

We Three Kings

Leon Marks

Will

THE THUNDERSTORM ARRIVED AT DUSK, POLITELY ESCORTED THE sun away, and left clouds and stars to battle for the night sky. They'd said it would be a monster, but its visit was uneventful. Now, Will's mind feels light and liberated, as if he could float skyward. But nothing up there interests him. No galaxy, inhabited or not, can tempt him away from an imminent encounter with Tom. He waits on the beach, gazing at the jetty, its boulders barely detectable in the dark.

He shares the entire beach with a dog with a limp. The white mongrel approaches him, rotates his rope-like tail, sniffs the sea air with pleasure, and circles around once, then again, as if unsettled by the presence of a taller-than-average human who stands watchful in the sand at night. A seagull calls from the ocean, and the dog answers with a single bark. Will romanticizes out of habit that the two creatures are talking about him, debating whether or not he should be trusted. (Of course they agree that he should.) The dog steps near the water, sniffs with great effort, then stretches his front paws forward into the sand, arches his back, and shakes from side to side. He scampers off with a jolly four-pawed gait, his limp now undetectable. Within seconds the tide's shadow engulfs the speck that remains of him.

"That's Fritz," Tom says. Will turns. Tom is wearing an over-sized down jacket, which hugs his chest in shiny green nylon.

"You came," Will says.

"He's hung around here for years," Tom continues. "Don't fall for the limping act. He does it for food. He spends a lot of time at my place because I've always got baloney. I'd offer you my coat, but if I catch a cold I could die. You have an immune system, so you get to freeze your ass off."

Will stares at last into Tom's green eyes, which shine to match his green coat. "I don't mind," Will says, unaware of his own shivering.

"You have a big head," Tom says.

Will doesn't respond, but the remark makes him feel suddenly warmer. He smiles, trying to keep it from becoming a grin. He doesn't want to fall so fast, even though he's survived for twenty-three years by listening to his feelings, and his feelings are telling him to run to Tom without delay. The night before, when they met on the steps of Phantom Pizza, Tom's first word to Will, in response to his flirtation, was "shoo."

"It's square too, like a concrete block," Tom says, cocking his head to the side and scanning Will's lower body, which fits snugly into navy-blue gym pants. "Kind of like your ass."

"Are you always this honest?"

"Withholding information prolongs agony."

"Is that the virus talking?"

"Mmmm," Tom hums, perhaps satisfied by the question. "Everything I say has a little bit of virus in it. It rides my bloodstream into my brain all day long. It pollutes me with evil thoughts."

"So here I stand with the Devil."

Tom smirks. He gazes at the yellow edge of the moon and says, "What happened with the storm? It was supposed to be a bad one."

"It lasted barely ten minutes," Will says. He leans against a pole to which a neglected Massachusetts state flag clings overhead. Flapping in the wind, he can make out the image of the Indian waving his bow and arrow. Cupid was an archer too. If his mother or sister were here, they'd yank him into a car and speed off, lecturing him about being naïve and melodramatic and exposing himself to certain heartbreak. He will ponder what he's getting into, but not tonight.

"You're a very sweet guy," Will says without a second's thought.

Tom turns away, disinterested in himself. "Okay."

It's just a word: *virus*. But it produces silent terror in people, especially mothers and sisters. Will's heard about viruses for a long time, this one in particular, but only now can he picture it, almost touch it, feel it heating up his own blood.

"I'm sorry you're sick."

Tom twists his upper lip as if nobody has ever said these words to him before.

"I still have my sight and my hearing. I can still swim."

"Count your blessings," Will says, wincing at his own words.

"Look," Tom says. Will follows him obediently to a stone bench planted deep in the earth at the rear edge of the beach. The moon isn't enough, so Tom pulls a flashlight from his pocket and shines it on the center of the bench. A tiny brass plaque screwed into the stone is inscribed with one word: "Fritz."

"He has his own bench?" Will asks.

"I got it for him," Tom says. "They installed all these things and sold the plaques to raise money for maintaining the beach."

Will can't help but laugh.

"It was a few hundred bucks, and they wouldn't let me leave the plaque blank," Tom says. "In two years, they'll rip it off and raise the price."

They turn to find Fritz emerging from the darkness and darting toward the bench. *His* bench. He sniffs it at both ends, then glances up at Tom. Will wishes the dog could know. He reaches down to stroke Fritz's ears, and feels a couple of tiny bumps, probably bug bites. Fritz thumps his tail on the sand.

"He doesn't have an owner?" Will asks.

