

# A Distillation of Grace

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TWELVE GENERATIONS. THE sum is such that two thousand and forty-eight people reduce down to one person over twelve generations if, and only if, each couple have only a single child, and if the conceptions are controlled such that half of all children are of one gender and half the other. We can call twelve, in this context, a magic number, provided of course that we understand “magic” in its forceful sense of a miraculous divine interven-tion in reality, a sacramental thing. In this sense, Jesus Christ was a magician. Shad also.

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HERE IS A conversation between Cole, a young boy of the eighth generation, and his tutor, the Patriarchus, or oldest surviving inheritor of the tradition of Shad. Though only ten years old, Cole was elo-quent and intelligent. “Of course I understand,” he said, “that our world is unusual in the Galaxy—”

“Singular,” corrected the Patriarchus. “Unusual implies that there are some others like us, though few. But there are no other worlds like ours. This is our glory.”

“Singular,” said Cole, and bowed his head in acknowledgment of the correction. “And yet it seems to me,” he continued, “that it is the rest of the cosmos that is unusual, not us. This matter of generations—surely it must be true on every world, just as it is true on ours, that every child has two parents, and every child has four grandpar-ents, and every child has eight great-grandparents, and so on, backward in time...”

“Of course,” agreed the Patriarchus.

“Therefore it seems to me that every world should have many more ancestors than present-day inhabitants. Everywhere there should be more inhabitants than descendents, just as it is on our world. And yet the archives say that on every other world,” and he clucked with astonishment at this indigestible fact, “on every other world the oppo-site is true. There are many more descendents than ancestors. The pyramid is inverted! I cannot understand how that can be.”

“These other worlds,” said the Patriarchus, indulgently, “have not had

the benefit of the wis-dom of Shad, bless his memory. They breed prodigiously, such that each new generation out-numbers even the large number of ancestors. And they interbreed promiscuously, so that people share many of the same grandparents and great-grandparents, and a whole vocabulary of words is needed to describe the tangle, terms such as cousin and nepotism and three-times-removed.” The Patriarchus was old, and tired, and here he paused.

But Cole was possessed of the impatient curiosi-ty of a ten year-old. “And when Shad,” he hurried, “bless his memory, brought the first of us to this world—”

“God had instructed him,” said the Patriarchus, somberly. “The Bible had inspired him. The Holy Spirit possessed him. He brought a population of two thousand and forty-eight people to this world, and gave them his plan. Each was to marry once, and have one child. Each child was to be genetical-ly determined, *in utero*, to be either male or female, with an exact balance between the two. The second generation would be half the size of the first, and each member of it would pair off, one-to-one. Med-ical science—since Shad, bless his memory—”

“—bless his memory—” Cole chimed in.

“—since Shad reveals to us that God approves of all scientific and genetic research insofar as it is conducive to the benefits of His divine plan... medical science is recruited to guarantee the exact balance of the sexes, to ensure that every couple will be fertile, and to preserve the lives of all off-spring. Only in the event of a tragic death may another child be produced, and then only by the parents of the child who has died.” And because this was a teaching session, and not a sermon, the Patriarchus paused here to look sternly at his pupil. “Define tragic death,” he said.

But Cole knew this lesson. “A tragic death is one in which a person dies before passing on their genetic material to their child.”

“And other deaths?”

“—are called glorious deaths, since after one of the Chosen, one of us, has given birth, we are guaranteed a place at God’s right hand.”

“Very good,” said the Patriarchus indulgently, but a little wearily, for he was tired, and the after-noon was a warm one. From where they were sitting, on the verandah of the Patriarchus’s splen-did house, he could see over his own ornamental gardens, with their perfectly circular pond, to the

dark-green topiary beyond.

In the middle distance was a vast arable field across which an automated tractor rumbled along, its oo wheels pressing parallel lines out of the pink clay. Beyond that, purple mountains frayed the line of the horizon, enormously distant and yet vivid, jewel-brilliant, seemingly close enough to reach out and touch. The sky was a flawless mauve. The Patriarchus took simple pleasure in this vista. His charge, the young Cole, took it for granted, of course, as children do with such splendid facts of nature. Never looked at it. Perhaps he would appreciate it when he was older.

