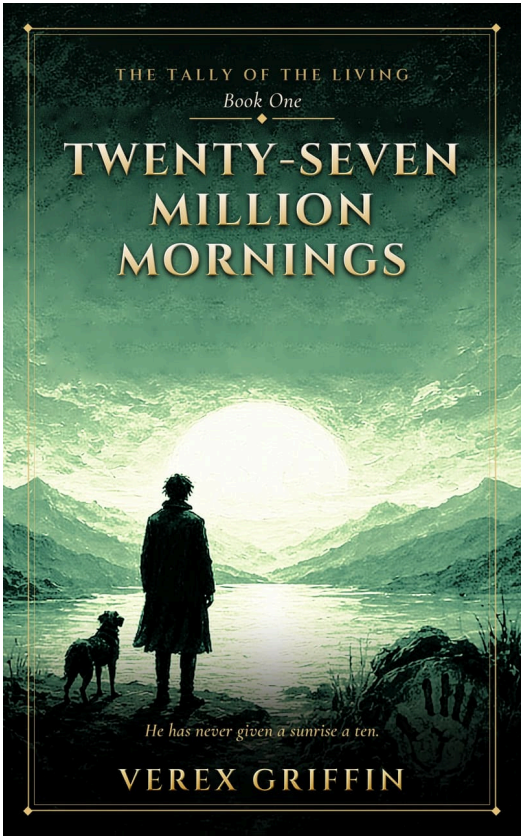

Twenty-Seven Million Mornings

A free sample: the prologue and first chapter.
Verex Griffin

Prologue: The Narrowest Place

Before there was a word for *last*, there was a young man who was about to be it.

He did not know that. He knew the cave, and the cold, and that the sea had gone a long way out. He knew his left hand hurt in three straight lines, the way it had hurt every damp morning since the night of the burning branch. He knew that the fire at the cave mouth was small because there was nobody left who was strong enough to feed it.

The sky had been the wrong colour for seven winters, so long that the blue seemed like a thing he had been told. The old ones said it would come back. He had only half believed them, and now there were no old ones to ask. Grey fell out of the air like the softest snow and it was not snow. It lay on the grass and the grass died. The animals that ate the grass walked north and did not come back, and the people who ate the animals followed them, or lay down.

His people had come to the edge of the land instead, because the edge of the land had shells.

That was his mother's idea. She had been the one who watched the two moons and worked out that when the pale one and the little red one rose together the water went furthest, and the rocks came up black and loaded, and you could fill a skin with mussels before the sea remembered itself. When the grey came the band had been nineteen, as it had been for years, and she had kept all of them alive through the first winters on that one piece of noticing. Then seventeen. Then nine.

She had been dead for six tides. He had put her at the back of the cave where the roof came down low, and laid the string of shells she wore across her chest, and then picked it up again and put it around his own neck, because he could not stand for it to be in the dark.

Now there were four of them, and three were not going to see the morning. He was one of the three.

He understood that quite clearly. The fever had been in him for days, and that afternoon it had stopped feeling like heat and started feeling like distance. His sister's child was asleep against his side, light as a bundle of sticks. Across the fire the man with the bad leg breathed with a sound like a foot in wet sand.

He looked out at the water going grey to black.

He was about twenty-two winters old. He had no way to count that and no reason to. He was the best of them at finding the fat mussels, and he was fast, and he was afraid of very little, and he had laughed more than anyone in that cave, even this winter, even after. What he was thinking, mostly, was that he would have liked to see the sky the old ones said would come back. Just once, to check.

Then the distance closed over him, and he died.

There are not many of anything, at the start. And there are not many of anything at the end. Whatever keeps watch over the world, which has no name and has never asked for one, knows these two places well, because they are the same place: the narrowest place, where a kind is few enough to be held in one hand.

Kinds had ended there before. A great many. They went out one small light at a time along some coast or ridge or riverbank until there was a single light,

and then there was not, and the last of them always went the same way.

Alone. With nobody to see.

Something had grown tired of that.

