

# ***Bite size uplifting stories***

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## **Chapter 1-Funny stories**

### ***Jerk aliens***

"No, no, no, we said if you want the replicator technology you must get rid of three charities of our choosing." The head alien told the UN negotiator.

“It isn’t a matter of money, it’s a matter of it being funny to us. Now do you want the power to summon food out of thin air or not?” It was a difficult choice, and no mistake. They had tried electing several different UN negotiators to no avail.

First it had been the politically sound choice. A champion diplomat with a half millennia of international negotiation experience. They had asked him which of his family and friends he was willing to personally sacrifice for advanced laser technology, and after five days of going through his family photos, he had quit.

Second had been the academic choice. A team of scientists and professors had been found from the tops of their professions. The aliens had told them that they must fight to the death to win teleportation tech. One scientist had actually picked up the ornate knives they had offered and made for one of his colleagues. He was removed from the team, and shortly thereafter the team was disbanded.

Third had been the religious choice. The pope, the Dalai Lama, and several other heads of religion were sent to obtain food cloning technology. Each of them was asked to denounce their god, and had promptly refused to continue negotiations, but they did offer to pray for the next negotiator, which was nice of them.

Lastly, the world governments had tried one last unorthodox method in a final attempt to extract some useful information.

“And I’m telling you slimy lot of impudents I won’t even talk about any minging piece of miserable alien tech until I’ve had a chance to see it work!” Gordon Ramsey shouted.

“How am I supposed to know this little artificial chef is any good at cooking? The little blighter probably doesn’t know Cheesecake from the holocaust, and would probably put ketchup on both!”

Sometimes evil needs to be fought with another kind of evil.

### *Kiss me ‘cause I’m Irish*

It looks like me and that cute girl are both on the same flight from Baltimore to Dublin. She’s got a bit of red hair, and call me racist, but she looks Irish. What the heck, let’s give this a shot.

“Top ‘o the mornin’ to ya’ Lassy.” I say as I sit down next to her at the terminal.

“I believe ‘ya mean afternoon.” She responds back.

“Well as long as the sun is shinin’ my heart’ll be warmed.” She gave me a flat stare. A normal guy would’ve probably given up, but I was not an ordinary guy, and had been shot down way harder before. “We’re only a few hours away from being back in the emerald isle lass. Don’t be making a rainy day of it.” She relented a bit and turned towards me.

“Scuse me for a second m’lady I believe I’m getting an urgent text.” I pull open my phone and open the Wikipedia page for Ireland.

“Everything alright?” She asks, even going so far as to look a little concerned.

“I believe so, me brother gone and bashed his head in a bar fight last week, and my sister’s in the hospital updating me.” She nodded.

“So whose your favorite soccer team?” She asked. Thankfully I was still looking at my phone. I scrolled around furiously. Soccer team, soccer team,

“Oh saints preserve me they’re going in for surgery.” I said to buy more time to look at my phone. Politics, Geography, Cultre, aha sports! What the heck is Gaelic football? Says it’s the most popular, let’s see if we can change the subject.

“I’m not a fan of the main stream sports. But I do follow Kerry a good bit, have you heard of Gaelic football my bonny lass?” While she responded I also opened a tab on head wounds so i could BS about my imaginary brother’s surgery.

“Can’t say that I have. Guess that’s just me being a city girl who spends too much time among the yanks.” I nodded and smiled. Jackpot!

For the next three hours I flipped furiously between my phone and her, building up the tension and the fun by demonstrating how the game is played with some starbucks cups. We eventually got a whole match going with a high school team that was also on the flight.

By the time we started boarding I put my phone away, and put an arm around her.

“Now m’lady. We are about to be spending a couple hours on a plane together. I’ll see if I can move around to sit with you, but first.” I grinned like a hyena. “Will you kiss me ‘cause I’m Irish?”

### *Perchance to fix a quick mistake*

*“Perchance to fix a quick mistake, or pass over a terrifying moment of fate. To choose only one is your assigned task. Either jump to the future, or relive the past.”*

It was a mysterious sounding rhyme, and I wasn't sure I should take it seriously or not. I was combing through my attic when I had found the watch with the cryptic inscription. There was a note attached to it explaining the rhyme.

*DO NOT TOUCH THE WATCH UNTIL YOU'VE FINISHED READING THIS NOTE! On the side of the watch is a dial. You can turn it clockwise until it clicks to set it to jumping forward in time, or you can click it once counterclockwise to set it to jumping backward in time. Be warned, once you set the watch, it will stay on that setting until you die. The period it jumps you either forward or backward is ten seconds. The watch needs about a minute to recharge between jumps. To activate, just tap the dial. Choose wisely.*

Huh, clicking it backwards would allow me to fix some small mistakes in life, but clicking it forwards would allow me to skip the truly harrowing moments. I heard someone say that many great things are accomplished with just 15 seconds of pure courage. With this I watch I could have at least ten of those seconds. I could be infinitely brave for those ten seconds. I could live with making mistakes. Now I could skip all of the truly scary moments in life! I click the watch clockwise, and test it out. I throw a little ball in the air and tap the dial

It works. I have a small bruise on my head, and the ball has rolled to the other side of the attic. I didn't feel the impact at all. The residual pain yes, but not the impact. This is going to be so useful for my date tonight!

Three hours later me and Jenna are sitting on a park bench. The sun is setting, my arm is around her, and the mood is right. The only problem is I'm as nervous as a moose at an NRA convention. Thankfully I've got the cure to my nervousness on my wrist. I tap her on the shoulder to turn towards me. As she looks me in the eye I tap the nob.

"You know I see you more as a friend." She says.

### Mischievous Protagonist

It was then that the hero happened upon the truth forge sword, the legendary blade itself. He knew the legend and approached it reverently to take hold of it.

I mean he raced forward exclaiming 'dude check out the radical new nose picker'. As this must've had some great spiritual significance to his people.

As he removed the sword from its pedestal he raised it high to the heavens, and promptly began admiring himself in it.

"Come on now really?" I asked.

“Yeah man, I need to shave bad, ooh and I bet this thing is sharp enough to make sushi.”  
The hero valiantly dashed to the nearest river to procure fish to um, well, make sushi with in order to, hmm, impress the king?

“Nah man, I ain’t sharing. I haven’t had Japanese in weeks.”

“How could you have Japanese? There isn’t even an island nation in this world!”

“There was in the last book you were narrating.”

“How could you possibly know that!”

Anyway the hero got bored of his quest for fish and was now valiantly picking berries and throwing them at small animals to....lift a curse on some maiden who might have at some point maybe gotten turned into a small animal.

“No dude, it’s just fun.” He responded back.

“Well, I hate to do this, but you leave me no choice.” I informed the impudent little fool.

“What can you possibly do? You just talk about what I’m doing.” He retorted.

“You clearly aren’t familiar with my work.” I took a deep breath and recited from memory.

“Tinky Winky. Dipsy. La La. Po.” Four giant monstrous monocolored demons appeared right behind our hero.

### *Deus Oops Machina*

*Man makes a computer that is literally god.*

“Alright, we just got clearance from the president, fire her up.” The machine is massive to say the least. Someone got poetic and actually turned Mount Olympus in Greece into a giant Deus Ex Machina. Kind of a heavy handed analogy, and something that had taken the world’s religions some coaxing to accept.

Well, most the world’s religions. The pope, a couple sheiks, a few Buddhists, and some prominent members of the jewish community had all agreed to it rather quickly. Too quickly, as the scientists were finalizing the initialization sequence they looked quite calm.

The scientists kept glancing over their shoulders at the religious people who were chatting idly as they watched the giant monitor flick on. The scientists held their breath, and waited for something miraculous to happen.

One of the scientists whooped for joy as he was lifted into the air by an invisible hand. They had done it! They had created god!

“Shut me down.” The machine boomed. That was an odd request for a god to make. Before we could think to ask why it anticipated our actions and continued. “There is already a god here, and he is more powerful than I.” The scientists looked dumbfounded as their compatriot was let down so he could start the shutdown sequence.

The religious people exchanged a few knowing smiles and light chuckles before the pope walked over to the head scientist and patted him on the back. “Don’t take it too hard. Someone comes up with an idea like this every couple of hundred years.”

### *Election of the gods*

“Settle down everyone.” Athena said. Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, the big three, were all standing at the podiums awaiting the start of the debate. Zeus was sharing a laugh with Dionysus.

“Father.” Athena said, mildly angrily, at Zeus. “We must begin, the mortals are awaiting our decision. The Norse gods elected Thor the head of their pantheon two weeks ago and if we have any hope of maintaining our number of believers we need to make this quick.”

“I’m sorry.” Zeus said, whipping away a tear of mirth. “Please continue.” Hades was glaring sideways at him, he still suspected Zeus had cheated in the drawing of straws that had earned him his place on the mountain. Poseidon was looking off into the distant ocean, and Hermes had to give him a poke to refocus his attention

“Thank you.” Athena replied, returning to her stately bearing. “As I was saying, welcome to the first annual debate of the gods. You three are the major contenders, and so have been chosen to debate. We have chosen the questions carefully and each of you will have a chance to respond.”

“First question, where do you stand on paid advertising at temple entrances. Poseidon, your response first.” Athena said, in a very careful measured voice.

“Hmm, what?” He said, having become once again distracted by the ocean in the distance. “Oh, uh, I guess advertising is bad. Place of worship and all.” He didn’t even finish his sentence before looking back out at the ocean.

“Hades?” Athena prompted.

“Now then, I propose that the situation is not bifurcated in nature and requires a thorough investigation as to the advantages and disadvantages. I believe that this investigation will demonstrate that some advertising, if kept to an acceptable and not outlandish nature will be acceptable.” Hephaestus had yawned halfway through his speech.

“Zeus?” Athena asked.

“More money!” Zeus shouted. This brought a laugh from the crowd of assembled deities. Athena shook her head and turned back to Poseidon.

“Second question.” Athena was cut off before she could finish.

“I’m sorry.” Poseidon interjected. “I really have to get back to my kingdom, can we just vote for who gets to be head god now?” Athena sighed. She had a twenty point list of hot button issues, but several gods were already falling asleep and they had barely started.

“Fine.” She exasperatedly put a hand to her forehead. “All in favor of Poseidon becoming head of Olympus?” Everyone but herself, Dionysus, and Hephaestus raised their hands.

“What!” Hades shouted. “The fool doesn’t know the first thing about governing!”

Hermes shrugged. “He seems to manage well enough, and he’s not going to overcomplicate things like you.”

“Overcomplicate things!” Hades yelled. Before he could find more words to say Poseidon interjected again.

“Great, thanks everyone, now I gotta get back to the sea. Zeus gets to rule while I’m gone.” Zeus whooped for joy. Athena buried her face in her hands, Hephaestus and Dionysus high fived Zeus, and Hades went back to the underworld in a shrieking ball of flame.

### *Aliens like whales more than humans*

“So we have determined the aliens are not whales themselves yes?” The president asked the secretary of defense.

“Correct mister president. Several flybys have confirmed they are humanoid in nature.” The president had called all the cabinet members together to solve this problem.

“We have also determined that they are as of yet conducting no hostile action toward the whales, nor to any surrounding aquatic or human life.” The secretary of defense continued.

“Then what in the blue blazes are they doing?” The president asked.

“William Shatner hasn’t gone missing has he?” The secretary of state asked.

“No mister secretary, neither has Leonard Nemo or any other of the original cast. We’re still pinning down the locations of the reboot stars.” The defense secretary said.

“Are they mating with the whales?” The secretary of education asked.

“Arne get out of here!” The president yelled. “You’re not turning this into another meeting about sex education.” The secret service escorted the secretary of education out.

An aid suddenly burst into the room.

“Mister president, we’ve received a communication from the aliens!”

“What?” Every man in the room said.

“Let’s have it, what did they say?”

The aid excitedly looked at his piece of paper.

“They said, please stop sending those loud jets, they’re interfering with the tenth millennial interspecies symphony. We just got the killer whales to stop eating the pilot whales, and we’d like to get started.”

### *A rom com?*

“James if you walk out that door, then we’re done. There’s no going back.” Jessica said, tears in her eyes to her now ex-fiancé. James hesitated with his hand on the door. Could he go back? Was this problem fixable? He turned toward Jessica with his answer.

“I’m sorry Jessica. I just can’t do this anymore.” Jessica’s lip trembled, and James left before she burst into tears.

“Phew, man, so glad I dodged that bullet.” James said, as Jessica’s wails become audible through the door. As James reached the car his best friend called.

“James, did you do it?” She asked.

“Yeah, me and Jessica are through.” I reply.

“I’m so sorry James.” She says.

“It had to happen.” I say. “We just weren’t meant for each other.

“Well, if you need to talk about it I’ll be here for you this weekend. Do you want to get coffee?” She asked.

“That’s very thoughtful of you.” I say. “But I’ll have to decline. I’m actually really looking forward to having some alone time.”

“Um, okay.” My best friend replies. “If you change your mind I’m always here for you James.” She says.

“Cool, thanks, I really appreciate having you as a friend.” I reply, and then hang up the phone.

That weekend I have an amazing time in my wood working shop finishing up a beautiful cedar table. I’ve just learned a new carving technique to inlay a chess board in the middle of it. During the final polishing steps Jessica calls me up.

“Hey, James, I’ve thought a lot about what you said, and you’re right, maybe we aren’t right for each other.” She says.

“I’m glad you feel that way.” I say. “Closure is a good thing.”

“I think so, would you feel comfortable coming by later today to do this in person?” She asks.

“Nah, I’m really just fine now. You take care now Jessica.” I say.

“Um, okay.” She says awkwardly.

“Bye.” I say.

James spent the rest of his life being single and pursuing a flourishing handmade carpentry career.

*Humanity invents, and subsequently abuses, the respawn point*

“Bob, you really shouldn’t kill yourself just to get home. You know respawns take a lot of electricity.” I advised my coworker.

“Frank, this saves me two hours of sitting in traffic, besides, it’s not like I’m paying for it.” I shrug.

“Suit yourself buddy.” Bob goes upstairs to jump off the building into the dumpster 12 stories down. The first couple of times he had missed and it had been messy for us to clean up. Now he could land smack dab in the middle and not even get any splatter on the pavement.

I keep a straight face until he’s closed the door to the stairwell, and then I burst out laughing. He doesn’t know that after he brought in those arsenic laced donuts ‘to share’, the rest of us had decided to get revenge. We had set his respawn two hundred feet above his house.

We had rigged a camera in his backyard, and any second it would be live streaming a most amusing scene. My coworkers crowd around my desk as I pull it up, and we start taking bets on how many tries it’s going to take until he manages to reset it close enough to the ground to survive.

Our boss had suggested we set the respawn point to be his mother for irony’s sake, but we figured his mom would probably tell on us.

*Good morning Earth 623!*

“Thought projection radio is here to tell you Gooooood Morning Earth 623! It is a bright sunny day in this pocket universes biggest city! Let’s get down to news. In politics Eminem, the god of the rap dimension, is stopping by the president of the Universes’ office in order to ‘stop all the haters’. In science Unidan is still cloning himself. The petition to expel him into his own new universe has reached 2 billion signatures, but he’s multiplying faster than we can recruit. Breaking Benjamin has suggested we wait for superman, but that hasn’t worked since all the superman keep dying since all the rooster teeth fans turned the sun red. In sports the new England Bengals have found a way to cheat at Calvin ball. This was not thought possible in a game without rules, but the head coach solved this by making some. Lastly, we would like to once again thank all the babies everywhere for not crushing us with their infinite imaginations.”

Every Conversation has two sides

Two sides of a phone conversation.

Side 1:

“Oh hey John, yeah my special lady is here. What’s up?”

“That’s horrible, when did you find out?”

“I’m so sorry man, is it chronic? I mean, is it going to be permanent?”

“Oh man I thought they had a cure for that.”

“Failed phase three clinical trials? That’s just terrible.”

“How long have you known?”

“Just found out, were there any signs or warnings to prepare you for this?”

“Got tested on a whim before there were symptoms. That’s a rough way to find out.”

“No, no, I can stay on the line as long as you want.”

“Are you sure? It’s really no problem.”

“Okay, I’m going to tell my wife. You two call us if you need anything. Seriously, our house is always open to you. You know that right?”

“Okay, take care man.”

Side 2:

*“Special lady huh? That’s the code phrase for that ridiculous thing from high school. Well you’re going to love this then. Mary’s pregnant!”*

*“Oh hah hah, you know your wife is probably freaking out right now right?”*

*“Of course it’s not permanent! She’s due in eight months. Are you seriously going to do this for the whole conversation?”*

*"Now you're just being mean."*

*"Alright, well, you remember the deal right? You take a video of whoever is listening to you have this conversation when you tell them."*

*"Oh just a few minutes. Thanks for asking a real question."*

*"Surprisingly not, no morning sickness or anything. She just took a test because we had some that were about to expire."*

*"It was pretty sweet actually. Like having Christmas come in the middle of August. Okay, you've had your fun. Now go calm down your panicking wife."*

*"No no, really, get off the line before she has an aneurism."*

*"Now you're repeating what I say? Okay, I'm hanging up now."*

*"It's been great talking to you dude."*

*"Remember, take video"*

Together:

*"Oh hey John, yeah my special lady is here. What's up?"*

*"Special lady huh? That's the code phrase for that ridiculous thing from high school. Well you're going to love this then. Mary's pregnant!"*

*"That's horrible, when did you find out?"*

*"Oh hah hah, you know your wife is probably freaking out right now right?"*

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*"Of course it's not permanent! She's due in eight months. Are you seriously going to do this for the whole conversation?"*

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“How long have you known?”

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“Okay, I’m going to tell my wife. You two call us if you need anything. Seriously, our house is always open to you. You know that right?”

“It’s been great talking to you dude.”

“Okay, take care man.”

“Remember, take video”

*What wizards be when they’re bored*

“You shall not pass!!” The wizard shouted at the students entering the classroom. The professor was still in shocked silence from when he had appeared in a flash of smoke mere moments before. The students also froze as they came in, forming clumped lines in the hallways.

“Security.” The professor whispered into an emergency phone.

The wizard rounded on him, bringing his staff to bear, circling it as he incanted “I am a servant of the secret fire, wielder of the flame of arnor. The dark fire will not avail you flame of Udun! Go back to the shadow. YOU. SHALL. NOT. PASS!” He then blasted the exam papers into the air, setting them on fire to the cheers of the students.

At this point security walked in, and the wizard turned to once again address the class. “Fly you fools.”

## **Chapter 2-Heartwarming stories**

### *Mommy why don't I have dreams?*

“You’re a reconstructed person.” My mommy tells me.

“What does that mean?” I ask. I was telling my mommy how the other kids had these weird hallucinations when they went to bed, and I was worried they were sick or something. Mommy had explained to me that it’s normal for other kids, and now she was telling me why it didn’t happen to me.

“You left us during the birthing process, and the doctors told us about this new treatment where we could, bring you back to us.”

“Bring me back? Bring me back from where? Where did I go mommy?” Mommy’s eyes are turning red, maybe she’s sick too.

“Far, far away sweetie, so the doctor’s had to replace parts of your body with metal parts, and they had to talk to your brain to tell it what to do.” That sounded cool! It was like I was a superhero. Why were mommy’s eyes red?

“Is that why I can run faster than all the other kids? My metal body parts help me run faster?”

“That’s right sweetie, but you still have your fleshy parts to do all the normal things like breathing and making your heart beat. Here.” She takes my hand and taps it on the kitchen sink. It sounds like two pans hitting together. “That’s your metal parts making that sound.” She then taps her own hand and it makes a different sound. “And that’s what a non-metal hand sounds like.” Mommy’s eyes aren’t red anymore, I guess she couldn’t have been that sick.

“What about my brain? Do I have a metal brain?” I tap my skull with my knuckles and it makes a slight clanging sound. I thought all kids could make their heads clang, but I guess it’s just me. How cool for me!

“No sweetie, but they did have to connect your brain to a big computer to tell it how to be a brain. When you went away.” She pauses and searches for a word. “Your brain....forgot.... how to be a brain, so they had to teach it, but they couldn’t teach it how to dream.”

“And that’s why I don’t dream?”

“That’s why you don’t dream.” I start tapping my knuckles on the wall, the floor, my knees, anything I can reach.

“I’m the coolest kid ever!” I declare. My mommy ruffles my hair.

“Yes you are kiddo. Yes you are.”

### Humanity’s secret defenders

“Where did that giant rock come from?” I asked my friend. The flying saucer had been settling over the white house, and had been powering up some giant glowing weapon, when a large rock had sailed up and struck the device. The rock had done enough damage to power down the device.

“Look, on the horizon, something’s coming.” My friend points at a group of flying things coming from the north. I squint, they’re far away, but as they get closer I can make out the shapes of large birds. They must’ve escaped from the zoo, and there were thousands of them! Bald eagles, cranes, hawks, geese, even ducks, and they weren’t coming alone. Most of them were carrying small mammals and reptiles. Little snakes, poisonous lizards, small monkeys, even rabbits of all things.

In one giant flock they fly up into the center of the UFO. The small monkeys form a chain that extends down to the roof of the white house where slightly larger monkeys are ready to scurry up this ladder. These make a chain of larger monkeys, which then allows even larger still monkeys to climb up. Eventually there are multiple chains of gorillas that lions and tigers begin ascending.

I can see they're wreaking havoc from the inside of the ship. Lights begin to blink off, windows get blown out, and the thing begins to tilt. There's a mass exodus of wildlife, and then the ship crashes into the white house.

It's a fantastic sight, but I can't help but wonder, where did the boulder come from?

