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A
THEORY
OF
NOTHING
A NOVEL
THOMAS BARLOW



IVORY LEAGUE
PUBLISHING

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The dominant incentives in the world of the intellect have tended for hundreds, if not thousands of years to encourage intelligent people to complicate their communications. When any intellectual argument seems abstract and difficult to comprehend, it is customary in the academic milieu to presume that its exponent must necessarily be brilliant. On the other hand, when an intellectual argument seems simple and easily understood, it is usually assumed to be facile. This is why intellectual authors tend to write books that nobody will understand and why intellectual readers tend to read books that nobody enjoys reading. However, an incomprehensible book serves little purpose no matter how profound its underlying ideas, and in this respect *A Theory of Nothing* represents something unusual. My goal has been to create a story so thoroughly incomprehensible, so completely baffling and outlandish, and so utterly devoid of meaning, that it actually makes sense.

*For Jeremiah and Cassandra,
both long dead, if they ever existed,
but still the greatest friends a scientist could have.*

CHAPTER I

THE FALL

The Cambridge police declared it a suicide, but of course, it was nothing of the sort. I was there when it happened. It was a perfect morning in early summer. An eastern sea breeze was blowing across the campus, gently caressing the leaves of the elms and hackberry trees. The sun was making a bold ascent, its sharp rays segmented and dispatched in a frenzy of Rayleigh scattering, for the sky was clear blue.

My normal routine was to traverse the campus only at its barest moments, in the diffuse light of dawn and in the lengthening shadows of the night, but I had worked particularly late the previous evening and slept longer than usual. I remember thinking how pleasant it was to see the university in broad daylight, when the campus was properly occupied. Indeed, I remember thinking how well populated Harvard felt, even at that very instant when fate reduced its population by one.

The incident occurred while I was walking among the cluster of buildings that constitute the Harvard Law School. It happened without warning, directly behind me. I was on a path next to the brown brick edifice known as Griswold Hall. There was a heavy thud, followed by a high scream, an anguished shout, and the urgent scuffling of running feet. I turned and saw a body on the ground.

It was a woman's frame, white-haired and middle-aged, and it struck me that had I finished my breakfast a mere ten seconds earlier I might have seen the whole thing, as it happened, including the acceleration of a human being at thirty-two feet per second per second. I shuddered.

A man and a woman knelt beside the body, and the man felt for a pulse. Somebody said to call an ambulance. A crowd began to gather. I noticed a woman with a hand clamped over her mouth, the half-turned heads, the murmurs of distress and disbelief, the unwillingness to look – but the irresistible desire to do so. It was clear that nothing could be done.

“She's dead,” someone said, and an awe-stricken whimper rippled through the crowd.

Numbly, I raised my eyes and carefully surveyed the side of Griswold Hall. On the fourth floor, there was an open window. Beyond it, I could see only a motionless shadow and the corner of an empty ceiling. I sensed that the room behind lay vacant, and a shiver passed along my spine. Then the campus police and an ambulance shattered the morbid hush with the blare of their shrieking sirens, the sudden screech of brakes, the slamming of car doors, and the dissonance of urgent shouting and running. Two paramedics scurried to the body. Several police officers took up sentinel positions around the scene. A tall young woman in plain clothes, with some apparent authority, spoke in a clipped voice to the onlookers. She asked for any witnesses to remain, but for the rest of us to disperse.

I could not move, however, for at this same instant a paramedic brushed the hair from the victim's face. I gave an involuntary gasp of recognition. The woman lying before us was one of Harvard's most celebrated scholars:

a distinguished professor in natural law, an eminent legal philosopher, public intellectual, freethinker, minority rights activist, and role model for young women. She was the Chair of the National Council for the Humanities, and a winner of the Presidential Medal of Honor for legal scholarship and services to higher education – a fierce and powerful woman, a person unlikely to acquiesce to anything, least of all her own death. Her name was Sandra Hidecock.

I turned away from the awful spectacle and continued on to my laboratory. I had not known her well, but we had been personally acquainted – a fact that played upon my mind. I had a vague recollection that we'd spoken at some point about her work, that she had been a standard bearer for avant-garde culture, and that this had been a source of disagreement between us. In those days, there was a view among many intellectuals operating at the cutting edge of the humanities that all truth is relative; that one should repudiate established knowledge, seek one's own reality, and aggressively question the scientific worldview. My passing memory was that Sandra Hidecock had been of this mind, and I was not surprised, therefore, to discover the following statement pinned to a noticeboard in our department later that day:

All men and women have a moral obligation to achieve the highest state of autonomy possible. I am opposed to the soulless and frigid constraints imposed upon us all by the laws of science. I object to the disempowering and disenfranchising consequences of mathematical representations of life, energy, matter, and our universe. There is but one power to which I can yield a heart-felt

obedience: the decision of my own understanding,
the dictate of my own conscience.

This was extracted from a short article published by the deceased in the *Journal of Semiotic Justice*. Within an hour of her death, these rousing words had been disseminated throughout the university; declaimed, deconstructed and analyzed from a thousand different angles. Perhaps inevitably, rumors began at Harvard that Sandra Hidecock's ultimate plunge was not a deliberate attempt at self-destruction but a courageous act of intellectual rebellion and self-expression. It was observed that, true to the logic of her own personal philosophy, she had simply rejected all pre-conceived notions about mass, proportionality, distance, and force, and that she had stepped from the fourth-story window of her office not so much with an intention to die, but from a deeper and more significant desire to oppose the law of gravity.

The idea began to circulate that this was not a suicide at all, but something entirely different: a profoundly symbolic act; a purposeful attempt to challenge the laws of nature. Several members of the Harvard faculty, especially those in the liberal arts disciplines, began to speak of Sandra Hidecock as an inspirational figure. They spoke of her intellectual integrity, of her courage, and of the injustice of her fate. She was, they said, Harvard's only true insurrectionary.

I will never forget the distinctive crunch as Sandra Hidecock's body collided with the ground and experienced the full brunt of an equal and opposite force, consistent with Newton's third law. My presence at that tragic moment of impact was significant. In many ways, it was the genesis of all that followed, for it prompted me to

attend her funeral some days later. I wanted to express my sorrow but I was also curious to know more about her strange, self-destructive deed, which although officially declared a suicide, seemed at Harvard, at any rate, to signify something more.