

In Heaven

He sat at the opposite end of the bar nursing something brown in his glass. If he was drinking I hadn't noticed and I can admit I was staring. He just sat there holding it in his right hand until the cubes melted. He spoke to no one and no one spoke to him. His hair was brown and shaggy, not long but intentionally disheveled, as though he didn't see the point of combing it. His skin was copper in color and he had a pronounced brow. He must have been fatigued with such an expression, like he'd been up for days in a frustrated search for something he'd never find. Stubble covered his jaw and neck. His heavy eyelids masked the greater portion of his eyes like heavy curtains. When he finally opened his mouth he emptied the drink in one easy gulp. He sat the glass down without making a sound and lifted his finger to call for another.

At first I took him to be one of the drunks who appear one day from thin air and remain until the pavement takes them in. The kind that hang around the bar, forcing everyone to inhale the stink of whiskey and nicotine that they've stained into their clothes. There was something different about him, though. He'd gotten lost somewhere on the surface and wandered down into Minton's. His attire was normal enough and he didn't slouch over in his chair, so I knew he had somewhere to go home to. When he made shy glances to his side, I could tell he was eavesdropping. The way his eyes twitched back and forth told me he wasn't listening to any conversation in particular, but as many as possible. I began to think he wanted me to talk to him. He was waiting for someone to interrupt his solitude, I was convinced of it. He was lonely like me.

Minton's was underground. By the second flight of stairs you were immersed in thick rivulets of smoke, under golden light which illuminated your flight down. The inside was similarly lit with a high ceiling that felt like a cellar. The pungent fragrance of the large oak barrels against the wall, mingled with the cigarette clouds to form a dignified aroma. It was the kind of place folks hung around in. No expectations. Sometimes I felt like I was hiding out. With the exception of the weekends, the music

wasn't loud and a stiff drink was almost cheap.

Around ten years ago, Minton's became a jazz bar on account of only jazz musicians applying for gigs. But it made no pretense toward a theme. Not a single portrait of Miles or Monk hung on the walls and no band passing through had ever left their signature as a mark. Mac, the owner, was sorta uptight. He kept the place cleaner than a hospital. He says he's not even that crazy about jazz, he's always liked rock, but the former has more respectful performers. "They don't break anything and they always show up on time," he told me one evening while closing up.

"Hi," I said, brushing shoulders with the stranger as I took the seat next to him. "My name's Rachel. I thought you might like company."

He looked at me with a contorted smile and extended his hand. "Vincent. Or Vinny, it's up to you."

"What do your friends call you?"

At that, he looked away. After a few seconds his face twisted as though he had something stuck in his teeth and he sighed. "Neither, I suppose."

"You have a nickname?" I asked. "I don't need to know. Just curious, is all. I saw you from the end of the bar. You looked how I have when I'm having an awful night, so I had to say hi."

His laugh was a short, genuine acknowledgment of this truth. I felt like such an idiot. I must have seemed desperate.

"No nickname. Call me Vincent. My father liked it best that way."

"Alright, Vincent," I said, raising a toast. "To your father."

"I'm guessing he doesn't live in the city?"

"Oh yeah?" He looked at me questioningly.

"You grew up in the suburbs and moved to the city later on."

"What gave me away?" he asked.

"Just a hunch. Where are you from, Vincent?"

“Heaven.”

I almost choked on my drink. “Yes, well, we're all blessed saints. But really?”

“I'm not kidding,” he smiled. His voice was deep and soothing. He spoke slowly and didn't use much inflection. How many muscles must have collaborated for his smile? He showed no teeth and his eyelids pressed together to form slits as his whole face lit up.

“Where's Heaven?”

“Fifty-first and Ames,” he said. “You don't wanna go, though.”

“Yeah?” I asked with condescension. “The place only for stiffs?”

He poured another drink down his throat then turned to me and said silently. “Cause, you don't know what you have to do to get in there.”

His expression was frigid. I pretended to take a drink so I could look away; feeling dizzy like I might fall off my chair. His claim was absurd and yet the void in his amber eyes said otherwise.

A few minutes went by and he spoke again. “Heaven is where they used to send people who were too damaged for their own time. It's where technology disregards nature. Cancer patients, the rich elderly and in my case, the severely disfigured. We were all frozen and reanimated. Anyone could be for a price.”

