

AFTER ■■■■■

AFTER LIFE

by Jaron Lee Knuth

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First Edition 2009

Sixth Edition 2010

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United States

Day 1

9:54 am

Alex poked his fingers through the plastic blinds covering the kitchen windows and opened them enough to glance outside. The polluted snow that floated down from the gray sky collected near the bottom of the frosted glass. People outside ran for cover. The lucky ones pulled their hoods over their heads and zipped up the front of their jackets tighter, securing their winter armor.

The meteorologist had missed another storm, but no one could blame him anymore. A storm like that was expected in January, not the middle of May. Mother Nature had become an unpredictable bitch, and that day Minneapolis was her bedpan.

As the young, out-of-shape man turned away from the window, he caught a glimpse of his neighbor, Mr. Peterson, chipping ice from the windshield of his car parked on the street. Mr. Peterson insisted on parking there instead of his allocated parking spot in the back of the building. Alex stopped and he watched the overweight man smash away at the frozen sheet that encompassed the entire vehicle. He smiled, feeling a twinge of retribution as he watched his most rage-fueled neighbor grow more and more irate with his own luck.

Mr. Peterson's whole ordeal not only reminded Alex of how grateful he was to have the day off from work, but watching his despicable neighbor suffer brought him a simple pleasure. Mr. Peterson was a poster child for Alex's list of pet peeves. The man's temper was out of control, and Alex was forced to listen to him scream at his teenage daughter every night. When Alex had the misfortune of running into his neighbor outside the apartment building, Mr. Peterson always insisted on telling Alex a racist, sexist, or otherwise socially ignorant "joke." When you combined these bad personality traits with the unending consumption of alcohol and Mr. Peterson became Alex's archenemy.

Seeing Mr Peterson beat down by nature was satisfying, but only served to remind Alex of his own social impotence. His own fear made him a pacifist. His anti-social behavior was beginning to feel more like agoraphobia. Alex wandered away from the window in a daze and crumpled his body onto his couch. He let out an exhausted sigh as he sunk into the permanent crease that had formed from his days of occupation. He felt no physical exhaustion, but his mind was feeling weak.

Alex felt the emptiness of his apartment creep around him, echoing in its hollowness. The shelves of action figures, collection of movie replica swords, and pile of classic video game consoles did nothing to fill his metaphorical void. The rumble of his neighbor Denny stomping across the floor and the laughter of Denny's girlfriend were the only noises in the apartment. Her cackles were caused by what Alex could only surmise was pointless, mediocre humor.

His mind filed through images of his friends one-by-one. He thought of those friends he barely talked to and those that had drifted away. He thought of the friends no longer interested in his dead-end life, the friends that had become married, the friends with children. He thought of the friends who had a better time with a bottle of liquor than with him. He pictured his co-workers. The people like him who turned to a job at Wal-Mart instead of college. They were, for the most part, good people, yet Alex found boredom in all of them. The people outside his apartment had become distant strangers from a foreign land, speaking in a language he didn't understand and holding to cultural traditions that seemed disgusting and strange.

As the pictures of these people flipped through his head, his eyes drifted toward his laptop. The top was only open an inch, but the screen lit the keys below it. He never completely turned off his laptop. He never let his BitTorrent program stop trading movies and music. The illegally downloaded entertainment took his mind off the slowly creeping hours that awaited the rest of the day, but the true draw of the computer's glow was the flashing red light on the corner of the screen. The light that let him know someone was trying to start an instant message conversation.

Morgan.

It had to be her.

Alex snatched the computer off the table, wondering how long he had ignored it, worrying she

would cancel the call before he responded. The icon still flashed, asking him if he wanted to respond with chat, or voice. His fingers slid across the touch pad, too nervous for accuracy. He consciously slowed his hand down and he managed to click on the phone icon.

“Hello?” Alex’s voice was scratchy, gurgling phlegm into the word. He realized how long it had been since he had spoken and cleared his throat. “Hello? Can you hear me?”

“Yes? Can you hear me?” The voice was breathy, sultry in the most subtle way possible, even through the distorted computer speakers.

“Yes!” He took a deep breath, suddenly embarrassed by his excitement, before asking, “How’s it going?”

“Good, good. I’m just taking a break from work.” Morgan created her own online comic. Her site had begun reaching some bigger numbers and advertisers had taken notice. She was finally able to relax when it came to paying the bills and this afforded her a much more tranquil attitude overall, a sharp contrast from the neurotic worrier Alex had grown to adore. Her new nonchalant lifestyle made Alex feel uneasy around her, as if she was leaving him behind on a lower level of maturity.

“What were you working on?” His voice trembled, wavering between sincere interest and passive small talk.

Whenever he talked to her he had to re-analyze what “angle” to take with her. He sometimes thought a passive attitude would push her to become more pro-active when it came to hanging out, or just finding time to talk to him. It seemed the more he pulled away, the closer she stepped in. When she showed him more attention, it made him feel wanted, which was something his diet severely lacked.

When this worked, it felt selfishly good, but his true feelings always came out in the end. He was a horrible liar and even worse at playing any kind of social “game.” He wanted to be there for her in every capacity. He yearned to know everything about her because he truly found her that interesting. So he always leapt to her attention, and begged for the same affection in return.

“I’m just trying to finish today’s strip.” Morgan’s voice sounded tired. Bored.

“What’s wrong?”

She sighed loudly, pausing for a dramatically long moment before answering, “Nothing, really. Just bored with... everything.”

“Everything?” He knew she was being vague, but wouldn’t let her get away with it. He wanted to show his interest, so he dug deeper. “Are you just bored with your comic?”