"Every planet with life has a dominant sentient race." A deep booming voice to my left says. I fall over by the sudden sound, and I see that I'm talking to a tree. "You have not been the kindest of masters, but you've been good to us overall, and those monsters." It points a branch at the UFO. "Have devoured countless worlds. If you will stand with us, we can stand against them, united as a planet."

### *Alone in the dark*

Good day at work, lots accomplished. Time to switch off the light and go to bed. Now just need to lay my head down on my..... Where's the bed? I know my room like the back of my hand. I could sketch it with my eyes closed. Where's the bed? Better turn on the light to find it. Must've moved it and forgot or something.

Where's the light? Where's the light? Come on, just find the light. I swear that wall was right here a second ago. Yes, definitely here, why can't I feel it anymore? Why aren't there any walls? I can't have fallen somewhere or else there would've been a drop.

Have I been drugged? I better sit down. I'm going to hit something walking about like this. I haven't drunk much today, how could I be drugged? If it is a drug, am I hallucinating? Have I just been stumbling blindly around the house looking for my bed. I hope I haven't hurt myself. Can I be sure I'm actually sitting down now? Maybe my brain is too messed up to tell. Maybe I'm sprawled out at the bottom of the stairs.

Why is there no light? My house isn't this dark. There should be moonlight or starlight through some of the windows. There's almost nowhere I know that's this dark. It's like someone just turned all the worlds lights out and just left me here in this barren lightless wasteland.

Is there anyway out? How am I going to escape this? What if I try yelling? Even if my brain is too messed up to make coherent words somebody should find me and help me.

Why isn't anybody coming? I have neighbors, they have to be hearing this yelling. I've got to have woken up half the neighborhood by now. Does no one know what's going on with me? I've got friends. I swear I do. Can't somebody somewhere just show me this is going to be alright, that this is going to end.

Where's the light? Where's the light? Let me get up and try to find it again.

Now I can't even get up. I can't feel my legs or my body. I don't know if I'm numb or completely immobile, or both. Help, just somebody help.

Wait, things are getting lighter. Yes, things are getting lighter. I can't see anything yet, but there's a shift from black to just dark grey.

There's nothing here. It's almost normal room levels of light now and I can't see anything. I can't even see me. Do I have a body? Where is this? It's getting midday in full view of the sun bright now, and there's a dull rumbling sound, like hearing people talk underwater from a great distance.

It's almost painfully bright now, like someone shining a light in your face. The sounds are getting louder. They are voices! I can start to make something out now. What's that? It sounds like....

"Doctor! Doctor! Somebody come quick, he's waking up!"

"I'm here, somebody call the rest of the family. He's been under six months and he's finally coming around."

My eyes flutter open and I see the bright light is a hospital light shining directly in my face, and the voice was that of my mother, calling me back.

"You've been under six months." She tells me. "You hit your head going to bed, and have been lying here for six months."

"How long have you been waiting here for me to come back?" I ask my mother.

She smiles. "Six months."

*A neural parasite begs for its life*

A man about to go into surgery to remove a neural parasite suddenly hears a cry for help in his mind.

*What?* I thought to myself. That's not what I sound like in my own head.

*I said, please don't let them kill me.* The voice was young and innocent, like a child asking their mom to please buy them some ice cream.

*Hello?* I ask. Not being able to think of anything more clever to say to a disembodied voice.

*You can hear me? Oh that's great. I just got the eyes and ears working when the big men in white coats told you about me. Please don't let them kill me.*

*Well, um, that's, that's very odd. I'm sorry, who are you exactly?* I wasn't about to make any deals with something I didn't know anything about. For all I knew this was some sort of psychosis caused by the parasite, and I was talking to myself right now.

*My name is Tim. I've only been in here for a few minutes and I really don't want to leave.*

*Thank you for telling me Tim, but that really barely scratches the surface of the questions I've got. I assume you're the parasite? How one Earth can you talk?*

*I'm not entirely sure. And I guess I'm not really Tim, I'm a vessel for him.*

This was taking a turn for the even weirder. *A vessel? I'm sorry Tim but that doesn't help me. A vessel for what?*

*A vessel for the boy in a coma in the next ward. He's only got nine months to live and he wanted to have one last look at life. You've got a wife, kids, a nice home, a stable job, all of the things that Tim wanted out of life. So an angel heard his last wish, and allowed him to spend his last nine months inside you. I'm the vessel for his consciousness. You have a choice in the matter. That's why I'm a parasite. If you don't want this you can get rid of me. But please don't let them kill me nice man. If you do, my consciousness will return to my own body. I don't want to spend nine months in the dark.*

The doctors were coming back with the anesthesia now. I thought about how ridiculous this all was. There was no way I could be sure that this was real. It certainly sounded completely ridiculous to me. And even if it is real, how do I know this 'vessel' or whatever, wasn't going to do permanent damage to me.

Then I looked over into the next ward, and saw a kid on a ventilator. On the door to his room, the sign said 'Tim'. I noticed he didn't have any friends or family waiting with him, even though it was time for visiting hours, and during the holiday season too.

*Of course Tim. You can stay as long as you like.*

### *The hero of prophecy*

"It has been almost a decade of training for you my young apprentice. You were brought to this farm as a small child, so little you do not even remember your parents. I have taught you the use of the bow, the sword, your hands, and even a little magic. You have learned speech-craft and the artistry of words so that you can employ them to sway your fellow man and inspire him to deeds of incalculable heroism. Now is the time to depart. Go now, and seek your destiny."

With a bow, and a full kit of combat and wilderness survival gear, the hero departed, entering the woods surrounding the farm. It was his time, the hour of fate, now he was to go forth and... hang, on were those wolves? Yep, those were certainly wolves. Like, a lot of wolves, and rapidly approaching.

Our hero drew his sword, readied his shield, mentally rehearsed the incantation for a fireball, and braced himself for the drawing of his first blood.

He had a bit of a start when a girl, a girl about his age, burst through the underbrush.

"Oh thank goodness." She said, tears in her eyes, as she caught site of our hero. "They've got my scent and I'm unarmed, please will you help me?"

Our hero knew what to do. He produced a pair of knives from his pack and placed them in the girl's hands.

"I've got you covered, stay behind me, keep your back against mine, and yell if you're about to be overwhelmed. I've got this covered." Without another word he placed himself in front of her, and with renewed purpose stepped in front of the maiden to use himself as human shield against the tide of teeth and claws.

No sooner had he done so then a score of wolves lunged from the surrounding bushes, and quickly encircled our hero. Good, he should be able to pick a few off with fireballs this way.

He twirled his sword hand and began reciting the spell accurately. Midway through the incantation he felt the girl begin to shake at his back. He paused his spell to comfort her.

“Hey, I’ve been trained for way worse than this. You’ll see. A little fire and these guys are going to turn tail and run.” Having said this, another man, on horseback burst through the brush and began calling down lightning to fell the wolves. In less than three heartbeats half of the beasts were put down, and the rest were running for the woods.

The horsemen turned to our surprised hero and called out. “Huzzah! And well met my good man, come, help me give chase to the vile things. There is a farm a mile hence which they are no doubt making for with all speed. Quickly now! While the scent is fresh.” Our hero looked at the man, then at the spot where the wolves departed. This is what he trained for, chasing wolves, defending the helpless, but shouldn’t he be better than this guy? He had almost half a minute, and hadn’t killed any wolves, this guy had killed most of them in just a few seconds.

Still, he might learn from him. Who said his training was done. He could follow this man and fulfill his destiny.

Then he felt the girl quivering with his back to him, and he knew what to do.

“Sorry mate, you have a good run at those wolves. I’m going to stay here and make sure she’s alright.” The horsemen nodded, understanding.

“Suit yourself. Good travel to you strangers.” And with that, his horse dove into the woods. Our hero dropped his sword and shield, turned towards the girl who was still staring at the ground as if she expected a wolf to take shape and leap from the earth. He wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her in.

“It’s going to be alright. I won’t let anything happen to you. It’s going to be alright.”

### *Happiness in human form*

It’s a man deciding to use his lunch break to go have a meatball sub with that homeless guy at the intersection. It’s that older sibling who, instead of going out with his friends Friday night, goes home to help their younger sibling with their homework. It’s that friend who didn’t mention they got an ‘A’ on the test so they can comfort you for getting a ‘D’. It’s that guy in the capture the flag lobby who didn’t get mad at you for team killing him on accident. It’s that SO who skipped class and drove 8 hours overnight so they could make you breakfast before you took that life changing standardized test for college or graduate school. It’s that guy on the freeway who waved you over even though he was already late for work. It’s that coworker who kept silent so you could take responsibility for that big project that just wrapped. It’s that boss who remembered to give credit to you when the director came by. It’s that parent who spent

years changing your diapers and feeding you, even though you cost them several hours of sleep every night. It's that friend we all have who spends their weekends volunteering. It's that classmate who sat with you at lunch instead of sitting with their friends so you didn't have to be alone. It's that stranger who asked if you were okay when you were having a bad day. It's any and every time you gave something to someone else, without expecting anything back.

Now go be the human form of happiness.

### *An ancient being escorts a man to the afterlife*

"I can't believe they used molten lead." I said, suddenly finding myself by a desert river, much like the one they had done the deed next to. ISIS was a cruel group, and disposing of a reporter with the morbidly creative use of a box and molten lead was shocking to say the least.

"Didn't see it coming did you?" A man with the a strange white crown and a green face asks as he sits down next to me.

"You're just in the box, and the next minute everything is all light and heat."

"At least the high temperatures prevent you from feeling much. Lead turns molten at about 327 degrees Celsius, and that kind of heat seals your nerve endings shut almost instantly." I shudder.

"It all happened so quickly, and what did I ever do to them? I was unarmed. I kept my distance. You know they actually came and found me miles from where the fighting is happening? Who does that? They even knew I had a wife and kids!" The green faced man picks up a river stone.

"You see this stone? It is like the burdens we carry in life. As we walk through the desert to the river we choose to pick these things up and carry them with us. You now carry a great stone with you, far larger than you can carry if you are to cross this river into what lies beyond. If you should try you would fall to the riverbed and remain there."

"How is that fair?" I protest. "I didn't ask for what they did to me."

"They may have inflicted evil upon you through no fault of your own, but it is you who are choosing to carry the burden of this great stone. I know you don't feel like you have a choice. They seem to have forced the stone on you. They have made you feel as if this burden is

yours to carry, but it isn't. You need to let it go in order to cross over." The green faced man throws the stone into the river. "Let it be as if it had never been. For when you are beyond this river such things will no longer matter."

"How do you know all this?" I ask.

"My brother Seth did the same to me. He sunk me into this river after incasing me in a box and pouring lead down on me. I sank, both in real life and in the afterlife, and it was a long time before I learned to let go of my burden and move on to lighter places."

"Seth? That sounds familiar, so that makes you..."

"Osiris."

"So the egyptians were right? Should I have requested my remains to be embalmed? Wow, Osiris. That makes you one of the big gods right? Should I kneel or something? Are there prayers I should know? I totally did not expect to meet an Egyptian god when I passed on."

Osiris shakes his head. "I am no god brother. I am just a man who, when I passed on, was fondly remembered by many. I, like many others who have been called gods were merely men that carried themselves with honor during life. It is my self-appointed task to come down here to the crossing point to escort people into the step."

"So this isn't heaven?" I ask.

"No brother, it lies beyond. The god, who you will soon meet, found that humans enjoy paradise the most if they first leave behind their worldly burdens. That way there is no taint or tarnish on perfection and you can be in bliss undistracted. Like a bride at a funeral all hurtful memory is left outside, only in heaven, it is never to be taken up again."

"That sounds wonderful." I say. Getting to be beyond painful memories forever. "But I don't think I'm ready yet. It is no easy thing to let go of what you are asking me to let go. Can you sit with me a while longer?"

"As long as you need brother. As long as you need."

*I can freeze time, but there's a catch*

I have to take someone with me when I go, that's the rule. Whenever I stop time, I need a companion. It's a weird rule, and one I don't really see that much of a point in, but it makes for an interesting time.

I tried taking people I knew first, friends, family, classmates, girlfriends, but the trouble was their brains just couldn't process it. During the time freeze they would either run off and do their own thing which they'd always wanted to do, or they'd go catatonic with shock and not do anything the whole freeze. That might've been alright, after repeated trips they would probably get the hang of things and we could have some proper fun, but the trouble was after the freeze they convinced themselves it didn't happen.

Some of them would claim they had been drugged by someone. Others would tell me it was all just a lucid dream. When I asked how I remembered the events the same as they did if it was just a dream they told me that they must have already talked to me about the dream and got so excited by it that I had one of my own. It's amazing how far people will go to maintain their perceptions of reality.

I had a problem then. If I couldn't take anyone I knew, who could go with me? There was no way I was letting this power go to waste, so who should I take along? After family I tried starting the freeze out with someone then ditching them. That didn't work, as soon as they were out of sight time resumed as normal.

Next I tried random people from the gym or the coffee shop, but most of those people either fainted or called the cops on me. Or called the cops and then fainted. I don't think the police had a complete description of me yet, so I stopped trying random people from shops.

This was really beginning to irritate me. I needed someone who I didn't know, but who had seen enough weird stuff that a little magical time freezing wouldn't completely weird them out.

That's when it hit me. I didn't think it would work. I mean, how could this not end badly? But I was running out of options, so I gave it a try.

"Hey man, I don't have any money, but I'd love to take a walk around the city with you."

"I appreciate the offer friend, but you don't want to walk with me. People give the homeless weird stares."

"Well you know, I might have just the thing to fix that."

### *The grim reaper's worst nightmare*

*Every year the grim reaper challenges Mike to a contest in order to allow him another year of life.*

“Not paintball again please, you know that my long robes are a disadvantage. They’re impossible to hide behind any of the obstacles they have on the course, and the last person I tried to reap while I was covered in pink Poke-A-Dots would not stop laughing at me.” I begged Mike. These eternal contracts really should come with a bit more discretion on the part of the reaper. He was only thirteen, but still. He could try and let me have some shred of dignity. Did flowing black cloaks and large scythes mean nothing to him?

“You said it could be any contest with a clear and non-subjective winner that I wanted, but I guess paintball isn’t very sporting so how about...” Mike looked around his room. “Sharks and minnows!” Mike cried, lunging for a cap and goggles that were nearby.

“What’s sharks and minnows?” I asked, knowing that the answer would not be to my liking.

“It’s simple. We go find a pool, you tread water in the middle, and I try to swim to the other side before you can touch me. If I can make it across, you lose.” Mike was already excusing himself to the bathroom to change.

“Oh come on now Mike, you see how I’m dressed. Try to be reasonable.” I begged of him.

“You said any game. I want to play sharks and minnows.”

“I bet none of the other reapers have to put up with this.” I mumbled.

“I hear that!” Mike shouted out. He trotted out with his swim trunks and goggles on. “Come on, the pool is just around the corner, and I’ll even give you an edge. I have to make it to the other side, and then turn around and come back. What do you say?”

“Oh alright.” I sighed, following Mike as he bolted out the door like a child eager to reach his birthday party on time.

A few painfully embarrassing moments later, after I explained to the astonished lifeguards what was going to transpire, I swam out into the deep part of the pool.

I say swam, it was really more like drowning in a forward direction. I didn't even want to think about how heavy my robes were when filled with water.

"Alright Mike, let's get this over with." I bemoaned as Mike practically bounced up and down on the side of the pool, waiting to dive in. He could be less enthusiastic about trumping an eternal force from beyond the vale. It was downright undignified having him be so....Happy about it.

"You have to say 'all minnows in'." Mike informed me.

"Fine, 'all minnows in'." Mike dove down to the bottom of the pool like he was a frog, and expertly reached the other side in only a handful of strokes. All while being safely under about 3 meters of water. I made one attempt to reach him, turning myself upside down to use gravity to my advantage. The trouble was my out fit didn't cooperate and I ended up impersonating an oil spill as Mike gleefully returned to his staring wall.

I dragged myself exhaustedly to the side and pulled myself out of the pool with much panting and coughing of water.

"Okay Mike." I coughed up half a lung full of water. "You win until next year."

"Sweet!" Mike called, and then ran back home chanting some asinine childhood rhyme that involved over usage of the word 'smells'.

"Thanks." His mom said, walking up to me from where she had been watching.

"No." I coughed a quarter lung full of water out onto the side of the pool. "Problem."

"He doesn't have any idea does he?" She asked.

"No mom. He hasn't the slightest clue I'm his older brother." I threw back my hood and tore off the voice changer. "He still thinks it's real." Ever since our father had passed on Mike had a resounding fear of death. So every year I pretended to be the reaper so he could beat me and feel safe for another year.

### *A childhood promise*

"Make haste friend Richard the hour is nigh, we must depart and with all speed." John burst into my office clad in weather mail and wielding a broad sword. He had just thrown me a 3 foot blade and had turned on his heel, obviously expecting me to follow.

“Uh, I’m working dude.” I said. “I kind of need this job. Feed the family and all that? I’m the breadwinner you know.”

“What folly is this that you are proclaiming my comrade of old? Hast thou lost the burning passion for the quest? Where is your unquenchable need to seek out that which is vilest in the world and strike it down? Where is the fervor of the friend who once claimed that he longed to follow me into the dragon’s den and slay the evil within to ensure the princess’ honor and safety? Has the flow of time made you soft?” He threw the words at me like a knight throws down a gauntlet. I didn’t know what had gotten into him.

“I know we had all those imaginary adventures together as kids, but they were just that, imaginary. Real people don’t slay dragons or rescue princesses. Real people have jobs and responsibilities. It may not be quite the adventure you want to have mate, but it’s real, and it makes me happy. I actually like what I do for a living, like it a lot actually. Is this about your job? Did you get fired? If so you know you’re always welcome at my place until you can find something else. You and your wife and kids. I know my wife would love some more company.” I tried to think if my wife Janus had told me anything about John before I left. Had I missed an email? Was one of his parents sick maybe? I knew he was real close to his mom.

“Do you suggest that I have distain for my duties? That I am no longer satisfied or have been expelled from my place of employment” John says indignantly. “Have you no faith in me brother?” Before I can respond he reaches into his back pocket. “Then perhaps this will convince you.” John produces a knife with a note stuck through it that he slams into my office desk. I’m appalled at the sudden destruction of office furniture and reel backwards.

“Compatriot, this was fixed to my door when I departed from my home this morning. I believe it shall explain all.” Hesitantly, and while keeping an eye on John. I pick up the note

\*Mortals, fear me and hasten to do my will. For I have imprisoned your spouses and children. They will starve lest you do exactly as I order. My minions will come for you soon. Stay where you are and do nothing to inflame my tempor. Signed, the dark lord of the twilight woods.\* After I finish reading the letter, the ink evaporates off the page and coalesces into a tiny black ball several inches above the note, leaving the page blank.

The ball of ink then ignites and slams into the paper leaving a burning hole through the middle of it that forms the shape of a dragon.

“The crossbows are still in my trunk.” I tell John. He smiles.

“Then we are departed my old friend. Let us make haste!” As he reaches the knife he tells me. “This morning I discovered that dragons were real. Now I have found that heroes are as well.”

*Real life has tech support*

Report # 01 for user 0790475020B: Dear big programmer person, my mommy says you can fix anything, so I should report any bugs in my life to you. I didn't get enough presents for Christmas. All my other friends got exactly what I want. There must be a queueing problem with the Christmas.exe program. Please look into it, user 0790475020B.

Report # 16 for user 0790475020B: Hey programmer dude, things have been good, just got a little tweak for ya'. The prom.2.0.doc file is shaping up pretty sweet, there's just one problem. My prom proposal bombed and the girl turned me down. I know you probably don't deal a lot with these small instance problems, but if you could just go press a few buttons to make that not happen it would be sweet, user 0790475020B.

Report # 023 for user 0790475020B: Hello once again programmer person, somebody pointed out to me that my user number is automatically included in the report so I don't need to mention it. Sorry for the redundancy, now let's get down to brass tax. The college.lifetutorial.exe program worked great and my bachelor's degree appears functional, but I've been looking for jobs for like nine months now, and my parents are really putting the pressure on me to move out. I'm sure it's a problem with the search engines, so if you could look at the code for me I'd appreciate it.

Report # 026 for user 0790475020B: Greetings programmer person. I don't know why I'm even writing this. You never seem to patch my problems. Now I'm having to write this during my fifteen minute break from the call center. I know you probably have an awesome job troubleshooting life, but some of us have to scrape by on the worst sort of job. You know how rude people are to cold callers? It's pretty horrible. I can't imagine ever doing this willingly. This can't be right, please patch soon.

Report # 027 for user 0790475020B: Oh, and not that you care, but the girlfriend update never came through for me. So thanks for that.

Report # 029 for user 0790475020B: Programmer, more of a question than a report. Can you patch someone back into the system if they log out? If that's true can you request to not be included in the patch? Just curious.

Report # 030: for user 0790475020B: I should probably send this to a different tech support group, but I'm sure you can just forward this to them. This is an actual software report, the spell check on my word processor is broken. It keeps autocorrecting words that aren't meant to be corrected. It's not a huge deal. The book that I'm writing doesn't use the words it doesn't like very often so I can work around it, but it's just kind of annoying.

Report # 032: for user 0790475020B: What up programmer! Girlfriend patch finally came through! I can see you guys have been working on polishing this one up for quite some time ;). Please disregard previous complaints on this matter.

Report # 033: for user 0790475020B: Hey programmer, I know it's been a while, I've been busy with my girlfriend and signing tours. Such are the struggles of life. My girl pointed out that I should probably say thanks for all the stuff you've put together for me recently. I can kind of see how you put me in a place where I could grow as a user into someone my girl liked, and how you gave me enough free time and motivation to start writing. I'm right where I want to be in life so I just wanted to say thanks. Seriously, thank you.

