



Arni Fannar

THE
IMMORTAL
SELF



TRACK ONE

“It’s a reminder, isn’t it?”

Finally something had come to his mind, something that was worth voicing, something suitable for breaking his silence—a reflection that was meant to bring their whole winding experience together and summarize it in a single sentence.

“A reminder, that *nothing* in life is permanent—isn’t it?”

But he was talking to himself. His partner had been lost in her own world for a while now and it seemed unlikely that she would turn talkative so all of a sudden, at least not until he had something more meaningful to say to her. He had felt a sense of urgency to get a reaction from her, if only to be reassured that she were still *there* with him, and that she was indeed still conscious.

“It’s not true,” she said—the sound of her voice disturbing him slightly, as he hadn’t expected to hear it. “There is one thing in life that’s permanent,” she went on. “And that thing is the past. That is why we should be more mindful when making it.”

It wasn’t the beginning of a conversation for her; she seemed to have already returned to her own thoughts. He felt discouraged from asking her what she had meant. Her meaning was her own and he felt as if he had no way of connecting to it.

But at least she seemed to be conscious.

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As Jackie opened her eyes, her surroundings looked even less familiar to her than the bizarre dream that had just ended. She found herself in an excessively large bedroom, of impossible dimensions—as if her senses were distorting the length of the walls, through the darkness. It was still the middle of the night and the only illumination was coming in through the windows on her left, presumably from streetlamps. A continuous humming-sound was coming from inside—the buzzing of a machine, out of place in the bedroom. She couldn't place this room anywhere. The only thought that the sight of it sparked in her was that of a roulette wheel in motion, though only gradually did the meaning of that imagery dawn on her: that the small white ball that she imagined inside the wheel, restlessly and noisily jumping between numbered spaces before settling anywhere in particular, represented her own thoughts as they moved between memories of places from her past, as Jackie strived to match the memories with the surroundings—anywhere she had woken up before. However it was futile; this dimly lit area didn't match any sight or situation she had any recollection of.

But that wasn't all. No, the feeling that was growing inside of her was more alarming still. It wasn't merely *this* room that she couldn't remember. Her memories, those reference points that she had been struggling to fit the room into, weren't vivid enough themselves. They weren't anything at all. Her mind was completely empty. All she could remember was her own name: Jackie Canessa. It was as if all the knowledge she ever possessed

had been stored in that dream that had just ended and was presently going up in flames in her waking state. Yet she still had the reel of the roulette wheel playing in her mind, though now the rattling white ball wasn't a part of it anymore, as the wheel went on spinning without a purpose. That metaphor seemed to have been the one semi-coherent thought that Jackie had been able to conjure since waking up. But perhaps that was reassuring—a sign that her mind had started to operate on some level, with the symbolism of her dreams turning into tool for her to analyze reality.

Why would she be lying in bed, fully dressed? The clothes she had on came with a sense of familiarity, as Jackie felt them with her hands. The denim jacket and the top were her own, she figured, also the jeans—she would be ready to run out of there, make a quick exit of it, if it came to that. All that was missing were her shoes. Would it make sense for her to try to get up at all before she had figured out where she was? Her arms felt numb as she moved them, and it became apparent that her limbs couldn't be relied on to make any decisive movements. It seemed unlikely that she would get far if she tried to escape in this state, shoes or no shoes.

As Jackie finally sat up, pressing her elbows against the mattress, it felt like an immense effort. She heaved a deep sigh, and then something stirred in the room. Jackie froze.

She was in a studio apartment. A rumbling refrigerator was sharing the space in common with the bed. Nothing out of the ordinary—the overwhelming impression she had had from everything around her before had possibly only stemmed from

Jackie having no recollection of falling asleep in there. But now there was also a shape of a man, appearing in front of her.

“So you’re awake,” he said in a hoarse, dried-up voice. “At last.” He coughed.

Jackie abandoned her attempt to get up, midway, with the man now towering over her, upright and alert. She would have no hope of making it past him.

He leaned over and turned on a shaded lamp by his feet.

The suddenly illuminated apartment become too much for her to take in all at once, and she shielded her eyes with her hand.

With her eyes adjusted, Jackie could now take in the sight of her captor. He could very well have been chosen to guard her there, as the muscles of his arms were visible from underneath the sleeves of his grey jumper, if one looked closely enough. His features looked rough and hardened, as if he wasn’t likely to age much more within the upcoming decades. Now, in the shaded light, he appeared younger than he had at first glance through the darkness—was probably in his mid-twenties. How old was Jackie herself? She figured around the same age. The man’s gaze reflected self-assurance that Jackie found sorely lacking in herself.

“What happened?” was all she could ask.

He chuckled—which immediately made Jackie feel more vulnerable, a reminder that she was at his mercy. She felt an urge to cover her ears to block out the sound of his painful jeering.

“*What* happened,” the man echoed, to himself. He turned to Jackie. “How long have you got?”

She didn't respond, hoping that he might still give her a proper answer. She didn't feel encouraged to try to run away from him, just yet.

"No, wait," the man went on. "I can tell you that: you haven't got long, actually."

He reached for a wooden, dining room chair, with a padded seat, and sat in it.

"Pardon me," the man said, sounding genuinely apologetic. "I'm not myself, right now. But, then, who *is*, anymore?"

"I'll need some straight answers, I'm afraid," Jackie said. "Who are you? What is this place? How did I end up here? How long was I out?"

With that she turned silent. At first the man seemed to be waiting for her to come up with even more questions, but then he stood up and began pacing around the room before finally responding.

"None of that's important right now," he said. "I don't know if you know... the really big news."

"Just assume I know nothing, please."

"Fine then."

The man turned away from Jackie, back to the chair he had been sitting in. He grabbed it, as if to reposition it—but then instead he took the chair with him all the way up to a tall window close to the refrigerator. Judging from the direction of the light from a streetlamp cast on him, as he approached the window, they were either on the first or second floor of an apartment building.

The man pushed the window open and then brought the chair up to it. He proceeded to shove the chair through the opening, and

then the chair was out of sight for Jackie. The sound of it crashing on the ground, some distance away, seemed to confirm the idea that the apartment was on the second floor. The man turned back to Jackie, looking pleased with himself. He quickly moved towards her, and Jackie expected to be the next to be thrown out the window. But instead the man merely stayed looking at her, wild-eyed.

“The-world-is-coming-to-an-end,” he said.

With that, he withdrew his gaze.

“No easy way to say it,” he added sheepishly.

Jackie felt her stomach churn—though not in reaction to the man’s erratic behavior; no, it was rather in response to what he had *said*, specifically. She had found herself believing him instantly. And it wasn’t even a matter of believing—she *remembered* it. Yet it was still all she could remember.

Jackie put a hand on her forehead.

“My god. You’re right.”

“You remember?” he said.

“Not... exactly.”

Jackie kept her eyes shut, in an effort to call forth anything at all from the depths of her mind.

“There’s a comet heading for the earth,” she heard him go on.

“Yes, it’s true,” said Jackie. She remembered that as well, as soon as she heard him say it. “Please, go on,” she urged him.

“We should be dead already,” he said. “Scientists said it would probably hit the earth on Monday and that that would be the end for us. But now it’s Wednesday. And we go on just

waiting to be evaporated. This is *bonus time*, I guess. How do you think you'll spend the last hours of your existence?"

"I've been *sleeping* through it?"

"You're not alone in that—if that's any comfort to you. You see, as the arrival of this thing took so much longer than anyone expected, eventually people needed to sleep and so they couldn't help themselves. Then they wake up and realize that they've almost slept through the end of the world. And I'm pretty sure that has contributed to all the madness out there. I've experienced it in my own head, I'll admit; though thankfully only an inkling of it."

None of what he was saying brought forward any more memories for Jackie. She found herself wishing that he would change the subject, so that he might stumble on something that would help her remember.