“Yes,” she said. “And life in general.”

“Oh come on.” He tried to keep his tone lighthearted. He didn’t want her to talk herself into her own depression. “You can’t mean that. What’s at the top of your list?”

She sighed again, struggling to get her thoughts out. Finally she said, “My list of things I’m bored with? I don’t know. I read a bad review of my comic this morning and I know, I know. It was just some dumbass with a blog, but-”

“What did they say?”

“It doesn’t even matter. It’s just...”

The silence lingered.

“What is it, Morgan?”

“Can you meet me for coffee or something? I seriously can’t work today. I need to smoke like a million cigarettes.”

Alex cringed. She knew he hated her smoking. He had tried smoking once and never smoked again. His mind brought up memories of cigarettes mixed with her perfume, but he pushed the thought away.

“Of course. Where do you want to go?”

“Somewhere warm. This weather is fucked up. Are people ever going to realize we are totally fucking the environment up?” Morgan cursed freely when she was feeling confident, or trying to give the impression of confidence.

“We need to go outside the city limits if you want to smoke.” He tried his hardest to control his tone. He truly didn’t want her to feel guilty for smoking. It wasn’t his place.

She made a noise of agreement before saying, “I can come pick you up if you want.”

Alex felt emasculated for a fraction of a second before he remembered Mr. Peterson. The thought of that man’s frustration allowed Alex to remember that he liked not owning a car.

“Yeah, sure.” Alex tempered his excitement. He hadn’t seen Morgan in over a month and the last meeting was only a brief encounter. She was always with her fiancé. That was why seeing her alone was almost too good to be true. Alex considered her, in some strange way, to be his best friend, even though they barely spoke anymore.

“Okay, um...” She paused, as if considering something silently. “I need to do a few things around the house and then I’ll be over.”

For some reason, her nonchalant attitude bothered him, but he didn’t let it show. “Cool. Just honk twice when you’re in the parking lot. That way you don’t have to get out in this snow.”

She ended the conversation simply. “Okay, I’ll see you in a bit.”

The icon on the screen grayed out with the message, “Call disconnected. Do you want to reconnect?” He clicked the NO button and then he checked his downloads. Most of them had completed overnight. He left his computer on out of courtesy to all the people downloading the files from him.

He stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. He knew he had to shave, but couldn’t decide what he should do with the three weeks of growth. He knew Morgan liked facial hair, but wasn’t sure what looked good on him. After trimming his beard into a mustache and goatee, he then realized he hated the mustache so he shaved the mustache and left just a goatee. Alex finally just shaved his entire face clean.

“Maybe I’ll seem more kissable,” he caught himself thinking as he ran his fingers over his smooth cheeks. He rolled his eyes at himself, feeling slightly pathetic for still having thoughts like that. He had, in the past, hoped there was a chance for something beyond friendship with Morgan.

They had been friends ever since they tried dating in the seventh grade. He asked her out to a birthday party, and when they went outside, Alex showed her the pack of cigarettes he managed to buy off an older kid at school. Morgan didn’t really want to smoke, but she thought Alex looked dangerously cool with the cigarette in his mouth, so she accepted his offer to join him for a smoke. After pretending they both enjoyed the cigarette, he kissed her. They made out for hours underneath a streetlight on the road in front of the party, stopping only to nervously smoke more cigarettes. After the seventh or eighth cigarette, while Alex’s tongue was exploring Morgan’s mouth and ignoring the pain from her braces, his hand began to reach up her shirt. Just as he passed her navel his stomach rumbled uncomfortably. The cigarettes had made his head woozy and his stomach was reacting.

Being a pre-pubescent boy, at first he ignored the pain, concentrating instead upon his fingers and their ever so slow march up Morgan’s belly. But, soon it became too much for him to ignore. His stomach groaned loudly and they both pulled away from each other in shock.

It was right at that moment that a crowd of kids started making noises. A crowd of kids who had gathered behind the tree to watch the two of them kiss. With hoots, hollers, and everyone making kissing noises, the kids poured out from the shadows.

Something gripped Alex’s stomach, twisting all of the birthday cake and Mountain Dew he had ingested throughout the night. His eyes went white as his head lurched forward. He released the contents of his stomach, spraying the liquid ooze from his mouth. He had aimed away from Morgan, but the splatter effect worked against him, flinging his dinner all over her feet and legs. He fell to his

knees in pain, releasing a second load of fluid onto the pavement.

—His eyes were blurred with tears, but he heard the laughter. The group of kids mocked Morgan relentlessly. It was his faux pas, but their minds had found another conclusion.

“Morgan metal mouth ain’t so cute! If you kiss her, she’ll make you puke!”

The chant didn’t even rhyme well, but it was easy to remember and remember they did. The story lingered for years. Alex was mocked for kissing poor “Morgan metal mouth,” but it was infrequent and easy to dodge. She was the real victim of the night.

One month later he gave her a mix CD he had burned for her. In black magic marker were the words: “I’m sorry” written over and over again as many times as he could fit. It was filled with the darkest emo-rock he could find.

She called him a few days later, and after that they talked on the phone nearly every night of high school. They foolishly agreed that they should just be friends, but it didn’t take long for Alex to develop real feelings for her. Deep rooted feelings that went beyond the temptation of just putting his hand up her shirt.

Although that feeling was still there.

She dated other men, and she always called Alex when it didn’t work out. They talked about love, dating, and sex. They found that they agreed on almost everything. They could talk for hours about the simplest of subjects and analytically tear them down. They laughed at dark humor and openly cried with each other. He introduced her to comics and she drew him notebooks full of pictures.