So in the cave at the edge of the land, at the lowest water of the darkest month of the worst winter the kind called human would ever know, something leaned down close to the newest of the dead, and looked at him the way you look at the last coal in a fire, and made a decision.

Not unwatched. This kind does not go unwatched. You. You will be there.

He woke because a small cold hand was patting his face.

His sister's child was sitting on his chest, patting, patting, with the grave patience of the very young. Behind her the cave mouth was a ragged shape of light.

The fever was gone, lifted out of him whole. The man with the bad leg was silent across the dead fire, and so was the woman curled beside him, and he knew without looking that they would stay silent.

He sat up. He felt wonderful. That was the first terrible thing: on that morning, in that cave, with his dead around him, he felt *wonderful*, light and clear and rinsed, and he was too young and too glad to be ashamed of it yet.

The second thing took him longer to notice, because it was so quiet.

There was something in his chest that had not been there before. It didn't hurt. It was like standing with your eyes shut and knowing the fire is on your left, except the fires were people. He could feel them: the child on his lap, burning small and fierce, and beyond her, far along the coast in both

directions, others. A scatter. A thin, guttering handful, spread along the edge of the land like coals kicked out of a hearth.

He could have counted them, if he had had numbers that went so high. There were so few.

That is all of us, he understood. He did not know how he understood it. *That is everyone there is.*

The child patted his cheek again, more firmly. She was hungry. The tide was out.

He stood. Near the wall, where his mother had ground the red earth for marking the dead, there was still a slick of it in the hollow stone. He did not decide to do what he did next. He put his left hand flat in the red, the hand with the three scars and the bent finger, and he walked to the smoothest part of the wall and pressed it there, hard, and held it.

Here, the hand said. *I am here. I am still here.*

Then he picked up the child and the skin bag, and went down to the black rocks to find breakfast, under a sky that was — he stopped; he actually stopped walking — just barely, just at the eastern rim, just for a moment before the grey rolled back across it —

Blue.

He stood with the cold water around his ankles and his mouth open.

Oh, he thought. *They were telling the truth.*

It was his first morning.

He would have something over twenty-seven million more of them before he understood what he had been given.

Chapter 1: Someone Is Digging Up My Bedroom

Tally of the Open Hand. Entry 1,940,187. Subject arrived Tidewane on foot at first light. One dog. Subject sat on a milestone for the duration of sunrise and appeared to be marking it. No action.

KESH

Morning number twenty-seven million, thirty-one thousand, four hundred and six came up over the Sounding Sea like it had something to prove.

I was sitting on a milestone on the coast road with a paper of syrup-knots and a dog, and I gave it a nine. I am a hard marker. I have to be. When you have seen as many sunrises as I have, you cannot go around handing out tens to anything orange.

But this one built. It started as a line of dirty pink low down, which is nothing, I have seen that a million times. I have checked. Then the cloud bank over the water caught the light from underneath and the whole lot went up at once. The sea turned to hammered copper. Sennet was high in the south, half a face, and the Kit was scurrying after her the way it does, red as a coal. A cormorant flew straight through the middle of it all, very pleased with itself.

"Nine," I said out loud.

Soot looked at me. Soot has been looking at me like that for twenty-three thousand years and it still works.

"Fine. Nine and a half. It gains half a mark for the cormorant. Showing off."

She sighed through her nose and put her chin back on my boot.

I should explain about the numbering, because people find it strange, on the rare occasions I let there be people. I do not actually know how many mornings I have had. Nobody was counting at the start, least of all me. The number is an estimate I made about four hundred years ago with the help of a lens-grinder in Quillon, who believed he was assisting me with a problem in philosophy. I have kept it up faithfully ever since, adding one a day. It is certainly wrong, and I would not swap it for the right one.

And I have never missed one. That is the rule under all my other rules. Whatever else is happening, and some very other things have happened, I get up and I watch the day arrive. I have watched it from the top of the Stair of Kings when it was only half built. Well. I broke the rule once, for a long time, and not by choice, and I do not talk about that.

