aura surrounding the snack.

Whereas others might have felt compelled by the cheetah's domineering persistence, Albus knew the twat was nothing more than a puffed-up nuisance. Again, Albus politely declined.

Chet slowly raised his jet-black sunglasses in disbelief, as they floated away off his head. No one had ever turned him down in all his existence. The brittle foundation of the cheetah-man's solitudinous fortress of hyper-inflated, alpha-machismo, constructed entirely on his ability to always seal the deal, was crumbling down all around him. He was shaken to his very core by how flippantly this clam-covered freak had declined his divinely beguiling cheesy ambrosia. Chet hightailed it out of there, his tail between his legs; he motorboated his way across the lake to seek out Golgotha and tattle.

Snapped back to the scene around him by the off-putting encounter with the overly pushy cheetah creature, Albus looked down at his clammy hands; it dawned on him how quite ridiculous it all was, really.

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The gloomy clouds hanging oppressively over the body of water started to dissipate, as the clear sanitizing light of acceptance began to filter its way down to the dim, murky lakebed, willfully pressing itself in upon Albus. The Elixabeth he had known was gone and never coming back. The love of his life had disappeared, vanished, dematerialized without a word. *She's just gone.* His only choice was to accept it. His lovingly preserved and carefully maintained world had changed.

Albus frowned, shaking his head; he found himself wondering again if he had made the right choices. Wallowing in exile on the bottom of a lake wasn't going to answer that question. Standing, he shook and plucked the invasive mussels off of him, ripping and grasping at the kelp affixed to him, yanking it off; he kicked towards the surface and swam back to shore. Heading

back towards his cottage he thought, perhaps, it was time he made some changes of his own.

Cleaning out the attic first, he stuffed stuffed animals bereft of love, Beanie Babies stripped of value, and souvenirs from locales he no longer recalled, into overflowing plastic garbage bags. In his den, Albus rummaged through antiquated filing cabinets that had been passed down from his father. Shaking out the contents of yellowed manila folders, graph-paper scrawled with incorrect calculations, crumpled love notes, belated birthday cards, and other parched pieces of parchment, flooded forth flapping to the ground, inundating the varnished wood floor in disarray.

Sifting through mounds of desiccated documents, newspaper clippings with their dates missing, receipts for items rotting away in a landfill, and take-out menus from restaurants that now sold shoes, attentively Albus procured rectangular index cards from the mess, collecting and sorting the cards into neat little stacks. The stiff, white cards were punched through with incomprehensible blocky symbols. Meticulously, Albus scanned through the hole-punched pieces of paper, compiling his time-cards.

To his astonishment, he discovered that he had worked, in some form or fashion, every single day since relocating, even when lounging with Elixabeth at their cottage on weekends or taking his geriatric dog, Argus, for walks around the lake.

It should be noted that Albus Cake wasn't the type of man that worked for the money. In fact, money didn't exist here; well it did, but it was used mostly ironically, streets of gold, props in rap videos, that sort of thing. No, Albus Cake was a man that worked for the sheer pleasure of having something to do. The only real currencies left were time and space.

Maybe I need a vacation, he mused, clear his head, take his mind off of everything. Some time away would do him good, bring into focus the aforementioned nebulous changes he intended to make. His head knew that his wife was gone, though his heart still desperately longed for her, further deluding him-

self into believing that perhaps he would find some clue to her disappearance on his travels.

Riffling back over his timecards, he counted; he had accrued 3,141,592 days, six hours, five minutes, three seconds, five deciseconds, eight centiseconds, nine milliseconds, seven microseconds, nine nanoseconds, three picoseconds, two femtoseconds, three attoseconds, eight zeptoseconds, four yoctoseconds, and so on, and so on, of vacation time. *Not bad*, Albus thought, *I deserve this*.

Penning a hand-written note, should Elixabeth magically return in his absence (a note, that deep down, he knew his wife was never going to read), he pinned the missive to the door of their humming refrigerator held in place with a magnet of the Eiffel tower, a souvenir from their last trip to Paris together. The note read:

*Lixa,
Love you to Mars and back.
Be home soon.*

Eternally yours,

A.B.C.'

.....

In the cottage's master bedroom Albus clicked the strap of his stylish, tri-color fanny pack into place around his waist. He filled Argus' bowl with an indeterminate quantity of kibble as he scratched the ruddy, tired dog about his neck, saying his goodbyes to the nearly deaf hound. Argus forlornly lifted his exhausted head from his chewed-through pillow, beholding his master with cataract-caked puppy dog eyes one last time. As Albus made his way towards the backdoor of his idyllic haven, he took one last look over his right shoulder—and left.

As an author, sharing my work with others is an incredible joy and I cannot thank you enough for being interested in Lord of the Clouds.

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Thank you for reading!

Sincerely,

G.S. Lewis