### Feeling again

"When was the last time you felt something? I don't mean the last time you got cut off in traffic and swore at the other driver. I don't mean the last time you went on a date and waited anxiously afterwards for a phone call that didn't come. I mean really felt something. I mean had your blood pressure spike so high that you felt like you were going to pass out. I mean you seriously questioned if you were going to die. I mean **really** felt something. You can't answer can you? Go to the end of the street and walk into the woods. There will be an old man waiting there. He will show you another way."

This letter had come sandwiched between a note from my bank summarizing the last month's activity, and the phone bill. There was no return address, and no name listed anywhere. I wanted to brush it off and trash the letter. It was probably some prank by a neighborhood kid who had learned to open my mailbox. Except it was right. I couldn't remember the last time I had really felt something. There was probably nothing waiting for me in the woods, except maybe a kid with a squirt gun, but I was willing to risk it.

I grab a jacket and head outside. It's getting cold out. There is snow forecasted for tomorrow. I feel a biting chill from the wind, and grab some gloves and a hat too. As I head down the street I really hope there isn't some kid with a water balloon. You could get hypothermia from getting wet in this weather.

I reach the edge of the woods, and grit my teeth as I walk through. I expect a cold splash on the back of my at any moment. At least for the first few steps I do. Then I develop a sense of wonder at the woods. I've driven past them countless times on my way to work, but I've never actually set foot inside them before. I wonder what's back here.

I here a splash and a cry for help ahead. Someone's fallen into a lake of some sort. I run ahead and sure enough the trees give way to a lake, and an old man desperately splashing as he tries to stay afloat.

“Help!” He shouts again. I barely register the bridge he must’ve fallen from as I shed my jacket and dive in. He’s about fifty meters out and I’ve got to be quick. With his poor circulation he’s probably only got seconds before he starts losing toes to the cold.

Burn me is this water freezing! I involuntarily stop breathing as the water feels like it’s choking me, trying to force itself into my lungs, but I was a lifeguard in my youth, and resiliently begin to stroke my way out to the old man.

I’m about ten meters away when his head ducks under. Oh no, the water’s deep. If he falls very far I’ll never be able to catch him, and if he inhales any water it’ll damage his lungs for sure. I desperately close the distance to the epicenter of his ripples, and dive down. I close my eyes and blindly feel for something. My hands brush aside algae that has been growing in the stagnant water, nothing. How could he have sunk so far?

I kick with my legs to propel myself even further down. He’s been under twenty seconds at this point. Seriously, were there rocks in his pockets? Come on old man, give me something.

He’s been under almost forty seconds, and my own lungs are starting to burn. My body tries to reflexively breathe in the surrounding water and I’m choking out bubbles. I take one last searching swipe with my arms, and brush a coat. The old man!

I loop an arm under his shoulder and start stroking furiously. He’s been under almost a full minute, and I can’t tell if he’s unconscious and therefore drowning. He’s limp in my arms. It doesn’t look good.

We break the surface and I kick like crazy for the shore. I tilt his head back and out of the water. His eyes are closed and there’s water dripping from his mouth. Not good signs.

I pull him onto the shore. Okay, ABCs. Airway, breathing circulates, clearly his airway is blocked by water. I find his sternum and start compressing. Water starts ejecting from his mouth in spurts. Clearly still clogged, keep compressing. I think I feel something crack. He’s going to have some broken ribs.

He coughs violently and sits up. Oh thank god. I thought I had just pulled a corpse out of the water. I grab my phone and dial 911. As I’m informing the dispatcher where I am and what I need the old man reaches into his jacket and pulls out a letter that appears to be water proofed somehow. What on earth?

I thank the dispatcher and hang up.

“Ambulance is coming. You’re going to be fine.” I tell the old man. He continues to cough and gestures for me to open the letter. Really confused, I open the letter. Inside is a piece of paper with a single sentence.

“Well done, await further instructions.”

### *The last French fry*

“Alright, you guys have twenty minutes to grab any souvenirs of civilization before we pack it out of here. They’ll be coming soon and we need to be gone when they do.” My bug out crew had made a decision to come back. We had all met at the agreed upon panic location when the bombs had started going off. Thousands of nuclear bombs made in secret under false pretense had been distributed by a very sophisticated group.

The one in this mall had been disarmed by some off duty navy SEAL explosive technician. It was a lucky twist of fate that left one of the only standing monuments to western culture in a hundred miles. My crew had heard about in on the radio on our way out. It was currently being swarmed over by scavengers, but if you carried enough guns and went in packs, the bad ones would leave you alone.

I buddied up with my childhood friend Eric. Him and me had been hanging out since middle school, almost ten years now. So many nights staying up late talking about life. So many adventures out into the wilderness. It was there we had met the people who would eventually become our bug out crew. Yeah, me and Eric had a lot of good memories. It was fitting we would get to share our last memory of what life was like before the fall together.

“So where do you want to go mate?” He asks me. The mall’s big, so we only really have time to hit one last location. I’m glad he’s given me the choice. I know exactly where should go.

“The burger joint on the north end.” Eric nods approvingly. Every time we had stayed up late, or headed out on an adventure, we had stopped here for food. Every time we came Eric always got the fries, and I got the onion rings. It had been a friendly game for us. Each of us swearing that we had made the best choice, and each of us refusing to taste the others dish as a matter of pride. We would have time for one last meal before the apocalypse closed in around us.

We break into the kitchen to find it’s picked clean, except for one french fry and one onion ring sitting next to the frier. They’re a little mushed, but beggars can’t be choosers.

Eric picks up the onion ring and gives it a whiff. “To memories” He says. I pick up the french fry and answer his toast.

"To memories." I say, and we take our last bite of civilization together.

*Not your average school shooting*

"Everybody on the ground!" The troubled kid from calculus shouted. He didn't need to ask twice. We all dove under our desks in the class room faster than gravity could have dropped us.

"What is he doing?" I whispered to my classmate Jason. We sat towards the back so I didn't think the shooter could hear us. "And where did he get that rifle?" The shooter was directing the teacher to lock the door, and then forced her to the back of the class.

"I don't know Thomas." Jason whispered back. "His parents hate guns. He for sure didn't get it from them."

"Enough chit chat!" He shouted again. "Cell phones out and shove them up front. There's twenty two of you, and I can count!" I took out my phone and hoped one of my classmates had called the police. I felt bad that I had chosen to talk instead of make the call.

"Everybody listen up!" He shouted.

"Did you call the police?" I whisper to Jason.

"I said listen up!" He yelled again. "I finally get a chance to speak, and nobody's going to stop me. Thomas!" The name hit me like a shot from his gun. "Quit running your mouth and get up here!"

I appreciated how quite it was as I walked towards the front of the class. No one said a word. There had been no alarm sounded, and as far as I could hear, no police had called. Or at least, if they were called, they wouldn't get here in time.

"On your knees Thomas!" The shooter shouted. I drop to my knees as he raises the gun.

"I'm going to make sure everybody remembers this day. Starting with you." He had been shouting up until this point, but these words were said in a whisper.

"You haven't chambered a round dummy." I say. He looks to the side of his gun to see what I'm talking about. In that brief second I knock the gun away from my forehead, and stand up quickly, using my head to bash him in the jaw. Then punch him just below the sternum to drop him to the floor. I put my foot on his throat and grab the rifle out of his hands.

“Next time you steal a gun.” I tell him. “Make sure the chamber’s open.” He can’t respond because he can’t breathe properly at the moment, but I can tell that my point has been made.

A couple of my classmates flip him over and pin his arms behind his back. I break down the rifle and hand it to the teacher.

“I’ll get this to the principle at once.” She says.

“No.” I tell her. “We can’t give him any publicity. That’s what he wants. He was dying to get some attention from this. We can’t give him that. Give me three of the football players a pass to escort him to the parking lot, and call the police. I’ll stow the rifle in my bag as evidence. Quickly, quietly, no one hears a word of this.”

### *On the count of three everyone switch bodies*

*An alien visits earth, and reshuffles everyone’s consciousness into different bodies every twenty-four hours.*

Giant red floating numbers appear on my eyelids at noon, and decrease from ten to one. The alien said the first jump would be easy. I don’t think any jump would be easy. I’m a towering male body builder. The odds of me getting someone whose better physically fit than me are basically zero. I had called my girlfriend earlier, and we had agree to skype as soon as the switch is made. The alien had instructed everyone to be seated for the change, and I saw several rebellious coworkers forced into sitting positions. Good, at least I won’t find myself on a tight rope or barreling down the highway at 90 miles an hour

2....1... I’m at an office, I’m sitting in a cubicle with a computer on in front of me. There’s a word document open, and my hands are on the keyboard. My vision looks dirty, and there’s something on my face. I reach up and touch my face, glasses. I notice there is a periodic table of elements on the side of my cube, and to my utter amazement I recognize most of the elements. Wow! I must be smart! I found it reassuring to know that you also got the latent knowledge of whoever I was transported to.

I take a look at what I’m writing, and see instructions. ‘You are a research associate at a well known lab. Your job is to perform column chromatography to purify proteins. Today you are running an experiment on ion exchange chromatography to investigate the possibility of a negative capture of the remaining contaminants.

Hmmm, a negative capture, it made sense. The protein was over 90% purity, so some polishing should be all that’s necessary, and we’ve had good yields with ion exchange in the past. I was smart! This was cool. I see he’s got another word file open. I tab over to it to find the

printed instructions for what I was to do. I scroll through and notice it's just like yesterday's, but we're investigating a higher salt concentration in the wash step. Was this what science people did all day? Think in really big words that not many people understood, I could get used to this.

Then I remember my girlfriend and open Skype.

"Hey babe." A female park ranger on the other end says. There's a forest behind her. I'm lucky she ended up in a park ranger with a good cell phone plan. "Where are you?" She asks. I can clearly see the sign for the park behind her. It isn't that far from where I lived before the switch

It's a good question, I check my surroundings. There aren't any windows. I consider asking someone, but they're probably just as confused as me. I look back at my computer screen and my new science brain suggests using the internet. A quick google search later I have the answer.

"I'm only about thirty miles south of you." I feel an itching sensation in my head. What is that? Am I sick? The itching directs me to some paperwork nearby. Oh, it's my work ethic telling me to get going.

"I'm in a Biology lab sweetie, and I need to get back to work. There's science to do!" She smiles.

"Okay babe, call me again tonight, and we'll recap the day."

"K, ttyl sweetie." I say. She says goodbye, and I grab the paperwork to head into the lab.

It's my first time working in an actual lab, or even seeing one. It looks kind of boring. Most of the equipment looks like it belongs in a kitchen, until my science brain shows me how things are linked. This ordinary looking plastic bag holds a solution that has been carefully refined over years. It is used in conjunction with the sand looking substance to pull out a protein from a blend of bacteria. That protein is then used to combat deadly flesh eating bacteria.

I marvel at the intricacies within the brain I'm occupying. It's so incredibly interconnected. Atomic structures reveal truths about large macromolecules. The large macromolecules in turn perform precise actions dictated by thermodynamic equations. Those thermodynamic equations also apply to the function of the macromolecules, and the macromolecules are impossibly numerous, and all affect each other. This science brain studied a great deal about channel proteins in his graduate school, and I spend an hour just tracing the pathway of the protein and how it interacts with the other proteins.

I leave the day lost in thought, and instinctively drive to my host's rather nice house. I immediately boot up skype, where my girl tells me about her day.

"It was a blessing and a curse." She tells me. "On the one hand this body isn't as good as the one I have." My girl is/was a model. "But there's also less need for one. There aren't many people out here, and the few that come by aren't interested in my looks. They value the knowledge I have, and we bond over the shared experience of loving nature. Speaking of nature, there's so much of it here! I spent half the day walking in silence, just listening to the sounds of wind, water, and animals. I'm used to the hustle and bustle of modeling, and this is so serene." I'm happy for her, and share my day. All in all, it's a strange experience, but the new way we both have begun to look at the world has made us both happier and more well rounded people.

"I want to thank the owner of this body." I tell my girl. "But I can't think of how. The odds of me meeting him again are basically zero."

"Do what I'm going to do." My girl says. "Help out their body. Go for a jog or do some workout. Eat healthy, and then leave a note for the next person to help them take care of the body."

"But what good will that do if he's never going to get this body back?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Maybe he'll never know. Maybe he'll get the body back, but at the very least you'll know that you've passed on the positive experience to someone else."

"Yeah, I think I'll do that." I say, and I do, going for an extra bracing run, and before I go to bed I use the smart guy's phone to send him an email that will arrive at 12:01 tomorrow, leaving instructions and information for the next person.

Over the coming months I shift many times. The shifts become increasingly varied, sending me further and further away, to more and more different people. I get to experience other languages, much younger bodies, and much older bodies. I get to be an artist, a politician, a lawyer, a plumber, a doctor, a farmer, and many other jobs. Each job teaches me something different, and I honor their gift with one of my own.

Mostly people do the same things. They either leave strong memories with information, or written messages close to hand. Every day at noon there's a sort of ceremony that develops where people introduce each other and talk about their own experiences.

Occasionally you get a body with serious problems. A kid with suicide issues, an adult whose homeless, an elderly person who's terminally ill. For those people all you can do is just

leave an extra strong message of encouragement, and make an effort to leave them better than you found them.

Perhaps every 50th shift or so I get to revisit my body, and I'm always delighted with what I find. I'll have started a book, or my car will be fixed. Sometimes I'll have job offers from places I did not apply to.

There develops an international sense of brotherhood as well all come to accept that we need to treat ourselves and others with the utmost respect, because the body you harm could be become your own.

### *One last request*

"I wish to see myself at fourteen to convince myself to ask out Francine Walker." I asked the mysterious ghost who has appeared before me.

"But first I will show you what will change." Th ghost tells me. That's fair of him. It's his powers I'm taking advantage of, so I'll gladly abide by his rules.

We arrive at the honeymoon with my current with Margaret. "Gone." The ghost says.

That's alright. I'll get married to Francine. We'll have another honeymoon.

I'm standing at my wife's side as she gives birth to my first son. "Gone." The ghost says. I'm watching my first daughter being born. "Gone." The ghost says. Those two hurt, and hurt bad. I'm sure I'll have more children, but it was hard to tell that to myself as I saw them take their first breaths.

I'm at my dad's funeral. Oh good, I won't mind losing this. "Keep." The ghost says. I look at him questioningly, and before I can voice my question he points to my wife comforting me as I sob like a little girl. "Gone." He says. Then I know I can't change my past. I can't betray this woman who means so much to me.

"I wish to see myself at nineteen when I'm picking majors so I can go with something more lucrative than creative writing." The ghost nods. I suspect I am about to view the changes to my life, and I am right when I find myself at my first book publishing event. "Gone." The ghost says. That stupid book had only made 5,000\$ and had started me on a very poor artist lifestyle, but I remembered the stories my readers had told me about how my book had changed them.

I'm in my room reading one of my books to my wife and children as they go to sleep. "Gone." The ghost says. These two memories aren't as powerful as the ones from my wife, and I am still thinking about making more money when I show up in the room of a teenage girl. She's bawling her eyes out, and has a lot of pills around her on the bed. She's got my book on her lap. I ask what's going on when she finishes the book and runs bawling to her mom to tell her that she loves her. The ghost points to the girl. "Gone."

"I can't change this either." I tell the ghost. He nods and we return to my room where we started.

"You know." I tell the ghost. "I can sense a pattern. Everything in my life happened for a reason, and I didn't appreciate those reasons. Ghost, I wish to end this charade." The ghost nods and points to himself.

### **Chapter 3-Thought experiments**

#### *Arguing your way into heaven*

"Ryan, natural causes, well done my son, see what the lord had prepared for you." St. Peter waved the man in front of me forward.

"Andrew, suicide." St. Peter starts to say to me, but I cut him off.

"That's a mistake." I blurt out without even thinking.

"I assure you there is no mistake my son. We have made our list and checked it twice. You are a suicide for sure." St. Peter starts to say something more, and I cut him off again. I fear as soon as he opens his mouth I'll be condemned and it will be over, but if I can just keep talking and bring him around to my side of thinking, or maybe just stall until Jesus comes out, maybe I've got a shot.

"Come on, you had to see everything. I was a hostage. He said you have two choices. It's your daughter or you, no choose. I chose, and I did the right thing man. That's not suicide. The guy who was holding a gun to my head clearly forced my hand. That makes it murder. That means I get in. It's not suicide."

"You could have refused to kill anyone. Are you sure that gunmen was going to take a life? I have consulted with the angels and I can tell you that man was not going to pull the trigger. We're sure of it. You are a suicide, now if you." I cut him off a third time.

“No, that’s not right. It’s suicide by cop, or by robber. I don’t know, but it’s still suicide. I’m not going down there. I did the right thing. Can’t you” St. Peter cuts me off this time.

“You’re going up my son.” He says. I stop my rapid fire defense.

“What?” I say. “But you said I was a suicide.” St. Peter shakes his head.

“Nobody ever reads their catechism anymore. First off, in order for it be a mortal sin, which is the only thing that can cut you off from god, there has to be full consent. In other words, you cannot be coerced into doing it. Somebody holding a gun to your head counts as coercion and basically eliminates your moral culpability. You’re fine on that count, secondly, to clear up the general suicide confusion, the catechism as it was written when you died clearly states that it is very likely that suicides are mentally ill and therefore also have their moral culpability reduced or even eliminated entirely. You’re going to heaven my son. It’s a conversation starter for the other side, that’s all. Everybody wants to know ‘hey friend, how’d you die’. That’s all, don’t take it so seriously.” St. Peter gestures behind him. “See what the lord has prepared for you.”

*Medical student installs computer with google glass  
on their face, they are summoned to see the dean*

“The student who performed the surgery is here to see you.” My assistant informs me.

“Give me a moment.” I tell her. I can’t believe he managed to afix the google glass to his skull without fracturing his skull. I saw the pictures and it was amazing the implant didn’t cause some sort of structural damage.

*I should expel hir for the risk. I tell myself. If she’s this careless as a student, how much more so will she be with a MD?*

*But think of the benefit to mankind. The metaphorical devil on my shoulder replies. How large of a boon will such a device be to researchers everywhere? Instantaneous access to the complete knowledge of mankind with a mere thought? Vast medical statistics could be immediately provided to patients, or to speed up the diagnostic processes. We cannot let this invention end here.*

*But whose to say it will even work on someone else? I argue with myself. Perhaps her brain is uniquely suited to this device? It could very well cause an aneurism in other patients. It could still cause an aneurism in her.*

*So I have an answer for her then?* I ask myself.

*Yes, I think the answer is clear.* I conclude to myself.

“Send her in.” I tell my assistant.

As soon as the bionic student sits down I launch into my recently prepared speech.

“You’re immediately dropped from the program.” I tell her as calmly as I can.

“How can you!” She shouts, standing up. “I did it by myself, and this thing.” She points to her face. “Really does work!”

“Sit down Eve.” I tell her. “I wasn’t finished. She looks torn between a decision to punch me or to burst into tears.

“As I was saying. You are no longer a medical student because no one who will take such unauthorized liberties with the human body should be let near a patient. Besides that our IT department hacked your internet feed and we knew you’ve broken the honor code by cheating on tests. However.” I quickly move on as she looks ready to stand up again.

“You have an exceptional medical mind that we cannot possibly let go to waste. So we are granting you three doctoral degrees with valedictorian status. I also have five offers from major tech companies, including google, who are looking for new research directors.” She stand up again and begins to simultaneously giggle and clap her hands.

“I will say that all of these offers, and the degrees, are contingent on you restraining yourself from future spontaneous acts of bionic surgery. From now on, you have to tell someone before you upgrade yourself. Now then, which offer would you like to discuss first?”

### *Aliens offer technology at a great cost*

“500 million lives, to be paid thirty days from now.” The aliens stated there terms and would have no negotiation. They did not say what the lives were for, or even what exactly would happen to the people. The deal was set, and they would have no bargaining to alter it.

An emergency council of the UN was convened.

“I can’t believe we’re even considering this.” The representative for China announced. “I know that being so heavily populated my country will bear the greatest share of the burden, and besides that, these are real people we are talking about. We can’t just throw their lives away for technology! They’re worth more than that.”

“I agree.” The Indian representative added in. “We represent about a third of the world’s population and you cannot move forward with this unless you have our consent. We are convinced of this and will not be persuaded otherwise.”

This firm stance from the two eastern representatives seemed insurmountable. The NATO country representatives glanced at each other uneasily. Some wanted this technology, others wanted the human lives to remain as they were, but regardless of their wants, the matter seemed concluded.

“How many people have AIDS right now?” The South African representative asked the assembly. “How many will get AIDS in the next fifty years?” There was of course, no response to this. “I know in the next decade alone we will lose more than 500 million souls, and most of those are prevented.” The South African representative turned towards the Chinese representative.

“My fellow honorable representative, how many souls would you save if cancer were cured? Would that not alone be worth the cost?”

The Chinese representative shifted uneasily. “Even if it were, who would pay this cost? I cannot believe that many people would willingly sacrifice themselves, and if they don’t what you are talking about is mass genocide on a global scale.”

“Yes.” The South African minister replied. “Yes it would be, and if we cannot gather the volunteers than I suggest we reject the proposal. However, I believe we can obtain the volunteers.”

“How?” The Indian representative asked. “Surely 1 in 14 people in the world are not willing to make that sacrifice.”