A wind puckered the surface of the pond briefly, and passed on.

“Have there been any tragic deaths in your generation, Patriarchus?” Cole asked.

“None, thanks to God, and thanks to Shad-bless-his-memory,” the old man replied. “And none in my child’s, or my grandchild’s, or in your generation either. We take good care of our people on this world. Every soul is precious, for each contributes his essential holiness to the final product, the road to the Unique.”

“Will you tell me, Patriarchus,” said Cole, after a pause, “about the Unique?” He asked this question tentatively, because he knew that the Unique partook of the nature of divine mystery, and as such it should not be the business of idle chatter.

“I shall tell you what you know already,” replied the Patriarchus, “and that should suffice you. You are eighth generation, and your partner is decided.”

“Perry,” said Cole happily, for Perry was pretty, and Cole looked forward to their marriage with pleasure.

“You and Perry will have a child, a ninth generation. He, or she, will pair and have a child and that child, your future grandson or granddaughter, will be more blessed than us, for he or she will be the grandparent of the Unique itself. That child will give birth to one of the Unique’s parents, and will be alive, should God will it, still be alive when the Unique is born!”

“And when the Unique is born...?”

“Then Shad’s purpose will have worked itself out in this cosmos,” said

the Patriarchus. “A new grace will enter the universe. And this Unique, this he or she, will be the precise sum of all the holy people who have lived and worked and wor-shipped on Shad’s World.”

But this did not tell Cole anything new. This matter of new Grace was kindergarten theology. He wanted more precision—the Unique as a blast of spiritual flame, God like a pillar of light burst-ing from the planet’s surface, something vivid and fireworky to feed the hunger of his ten-year-old imagination for spectacle. But the Patriarchus’s eyes were closing, and Cole knew enough to leave the old man to his nap.

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COLE, IN TIME, married and had his child, a boy called Parr. And Parr, in due course, married and had a son, called Medd. Cole, in due course, became the Episcopus, the second most senior position in the community of Shad’s World. And then, when the existing Patriarchus died a glorious death, Cole himself became the Patriarchus.

Life continued in its divinely preordained groove. Every year brought the birth of the Unique closer.

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THERE WAS A problem.

Medd was fourteen. He had been raised in the fullest knowledge of his holy position, for he would be one of the grandparents of the Unique. He would almost certainly be alive and hale when the Unique was born.

Yet Medd was a contrary boy. He repudiated his holy calling. He absented himself from school, and ran wild in the woodland, making huts for himself, climbing trees, killing fish in the rivers and cook-ing them, caked in mud, inside the ashes of an open fire.

He had been allotted his wife at birth, of course, and being of the tenth generation, there was a sim-ple choice of two—for his generation was only four strong. So close they were to the Unique! Bless the memory of Shad. He was to marry a girl called Rhess, exactly his age, a devout, dark-faced little girl, who looked disdainfully as Medd threw one tantrum or another, in schoolroom or in church. She did not like Medd. Yet she accepted her holy destiny, and was reconciled to the notion of becoming his wife.

He, however, was not reconciled. "I do not love her," he said.

He had fitted up a transceiver from various tech-parts, and had narrowbanded a connection to a Flatship passing not far from their system, sweep-ing for Gateways. From a friendly AI upon this ship, Medd had downloaded a bundle of old liter-ature, old Earthly poems and plays. These he read avidly, memorizing large portions, such that when the church elders found and deleted his cache he still had great swathes of poetry in his mind.

It was, the Patriarchus thought, from these for-bidden poems that he had learned the notion of sexual love. "I do not love her," Medd declared, with the absolute certainty that is often character-istic of the young adult. He was fourteen years old and knew everything, past, present and future, without embarrassment of uncertainty. "I never will. I cannot marry her."