But they never touched the subject of dating each other. When high school ended and college started, Alex rejected his own feelings. His hope began to fail.

And then Morgan got engaged.

Her fiancé, Christopher, was nice enough. While she was going to school for web design, he was studying drama. He loved to talk about movies and the art of film. He was intelligent. He was attractive. He got along with everyone.

He was the loss of hope for Alex.

Alex never spoke a word of discouragement. He used morals to justify why he felt he should respect both of their decisions to marry. The truth was he had lost any self-esteem that would have made him feel worthy of her. He had no money to offer her, and Christopher’s family was beyond rich. He wasn’t popular, nor did he get good grades. He was depressed more often than not and found himself complaining about life more than enjoying it.

Their friendship became random emails and the occasional mutual acquaintance’s party. He always smiled and nodded at Christopher’s self-righteous rants on the genius of Tim Burton. He watched in silent protest as Christopher had “private rehearsals” with every attractive cast member of his student films. Yet, Morgan appeared happy. She talked of the beauty of “open relationships,” and the maturity and honesty it took to accept each other as people who make mistakes. Infidelity had become “the adult thing to do.”

It only served to convince Alex that Morgan was wrong for him. He told himself that she had grown incompatible with him. He was loyal if nothing else, and considered it a trait he would require in a partner. He told himself she had changed too much to make him happy. He also thought he had only himself to blame for his sadness, and did so daily.

As impossible as his romantic delusions were, he still found himself worrying if he put on too much cologne before she picked him up. He decided he had and he flapped the hooded sweatshirt in front of him, hoping to air it out.

While he waved the sweatshirt around his apartment he heard the double honk from the parking lot and ran to the window. Morgan’s tiny, blue Volkswagen sat in the parking lot with its

wipers furiously trying to keep the huge flakes of snow off the windshield.

~~Alex put on his faded gray shirt and grabbed his black pea coat. He slipped his boots on in the hallway while he locked his door. He walked down the back stairwell and tugged an old knit cap down over his head. He then pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over that before stepping out into the blizzard.~~

Keeping his head down and his face out of the falling flakes, Alex ran to the passenger side door of Morgan's car, high stepping through the drifting snow. He grabbed for the latch and found the door locked. Morgan laughed inside the car and leaned over, popping the lock up with the tips of her fingers.

As he burst into the car trying to escape the weather, Morgan shouted, "Hey!" and pointed angrily at his boots. "I don't want that shit in my car!"

Alex looked down at his boots and saw the ugly snow all over them. He smiled and banged his feet together outside her perfectly maintained car, knocking the clumps of wet, dirty mud onto the ground.

"Hi," he finally said with a smile. Smoke from Morgan's cigarette mingled with the scent of a vanilla air freshener. "How's it going?"

Morgan shrugged her shoulders. Her short curly hair hung in a crazy frizz around her thick black-rimmed glasses. She raised one eyebrow in a frustrated contemplation and answered all in one breath, "Some dude just randomly ran out in front of my car on the way here and I almost killed him. It's snowing in May. My fiancé left for California today, and some douche-bag on the Internet thinks my comic is 'a feminist, man hating diatribe blaming western culture and the current presidential administration for every misogynistic oversight ever made by mankind.' Can you believe that? Misogynistic oversight? What the fuck does that even mean?"

"Christopher went to California?" Alex blurted the question out, ignoring any other words she may have said.

Morgan laughed as she blew out smoke from her mouth. Her lips were plush and slightly chapped. "Yeah, his agent got him an audition for a really good role."

"I thought he was going to do that play? The one about the homosexual trees?" Alex was scared of the answer.

The play was the only thing keeping them in Minnesota ever since Christopher had graduated. He talked all the time about how he couldn't decide between Hollywood and New York. The Minneapolis theater scene wasn't even an option for the movie-obsessed actor. Fame was what he craved.

Alex disallowed his mind from lingering on the idea of losing one of his last friends.

"He's still going to do the play. Filming wouldn't begin until next January, so it's perfect for him."

She spun her tires a bit and Alex secretly hoped he wouldn't have to get out into the snow and push. Her tires finally gripped hard and the car lurched forward. She didn't bother trying to stop before leaving the parking lot and pulled directly into traffic. The back end of the car slid a little farther than she intended, but she righted herself and started their journey out of town.

"What is he auditioning for?" Alex asked, hoping he could learn more about the trip and their plans without sounding like he was snooping.

"Some Spielberg alien movie. I don't remember the name. The Blue Light? The Blue Night? Something." She waved her cigarette into the air, acting as if it wasn't that important. "He's auditioning for the scientist who figures out that the aliens are here to help, and he tries to talk the president out of nuking them."

"That doesn't sound very original."

"Whatever. It's Spielberg so it's good for his career, for sure." She smashed her cigarette butt

into the ashtray as they pulled onto the interstate on-ramp.

—“So like, if he gets the part are you guys moving?” Alex glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, trying not to appear desperate for an answer.

She just shrugged her shoulders again and said, “I’m not sure.”

Her attitude was infuriating to him some times.

“She’s acting like it’s no big deal,” he thought. “Did she really care so little about me? Did it really not bother her to move away from me?”

He looked out the window, watching the traffic build up as they merged onto I-94 and headed out of Minneapolis. Giant SUVs, pick-up trucks, and eighteen-wheelers boxed them in on all sides, and the smell of exhaust started leaking through the tiny car’s heater.