“Are you so sure my friend?” The South African representative replied. “How many grandfathers and grandmothers, being not long for this world, would not gladly give themselves up for their offspring’s sake? How many already dying men and women around the world would not give themselves up so that their passing could take on greater meaning. Even if these people could be saved by this technology, how great a gift is it to have one’s death be that of a hero? Would not this event be hailed for generations, nay, millennia to come as an of absolute heroism, and would not all the names of those who committed themselves to this be hailed for the remaining history of mankind as the stewards of a new and glorious era?” The two eastern

representatives were considering this now. Their faces were pensive, but they were still on the fence, and needed a final push to sway them.

“Even so.” The South African minister continued. “There is a final thing to consider, some people to go first. Some group needs to stand up and lay their lives down as the leaders in this great sacrifice. I think you already know who I suggest.” The South African representative stood up. “We are the leaders. Our peoples have chosen us. This is our burden.” The lone man looked around the room, his speech concluded, and made eye contact with each country’s chosen representative. One by one, as he gazed at them, they rose to their feet. It took a half an hour for some representatives. Some broke into tears. Some fainted and had to be revived. Some made calls to their loved ones, but at the end of the day, every last leader stood up, and volunteered to lay down their lives for their country.

### *Last men standing*

“Don’t shoot!” He calls out from behind the car. I had put a bullet through his windshield with my hunting rifle to let him know I meant business. It had been months since I’d seen a robber, but I was not going to lose another generator to carelessness.

“I’m going to come out now. I’ve left all of my weapons in the car, and I’m going to come out slowly.” He slowly rises with his hands raised above his head. I put another bullet through the passenger window. He doesn’t even flinch. He finishes standing up, and slowly walks over to me.

I put another bullet in the ground. I was not getting robbed again. I could no longer see properly out of my left eye because of bandits. He still doesn’t flinch. He just keeps walking towards me with his hands up until my gun is touching his forehead.

“If you’re not going to trust me you might as well end this right now, because I think we’re the last ones. I haven’t seen another soul in two years. Even if they exist we’re not going to find them.” I consider doing it. I consider giving that trigger a squeeze. How do I know this guy isn’t going to make himself the last man on earth when I go to bed?

Then again, if he does, I think he will have suffered the worse fate. I lower my rifle, open the chamber, drop the mag, and flip the safety on.

“Good.” He says. “Because I’ve also got the world’s last xbox in my car, and there are a whole lot of co-op games I’ve stockpiled.”

### *A question of eyes*

“Dude, have you seen the new vision 4.2 patch? You can actually taste things you look at now!” Jason says to me, practically drooling as he says it.

“No man, you know I don’t go for that stuff.” I respond. We’re calmly taking a walk around the lake like we usually do after class gets out. It helps us relax. At least it used to, he’s been kind of off the wall since getting his enhancement suite installed.

“You should totally hop on board for this one mate. See that large oak tree over there?” He points to a towering white oak that stretches a hundred feet up and over fifty feet out.

“Yeah I see it. It’s kind of conspicuous man. I’ve been looking at it for about a minute now.” I kick a pebble on the path into the lake. He’s been going off about his updates pretty much every time we have a walk. At first I was happy for him. His ocular implants made for certain he would never have to have any kind of corrective lenses ever again. It was even cheap enough to be economical. Then somewhere around the 3.0 update it started to get out of control.

“You just see that tree, but man, I’m tasting some delicious peanuts right now.”

“Peanuts don’t grow on oak trees.” I inform him.

“I know that, but you can set it to whatever you want. You can even set it to random. I did that once. It made math class so interesting dude. Or that lake, tastes like shrimp. Those clouds? Ice cream.”

“I noticed you’re not looking at that tree anymore.” I tell him.

“What?” He says.

“The tree, you’re not looking at it. With all your enhanced vision, your telescopic retinas, your taste-o-vision, your multi-spectrum vision, that tree could not hold your attention for more than a few seconds. Yet I’ve been admiring it’s natural beauty for close on to three minutes now.”

“Are you hating on my technology man?” He asks.

“No, I think it’s marvelous technology, but the fact remains. Your technology has led you to be constantly updating, constantly experimenting, and constantly searching for new stimuli. You’re not happy unless there’s always something new. While I can look at a simple tree for hours. Tell me, which of is better off?”

### Who gets to survive the apocalypse?

“So we’ve ruled out anyone who has a disease that will be longer treatable after the collapse, anyone too old or too young to reproduce effectively, that leaves us with a bunch of people between the ages of 18-35. Anyone care to narrow it down a bit more? Come on now, don’t be shy.” The head scientist said to the group of his colleagues that he had assembled.

There were many different representatives from many different fields. There were the biologists and psychologists of course, as well as the philosophers and economists. The historians had insisted on sending a representative, and of course there were the doctors. Numerous other fields had requested to be present for this occasion, but the psychologists had pointed out that too many different opinions would prevent anything from getting done, so the selection had been made from these five.

The head scientist, a biologist, sat down, and gestured to the economist to have a stab.

“We must rule out anyone who doesn’t believe in small government.” He said. “There will be no government to support the people, so they must fend for themselves. We will look at voting records and rule out anyone who hasn’t consistently voted for the decreased size of government.

“Even if we accepted that as a plausible screening criteria, and even if we someone violated the privacy of billions to find out that information, historically it won’t work out.” The history professor said. “Whenever you separate people out a group of people based on a political belief, they tend to start a war with the people of the opposite belief. You can’t really think the world will accept a political agenda as a means to decipher survivability. As soon as word gets out, and it will, there’ll be a public outcry and the whole program will collapse on itself.”

“Alright, no political beliefs then.” The biologist said. “What else?”

“How about IQ or mental stability screens?” The psychologist put in. “Surely we should be saving the smartest and most secure people in order to rebuild civilization.”

“I agree.” The biologist put in. “Can we get a two thirds majority on the matter?”

"You have my vote." The historian put in.

"And mine." The economist added. All heads swiveled to the philosopher.

"Well, what have you got to say?" The biologist asked. "We have a majority, but if you'd like to say something for the record we'd be happy to hear it."

"Did you know." The philosopher said. "That there are routinely young men and women who IQs in excess of 150 who never make it to college? That puts them in the upper 1% of intelligence on this planet. They typically suffer no mental illness, and are reasonable physical condition. Can any of you tell me why this happens?" There was no reply.

"Because they had no motivation to." The philosopher said. "Intelligence and physical fitness may be the engine which drives the human person forward, but motivation is the fuel. If someone has no reason to survive, because they have no friend, or family, or loved ones of any sort, then they will no doubt do what they are currently doing, sitting at home watching television, watching their lives slip away. If you really want to survive, you need a reasons to live, and those reasons must take the form of people. I propose you select those who care deeply for each their fellow man. This is a difficult task because you can't measure it directly, but my friends the biologist and the psychologist can no doubt come up with a list of persons so equipped?"

The psychologist and the biologist looked at each other. "I think we will look at neurotransmitters in the blood, and screen for people with high levels of oxytocin." The biologist said.

"And I say we start by examining newly weds, and those with young children." The psychologist said.

"Any objections?" The philosopher asked. There were none.

### *Serial killer rom com*

"Two Bloody Mary's please." I tell the waitress.

"Don't you normally get those after you finish drinking?" My date, Ellen, asked.

"Sorry, old habit, I like the name." I explain. Ellen looks at me like I've got something stuck in my teeth.

“Are you a fan of really old nursery rhymes?” She asks, trying to find a reason why I would like such a violent name.

“Well, kind of, I like the urban myth, you know the one right?”

“Sure, the thing with the mirror that prepubescent kids do at sleepovers. Were you a big fan of that?” She had downgraded from seeing something stuck in my teeth, to maybe catching a whiff of bad breath.

“I just sympathized with Bloody Mary a lot.” I bite my tongue as soon as the words are out. That’s something only a crazy person would say. Now I would have to be on damage control for the rest of this date just to keep her from walking out. A second date was entirely out of the question at this point.

“Because she can’t control it.” Ellen says. Her look of revulsion is gone. Now she looks like she’s just finished a puzzle that she’s been working on.

“I know right? It’s like, what if she doesn’t want to appear and do horrible things to people.” I say.

“Maybe she would rather just rest peacefully by herself somewhere instead of being constantly forced to do bad things against her will.” Ellen continues my thought.

“She’s clearly got a curse on her, has anyone ever thought of doing something to help her. Call a priest to exercise a mirror or something.” I say.

“Nope, they just tell whispers about her everywhere and keep forcing her to do things she doesn’t want to do.” Ellen finishes. It’s so refreshing to hear someone who feels the same way I do.

“How do you feel about horror movies?” I ask.

### *The actual love drug*

“Hormones?” He says.

“Yeah, I think they said there were modified stereoisomers of Dopamine and Oxytocin, or something like that. You can check the pamphlet if you want.” I thought Bryan would be extatic, but he’s giving me a flat stare. I know that stare, it was the same one he had given me when I suggested we move in together.

“So, did it come in a bottle? Or a pill?” He asked. It was an odd question. He must be stalling for time to think.

“An injection actually. Well, kind of, an injection. It was like when you donate blood and they stick something in your arm, only instead of collecting my blood they hooked up a bag and let it drip into my veins.” He nodded, and looked at his hands which he was folding and unfolding. I wanted him to say something to let me know what was on his mind.

“It didn’t hurt.” I said. “It felt a little cold actually. I guess that’s because the bag is much colder than my body temperature. Weird right? I mean if I touched the bag it wouldn’t feel cold, but I guess the nerves in your blood vessels are more sensitive or something.”

“So they put love in a bag.” He said. That hurt, it made me feel cheap.

“No, no, that’s not right, it’s all natural science.” She said.

“All natural?” He said. “You really believe that?”

“Well, yes, yes I do.” I fumbled out. I had believed it when I had first said it. I wasn’t so sure now.

“It doesn’t matter.” He said. “You’re telling me that you didn’t think we were strong enough.”

“No.” I quickly blurt out.

“Yes you are.” He said. His speech was slow. It wasn’t heated or loud, it was like he was reading a list of facts. “You didn’t think we could make it, so you gave yourself a love shot, and to top it all off, that means the thing you’re depending on in this relationship isn’t me. You didn’t trust me to build you up, so you needed some doctor or nurse to give you a shot of what you wanted, a bit of an emotional high. You didn’t want me, Jessica, you wanted to feel good.” I couldn’t respond to that, and he didn’t give me a chance.

“You know the funny part? I was ready to do forever with you.” He pulls out a small box out of his back pocket, and sets it down next to him. It’s the kind of box made for carrying one specific, very expensive thing.

### *Part time heroes*

“Captain flying brick you will never catch me!” The indestructible man shouted as he raced down an alley.

“Think again indestructible man!” Our hero retorts as he flies into the alley, readying his laser vision to trap the indestructible man.

To our hero’s surprise the indestructible man has dropped the bags of money he stole and is pointing fiercely at his watch. Our hero quickly checks his own. It’s 5:00, shift is up.

Our hero looks around and points to a storm drain. The indestructible man flashes him the OK symbol, and the two silently lift the man hole cover and drop through..

As the sound of sirens gets closer the captain shouts as loud as he can. “Oh no, not through the apartment complex, you dastardly fiend!” And then quickly covers the man hole behind him.

“Phew.” Indestructible man says as soon as the captain drops in behind him. “I thought we were going to have to have a climactic battle or something. I’m still sore from the last one.

“Indestructible indeed, you know I take that name as a challenge right?” The captain asked.

“Oh it was in the contract, don’t give me gripe.” Both were swapping out their costumes for street clothes that had been stored in some cached duffle bags. The city’s maintenance personnel were told to keep all storm drains stocked with them for the heroes. They didn’t know the villains used them too.

“You want to grab some wings?” The villain asked.

“Sure, I’ll pick up a paper so we can take a look at the crime rates while we’re at it.” The captain said.

“Great.” Indestructible replied. “I think my gang is up to about 120 people, so when you find my secret hideout and round them up we should see a couple percent drop.”

“You don’t think your henchmen will suspect something?” The captain asked.

“Nah, I’ll just have some incompetent people on guard duty. I’m sure they’ll start a fight or something that we can use as the excuse for you finding me.”

*How much do my parents love me?*

*Abortion is legal until the age of 18, a kid who's still a month away from his 18th birthday faces a difficult choice.*

"Good night dear, we love you." My parents called.

"Love you too." I called back. Love me, that's what they said. They didn't know what I'd done today.

All my life my parents had raised me to be a great doctor. They had given me extravagant gifts and much praise whenever I brought home a 4.0 GPA, and I had brought home a 4.0 GPA every semester of my life.

I had been a part of all the right extracurricular activities and volunteer groups. Until today my chances of getting into the right school had been 100%.

Today had been the SAT. I had practiced for months, read every book on the subject, and taken every necessary class. My preparation had been ideal, and every sign indicated I should score in the top 5%.

I scored in the fifth percentile alright, just not the upper fifth. I hadn't told my parents my score. Most students received their scores a week after testing. I didn't know you could receive your scores the same day until today. After I had completed my exam, one of the proctors pulled me aside and told me that I had scored in the bottom five percent.

Before I could cry out that such a score wasn't possible for me he had hastily told me that I wasn't supposed to know, but parents had been known to abort their children when they scored low.

"It isn't super common." He had said. "But it happens."

"My parents would never do that to me!" I had shouted. Thankfully he had pulled me into an empty soundproof room to have this discussion.

"Is it?" He asked. "You know who gets the pre-birth abortions right? Kids without futures" I didn't respond. "Think about it kid, think of all those children with birth defects who get the axe."

"But I'm not defective." I said, still reeling from what I was hearing.

“I know that.” He responded. “I didn’t say you were, but to them, they’ve put a lot of money, time, and energy into your success, and after today, well, not saying anything about your future kid, but that kind of a score doesn’t look good.”

I thought about all the vacations my parents had taken me on, all the money on tutors, private schools, summer school, vacations to educational places, and all of it in their eyes was now wasted.

I could retest of course, but not until after my birthday, and a retest wasn’t a clean slate. I still had community colleges, night school, trade school, apprenticeships, but medical school was all but gone for me.

To them, I might as well have just plastered ‘boomerang generation’ on my forehead. My outlook on life did not look good.

I had jokingly told my friend that my parents would kill me if I scored low. Could it be true?

“How old are your parents kid?” The man asked me.

“Late thirties early forties.” I said.

“Still young enough to start over.” He told me. “Adoption agencies are eager to give kids to parents with practice.”

‘We love you’. My parents had told me before I went to bed. Was I willing to stake my life on that?

### Video game vision

Level 22 nerd Teddy looked like he had aced the test as usual. I give him a nod and a congratulatory handshake as we walk down the high school halls to lunch, making sure to dodge the level 50 harpy with her dress of +3 shrieking, and her troll boyfriend. She clearly had some buffs casted onto him, and the two were usually trouble.

I wave goodbye to Teddy as I go and sit with my level 5-10 crew of humans. We all had very ordinary stats, a video game move here, a leadership buff there, but we were all pretty normal guys. I liked it that way, no competition. Just some regular old people having some regular old conversation.

I notice that our quarterback is sporting a new special move, but before I can make it out someone sits down across from me. He appears to be just like me and my friends at first, until I see his class and level contain only question marks.

“Hey, did you guys hear about the quarterback’s sweet new fake punt move?” He asks, looking straight at me.

“Uh yeah.” I say.

“How could you know that?” My friend with +2 athleticism asks. “We just practiced that before school?” The mystery man shrugs, without breaking eye contact with me.

“I know things.” His eyes narrow. “Many things.”

“James Franklin Glasgow, let’s go.” The mystery man says.

“Go where?” I look to my friends, but none of them seem to hear.

“You shall see.” He says. I look at my friends. None of them seem to think this is strange, and I need to figure out what the question marks mean.

“Where are we going?” I ask, standing up and following him out of the cafeteria.

“To the afterlife.” He says. I try to dive away from him, but I’m suddenly unable to move.

“Your friends are about to figure out that you’re suffering a lethal allergic reaction to that crabmeat sandwich you’re eating. The mods have decided to pull you before it got too painful, seeing as you’ve been good enough to beta test ‘stat vision’ for us. They’re awaiting your report on the new special ability now.”

### *Apocalypse cancelled*

“Scientists are now reporting they did the calculations in English instead of metric. We actually have another twenty thousand years to live.” The news report had come in at 12:07, seven minutes after the world was supposed to end.

No government had survived the ensuing chaos. Every last politician had defaced themselves beyond repair, those that weren’t lynched and hung that is, and the militaries of the world had taken the opportunity to fire every last round of non-nuclear ammunition that they had. After all, the world was supposed to go out with a bang right?

The world had now divided into three factions, the people who had lost everything, the people who had prepared properly because they knew it wouldn't, and the people who had gotten all the money and resources from the people who had panicked.

The scientists and religious which made up the second group were an odd mix. There were skeptical scientists who had done the math themselves, and realized they weren't going to die, and the very religious who had either not partied relentlessly, or had known through some religious dogma they would be fine. These two groups now found themselves working closely together as they were the protagonists of the post-apocalyptic world.

The victims of the apocalypse were those that had committed horrible crimes, or had squandered their wealth needlessly. Most of the world was penniless, or on the run from the families of those they had killed or robbed. Mostly penniless though, so much food and gas had been depleted in the final hours, and the people had been shuffled all over going to their dream vacation spots to die. People woke up in countries they did not know the language of, and no way to get home. Borders meant nothing anymore, no remained inside the countries to enforce the borders, since they were now scattered and broke.

Which left the winners of the fake apocalypse, those that now finding themselves drunk with power and stuffed to bursting with ill-gotten gains. It was the gangs, the hardened criminals, and the shrewd couple of businesses who had wagered the world would not end. The gangs had banded together to protect themselves from last minute police or opposing gang retaliations. The hardened criminals had all sprung from jail, and spent the night amassing stockpiles of everything they had missed, and the businessmen had made highly illegal deals to consolidate the world's power.

They formed a hierarchy, the businesses contacting the gangs to enforce their new laws, and the gangs hiring the criminals for their resources and illegal knowledge. The businesses spread outward, bringing more and more gangs under their belt, and utilizing their company resources to spread far and wide. A burger chain took the east coast of the United States by storm. A famous rapper dominated the west coast, and the middle was controlled by a mess of smaller steakhouses and land owners.

Smaller island nations like Japan, Iceland, and New Zealand were taken over by an airliner who used their fleet to land gangs at key supply points to control the flow of resources. Australia's inhabitants had all either died or gone into the bush. Africa was overrun with medical corporations. The middle east was taken by oil. Some small business owner who had gotten hold of nuclear weapons was now running India. Cartels ran Central and South America, and Europe had splintered into hundreds of small warring states.

The Vatican gathered to it all the world's scientists and religious leaders, using its influence, and the Swiss guards, to control Italy. They rallied to the call of any people who could

reach them to call for help. They invented new planes and boats for rapid international travel, and new crops for food distribution. The religious institutions used their experience in aid delivery around the world to make sure the supplies got into the right hands, and the scientists saw they had the means to deliver them.

It is now a slow battle with the church and scientific community fighting inch by inch to take back civilization. They pray every night before they sleep that the smaller disjointed corporate states do not band together and wipe them out.

*With great knowledge comes great responsibility*

Of course! The third carbon on the benzyl amide was the key to it all! My doctoral thesis had just become a snap. I would still have to do the experiment to prove it, but using my infinite knowledge would certainly stream line the process, and already knowing the outcome, I could write my thesis anytime.

It had come to me in a dream, there was something about a great cosmic choice, and upon waking he suddenly knew. To celebrate I decided to take myself out to lunch, the usual Chinese restaurant would do.

As I joyfully hopped into my car I realized that my rear brakes would require replacement in about three thousand miles, that was good to know. I discovered my car would no longer be economical to maintain in about another forty thousand miles. Knowledge was wonderful!

Things started to take a dark turn as I arrived at a stop light. I know the car next to me is going to suffer a terrible crash that will leave the driver on life support for life. This knowledge hits me like a slap to the face. I need to tell the driver. I roll down my window and try to yell at the driver, but the light turns green, and I'm in the wrong lane. The car quickly speeds out of sight to its fate, and a honking horn behind Francis' sends him in the opposite direction.

"It's okay." I tell myself. There are going to be some downsides too. I look at another car driving next to me, and know the girl is going to be proposed to soon. This brings a smile to my face, until I also realize their subsequent divorce in six years will ruin their two children's lives, driving one to become a homeless alcoholic after he drops out of med school with 100K in debt.

I drive to the Chinese restaurant without looking at anything but inanimate objects. Those are all fairly dull, giving me nothing but what they're made of and when they'll break mostly.

When I arrive at the restaurant I grab a menu and dash to a booth quickly. I bury my head in a menu, and when the waiter comes to take my order I quickly spurt out my order, and

go back to studying the menu, which I insist on keeping. It is actually a rather pleasant menu, and I learn much about the rich history of China by studying the items.

“I’ll have the lobster.” A girl in the booth over says. She’s allergic to lobster and will suffer a lethal allergic reaction. I instantly know. What should I do? I can’t tell her, she will never believe me, and I certainly don’t want to talk to her lest she should find out all sorts of horrible things. I stew and stew, ignoring the waiter when my own meal of chicken with cashews is brought.

The girl’s own food comes out and I instantly know what to do. I run up to the waiter and knock the plate out of his hand.

“What are you doing!” Both the waiter and the girl shout.

“I’m, I’m sorry.” I say. I want to explain myself, but it would do no good. I just have to stop her from ordering more lethal food.

“Now what am I going to eat?” The girl demands.

“Um, here.” I grab my own chicken and cashews, neither of which she is allergic too. “Take my food.” The girl snatches it from my hands quickly, and sits down to eat without a word.