"But everyone cracks in the end," the man went on. "Just a matter of time. Before it happens to me, there's somewhere I wanted to be. I was on my way out, actually. It's a coincidence that you woke up just before I left. We would never even have been introduced. Oh, yeah—I'm Wesley Collins, by the way."

Now the only other name that she knew. Jackie looked up at him.

"Where were you going?"

Wesley smiled.

"The mall."

"You don't want to tell me?" she sighed.

"No, it's *true*," Wesley insisted. "I *really* am going to the mall. It's been taken over, and there's a party going on over there.

Some kind of a *rave*—you ever been to one of those? People I know were going. They were just going to let loose until the world comes to an end. I didn't think I would go there myself, but then staying here, all by myself, I've grown curious to see it. Now I guess you'll be coming with me."

"To *party*?"

Wesley couldn't have missed the look of utter bewilderment in her eyes, as she stared back at him. For the moment Jackie wasn't even trying to bring forth her missing memories—he had managed to take her mind clean off that.

"Not much else to do anymore, is there?" he exclaimed and turned away from her, defiantly.

"Yes," Jackie protested. "There *must* be."

She got out of bed, and—just as she had expected—her legs instantly turned limp. Wesley had turned around and was reaching out to catch her, as it no doubt looked to him like she would collapse, yet Jackie was able to steady herself and maintain her balance. She moved towards the open window.

Two stories down, in the street, she could see the shattered chair that Wesley had thrown out earlier. Otherwise the streets were empty.

"So where is everyone?" she asked into the air, without turning back to him.

"This isn't the most exhilarating part of the city to be spending the last days of your life," she heard him explain from behind her.

"There was something I needed to do," Jackie reflected out loud.

“There’s nothing more to do,” Wesley said, now getting closer to her. “That’s just the way things are now. Come on, let’s go join the others at the party.” He put a hand on her shoulder, but she shook it off.

“No,” she said. “There was definitely something important I needed to do. I can just feel it.”

“It’s just that that’s impossible at this point,” Wes replied with a sigh, sounding impatient. “The very concept of *importance* has expired. You just haven’t come to terms with it yet.”

Jackie turned her gaze up from the street to take in the view of the city in the night, in between the tall buildings in front of her.

“*Blackmill*,” Wesley said.

“I need to find out, where it was that I had to go,” said Jackie. “You could come with me.”

She turned to Wes, who was now backing away from her.

“You *must* realize that *that* is asking too much. I can’t spend my last days alive on that. We don’t even know each other.”

“I’m Jackie.”

“Huh?”

“Jackie Canessa. I’m sorry, I didn’t introduce myself before, when you did.”

“It’s been a pleasure to meet you, Jackie.” It sounded sarcastic. “I guess we’re going our separate ways.”

He turned around, as if to leave.

“Wait,” she said. “You have to tell me how I ended up here.”

She felt for her pockets.

“Oh, yeah; you don’t have your wallet anymore, I’m afraid,” said Wesley.

In fact all her pockets felt empty from outside. Jackie put her hands inside the pockets of her jeans.

“Did you take it?” Jackie asked, without looking at Wesley.

“Not me, no.”

She fished something out of her pocket, the only thing she had on her: a piece of paper, something that the pickpockets had missed.

Jackie turned back to the window, to let the light coming in from the streetlamp shine onto the note as she read it.

The paper was folded, with handwriting on the side.

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“What you have there?” Wesley asked from behind her.

Jackie unfolded the slip and held it up so that the two of them could see the words, scribbled on the other side.

THE METEOR IS A SCAM

Jackie felt shivers.

“What the hell?” said Wesley. “*Who* wrote this?”

“It’s true, isn’t it?” Jackie said.

“Just because it’s written on this paper that you found in your pocket?” Wesley retorted. “No. *It’s not! Everyone* knows that the meteor is real. For fuck’s sake, fucking society has gone to the dogs—it’s gone haywire. Everyone’s having a mental breakdown over the meteor. Once you’ve seen it with your own eyes, you’ll realize the madness out there. In fact it’s not safe for you to be going around by yourself, so you really ought to be coming with

me. The whole world has turned to chaos, and that's because everyone *knows* that the meteor real."

"But they said the meteor would arrive two days ago, didn't they?"

"That was their estimate, yeah, but no one knew for sure."

"Have you seen it, the meteor?"

"Yes, of course. Where did you get this note from, anyway?"

Jackie held the paper up again and examined the handwriting.

"I can't remember anything—or, at least, I couldn't remember a thing when I woke up, but now that we've been talking, things have started to come back to me and now I *know*... I know things. And what I feel most certain of is that what it says on this piece of paper is true. And I'm positive that wherever I was going, and whatever I was going to do, it had something to do with this message."

Wes looked back at Jackie in silence. It didn't seem like he was heading out himself anymore.

“Paul. *Pauuulie-Paul*. This is the meteor calling. It’s time to wake up.”

The trembling male voice instantly transferred Paul Ivy out of his disjointed dreams. Had the ground beneath him turned to *dust*? Was he in the post-apocalyptic world already? Was Paul lying in a field of cocaine? Was this heaven?

Paul looked up and saw the figure of a rotund man towering over him, and then nothing but the overcast sky beyond that. Paul knew this schmo, and it felt disheartening to see him there—as if there was no escaping this person, ever. Even at the end of the world, Richie Benton would find a way of showing up.

As Paul tried to sit up, the sand he was lying in somehow got into his face, disrupting his attempt. He heard Richie laugh. With a second attempt, Paul managed to sit up. He now saw that he was in a sandbox of a playground, with a swing set nearby. It was dawn.

“How’s being homeless?” Richie asked cheerfully.

“I can see why I never tried sleeping in a sandbox before,” Paul reflected. “How did you find me?”

“I wasn’t *looking* for you,” Richie clarified. “But when one sees a hobo sleeping a sandbox you just have to go check it out, don’t you? I was debating with myself what would be the funniest way to wake you up—like, kicking sand in your face, or taking a piss on you, literally.” Richie laughed. “A wasted opportunity, huh?”

“This hangover was never supposed to take place,” Paul complained.

“Can’t handle your booze, ay there, Paulie-Paul? Well, let’s just say it’s time for round two now. Maybe there’ll be some babes involved this time, and you’ll wake up with something other than sand on your dick the next time. I guess at this point you can just walk up to whatever chick and ask her to have sex with you. Why wasn’t it always like this?” Richie turned to the sky, as if to indicate that the point he had just made called for a silent reflection.

“Why aren’t you with your family?” Paul asked him.

“*Family?* Give me a break. That’s how I spent the *first* last day, you know, the day that was *supposed* to be last. The day of an unbelievable waste of time. So sentimental, those fucking people. I’m happy to get this do-over, a chance to relive the last day, properly. I guess this must be it now, right? Hey, you know what I discovered at my parents’ place? Some TV stations are still running. Just old reruns, but still, can you imagine? Who do you think is spending their last days alive watching reruns on the telly?”

“Was there any update on meteor?”

“*What? No,*” Richie shouted. “Didn’t you hear me? I said they were old *reruns*. So there wouldn’t be any *update* on anything, now would there? Man, the alcohol has wiped away all your brain cells.”

Paul felt nauseous.

“Well, I guess we’re going to starve today instead,” he remarked, with a hiccup.

“Not on my watch,” Richie asserted. “There are still ways of getting to food, but the trick is not to go for the obvious places, like the supermarkets, because chances are those’ve already been raided. But most workplaces will have lunchrooms, with food stored away, so we have a better chance of breaking into those.”

“Hey, that’s pretty clever.”

“No need to tell me. Guess which one of us is the brains of the outfit.”

Paul moved around in the sand in an attempt to get up, but got distracted by a metal object lying on the board of the sandbox, just a feet away from him. It was a pistol. The sight disrupted Paul’s attempt at standing up and sent him sprawling back in the sand.