"Not that anyone knows about."

"Then how do you know his name?"

"I gave it to him."

Tom's face disappears. Clouds have blocked the moonlight. Will imagines Tom's eyes gazing at him. They both remain silent for a moment, as if showing respect for the dark. Will hears Tom's breathing:

it sounds slightly labored. Then he feels a hand on his forearm. Tom has found him, and slides his grip down Will's forearm until their thumbs interlock. Tom shakes Will's hand, like a formal greeting, but he doesn't let go. They remain awkwardly attached, and Tom soon places his other hand on Will's back, a little clumsily as if drawn by tiny magnets.

The clouds retreat and Will catches a grin on Tom's lips. The Devil is bashful. They detach.

Tom takes off for the jetty, so Will follows. Tom hops onto the first boulder. Will can tell he's made this journey thousands of times because he barely looks down as he navigates away from shore and toward what feels like the middle of the ocean. Will slips between two sandy boulders. Tom snickers audibly without looking back. Even Fritz blazes past Will, his toenails clicking on each surface.

Minutes later, Tom comes to rest on a very specific pyramid-shaped rock. He lowers his body as Fritz takes a seat at his side. The dog pants beside his green-eyed friend, tail wagging, proud to have arrived so fast. Will is far behind, but he's not embarrassed. He smiles at his battle with the surfaces, frustrated but committed to leaping and lunging, till he reaches Tom's welcoming hands, which steady him as he sits. Neither man nor dog makes a sound until a seagull swoops down, provoking a bark from Fritz.

"You don't mind sitting here with me even though I'm sick?" Tom asks.

"You don't seem sick to me."

Will senses that Tom doesn't understand why some people find him attractive. His face is freckled, his hair is thinning, and his body is average, but Will already finds all other men unremarkable. Had Tom known this, he surely would have thought him idiotic.

"How'd you get it?" Will asks.

"Manuel Hernandez."

Will pushes gently. "Who's he?"

"Mannie. Ten years ago. We were nineteen, and he was a dumb punk. We were just fooling around, but shit happens. He's been riding a guilt trip ever since." Tom pulls a handkerchief from his nylon coat pocket and blows his nose without the slightest embarrassment. "He

comes up here from New York once a month, cooks me dinner as if I'm already some kind of invalid. He tries to clean my place for me, takes my car for a tune-up. Thinks he's my best friend now, and I suppose he is."

The moon is naked now, deflecting the sun's rays onto the jetty at full force. They sit in silence, each finding his own stars above, and when the breeze becomes a powerful wind, they take each other's hands and move closer. Will's so cold that his chin vibrates and his teeth rattle like bouts of machine gun fire. He can't stop it, and might have felt scared if Tom weren't laughing. Tom pulls Will back against his chest and wraps both of them in his shiny down coat. And before the next star pops from infinity, his arms have engulfed Will from behind. Will turns to get warmer. Tom's a heavy breather, and Will likes that. He can hear his aliveness. Tom smiles, and Will savors that smile when he pulls their lips together.

As they hold each other, Fritz resumes his barking at the sea gulls overhead. Will has no way of knowing that before the year is out, he'll look back on this moment and remember the gulls, with their winged perspectives, and wonder if they had seen the tiny red speck on the back of Tom's neck, barely detectable for months to come, just below his hairline, slightly raised, the kind the doctors told him to check for regularly, the kind that was filled with Kaposi's sarcoma and could make forever come much too soon.

Tom

HIS MIND IS HOT, but his body is chilled. He looks down at the skinny arms at his sides, and twitches his fingers to prove he still can. He is tucked up to his chin in the blanket, the one with blue and purple paw prints. They want him to stay warm, even though the window is sealed tight and the snow falling outside will never get close to him, never again. His eyes focus on the yellow roses in the vase on his bureau. The mailman brought them yesterday.

He waits. Light creeps in from the window. He's silent and self-contained. Through the window he can see the brownstones across the street. He can't make out the bricks or mortar, just red blurs. His eyes are weaker now.

Where are they? Maybe he should call out. Then he remembers that he can't speak anymore. Maybe he can get something out. A groan or a whine.

His bathrobe is hanging on the door. Its plaid design is fading fast, just the way he likes it. He doubts he'll ever wear it again. It's a sorry old sight next to his bright orange sunset painting, the one he created to please Will, who gave him the easel and paints for his birthday because, "You make my world beautiful." Good God.