“Oh man, that’s so obnoxious.” Morgan reached over and turned off the fan in the heater, trying to cut down the smell. She immediately pulled out another cigarette and lit it.

Alex decided to change the subject back to what he thought Morgan really wanted to talk about. “You aren’t actually letting this blogger get to you, are you?”

“No,” she said. “I mean, I don’t know.”

“Morgan! Come on. You get tons of fan mail every day. You can’t let some kid with a blog affect your-”

“No, no.” She cut him off, waving the hand with the cigarette casually toward him. “I know. I mean, I just needed to get out of the house. Too much crap all at once, ya know?”

“Okay. Just remember how many people love your work.”

With no response to his statement, Morgan asked, “How about that diner in Stillwater? You can still smoke there, right?” Without waiting for an answer, Morgan merged into the exit lane.

As soon as she pulled out from behind the large semi-truck in front of them, she let out a scream that caused Alex to jolt his head forward and look out the windshield.

In the middle of the far right lane, stood a man dragging his feet through the shin-deep snow.

Morgan jerked her arm to the side, spinning the steering wheel toward Alex. The car turned sideways, but it continued to slide forward, directly at the man. Alex braced himself against the dashboard and Morgan continued screaming.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Morgan’s words stumbled out of her mouth until she screamed at the top of her lungs, “Dude, look out!”

The car kept sliding down the highway sideways, but the man made no motion to move out of the way. He kept walking slowly, dragging one of his legs behind him as if it were broken.

At the last second the car’s tires gripped the pavement and the small Volkswagen lurched to the side of the road. Its rear bumper just missed the man in the road. Alex looked out the back window and saw the man didn’t even flinch as they zoomed past him.

Morgan twirled the wheel around, directing the car back at the road so they didn’t continue into the snow bank. She managed to wrestle the car into control and it slowed at the stop sign at the bottom of the exit ramp.

“Oh my god,” Morgan said, resting her head on the steering wheel when the car completely stopped.

Alex reached over and almost placed his hand on her back, but pulled it back. “It’s okay, Morgan. It’s okay. You did good. You did really good.” He said these meaningless words of comfort, even though Morgan would require none. His tongue felt swollen and his brain was flush with adrenalin. He could barely think straight.

“What is with people today? I almost hit a guy on the way to pick you up and then this. Was that frickin’ guy homeless?” She gasped. Alex could see her cheeks flush red with anger. She turned her head toward him. “What was he doing? He wasn’t even wearing a coat! I almost killed him! Alex

I almost killed him! Unnhh!” Morgan shook her hands out in front of her as if she was casting water off her skin and pulled her hair back behind her ears. “Now I really need to smoke.”

She pulled out from the stop sign and headed toward the town of Stillwater. It was there that a diner supplied coffee and greasy breakfasts for weary travelers. Alex looked down the road, in the opposite direction of Stillwater. There amongst the falling snow three men were wrestling another man to the ground in the middle of the street.

Alex was about to say something, but the car sped away, and soon he couldn't see the men in the blizzard. Morgan turned on the stereo and the car was filled with one of his favorite songs. This was enough to make him forget about what he saw and he began singing the familiar lyrics.

Day 1

11:08 am

Morgan lit her third cigarette since they had sat down on the red, cracked leather booth. She took a deep drag, then smiled at the waitress refilling her cup. Outside the window the snow began to let up, but the wind continued blowing it around, causing very low visibility. Many of the customers “ooh-ed” and “aah-ed” as the cars and trucks went sliding through the stoplight in front of the Diner parking lot, barely missing each other. The anticipation for a crash was thick in the air.

“Well, this is morbid,” Alex said, sipping his vanilla shake. He hated the bitterness of coffee. He also liked the fact that he saw just a hint of jealousy in Morgan’s eyes when his giant shake came for him, and she got her tiny cup of coffee that had the consistency of tar.

“We should be in t-shirts right now,” Morgan said, looking out the window longingly. “What the hell did we do to this planet?”

Alex smiled. “We made a lot of money raping the earth. That’s what we did.”

Morgan, sensing his sarcasm, rolled her eyes. She snatched the cherry off the top of his whip cream and popped it in her mouth.

“Yum,” she said, staring directly at him as she chewed the red fruit.

Alex grew uncomfortable with even the slight flirtation and he instead looked at the small TV hanging over the counter. The volume was muted and they had the closed captioning turned on, but on the screen were images of the freak snowstorm all over the Midwest.

Morgan took a sip of coffee and her mouth hung open for a few seconds before she spoke, as if she needed to push past her own thoughts. “Alex, do you think Christopher was a good choice for me?” Even she was taken aback by the randomness of her question, but she had no idea how to segue into the topic. “Do you think he is a good choice for me?” Morgan’s voice trembled and she took another drag off her cigarette.

She hated asking questions like that. She hated exposing any vulnerability. Her father taught her at an early age that exposing things like that was a sign of weakness. She always suspected this was a lesson he planned to teach the son he never had. Regardless, he had toughened her up more than most girls she knew. In fact, throughout her life, when she saw other girls break down and cry over simple things, or drag out their problems in overly dramatic public situations, she cringed. She saw her own weak self reflected in these moments.

Alex saw things differently. He saw that exposing herself to pain was her true power. Holding balance between her strength and weakness was the true art. This complexity is what enthralled Alex. Her ever-changing, ever-evolving state of mind is what made her transcend the other people who never grew past one-dimensional parodies of themselves. Her ability to constantly grow and adapt to everything life threw at her. This escaped her personal view of herself. She was the strongest person he knew, yet she refused to see it.