“Holy shit!” Paul exclaimed. “There’s a fucking *gun* over there.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s mine,” Richie clarified. “Had to put it away *somewhere* when I came to wake you up, didn’t I?” He reached for it. “We’ll need this for protection. I mean, *hell*, the way society has gone, *we* might even end up getting raped at this point. How many sick bastards you figure are going around with unfulfilled homosexual fantasies in their heads?”

Richie turned the gun back and forth before his eyes, methodically, as if in an effort to look at both sides of the weapon an equal number of times.

“Just think,” Richie said, without taking his eyes off the piece, “I might actually get a chance to *shoot* someone in my life.”

“I guess; if you happen to run into someone you dislike enough,” Paul remarked.

“In that case, that person will never see it coming,” Richie said. He lowered the gun, but then quickly pulled it out again and aimed it straight in front of him, at the swing set. “*Yeah*, I can be quick.”

“Be careful where you point that thing,” Paul cautioned him.

“I’m done being careful,” Richie said, turning back to the overcast sky. He then turned to Paul. “Hey, when we go scavenging for food, let’s just stay away from churches, alright? You don’t feel like visiting a church anyway, do you? So many people have been flocking over there, to pray—I guess; there’ve been riots. Imagine that. I mean, I know God likes *praying*, but I can’t see the big guy being a fan of rioting.”

“At least we know he’s a fan of meteors. Should we get going?”

Paul crawled out of the sandbox, and figured that he must look more like a seal than a human in the process. Good thing there were no sharks around—or seas with sharks. Stepping onto solid ground felt like a relief to Paul. It was like returning back from a state of uncertainty, with the only constant remaining the presence of Richie Benton. The events from the night before were coming back to Paul: the way he had ended up there, he had been *escaping*—hiding from someone. Of course there were plenty of things to hide from these days, even in a children’s playground. Paul didn’t dwell on trying to recall the specifics of what had happened, as all that mattered now was the present.

Although Paul had been put off by the sight of the gun originally, he grew to appreciate knowing it was in Richie's hand. Any interaction with strangers would be dangerous. Anyone who tried to approach you should be perceived as a threat. Paul kept a lookout, while Richie seemed surprisingly at ease.

There were echoes of screams, inarticulate at first, but then they sounded distinctly like a heated argument.

"Imagine spending your last day alive like that," Richie observed, cheerful as ever.

A woman sprinted past them, along the road, darting forward, without looking anywhere but straight in front of her.

Richie turned back and smiled. "Look at that," he said to Paul.

It seemed like a sensible way to go around—not risking any interaction at all. Not giving anyone a chance to approach you. Was Paul perhaps putting too much trust in *the leader of their outfit* and his handgun?

It seemed somewhat ironic that Paul would come to depend on Richie, that Richie would be his savior—the man Paul had never perceived as anything other than a nuisance and a waste of space. Paul thought back to the days when he had been working at the bar, and Richie would turn up, alone, for a night out in the company of the people working there. This led Paul to think about Kimberly, the blonde, slender barista, who would so often show up to work disgruntled, much like a stereotypical barmaid straight out of a sitcom, but then as the evening progressed she would turn animated and even flirty with Paul. How often had he *almost*

ended up sleeping with her? He had cherished her presence, but she, in particular, couldn't stand the sight of Richie Benton.

"*Yuck*, there's that guy again," Paul remembered her saying.

"He's by himself," Paul had remarked, looking up from the glasses that he was arranging behind the counter. It had been a couple of hours before the bulk of the clientele would show up.

"*Of course* he's alone," Kim had snapped back at him. "He's *always* alone."

Shortly later she disappeared—a definite sign that the man in question was making his way over there, to approach the staff, as they were practically obliged to put up with him. Richie would then stay in that same spot by the counter throughout the entire night, while the premises became crowded—only leaving his station briefly to use the toilet. Paul would witness him making several hopeless attempts at chatting up girls as they approached the bar, and invariably nothing came of it. And then, after work, when Paul would move on to one of the clubs that were open longer than the bar where he worked, Richie would go with him.

But those memories were all irrelevant now. All that mattered was finding a way to survive the hours that were left before the earth got blown into smithereens. Was this destiny? Had there been a greater purpose in Paul getting to know Richie back in the days? Had it perhaps been God's will?

"Here we are," Richie announced. "This will do."

He had halted and was now turned to a fashion store, with the mannequins in the windows representing calmness and tranquility that was completely at odds with the rest of society.

The entrance was locked, though the metal shutter had been left up.

“You think they have food in there?” Paul wondered.

“Like I said,” Richie responded, “we have to count on the places that will have kitchens for the staff, rather than going to the grocery stores like all the other morons.”

“So how are you going to *break in* there, exactly?”

“You know, I would try to kick the door open, but if I don’t manage it might lower your confidence in me and bruise my ego”

Richie rearranged the gun in his hands, to hold it by the barrel. He then used the handle of the gun to smash the window clean out of the frame of the front door.

“Jesus. You’ll shoot yourself,” Paul cautioned him.

As Richie was opening the front door from inside, a screeching alarm went off. It didn’t have any notable effect of Richie, who leisurely proceeded to push the door back and then waited for Paul to enter before him.

“Don’t worry about that,” Richie said. “No one is coming.” He turned around and called into the store: “*Keep shouting, honey.*”

Paul didn’t remember having been inside this particular fashion store before. It looked too trendy for him anyway.

“Let’s trash the place while we’re here,” Richie shouted, as he reached for a rack with hangers of clothes on it and yanked it so that it tipped over and hit the floor.

“Take it easy, man. I may want to find some clean clothes to put on later.”

“Man, you really are a drag, Paulie-Paul.”

“First things first,” Paul said. “I need to find the bathroom.”

The comment made Richie stop in his tracks and turn to Paul, with a look of astonishment. “A *bathroom*? Jesus-fucking-holy-Christ, you mean to tell me that you’ve been *waiting* to go? You could have taken a shit *anywhere* you wanted. Even out in the street. And, I mean, you even woke up inside a fucking *sandbox*!”

“Please, Rich, you’re not helping my stomach. Mind you, I have a hangover.”

“Sure, go ahead. Find your *precious* bathroom then. It will be wonderful with this fucking alarm ringing in your ear.”

Paul appreciated a chance to be away from Richie for a few minutes, though there was no guarantee that Richie wouldn’t show up and start hassling Paul while on the toilet. With that in mind, Paul locked the door. Even though Richie had been right that there was no risk of security guards showing up at this point, even with the alarm still working, the constant sound was somehow worrying.

Returning from the restroom, Paul heard Richie singing *Born in the U.S.A.* over the incessant ringing. Richie wasn’t on the move anymore; he had located the lunchroom. The constant noise made it difficult for Paul to realize exactly where Richie’s booming voice was coming from, but then the way to the back was simple enough, with only a single, narrow corridor.

“We have ourselves a microwave meal,” Richie announced, as Paul reached him.

“Is that what you call a *jackpot*? Is the microwave oven definitely working?”

“We’ll soon find out,” Richie said, throwing the packed meal into the microwave while looking at Paul, then slamming the microwave door shut and turning it on. With that, the light turned on inside and the package began to rotate.

Paul grabbed a chair and waited for the meal to be ready.

“Do you know who must really be kicking themselves right now?” Richie shouted conversationally over the alarm. This was much like in the days back at the bar, conversing over the live music. Richie had had some practice in that.

“Vegetarians,” Richie went on to answer his own question, with a smirk. “Do you think they *still* won’t eat meat now? I said to a vegetarian once: won’t it be ironic when you, who put so much importance on preventing everything else from dying, will end up dead yourself? I mean, it was bound to happen, anyway.”

