

Mister Resurrection

Caleb O'Keefe watches the clear fluid leaching out drop-by-drop into his I.V. line, some unknown drug cocktail snaking its way down the long tubular trail toward the crook of his arm. Must be a shitload of painkillers in it because he can't feel a thing. He had never feared death, not while hopping girder to girder, working high-rise construction, not while base jumping the Royal Gorge, not while taking his bike up past one-hundred on an unlit stretch of highway in the dead of night, but lying here broken and battered, Caleb can't keep himself from shaking. The fear and doubt about what lies beyond buzzes through him with a nervous electricity he can't control. If there is a heaven, the self-indulgent life he's lived hasn't won him a reserved spot there. If God's been watching all of his foolish behavior, the fucking around with drugs, him screwing all those loser chicks who only wanted to be with him for his close brushes with fame, then the end won't be pleasant. God knows Caleb doesn't deserve a ticket to paradise, and that prospect is doubly sobering considering Caleb can no longer feel his legs. Christ, his skeleton must be in a million pieces.

The stunt only took a fraction of a second to go bad. The moment he knew he was screwed is burned into his brain, the whole grizzly scene playing out in a continuous loop before his mind's eye. The jump, the release, him leaving the bike and twisting through

the air, one-eighty, three-sixty, then that horrible second when his hand misses the throttle-grip, the bike careens sideways and his body plummets like a dead weight toward the gray hardpan laid out over the arena's cement floor.

The worst part of lying here now is knowing his fate, knowing death is peeking around the corner, but being unable to do a thing about it. Doctors have been stopping by all morning, asking him who they should call to come and be with him. What a useless family he has. His mother's dead and buried, and Caleb won't let anyone contact his loser old man, the fucking heroin burnout. The one sister he was ever close to took off for San Francisco in 2012, and he hasn't heard a word from her since. Only Louie T. came to mind, his best friend, an X-Game circuit-bum mechanic with ties to his sponsor, Yamaha. The guy's been with him, gypsying around venue to venue, for the past two years. But when Louie saw what a mess Caleb had left himself in he took one look and bailed, took off out of his hospital room bawling like a ten-year-old. You put your faith in people and what happens? The moment you really need them they let you down.

The door to his room creaks open. In walks a man wearing a black suit, black leather gloves, a starched white shirt and a black felt fedora that reminds Caleb of the hat Humphrey Bogart wore in *The Maltese Falcon*. Old movies—the cold black and white of the man's attire triggers the memory of a girl, what was her name, Faith. They used to lie around together on Sunday afternoons, watching black and white films and screwing like hamsters. In the moments following sex she'd always try to get him to sober up and quit the X circuit. Maybe Caleb shouldn't have left her. There was always something warm about Faith. Where was she now? The man in black strides over to Caleb's bedside and removes his fedora, holds it in front of him against his belt.

“You in any pain, Caleb?” the man asks him in a whisper.

“Who the fuck are you?”

The man cracks a grin, and then chuckles a little. “Yeah, that’s what I’m looking for. Still got a little fight left in you, huh?”

The man’s eyes are so black Caleb can’t make out where his irises end and his pupils begin. His nose is a sharp triangle that casts a shadow across his high cheekbones. He’s wearing some potent aftershave, its aroma like burning charcoal. The man puts his hat down on Caleb’s hospital bed table and pulls at the fingertips of his gloves until he’s removed them both. He tucks them into the side pockets of his suit coat.

“Who are you?” Caleb asks again.

The man smiles down at him, his perfect white teeth picking up the sheen from the florescent light above Caleb’s bed. “My name is Hama. I was once a heavenly angel, the charge of the archangel Raziel, keeper of the keys to this universe. But now I am given a new task. My followers call me Mr. Resurrection, and I rather like the name.”

“What the hell is this?”

“I’ve come to make you a proposition, Caleb.”

It’s easy for Caleb to smile. The drugs must be working overtime. He tries to laugh, but finds he hasn’t enough breath for it. “C’mon. Nobody’s named ‘Mr. Resurrection,’ man.”

“Well, let’s just say that’s my nickname. Doesn’t matter. What matters is that you consider my proposition.”

“What?”

“My proposition, you know. I’m here to make you a deal.”

The man raises his hand to Caleb's cheek. His palm is warm, inviting. Then, like a priest administering a blessing, the man makes the sign of an inverted cross on Caleb's forehead with his thumb. "Congratulations," he continues. "You're one of the chosen."

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"Hardly," says Mr. Resurrection. "But, if you need proof you should look to your left. Check out your monitoring devices."

Caleb can't really turn his head, but he glances as hard as he can over to the side of his hospital bed. A heart monitor that a moment before read 68 BPM is now displaying a string of dashes, and the line on the digital display that had been snaking out the familiar curves of sinus heart rhythm is fluttering up and down, a chaos of squiggly waves.

"Wait a minute," Caleb says. "So this is it? It doesn't feel like I'm dying."

"I know. It's not as scary as you thought it might be, but in fact, you are... dying I mean. That's why I'm here to make you an offer."

The fear that all that's left of him will flicker out at any moment grabs hold of Caleb. A shriek builds up from his diaphragm, but as it rises to his throat all that escapes his mouth is one forceful breath. That's all he can muster, then Caleb's chest collapses down, and he feels no further need to breathe.