“Alex, are you listening?”

Alex kept looking at the TV, only half aware she was talking. “Morgan,” he pointed at the TV “look at that guy.”

Morgan looked over at the TV, ready to yell at Alex for interrupting, but saw a man slowly dragging his feet through the snow, his jaw hanging slightly askew. He wasn’t wearing a coat, or hat, or any winter apparel. In fact his clothes looked shredded and torn. Alex got up from his seat and stepped closer so he could read the small print at the bottom of the screen.

“They’re saying it’s a massive flu epidemic that’s causing people to act like that. Wandering around outside no matter what the temperature is. They aren’t responding to anyone.”

“Just like the guy on the road,” Morgan said. She stood up and started reading the scrolling words at the bottom of the screen with Alex.

The words crawled across the screen, revealing their information inch-by-inch as the videos continued to play.

Outbreaks of the deadly flu have been confirmed nationwide - New reports suggest outbreaks in Europe and Japan

Officials say people suffering from the flu virus have appeared unresponsive and hostile

The CDC issued a statement calling the speed of the outbreak “unprecedented”

“Oh man, I totally don’t want to get sick,” Alex said, sitting back down in the booth.

~~Morgan sat back down and put her cigarette out in the ashtray. She sipped her coffee and shivered as the warm liquid rolled down her throat. She looked across the table at Alex and watched him slurp up the last of his shake.~~

He looked innocent to her at that moment, like there was nothing else going through his head other than the sweet flavor of vanilla. His normal look of worry and concern was gone, if only for the briefest of seconds. She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and opened her mouth into a tiny smile.

“Look at that guy! He must be sick.” A trucker was shouting and pointing out the window.

Everyone looked out through the blowing flakes and saw a man wearing a suit crossing the same intersection that all of the cars had been sliding through. Instead of taking steps the man lurched forward, thrusting his shoulder to give his body momentum. His feet dragged across the ground and he looked as if he might topple over at any minute. He slowly made his way toward the Diner.

“Someone should help him,” one of the waitresses said, passively pleading with the customer.

“Guy is gonna get hit,” a trucker mumbled, huffing his breath under his mustache.

The group gasped in unison when a pickup truck sped toward the intersection and locked its breaks. The truck honked its horn as it started spinning out of control, crashing into the man and sending him flying into the diner parking lot. His body slammed into the side of a semi-trailer and flopped on to the ground. A splatter of blood remained stamped on the trailer where his head had impacted.

Everyone stood frozen in shock at what they had witnessed. The pickup truck continued to spin and came to a stop nearly a block away. The man’s body lay on the ground, still as death.

And then he moved.

Slowly, the man in the suit lifted his arms and pushed against the ground, lifting his body. He gradually pulled his legs underneath, leaning against the semi-truck cab for assistance. Blood poured from his torn neck with a rhythmic gushing, and his head bobbed side to side. Lifeless eyes stared into the diner. His arms lifted away from the expensive suit he wore that was torn and stained. His hands reached out toward all the customers staring out of the window.

The waitresses screamed. The truckers cursed incoherently. Morgan reached out and grabbed Alex’s arm, digging her short fingernails into his skin.

Alex was frozen, staring at the man in the suit as he continued to lurch toward the diner, his leg almost broken in half. A bald trucker in a blue flannel shirt finally stepped outside and approached the man. He held out his hands saying, “Just sit down there, buddy. We’ll get ya some help.”

A waitress dialed 911 on her cell phone, but cursed loudly when she got a busy signal. Just as the bald trucker reached out to touch the broken frame of the man in the suit, the body fell forward. The man in the suit’s blood covered hands gripped onto the bald trucker’s arms. The man in the suit pulled himself closer, his mouth open wide and his eyes showing only white orbs. The bald trucker tried to support him, but the man in the suit lifted himself, pulling his face up to the bald trucker’s chest.

The bloody, wounded face lunged forward, mouth stretched open, baring broken teeth. The bald trucker felt the jagged edges of the teeth dig into his neck, first squeezing his muscle, then piercing through. As the teeth slipped inside, the wound sent the warmth of blood dribbling down the neck and onto the trucker’s chest. The man in the suit’s teeth slid under the muscle of the neck, and he ripped his face away with a hunk of bloody meat the size of a fist hanging from his mouth in a stringy mess.

The customers in the diner reeled back at the same time. Everyone screamed in fear and anger. The bloody man in the suit feasted on the hunk of meat and he let the trucker’s body fall to the ground.

When he finished chewing, he sniffed the air near the trucker and then turned toward the diner. He began his lurching movement, disregarding the body of the dead trucker all together.

Another trucker yelled, "That son of a bitch killed Chester!" This trucker had long curly red hair that matched his thick beard. He slammed the front door of the diner open, stomping out into the parking lot to confront the murderer.

A waitress yelled out, "No, Red! Don't!"

By the time she yelled, the red haired trucker was already outside and punching the man in the suit repeatedly in the face. The man fell to the ground, but kept struggling.

As Red continued to pound his fists into the crushed skull of the man, the bald trucker with a bite out of his neck began to twitch in the snow.

"He's alive," Morgan gasped and pointed at the bald trucker's body. A waitress yelled at her phone from behind them when there was still no answer from the emergency services.

The twitching trucker suddenly sat upright, blood still gushing from his wound. He scrambled to his feet and stepped toward Red who was only beginning to slow his assault. The murderer's skull was nothing more than a bloody, pulpy mess in the snow.