Then, later, when the absolute necessity of this marriage was pressed and pressed upon him, he changed his tack. "It would be a sin," he announced. "A sin to marry a woman I did not love. God is love, as it says in the Bible. Wouldn't it go against the nature of God to enter into such a marriage?"

"And you believe," countered the Episcopos, "that you, at fourteen, understand the nature of God better than the whole of Shad's holy Church?"

"Yes!" cried Medd, fire in his eyes.

"You will marry this girl," said the Episcopos. "It is the will of Shad, bless his memory."

"You do not know the will of Shad!" Medd declared, fiercely.

"If you do not marry her and have your allotted child," said the Episcopos, angrily but with tears of frustration and fear in his eyes, "then the whole of Shad's divine plan will come to nothing!"

"I don't care," yelled Medd. "I don't love her!"

Every attempt to persuade him broke upon the anvil of this fiercely spoken statement. But is she not comely? Is she not devout? I don't love her! Do you want to be responsible, you alone in your self-ishness responsible for bringing the whole plan crashing down? I don't love her! Do you want to live a life of celibacy and barrenness?

“No,” said Medd, becoming calmer. “No, I shall leave this world, somehow. I shall travel the stars, and find my lover there. My true lover.” But why travel from home, when you have a wife already chosen for you? I don’t love her!

This cussedness on Medd’s part rather spoiled the mood of the New Year’s party. You see, as the year AD twenty-seven-hundred dawned, there was a special mass, and afterward a gathering, dance, and chess tournament. But the mood was subdued, and several members of the congregation cast sorrowful looks at Medd, as he was absorbed in his chess game. “Twenty-seven-hundred is only a number,” he said. “An arbitrary number, after all. It is not intrinsically more special than twenty-six-ninety-nine, or twenty-seven-oh-one.” Nobody was disposed to discuss the point with him.

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IT WAS NOT unprecedented that members of the congregation of Shad’s World sometimes wrestled against their destiny in this way, especially at that emotionally volatile period we call teenage. Still, it was the Patriarchus’s fundamental duty to guard Shad’s holy plan, this distillation of twenty thousand and forty-eight holy people into one Unique person over twelve generations, and so it fell to him to talk to the boy, to explain to him the consequences of so terrible a decision. He summoned Medd to his house, and waited upon his porch for his arrival.

It was a mild morning. The wind rummaged in the leaves of the fat-headed oak tree in the garden—a tree grown from a conker brought by the first settlers. The tree was a symbol of the connection between the newest generation and the first. The sound of the wind in the leaves was exactly the sound of rushing water. Medd contemplated the precision of this aural echo.

Medd arrived, finally, two hours late. He was not apologetic.

“You wished,” he said, sulkily, “to speak to me, Patriarchus?”

“Yes, grandson,” said the Patriarchus. “Come inside, please.”

As they stepped through into the cool hallway, Medd said, “You will try to persuade me of the necessity of marrying Rhess. But I do not love her. Nothing you can say will change that.”

“I think I understand,” said the Patriarchus, “the nature of your feelings for poor Rhess. You have cut her deep, you know; cut her to the heart, with your rejection. Don’t you think she loves you?”

Medd had never considered the question from this perspective. He followed the Patriarchus through to the sitting room, and took a chair. “I do not know,” he said.

“There are many things you do not know,” said the Patriarchus. “Things that I do know, by virtue of my position here as the Patriarchus. Shall we talk of them?”

It was on Medd’s tongue to say I do not love her! again, but he checked himself. “You mean, not talk of Rhess?”

“Talk of the Unique,” said the Patriarchus. “Are you not curious?”

Of course Medd was curious.

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THEY DRANK YELLOW tea together and for a while sat in silence. Shortly the Patriarchus sat forward in his chair. “Have you thought much of the Unique?” he asked.

“Patriarchus,” replied Medd. “A little. I have, a little.”

“Of course you have. And what do you think will happen when she, or he, is born?”

Medd shrugged. “Miracles?” he hazarded.

“Grace,” said Patriarchus.

“Of course, grace,” said Medd. “We learnt all about that in kindergarten.”

“All about it?” said Patriarchus. “I doubt that.”