“I don’t believe you ever said that,” Paul shouted back. “You used to be polite.”

An overstatement, for sure, but Paul figured that it might serve to soften up the old drunkard and encourage him to start behaving in a more civilized way. However, even as Paul let go of the words, he realized that that was an unlikely outcome.

Richie removed the meal from the microwave. They waited silently for the food to cool and then went on to eat it with forks, straight from the package.

“These will need to be washed later,” Richie remarked jokingly, indicating the forks.

Richie took two glasses out of the cupboard and filled them with water from the tap. He handed one to Paul.

“You had promised alcohol,” Paul remarked somberly.

“In a fashion store? Well, I wouldn’t blame the poor saps who had to work here, but I’m afraid we’ll need to find a bar for that. That’s where you feel at home, right?”

A single, soft banana was the only other morsel of food that was left in the tiny kitchen. Paul broke it in half and handed the piece left inside the peel to Richie.

As the two of them headed back out, Paul looked at the clothes that his companion had thrown to the floor earlier, and the sight came with a sense of regret over leaving the place in a sorrier state than when they had entered. There was already enough disorder in the world, without adding to it.

They weren’t alone in the store anymore; someone else had just entered through the front door, though not a security guard—unless they had taken to going around in bathrobes.

“Sorry, pal,” Richie shouted at the man. “All the food is gone. Plenty of outfits left though.”

The man, who appeared to be in late thirties, with ruffled hair to match his dressing style, glared back at Richie with the kind of disdain that Paul had already felt towards his companion—though he hadn’t thought of showing it this evidently.

“Do you get a kick out of this?” the man asked, in an accusatory tone.

“What?”

“Breaking into a store when there is no one around to protect it?” the man went on angrily.

“There was no one around to let us in,” Richie responded defiantly. Paul couldn’t tell if Richie was attempting to come off as intimidating, though it was hardly needed, as there were the

two of them against this new arrival, who nevertheless showed no sign of backing down.

“This alarm is very annoying,” the man went on. “Me and my girlfriend were trying to have some quiet time next door, you know, while we still can.”

“Tough shit!” Richie retorted. “We can’t turn it off. We would need the code.”

“Well, did you try to?” the man asked.

Richie stepped back and looked at the man silently. When he finally spoke it was directed at Paul, though he did it without taking his eyes off the other man.

“Do you remember what I said earlier? About finally getting a chance to shoot someone.”

Richie raised the hand holding the gun. “What an opportunity this is.”

The man in the robe was looking back at the gun, now with terror in his eyes. He raised his hands in surrender.

“Coming here to *complain!*” Richie shouted. “How dare you spoil this moment for me and my friend?”

“No, please, don’t,” the man begged.

The gun was aimed straight at his head. Richie cocked it.

“Richie,” Paul said from behind him. “Don’t.”

“Why don’t you shoot the alarm instead?” yelled the man in the robe.

“Could do both,” Richie observed casually. “What a *great* idea you had, coming over here. I bet you said goodbye to your girlfriend before you left, didn’t you? In case the meteor arrived before you did. Just think, now you’ll never get to see her again.”

“Rich, it will make you feel awful, if you go through with it,” Paul tried.

“No, it won’t. It will make me feel *great*. Call it misdirected aggression if you must, but this son of a bitch just has become the epitome of everything I hate.”

“Please let me leave,” the man in the robe went on begging. “I’ll leave you alone. You’ll never see me again.”

“Rich, listen; you’ve made it through your whole life without killing another human being. Is that really something you wish to change now?”

“Now? *Now* it’s like taking someone out who’s already on death row, isn’t it? Shouldn’t really count, should it? And the way I see it is like this: this way I get to know the sensation of killing someone before I get whacked myself.”

Richie was breathing heavily, and so was the man in front of him, who seemed to have given up on trying to beg for his life, though he still kept his hands up. It was down to Paul to try to talk sense into his gun-wielding drinking buddy.

“Just put the gun down, Rich. You were never this bad.”

“Tell you what,” Richie shouted at the man in the robe, ignoring Paul. “I’ll make you an offer: if you pretend that you’re a policeman, I’ll make it snappy for you—shoot you right between the eyes, so you don’t suffer.”

“Rich, don’t.”

The man was sobbing.

“You just have to say: ‘*you’re under arrest!*’ I’ll give you to the count of three to do just that. One.”

“No, please, don’t,” the man wept.

Paul was speechless. It seemed like nothing he could say would have any effect on Richie. The die was cast.

“Two.”

“Richie, *don't!*”

Paul leapt forward, into Richie's back.

The gun went off.

Richie had withstood the impact—unsurprisingly, as he was considerably larger and heavier than Paul. However, the former had lost his balance, and possibly only fired the gun in a knee-jerk reaction, without being able to aim it.

The man in the robe darted out through the front door, seemingly unscathed.

Richie turned to Paul, looking enraged, still with the handgun firmly in his grip.

“*Damn it, Paul,*” he shouted. “Why the hell can't we ever do anything *I* want to do?”

And with that he raised his gun again. Paul was fast in putting up his hands, much like the man in the robe before him, and he looked away—however not fast enough to miss the sight of what was coming: instead of aiming the gun at Paul, Richie put the barrel of the gun up to his own head, at the temple.

And then he pulled the trigger.

The momentary realization of the pain and the consequences of his actions came out in Richie's eyes, in the split second before his body collapsed and hit the ground.

Paul followed him, by kneeling helplessly to the floor. He stayed that way, with his hands on the ground. The queasiness he had felt before was revisiting him. Paul felt the meal he had just

had suddenly back in his mouth, and then it came flooding out, splashing on the ground beneath his face. In a way it was cathartic, a distraction away from the greater horror that Paul had just witnessed. A drop splashed back into his eyes, and it burned. Yet Paul couldn't get himself to reach for his eyes to wipe the stains of vomit away. He just stayed there, stuck.

What a way to end your life. Both for Richie and Paul himself.

“Look at it this way,” Jackie said to Wesley, as she turned back to him in her pacing around his flat. “Wouldn’t you rather spend the last days *believing* that what it says on that piece of paper is true?”

He was sitting on the bed.

“Believing that there’s still hope for us,” Jackie went on. “Won’t that be so much better, even if we would end up being wrong? For us to at least live in hope.”

Wesley kept his left hand up to his temple, stroking his left eyebrow with the index finger. Without saying a word, he reached out to Jackie with his free hand. Catching the gesture, she handed him the note. Wes held the slip to his face with both hands, looking at it intently.

“What if that was your idea, all along?” he asked without looking up from the paper.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’ve thought of it now, haven’t you? Perhaps you wrote this damn note with that purpose in mind: so that you wake up and find it, then you believe that everything is going to be perfectly alright and that way you feel better.”

“But that makes no sense,” she pointed out to him. “That would mean that I had *planned* this; planned passing out and not remembering a thing. And it would also mean that I would have known that the meteor would hit the earth later than everyone else thought it would.”

“All right, all right; let’s dismiss that possibility. But that still doesn’t make this writing any more believable. If you want me to play along, you’ll have to convince me that what it says on this paper might be true. Who could have written it? And why would you have it?”

“Well, first you have to fill me in on how I ended up here, and maybe that will help me remember.”

“You were already unconscious when you arrived,” Wesley said. That much Jackie had already suspected. “And I was the one who brought you. It’s really only been a week since people started giving any credence to the meteor story, but then things escalated pretty fast and spiraled out of control. Soon there was no turning back.”

“You said you had *seen* the meteor,” Jackie said.

“Yes, there was *something* in the sky, some lights, but without the information from NASA I wouldn’t have been able to tell what it was. You see, NASA had been keeping the whole thing a secret, but then the information leaked that an asteroid was on its way to earth. At that point it had already gone through a *keyhole*, which meant that it was on a collision course with us and our fates were sealed.”