He hears a knock on the apartment door. He waits. It's Will. He hears the rustle of plastic shopping bags in the hallway. Back so soon from his errands? He must have forgotten his keys. Again. How does he get through each day, so absent-minded? Until recently, Tom had to remember an entire regimen of forty pills a day, but Will forgets his keys weekly. Maybe he forgets them on purpose as a strategy to come back home, usually carrying flowers or a card with a poem that's supposed to be profoundly moving. Tom hopes that someday Will will stop trying so hard, stop trying to make life meaningful. And here he is, poking his head in the bedroom door.

"Baby, look what I got for you!"

Tom doesn't want to expend the energy to look, so he keeps his eyes on Will's, waiting for the revelation.

"Blueberries. They were selling them next door."

Will's hand presents a yellow bowl bursting with little blue globes. They look plump and fresh.

"I'll crush them up if you want."

Tom blinks, but not a quick blink. A long tired blink. He isn't hungry, and why does Will have to talk to him like he's an infant?

Behind Will come Mannie and the nurse. They look ridiculously proud of the blueberries too. They surround him. Tom's eyes float slowly from one to the next to the next, landing, of course, on Will, who smiles wide again, squeezing out all his remaining happiness. Tom gazes at him, wishing he too could smile, but his lips are a lost cause. The bowl is placed on his belly. Will selects a berry and holds it up to his face.

"Isn't this a gorgeous one?"

Tom nods slightly, but everyone looks so wanting of acknowledgment that he can't just nod once, but three times, and with clear purpose. To thank them.

Shit. It's coming. The blueberries spill out of the bowl and onto the sheet. His throat can still form sounds of warning.

"Aaaaahhhhh."

"What is it, baby?" Will says. "You have to shit!"

A fast, yet orderly, scrambling ensues. Mannie directs the nurse outside as he hands Will the pan. Will and Mannie lean Tom on his side. Mannie glances quickly at Will, but not to make him self-conscious as he works. Will unbuttons the shorts, slides the pan underneath as far as he can.

"Aaaaahhhhh."

Tom whimpers, his voice muffled by the pillow. Then he begins to cry. He doesn't know why. When it's all out, he sighs. He feels Will begin wiping. With each stroke, Tom whimpers again. He's glad the worst is over. But it isn't. More is coming now.

"Aaaaahhhhh."

"It's okay," Will says. "Let it out."

Will stands up tall and waits. Tom feels it oozing out like toothpaste. They must be able to see the gash on his lower back where the mattress has bitten a chunk from his flesh. He feels Will place a towel over the open sore to protect it from shit. Tom's hand clutches the pillow like it's a body. He can't stop crying, but nobody can hear him anyway.

"Is that it?" Will asks.

Tom's asshole feels raw, and with each stroke of the wet towel he cries out a little louder. When it's clean and powdered, Will pauses and caresses Tom's sweaty head. His hair is falling off like dust now.

"Give me one," Will commands, so Mannie scratches the package open and hands him a diaper. It's the first time. They all knew this was inevitable. They lift his legs.

"Aaaaahhhhh."

When the position is just right, they place him back down. Tom is tired now, and tries hard not to look angry. His pained eyes glance

about the room again. They come to rest on Mannie. He's sweating and looks sexy in his tank top. Then they find Will. He's sweating too, and wiping his hands with a towel. He stares down at Tom and sticks out his tongue playfully.

Tom stretches his fingers and feels the plastic around his waist. It crinkles. He feels the tape fastener. The nurse re-enters and they all stare, waiting for his reaction. He knows that this way is easier for them, so he isn't angry. He accepts it. He doesn't quite smile, but rests his eyes in peace. Will leaves, followed by the nurse. Mannie stays behind. Tom knows that out in the hallway Will is crying. It's okay. It must be painful to see someone you love in diapers. But it's for the best, and they're pretty comfortable. He tugs at the Velcro strip and listens to the sound of attachment, detachment, attachment, detachment, until he falls into a beautiful sleep.

TOM WAKES UP and hears snoring from the bed next to him, where he used to sleep before this hospital contraption. It's Will. He's curled up in a ball with his big head buried in the pillow, a tiny puddle of drool just beneath his lips, just as there's been every night for the past month. Even in the hospital, Will could curl up on the cot and whisper goodnight and within ten seconds he'd be snoring and drooling. This makes Tom happy, that he can still sleep soundly through the night. Sometimes at three in the morning Tom cries out for the bedpan, and Manuel runs in from the other room in his underwear, his hair tousled beyond recognition, his eyes caked with sleepy crust. But Will never rises unless the commotion escalates to a bed change or something more alarming.

