

## The Invisible Hand · *Leslie Pietrzyk*

6:45 P.M. THE AQUARIUM CLOSES

The most basic law of economics is “supply and demand,” which states that the less you have of something the more valuable it becomes. Like time. Of course the examples in the economics textbooks are less dramatic. I remember widgets. Guns and butter.

“Time to go.” I pass through clusters of families, murmuring. “Time to leave the aquarium.” I say it so soft that it becomes their idea instead of mine, almost a whisper.

These families look so normal.

A little girl touches my hand. “Where’s the bathroom, sir?” She’s wearing tights and patent leather shoes. Anyone would agree she’s cute.

Her mother turns and grabs her by the wrist, says, “Sweetie, he’s just the janitor. Don’t call him ‘sir.’” She says it like I can’t hear her, though I’m less than a foot away.

On my last employee evaluation, my boss wrote: “Tends to abstraction.” When I asked what that meant, she said, “You forget to remove gum wads out of the drinking fountains.”

None of the janitors here at the Baltimore Aquarium thought they’d be janitors. We were certain we’d end up rock and roll guitarists or NBA stars or radio deejays. Anything except janitors. I have an all-but-dissertation PhD in economics.

I’ve been on the night shift for about a year. Day shift means you’re mopping up overflowing toilets or kids’ barf. Sweeping the cafeteria and hauling bags of garbage. Night shift is vacuuming and cleaning gum out of drinking fountains. Wiping fingerprints off fish tanks. Time slows during night shift so you think there’s plenty of it. I like to watch the fish at night. They don’t sleep, they circle those aquariums like it’s something new to them.

“Hey, Professor.” Dale slaps my hand in greeting. “I gotta cut out early. Mind?”

It’s not really a question because he knows I don’t mind. I never mind anything. Behind my back they say, “Too many drugs during the ’70s.” I let them think drugs. I let them think ’70s. It seems less personal.

9:15 P.M. THE STATE MANDATES A FIFTEEN MINUTE BREAK

I always break at 9:15. I take the service elevator back down to the first floor where I watch the rays and sharks circle the big tank while I drink vending machine coffee. The rays are my favorite. Despite their appearance, despite names like Cownose Ray and Bluntnose Ray, they have an odd sort of dignity, their own way of sailing through the water, like kites let loose in too much blue sky. Like butterflies or birds. But mostly like something I don't know what it is, something I've seen and forgotten.

I sit in the semi-dark and watch the rays glide, and I sip my coffee and think about my nine-year-old daughter, Amanda, who perhaps knows many things, but doesn't know what it's like to watch the rays at night while thinking of nothing much beyond their movements.

There are many things I used to know. I remember the law of diminishing returns. After a certain point, the capital or labor a corporation invests in itself will not result in proportionate gains. In other words, the more you put into something, the less you get out of it—after this certain point. Vicky, Amanda's mother, quickly learned how this principle applies to marriage. Nevertheless, knowing this failed to solve our problems.

10:00 A.M. AA

I attend an AA meeting once a week. There's excellent coffee with real cream, and cinnamon buns brought by a recovering pastry chef.

I sit in the back, clap when I'm supposed to. But mostly I use the time to remember. How when Amanda was a baby she chewed on my second finger but never the first. How my father called himself daddy-o, as in "Your daddy-o has to hit the hay," embarrassing me in front of my friends; how the last conversation I had with him before he died he concluded by saying, "Time for your daddy-o to get himself off the phone and into bed." Odds and ends that add up to nothing, but thinking of them in the midst of someone else's story about spinning out of control makes them seem important.

Before Amanda was diagnosed with leukemia, Vicky came to these meetings. We sat on opposite sides of the room, and if she didn't leave early, I would, so we wouldn't have to talk. By then she'd already said she had nothing to say to me. But sometimes Vicky sat where the sun shone through the window and her skin glowed until someone got up and closed the blind.

Today a woman confesses she fed her children nothing but dry Cheerios for three weeks when she was drinking. I remember how Amanda loved Cheerios when she was a baby. We poured a pile onto her highchair tray and she gobbled them all up, cramming them into her mouth with her wet, slippery fingers, pounding the tray for more. “That’s healthy,” the doctor told us. “Nothing to worry about.”

I haven’t had a drink in one and a half years. That’s the thing about me that’s most important to the people in this room. Not my name, not my job, not which university I attended, not that my daughter is dying. Just that I haven’t had a drink in one and a half years. It all comes down to “how long, how many days-weeks-months-years?” As if time is something to stretch wide from hand to hand.