Wesley got up from the bed. Jackie sat down in it.

“I was going to spend my last days alive with my girlfriend,” Wesley went on. “On the second day, waiting for the end to arrive, we went over to this house that used to be a hangout for us and our friends. And, sure enough, there we met the others—three of them. They arrived after us, and we first assumed that they’d had the same idea as us. That was the first time I saw you. You

were being taken around in a wheelchair, by an old friend of mine—though I’m ashamed to call him that now; a man by the name of Scott.

It was at that moment that Wesley realized that the last days of his existence wouldn’t be anything like a continuation of his life leading up to that point. His three friends had already undergone a transformation that was evident from the way that they carried themselves. Morgan was no longer a tidy real-estate agent, now wearing a dirty, green trench coat that couldn’t possibly have belonged to him before. Next to Morgan there was Sara, his childhood friend, reminding Wesley of a character from a play—someone who had been meant to come off as crazy, and the actress had used every gimmick at her disposal to convey that image, with heavy eyeliner, wild eyes and a constant look of utter bewilderment; as it turned out it had been an accurate portrayal of what Sara would be like in the future. She was still presentable, and even cute, though her makeup was evidently wearing thin. Scott looked equally disoriented, bobbing his head to some unheard beat without having any headphones in his ears. He was hunching over a wheelchair as he pushed it forward, with the girl sitting in it clearly unconscious.

“Who’s this?” Wesley asked him.

“Someone I picked up at the train station,” Scott responded with a grin. “Totally spaced out, as you can see, but she looks like the type who will give good head for coke.”

“Speaking of which,” Morgan took over. “Guess what we’ve got.”

Definitely not a head, Wesley thought to himself, though he didn't say anything. It felt like these were three strangers whom he wouldn't ever want to have anything to do with. He gathered that his girlfriend, Diane, was feeling much the same way, as she moved closer to him and was staring at the others without saying a word.

"The real deal," Morgan went on. "Cocaine." The word rolled off his tongue like some piece of news that he expected to generate genuine excitement in the others. Morgan pulled out a small plastic bag and Wes could see that there was something white inside it. Morgan dangled the bag in front of him.

"Not interested," Wesley was quick to respond. "Don't you know me?"

With the slumped way that Morgan was carrying himself, he could have been intoxicated already—all three of them, for that matter.

"Well, *we've* never tried it either," Morgan said, wobbling his head in a playful manner as he spoke. "We're going to do it together."

"Let's have it *now*," Sara whined from behind Morgan. That was her first contribution to the conversation, and she already came off like an addict. "I'm seriously depressed," she added. "I need it."

"No, *fuck that*," Scott now shouted forcefully, from behind the wheelchair. "We should see if we can't trade it for something stronger. If we're going to do this thing, let's do it right. Get some *heroin*, motherfucker."

“And just where, the hell, is that transaction going to take place?” Sara demanded.

“You know where,” Scott responded and then turned back to Wesley. “We’re going to the mall. People gathering there from all over. There’s a rave going on. The kind that everyone always dreamed of. We’re going to see it come to life *before the whole shithouse goes down in flames*. It’s going to be great.”

“Then why did you come here?” Diane directed her question at all three of them. Wesley was pleased to hear it. To him her tone indicated that she too hoped that, with that, the trio would come to their senses and scatter off.

At first none of them answered, until Scott finally spoke up. “We came here to *fuck*, all right? And then to *fuck off*.”

“So that’s the program,” Morgan confirmed.

Diane came closer to Wesley, and he put his arm around her waist. He looked at Sara, who was avoiding eye-contact with the two of them.

“Were you really going to have sex with these guys?” Wesley asked her.

“*Of course* I was,” Sara snarled back at him. “Why the *fuck* not? Don’t you want a piece of this too?” She tore open her blouse, revealing a blue bra—which Wes appreciated being there to cover up the rest of her.

“And so you brought this *wheelchair-woman* with you for an even number?” Wes said to all of them, hoping that hearing it would suffice to make them feel ashamed of themselves.

“It’s not her wheelchair,” Scott calmly explained. “I just put her in there so that I could bring her along. I’m sure she can walk, and do all sorts of funky things with her legs.”

Morgan stepped closer to Scott and the wheelchair, and then he reached down, as if to grope the girl, but ended up putting his hand into the inside pocket of her denim jacket, fishing out a wallet. Morgan pulled a card out of the wallet and read it.

“So this is *Jacqueline*.” He threw the card away and then took out a few bank notes. “She won’t be needing these anymore.”

“Oh, yeah? And what the hell are you going to be doing with them?” Diane called to him.

“I’ll *tell* you exactly what,” said Morgan. He threw away the wallet and held the bills up with both hands and then proceeded to tear them to shreds.

“*No*,” Sara shrieked. “You idiot. We should have used them to shoot the coke.”

“Again, we’re not doing the fucking coke,” Scott shouted. “We’re going for the heroin.”

“Well then should have used the money to wipe our asses with it,” Sara said. “I’ve always wanted to try that.”

“You can wipe your ass on Wesley’s face instead,” Morgan remarked.

“Will you guys *snap out of it*,” Diane shouted back at them. “What’s the point of this? Wouldn’t you rather *be yourself*?”

“Shut the fuck up, bitch.” This coming from Sara.

“I’m sorry,” she then added, sniggering. “That came out all wrong.”

“Don’t be offended, sweetheart,” said Morgan. “There’s no point anymore. Isn’t that the most liberating thought, after all?”

“I’m getting the hell out of here,” Diane breathed out, sounding as if she were about to break down.

Wesley turned to her.

“Where do we go?” he whispered.

“Back to your flat,” she mouthed to him, so that the others wouldn’t hear.

“*Whatever*,” Morgan shouted at her. “Let’s do this thing.” He slapped Sara on the backside. She quickly turned around to face him.

“There better be foreplay. You guys are my slaves.”

“No deal,” said Morgan. “Double penetration is all you’re getting.”

“Then what about her?” said Sara, pointing a finger behind her back. At first it looked like she was indicating Diane, but then she lowered her arm, so that she was clearly pointing at the woman in the wheelchair.

“She’s coming with *us*,” said Diane.

They all turned to look at her. Wes hadn’t expected it.

“*We* found her,” Scott protested.

Diane turned to face Scott. “That poor girl is not going to end her life being *raped* by you sick fucks. If I only get to do one more good deed in my life, this will be it.”

Scott pushed the wheelchair out of his way, so that there was nothing in between him and Diane.

Wesley reflected that, if it came to trading blows, he could confidently take out Scott. If Morgan moved in however, that would be another matter altogether.

“Just let them go,” said Sara. Morgan had taken a position behind her and was now licking her neck.

Diane hastened to get to the wheelchair. Wes walked up to Scott, who continued to look angrily in Diane’s direction. Wes took his head with both hands and looked him in the face.

“What happened to you, man?” Wes asked him. “You used to be a winner.”

“*Winner?*” Scott echoed, with contempt. “There are no winners. Can’t you see? Well, you will, eventually. And when you do, you know where to find us—at the mall. Until then, make sure she lets you put it in her ass.” He pointed a finger at Diane, who was already leaving, pushing the wheelchair in front of her.

Wesley pushed Scott out of the way and turned to face the other two.

“I don’t even know what to say to you guys,” he said. “Goodbye, I guess. It was nice knowing you, once.”

He turned around and hurried after Diane.

They walked all the way to the building of Wesley’s studio apartment. They left the wheelchair at the entrance and carried the girl up the stairs together. In the apartment they lifted her up into the sofa. Then the two of them sat on the bed.

“She’s not waking up, is she?” said Diane.

“If she’s lucky, she’s not,” Wesley responded.

Diane looked at the woman, who was positioned to see the two of them in the bed if she would wake up.

“We should still turn her around,” Diane whispered. “Just in case.”