The room was long and narrow, with tall spire-shaped windows along one of the walls. A low table filled the space between the chairs of the Patriarchus and Medd.

“I don’t know,” said Medd. “When the Unique is born—will the whole

world shine with light, the glory revealed? Will the congregation of the blessed be able to fly through the sky? I don't know."

"Something very powerful will happen," said Patriarchus. "Twelve holy generations distilled down to a single person. The birth of this single person, the sum of these devout generations of ancestors, will be a powerful event. You know this to be true."

Medd said nothing. He stared at the floor.

"It is because the Unique is so powerful a prospect," the Patriarchus continued, "that you take a private joy in threatening to block it. For, without your marriage to Rhess and the begetting of your child, the Unique cannot be born. It flat-ters your pride to think that you can say yes or no to this thing."

"I do not—" Medd started sulkily.

"—love her, I know," the Patriarchus said. "Let us not talk of that. Let us talk of grace. What do you know of grace?"

Medd opened his mouth, and looked up quickly, ready with some sharp reply. But the words died on his tongue. "I know a little, Patriarchus," he said, humbly.

"Grace is what the Unique will be," said Patri-archus. "It is what the birth of the Unique will signify. A nova of grace. And do you think that grace travels through space according to the logic of Einstein's constraints? Do you think that grace is something like light, or gravity, or radio waves, to pass only slowly through space? No. Grace passes instantly—spreads at once through the whole cosmos, spreading out from this person, at this time. Shad, bless his memory, teaches us so. Grace is part of God, and surpasses the physical laws of the cosmos. Grace is miraculous and instantaneous."

Somebody passed by outside one of the win-dows, and Medd looked up. But, whoever they were, they had passed on.

"But," the Patriarchus continued, "we still live in the Einsteinian universe. Grace may transcend that, but matter cannot, and you and I are matter as well as soul. We cannot travel faster than light, except through the Gateways. And travel through the Gateways is not instantaneous—harmonic multiples of light speed. We cannot accelerate faster than light in the space of this cosmos, and we cannot travel instantaneously. Do you know why?"



“It is simply how things are,” suggested Medd.

“True. But another way of saying so is that to travel instantaneously would violate cause and effect. We would arrive before we set off—because that is what time is, that ordering of cause and effect. That is why the Einsteinian constant exists, to preserve that, to preserve those things, cause, effect, happening in that order—”

Medd broke in. “But I do not love her,” he said.

The Patriarchus twitched his nose, like a rabbit, perhaps in annoyance at the interruption. “To travel,” he continued, undistracted, “instantly in our space would be to travel back in time. Back,” he added, holding up his forefinger, “in time.”

“I am not talking of time,” said Medd. “I am talking of love—”

“To travel five light years instantly would be to arrive five years in the past.”

“Patriarchus,” said Medd. “I appreciate your kindness in speaking to me—in explaining this to me—but—”

The Patriarchus’s finger was still raised. “To travel a thousand light years in an instant would be to travel back a thousand years in time. To see a star a thousand light years distant is to see it as it was a millennium ago. And so you can see how grace, emanating from the Unique, will pass back through time as it passes through space. And to what end will it travel, forward in space, backward in time? And to what end?”

But Medd didn’t care to what end. He spoke his talismanic words, the words that distilled his own will to refuse. “I do not love her.”

He rose to go. And suddenly the walls seemed to spring at him from three sides, rubbery membranes cast from apertures in the walls and trapping him in a muscular web. He tumbled to the floor, wrapped tightly. “Patri—” he cried, suddenly very afraid.

The Patriarchus had not moved from his chair, and looked down at the wriggling bundle at his feet. “You do not love Rhess,” he said.

Medd struggled, but the membrane only tightened around him. It filtered light poorly, pinkly, and he couldn’t make out the Patriarchus’s form.

Suddenly hands grabbed him on two sides, and he was lifted. Muffled, the Patriarchus's voice came again.

"But we do not need your love," he said. "We only need your sperm, and that is easily harvested. Rhess will give birth to your child."