#### 4:00 P.M. AMANDA ON THE PHONE

She’s sighing exactly the way I’ve heard her mother sigh, like a pointed weapon you jab. Amanda says, “But you promised.”

I don’t make promises anymore. I say, “I’m sorry, honey. It will have to be next Saturday.”

“Next Saturday I’m going to Janna’s birthday party,” she says. I imagine Vicky standing close by, her face getting tighter and more pinched as this conversation lingers, thinking, The bastard, collecting ammunition for the team of therapists she’s got on her side. Amanda says, “Dad!” stretching the word into two syllables.

I’ve forgotten what we’re talking about, what I’ve allegedly promised. “The Saturday after that,” I say.

“I might be dead by then,” Amanda says.

Vicky in the background: “Don’t say that, Amanda.”

There’s no answer except that we might all be dead by then—not what Amanda or Vicky want to hear.

The blunt click of call-waiting interrupts, and Amanda says, “There’s another call. Good-bye,” and she hangs up.

Five minutes later, the phone rings. Before I can even say hello, Vicky says, “That was a shitty thing to do. You promised to take her tonight for crabs. I counted on that; I made plans, and now I’ll have to cancel them to stay home with her. Is that what this is about? You don’t want me going out with other men? You begrudge me any bit of happiness?”

“I begrudge you nothing,” I say, but the word “begrudge” seems insincere, so I add, “I want you to be happy.” And I do. “But the fact is, I have to work tonight. I’m filling in for someone.”

“That stupid job,” she says.

Has health insurance that covers Amanda, I could have added. And you and all your therapists, but she’s crying.

“I hate what my life is,” she says. Because of the insurance thing, we can’t get divorced until Amanda gets better. Or dies.

I say, “Amanda can stay with me at the aquarium while I work, and then I’ll drop her off at the house. I’ll stay overnight with her even. You can be out as long as you want, all night. Dance till dawn. Be as happy as you want to be.”

“I can’t do that.” But how she said it made me know she’d decided that she could and would.

It was economist Adam Smith’s contention that the market is ruled by an “invisible hand,” that we produce goods and services out of economic self-interest, and this self-interest is what sustains the economy and makes it grow. The butcher and baker and candlestick maker don’t produce their products because they’re good people, Adam Smith said, but because they’re greedy. And we benefit from their greed.

I really do want Vicky to be happy. I also want Amanda to come to the aquarium.

#### 9:15 P.M. AMANDA WANTS TO SEE THE RAIN FOREST

Amanda is tired of watching the rays flit and dive. “They don’t look like fish,” she says.

“Plenty of things don’t look like what they are,” I say.

“Well, fish should look like fish,” she says. She’s wearing an old Orioles baseball cap, a stained sweatshirt, fancy sneakers, chewing a wad of pink gum; she could be any kid. Not this particular kid, not my kid—not my kid who’s dying of leukemia. But look at her brown eyes, just like mine. The way she crooks her neck to examine something more closely. How she smiles lopsided. All that is Amanda, my child. But what I see are blood cells, cancer, long needles, endless charts and tests.

I say, “The rays are my favorite.”

So she sits down again, and we’re quiet until a minute later she says, “I’m bored.”

Maybe it's different when you're a child who's dying. Maybe every minute should do more than the minute before.

"Want to go up to the rain forest?" I ask. It's a special exhibit on the glassed-in top floor of the aquarium: a working replica of a rain forest, with animals, birds, lizards, jungle, rain. The guides call it an ecosystem, where each individual thing is linked to the others. "Like a puzzle, you need all the pieces," they say, "or it won't be complete." Once I came in early and took the tour, and that's what I remember. I say to Amanda, "You'll like it," and I start walking so she has to follow me. I want to take her to the rain forest; I want to show her that though there's no reason for me to go there as a janitor, I have a key that gets me through every door. Perks.

The only way up to the rain forest is by escalator, which is shut down at night. So Amanda and I begin the long walk, and I'm hoping this works, that she likes it, that my key fits, when suddenly she says, "Mom still loves you."

I'm ahead of her so she can't see my face. I pretend I didn't hear to see if she'll say it again. She doesn't, and then it's been too long for me to turn around and ask her what she means. So we keep clumping; it's about a three-story climb, and I turn to ask Amanda if she needs a rest. She's a ways behind me, looking down at each step, and she doesn't see me stopping to watch her until she bumps into me. "Ooph," she says. Her breath is raspy. I want to fold her up and tuck her safely in my pocket.

Instead I say, "Your daddy-o's getting old. He needs a rest."

She says it again. "Mom still loves you." The words wait for me.