“We took our chances that you wouldn’t wake up while we were... well, *going at it*,” Wesley confided to Jackie. “That’s pretty much *all* we did. There’s something about dying while you’re in the act of making love to someone that used to have such a humiliating connotation to it, but at this point we didn’t care that the meteor could hit the earth exactly as we were in the act. Then we stayed in each other’s arms and we just went through all the memories of time we had spent together, moments that were of no consequence at the time, but now felt so precious to us both. We had been together for two and a half-a-year. I repeated to Diane every compliment I had ever given her, and she did the same in return. This was our long goodbye to each other. We fell asleep in each other’s arms. It was a beautiful ending, but not to our lives, only to our relationship.

“We woke up, and neither of us had expected that we would. Now it was Diane’s turn to freak out. God, I’d never seen her like that. I don’t know if it was regret... over how she was spending her last days alive, the last days of the earth. We had seen the animal instincts in our old group of friends, and maybe she thought we were heading in the same direction. I can understand it, in a way, but suddenly she didn’t want to have anything to do with me. Her outburst seemed like it would last for the rest of eternity. And when she finally calmed down she had made up her mind—she was leaving. All she wanted now was to get away from me. Maybe some side of her that had always wanted to

dump me was coming out, and now she could act on it. I tried reasoning with her, but she said that she would rather throw herself out that window and hit the pavement, rather than go on staying here with me. And I knew she wasn't playing; the desire to step in and end my own life was something I had already felt."

"What had you done to her?" Jackie asked.

"I've told you *everything*, truthfully. You don't realize yet how this situation affects people. So, she left, but I stayed here. I moved you from the sofa to the bed, though I wasn't going to do anything with you, I swear. I ate the rest of the food we had around. And then, it seemed like the only thing left for me to do was go to that big party at the mall. I thought maybe I would find Diane there."

With that, Wesley looked away from Jackie. He had finished his story. There was nothing more to be added. Jackie was left wondering how things could have gone differently without her in the picture.

"I will be forever grateful to your girlfriend," Jackie said.

Wesley turned back to her.

"That's how I would like to remember her too: when she was saving you from those guys, but they used to be swell, back in the days—before they got *turned*. After all I've been through I can promise you that you're going to have a hell-of-a hard time convincing anyone that the meteor isn't coming. Everyone has already accepted it."

"But what if it *doesn't* come? How long do you think it will be until people come to their senses?"

“I don’t think it matters at this point; people will just end up killing each other anyway. We’re far beyond the point of no return.”

Jackie stood up, and now she was finally able to speak with an air of self-confidence.

“Let’s make a pact that that never happens to us; that we never go beyond the point of no return and lose our minds, however long it is we have left.”

She waved the piece of paper at him.

“This note will keep us going. We have a mission, to find out where it came from. We need to retrace my steps. Where did your friends say they found me?”

“Scott mentioned having found you at the train station, but I don’t think the trains were still running—I doubt it.”

“Well, it would make sense that I took a train to get here. I’m definitely not from this city.” That fact had just come back to Jackie. She felt hopeful that soon she would remember everything, though it seemed like she would need to find ways to actively stimulate her memory. “If I was at the train station, then maybe going back there will help me remember something more. Can you take me?”

Wesley took a moment to consider it.

“I’m afraid it’s not going to be that simple,” he said. “For one thing, if we’re expecting to go on living for a few more days we’ll need to find food. So, before we go to the train station we really should make sure we have rations.”

“So, let’s get going then.”

Merely a few seconds of driving the way Paul Ivy had been used to back in the days—letting his guard down towards the dangers that were all over the road, and accelerating—had ended in a harsh reminder of the new reality Paul was living in. The road had seemed clear, encouraging Paul to abandon his previous way of stealthily drifting along it, to make some headway, at last, with the sole mission of getting out of the city.

Those plans seemed to have come to nothing, as he ended up in a car crash. Another vehicle, with someone just as reckless as Paul in the driver seat, had come speeding straight into his side at an intersection. The impact sent both cars sliding sideways. Paul reflected that it was the first time in his life that he had been in an accident, and now he was surprised to have remained intact—conscious and unscathed. Now he had to decide whether it would be worth it to try to turn the car on again, or if he was better off proceeding on foot. Either way he would be running a risk of ending up in more accidents. Having come upon a car, abandoned by the road with the keys in the switch, had seemed like a blessing at the time, but now he realized that driving it had been suicidal.

Paul reached for the switch and turned the key. With that the engine came to life. It was still running. Beautiful. The thought of going over to see whether the driver of the other car was intact passed as quickly as it came to Paul. *They're all on death row anyway*, Paul told himself—just as Richie Benton had once schooled him so wisely. Paul accelerated again, leaving the scene

of the accident. *Hit and run is all the fun.* The roads were a hazard. Paul wondered whether it wouldn't be safer for him to drive through parks, or just about anywhere he had less chance of getting close to other vehicles. His quest was to find a safe location, without any people at all, where he could stay by himself until the end.

He made a turn around the corner, but then he had to break quickly to avoid driving into a crowd of people.

Didn't stay away from the churches as Richie told me, Paul reflected.

He stopped his hand from hitting the car horn. What might that not lead to? Did these people imagine that Paul was *less* likely to run them over now that the world was coming to an end? He had even fled from the scene of an accident earlier that day. Perhaps the other driver had been in urgent need of attention—but that accident had been that person's own fault anyway. It wasn't a matter of insurance anymore, just a matter of the other party leaving you to die in your car if you were in the wrong.

And now these people who were getting in the way of his car, out in the street, were clearly in the wrong. Couldn't Paul just run them over? He drove up to them, slowly. That way they would surely take the hint and move out of the way. But instead it was if they didn't even notice. The windshield got cracked with a bang, as a rock hit it.

"This is a place of prayer," someone was shouting.

"When did that ever include throwing rocks?" Paul shouted back, though probably no one would catch it, with all the commotion going on outside.

The car began to shake. A man from the crowd was pressing down on the hood. He stopped to turn and address the people around him, without getting off the hood. Paul didn't catch what the man said to the others, but somehow the man managed to convince them to turn around and join him in shaking Paul's car. This time Paul honked the horn, but the crowd reacted by vehemently kicking the side of the front of his car. He also saw people gathering behind it, in the rearview mirror. It was as he had feared, that honking would only aggravate them. Paul gave up; he quickly unlocked the door and darted outside, pushing his way through the crowd.

He expected to be attacked, and if anyone managed to knock him down, Paul imagined that he would end up getting stomped on, while lying on the ground. However, no one seemed to be interested in him while he wasn't inside that car. Paul made his way through the crowd, headed out of the city. His foot got stuck on something and he fell to the ground, grazing his hands and knee. He looked back and saw a woman who was lying on the ground as well, yet in a different position. She had reached for his ankle and tripped him. She was grinning back at him, lying on her back, with a man on top of her, both of them naked below their waists. Paul darted onwards. A couple of times he had to push someone out of his way, yet luckily no one managed to strike back at him.

Paul reached the hill that had been his destination, all along. Beyond it there were no streets or houses—just grassland. He looked back. No one was coming after him, no one was near to

him, for the time being. Paul knelt down on the grass to catch his breath.

Everything I do from now on is like my sole goal in life, he thought to himself. First thing is to get to the other side of that hill and hopefully there, no one will even see me.

Paul walked on.

Once he had reached the top of the hill he realized that now he could take an advantage of heading downhill. Triumphant, he dived forward, and rolled in the grass, laughing all the way as he went. Where he ended up, he seemed to be completely alone. He heard no voices and saw no one approach him. Paul fell asleep.

When he woke up the sun had set. His whole body was aching, from his adventures that day. He pushed himself up from the ground.

Now I've slept in grass and sand; feel like I'm ready to graduate to a caveman.

