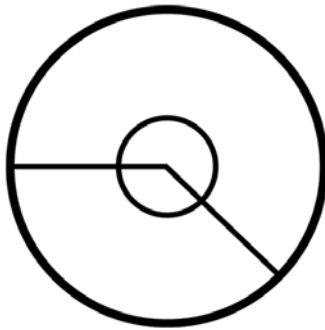


THE TURNING



Christophe Dillinger

Book one of the Imms series

Marian might just be my favourite character. He's probably a Down's syndrome guy, minding his own business, but nonetheless showing more heart than many "respectable" people.

Marian, Kyiv

Marian is worried about Katherine, his neighbour. She hasn't been out in a few days and as far as he knows she's been missing work. It's not like her at all. Marian knows a lot about Katherine, but he doesn't think Katherine knows anything about Marian.

People say Marian is fat. That Marian is simple. It doesn't bother Marian, because it's true: he is fat. He doesn't quite know what to do with "simple" though. He just is. He has come to the conclusion that Katherine, on the other hand, is not simple, because she's very different from him. She's definitively not fat. She is different from other people too, because she's never called Marian "simple". She's always been polite and decent to him, she's smiled at him on the rare occasions they've met. The effects of these smiles on Marian have not been simple.

Sitting in his favourite armchair, Marian is wondering what to do. What he really wants to do is to sneak to the back of the joint bungalows and have a look in Katherine's flat, but he's not sure he should. He's done that before a few times, not many, when he was sure Katherine was asleep, but it had been in the evening, when no one was about. In daytime things are complicated. People could see him and he feels, confusedly, that slinking out in the narrow passage between the flats might not be something he's supposed to do. He has to do something though, Katherine might be ill, or stuck. He hasn't heard anything com-

ing from there for a while, not even the TV she's usually watching on Fridays. Her car is in the drive. Sure, she could have gone away, on holiday maybe, or visiting her parents, but Marian doesn't think so, although he can't say why.

Maybe she got this strange flu that made people slow down, like Mrs Ostolski from over the road, whom he's witnessed being escorted to an ambulance. Two first responders were holding her upright, her walk hesitant and all jerky, and that was not because of the snow. Her eyes, even seen from the safety of his house, were kind of dead. She behaved like a resident of a mental hospital, like the one Marian spent some time in when he was younger. He hoped to catch more about it on the news program, but nothing, so he's got to rely on the gossip, while he queued at the bakery or the butchers, about how normal people just stop, like a dead clock, and how nobody really knows what's going on. To Marian, it looks like everyone is getting simple. Marian resolves to wait until the evening to check things out. Something in him just can't believe that Katherine is away. It's like she's calling to him. He pictures himself rescuing her, snatching her from this weird illness that's making her simple like him, and his hand starts to stray towards his crotch. He calculates that he will need all his energy tonight, so he can go for a nap now and masturbate, so that he'll be in full form later. Marian gets up from his nap and fixes himself some eggs. He loves eggs, their ovoid shapes entrance him and make him forget he's supposed to break them to make dinner, that's why now he only put oil in the frying pan when the eggs are ready, so that the fat doesn't explode and burn him. That had been a bad dinner, a day when the world had definitely not been simple but overwhelmingly perplexing. He eats in front of the TV, sitting in his favourite seat again, with a fork and a knife he knows well. He then plays one of his favourite movies on the VCR. Mrs

Ostolski, who would come over sometimes to check on him, used to tell him nobody else is using VCRs and showed him a picture of a CD player, but he couldn't understand how he was supposed to cram his cassettes in the flat opening, so she'd showed him a picture of a disc and he had nodded, but he never told her that he prefers round or blocky things and distrusts flat stuff. Round like him, in a way.