“You were,” I paused. “Cryogenically frozen? How does something like that even work?”

“It was explained to me thoroughly, only I was given most of the details shortly after waking up. Picked a perfect time to lay something so heavy on a guy. I couldn't even remember my own death. Still can't.”

“Your death?”

“I died once, yes.”

There was that smile, again.

“W-When?” *How?* I caught myself. “Actually, forget I asked. I can't imagine you're in the habit of telling intimate details to strangers. And I feel like a loony for pressing you.”

“Tell you what,” his voice was tranquilizing and his eyes pleaded in desperation. “I was released earlier today, and I haven't got a friend in the city. I'd love to take a seat somewhere quieter and talk. I'm,” He looked away slowly and then back, “well, you were right, I could use some company.”

“Sure.” I was staring. “Sure thing.”

We slipped between the tables, making our way to the murky shadows of the back booths.

* * *

“And how about Mythic Pizza on Haight?”

“Couldn't say for sure. But I remember reading something about renovations, nearly a year ago.” I said.

“The Fillmore? *Please*, tell me the Fillmore still stands.” He looked at me like a child on Christmas morning, months deep in prodding and suggesting.

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye before taking a drink, “It's a museum.”

“*What?*”

“A rock museum with memorabilia and all sorts of psychedelic art. You should check it out.”

He scoffed at the suggestion.

There I was, sitting with a stranger from the past. I didn't know a thing about him and yet it felt like a reunion. Like I was drinking with a high school friend or an old acquaintance. There was a familiarity about him, as there is with anyone who wants to make friends. That gentle longing for comradery, to sit with someone and listen and be listened to. How long since I'd felt a connection like that?

“How did you do that?” he asked as Oliver placed a whiskey on the rocks before him.

“Do what?” I asked.

“Order the drinks.”

“Will that be all, Ms. Thorne?”

“Thank you, Oliver.”

“Shall I deduct it from your credits or arrange a tab?”

“Credits will do,” I smiled at him.

“I must say, Ms. Thorne, this evening you're *dressed-to-kill*.”

I felt such a flush come over me, I must have looked like a strawberry.

“Oliver, you're embarrassing me,” I laughed. “You're sweet but as far as dressing goes, I have zero fashion sense. Meet my friend, Vincent. He's not from around here.”

The two shook hands and Oliver returned to the bar.

“*So?*”

“Yes?”

He chuckled. “I've gotta know. Did you flag him down or is there a button you pushed? How did he know to bring our drinks? I didn't see you call to him.”

“I called to him on Cerebrex. We're across the room, how else was I going to get his attention?”

He stared at me with a blank expression.

“How many have you had?” I asked.

“I'm sorry, what's Cerebrex?”

“Oh! God, I'm such an idiot. Of course, you've been asleep. How would you know? They didn't tell you anything about Cerebrex?”

“Not that I can remember. What is it?”

“It's integration technology. You receive it as an implant behind your right ear. It allows instant online access, a messaging system and a myriad of other functions I couldn't begin to explain to you. It's how I messaged Oliver.”

“Like an old smart phone?” He asked excitedly.

“Eh, maybe. I've never used one.”

“So, you've got a chip in your brain? How futuristic.”

“To you, perhaps,” I laughed. “Everyone has one. And it's not a chip. It's an injection of wireless nano-machines which attach themselves to a section, not sure which, of your brain, allowing almost unlimited access to information and communication.”

He was taken aback. He looked at me as though I were making it all up, like I was playing a joke on him. After a moment, he began to look at me with intense curiosity.

“And when you receive a message, do you hear it inside your head? How does it work?”

“If it's a voice message, ya but I rarely send those. With text messages a tiny alert will appear in the corner of my vision. When I accept, it appears in front of me like subtitles.”

“And what about all the other stuff? Say you want to read something from the internet? Do you see a web page in front of you or?”

“Of course. It allows me to search by thought command. You can imagine how frustrating this technology could be with a class full of teenagers.”

“You're a teacher?”

“High school.”

“What's that like?”

“I'm here on a Wednesday night if that tells you anything,” I grinned.

“That rough?”