I push my fingers through my hair. Amanda looks towards the bottom of the escalator. There's the rush of water pumping up to the rain forest in the pipes running behind the wall.

Finally I say, "Did she tell you that?"

Amanda won't look at me, but she nods. After a moment she asks, "You love her, don't you?"

"No," the safest, simplest answer.

"Yes you do," she insists. "You have to."

"I'm sorry," I say.

"But she loves you. She said so."

I don't remember what it's like for Vicky to love me, it was that long ago that she did. "No."

Amanda whispers, "You're not divorced."

I don't say anything.

"So you must still love Mom."

"Nothing is that simple," I say. But of course many things are. Supply and demand. Diminishing returns. "Some day you'll understand," and I don't finish.

There's a moment where all we hear is water rushing to the rain forest, and then Amanda pushes past me and stomps up the escalator. At the top she leans against the locked door. "I hate you," she shouts down at me. "I hate you, hate you, hate you; I hate you!" Her voice seems faraway—an echo, not a voice.

Of course an economist considers neither love nor hate. Only the market determines prices, wages, products. The market answers every question. I say, "Hold on, Amanda, I'll unlock the door."

She shakes her head, turns away from me, stomps her foot. Nobody else I know stomps their foot when they're angry. I want to laugh, she looks so cute, so certain. It's the way she was from the beginning, stubbornly adorable, adorably stubborn. Remember this.

Starting up the stairs, I get through three before stopping again and looking at her. She stomps her foot. Something about this moment I want to hold onto—Amanda screaming at me, stamping her foot, has forgotten she's dying. But as soon as I realize that, I realize I'd forgotten, too.

The rest of the stairs go fast.

I put one hand on her shoulder, sort out the key with my other, unlock the door. Amanda pushes her way through and hurries along the asphalt path. I follow more slowly. The rain forest is hot and damp, a slap with a wet towel, and except for the rush of water, it is still. Of course—the birds are asleep, the animals and lizards hiding. Nothing seems to be alive in here.

"Amanda," I call. "Where are you?"

I follow the footpath, twisting and curving my way through tatters of mist, climbing the wooden stairs to the observation deck. There's Amanda, looking through the glass walls at the lights of the Inner Harbor and downtown Baltimore spread out before her like it's a step away.

I look too, wait for whatever's next.

Amanda says, "She got drunk and said it last week."

“She’s drinking again?”

“Just that one night.”

“Don’t let her drink,” I say. “You know what happens when—”

She starts to cry. “Hey, I’m only a kid,” and heavy rain falls from the ceiling, and I wrap my arms around Amanda, trying not to notice how thin she is, how breakable her bones have become. As I hug her, her cap slides backwards off her head, and I kiss where her hair used to be.

I hold on as tight as I dare. There’s nothing to say as rain pours down.

### 10:30 A.M. VICKY GETS BACK

Amanda’s watching videos, I’m making pancakes. Vicky comes through the side door, yawning, tossing down her purse. Her skin is dull like dry sand.

She looks at me like she wishes I was anyone else. “Thanks for taking care of her,” she says.

I hold up the half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel’s I found in her underwear drawer, unscrew the cap. The smell bites into me as dark liquid gurgles down the drain. Whiskey was my drink, and there’s the glass in my hand, ice clinking, a woman’s laugh from across the bar, smoke curling upwards off a cigarette that’s been in the ashtray too long; all the details are there, remembered.

“Oh,” she says, and I’m sure she knows exactly what Amanda told me. “Oh dear.”

I rinse out the bottle for recycling and then turn back to the stove, where I flip my first batch of pancakes, stir the warming maple syrup.

Vicky says, “All this is so hard on me.”

I say, “I’ll be better,” but she looks like she wants more. Though she must know the market value of my promises, I say, “Promise.”

“We’ll both be better,” Vicky says. “This time is different.”

I imagine Amanda in the other room straining to listen to each word, what it is, the way it’s spoken. I can’t stop myself: “Every time is different. Isn’t it?”

She says, “You won’t even try.”

In the silence that follows, the pancakes scorch, and I stuff them down the garbage disposal. When I grind them, the smell of whiskey comes at me. The morning’s stale.

Vicky says, “How could I forget why I hate you—even for a minute? God damn it.”

Amanda comes in just then and looks from Vicky to me and back. Amanda’s the first one to speak: “The aquarium was cool at night,” she says. “Dad took me up to the rain forest. All the animals and birds were sleeping. It was the quietest place I’ve ever been.”

“That’s nice, honey,” Vicky says.