Will isn't alone in the bed tonight. His head is cradled by someone's hand. A hand more affectionate than a friend's. Tom pans his glance farther and sees that it's Mannie. He too is sleeping peacefully, his tan face buried in Will's neck and his thick body swirled alongside Will's like a coat. His other hand rests across his chest, grasping for more than just Will's flesh, for something deep inside him that isn't being well served by a crippled husband.

Tom's emotionless for a moment, and blinks hard to shake the

image. But every time he opens his eyes, the caressing hands are still there and Will's snoring sounds more peaceful and he seems to be smiling in his sleep. Tom closes his eyes one last time, hoping the scene will vanish, but instead he senses something new. Someone's staring back at him. It's Mannie. He's woken up and his tired brown eyes are frozen on Tom's face. He waits, as if unsure if Tom's vision is working. He doesn't know if he should move his hand, or say something, so he lowers his head and feigns sleep.

Tom isn't content to play along. He begins to moan. He can't form words but can still convey emotions, even uncertain ones. These sounds make Manuel remove himself at once from the bed and stand by the wall.

Will rises and wipes away his threads of drool. He looks concerned by the expression on Tom's face. He takes Tom's quaking hand, which Tom tries with all his strength to pull away. Will looks tired and pale. He tries to comfort Tom with words, but only a few. Words lack power now. "It's okay. It was just a dream."

Was it? Tom's scalp is sweaty beneath his remaining tufts of hair. Sweat and tears combine so that neither matters. Will kisses his forehead again. He holds his hand tightly, trying to break through the disease wall. *I love you.* He wants Tom to forget everything else. Everything that's not here in this bed right now. So Tom tries. But Will is leaning on his chest, his sores, so Tom opens his eyes wide. Will pulls back and stands up. He reaches down to hold Tom's toe under the sheet. He can't possibly hurt the toe.

Tom is calmer now, his eyes open wider. He thinks about the situation. He knows that Will is loyal and that Mannie is lonely. He knows that sleep stirs the imagination, and imagination stirs the soul. He knows these things, but he is still crippled and melting into his bed, melting away from all of them. He can't speak. He can barely move. Their lips haven't touched for weeks.

"What is it, baby?" Will asks.

Tom struggles to form a look. Something like a smile. He even chuckles, but without sound.

"What is it?" Will happily moves in closer.

Tom makes a more distinct sound. "Cuuuuhhh . . ."

"What? Try again. Go as slow as you want."

"Cuuuuhhh . . ."

"You want me to come? You want me to come to you?"

Will leans in, and Tom tries to shine hopeful eyes.

"What is it?" Will asks.

Tom does it. He puckers. It's slight, but clearly a pucker, ready for a kiss. His fever blisters are clogged and dried with blood and blueberry stains. He hopes the pink of his lips is still visible somewhere, maybe in the corners. Will bends down and kisses him, not just the pink, but everywhere. He smiles wide as he kisses, and when he pulls away:

"Cuuuuhhhh . . ."

So Will's lips fall into Tom's again. He wraps his clean healthy lips around the blisters and the blood and the blueberries. Tom suckles with all his remaining strength. It will be the kiss that has to stay with Will forever. A tear, filled not with despair but with love, falls from Will's eye and drops right into Tom's. Will smiles at the sight of it.

For the briefest moment, Tom looks at Mannie in the corner, and watches as another tear forms. It clings to Mannie's eye with nowhere to go.

Manuel

THE NEXT DAY IS DECEMBER 31ST. Manuel places a paper horn on Tom's nightstand; they'll celebrate at midnight. Tom's stare follows Manuel's every move, from one side of the bed to the other, where Manuel turns a metal crank to raise the hospital bed six inches or so. Normally Manuel would narrate his actions—*I'm just going to raise you up a bit, Tomás, está bien?*—but this morning he refrains. The sound of his voice might anger Tom. He didn't mean to borrow his husband last night, but for the first time he saw Will as something other than *Tom's husband*. Will has such a talent for love. It fills this bedroom; all the visitors have noticed. One of the nurses commented that the apartment smells of love. This is the allure of Will, the light that shines from his heart and pulls people in like eager children.

Still, Manuel is angry at himself. He cannot be the husband. He

must only be an object in the room. In this room, and in every room. He is toxic, and no longer possesses the faith that a man must possess in order to love someone. He did once. But now his affections can only lead to suffering. Love as the opposite of life.