“It's not just the students; I'm part of a dying breed. The massive layoffs that started six years ago are entering their final phase. It's all part of their plan to restructure the entirety of America's educational system. The Federal government, under the guidance of our *very good friends* at the Brix Corporation, have deemed classroom learning to be, ineffective and outdated. Why go through the work of purchasing the books, organizing the classes, paying the teachers, without a *definitive* guarantee that the students will even absorb the material? Far simpler, they say, for students to download the work from the comfort of their homes. Of course, this frees up millions of dollars that up until recently had been given to the education budget. Not to mention the conversion of thousands of

elementary, middle and high schools into miniature private prisons but—”

“Wait, wait. If I'm hearing you right, you can download information, whole books and articles and what not? *Into your head?*”

“*Yeah.*” I gave him a quizzical look. I was fired up and wanted to continue but I could tell he'd stopped listening a minute ago.

“Can I hear more? This is, pardon my enthusiasm, the most incredible thing I've ever heard. It's like something from a film in my time. How extraordinarily! I mean we all saw something like this coming but to sit here and see, well, to witness it in action. It's out of this world.”

“How about a shot?” he asked. “What's your drink? Tequila? It's been a rough night, I think we both could use a little loosening up?”

“You want to watch me do it,” I smiled coyly. “I can see it on your face.”

“I'd be lying if I said no.”

“Two shots of tequila, it is. Do you want lemon?”

“Why not?”

He looked at me as though I were a wizard conjuring a spell, like it wasn't the most casual and repetitive action of my day.

“There it is! I saw it. That little flash in the center of your pupil. That was it, right?”

“Sure was.”

“I'm sorry, getting back to what you were saying. There are no more schools? Even with the advances in technology, that can't be better for kids. What about socialization? Kids need to be around their peers. They need to form social skills. You can't get that from sitting in your room all day.”

I listened to him rant with a passion that, in my time, was considered fatalistic. He droned on about positive influences for children and spoke at length about the merits of playing outside, human contact and the necessity of harsh trials for growth. He lectured so strongly I became convinced he had children of his own.

“At the end of the day, I'm most concerned for my student's learning. Dropping *The Great Gatsby* inside a fifteen year old's skull is about as effective as giving a plastic bottle to someone dying of thirst. What good is memorizing events if you give no thought to their meaning? Shame is, they won't even be entertained. In a few seconds you've *read* *Catcher in the Rye*, *War and Peace*, *Invisible Man*.”

He sat brooding while I sank lower into an intoxicated sulk. I was fatigued and my limbs felt like heavy rubber. What was I doing sharing a table with this stranger from the past? I sat there pouting about a world he didn't belong to and had no understanding of. Maybe that's what made conversation with him so easy. Unlike so many friends, he didn't try to rationalize events, but took them with the awe and horror I'd stopped expecting. We were both out of place in this world.

“Here you are, Ms. Thorne.”

Oliver arrived with the drinks and shook me from my trance.

“Thanks, Oliver. Take it from my credits, please.”

“Very well,” said Oliver with a slight bow before turning.

“Is there anything between you too?” Vincent asked.

“Between who? Between Oliver and me?”

“Yeah?”

I laughed so hard I nearly spilled my shot.

“What?” He looked around nervously. “C'mon, what's so funny?”

“He's a,” I couldn't catch my breath. “Well, I've been known to get lonely but never so hard-up as to go for an android.”

“*An android?*” He looked frantically back and forth between Oliver and I. “No, no, no way. No way in the world.”

I nodded, trying to keep from laughing more.

“He's an android? I shook his hand, it was warm. He, he looks.”

“Human?”

“Yes!”

“Of course. They could preserve the dead in your time but they couldn't make A.I.?”

“Not as far as I know.”

“And he works here?” He asked.

“He's gotta make a living, doesn't he?”

“Wow. What a world.”

“Strap yourself in. Cause you know what?” I looked side to side. “*C'mere.*”

“What?” He leaned in with a concerned look.

I whispered in his ear, “*They're everywhere.*”

“Now let's take this shot, it's getting cold.”

He was confused for a second before shrugging and lifting his glass.

“To the gruesome future,” I said. “May it devour us all.”

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“What's your family like?” He asked “You have any brothers or sisters?”

“A sister. She's older.”

“What's she like?”

“She can be a real bitch when she wants. We get along fine most of the time.”

“What about your folks?” he asked

“They live in Sacramento. We speak occasionally.”