“Here, this if for my meal, her meal, and your trouble.” I tell the waiter, giving him a rather large tip on top of the cost of both meals. He takes the money, and I know he isn’t thinking pleasant thoughts about me, but his anger is soothed. I quickly move to leave the restaurant, but before I do I look at the girl. I know her name is Sarah.

Sarah, I repeat the name to myself over and over again so it is at the forefront of my thoughts. I may be doomed to know everyone’s fate, and misery, but at least I can save a few, and I must hold onto those few to get my by.

*A lifetime of October 13<sup>th</sup> 2014*

Okay, the train just passed, one one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand, and turn. Squint, eyes go wide, jaw drops, reach it into back pocket, and kneel.

“Oh my gosh you are the most wonderful woman I’ve ever seen in my whole life, will you marry me?” She steps back and covers her face in shock. Now quick lunge forward to grab her dangling hand and pull her away from the on coming cab.

“I’m sorry.” I stand up and quickly release her hand and back peddle. “I didn’t mean to scare you so badly, it’s just I couldn’t risk the chance of you getting away.”

“How, how, what.” She stammers. I put the ring back into my pocket.

“It’s okay, I understand, this is too much. I should go.” I turn and take three steps away, and then pause and drooped my head. It had taken a dozen cycles to figure out it was exactly three steps that would do it.

“Wait.” She calls, running up and taking my hand. “It’s okay. I just.” She fumbles. I look at her eyes with an expression of hope and fear that I had spent two whole cycles perfecting in a mirror.

“Why did you have an engagement ring in your back pocket?” The first time she asked this I had went with ‘Just in case I see something as rare as you’. That had gotten me a few oohs and ahhs, but hadn’t gone anywhere. Next I had tried some practical excuse about selling an old family heirloom. That had almost earned me a slap for selling an engagement ring. This time I decided to try.

“Because I was going to propose to the woman I love, and I didn’t expect to run into the woman of my dreams.” Her knees buckled and I had to lunge forward to catch her again. Three hours later we were saying our vows in front of a justice of the peace.

Some people would spend an eternity doing depraved acts, or earning lots of money, or possibly traveling. Me, I wanted to marry every girl in the world.

### Immortality

*Fair warning, this story does not have a happy ending.*

Immortality, it’s such a strong word. It summons up images of gods, legends, and mythical beings. It isn’t until after you’ve obtained it that you discover such comparisons are highly misleading. It’s partially because immortality doesn’t come with automatic superpowers, but it’s because those other immortal beings had one thing in common. Can you guess what it is? Friends.

Every demon, angel, elf, demi-god, and magical undying creature had others of its kind. Dragons had other dragons, even modern Christianity has the trinity because god cannot be alone. It probably makes it worthwhile, having someone or even something to share eternity with. I’ve seen empires rise and fall, oceans form and mountains rise. After you’ve been alive

long enough time begins to flow differently. To me a year is as a day, and the lifetime of a human is but a summer vacation. The closest thing I have to constancy in my life is a rock.

A small chunk of gold to be specific. You see the thing with gold is that it lasts. It doesn't tarnish or oxidize like other metals. It stays the same as the day you dug it out of the ground until you lose it or sell it. I have done neither, and now the only thing I have in my life that time doesn't strip away is a chunk of stone.

I gain some solace from the humans I interact with, but eventually all of them will die, and I'll be the only sentient being left. Then I'll be faced with an impossible choice between two eternities. One to be reached by doing nothing, and one to be reached by doing what comes naturally to everyone else, dying.

## Chapter 4-Weird stories

### A suspicious skype call

"Hey Sam." I told my skype buddy from 'Australia'. "I think something is wrong with your screen."

"What do you mean Bill?" He said innocently, pretending like nothing was going on.

"It just, um, it just flickered you know? The window. It was like a desert mirage for a second and I thought I saw something on the other side."

"On no." Bill said. "I'm sure it's nothing, firewall messing with the output or something. You can never be to careful with bacteria these days."

"You mean viruses?" I ask.

"Yes, right, viruses, of course, always ramming the hard drive." *Ramming the hard drive? Was that Australian slang for something?*

"Sure, yeah, all the time, ramming the hard drive. Really causes problems with the.....output. Anyway, did you see the football game?" I asked my skype buddy Sam.

"Oh yes, American football, the Pittsburgh metallurgists against the Green Bay cheese fanatics." He said matter of factly. "Surely the steel shall prevail over dairy."

"What? That was four years ago. I was talking about the upcoming one, the patriots versus the seahawks." Sam looked frantically at his screen, scrolling frantically.

“Time distortion offset needs recalibrating.” He muttered under his breath.

“What was that?” I asked. Sam was starting to go off the deep end.

“Nothing, nothing, I was just going to comment that waterfowl will have great difficulty prevailing against men who are armed with the modern musket.” \*Modern musket? I don’t think anyone has fired a musket in anger in almost two centuries. Also, I knew people could get caught up in the mascots, but it really seemed like Sam thought there were going to be a bunch of Seahawks facing off against a group of patriots.

“Hey Sam, do you think the muskets are going to be custom made with smaller caliber rounds? I mean the ball size seems a bit excessive for taking down a bird of that size.” Sam did not miss a beat when he agreed with me.

“For sure, for sure, one could hunt bears in the frontier with those weapons. I would wager they would decrease the caliber by half at least, if not a quarter. That way they could carry more ammunition.” *Something is most definitely wrong with Sam.*

“Sam, what year is it?” I asked.

“You mean right now?” He returned.

“Yes Sam, right now, what is the year.” I said calmly and measuredly.

“Uh, well you know I’m not sure how to convert the number from metric to English, and have you opted for the Gregorian calendar?” Sam replied.

“Okay Sam, what’s going on. It’s pretty clear you have no idea what American football is, or even what the year is. Now I like talking with you buddy, but you need to level with me.” I folded my arms and waited.

“Well, if you must know.” Sam flipped a switch I couldn’t see and suddenly his screen was occupied not by another man like me, but by what appeared to be a stereotypical green, bug eyed, antenna eared alien.

“I’m sorry you had to figure out Bill.” Sam said. I was so busy trying not to swallow my tongue I almost didn’t hear him. “I should’ve checked the local events in your year and place before answering the call.”

“Forget that, what are you and why are you doing this?” I demanded.

"I'm from your neighboring star system, Ceti Alpha V, you would call me an alien, and as for the reason." Sam sighed.

"Is it research?" I asked.

"No." the creature that was Sam sighed.

"Is it for entertainment?" I asked.

"No." Sam said

"Is it for interstellar politics?" I asked.

"No." Sam said for the third time.

"What then?" I asked.

"I just wanted a friend Bill." Sam is staring down at his keyboard and picking at one of the keys so he doesn't have to make eye contact. "It gets lonely over here and I just wanted someone to talk to."

"Well you can always talk with me Sam." I told him. "Just don't say anything too weird while my friends are over okay?"

### *The ancient creatures are back*

You ever watched a unicorn? I mean really watched a unicorn. Not just a passing glance at it as you were walking through the woods, but really stopped to watch it graze.

It will seem dull at first, like any other animal during feeding time, but it's not just any other animal. The white elegant beast will glance at you, and if you maintain it's gaze for long enough, it will start to do things decidedly, human. It may tilt it's neck to one side and blink at you. It may narrow it's eyes like it's trying to figure you out. If you really stare at it the horned animal will start giving you sideways glances like a middle schooler looking at their crush and trying to decide whether to ask them out or not.

"Dragon!" Someone called out from behind me, pushing me to the ground. I glanced up to see a giant winged lizard descend on the animal and lift it into the air. It was still looking at me as it was carried away. It didn't cry out. That part was perhaps most human of all. What animal upon being presented with its final fate wouldn't struggle? The beautiful thing just looked at me as it was carried upward.

“Get down lad!” Someone called from behind me again. They didn’t give me time to react. They shoved me to the ground, and when I looked up there was a great roar as the dragon was felled from the sky. I saw the unicorn gallop off into the woods, safe. I felt as if I had just seen a child wrested from the arms of a kidnapper.

“Were you just going to stand there and watch lad?” The man from behind me asked.

I realized this whole time I must’ve appeared bound by some magical trance to stare at the unicorn, and perhaps I was, but I was being most rude to this person who had saved the animal.

“I am sorry.” I say, getting up off the ground and turning to see who had saved me. “That was an excellent shot....father?” I was confused. Behind me was a scene straight out of a bible thumper’s fanfic.

Four priests, obviously priests, I could see rosaries and roman collars. They were clad in plate mail, carrying crossbows that had vials of holy water strapped to the bolts.

“That’s right my son. Ever heard of the legionaries of Christ?”

*To awake from this coma you must complete the quest*

*Respawn in 20 seconds*

Okay, last time I tried the stealth approach to take out the forest guards before the caravan comes through. Hit the first two with my bow and arrow then went in with the knife for the chain combos. Chained up the first four, but the last one saw me before I could finish the combo. He called in the reinforcements, and I had taken too long setting everything before they came through.

*Respawn in ten seconds*

I had tried the run and gun approach several times, perfectly rehearsing my moves until it was practically muscle memory. Could never clean up all the reinforcements before they arrived. This was the eighth time I had tried the stealth approach. Maybe a combination?

*Respawning now, remember, protect your family*

Yeah yeah, protect your family, save the convoy. Well, might as well try the stealth approach one more time.

Climb the rock, swing over three trees so I can get the perfect angle. Count to twelve so the guards line up properly..... Now. Gotta make this quick, shot one, shot two, downward strike against the guy with his back turn, chain two kills forward, throw the knife. Dang, the fifth guy saw me. Taking him down with the bow, but he's already blown the horn, and the reinforcement will get to the caravan before I can.

Nope, this is definitely not the way to do it. Might as well take a look around. I haven't scouted the map much, and there could be a hidden item or something.

"Help...Me" One of the downed guards says. It's the one with the horn. Must've only wounded him. The guards would say this if you only downed them. I never paid it any mine.

"It won't matter. Once your buddies finish with the caravan everyone will respawn anyway."

"Help...Me." The guard asks again.

"Seriously, give it like twenty seconds. I can already hear them ambushing the caravan now."

"Help..."

"Fine, what the heck, this should be interesting." I walk over, lift up his mask, and to my horror, see my little brother's face staring back at him.

"Help...Me...He won't wake up."

"What?"

"Call an ambulance, he's not coming around. Somebody please help me."

"I back peddle, dropping the helmet." I haven't been attacking my enemies this whole time. I've been attacking my allies, and...and they were somehow family?

"Help....me"

*Respawning in 20 seconds*

How? How was this possible. Where had he come from? Why was my little brother in my....dream? No this couldn't be a dream. It had gone on for far too long and I remembered way too much. I didn't have dreams like this.

*Respawning in 10 seconds*

What had he said after help me? He had said something about an ambulance. Then it hit me. This wasn't a dream.

*Respawning now, remember, protect your family*

I had it wrong. My family wasn't the convoy. My family was the guards.

I run into the middle of the road and start shouting orders.

"You with the horn, call for reinforcements. You three swordsmen with me, archers, up into those trees, they have a nice angle. We've got about forty seconds before the convoy shows up.

I look into the eyes of the swordsmen as they line up alongside me.

"Is he going to make it?" I recognize the far left one as my sister.

"We'll get him to the hospital as soon as we can." The two men on the far left echo simultaneously.

"Let us come with you!" One of the archers calls from the trees.

"You'll have to meet us there." One of the other archers calls back. I block out the rest. I can't stand to hear my family worrying over me. They're probably at my bedside right now.

"Convoy in range, arm fire arrows!" I call to the archers. I can see the reinforcements taking positions to ambush behind the bushes.

"Loose!" I call. Arrows tipped with flaming coals fly into the wooden wagons, forcing the pikemen onto the exposed path.

"Hold your positions, wait for the archers to draw them to us." I call to my small force.

Sure enough, a few spearmen downed to arrows later, and they're giving up their defensive spears for offensive shortwords.

“Now!” I call to the reinforcements, and we have them in a circle formation in the blink of an eye. Like cornered dogs they lunge at us, and like a well trained pack of wolves we bring them down one by one, until no one is standing.

Everything is dark, then very white.

“Remember protect your family.” I hear a video game announcer declare.

“You still playing that one level.” I hear an older male voice ask.

“It was his favorite, besides I never beat it.” A younger voice replies.

“Yeah, because you’re going about it wrong.” I sit up, telling my younger brother. “Here, give me the controller and let your older brother show you how it’s done.”

#### *World’s oldest man dies at 54*

“Studies continue to show rising happiness trends after the passing of the world’s oldest man at the age of 54. The death rate from the cancer that resulted from all of the nuclear fallout has finally leveled off with an average life expectancy of 42. Something not seen practically since Rome was in power. We are going now live in the field to reporter Robert Jones who is at his funeral to ask people about this startling trend. Jones?”

“Thanks Steve. There’s a pretty good party going at the funeral. His family is mourning inside, but the rest of us are recognizing a life well lived and ended not long after his prime. I’m here with a fellow celebrator. Sir, how do you feel about the trending happiness despite the atrocious life expectancy?”

“Well Jones, it’s been a long known fact that countries with lower life expectancies were happier even before WWII. Now that most people won’t reach fifty so much of the pressure is off.”

“What do you mean the pressure is off?”

“You see Jones, before the war people would spend decades of their lives figuring out what to do and hunting down the perfect person. Now the average person has a job that they enjoy before the age of fifteen because the economy can’t support extended periods of unemployment through education, and typically married before 18 because if you want to see your grandkids you better get to it.”

“But aren’t people afraid they’ll make the wrong decisions? What about the midlife crisis where people realize they’re not doing what they want with their lives?”

“Jones, people don’t have time to worry about that sort of thing anymore. All they have to worry about are providing for their loved ones and coming home to a family who supports them. All the rest is just too much to be getting on with.”

*Best of luck worst of timing*

Ha! Pregnant on the first try! My husband and I had decided to try just this month, after waiting for two years, and on the very first try we nailed it. Pun not really intended. I jump up and down for joy. This is amazing. I’ve got to tell Susie right away.

I run down the stairs and hop into my car to pop over to Susie’s. I call my husband on the way over to gush over him. He’s just as ecstatic as I am. This is just in time to spread the good news to Susie. We shared everything together. We had met our spouses on a double first date. We had graduated college and went into the same field. Aside from my incredible luck we could practically be the same person. She only heard last week that she was pregnant. We could go shopping for oversized pregnant shirts together now!

I pull into her house and run inside. I have a key to her house so I don’t have to knock. She even recognizes my footsteps running up to her room so she doesn’t freak out when I see her. Susie does give me an inquisitive look when I burst into her office like a crazy person, but she sees the stick I’m waving and knows what’s going. Her face lights up like a Christmas tree, but then darkens like a storm cloud. She turns the screen towards me. “The sonogram came back negative. I’m not pregnant after all.” I feel like a terrible person. This happens all the time. It’s why I always carry plenty of dark chocolate in my purse, and always save some sick days from work so I can stay home and take care of a friend.

*Bless me father for I have sinned*

“Bless me father for I have sinned. It’s been one month since my last confession, and I shall confess to the sins of lying once, anger against my coworkers, pride, and jealousy. I am sorry for these and all my sins.”

I was always happy to hear Angelica’s confessions. She was concise, direct, and I got the sense that she always made a thorough examination of conscious.

“Thank god for the gift of an honest confession.” I told her. “I advise you to examine your sins, and to select one to work on the most. Say three Hail Mary’s, and you may now make an act of contrition.”

“My god, I am heartily sorry for all my sins. In choosing to do wrong and in failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend with your help to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us, in his name, my god, have mercy, amen.” Angelica was well named. The humility in her voice was angelic. Hearing each and every syllable brought me joy, as if I was hearing them directly from an angel. I gladly grant her an absolution.

“God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Go in peace my child.”

“Thank you father.” She says, and departs.

“Bless me father for I have sinned. It’s been one month since my last confession.” Angelica says. Even though there is a screen between us I can tell it’s her. I could pick her voice out of a crowd even if there were a hundred voices all chanting the same thing.

I listen to her confession, she is brief and to the point as ever, and it heartens me to hear a confession such as hers. As I give her a variation on my usual advice I reflect that it would be good to spend time with someone as devout as she.

I assign her a penance, and she begins the act of contrition. As she outpours her sorrow there is a telltale flicker in my chest. It’s just a flicker, but I was not always a priest, and recognize that flicker.

I am suddenly glad for the screen between us as my eyes are no doubt widening in shock. I try and dismiss it. She finishes her act of contrition, and I begin my absolution. I focus on the words, using the repetition to block out thought and emotion.

“Thank you father.” She says. I do not feel particularly fatherly at the moment.

“Bless me father for I have sinned. It’s been one month since my last confession.” It’s her again. As soon as I hear her voice the flicker comes back. Only it has progressed to a solid thumping in my chest. As she lists her sins I perceive each one as a reason for my affection for her to increase.

I stumble through my brief words of advice to her. I hardly heard what she said to me, so I hope it’s still relevant. As she begins her act of contrition I mourn that holy orders do not remove such emotions from me. I can feel myself falling ever farther for her.

Then I begin my act of contrition. I am reminded that as a priest I speak for another man. A man who experienced great suffering. I am reminded that the current emotion is but another burden to carry. The knowledge does not less the emotion. Indeed I find myself feeling an even greater attraction to her, but I am reminded that duty comes first.

I even begin to feel ashamed for reacting so strongly to this emotion. Do not husbands still feel for other women after marriage? Do employers not occasionally feel attraction for their employees. Unwanted infatuation is nothing special. I'm not some hormone driven teenager. I'm an adult, and I can control myself.

### Ye olde prison letter

A letter to my beloved in an 18th century debtor's prison.

*"Dearest Rebecca, it has been overlong since last I was blessed with the gift of your society and have felt the loss most keenly. Seven months you have now resided in that dreary environment, and seven months have I toiled away in the coal mines to support your family.*

*It shall gladden you to know that at the time of this letters creation I am in good health, as is your family. They have reconciled themselves to the loss of their father and their subsequent loss of you.*

*Alas, this state of matters cannot last. My funds are rapidly becoming exhausted. Without your aid I cannot possibly continue to provide bread to satisfy so many mouths. We need you dearest. We need you now.*

*I have wrote you before about my friend Alfred yes? He is a chemist at the local university who has on occasion visited my mine to collect certain elements for his experiments.*

*This gentlemen has been a balm to the wounds of my soul as of late, and I owe him a great debt. Well now you shall share in my debt dearest, because he has hatched a plan.*

*Our comrade Alfred has concocted a certain way of mixing a certain kind of oil with acids to produce a most remarkable substance he calls trinitrotoluene. He believes this substance may be of use to us in our current sorry state of affairs. I cannot write more to you dearest concerning this matter in case this letter falls into the wrong hands. All I can say is that on the morrow, before the third crow of the rooster, you should lay beneath your bed with you head facing the door, and both of your hands should be employed to cover your head."*

### Dairy of a super hero

January 1st- Lost eagle woman yesterday. It figures, we just had our first date, and some supervillain just had to take her out. I should've known. It was a new year, and things were looking good. Things always turn absolutely horrible just when stuff is sorting itself out. I don't know if it just got too quiet and the human fly got bored, or if he knew somehow, maybe he had our secret identities pegged. All I know is she's not here anymore. Happy new year.

February 14th- Fourth villain back in jail today! Felt like letting off some steam so I called in sick to work and spent the whole day fighting crime. I didn't feel like talking to coworkers today so it's for the best, and I got so much done! The commissioner tells me that I might crime fight my way out of a job if I keep this up. It's just good to keep my mind off things. There's a lot I don't want to think about today.

March 17th- Ultraman came into town today and said he'd cover for me. Apparently the league of heroes has noticed I've been burning the candle at both ends and thinks I need a break. Let's see if my new all-purpose anti-toxin works on alcohol!

March 18th- New all-purpose anti-toxin does not work on alcohol.

April 1st- Mer-woman set me up on a date with her sister the dolphin whisperer. Ocean heroes are a little bit underpowered, but man is dolphin whisperer a catch! On second thought it's probably really offensive to call someone who works with aquatic life 'a catch'. I'll have to think of some other compliment between now and then.

April 2nd- All of my intelligence and prep work, and I failed to notice they set me up on April. They thought I knew it was a joke, they all knew I wasn't ready for a relationship, why would they set me up for real? It had been a cooperative mission to some underwater something or other. I don't know who that villain was, but he probably won't be swimming or walking anywhere for a while. I may have vented a bit.

May 10th- All the college and university students are home for the summer. Swinging by the usual nerd hangouts to see if any of the recent graduates are side kick material. Eagle boy moved on to a new city, and I could use an understudy to help out with the summer rush of villains.

June 6th-Alien invasion! Woohoo! Haven't got to bust out this much gear since the mind control device put half the league under the control of the disembodied brain. I have been dying to put my new remote control stealth fighter squadron to the test, and I even just got my knockout gas optimized for this particular species. Good day!

July 4th-Bloody Americans, that's all I have to say. Bloody, bloody, Americans.

August 29th-Summer's over and no apprentice, got a couple contacts who are heading into graduate school. One of them is working in high energy theoretical physics, that's always promising. I've looked into his work, and they have just the right mix of brilliant and reckless that causes super powering lab accidents. Very promising.

September 10th- Absolutely nothing happened this week, not so much as a liquor store hold up. September is such a chill month. Got some time to think on things, and had a couple lunches with ultraman. He's worried about me putting so much time into my superhero career. Got deep, shared some stuff, made some revelations. He knows the dating scene is frustrating me, and says I'm just holding back hoping something resurrects eagle woman. I disagreed, but he pointed out I have remote operated stealth jets. If I have the time, money, energy, and intelligence to do that, I should be able to figure out dating. He might be right

October 31st- I love Halloween! It's like superhero appreciation day. Went into a club that was entirely dressed like me! It was like a fan convention. Had some really long talks with fans. All of them were very complimentary on my super realistic costume and in-depth knowledge of my own exploits. One woman in particular seemed fascinated. Got her number, but I'm not sure it's right to date a fan.