But Paul was still on the same mission as before: to get away from *everyone*. He hadn't gotten far enough away from the city yet. Paul had to make sure he would be completely alone by the time that the comet hit the earth. He carried on walking.

Why am I doing this? With nothing else left to think about, Paul started questioning his motives. Why was it so important for him to die alone? Wasn't that what everyone feared? The comet spared them in that way—made sure that everyone died *together*. What Paul was attempting was like a resistance to that fate, as if the comet *wanted* him to die in the company of others, but Paul wouldn't give it the pleasure. *Have I lost my mind?* If he hadn't

spent the last seven months being single, and mostly wasted his spare time in the company of people he didn't really care for, the likes of Richie Benton, then maybe he would have chosen to spend his last days with a special someone. What had his plans been the day before? Getting drunk with Richie. That fitted with everything else of Paul's unremarkable and miserable existence.

Now the sun was coming up again. In front of Paul the field of grass went on, but it was occupied by a few family-sized tents, with people coming out of them.

"There's always going to be someone," Paul complained to himself. Getting to be by yourself had become the impossible task.

The people noticed Paul, as he got closer, and he sensed that they weren't all that pleased with the upcoming encounter either. They were grouping together, as if preparing for confrontation. Yet they looked harmless enough—those three or four families that were there.

"Never mind me," Paul called to them. "Just passing by."

They observed him in silence. None of them looked anywhere else, as Paul made his way past them.

"Are you looking for someone?" a man called to Paul when he had his back to them.

Paul stopped and turned around.

"No, not at all," he called back. "I want to be by myself, all alone, away from the *whole* world now."

"That was our idea too," responded the same man. He seemed to be in his sixties, with white hair on a balding head; much of the fat was gone from his face so that now he looked

slightly skeletal, yet still healthy as a horse. The woman next to him would be his wife, as she stayed close to him and seemed to be of the same age.

“That was nice of you,” Paul observed. “To do that for your family.”

The man avoided looking at Paul.

“And what about *your* family?” he asked.

“I didn’t think I had time to track them down, to be honest. I was probably wrong about that, so now I’m destined to die alone.”

Even though that had been exactly what he wanted, Paul realized that he was making it sound as if he felt sorry for himself. He looked around at the rest of the people there. There was another couple, slightly younger than the one Paul had spoken to. Then there were a few men and women in their twenties or early thirties. And then there were children and teenagers. There were probably around twenty-five of them, on the whole. In five or six tents.

“And you guys brought tents,” Paul went on. “You certainly are much more organized than I am. Did you bring food as well?”

“Do you need food?” the man asked back.

“*Nah*, who needs food anymore?” Paul said dismissively.

“Why don’t we let him stay?”

It was a female voice. Paul looked around for the young woman who had spoken. There were a few of them there, presumably the daughters of some of these adult couples. Now that Paul eyed them, none of the girls owned up to having spoken.

“I wasn’t alone yesterday,” Paul said, to no one in particular. “I was with my friend, but then he killed himself.” Paul had to stop himself from going on; he was choking up. Could he really get *that* emotional over the tiring Rich Benton? Paul desperately tried thinking of something else—anything that wouldn’t make him cry; he particularly dreaded breaking down in front of all these young women now that he had just noticed them. He thought of that hideous couple that he had seen having sex in the street with the woman having reached out for Paul’s leg, only to trip him on his run. And with that the tears weren’t forming anymore.

“My friend wanted to kill someone else before he died,” Paul reflected. “But then he only killed himself. I paid my tribute to him by vomiting all over the floor next to his dead body. Then I lay there in my own vomit. Thankfully, it was inside a fashion store, so I could change clothes.”

“That’s enough now,” the whitehaired man cut Paul off, in a soothing voice. “We know that the city has become a jungle. That’s why we left it. This is less of a wilderness out here.”

“It sure is,” Paul acknowledged.

“I’m sorry to hear about your friend. It’s like what happened to my daughter.” The man quickly turned away, and Paul could see a tear running down the side of his face. The man’s wife held him tight to her.

“I guess it won’t be much longer until we’re reunited,” the man said at last, wiping away that single tear. His wife nodded with enthusiasm.

“Man, I hope you’re right,” Paul said, but then his own thoughts distracted him from saying anything more. *Did* he hope that there was an afterlife? He had pretty much dismissed the idea until now, and only flippantly thought of *heaven* and *God’s will*. If heaven was real, did Paul have any hope of getting there? He had saved a man’s life, the day before—the one that Richie had intended to shoot—but then he hadn’t managed to save Richie. Would Richie Benton even get to heaven, having taken his own life? How about the daughter of that couple?

“Well, I guess I should be moving on,” Paul said, cutting his thoughts off.

“Oh, no; stay,” said the whitehaired man, whom Paul had now come to perceive as something of a father-figure. “Don’t go out there to end your life,” he went on. “It’s not worth it, even if you may think that it makes no difference now.”

It was remarkable how well adjusted all of them were there, Paul observed; the way they stood by in silence, patiently following the conversation between Paul and the most senior member of their campsite. No one had interrupted them, no one had said anything at all—except for that one time, when one of the girls had suggested that they let Paul stay. So it hadn’t been by the initiative of the old man that Paul was being offered to stay with them. Paul looked over at the crowd, scanning their faces, trying to see if they *really* cared for having him among them. He couldn’t tell; *cold reading* had never been a specialty of his.

“Well,” Paul said at last. “I didn’t come out here to kill myself, I just came to be away from other people. But that was

because I didn't think there were any people left who were as civilized as you are."

He turned to the father and spoke to him specifically.

"I would truthfully be honored and humbled to stay with you, for a few days."

Through her closed eyes, Jackie could already tell that her surroundings were bright—so much so that she expected to be blinded if she opened her eyes. First she moved her hand in front of her face. A semi-transparent fabric was stretched out above her, where she lay, capturing the sunlight and spreading it around, rather than blocking it out. It seemed as if she were inside a cheap, albeit sizeable, tent. Jackie sat up and then realized that she was practically naked, with what she had on: a thin, single-piece garment, barely covering her from the shoulders down to the thighs. Had she put this on herself?

She was startled by the abrupt entrance of a tall, dark man. He barged in on her without a word of warning. Jackie felt like covering herself up with her arms, yet her body didn't respond to those instincts. Then she discovered that there was no need for her to be that modest, as it was only her *father* who had entered the tent. Her father, the chief of their tribe, would hardly be expected to stand outside and wait for her permission to come in. He was dressed formally, in a three-piece garment: one piece covering his torso, another over his arms, and then a third covering everything below his waist.

“You should get up,” he said, forcefully—though she didn't get a sense of any hostility in his voice; this was merely his custom way of speaking. “While you were sleeping, we have captured our *enemy*.”

“Who's our enemy?” asked Jackie, suddenly realizing that she had absolutely no idea who her father could be referring to.

For that matter, she wasn't certain if this *father* of hers was anyone she knew at all.

"The traitor," he clarified proudly. "The one that the prophecy warned us of. We have taken him down, along with his plans. This is a marvelous victory for us, a time to celebrate."

"What did he do?" Jackie asked, now feeling as if she too had been expecting this traitor to turn up, wreaking havoc. And so it was a relief for her to hear that instead he had been captured.

"My dear," said the chief, beaming, "we are so resourceful, the traitor wasn't even able to strike first. We caught him in advance. Another prophecy led us to him. *All* the damage he would have done to us has been averted."

"So who was it?"

"Manuk Awk."

"Really? I know him quite well." Yet it felt to Jackie like her mouth knew more than her mind did. "Are you certain it was him?"

"Ah, yes. That much has been determined."

"Where is he now?"

"We keep him in the barred cave. A small token of mercy towards him, rather than having him tied to a pole or locked up in a cage, seeing as he didn't manage to see through any of his ill intentions towards us. Though that's as far as my generosity goes. There will be no mercy when the council meets to decide his fate—which will be *death*, with all we know."