Red turned toward the twitching, bleeding man and jumped to his feet to help him. The bald trucker lunged forward, and Red tried to block the gaping mouth with his arm. The trucker's teeth sunk in to the meaty part of Red's forearm. The bald trucker ripped his teeth away, pulling strings of flesh and muscle with them. Red fell into the snow and the bald trucker in the blue flannel began chewing his mouthful, watching Red with the same white, lifeless eyes that the man in the suit had only seconds ago.

"Morgan, we need to get out of here," Alex said to her, never taking his eyes off the windows. The crowd was panicking, and Alex could feel the tension in the air.

"My car is out there." Her voice drifted off as she pointed out past the madness. The attacking trucker jumped on top of Red again, snapping his mouth open and closed like a crazed dog. Behind them was Morgan's Volkswagen.

Two more truckers ran outside, trying to stop the mayhem. More blood was spilled, and Morgan's grip was beginning to turn Alex's arm numb.

Showering the window in a spray of blood from his neck, Red slammed into the glass with his body. His mouth was open and his tongue swirled around on the glass. He moaned and gurgled through the blood in his throat. His hands pounded on the glass, smearing crimson handprints on the icy exterior.

The men behind him moaned as well, all of them covered in blood with gaping wounds that produced more red fluid every second. Only the original man in the suit didn't move. His head was still nothing more than a liquid puddle formed from Red's fists.

The men who were moving ran toward the Diner, their mouths hanging open in a look of salivation. Two older men braced the doors, holding them closed so the crazed men outside couldn't get in. The two men yelled for someone to call the police. Red continued pounding his fists into the window. The glass splintered and more of the bloody men started to give up on the door and join his pounding.

"Holy shit," Morgan said bluntly. Alex backed away from the window and finally tore his eyes away from the carnage. He scanned the back of the diner and yanked Morgan toward the kitchen saying, "Come on, we need to get out of here."

Morgan did not argue.

The two of them pushed through swinging doors into the kitchen and they heard the cook yell at them to get out. They ignored the cook's demand and he gave up, focused more on the insanity happening in his parking lot.

The two made their way past the row of oven-tops and hanging fry pans. They found a metal door in the very back with a red exit sign taped on it crookedly. Alex pushed open the door and they both watched a pile of wet snow fall down from the roof. He immediately realized he had forgotten his coat. He began to turn back, but he heard the shatter of glass from the front of the diner and then the explosion of screams. Morgan turned and looked directly into his eyes, drilling her fear into his brain. He nodded, letting her know she need not explain, and they both ran out the back door, leaving the inhuman moaning sounds behind them.

The alley behind the diner was flanked by a wire fence that separated it from a small park. A dumpster was sitting right next to the back door and bags of trash lined the wall. Alex and Morgan both looked around cautiously, scanning through the blowing snow for any of the murderous men. Screams could be heard from inside the diner. Horrific screams.

Alex moved to the right when a moan erupted from around the corner and a decrepit old man staggered from the side of the building into the alleyway. He held his arms the same way as the other, reaching for the two of them with his mouth hanging open, but his body could only carry him so fast. Matching his age, he dressed in clothes from the early 1940s. Half his face was gone and only bone showed through. The old man moved toward them.

Alex called out, "Hey! Hey, just leave us alone!"

Morgan added in, "We don't want any trouble."

The man continued approaching them. Behind him, out in the street, Alex saw a man get tackled by a woman. She tore into his chest with her teeth. Alex looked into the panic stricken eyes of the girl he cared deeply for, hoping for an answer.

"Run," was all she said.

Alex saw a piece of fence that hung loose and he knelt down to it. Pushing it aside for Morgan he said through gritted teeth, "Come on, through here."

Still holding onto each other's hands tightly, the two of them ran into the park and over the small hill that a tree sat at the top of. Their feet slipped on the snow-covered grass periodically, but their momentum kept them moving forward. When they reached the top they both spun around, surveying the streets that surrounded them. They could see random groups of people moving near the park and a few people running away from them. Screams and moans were carried on the howling wind. The sound of sirens could be heard faintly in the distance. The chaos was scattered, but grew with every passing second.

"What is happening, Alex?" Morgan panted, out of breath from running up the hill. "Why did those guys attack each other like that? This can't be just a flu virus."

"They were eating each other." Alex rubbed his eyes, no longer trusting them. "Why would they do that? What could make somebody do that?"

Morgan shook the snow from her hair and looked down. "I want my car. We need my car. We can't stay here."

"You're right." Alex looked around as smoke started to pour into the air from surrounding buildings that had caught on fire for unknown reasons. The chaos was spreading out in waves. His paranoia showed him the end of the world. Morgan screamed his name, shocking him out of his fantasies and alerting him to a small child running toward them. She was missing her arm and growling through bloody teeth.

"Oh my god, I'm going to puke." Morgan covered her mouth.

Alex looked down at the one-armed girl as she tried to lift her feet high enough to walk through the deep snow. She kept coming toward them, wearing torn, stained, pink snow-pants. The sight of the blood-covered child chilled him to his bones. His instinct was to help her. She was eight the oldest.

Morgan had never seen a child so young with that look on her face. She ground her teeth together, making up her mind. The little girl posed no physical threat to her. A swift kick to the head and the kid would be tumbling down the hill. If the parents wanted to sue her, they could go right ahead.

“You’re not going to eat us.” Morgan stepped up and kicked as hard as she could, almost slipping on the ice but managing to fumble her arms in the air to keep her balance. Morgan’s foot connected with the little girl’s face and her tiny body went rolling down the hill, casting off the snow all around it. She never stopped hissing the entire way down the hill.