“It’s different during the day,” I say. “Flying all around are birds colored like a box of crayons—red, blue, yellow, green. There are monkeys and lizards and long snakes coiled across tree branches. If you look close you can find the sloth; it sleeps twenty-three hours a day. Amanda, I’ll take you sometime to see the rain forest during the day; that’s when it’s really alive.”

“Okay,” she says. “But I’ll always remember how it was at night. Quiet like a church.”

Vicky looks at me like she’s accusing me of wasting our daughter’s time.

I say, “Breakfast is ready.”

We eat pancakes together; no one says much, and then I leave.

### 3:35 P.M. VISITING HOURS ARE ALMOST OVER

The hospital is never quiet. Doctors tease about golf scores as they pass through the halls; nurses gossip at their stations; someone is being paged; men and women in white lab coats race down hallways; volunteers wheel squeaky carts from room to room; visitors speak cheerfully, saying anything to coax a smile from the person they’re visiting.

Vicky sits on the only chair in the room, by the window, holding her purse on her lap. Amanda is asleep in the bed. A talk show plays on the TV, but the volume’s turned so low I can’t hear what anyone’s saying.

“Dad.” Amanda doesn’t open her eyes.

“He’s right here,” Vicky says.

“Thought you were asleep,” I say, perching on the edge of the bed.

She shakes her head, eyes still closed. “You finally came,” she says.

“I stopped by on other days,” I say. “You were asleep.”

Vicky lets out a huffy sigh and looks out the window.

“I remember,” Amanda says, opening her eyes.

A silence stretches too long. I’d be happy even if Vicky said something, but she’s still staring out the window, fiddling with the straps of her purse.



“A baby dolphin was born at the aquarium,” I say. “There’s a contest for what to name it, and I voted for Amanda.” My voice is jolly. I hate the sound of it, the feel of the words leaving my mouth.

Amanda says, “A dolphin needs a cool name like Sparky or Flash.”

“What’s wrong with the name Amanda?” I ask. “I chose it.”

Vicky says, “I chose it.” She’s still turned towards the window.

“She gave me a list of names to choose from,” I say to Amanda. “Mom kept telling me to pick one, but I wanted to wait until you were born to see which fit you best.”

“What were the other choices?” Amanda asks.

“Rose,” Vicky says. “Hannah. Jill. Patricia. Julia. Brenda.”

“I like Rose,” Amanda says. “Dad, why didn’t you choose Rose?”

I say, “Rose is an old lady knitting in a rocking chair. She’s got sixteen cats that pee on the carpet, and she eats tuna fish every day. She keeps her teeth in a glass in the bathroom.”

Amanda’s supposed to giggle or at least smile, but she says, “And Amanda is a girl in the hospital. Dying.”

Vicky won’t look at me. A commercial I’ve seen for frozen waffles comes on the TV. I can’t hear the words, but I know the song. It jangles through my head.

“Is that what you were thinking when you chose Amanda, Dad?”

“Of course not,” I say.

“Don’t let them name the baby dolphin Amanda,” and I’m afraid she’s going to cry, but she just looks at me with my own brown eyes. “Promise,” she says.

“Promise.”

Before I go, Amanda says she wants to ask me something in private. Vicky gives me a look I’ve seen that means “don’t blow this” and then she leaves the room.

Amanda says, “What about how Mom said she still loves you?”

“She didn’t mean it,” I say.

“I want you two to live together,” she says.

I shake my head. “We can’t.”

Amanda says, “It’s my dying wish.”

“Stop it,” I say. “You’re not dying.” I don’t know why I say that. The doctors agree, the specialists agree; I read it in the charts, the reports, the way the nurses smile at her.

She says, "My dying wish is for you and Mom to live together again." She sounds like someone I never knew. "If it's my dying wish you have to do it."

I glance at my watch and walk out of the room. I think I hear Vicky calling my name, shouting down the hallway after me, but I don't turn around. I don't look back. I go straight to the elevator and the doors slide open for me just as I get there. Someone's even punched "1" already.

#### 12:15 A.M. I FINISH FOR THE NIGHT

There are people who think the economy is a zero-sum, meaning that if I earn more money someone will earn less. That there is only so much to go around, like a pie. I remember thinking that anyone who bought into that was stupid. The economy can expand.

So because I've had more time to live doesn't mean that's why Amanda had less.

Dale brought his girlfriend in with him to work, the kind of girl with a voice that's too young to fit her body. Some men really like that. Her name is Rose. When introduced I said, "Coincidence," without explaining.

She'd never been to the aquarium and wanted to see what the fuss was about, so he's showing her around. I don't care, the work's nearly done. Just a matter of putting away equipment, signing out.