He sprays down the nearby bookshelf with disinfectant, then organizes the medications. He counts the pill bottles—*dos*, *cuatro*, *seis*, *ocho*, *diez*, *doce*—lining them up like soldiers. He rolls up a plastic baggy holding crushed powder. He considers tossing it in the garbage pail, but what if a single grain of that powder will make the difference? He stacks the fresh diapers in the corner and grabs a napkin to clean the lip of the morphine bottle. That's when he hears the snort behind him. Asleep already? He turns to face Tom's stoic glance. His eyes are frozen attentively as he inhales again. The snort was a form of communication. Manuel's fingers rest on the morphine. He takes the bottle in his hand and leans down to stare into Tom's eyes. They are dark yellow with the tiniest glint of green. They look almost translucent, as if coated with some sticky substance waiting to glue them shut for good.

An hour ago, Manuel stood in the kitchen with Will, looking over the paperwork shared among the visiting nurses, adjusting to words like *final stage*, *dementia*, *stop all meds*. Neither of them said a word. Manuel made scrambled eggs and toast with jam. He served Will on a Styrofoam plate with a Christmas tree design, which he'd found in the dusty cabinet above the stove. Then Will went to the living room, where he turned the TV to the music channel. A slow jazz piece: piano and saxophone. Then Will grabbed his jacket and left. "Going for a walk," he muttered on his way out.

"*Tiene dolor?*" Manuel asks Tom quietly. "Do you need some?"

He knows there will be no audible response. He removes the cap from the bottle, inserts the plastic dispenser, and sucks up the bright red liquid. He places the dispenser tip in the corner of Tom's mouth and slowly releases it. As the medicine finds its way to Tom's brain, the two men don't take their eyes off each other. It's been almost ten years; they don't need language anymore. The dispenser is their final partnership.

The plastic dispenser, drained by now of its nourishment, rests against Tom's lips. Manuel asks, "*Un otro?*" If Tom could nod, he would.

Manuel is certain of that. So, with their glances still affixed, Manuel replenishes the dispenser and slides it back into Tom's mouth. Even through the yellow film coating his corneas, Tom's eyes are grateful. Manuel is certain of that too.

"*Un otro?*" Manuel says, quieter this time.

ON NEW YEAR'S DAY, Tom's body is gone. The radiator is relentless, so the apartment is much too warm. Manuel lies back on the hospital bed, massaging the crank that once raised his friend's head so that he would have a more pleasant view of his little room in the world. His tank top is soaked in sweat, but he's showered so there should be no odor. He's very tired, and he feels unhealthy. Like his mind has left his ugly, stale body behind to grieve. His hair is long and messy. His face is unshaven and feels plump with the disease of grief.

He twists the crank until the bed is at sixty degrees. He looks at the pillow and recalls the head that once made its home there. He can still see the imprint. As wind begins to howl and snow lands on the earth, Manuel lies back on the bed and rests his head exactly where Tom did. He sees the flannel robe hanging from its hook. The yellow roses on the bureau. The television set, which hasn't been turned on for weeks. The sunset painting with Tom's tiny signature. He closes his eyes and rests.

"You okay?"

Will stands in the bedroom door with a mop in his hand. Manuel has never seen Will clean before, but he's never watched his best friend carried out in a body bag before either.

"Sí," Manuel says. He sits up.

"You should sleep," Will says.

"No need for sleep."

"Want to help me clean?"

"Sure," Manuel says, feeling stupid. He stands up. Out of the corner of his eye he sees movement outside. When he looks, he has to squint to identify the source: a sea gull on the windowsill. It hops from one foot to the other on the ice, the way humans hop on hot sand. Its beady black eyes dart from side to side, inspecting the bedroom's contents as if on a mission. Manuel leaps to the window and waves the gull away.

Will approaches and faces him. He drops the mop. Manuel sees despair in his eyes. The two men embrace, like the entire world has died. Will shudders and begins to cry. Manuel feels Will's love spilling into him. *Tom's husband*. This is the love that Manuel might have bottled for himself for weeks, months, since Tom became bed-ridden, since Will fell apart.

As Will's tears leak from his eyes, that familiar rhythm pokes at Manuel's heart, the little hammer that pounds noiselessly whenever someone makes him feel alive. It's the gift that Tom gave him many years ago. It means to step away.

It's possible that Tom wanted Mannie to be with Will. That he resigned himself to the idea that his two best friends might end up together. He served his purpose as the bridge between their two lives. It's quite possible Tom thought that.

Manuel unties his arms from Will and steps away. He exits through the bedroom door and doesn't turn back. He raises his head high, content to have borne witness. ◇