Morgan shrieked, “Oh my god. What did I-”

Without answering Alex grabbed onto Morgan’s wrist and he pulled her toward the street. She resisted at first, but gave in easily, following his pull. When they reached the sidewalk, he ran in a straight and determined line back toward the parking lot.

“I kicked that little girl!”

“These people are insane and they’re trying to kill people,” Alex was speaking in a focused monotone explanation. In his mind, there was no room for error in his judgment. “You did the right thing. You were trying to help me.”

“You’re right.” She breathed heavy and grabbed his shoulder, turning him so he was looking at her. “Thank you.” He had reminded her of her strength. He had pulled her back into the space in her mind she was most comfortable. A cold place.

Alex turned back around, leading them toward the front of the diner. A small group of older women moaned in front of a hair salon and they turned toward Alex and Morgan, lifting their arms outstretched in front of them. Alex started running again, pulling Morgan’s arm behind him. One block later the three women became distracted by a family who was trying to unlock the doors of the minivan.

When Alex and Morgan finally reached the corner of the diner and peeked around at the parking lot, they saw it was beginning to fill with the infected. Morgan recognized most of the customers from inside the diner. All of them were badly wounded, one even missing his leg. They all stumbled about, mindlessly staggering through the snow and broken glass.

Alex knew they couldn’t get into the car without getting near at least some of the infected people, but he hoped Morgan could.

“I’m going to run through the parking lot and cause a distraction,” Alex said, squinting his eyes to scan the entire lot. “When they come after me, run for your car. I’ll circle around the back of the diner and you pick me up at the end of the alley.”

“Alex, no...”

Without listening to her, he took off running. Her instinct was to yell at him, but she caught the words about to burst from her throat and she stayed hidden.

Alex ran into the lot, and before he made a noise two waitresses shrieked into the air. One of them was missing her bottom jaw and a tongue wriggled around in the exposed throat. She started moving toward him, climbing over knocked over chairs, still shrieking. The rest of the infected people turned to face him, alerted by the high-pitched noise. He ran past the first two truck drivers easily, slamming his fists on the hoods of the cars to draw their attention.

Soon the whole lot was moaning, turning to run toward Alex. He leapt up onto the ice-covered hood of a car, slipping, and almost falling off. Once he regained his balance he looked over the mass of people moving toward him. Some of them walked, some were running, and in the distance he saw Morgan spring from the corner of the diner and start for her car. The people stayed focused on him. Smiling, he leapt off the hood and he ran for the side of the building, turning around to keep yelling at the infected people, drawing them closer.

He made his way to the back of the diner and he slid around the corner into the alleyway. ~~Between him and the road stood the old man dressed in a suit from the 1940s. The old man moaned when he saw Alex and started walking slowly toward him. Alex looked back and he saw the mass of diner customers still following his trail.~~

He looked down at the dumpster against the brick wall and he saw a plank of wood hanging loosely from a crate. He grabbed the wide board and pulled on it, trying to break it off. His first pull didn't budge the board, but once he planted his foot into the side, the board pulled free. As he stepped back from the release, he saw the customers behind him round the corner, their moan reaching a sort of crescendo.

Alex ran toward the old man, swinging the board behind his head like a baseball bat. Right before he reached a swinging distance in front of the flesh hungry old man, Alex's foot slipped out from underneath him and he found himself lying on his back with the wind knocked out of lungs.

As he stared into the sky, trying to suck air into his chest, the old man stepped over him, leaning down to grab him with long, skinny fingers. Alex rolled to the side and scrambled to his feet. He saw the customers running into the alley and he stepped back as the old man lunged for him.

He found himself with his back against the chain link fence and the old man was still coming. He dove under the old man's outstretched arms and ran for the street. He felt the old man's fingers scrape against his back as he ducked by him and broke away free.

As he neared the opening of the alleyway, he saw Morgan's Volkswagen pull up. She leaned over and opened the door so that he could jump in. He did and he slammed the door behind himself. Alex hammered the lock with his fist and Morgan stomped on the gas as the mob of people slammed into her car, splattering their blood across the windows. The wheels spun in the ice before finally catching and launching them down the road. Alex realized then that he had been screaming the entire time. He was still screaming. His lungs tried to stop.

"Don't ever do something like that again," Morgan yelled and she started slapping his arm.

Morgan spun the car around on the ice, making a sharp right turn at high speed. She spun the car out straight again and she headed for the city limits, dodging around the random person running through the street.

She stopped herself from crying as they drove past a woman yelling for help. The woman was holding off one infected person, but two more were almost on top of her. No matter how many times Alex told her she did the right thing by continuing to drive, Morgan would never forgive herself.

Day 1

12:32 pm

The radio offered nothing but speculation as they turned onto I-94, heading back to Alex's apartment. ~~Morgan's house was closer, but she brushed off Alex when he asked why she didn't want to go there.~~ The interstate was surprisingly empty and Morgan pushed past the speed limit without hesitation. She needed safety and she needed it fast. Alex tried his cell phone over and over, but only got a recorded message about high call volume. His body was starting to feel weak as the adrenaline wore off. His arms felt tight and his tongue was dry.

"The President has issued a general health warning for all the 48 states." The hosts on the radio acted calm, which Alex felt guilty about wanting to believe. He wanted to think this was normal. He wanted to think if they just got home and locked the door, it would be no different than a bad blizzard. He felt guilty that he could offer no solace, or comfort to Morgan. He wanted to badly. He knew they both needed it.

"Is it really only fear that stops me? Fear that I would make her uncomfortable if I touched her," he thought. "Or is it the fear that the temptation of simply touching her is too much for me?"