Vicky calls me every day now. Or I call her. We sit together at AA. She told everyone the story about the booze I poured down the drain, about Amanda dying, about falling asleep in the hospital cafeteria where no one could find her to tell her Amanda was calling her name. Everyone clapped afterwards.

As I listened to Vicky tell her story, I remembered this: At our wedding fourteen years ago, I dropped the ring as I was about to slide it on Vicky's finger. Somehow it took a hop down the steps and kept rolling all the way to the front pew, stopping at my father's feet. So he picked it up, walked to where we stood, and held out the ring. Vicky slipped her finger into it. Later I teased her that she actually married my father. Even later she told me her therapist said it indicated a lack of commitment on my part. Now it just seems sort of funny.

The rays dip and dive, dip and dive. I determine no pattern to their movements. Just moving for the sake of moving. They all look the same to

me, big and little; Bluntnose, Cownose, Southern Stingray, and Roughtail Stingray. If there were one more or one less, I wouldn't notice.

I put my hand on the cool glass. If you do it gently, they don't know you're there.

Rose and Dale are running down the escalator. "I can't believe you did it!" she squeals in her little-girl voice. Who could imagine she was serious about anything, but she told me she works in a law library.

Dale says, "We're outta here, Professor," and he grabs Rose's arm, leads her towards the locker room where we keep our coats.

"Hold on a sec," and Rose bends to tie her shoe.

I look back at the rays, but Dale and Rose are reflected in the glass. He sticks his hand in his coverall pocket, shifts it around oddly. "Hurry up," he says to Rose. His hand remains in his pocket as if he were holding a gun on a bank teller. "Come on, babe."

Rose stands up. "Nice meeting you," she says to me. "Good luck."

Dale says, "See you tomorrow."

"Wait," I call, and they stop, look at each other, look at me.

Finally Dale says, "What?"

"Hold on," I say.

"What's with you, man?" He turns to leave, but then I hear a piercing chirp. Rose giggles.

"Busted," she says. "Dale bird-napped from the rain forest."

"You did what?"

"Stole a bird," and he pulls a small green and yellow bird out of his pocket. "Wasn't hard," he says. "There's a nest right up near the top railing. I'll show you."

The bird chirps again.

"What are you going to do with it?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Keep it in a cage, I guess. I don't know. Rose wanted it."

"Did not," she says. "It was you."

"Give me the bird," I say, standing up, holding out my hand.

"You serious?" Dale asks. It's the voice of someone who's never lost a bar fight.

I don't say anything.

"It's just a bird," Dale says. "Jesus Christ. Not like I'm stealing the crown jewels."

I say, "You'll forget to feed it. You won't give it water. Your apartment's too cold for a bird like this. It will die."

"What's it to you?" Dale says. "There's tons more birds up there."

"It's part of the ecosystem," I say.

"Huh?"

"Just give it to him," Rose says. "Let's go." She glares at me.

Dale puts the bird in my hand. It's too afraid to struggle, but its pumping heart is like a stone pressing against my palm.

As I begin walking up the escalator to the rain forest I hear Rose say, "Who does he think he is anyways?"

Halfway up I stop to rest. It's just a bird. Saving its life means nothing to anyone except this particular bird. It doesn't remember—if it ever knew—what it's like to live in an actual rain forest, to fly through a real jungle, to splash in water that hasn't been piped in, to hunt for food. To live free.

I go slow, step by step, and when I'm at the top, I remember how Amanda stood here stamping her foot and screaming that she hated me. It's a strange way to remember your daughter, but I can almost see her, brown eyes, lopsided smile, Orioles cap, gum; almost touch her the way I touch the rays through their tank.

She didn't hate me, of course. She was just a kid.

The humidity of the rain forest wraps around me as I step inside. It's as quiet as I expect—no animals, no birds. Nothing I can see except mist, shadows.

The bird chirps as if it recognizes where it is, but I don't want to let go. I like how it feels in my hand, like holding a tiny piece of life. Birds' bones are hollow; that's one of the reasons they can fly.

It could be that I'll quit my job or finish my dissertation or get back together with Vicky. It could be that I'll find the nearest bar and get blitzed and crash my car head-on into a streetlight and die.

If I'm capable of remembering anything, it's that there isn't enough time for anyone—children, birds, or men. That there are things I should've done and should've done better. Regardless of what professors claim, economics is not a science. Maybe nothing is.

I place my palm under the bird and loosen my fist, let go so the bird is free to fly. It perches on my palm for a moment, feet pricking my skin, gathering itself, preening. And then it's gone.