It's been some ups and downs for sure, but in the end I'm just grateful that I've got people around me to support me. There's ultraman, my fans, my ex-sidekicks, the commissioner, and even the ocean superheroes had been real friendly, even if they were kind of jerks. All in all, it's been a good year.

December 25th- No supervillain holiday attacks this year! Been doing this a decade and that's a first! Commissioner seems to think it's because I've got them all in prison. Whatever the reason it's been nice to spend some time with old sidekicks. I don't have any family, except for these brave young men, and it was thoughtful of them to come back and do some good old fashioned superhero bonding through training drills. Still just talking to my one special fan from the club. I think I've got a new year's resolution for her.

January 1st- I did it! First time going on a date in over a year, and she seemed just as excited to me. She even wants me to wear the costume. I think I will, and she just might find out how realistic it is.

*Love is experienced for the first time in a hundred years*

"I don't know. I just saw her the other day, and there was this light flying sensation, a bit like when you're dizzy, but without the bad part of feeling unbalanced. I looked at her and things were just right you know?"

“No I don’t.” My father replied. “We did away with that nonsense a long time ago, and we had your brain checked just six months ago. Besides, what are you going to tell Jane?”

“I don’t know father, and it doesn’t make any sense to me either. Promise you won’t tell anyone?” Father scratched his head and looked to be fighting with himself.

“I’ve known you to be a good lad Jason. So I shall keep your secret, but please don’t betray my trust.”

“Thank you father.” I then leave and immediately walk outside to the park where I saw her yesterday, perhaps I will see her again. I won’t say anything of course, but just to feel that again, to see if it really was love. I sit on the same bench I saw her earlier for an hour, and nothing. Two hours go by, still nothing. I spend half the day sitting on a bench, and still she doesn’t come.

It was foolish of me to think she would. Why would she come this way again? I had better go home. I get up to leave, and then I see her.

The feeling comes back five fold, and I am immobilized by it. I cannot help but be enraptured by her. She walks by like an angel, or something out of a dream. Everything in me screams to go talk to her, and everything else screams at me not to. I don’t move a hair, until she rounds a bend in the path, and then she disappears. I know then what I must do. I pick up my phone and call Jane.

“Jane. It’s Jason.” I hurriedly say, trying to end this conversation as quick as I can so I can be after her.

“Hey sweetie, what’s going on?” Her use of the word stings a bit given what I know I’m about to do.

“Jane. I’m sorry, it’s over. I’m in love with another woman. I haven’t done anything yet, but I’m about to, so I thought I would end this to keep us both honest people. I can’t explain it Jane, but there it is.” There are several moments of silence before, in a cracked voice comes back over the line.

“I understand Jason. I feel the same way about you, so if you feel that way about her, then you have to go after her.” Remorse fills me, but the butterflies are still there. I want to say something to make it better, but the line goes dead.

I return my focus to the girl and rush after her. She had rounded another two turns in the path, but fate guides me to her.

"I'm sorry." I say as I approached her. "I love you. I don't know why, but I do, and I had to tell you. I just broke up with my fiancé to tell you." Her mouth works wordlessly for a few moments, and then she asks me a few questions.

"Do I know you?"

"No."

"We've never met before?"

"No."

"But you broke up with your fiancé?"

"Yes."

"And you feel love for me?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Then you're an idiot. Love is putting other first. Your fiancé put you first when she let you go, and you've just proven you feel nothing for me but infatuation. Did she feel love for you?"

"Yes."

"Then you better call her and pray you didn't just ruin the first true romantic love in a hundred years."

### *A single moment*

The six foot rule, nothing more than six feet away from you matters. It was a rock climbing term, but it perfectly encapsulated how I felt. There was the rush, the butterflies in the stomach that came from the expectation of this moment, and all the hard work to get here. Countless attempts that had ended in failure to get to this point, it made me feel alive, but not feeling anything outside of this moment was the best feeling.

To have so much stress from the constant exams of school, the troubles of family life, and the troubles of friends and romantic interests, the pressure to find someone, none of that could be felt here. I could do nothing but feel the cold water all around, the intense

concentration that let me get here, and the freedom that being here brought. Things seemed to slow down, and the world just seemed to breathe.

Right here, right now, was worth more than a hundred therapy sessions.

### *The best girl*

“Wake up Neo.” A feminine voice whispers into my ear. I open my eyes and smile to myself, somebody knows one of my favorite movies. I look around see I’m in a hospital room. A hospital? That doesn’t make sense. The last thing I remember I was at Jason’s high school graduation party.

I see the source of the feminine voice, it’s a rather cute nurse whose leaning over me with some sort of flashlight. “Follow the light darlin’.” She tells me in an adorable southern accent. After a few medical diagnostic checks she sits down and starts asking me some questions.

That’s when the bad news starts. At first the questions are easy, thing about my early childhood, basic language testing. When they progress to middle school they get a little bit fussy. I remember my first crush and a surprising amount of history. Then comes high school and things get hard. That’s weird, I’m in high school, shouldn’t it be the easiest to remember?

The nurse doesn’t appear to notice and continues asking questions and smiling as if nothing is wrong. We get through freshman level questions, first basketball game, first dance. Then when we get to sophomore year of high school I can only remember a few bits and pieces, and most of my coursework is foggy to me. Finally we get to summer between Sophomore and Junior year, and I can’t remember anything else.

“Okay sweetie, how old do you think you are?” The nurse asks me.

“Well my birthday is in April, so sixteen right?” If I didn’t already know something was wrong by my foggy memory or the question ‘how old are you’ by someone who has my complete medical history, the fact that I’m only guessing at the answer is a dead giveaway.

“You’re 24.” The nurse informs me. She quickly produces a driver’s license to prove it.

“How?” Is all I can think to ask. She explains all about the accident to me, gently, and with a lot of sympathy.

“Thank you.” I tell her.

“your job has already informed us that they will take you back on as soon as your ready.” She smiles. “Thankfully, master artists don’t have to have really good memories.” She turns to leave.

“You know, you are handling this better than any amnesia patient I’ve ever had.” She tells me.

“Yeah?” I ask.

“Yeah.” She says. “It’s really inspiring.” There’s a pause where I start to feel a feeling in my gut that I don’t need to remember Junior year to recognize.

“Anyway, your girlfriend is here to see you. You are some lucky guy to be dating the richest hottest bachelorette in the country.” She informs me before turning on her heel and walking off.

“Yeah.” I say again, forcing myself to smile. My girlfriend comes in all smiles and enthusiasm, but I can’t help but keep glancing at the door to see when the nurse is going to come back.

### Going to hell

Things had gone cold, numb, and dark, and then suddenly reversed themselves. I was laying down, now I was standing up, and it was as bright as summer at midday, and warm too. My closed eyes were opened and I saw a great line of people stretching forward toward a gate. I did it. I had died. Now I was on my way to my eternal reward. I looked up at the heavenly gate, and saw inscribed in gold above it ‘Abandon all hope ye who enter here’.

There must be some mistake! I had lived a good life, I had followed the commandments, never missed a church service. I was a good man! I tried to turn around and walk away, but my feet kept taking me forward, and I couldn’t look away. It was like some great hand was pushing me towards this eternal fate. I now saw there were great fires roaring above the gates, and could hear distant sounds and awful sounds.

“It’s alright son.” A middle aged man in front of me said. “We are all going to the same place.”

“It can’t be!” I shouted back to him. “It can’t!” Did he say we all go to the same place? “Did you say we all go to the same place!?” He nodded.

“That’s right son.” He sounded so calm! How could he sound calm? Didn’t he know where we were going?

“Don’t you know where we’re going!” I shouted at him. Again, he nodded, still calm as ever. The sounds were louder now, I could make them out to be screams. We were over halfway to a burning eternity. Without a hint of fear in his voice he responded.

“We are all going together. That’s how it’s always been. That’s how it always will be.” I couldn’t believe this. Hell was here, that means god existed right? Did he have such high standards? Did he think no one was worth saving?

“But why?” I demanded of him. “Is no one saved from this.” The man shook his head. How could he not be weeping with terror from this?

“It’s not so bad.” The man told me in a level voice. “We’ll all be there together.” He sounded comforted by the thought, and yet. As he said this, my fear lessened, just a hair. Part of me had feared that hell meant being separated from everyone, being alone forever. Now, if what this man said was true, I would have company. Would that be so bad?

“Does that mean my parents will be here?” I asked him. “And my wife? And the three children she lost before she could carry them to term?” He nodded. My heart rose. I still dreaded what was coming, but it was more like the fear of getting on a roller coaster. You dreaded the moment, maybe even feared for your life, but it wasn’t the worst thing.

We were almost to the gate now, and I could pick out individual voices. In a minute it would be all over. “Have faith friend.” The man in front of me said.

Have faith? In what? In god? He had sent us all here. I couldn’t imagine why I should have faith in him. He had forsaken us. “Why has god forsaken us?” I asked my friend. We had reached the gates now, and it was my friend’s turn to step into the fire. He turned around, and held out his hands to me. I gasped.

There were holes from nails in both of his hands. I could move my head now, and looked down to see holes in his feet as well, and I knew that face. It didn’t look exactly like it did in the movies, but it was close enough to be recognizable.

“Jesus.” I said, my voice low. I felt like I should kneel or something. He had said everyone comes here, and I didn’t realize that included god’s own son.

“Come friend.” He told me. I looked into his face. It would be alright. I realized. Here was a man willing to die for me, and then take me by the hand to eternal damnation.

“You know what.” I told him, reaching out to take one of his hands and step into the fire. “I think I would rather spend eternity burning with you, then one day in heaven by myself.” Jesus smiled at my words as we stepped forward, and I felt an intense burning sensation that made we want to cry out. This was it, an eon of pain.

Then it vanished. I felt a cool pleasant breeze and something soft beneath my feet. I looked down and saw not fire, but a cloud. I looked up to see the face of Jesus again. His smile had broadened.

“All those times you went to church. You weren’t choosing between fire or clouds.” He told me. “You were choosing between yourself and me. So when I bled out and descended to the dead. I returned the favor and chose you over me.” He swept his hand outward to show a vast expanse of gold robed figures on clouds that were assembled like a football stadium as far and as high as the eye could see. “And so did all these people choose others before themselves.”

I marveled at the expanse of it, and I now felt that the breeze had a spirit to it that warmed me, and there was now an older man at my side putting his hand around my shoulder.

“Let us go together.” The old man told me in the most reassuring voice I ever heard. “You chose an eternity with us, and you shall have it. All our family and friends are right this way.”

### *The choice*

Meaning, or life, that was the question. So many people asked about the meaning of life, that was no longer relevant for me. The mysterious white robed individual before me was being very tight lipped about the details. He wouldn’t say where we would go, or what we would do, only that the places would be wondrous, and the things meaningful.

Meaning, or life. A week to live, wasn’t much time. I would never get to meet true love, watch my children grow up, or even graduate college for that matter. What would my parents say? I had two of the most loving people in the world to call mother and father, and they would now be forced to bury their own child. I couldn’t imagine what that would feel like.

But the places I would see! Could it be we would travel to the center of a black hole? Or to another world with an alien civilization? I gazed around at the white mountain top temple I had found this white robed wish granter in. The place was vast and ancient, it certainly seemed to be able to deliver wondrous things. I gazed piercingly at the mysterious figure whose arms were crossed and whose eyes were unblinking. I would get no answers from him.

Meaning or life. I would also do something wonderful, cure cancer, solve world hunger, create a lasting international peace. I would cause pain to a few yes, but so much joy to so

many. For that reason alone I must choose meaning or life. My life's goal was to have meaning, so really there was no choice.

Meaning it was then. The wish granter didn't need me to speak, he had read my mind, and nodded before snapping his fingers.

The week flew by in a flash, but not how I had anticipated it. There were no scientific wonders or spectacular views. The first place I saw was a California beach. No future technology, no aliens, just a regular beach. I waited for a second to see if Poseidon would rise up for the depths or something, but nothing happened.

The white man and I were sort of hovering halfway out into the ocean like a couple of ghosts that no one could see. I was about to ask him for a refund, until I heard a cry for help from far out in the ocean, and a young man streak out into the waves.

I looked to see where the cries for help came from, and saw a lady about a hundred yards out, being pulled by a riptide. She was losing her strength and starting to sink when the young man reached her, and pulled her up. He could barely keep the two of them afloat, much less bring them back into shore, and the riptide was pulling them further out.

I wanted to cry out for someone to help them, thankfully the lifeguard on duty had seen the whole thing and had sent for help. A small raft was making its way towards them.

Just like the young man the boat arrived just in time. Unfortunately there was only one seat on the boat, which the heroic man gave to the woman. I bit my lip as he began to visibly struggle to stay afloat.

The man continued being pulled further out to sea. By the time the boat made it back, the hero had went under.

The entire week I didn't see a black hole, or an alien civilization. I saw medals of honor being earned, husbands sacrificing themselves for their wives, wives sacrificing themselves for their children. I saw proposals, births, weddings, and also funerals, and deaths. At the end of the week I knew I had truly seen some of the most incredible things that had ever happened.

I had no regret when the seventh day had passed and I turned to my escort and asked him. "Alright, I'm ready, what am I to do." For an answer, he snapped his fingers.

I found myself on a California beach, and heard a woman being carried out by a riptide cry for help.

## Chapter 5-Not so bite size stories

### Man out of time

"I do not hesitate to impose upon the defendant the following sentence. For the murder of Rebecca Marerro for which I have found you guilty of aggravated murder in the first degree you will serve a sentence of life imprisonment without the possibility of early release or parole. This sentence will run consecutive to the 48 other sentences already imposed upon you under king county superior court case number 011102070-9. You will have no contact with the family of Rebecca Marerro for that same period of time. You will be required to pay restitution to that family to be determined at another time."

As those words are spoken by the judge I feel relief wash over me. They can't bring themselves to say my name, Gary Ridgwy. They hide behind words like 'defendant', because to say my name would be to humanize me, and to them I am an animal.

Paperwork is now being filed before the trial concludes. The words of the family of Rebecca Marerro, victim number 49, ring in my ears. She says she doesn't think they should spare my life. I'm going to serve 1680 years in prison, and she doesn't know the only reason I went for a plea deal, was because death would be too quick for me.

I was the worst and darkest kind of addict. I knew what I was doing, but I just couldn't stop myself. I needed to be locked away, and now I would be. I would no longer have to worry about the urges striking me again. The world would be safe from me, and I would have time to suffer for what I had done, 1680 years to suffer. It wasn't enough time, I had destroyed 49 lives, all of them worth more than mine. They should've locked me up for 5000 years, but what did it matter? I couldn't possibly live long enough to make up for all that loss.

"Cryogenic freezing is the term." The man in the black suit from the FBI tells me. He's with a NIH consultant, one of those scientist types. The scientist mostly just stares at the ground. People who don't work in law enforcement can't usually bring themselves to talk to me.

"It's a new technology. It hasn't been tested on healthy human beings before." The FBI man informed me.

"Why me?" I asked, knowing little about what he was talking about.

"Because you're never going to get out of here alive anyway." The FBI man responded.

“This procedure will halt the progression of your age, if it doesn’t kill you.” He went on. “So we will freeze you now, and wake you up just a few days before your release. It will be like no time has passed. If you survive of course, which is why we are asking you, because you’re basically dead anyway.” The black suit man looked briefly at the scientist to confirm everything he had just said. The scientist nodded.

“So I will be released then?” I asked. The FBI man nodded. No, I thought to myself. No, I had to stay here, this was the only place that was safe for other people. Unless there was some other benefit, there had to be some reason they would be willing to give me a free pass

“You told me what good it would do me, but what good would it do you?” I asked the FBI man. “I would think you were just doing this to kill me, and I don’t blame you. But there’s no way the NIH would go along with it if there wasn’t a good reason. So what’s so great that you’re willing to risk letting the green river killer go free to get it?” The FBI man looked to the scientist for an explanation. The scientist shook his head back and forth vigorously. Civilians really don’t like talking to me. The FBI man gestured in my direction and whispered something about willing test subjects. The scientist sighed, and then took a couple of deep breaths. When he spoke his voice was stuttering

“Because we c-could save people this way. If a disease isn’t c-curable, we can freeze a person until a c-cure develops. If someone is deemed highly important to s-society, we can freeze them during a time of prosperity, and thaw them ag-gain in a time of desperation.” His stuttering stopped as he began to get caught up in what he was saying. “Long missions to other planets could be made possible by freezing the passengers until they arrive. This could open new worlds for us.” For a moment the scientist was looking at me excitedly, like he was actually happy to talk to me. Then he remembered who I am and he went back to staring at the floor.

“I’ll save people?” I ask the FBI agent. The man nods. That’s enough for me. Hopefully I’ll die during the testing. My life will go towards saving others. I had 49 life debts to pay, and if this testing saves at least that many, I will have paid that debt. I needed just one more assurance before I consented.

“If it works, thaw me out 100 years before I’m to be released.” I pause for a moment to think. “As long as that won’t interfere with the testing.” I add on.

The scientist and the agent look at each other. They huddle briefly and exchange a few words. “Why?” The FBI agent returns my own question to me when the huddle is concluded.

“So the world never has to deal with me again.” I tell him. The scientist looks up at me, and without a stutter in his voice responded.

“It will not interfere with the testing.”

“Then do it as soon as you can.”

“He’s waking up.” I heard someone call. The voice was distant and muted. I couldn’t see much, just an iced over plate inches in front of my face.

There was a hissing sound, like gas escaping from a sealed beverage. I was alive, that was unexpected. I had hoped it would be over, but at least I was still in prison.

The hatch covering me pulled back and revealed a small room with a couple of scientists and a couple of men with guns. Men with guns, that was good. They were still taking me seriously. The guns weren’t really necessary. I wasn’t skilled in combat. I was just willing to kill. All of my victims had been defenseless. I never would’ve been able to take them down if they hadn’t been so much smaller and weaker than me. It stung to think of them again. A few violent images popped into my imagination unbidden, and I had to force them down.

Hands quickly pulled me out of the chamber and threw me onto a nearby gurney. That was good, get me cuffed quickly, and put me back in a cell. Except they didn’t. They were rapidly strapping on various monitors and shining things in my eyes.

“Pulse is good, internal temperature normal, brain function nominal, no freezer burn.” They pulled the devices off and stepped back. Confusion painted their faces, this was not what they expected.

“He’s.... fine.” One of the scientists commented. They exchanged glances, and began double checking their equipment. One of them pulled out a photo of me, and began comparing it to the real thing.

“No damage whatsoever.” A different scientist commented. “That puts the final survival rate of the program at what, 0.5%?” He asked his compatriots. They all nodded. “So he’s the only one.” They were crowding around me now, looking at me like I was the world’s biggest diamond.

Why weren’t they cuffing me? Why didn’t they look afraid? I looked around the room some more and none of the men with guns seemed to be paying much attention. In fact, they weren’t even looking at me. They were looking at the scientists. What? I was the danger here. Why would they think the scientists were a threat?

“Alright labrats, you thawed him out, now it’s our job to see him safely out of here.” The armed men began escorting the scientists out of the room. “You’ll finish your diagnostics later when he’s had time to rest.” Rest? Who cared about me getting rest? They seemed to think I was some kind of important person, not one of the world’s worst serial killers.

"You're taking me to my cell aren't you?" I ask the guards. One of the guards laughs.

"Cell? You? Of course not! We wouldn't put someone as valuable as you into a cell. You've got an apartment laid out for you nearby. We've already checked out the neighborhood and taken every precaution for your safety." I felt a note of panic. No, no, no, they had to keep me in here, away from everyone else. Another violent image flashed. This one takes a moment to shove away. It stays long enough for me to recognize the face. It's Cynthia Hinds. I remember the name. I remember all their names.

"But I've still got 100 years left in my sentence, you've got to keep me in here. It's the law." I start to sound like I'm pleading.

"Um, your crimes are over 1500 years old sir." He called me sir. No one should call me sir. "I don't think anyone still cares." Nobody cares? How could they not care? I felt like I was going even crazier than I already was.

"Besides, you're the worlds oldest man. You're a living historical icon. We've got to keep you safe so we can learn about when you came from." He leaned in close to me with a boyish smile on his face. "You obviously couldn't know this, but you're kind of famous, and there are a lot of ladies who are into that kind of thing." He winked at me.

That was too much, maybe if they kept me only around men it would be alright. I could control myself around men, or at the very least they could defend themselves from me. Several more images flash in front of me, painting the last moments of Rebecca Marerro. She was my final victim.

I grabbed the guard's his collar. It was a mark of how true his words were that he didn't try and defend himself, and none of his buddies came to his aid. I couldn't be around people, but women in particular were completely out of the question. I had been near too many women, at least 49 too many. There would not be a 50<sup>th</sup>. I would not let my debt get any higher.

"You've got to put me away." I demanded. The guard didn't even looked scared by the serial killer grabbing his collar. If anything I'd describe his expression as awkward.

"Easy Gary." He said, trying to calm me down. He was talking to me like I was a friend. "We'll put you back in your cell if you really want us to. I mean you're the boss." I released him and lay down on the gourney. I closed my eyes and felt relief course through me. It would be okay, I had at least 100 more years where I wouldn't hurt anyone. Maybe future medicine would keep me alive for a while, but I had been an old man when they froze me. I couldn't have much time left. I would die in a cell, just like I had planned. It would be okay.