Morgan bit her lip, her mind thinking of Christopher. She wondered if he was okay. She wondered if he was sick, or if these crazed people were at the airport. She wanted to voice her concern but she held it in. She was unable to show Alex any vulnerability.

The radio filled the silence. "The number of dead is still an unknown factor at this time, but eyewitness accounts lead us to believe the number is very large, possibly reaching into the tens-of-thousands. Those suffering from fever, disorientation, suicidal or homicidal thoughts, or any type of psychotic behavior are urged to visit the hospital immediately. You can also visit our website and check our FAQ – that's frequently asked questions – about this new health phenomenon. And now we have an expert in the field joining us. Dr. Julian Randolph, author of 'The Sickness of Madness.'" "

"I'm scared Morgan." Alex had held that in since he saw the first person die.

Morgan had an unlit cigarette hanging in her mouth. She stared out the windshield, gripping the steering wheel tightly. Alex grabbed her lighter out of her hand on the steering wheel and he lit her cigarette for her.

"Thank you."

He tried to start a sentence, but spoke in fragments. "I'm... I don't mean... I just... This isn't just some sickness, you know? People weren't feeling pain. They were missing limbs, but they were still walking around."

"I know," she said dryly, taking another drag from her cigarette.

"They were attacking each other, but they didn't just want to hurt people."

"I know, Alex." She blew out her smoke hard, angrily.

"They wanted to bite you! To eat you!"

"I know, Alex!" That part she yelled. "I get it, okay? I was there. This is fucked up. This is totally... this is a total mess. I get it."

"I'm sorry." Alex shrunk into his seat. "You know me. I have to figure shit out. It always helped when I could do that. With you."

There was a silence in the car as those words hung in the air. Morgan let the sweetness of the comment sink into her chest. She took a deep breath.

"Alex." She took a drag of her cigarette. "Thanks for... thanks for everything back there." She reached out and grabbed his hand, squeezing it for only a moment.

Alex smiled and looked at Morgan, hoping to catch the look in her eye. She stared out the windshield, letting go of his hand. Alex turned away from her and looked out his window. The sky over Minneapolis was beginning to fill with clouds of smoke. Small fires had broken out all over. Homes, businesses, cars, all of them sent plumes of billowing black pillars into the sky. The city looked like a war zone.

When they reached the exit, Morgan let out a whispered curse as they both noticed a grouping of people wandering down the middle of the ramp. The people turned as the car approached and started running as fast as they could, screaming in a bloody, gurgling growl. Morgan instinctively pressed on the brakes and the car slowed.

“No!” Alex yelled, pressing the palms of his hands against the dashboard. “Don’t slow down!”

Morgan screamed in disgust as a woman leapt onto the hood of the car, her eyes gouged from her face and her shirt torn open exposing her ripped apart chest. The woman’s ribcage was opened wide, vital organs missing from the cavity.

Morgan pressed on the gas and the car sped forward, slamming into the side of a mailman with a red stained uniform. It continued on, knocking over a large man with no shirt, whose arm dangled at the elbow by a few layers of skin.

“What the fuck, Alex! Look at these people!” Morgan spun the wheel when they reached the top of the ramp, turning onto the two-lane road at high speed. The bloody woman atop the hood slid off, her fingernails digging into the windshield leaving behind a smear of red blood.

The road in front of them was scattered with people, many of them running at the car and beating their hands against the side as Morgan swerved in between them.

They reached the parking lot behind Alex’s apartment, and both gasped a breath of relief when they saw no infected people. Morgan slammed on the brakes, hopping up onto the curb of the parking spot. They both jumped out of the car, and keys at the ready, Alex unlocked the back door to the building. Holding the door open for Morgan, he nearly fell into the doorway as he saw an infected man from the street come running around the corner, trying to spot what happened to the inhabitants of the Volkswagen. The stairwell door slammed shut, auto locking, just as the enraged man saw Alex in the doorway.

Alex started the climb up the three flights of stairs, leading the way. He bounded up the stairs taking at least two stairs at a time. By the second floor Morgan called out: “Slow down” in between heaving breaths. Alex trotted back down a few stairs and put his hand on her back. He immediately yanked his hand away like he had touched a hot pan, instead just walking at a slower pace alongside her.

When they reached the third floor, Alex pulled the door to the hallway open and peeked through the opening as quietly as he could. The hallway looked empty so he pulled the door open fully and waved his hand at Morgan, motioning for her to walk through.

She ducked under his arm and he followed her down the hallway once she passed through. They made their way to his apartment as quietly as possible, but he fumbled with his keys once they got to the door. Finally he got the large key to slide into the lock and the door fell open. They both rushed in, gasping for breath they didn’t realize they had been holding, and Alex shut the door behind them. He locked the doorknob and the deadbolt.

Morgan took off her coat and sat down on Alex’s couch. She rested her head in her hands and let her hair fall to the sides of her fingers. Alex walked into the kitchen and leaned against his counter top.

“We should turn on the news,” he said quietly, not sure what he should say. A thought dawned on him and he began digging through the cupboards. Morgan pushed her hair behind her ears, adjusted her glasses, and reached out for the remote. As she clicked on the screen, Alex came back into the room with a small bowl. “You can use this as an ashtray.”

“No. No. I’m not going to smoke in your apartment.” She pushed the bowl away from her.

He laughed uncomfortably as he sat down in a recliner next to the couch. “Seriously. I’m not going to make you go outside.”

Morgan chuckled and let out a sigh of defeat. She smiled when she thought of how nice he was.

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