“*Occasionally?*”

“So I don't call them as often as I should.”

“No judgments,” he smiled. “Just being nosy.”

“I'll show you some pictures. I have a tendency to do this when I'm tipsy but you seem nice enough to indulge me without thinking I'm a loon.”

He laughed.

“Don't worry, I won't reminisce over old vacations or show you dead pets.”

“Please, go ahead,” he said, warmly.

I tapped the table and the grid appeared. A few seconds later, the large holographic image of my folks and I, from Labor Day appeared. My mother wore the yellow blouse I'd gotten her for her birthday. She always looked good in pictures. Her skin had that smooth glow that passed me over. She had a comfortable smile that displayed a row of straight teeth. My father stood behind her, so proud and tall. He hated taking pictures and my mother's always pushing him into the frame.

“Whoa,” he said, waving his hand through the hologram. “The table's a computer?”

“Sort of. I can connect with it to display images.”

“Looks like a wooden table to me.”

“It is, for the most part. Just with a few adjustments. That's my sister and her husband on the end. They can't go anywhere without each other. You'd think they were sown together on their honeymoon.”

“I sense some resentment.”

“Not really. It's what makes her happy. Call it a difference of lifestyle. I prefer to be alone. It's easier that way. People just end up wearing you down. Why put myself through that when I can be much happier on my own?”

“Let me guess, you own a cat? It's a boy?”

“His name's Thomas and he loves me,” I said.

“I thought so. So if people are such a burden then why strike up a conversation with me? Let's be honest, I wasn't getting any attention besides yours.”

“You looked interesting and you were alone.”

“I have a hard time believing you take pity on the solitary.”

“You looked like you could use some company, I told you that earlier.”

“Maybe you were the one who wanted company.”

I listened with half interest while gazing at the wall.

“Perhaps you needed someone to talk to. Forgive me if I've said too much.”

“I'm not a teacher,” I looked at him. “Not anymore. I was laid off.”

He nodded slowly. “And?”

“I'm obsolete. Myself and thirty-five hundred other teachers were let go, last week. Each of us was given a severance check and a hand shake for good luck.”

“That's terrible. I'm sorry to hear that.” He paused. “You're really intelligent, you'll find something else.”

“You know, that's what everyone says and they're right. I know that. I'm a smart, motivated woman and I will surely find a source of income in not too long. That's not the issue, though. If it were I wouldn't be talking to a stranger at this hour on a Wednesday evening.

“That job was my life. I'm a teacher. I teach Junior and Senior English, it's what I do and I do it well. I've been doing it for ten years now. What am I, if not a teacher? My grandmother taught until she was seventy-one. My mother taught sixth grade. Oh, what that woman could do to a classroom. She had such a way with decoration. There wasn't an empty space on her walls. They were covered in essays and colorful construction paper and charts and my god, I wanted to be like her. The first time I walked into her classroom I felt a trembling of excitement within myself that I'd never felt before about anything else so I knew it was a sign. I knew I wanted to teach. And I did.”

“You've lost everything,” he said solemnly. “I can understand that.”

“Can you?”

“I said earlier I'd tell you about Heaven and my accident and how I fell down here. Still interested?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said, as I took a sip.

“The week after my wife and I purchased our first house, I was driving home from work when

an elderly man, legally blind, ran a red light and collided with the driver's side of my car. I'm told the damage to the left side of my body was severe. The arm and eye, you see, are not my own. They were grown for me, along with large patches of hair and skin tissue and several organs. I was literally falling to pieces when they pulled me from my car. The Brix corporation approached my wife some time after the accident with a proposal to sign over my remains. Apparently, the technology wasn't perfected at the time and they were looking to find test subjects. That was fifty-two years ago.”

I watched him as he spoke coldly of the past. There was an undercurrent of anger in his voice. I felt my own sadness eclipsed by such a staggering outpouring of pain. I had no words for comfort, nothing logical or even cliché. Grief wasn't something I ever encountered. As I thought about it, I realized I hadn't a single family member who had passed. Even Leslie's dog had been revived after getting hit, last spring. I kept opening my mouth but only air escaped.

“Clinical death is what they call it. Means my blood stopped circulating. I was dead for eighty-six minutes. You always hear about a white light and seeing your whole life in an instant. The last thing I remember is stepping into my car. I could smell my leather seats for an entire day after they woke me. Every time I closed my eyes I saw the trees lining Pacific Avenue. I could hear the sound of the tram clicking by, as if it were a few feet away.