His movie ends just when the streetlight goes on outside, and Marian see this as an auspicious sign. Coincidences like this fill him with hope and positive feelings. He checks that he can open the back door and notes that snow has accumulated on the steps, so he wipes it off with a broom. He realises that he will leave tracks when he gets out, and he closes the door again. In the end, as he can't think of a way to mask his tracks, he just decides to go for it and anyway he's going to rescue her, so it's fine. Katherine's back door is unlocked, which is both lucky and worrying, because it means she is certainly in, but she doesn't reply when he calls her name. If she's in, he doesn't want to startle her, in case she has an axe or something, or even a gun, which are not that hard to find so close to the end of the war. Thinking of the war puts Marian in a sad mood, so he carries on calling Katherine's name and banging on things like the table and the pans she's left to rot on the cooker, another sign something's off. Then comes the smell and he is sure now something bad has happened, because it shouldn't smell like that in Katherine's house. It's a smell he has not experienced for a long time, the smell of shit that hasn't been cleaned, like shit on a wall, or on oneself. Marian gasps and quickly checks it isn't him who stinks like that, because he used to a long time ago, but no, it's coming from the living room. He reflects that being a hero and saving Katherine is not simple, but he has to do it now, otherwise he'll feel like a coward or a traitor.

Katherine is sitting in the sofa, or rather she's lying. She's slipped, and her head is lolling off the arm. He's glad that there isn't any blood. Blood means trouble, at least more trouble than just shit. The smell comes from under her and in a way it reassures Marian, because it truly means it isn't coming from him. He walks to her and gently parts her hair so he can look in her eyes. Marian has seen death before and doesn't fear it, maybe because he's simple. Her eyes are dull, but not milky. Hesitantly, he pokes at her arm and touches his fingertips to her forehead. She's cold, but not dead cold.

Marian doesn't know any first aid, but he's watched a few hospital series, endless reruns in the afternoon, when the air inside his flat becomes soft and hazy and the world gets very small. Years when nothing happens. He knows that old shit causes ulcers, not from any TV program though, but from experience with a few fellow patients a long time ago too. So he knows he has to clean her up and make her drink and eat. Drink first. He stares at Katherine's body, which is not something he has ever seen that close, although he can describe her face in the smallest detail. All this skin and breast and intimate bits, he will need to expose them and be close to them, and even touch them, and suddenly the task of saving her looks so complex and not simple, and he considers running away. Instead, he pushes on her back to prop her up, gets both her feet together, and bends her knees so that he can pass his arm under them. She makes an indistinct noise and a bit of urine dribbles on his trouser leg, but it doesn't really bother him.

He carries her back to his flat, through the back door, as fast as he can so that no one sees him, and also because he didn't think of wrapping her in a blanket or something. She's only wearing knickers and an oversized hoodie, and the night is pretty cold despite it being spring. He gets her straight to the shower.

While he waits for the water to warm up, Marian fetches a small carton of orange juice, his favourite beverage. He hopes Katherine likes orange juice too, he doesn't know if she does. By the time he comes back, she has slid on the floor and must have banged her head on the tiles because a bit of blood is flowing from her nose. He carefully takes her chin in his left hand and uses the right one to delicately pour some juice in her mouth. At first she coughs, then he sees her Adam's apple moving up and down, which means she's drinking.

Marian scratches his head, wondering if Katherine would be OK with him taking her clothes off. The shower is hot now, but not too hot, and he's never heard of anyone having a shower with their clothes on, but he can't ask her. He resolves to take them off anyway, because they're full of piss and shit and he's reasonably sure Katherine would not like taking a shower covered in piss and shit. He tries not to notice her breasts or crotch, aiming the douchette head approximately with his eyes averted, but it isn't simple. He sats her up on one side of the shower, her back to the tiles, then gently, not looking much, lays her on the floor to wash her back and her bum, which are sore. He will have to tend to that, because it'll be painful by the time she wakes up.

Drying her off with his second best towel, as his favourite is in the wash and will be ready only tomorrow, he considers that she might not actually wake up, like Mrs Ostolski might not either, if this new flu thing is real. He looks at Katherine's naked body, and then at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, and thinks that it doesn't matter if he's fat, he can still take care of her, he's shown that tonight in fact. He did save her. He's going to give her more juice, maybe some yogurt with sugar. He calls her name and gently tugs on her arm and, hesitantly, she tries to stand up, but she's too weak.

Maybe they could live together. They will watch his favourite movies and maybe he'll get one of these disc players, if he can buy one here, he's not sure. He's also quite pleased that Katherine isn't flat, but a bit round here and there, but he's not going to touch her without her permission anyway, in hospital series they're always asking for consent, although he reasons that touching her to bathe her or guide her to the dining table is be okay. They can even share time on his favourite armchair, although she might prefer sofas, but he'll take care of her, that's for sure.