"Really? Is there a way for me to meet him first?" Jackie asked. Her father seemed taken aback.

"Daughter, he's a *prisoner*."

“Yes, of course he is. But, as the chief, you could surely arrange it for me, as I am your daughter.” Jackie was feeling more spontaneous than she remembered herself ever being before—though granted that span of time didn’t go particularly far back.

“What would the others think of me,” responded the chief, “bringing my own daughter to converse with such a fiend? It would be an act against our honor, a dark cloud on our reputation.”

“But I used to know Manuk Awk, and I think he was fond of me. Poor rag, never had a chance with me, and honestly I felt bad about it.”

“No need to feel bad for him now,” her father reassured her, “with what has come to light.”

“No, but I might be able to get him to tell me something about what he had planned to do to us. The prophecy was incomplete, wasn’t it? I might be able to get Manuk to fill me in on what the prophecy has left out.”

From the chief’s frown, which hadn’t come out in his face so far, he didn’t seem to be seriously considering what Jackie had suggested, but was rather merely waiting for her to stop talking.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he finally said, and then he left her tent.

So the traitor had finally been captured, the single greatest threat against their tribe, which even went beyond all the external dangers of predators lurking out in the wilderness surrounding them. The traitor was said to destroy their community from within, killing enough of them to weaken the whole, to the point that the rest of them would get devoured.

Jackie was being taken by her father and one of his servants up to the mountains. She halted as the chief gave her a sign. He pointed in the direction of the armor of bars that had been mounted onto the cave's opening, originally to imprison a whole group of people, though this time there was only one person inside.

“Stay behind, please,” Jackie said to her father.

He wasn't likely to take orders from her, and he made as much clear, both to her and the servant accompanying them, by looking her down, silently and defiantly.

“Very well then, Maea,” he said at last, stepping aside.

Jackie approached the barred entrance to the cave. The prisoner was sitting on a rock a few steps away from the bars, looking deflated. He didn't notice Jackie, and for a moment she watched him without saying a word. She thought back to the times when she had met him in the past, when he had tried to have his way with her. Even though she hadn't accepted his advances back then, she had never distrusted him. But now he had certainly betrayed that trust. She would never have guessed that he would be the traitor whom the prophecy had warned them of, the one who would ultimately destroy their whole community. How was it possible?

He looked up and saw her.

“Maea?” he said in disbelief. “Have you come to rescue me?”

“Not likely. I'm as glad as anyone to see you in this cave. I would never have thought that you possessed such evil intentions against us. Though the prophecy *did* specify that it would be

someone with a friendly face, a true traitor that none of us suspected.”

“Don’t believe that prophecy,” he spat back at her.

“Don’t even try that,” Jackie retorted.

Manuk pushed himself up from the ground and then hurried towards the bars. Jackie backed away, but at the realization that he couldn’t get close enough to do her harm she went up to the bars herself, only to glare at the prisoner from up close.

“Whatever you’ve been told,” he said in a low voice. “I have done nothing.”

“Of course you *haven’t*,” she responded. “That’s not for lack of trying, though. This is one of those all too rare instances where we were ahead of our adversary and were able to prevent all the damage you would do, with the help of a prophecy. I thought I knew you, but let that be a lesson to me, not to be so trusting. What I really want to hear from you is *why* you were planning to betray us.”

“I planned no such thing,” Manuk protested. “You’ve got to help me get out of here.”

As he looked into her eyes, Jackie thought she detected genuine honesty in his words.

“Do you mean that the prophecy knew, even before *you* did, yourself?”

“No! The prophecy doesn’t know anything. The prophecy is a *deception*.”

Jackie found her attitude towards him change back. She stepped back from the bars.

“You know, you almost fooled me,” she said, smiling. “I can see that that’s where your skills lie. Now I no longer doubt your guilt. Don’t forget who *I* am. You expect that I can get you out? Well, think what other influence I can have, then. Your fate has yet to be decided, and I might have some ideas of my own regarding how they can make things even worse for you. So, tell me: *what* were you planning to do to us, and, more importantly, *why?*”

“Maea... someone wants me out of the way, and that’s all.”

“No one wants to have anything to do with you. You’re not important enough for anyone to conspire to get rid of you. And you’re not important enough for *me* to care why you wanted to do whatever it is that you were going to do. You are *nobody*, and you will die as such. You will leave no legacy of what you would have achieved.”

She turned around and leisurely walked away, picking up flowers as she went. The whole way she could hear him screaming behind her.

“Maea! Don’t leave me here! Please!”

Jackie got blinded by the sun, as she had accidentally ended up looking straight into it. The university building wasn't quite as tall as she had assumed, as she had turned in its direction—not tall enough to block the sun from her eyes. Campus was quiet, with just a few people going around on this sunny day. A live football match was being broadcasted on TV, which explained why hardly anyone could be seen. Once the match would be over, the campus grounds would surely become overpopulated with students. Jackie hoped to have her errand out of the way at that point.

“Jackie,” someone called to her.

She turned to see Alexandra walking over to her.

“Hey, girl,” said Alexandra. “Seems like ages I haven't seen you.”

“I'm not taking any classes this semester,” Jackie explained. “I only have my dissertation. I actually just came to try to catch a professor—my supervisor.”

“Who do you have?”

Jackie rolled her eyes.

“Gregory Waters. Do you know him? He's terrible. Truly the most useless professor. He hasn't been around *forever*. And there seems to be no way to reach him. I had handed in a draft of my work that he was supposed to go over and then give me some feedback on it, but now no one of the faculty even knows where he has been. He just stopped showing up. Until yesterday, big news: he was back at uni. I'm hoping to be able to catch him now. I would like to really give him hell.”

“You should. Seriously, don’t let him get away with this. Want to go for a coffee, while you’re here?”

“Absolutely. Can we meet maybe in an hour? I have to see if I can get a hold of Waters first.”

“He’s probably at the bar, watching the game,” Alexandra suggested.

“In that case, I hope his team loses—not that I’m bitter, or anything.”

In the department of Social Sciences, Jackie found the department secretary, Natali—as friendly and helpful as ever, though lately there was rarely anything she could do for Jackie.

“Are you alright there, luv?” Natali greeted her.

“I’m fine, thank you. I heard that professor Waters was in today. Is that so?”

“No, sorry, luv. Apparently he was here yesterday, but I wasn’t here so I didn’t see him.”

“*Oh, I can’t believe it,*” Jackie said with a sigh. “He’s *never* in and I have him as a supervisor.”

“*Oh.* Perhaps you should change supervisor, dear,” Natali suggested caringly. “Or, if you want, you could try reaching him at his other office, at The University of Blackmill.”

“You don’t know when he’ll be back?”

“I don’t know anything, I’m afraid. Oh, wait; he may have left something here for you, come to think of it.”

Natali spun around in her chair and went through a pile of papers on her desk.

“Here we are. You are Ms. Canessa, right?”

Natali handed Jackie an A4 manila envelope, with her surname written on it in pen.

Upon leaving the secretary's office, Jackie headed over to the campus café. She was the only customer, while she waited for Alexandra. Jackie sat down at a table inside and opened the envelope. Inside there were the papers she had given to the professor to go over. Jackie quickly flipped through them. On the first pages a few remarks were written in red. Jackie looked at the following pages and it seemed as if on the fourth page the professor had stopped writing anything.

“Didn't even bother to read through all of it,” Jackie said with a sigh.

Something fell down from between the pages, onto the table in front of her. Jackie picked it up. It was a folded paper, with *TO JAQ* written on the side.

Jackie put down her papers and then unfolded the one that had slipped.

As she read the single line that was written inside it, Jackie whispered to herself: “You must have really lost it, Waters.”

TO BE CONTINUED.

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