I eat something, if there is something. And I think the same thought, every time:

Still here.

People think it must be awful, going on and on, and I let them think so, because the truth sounds like bragging.

The truth is that it is *wonderful*.

It is the best thing that has ever happened to anyone. I got picked. Out of everybody, ever, I got picked to see how it all turns out. Just when I think I have run out of world, someone invents the stirrup, or spectacles, or plum wine with snow in it, and off I go again.

Syrup-knots, for instance. Plaited dough, fried, dropped in cold honey-water. Three hundred years old at the outside. A baby. I ate the last one and licked my fingers, and Soot pretended she had not wanted any.

I have loved some of you, too. I have been a husband, more than once, and every time I meant it. I have been a father. I have been jealous enough to burn down a boathouse, which I did, and proud enough to wear a crown, which I also did, and I recommend neither. I have felt everything there is to feel, most of it several thousand times.

That is why I have rules now. Seven years in any one life, one name and one set of faces, and then I go. Nobody close. I have been the one left holding the coat more times than I can stand to count, so these days I am three towns off before anybody needs it held.

So it is sunrises for me now, and dogs, and whatever there is for breakfast, and things that come back.

"Come on then," I said. "Let's go and see the old place."

I had not been back in a hundred and ten years.

That is about my usual gap. I leave it long enough that nobody who saw me last time is in a position to say so. The coast had changed, the way coasts do if you turn your back for a moment. Last time there had been a fishing village, a whalers' try-works and a mud track. Now there was a town, a proper one, spilling down the hill in white walls and slate roofs to a harbour full of masts, with a painted board on the road in.

TIDEWANE. Nine thousand souls. Home of the Winter Whale Fair.

Somebody had added underneath, in chalk: *and nothing else.*

I liked it at once. I like most places at once. I have liked towns that were mostly mud, and one that was mostly goats.

Nine thousand. I could feel them, a little, if I let myself. I don't feel them one by one, I am not a monster. They're a warmth on one side of me, like a

stove in the next room. Underneath that, much further off and much, much bigger, is all the rest of them. Half a billion, the assurance houses say, and they would know. I keep that shut. You would too.

But it is always there if I want it. Now and then, on a good morning, I crack the door a finger's width and let it wash through me, the great steady warm roar of everybody being alive at once. And I think: *look at you all. Look how many of you there are. I am never, ever going to die.*

Because that is the bargain. I found it out a long time ago, from someone who knew. I do not die as long as there is one of you left. One. And there used to be so few of you that I could feel every single light, and now you are like sand. You have made yourselves so hard to get rid of that sometimes I want to shake each of you by the hand.

I did not come back to Tidewane to be grateful, though.

I came back because one morning in spring, in a rented room over a chandler's in Port Ostrel, out in the islands, I woke up and tried to picture my mother's face, and could not.

That was spring. I let it ride until the Lyceum at Tidewane wanted an usher for the winter term and Gideon, my hired uncle, had played out his season in the islands. I am never in a hurry. It is one of the perks.

We walked through the town as it was waking. A baker was taking down her shutters. On the harbour steps a Murren family was hauling up the night's pearl-baskets, sleek heads and dappled shoulders, a mother, her sisters and a pack of children arguing cheerfully in that language that is half whistle. A Nim lamplighter no higher than my ribs went past with his snuffing-pole over his shoulder, on his way home to bed. He had smoked glass strapped over his enormous eyes, and he was yawning hugely.

Every dog we passed stopped what it was doing.

That always happens, and I stopped flattering myself about it long ago. A fat harbour retriever outside the bakery actually sat down and lowered its head as we went by. A wire-haired ratter on a balcony three floors up stopped barking in the middle of a bark. Soot paid them no attention at all. She trotted along at my knee with her torn ear up and her tail level, like a small grey queen who finds her subjects a bit much before breakfast.

"You could say hello," I told her. "It would not kill you."

Nothing would. That is rather the point of her. But that is her story, and she has never once offered to tell it.