"Don't be afraid," Mr. Resurrection tells him. "People are always afraid at this point, even when, just a moment before, they were as calm as newborn angels. Still, you have a decision to make, Caleb. I'm here to offer you back your life, in exchange for quite a simple thing."

Caleb stops struggling, stops marveling at the fact that he feels more an observer of his death than a participant in it. He again tries to talk, and finds that moving his lips is all he needs to do to speak to Mr. Resurrection.

“What do you want?” he asks the man.

“Your allegiance,” says Mr. Resurrection.

“My what?”

“Your vow to fight for my master when the time comes.”

“Who is your master?” Caleb asks.

The man in black smiles, steps back from the bed. His eyebrows rise, their tips near his temples straightening into two lines, jagged as lightning bolts. “My master is the Keeper of Darkness himself, and we are harvesting lost souls who will fight beside us in the coming battle—the final battle. The end is nigh, Caleb O’Keefe, and if you fight for my master I will offer you a new life as one of his powerful servants.”

“This can’t be real.”

“Of course it is real. As real as any experience made manifest in this universe. You must trust your own feelings, Caleb.”

“So, what’s the deal?”

“This:” says Mr. Resurrection, rubbing his hands together as if he’s washing them under a spray of clean water from a faucet. “Anything you desire. Near endless days and nights of debauchery—sex, food, drink, drugs, laughter and contentment, all of it, but with the caveat that, when the time comes, you will take up arms and fight against the Redeemer when He returns to fight the last battle.”

“You want me to fight at the battle of Armageddon?”

“That’s correct. You will be a herald, shouting out against the lies of a merciless God. You will wield a mighty sword, and smite down those who remain true to His word. Free them from the bonds of God’s covenants with men, for His proclamations of faith and love are hollow promises, all.”

Amazing! He’s being offered a new start, the chance to do all the gnarly shit he’d never dreamed of doing after he got his sponsorship. But there’s something needling at Caleb, something he’d only just begun to worry about the second before this specter entered the room—heaven. The chance at an everlasting peace comes with a price, and he’s always known it. That price is his rejection of everything Mr. Resurrection is promising him.

“How can I trust this is real?” Caleb asks. “I mean, for all I know, this could just be my bruised up brain, cooking up a firestorm of shit before it checks out for good.”

“I could say a million things to try to convince you that it’s real, Caleb. But what I can’t do is make you believe. That which you believe, no being can control. What matters is whether or not you trust that what you see and feel is true. That is the basis for all we believe.”

So, really, all Caleb has to do is say the word and this angel will kick-start his heart, get him out of this hole and back into the game—party hearty. But the worry returns, a nagging question that keeps him from jumping at the angel’s offer. If all Mr. Resurrection has promised him is true, how does he know that the promise of heaven is not then also true?

“OK, I’m interested I guess. Only, one last thing, Mr. ‘R.’ What happens after it’s all over?”

“Pardon?” Mr. Resurrection’s lips curl down at the edges as he leans forward toward Caleb’s face.

“The party, and then the final war, I mean, what happens after Satan shows the world that it was all a lie? What then?”

Mr. Resurrection stares at Caleb, a malevolent ghostly stare. “I’ve never had a new herald ask that question before.”

“You got an answer?”

“We have our revenge, we reign forever, the purveyors of freedom and anarchy, enforcers in a grand new universe.”

“But I’m no angel. You said you promised *near* endless days of that freedom, so I imagine it ends for me when you win?”

“No man lives forever, Caleb.”

“That’s true, Mr. Resurrection. And that’s what I truly believe. That’s why I lived hard, the way I did. Maybe it’s time I took a new road.”

“Turn me down, and you will likely wind up cast down before my master in hell anyway,” says Mr. Resurrection.

Remorse descends upon Caleb, a realization born of a new reality. If what Mr. Resurrection is promising is true, then all of what God is promising, all the mumbo-jumbo about heaven and loving your neighbor, that must be true too. And if that is so, then heaven is the only thing with any permanence. Even all the shit Mr. Resurrection has promised him will come to a dark and final end. When it comes right down to it, nothing is worth the prospect of everlasting contentment, even if one has to face harsh judgment.

Naw, he's had his fun, now it's time to pay the piper. Perhaps God will show more mercy to the contrite than to the headstrong.

"I'm gonna have to pass, Mr. Resurrection."

"Oh? Have you decided you believe the lies?"

"No. But I've decided that hoping they are true is worth more than what you're offering. Shut me down, dude. I've got a train to catch."

Mr. Resurrection straightens back to his full height, puts on his hat and pulls his black gloves from his coat pocket. Puts them back on as well. "You want to know a secret before I send you on your way?"

"Shoot."

"You didn't miss the throttle grip on your cycle. The stunt went bad for one reason, and one reason only—retribution. God, His plan. He is determined to make you pay for your sins, Caleb O'Keefe." Mr. Resurrection laughs in his face, and then raises his arms as if to cast Caleb down toward some final dark repose.

"Or maybe this was all a test," says Caleb. "Maybe this was all purgatory, and I'm about to be set free from a prison I made for myself."

Mr. Resurrection frowns, waves his hands. "Believe what you will, Caleb O'Keefe. Believe what you will."

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