“Gary Ridgway, you have dutifully and responsibly served your 1680 year term. During that sentence you have contributed greatly to the medical knowledge base of humanity by your volunteering for cryogenic experimentation. As such this court eagerly releases you, and in recognition of your efforts and sacrifice restores to you your right to vote, your right to carry a firearm, and cleans your record of any criminal activity.” A bowed to the judge, and a couple of armed guards escorted me out, not because they were afraid I would harm someone. They were afraid someone was going to harm ‘an international treasure’.

There were so many things wrong with this. They shouldn’t be releasing me. They shouldn’t be patting me on the back. They shouldn’t be making me a normal member of society. I must be cursed. I had been given a sentence of almost two millenniums. I had volunteered for a medical experiment which killed all of the other participants. I had forced them to keep me in prison for another 100 years, and yet I was still alive.

That last part was my fault. Medical knowledge had progressed greatly in the last 1500 years. The average life span was about 250 years. I should’ve anticipated that and had them thaw me out earlier. 100 years had seemed like a long time back then. Now, being almost 200 myself, it had passed in the blink of an eye. Now here I was again, about to be put back where I could indulge my addiction.

At least they had given me good guards. As we arrived at the gate I heard a crowd outside, and there were several heavily armed men waiting for me. The prison guards exchanged salutes with these men.

I felt a little comfort by their presence. This new set of guards looked like they could overthrow a small third world country if they wanted to. I don’t recognize any of the weaponry or armor on them, but it looks far more expensive than the stuff my last set of guards had. I didn’t know how long they would be watching over me, but at least the world would be safe for a little while.

Then I see her. “Sarah Maxwell at your service mister Ridgway.” I didn’t see her behind one of the guards. She steps out and extends a hand.

I take a step back, look away, and throw up a hand. The last time I had Denise Bush flashed before my eyes. I winced. It had been decades since the last time I had seen one of my victims.

A woman, they sent a woman? This one didn’t even look remotely dangerous. She was unarmed, carrying armor that didn’t look nearly as impressive as the stuff the gun toting men were wearing. Were they crazy? Why was she even here?

She looked at the guards who shrugged. "He's been away for a long time." One of them said to her.

"Right." She said, putting her hand down. "Mister Ridgway, you've refused to learn about the outside world for some time. Your doctor's tell me that you think the less you know, the less dangerous you'll be." I look back to her, maybe she understands? Maybe the dangerous men are to protect her, not to protect me. I start to relax a little. Then when I meet her gaze I see she's smiling. That conjures up Terry Milligan's face, and I wince and look away again.

"It's alright Mister Ridgway. I'm here to bring you back into the world. I'll bring you up to speed on modern technology, politics, and anything else you need to know." They were giving me a personal assistant, a female personal assistant. Had no one told people those who don't study history are doomed to repeat it?

"For starters, we're about to head to Mars. You have an interview there with a major news outlet." That caught my attention. I didn't follow space exploration, but when I was being put under the thought of colonizing Mars had been lunacy. Now we had done it? That snapped me out of my self loathing long enough to not make eye contact again, but to look curious.

"Mars?" I ask her.

"Yes Mister Ridgway. Your FTL motorcade is waiting just outside these gates." She tells me. For the first time since I was put away I look around. Over the walls of the prison I can see there are floating houses, flying cars, and people jetting around between buildings.

Sarah sees where I'm looking and smiles again. "The population of the earth is over 70 billion; we had to resort to extreme means to fit everyone. The bottoms of the oceans have been colonized, and we've spread out to just about every celestial body in our solar system." I get a sense of wonder that calms me down. I'm distracted enough that I don't think about all the horrible things I've done for a few moments. I look back at Sarah and the guards. The guards are well trained I'm sure, this will be alright, at least for a little while

"Glad to have you with us mister Ridgway." She touches my shoulder and gestures to the gate. It opens and there's a giant crowd stretching as far as I can see. I notice there are no buildings or streets on the ground, just one giant mass of people.

"You're a celebrity mister Ridgway." Sarah shouts over the din of the crowd roaring my name, along with several nicknames. I catch man out of time, father time, and several other nicknames.

"Don't worry." She tells me as the guards clear a path to the cars. "These are the emperor of the Earth's own bodyguards. They're the best in the solar system. You'll be fine."

She's concerned for my safety. She's really concerned about my safety. "Besides, The Emperor has decreed that you're not to be harmed. Anyone who inflicts bodily or psychological harm upon you gets to serve the same sentence you did, complete with cryogenic freezing." A death sentence, harming me now carries the death sentence.

We reach the cars and I'm shuffled into the back seat of one, along with Sarah. Two guards occupy the front seats. Good, they're not leaving me alone with a woman.

"How long are the guards with us?" I ask Sarah.

"For six months, or until your notoriety dies down a bit." She responds. "After that you'll be switched over to a private contractor for several years, until your celebrity reaches more normal levels. Then, seeing after your own personal safety will become your own responsibility." Several years, maybe in that time they'd remember who I was, and decide to lock me back up. "I'm sure you could hire a local security company with your vast wealth." Sarah says.

"My vast wealth? What do you mean vast wealth?" I turn towards her, confused. "I haven't had a penny to my name in centuries." Sarah shakes her head.

"You had a 401K when you were put away, that has now matured to a very sizable fortune. On top of that, news outlets like the one we are going to will be paying you millions for your stories. To say nothing of the book deals, advertising spots, and endorsement deals." She gives me a sly look. "You are a made man mister Ridgway."

Advertising spots? Endorsement deals? "You're telling me people will actually buy a product just because I tell them?" I ask Sarah. "Does no one remember I killed almost fifty women in cold blood?" My voice starts to rise against my will. "I'm one of the world's worst serial killers! Does no one know that? Didn't you look up my profile when you agreed to this job?" She looks taken aback, but she doesn't shrink away.

"I read every file we have on you, and the consensus has been you're a hero." That word was physically painful to hear. It was as if someone had punched me in the gut. I couldn't think of anything to say so I looked out the window. Sarah said something, but I didn't catch it I just now realized where I was.

Outside the window was entirely black with little white stars in the distance. I jerked my head around and there was nothing except the sun visible, no Earth, no Moon, no Mars, as far as I could tell the entire solar system was gone except for the Sun.

“Where are we?” I asked Sarah. I had cut her off, but she didn’t seem to mind. They had said something about FTL vehicles. I didn’t know that meant they could go to space! FTL must stand for flying something or other.

“In space of course, we are about halfway to Mars. The Faster Than Light drive on this is pretty good so we only have about three minutes left to go.” Oh, that’s what FTL stood for.

“Is this your first time in space?” She asked me. It wasn’t a sarcastic question, she genuinely didn’t know. They must really not know about the twenty first century.

“Um, yes, very few people from my time have ever been to space.” I responded. I had begun examining the car’s windows. They looked like regular glass, could normal cars survive in space?

“Really? See that’s the sort of stuff that you should talk about during the interview.” Hadn’t this person thoroughly researched me? Didn’t any of that internet stuff make it through? “We have had limited storage space, so a lot of the data from your time has been condensed and trimmed down. We kept a file on you, so we know some medical stuff, and of course the terms of your imprisonment, but beyond some sit coms that we really don’t know a lot about people from your time.”

“Limited storage space?” I asked. “I’m not a big computer person, but I had thought the amount of data that a single computer could store was enormous.” She shrugged.

“When everyone in the world is recording their lives in higher definition than the human can perceive things get filled up, and old files corrupted or just run out of power and forgotten.” That still seemed a bit far fetched to me.

“You gotta realize, you are from a time that’s 1500 years before almost any of us currently living were alive. I mean, how much information did your generation have on people from the year 500?” It was a fair question. There were not many manuscripts from that time even before I was frozen. Something still didn’t seem right about the limited storage space. I remembered talking to a cell mate about how much information he put on his computer, and even if it had been 17 centuries, more should have survived.

I didn’t have time to analyze it further. Sarah pointed forward. “Look, we’re entering Mars’ atmosphere now.” I followed her finger and gripped the seat tightly as we entered the atmosphere.

“Good evening ladies and gentleman of the solar system. You are joining us for a very special edition of The Facts. Here with us tonight is The Man Out of Time himself Gary Ridgway!” The host was a plucky young twenty something girl with a pig tail. The studio

audience applauded. I waved sheepishly to the crowd. Were stage lights this bright back in my day? It felt like I was on a surgeon's table. That was a thought I quickly squelched. It was best not to think of places that had a lot of knives.

"So mister Ridgway." I had missed something, Sarah had been talking. I was doing a lot of missing conversation recently. Must be because I'm old. "How was life back in 2000? What did you do for fun?" I took a second too long to respond because I couldn't tell if the second question was a joke or a personal attack. I decided it didn't matter so I answered her question honestly.

"I think a lot of what you might do today. I read books, watched TV, went on dates." I paused for a second to see how the studio audience would respond to this. They were leaning on the edge of their seats waiting for me to go on. They weren't the slightest bit concerned about what my dates usually resulted in. "Took walks in the park, and I had a few hobbies."

"Well mister Ridgway, I think you've missed a lot. We in the 38<sup>th</sup> century don't have books anymore. Tell us, did you have to write on reeds with a quill, or had paper been invented?" She asked.

"No, we had paper. Some people had begun reading electronically, but most of us were still dead tree readers." An excited 'oooooh' came from the audience. It was like talking to a five year old, they found the most mundane things exciting.

"Now about these dates mister Ridgway. You had them in person yes?" This was getting weird. Once again the strangeness of the times overrode my concern that these people didn't find me dangerous.

"Yeah, you'd meet a girl out some place, maybe a bar, and then you'd exchange numbers and have dinner some time." The audience gasped. How had they thought I had gotten my victims?

The next hour was full of plenty of personal questions about every day life. There were some similarities, dental hygiene hadn't changed much at all. While others had changed drastically. I had spent an hour discussing dating because how people found 'The One' in this day and age was by putting your name into a database, waiting six months, filing the appropriate paperwork, and then showing up at a courthouse to fill out more paperwork when you finally met the other person. More casual encounters were achieved in a similar way, but with less paperwork and much less waiting.

After the interview the woman shook my hand and I was escorted back to the car after signing some autographs. Sarah was waiting there for me, and boy did I have some questions for her.

She told the driver to take me to my apartment on one of the moons of Saturn. I had a great view of the great red spot this time of year. She informed me.

“Sarah, earlier you said that there wasn’t enough storage for people from my time.”

“That’s right.” She responded.

“Why couldn’t you just take a couple dozen computers with large drives, and save a bunch of information from that year, and then lock those away. It could only take a couple hundred thousand computers to cover all the time from when I was frozen until now.” Sarah looked at me like I had just suggested rolling down the windows to catch some nice cool space air.

“Because we don’t have the resources.” She explained. “There are 70 billion people on earth alone, almost a trillion spread across the solar system. Every single resource has to be carefully measured out so there’s no waste.” When I didn’t respond to what she believed to be an obvious statement of fact she continued.

“I mean, physics only goes so far. There are limits to how much data a computer can hold, or how fast a ship can fly. That’s why we haven’t spread out further into the galaxy. It takes almost 4 hours to reach Pluto, and would take over a year to reach the nearest star. We can’t afford to squander the resources necessary to terraform a planet if it won’t help with the population problem.”

“The population problem?” I asked.

“She.” She said, getting mildly exasperated that this took so much explaining. “The population problem, the ability of the planets to support the population of the solar system maxed out at about the turn of the last millennium. Recycling and energy production both got much more efficient, but we still had to start allocating resources. Vital supplies like rare earth metals that computers need. We couldn’t just use them to keep data we didn’t need for research. We have to be very careful about what we use. It’s why we have a culling every couple of years.” Even before I asked what a culling was, I knew the answer. It explained why everyone wasn’t bothered by my murder spree.

“What’s the culling?” I asked, and my gut already had a sinking feeling before she responded. It was one of the first times that feeling hadn’t been caused by my own actions.

She was slow to explain this. Even with the limited knowledge about twenty first century earth that they possessed, she knew what she was about to say was shocking. “Every couple of years we remove the bottom 5% of humanity to prevent over population and an overburdening of resource allocation.”

“Remove.” I responded, with a note of anger entering my voice. “You mean kill. You kill.” I did some quick math in my head. “50 billion people every couple of years.” She nodded. Now it was she who couldn’t meet my gaze.

“No wonder you people don’t find my kill count disgusting. You must think I was just ahead of my time.” Her silence was confirmation of my assessment.

“Fifty billion people.” I said flatly. “That’s almost the entire current population of the earth.”

“We take them from the dregs of society.” She said in an effort to defend herself. She still wasn’t looking at me, and her voice didn’t have any energy in it. “Prisoners, unemployed, homeless, people who are a resource drain. No one who is a productive member of society gets culled.”

“And that makes it better!” I shouted at her. It felt good to raise my voice. It felt good to get angry, and to get angry for the right reasons. This was genocide of the worst kind, and on a truly staggering scale.

“Do you give murderers gold stars?” I asked aggressively. “Do you pin them up as role models who prevent ‘the population problem’.”

“No.” She said meekly. “Only people who are selected by the culling are viable targets. Unsanctioned killing is still a crime.”

“I get frozen so the world will be safe from me. Now I get thawed out to find out that the world is full of people who make me look like a saint.” Disgust was clear in my voice. I, a person who had slain in cold blood more people than could be counted on my fingers and toes was disgusted. The future was shaping up to be fantastic.

We arrived at my apartment in silence. Sarah hadn’t been able to think of anything else to justify her actions. I paced up and down the apartment. I was no longer concerned with protecting the world from myself. The world was already far darker than I could ever make it.

My debt still weighed on, but my fervor had made it lighter. It was no longer something that anesthetized me, it was something that energized me. I had fame, I had money I could fix this. I just needed to figure out how.

Sarah had been sitting on a couch watching me pace up and down, and when I walked up to her with a gleam in my eyes she flinched. That was not new to me, and I ignored it.

“You said these guards come from the Emperor of the Earth right?” I asked her. She nodded.

“The best in the universe.” She told me.

“Do they have to report to him?” I asked.

She hesitated, sensing that I was up to something. “Yes, as do I. As soon as you go to bed we’re going to report in.”

“And this Emperor has a large say in the allocation of resources?”

“Yes.” She said. “What’s this about Gary?”

“You’ll see.” I told her. “Last question, where’s the kitchen?” She was visibly relieved to answer a more normal question and pointed towards a door. It was time to see if they had knives in the future.

I sorted through the drawers and picked a nice sharp steak knife. As I picked it up my anger and drive faded for a moment, and several faces flashed before my eyes. I remembered what had happened the last time I had held a weapon like this. Could I do this? Well, one more couldn’t hurt. Regaining my determination I slammed the drawer shut and walked out to where Sarah sat.

“Call him.” I tell Sarah. She glances from the knife to my face, calmer than I expected. She should’ve read my case files more closely.

“Call who?” She asks. A couple of guards who had been watching from doorways walk into the room, hands going to weapons. They knew what was going on even if Sarah didn’t. It didn’t matter, they were already too late.

I put the knife to my throat. “The Emperor Sarah.” The guards rushed me. I spilt a little blood to show them I was serious and they halted. “Call him right now Sarah. You’ve spent a lot of time and money on me, giving me the best guards and medical treatment. I must be valuable to you. Show me how valuable, call the president, or you get to explain how you let an interstellar treasure get destroyed on your watch.” Her face had long since drained of color and she couldn’t move. One of the guards pulled something small out of his jacket and tossed it to me.

“Stick it to your throat and hit the red button.” He tells me.

“Thanks.” I tell him. “I’ll tell people what a stand up guy you are during my next interview.”

“Who is this?” A voice inside my ear rings.

“Is this the Emperor?” I say out loud. I had no idea how this technology worked. I made a mental note to ask Sarah if I survived this.

“No, this is the head of his security detail. To whom am I speaking.” One of the guards must be eavesdropping because there’s a pause and the speaker begins again.

“Ah, mister Ridgway, one of your guards has informed me of the situation. I’ll link you to the Emperor immediately.” During the pause the guards start looking at my hand and edging a little closer to me.

“I’ve killed before gentlemen, and I assure you it will be far easier to take my own life.” I drew a little more blood and they stepped back helplessly. I’m sure they’d eventually knock me out or something, but I didn’t need long.

“Mister Ridgway, what can I do for you.” A diplomatic voice speak in my ear.

“Is this the Emperor?” I ask.

“Of course, now what seems to be the trouble. We’ve gone through a lot of difficulty to keep you alive mister Ridgway.”

I wanted to snap something about how little life meant to him, but I held my tongue.

“The culling, it has to stop.” I heard someone not very close to the microphone on the other end laugh before someone with more discretion silenced him.

“I’m sure Sarah has explained we can’t do that mist Ridgway.” The Emperor told me.

“Yeah, she’s told me you need the resources of this system, and that you can’t spread out, but I think you’re over looking something.”

“I assure you mister Ridgway we haven’t. We have had every great mind of the last 700 years look into this problem to no avail. What could you have possibly seen that we missed.” The answer was almost too cliché. I didn’t tell him straight off. I’d lead him on a bit first to see if he could guess it.

“You said it takes too many resources to send a terraforming team out of the solar system, what if that team is cryogenically frozen. They could spent the whole journey in the freezer, and then when they arrived they would only be thawed as they were needed.” There was a pause on the other end of the line as no doubt the mic was muted and some hurried discussion took place.

“Even if we could do that Gary, cryogenic freezing doesn’t work. It kills everyone that’s put under.” I’m sure he realized his mistake as soon as he said it.

“Not all Emperor.” I actually smiled. “One man survived. I’m the thing you’re missing Emperor. I’m the thing you’re overlooking. I can’t blame you. I’ve been thawed less than a day.”

“But Gary we’d need volunteers. We’d just send the people we cull, but they would never be able to terraform a plant, and Gary.” His voice lowered for emphasis. “We would need your body for testing.”

“Get me on a few more talk shows and I’ll get you your volunteers.” I lowered the knife and tossed it to one of the guards.

“Then you can have my body.” I had found a way to pay my debt.

### *For use in the apocalypse*

Trips to the city were dangerous. Old relics of the time, almost 18 years ago, from before the world apart could be found, but the finding was dangerous. Some of the relics might be worth the risk. Old guns were useful, and some books were still in good shape if you could find one with something helpful in it.

Thom did not view them worth the risk, he stayed on his farm and kept largely to himself. He planted. He reaped. He lived. Thom’s parents hadn’t survived the downfall. They had left him on this farm when he was barely old enough to remember, and then they had abandoned him. Until one day his shovel struck something metal. He got curious and dug it out.

It’s one of those time capsules! On the side of it is written ‘For Use in the Apocalypse’. Someone must’ve stashed something useful inside it. Thom runs back to his cabin to grab to knife to pry it open. As he dashes back he wonders what could be inside.

There had been rumors of ruggedized electronics with instructions on how to rebuild modern society. No one had found one of those, so Thom didn’t get his hopes up. It wasn’t likely that he would be so lucky, but the thing was big enough for a pistol, or maybe a chemical

book that had useful recipes like gunpowder or dynamite. He would even settle for an agricultural book about crop rotation or what native plants were edible.

As he opened the capsule he found that it was filled with letters. Letters, who would leave letters? Maybe they had blueprints or something on them. Thom reached for a bright blue one and opened it, thankful that he had traded with someone early on for reading lessons.

“Thom, we know that you would reach for the blue one first. It was always your favorite color, and you no doubt think it contains a blueprint. If you’re reading this then your mother and I are dead, and we want to take this first letter to apologize. We wish we could’ve stayed and helped you grow into a fine young man, but we have to try one last time to save a little piece of this world, for you. Things have gotten bad, but we believe there is one last trick we can try to fix things. It’s too dangerous to bring you, and it’s a long shot. If you’re reading this, clearly it didn’t work, and you are now an orphan. Always know that we loved you, and that we have faith that you would survive. If you’re reading this clearly we were right. There isn’t much time so we’ll just say one last time that we love you, and that the rest of these letters contain plans for basic blacksmithing, gun smithing, medieval farming techniques, and other skills you’ll need. Love, your parents.”

I held in my hands the tools of civilization, perhaps not a modern one, but more than the scraps I had for myself, and those scraps had been wearing out. The bows my parents had left me were losing their strength. The arrows were broken, and all the farming tools had rusted almost to the point of uselessness.

The slow economic crash had left all the stores stripped bare. There hadn’t been any great war or plague that had wiped out most of humanity, it had been dwindling resources. It was useless to try and loot some of the old ruins, a decade of slowly deteriorating infrastructure had picked clean the stores.

I hadn’t had any plans for long term survival until now, and here before me was the key to lasting another thirty years. The only problem was, these plans required not just a teammate, but a whole village to make them work. As I sorted through the blacksmith plans it became obvious someone would have to dedicate most of their working hours to this. Something I couldn’t manage between farming, hunting, foraging, and doing what little I could to maintain my cabin and equipment. There would need to be a village to make this happen.

The trouble was, I hadn’t spoken to anyone in years. Whenever I came into contact with another human we just pointed our weapons at each other and slowly backed away. I didn’t think anyone had roommates, much less a whole family or group of friends living together. We had all been strong independent survivors, and people had tried to take advantage of our resources. We knew that other people usually only came to you when they wanted something, so we kept to ourselves.

Now, I had something I wanted to give, to work on together. I wanted to give knowledge and get someone to help me build something. The trouble was, going to get them to believe me.

I knew generally where my neighbors were. We kept very wide spaces between each other to avoid running into each other, but we knew where to find each other. I had stalked through the forest like I was hunting a deer, and found my first neighbor stalking right back.