At the foot of a steep street a sail-loft had its doors open, and two women were walking a new sail out across the cobbles to dry, forty feet of it, white as a page. The elder wore a sailmaker's leather palm on her right hand, and she stopped to look at the sky as though it owed her money. There was not a cloud left in it; the last of them had gone out to sea with the sunrise. I crossed the road all the same, and could not have told you why.

The path out to the headland ran along the clifftop through low scrub that smelled of honey and salt. The wind had dropped. Far out, something the size of a smack rolled over in the swell and blew, and the spray hung bright in the sun. Whales. The board had not lied.

I was walking along a cliff on a nine-and-a-half morning with honey on my fingers and my oldest friend at my heel, going to visit my mother, or the part of her I keep in a cave, and I was as plainly, stupidly happy as I have ever been. I had not had a real worry in centuries.

I dawdled. It was near noon when the path came round the shoulder of the headland, and I saw the cave.

Or rather, I saw the scaffolding.

A timber stair had been pegged down the cliff face, switching back and forth all the way to the ledge. At the bottom there was a platform built out over the rocks, and on it were three canvas pavilions, a windlass, a rack of leather caps and stacks of wicker crates. A rope net was strung across the cave mouth. Lamps were burning in there. *Lamps.*

A board was nailed to the rail at the top of the stair. I walked up to it slowly.

LIMPET HEAD — THE NINTH HOLLOW A Dig of the Collegium of Antiquaries at Quillon under the generous patronage of the Meridian House of Assurance NO ENTRY. BY ORDER OF THE HARBOUR REEVE.

I read it twice.

"The *ninth*," I said. "They gave it a number. There are at least eight others, and mine did not even come first."

I had not known there were any others.

I should be fair to myself. It has been seventy-four thousand years. Anyone would get hazy.

Nobody tells you this about living for ever: you get the body for ever, but nobody enlarges the head. Mine holds what a mind holds. A few lifetimes, clear and sharp. Behind that it all starts to go soft, like the far end of a beach in fog. I can tell you *that* a thing happened, and roughly where. How it felt goes first.

So I keep the important things outside my head. An object, in a safe place: a thing I held at the time, that I can go back and hold again. And when I do, it comes back, smell and all.

I call them Cairns, and there are a good many. The first one, the oldest, is in a sea cave under the headland the charts now call Limpet Head, behind a stone that only moves if you know where to push. There is very little in it. A hand-axe that fitted her grip and not mine. A lump of red earth, worn to the shape of a thumb. And a string of shells.

All I had meant to do was climb down, hold the shells a little while, and get her face back. Then a month or two of sea air, and away again before anyone learned my name. Easy. I had done it a dozen times.

Soot had wandered off from the board. She was standing quite still at the cliff edge, staring down at the pavilions with her hackles up in a ridge along her spine. I had not seen her do that in a long time.

"I know," I said. "It's a liberty. Somebody is digging up my bedroom."

But she did not relax. After a moment I stopped talking, and looked where she was looking.

A woman in a sun hat had come to the mouth of the cave and was calling back inside to someone, sounding excited. A second figure came out past her. Smaller. A girl of fifteen or so, in a leather cap too big for her, carrying a brass drawing-frame in both hands as if it were full to the brim with water.

She set her sheets out on a crate. A boy with a basket went clattering down the stair below me to join her, and a sleek head came up out of the sea by the platform. I watched them longer than I meant to. And for no reason I could see, she looked up.

Straight up the cliff. Straight at me.

It was a long way. She could not have seen my face. I am almost sure of that. But I have been looked at by a lot of people over a lot of centuries, and I

know the difference between somebody glancing at a stranger on a clifftop and somebody *noticing*.

That girl was a noticer.

I did what I have always done. I lifted a hand in a friendly way, turned round, and left without hurrying.

"Change of plan," I told the dog, when the scrub had closed behind us. "We may need to stay a little longer than a month."

Keep reading

Twenty-Seven Million Mornings is Book One of The Tally of the Living, a complete trilogy.
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