"Patriarchus!" Medd called, chokingly. "Pa.,! Pa...!"

"When so much hangs in the balance?" said the Patriarchus. "So much—should we allow your teenage emotional vagaries to interfere with the plan? With Shad's divine plan?"

Medd felt himself carried, bumpily, and deposit-ed on some surface. The Patriarchus's voice accompanied him.

"You know how far this world is from Earth. Did you think it was a coincidence that Shad, bless his memory, brought us to this world, of all worlds? That God provided this planet at exactly two thousand seven hundred and seventeen light-years from Earth? Can't you guess when the Unique will be born? Can't you see how far back in time his grace will pass? And only think of the events it will make blossom as it passes instantly past innumerable worlds! The mystery of it, the necessity of it, the beautiful strangeness of it. Understand the universal significance of the effect it will have upon one particular fetus on one particular planet, on the home world, a long time past!" the Patriarchus chuckled. It was difficult for Medd to hear through the constricting material of the membrane that wrapped him. "When you understand the final purpose of Shad's plan," the Patriarchus continued, "perhaps then you can see how foolish it is to set your glandular vagueness against such a plan—such a cosmic plan. Can you see? What can your desires, or even your life, weigh in the balance against such an outcome?"

Medd felt something sharp cut through the membrane and press against his groin. "I'm sorry," said the Patriarchus again. "This isn't what I want. This is necessity."

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"I HAVE BEEN worrying, lately," said the Patri-archus. "About one aspect of the teaching."

"At your age too!" said the Episcopos, mildly. "Don't you find yourself surpassing worry as you get older? Shad, bless his memory, has provided for everything. I find that a comforting thought."

The Patriarchus and the Episcopus were sitting on the broad patio of the Patriarchus's house, with a view down over gardens and fields all the way to the plum-tinted mountains on the horizon. The white moon shone like a second sun as the evening grew. Their table was laid with glasses of wine-lees tea, and dozens of tiny baked muffins no bigger than thumbnails.

"Shad," said the Patriarchus, eventually, "bless his memory," and he paused. Then he looked at the sky, and spoke carefully. "Shad wrote that the creation of the Unique would sum all the genetic qualities of the twenty-fourty-eight holy people who settled this world."

"Genetic qualities," agreed the Episcopus.

"And if," the Patriarchus went on, cautiously, "instead of merely genetic qualities—what if the Unique is the sum of all qualities? Of every action and thought of all of the people who have ever lived on this world?"

The Episcopus grunted as he lifted his tea-glass, which might have been a confirmation or a rebuttal.

"Such seems to me," the Patriarchus continued, "not only possible—but, since we are talking of the divine—it seems to me necessarily true. Don't you agree? A necessary function of divinity?"

"Necessary," said the Episcopus, "because we are talking of the divine?"

"Exactly. The divine is more than the genetic. Of course. Shad—"

"Bless his memory."

"—his memory—would have agreed with that, surely."

The Episcopus was silent for a while, watching the gathering sunset. "And then?"

"Well. I worry, perhaps, that all the thoughts and—actions—of all the people who have ever lived, or who live now, on this world will be dis-tilled into the Unique. The bad as well as the good. The violent and death-dealing as well as the pure. And will this not flavor the grace that passes out?"

"Perhaps so," said the Episcopus, after a long pause.

“And does that not worry you? So much vio-lence, kneaded into the dough of this grace?”

“I find,” said the Episcopus, eventually, “that, as I get older, I trust more and more to Shad. He knew how his plan would work out. He must have anticipated the bad as well as the good. Both must be necessary. Perhaps a messiah must possess a will to destroy, as well as a will to love. Perhaps we need also a messiah with a whip. A messiah who is a torturer. Or perhaps your worries are misplaced. It is not I,” he said, looking straight up at the evening sky, “not I who knows the answer to that.”

Above them, an automated jet-plane left its trail on the zenith, like a white slit in the purple sky. Only very faintly, and seemingly not connected with its slow passage, could the faint rumble of its scramjets be heard.

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