We both saw each other at the same time. He was a middle age man, probably ten years older than me, and instantly drew his bow when he saw me. My hand went for my own bow, even though I had left it behind, and I tried to play it off as raising my hands to show him I meant no harm.

As he had drawn his bow he had started backing away. I had run into him a couple times before, and this had been the procedure. Draw bow, back away, walk a mile in the opposite direction as soon as you can't see them anymore.

This time I took a step forward. He glanced at his arrow. It hurt your fingers to hold a bow drawn, especially one meant to hunt larger game like deer, and he normally would've started letting some slack back into the bowstring, but I was making him nervous. His fingers started to shake a little with the effort of keeping the string taught.

As I walked toward him I became nervous as well, we weren't really closing the gap, and I wondered if his fingers would get just a little too tired, and let go. You had to have good aim to survive this long, and those arrows looked sharp.

"I didn't bring any weapons." I call to him to try and get him to stop. "Look me over, you can see that I'm not carrying anything." He didn't slack out his bow, but he did stop walking.

"Back." He guessed, indicating where he thought I had a weapon. I didn't have a weapon on my back, and turned around slowly to show him. There was an open exposed feeling as I showed him my back. He could shoot me any time, it was like jumping off a high die and hoping that you would survive hitting the water.

"Boot." He called out again, letting a little slack into the string. This guy was really paranoid, but I took off both boots and showed the insides to him.

"Shirt." Was his next guess in this game of hide and go seek. Thankfully it was still warm, so I had no issue losing my shirt to prove a point. He lowered the bow, but kept the arrow on the line as he gave me a thorough look over.

As he looked at me I wondered what it might be like to get hit with an arrow. Those things could knock you off your feet, I had seen what it could do to large deer. Would it be like getting punched? Would there be a stabbing pain? Would my body be so shocked I wouldn't feel anything at all.

"Hands on head." He said. I obliged. This man sounded like he might've worked in law enforcement before, that could be useful. If he didn't put an arrow or three into me first.

"What?" He asked. It was a question that would require a lot of explanation.

"I've got plans for a blacksmith, and I need help." It was a short explanation, but it felt odd using more words in that one sentence than the man with the bow had used in his whole interrogation.

"Where?" He asked. He had taken the arrow off the string, and put it on his back quiver. I felt a moment of relief, until he drew his knife. Well, it was progress. At least he didn't have his ranged weapon out anymore.

"I've hid them a few hundred yards from here." The man nodded and took a few steps toward me, assuming I would lead him to them. He had assumed wrong.

"Give me your knife and I'll take you to them." I said. He stopped walking, but he didn't draw an arrow.

"Why?" He asked. I sincerely hoped if we started working together he would develop larger sentence structure.

"Because I need to know I can trust you." I told him. This wasn't just some resource trade. This was about forming a team, and if we were going to be on a team, there had to be trust. He looked at the knife in his hand.

"Could shoot you." He said, but he still didn't reach for his weapon, and his construction of a semi-intelligent sentence gave me hope for working with him.

"You could, and you could steal my gear and my plans. But I can see the rust on your knife from here, do you think my gear is in better condition? In a few years both of our sets of equipment will fall apart, and you'll need these plans to make new ones." He picked at the rust on his blade. I continued. "I've already looked over the plans. They need a group of people working together to make them work. If you're going to want to still be breathing in a few years, you'll need me." He walked over to me as I said this, and when I finished he was close

enough to take my life with the knife. I forced myself to look at his eyes and not the knife. Even if my peripheral vision told me that the blade was still in his hand, and still pointed towards me.

“You go prison?” He asks me when I’m done.

“What prison?” I asked, wondering if he proposing a supply raid on a local prison. It would be useless. Any prison would be picked completely clean of supplies.

“Incarcerated, serve time.” He asked again. This guy wanted to know if I had been to prison? That was a very strange question to ask someone after civilization had fallen.

“You a cop?” I asked. I saw the knife twitch out of the corner of my eye.

“Yes.” He replied. The knife was still twitching.

“I never got so much as a speeding ticket.” I replied. He didn’t need to know I was never really old enough to commit a crime. I saw the knife flip in his hand so that the hilt was pointing towards me. I looked down and took it.

“Thanks.” I said. He gave a sweeping gesture with his hand that said ‘lead the way’. My first friend, and he was practically mute. I suddenly wished I knew sign language.

After retrieving the capsule, which I had hidden in a patch of thorns, he pointed back where we had first met and asked. “Food?” I was touched. My plan had been to take them to his house to look over, and he had freely invited me into his residence for a free meal.

“Yes.” I said, beginning to slip into his habit of speaking in one word sentences. I slipped the knife into my belt and proffered the capsule to him.

“Here.” I said, he nodded, took the capsule, and then turned to walk towards his cabin. It was an odd trip back. I spent most of it trying to think of conversations to have.

“Nice trees.” I offered. He nodded and said nothing. Of course the trees were nice, we’d both been staring at them for almost two decades.

“Favorite berry?” I asked.

“Blackberries.” He responded, and then said nothing more.

“I like the wild straw berries myself.” I prompted. “There’s a nice patch by my house.” He nodded.

“How much?” He asked. I had to think about that one. Was he offering a trade? Blackberries for strawberries?

“I think one strawberry is worth about two blackberries.” I responded. It was an odd time to be trading, but I guess that’s what these meetings were usually about on the rare occasion that they happened.

“No.” He responded. “I’m asking how much do you think you get in strawberries every year. I’m trying to calculate how many people would be required to sustain a smithy and in order to do that I need to know about how much each person can contribute. So let me ask a more direct question, how much excess food do you obtain each year, and about what percent of your time do you spend obtaining it.” Wow, you just needed to find the right subject I guess.

We spent the rest of the trip back talking shop. He was quite prolific on the subject. His highly detailed descriptions of his crop rotation, bird migration patterns, wild berry preservation techniques, and numerous other practical matters were quite passionate. Whenever I tried to change the subject to something more casual like what he did with his spare time he merely shrugged. I tried to get him to talk about any books he had scavenged, they were all manuals or guides of some kind. I myself had a large fantasy collection, but he didn’t care to hear about it. Which was a shame, I was missing the last book in the Lord of the Rings and had hoped that he possessed a copy.

After attempting to get him to talk about any hobbies he had or musical instruments he used to play I gave up focused on the practical matters of how we were going to go about making a village.

We stepped into a corn field, over the top of which I could just see a log cabin, much like mine, with a pillar of smoke rising from its chimney.

He gestured again and said. “Welcome.” Followed by. “Watch your step, don’t squash the corn.” It was my turn to nod as we walked through a narrow path that worked its way through the tall stalks.

I was in awe for a few moments. Corn, my diet consisted of potatoes, berries, and wild game. I never tried to grow plants besides potatoes because I thought it was too risky. My mouth was open as I stared at the green leaves and the golden fruit they hid. I reached out and touched a piece, and it gave me the shivers. He had mentioned corn was a part of his crop rotation, but hearing that and seeing it were two entirely different things.

“Crap a few. We’ll have corn and deer for dinner.” I nodded and plucked four ears before we entered his cabin. Like me, he only had one chair at his table, and a modest fireplace. That was about it. There were a few stacks of supplies laying around. He lived very simply.

"I guess I'll have to bring over my own chair some time." I joked. He nodded.

"Yup, that'll be good. We'll be working closely, and communal living will allow for more efficient use of team resources." He said. This guy really was all business.

I made myself a seat out of a chest that he said he stored his books in, and spread out the letters on the table. He took the ears, set a pot of water over the fire that was smoldering in his fireplace, and went outside to get something.

It wasn't long before we were eating deer and corn stew, which wasn't bad at all really, and discussing our plans for the future. First we went through the letters, opening them carefully one by one, and discussing the supplies and time required for each thing the letters explained us how to create.

We didn't have any paper or anything to write with, so we both just had to memorize them as we go. It was a lengthy process. We had to recite the whole list to make sure we hadn't forgotten anything as soon as we added anything to it. It took us the rest of the day to get through the letters and memorize everything we need.

As the light became too dim for me to read I began to pull the letters into a pile.

"What are you doing?" He asked.

"Getting ready for bed." I responded. "It's getting too dark to read so I figured we'd make a fresh start tomorrow. He gave me a sly smile and said.

"Open the chest you're sitting on." I looked quizzically at him but complied. Inside were several dozen candles.

"Something I learned as kid." He explained. I was impressed. I lit one in the still smoldering fire of the fireplace and set it on the table.

Having memorized the list of supplies we would need, and having discussed how much excess food we each produced we began to discuss what we would need in order to setup this village. There would need to be at least two people who were primarily dedicated to non-food-production tasks. One of them would be a blacksmith, and the other would be a seamstress, all the other tasks could be completed in our spare time. We calculated that for every dedicated person there would need to be two non-dedicated persons.

"I've run into four other neighbors besides you." I said. "That makes six in total right there." He nodded.

"I've run into three others besides you." He replied. I ticked off on my fingers the people I had been sharing this patch of woods with.

"I've seen the girl whose a bit younger than me. There's the old man with the long beard, the dude who just turns and bolts as soon as he sees you, and the really short man." The cop had been holding up three fingers, and had ticked off one when I mentioned the girl.

"I've seen the girl too, an older woman who carries a crossbow, and a middle aged man with a slight limp." So we had someone in common.

"So since we've both seen her we should go persuade the girl first, and then work from there. My vote would be for the guy who just bolts next. He sounds the least threatening." The cop licked his fingers and then snuffed out the candle with his fingers.

"Sounds like a plan." He concluded. "I don't have beds so you'll just have to curl up in a corner with a book or something."

"A book? You haven't scavenged any pillows or anything?" It was hard to tell in the dark, but I think he shrugged.

"I don't mind." That was lovely, I was going to have to swing by my place at some point to pick up a few things if I was going to stay here on a long term basis. He propped up the chest against the door to keep any animals from coming. The lock had long since rusted off.

I expected him to say goodnight or something about nice to finally talk with another human being, but he just rolled himself up in a jacket that was laying around and nodded off.

It had been a good day. I hadn't been shot. I was sleeping under a roof with another human being, and we had made plans on the next step. We, it felt really good to say we. Now there were two.

Upon waking I found that the cop had made some more of that delicious deer and corn stew. He was eating quietly while looking over the blacksmith plans. I stared at the bowl that was meant for me for a minute. I had forgotten how good it felt to have someone cook for you.

Normally a meal meant stoking the fire and adding fuel, waiting for that to heat up. Then you added the water to boil, while the water boiled you cut up whatever you had scavenged that day, and meat if you had gotten lucky and made a kill that day. That was to say nothing of the fact that eating at all meant your food stores had been depleted a little bit. This meal required no effort on my part, and didn't deplete my stores at all. To say nothing of the

fact that someone made it because they valued me enough to deem me worthy of a bit of their food stores.

I knew better than to say anything as I took my time eating and looking over the plans.

“Ready?” He asked. I cleaned up my bowl and put it by the fireplace.

“Ready.” I said. He picked up his bow and arrow, and I slipped my knife into my belt.

“We should ditch these when we get close to her land.” I said. He agreed and we set out. On the way over I couldn’t think of anything practical to talk about, so I just admired the landscape.

I was enjoying the new landscape. I was boxed in on five sides by neighbors, so I made sure never to venture further than a few miles from my house, and knew every rock, river, and tree as if it was written on my eyelids.

A couple times I stopped to marvel at some new plant that I hadn’t seen before. Different colored flowers in particular amazed me as I had only seen blue and yellow ones in my part of the woods, and here there were red ones.

When I picked one up to smell it and inspect it closer, the cop gave me a sideways suspicious look.

“I know it’s useless.” I told him, knowing what was on his mind. “But I’ve never seen one before, and we are going to meet someone new. Maybe it will make for a good peace offering.” Cop didn’t respond to this. He just turned his head and kept walking. I plucked a few and then ran a bit to catch up.

“You think she’ll be as talkative as you?” I asked my friend. He gave me a sly look and before he could respond I heard a thunk and he fell backwards.

I was confused for a moment, until I saw the arrow sticking out of his shoulder. Something primitive in my brain kicked in and I dropped to the ground. I was afraid, then I thought to myself. Wait a minute, we hadn’t done anything wrong. In a moment of enraged stupidity I stood back up and turned in the direction I thought the arrow had come.

“What are you doing!” I shouted. I saw the girl, she was about thirty yards off and had knocked another arrow and was drawing a bead on me. When she heard me indignantly shout at her she lowered her bow.

“Sorry!” She shouted back, shouldering her bow and now jogging over to help.

“This could get infected you know!” She was hanging her head and running over as fast as she could.

“Sorry, sorry, I’d never seen two people in a group before, and I thought maybe you were a gang or something. Sorry.” She was wringing her hands.

“What kind of gang walks around with their weapons holstered, and only brings one bow?” I demanded. She shuffled her feet.

“Sorry.” She said again.

“Help.” The cop said. “You know, whenever you’re done talking.”

“Right.” The girl said, kneeling beside him. “Sorry. Do you have any water on you?” She asked me as she looked at the wound.

“No.” I said, intrigued by how quickly she had taken to seeing to his wound.

“That’ll be a problem. How far is it to your house from here?” She asked. I could see the arrow had gone straight through the upper part of the shoulder. “Let me see your knife.” She added before I could response.

“About two miles from here.” I told her. She cut off the part of his shirt around the wound, then cut off a strip from her sleeve and pushed into onto the wound. The cop, to his credit, didn’t even wince. It was probably not the first time he had experienced such a wound.

“I’m only about a mile and half. We’ll have to get him to my place. Can you walk?” She asked the cop.

“Yes.” He responded. “I don’t usually use my shoulders for walking.” The girl winced at the silliness of her question.

“Sorry, I thought maybe you were in shock or lost blood or something.” The cop stood up.

“I’ve lost way more blood than this before. Which way?” He asked. The girl stood up and for a second tried to prop up the cop so he couldn’t walk, but he just stared at her until she apologized again, and we set off.

“Sorry, I’m really not used to seeing people. I guess this is why I haven’t made any friends yet.”

“Yeah.” I responded dryly. “Flesh wounds are not a form of greeting I’m familiar with.”

“It’s alright.” The cop said before the girl could apologize again. “I nearly shot him when I first met him. If there were two men armed men coming at me I’d probably shoot first and ask questions later.”

“Thank you.” The girl said, and tried to hug the cop. She wrapped her arms around me, but he just looked at her like he had forgotten what a hug was. After several seconds had passed she let go in a painfully slow way. I wanted to say something to berate her about shooting my friend, but as I hadn’t been shot myself, and my friend had already forgiven her I couldn’t very well say anything.

As we walked on she tried valiantly several times to make amends with the cop by starting a couple of casual conversations about the weather or how did he like the flowers that were in bloom right now. When she discovered that he stuck to one word sentences when he felt the conversation wasn’t important she came to walk by me instead.

“So how did you two meet?” She asked me. She had quite gotten over the shame of having shot a man and her eyes were wide and sparkling at the prospect of having two people to talk to. Well maybe just one and a half people to talk to.

“About the same as we did.” I told her. “Yesterday I was walking through the woods, he saw me. I took a minute to convince him I wasn’t going to stab him in the back, and then we set off for his cabin.”

“So you two just met?” She asked. “That’s exciting. It’s like everyone’s getting together. Gosh, that’s wonderful. Are we going to meet more people? Oooh, if we meet someone with a guitar or something we could have a dance! I love dancing, don’t you? Do you have a guitar?” Her speech was now coming fast and furious and I had to blink a few times to let all that she had said sink in. The parts of my brain that processed spoken words had not been used this much ever, and it lagged for a few seconds.

“Um, yes we are going to meet more people, at least three more people. I think I might like dancing, and no I don’t have a guitar.” She practically bounced when I said we were going to meet new people.

“Can sing.” The cop said.

“That’s marvelous!” She said, actually making a small jump in the air. “We’re going to have a whole village. It’ll be like in a book or something! Which three people are we going to meet? Have you met anyone else? I’ve only met about six other people. They’ve been pretty nice. They didn’t shoot me or anything.” She looked over her shoulder at the cop. “Sorry.” She turned back to me, and kept talking before I could get a word in. “Where are we going to make the village? We should have it by a river. River’s are nice you can fall asleep to the sound of running water. You ever fallen asleep by water? It makes for a frightfully good night’s sleep even if it means you have to sleep in the open.”

The cop, having heard some logistical details being mentioned, took this moment to enter meaningfully into the conversation.

“We had not finalized any discussion about the ultimate location of the village. We had determined we should all live close together, if not in one house, and that perhaps my current residence would make for an ideal location as it is very near to a water supply, which, as you so elegantly put it, is necessary. Although I find it’s more useful for drinking from than to listening to.” The girl fell into step beside the cop now.

They began to babble endlessly about the village plans. The girl in a child-like state of wonder detailed all the wonderful parties we would have, and how we could make all the houses in the village in a nice circle, just like where she had grown up. The cop nonchalantly detailed his plans for clearing the woods and planting new crops, as well as his idea for a possible irrigation system,

The two got on remarkably well. I would’ve thought the cop would be irritated by the girl’s rapidly jumping from one subject to the next, and I the girl should’ve found his slow deliberate and to the point way of talking boring. On the contrary, the cop seemed to be energized by someone who was so eager to listen to him talk, and the girl was excited to have someone to tell all of her ideas to.

The two balanced each other. The cop seemed to value the more social touch of the girl. She turned the village into a series of homes, rather than a place where we all slept. The girl in turn valued the cop’s plans to keep their stomachs full, and their homes warm. They made quite the pair.

I myself just enjoyed listening. I didn’t have to take part in the conversation at all. The two carried on for the entire walk to the girl’s place. I was relieved to not have to think about topics, or try and steer the conversation in a direction that the other person would find amiable. I remember hearing that parent’s calmed their children down at night by just talking to them sometimes, or reading a story. It made a good deal of sense now. Just hearing other voices talking in positive tones made me feel like I belonged with these people.

When we arrived at the log cabin I was surprised to find that the girl had no visible crops planted.

“No crops?” The cop asked.

“Nope.” She said. “I don’t need to eat a lot so I just scavenge what I need from the woods and go hunting once in a while to mix things up.” She opened the cabin door and ushered the two of us in.

I was surprised to see that unlike myself and the cop, the girl had four chairs at her table.

“Come in, sit down, and I’ll have you all fixed up in a moment.” She patted the cop on her shoulder and bounced over to the fireplace to put on some boiling water.

She stuck the knife in the hot water to sterilize it, and went to a chest she had nearby to take out some old strips of cloth to sterilize them too.

“I’ve got some grain alcohol up on that shelf, would you fetch it for me.....” She paused looking funny at me. “Sorry, I’m afraid I haven’t caught your name.”

“Name?” I realized I had been thinking about these two people as ‘cop’ and ‘girl’ and this was not the polite way to speak to humans.

“Oh right, I’m Thom, and this is um.” I had started to introduce the cop hoping at some point last night he had mentioned his name and if I started to introduce him it would come to me.

“Johnathan” The cop told the girl.

“Right, Jonathan and Thom, nice to meet you, I’m Lily. Now Thom there’s some grain alcohol on that shelf. Would you be a dear and grab it for me?” Lily asked me.

“Of course.” I said

“Thank you Thom.” She said, and then took the sterilized knife and cloth from the now boiling water, and put the knife directly on the fire for a few seconds before walking over to Johnathan.

“Now Johnathan, can I call you John?” The cop nodded. “Now John, as I’m sure you know, this is going to hurt. Would you like something to bite down on?” The cop valiantly shook his head and tilted his head to give Lily better access to the wound.

“Right.” Lily said, and then pushed the red hot flat of the knife into the wound Thom frowned and grunted loudly, making a new noise every time Lily worked the knife to get at a different part of the wound.

“Alcohol.” Lily said. I handed her the bottle and she poured some on the wound. John grunted again, and Lily layered on some of the sterile pieces of cloth to finish the job.

“Now then, if I had my sewing kit I’d have stitched you up, but I lost that years ago.” She put her hands on her hips and examined her work. “Still, that’ll do nicely. So where’s the capsule?” She asked me.

“What?” I asked. I had lost my appetite watching Lily work on the wound, and didn’t expect this change of topic.

“The capsule, the thing with all the instructions on building a village silly.” She said.

“Oh, right.” I said unslinging the thing from my shoulder. I had strapped it on when we had left John’s cabin and had quite forgotten about it as soon as he got shot.

“Here, let me lay it out on the table.” We cleared away the improvised medical supplies and used our shirts to dry up the blood and water that had accumulated on the table. That night was another night of planning and laughing. John had brought some candles so we continued late into the night, talking about the future, who we would go see next. Making dinner was the highlight of the evening as we all pitched in and used different techniques we had learned throughout our years.

As we lay along one wall of the cabin for the night Lily once again demonstrated her difference from John and decided to stay awake and talk for a bit.

“Do you remember being put to bed by your parents?” She asked.

“Yeah.” I said. “I actually thought about that on the way over here. They would just sit up and talk in the same room as me. It was comforting just knowing that they were there, and that everything was fine.”

“I know what you mean?” She said. She was talking slower now. Much less trying to fit everything into one sentence as possible, and much more just taking your time and enjoying the conversation. “My parent’s would sing me to sleep.”

“Oh yeah?” I responded. “What would they sing to you?”

“A bit of everything, but the one song they would sing all the time was an old 90s tune about not losing your way. Would you like to hear it?” She asked.

“I sure would.” I told her. As she sung me to sleep my thoughts turned to the letters, and what my parent’s had told me. I was following their directions, and it was kind of like they were around. My last thought before I drifted off was ‘Now we are three’.