“They woke me up two weeks ago. The doctor told me the reconstruction was a success and that I'd been restored to my thirty-one year old self. 'As good as new,' he said. Later, the therapist told me my wife gave birth to a boy seven months after the accident. She remarried four years after that. There's nothing but ghosts in Heaven— the dead traipsing around wondering what happened to their life on Earth.”

“My god, I'm so sorry.”

“Now, I've woken to this world so hauntingly futuristic. Born again, but for what? I have no job, no family, no where to go.”

“Some might say you're free.”

“Free to do what? I had a life. Two weeks ago, I was planning a house warming party I didn't want to have. My wife wanted a big event for all our friends to come see the house. She was always the outgoing one. Two weeks ago, I was sitting with her on our back patio laughing about how our children would play in the yard.” A tear, formed in his right eye and slid down his cheek. “Two weeks ago, I complained about having to take out the trash and the movie she dragged me to on Sunday. Now, I'm here and she's grown old with someone else.”

“You said you have a son though. Have you thought about meeting him?”

He slowly shook his head. “He's fifty-one years old. That makes him twenty years older than me. My son is twenty years older than me. How absurd is that?”

“It sounds like a reason to live is what. Did they tell you his name?”

“Salvador. Salvador Ruiz. Why?”

“And he was born fifty-one or fifty-two years ago?”

“Fifty-one,” he said, drying his eyes with the napkin. Why?”

“Give me a second,” I said, doing a mental scan through the public database. “Ah ha! Salvador Mark Ruiz lives in Houston, Texas with his wife and three daughters. Did they tell you this?”

“No,” he said, surprised.

“You, my friend, are a grandfather. Here, take a look.”

I pulled up a family picture on the table. There stood a tall man, copper complexion, bushy mustache and a small paunch. The wife, stout with wavy jet black hair, was the same height as the oldest daughter, who smiled awkwardly with braces. The two little ones were twins. They stood in front wearing the same outfit. Their gap-toothed smiles had all the mischievousness of darling babies.

“*Thank you,*” he said with immense gratitude.

* * *

I spent the next two hours catching him up on every event and advance I could think of in my inebriated state. I explained in detail how neuro-technology works, all of it's features, what it feels like

and how the procedure is done. I told him about so many of my students, even I lost track. I went through my whole curriculum and recommended novels he'd never heard of. He would ask a question here and there, but he mostly just listened intently.

“All of that, of course, was before the third World War.”

“*The third?* Between who?”

“Yeah, between China, Pakistan and most of the western world. Since they both had such huge populations you can imagine the death toll. No one wanted to go nuclear but in the end it was the only choice.”

“My god.”

“I think you'll find the map of Asia in a much different state then you remember it.”

“*No shit?*”

“No, I made that all up.”

“What?”

“I made it up. I ran out of things to tell you but you were listening so closely, I had to keep it going.”

“Not funny,” he laughed.

“You still laughed,” I said, lifting my coat over my shoulders. “I'm afraid I've got to call it a night. I can barely hold myself up, anymore.”

“You're right. I should be going as well.”

It was snowing when we emerged from the staircase onto the street. A fresh coat of untouched snow blanketed the sidewalk and the cars. I was never much for cold weather but the stillness of the winter was inviting. At night it was like the world had stopped and fallen asleep with everyone else. The thin evening air was crisp and I could feel its bite seep down into my lungs. There was something cathartic about a midnight's stroll in the snow.

“Snow in San Francisco,” he looked toward the sky. “Who would've thought?”

“Another common occurrence.”

“Rachel,” he turned to me.

“Yes.”

“Thank you. For everything.”

“Please. Have you forgotten how I moaned on earlier?”

“What are you going to do?” He asked. “How will you get along?”

“It's you I'm worried about. But thanks,” I smiled. “I'll manage. I should call my parents, tomorrow. I haven't told them yet.”

“Good.”

“And you? Where will you stay, tonight? I have a couch and you're more than welcome to crash on it.”

“No, I'm headed to the bus station.”

“Where to?”

“To Houston. I'm going to go meet my son.”

I opened my mouth but stopped short.

“Be safe, Vincent. Let me know that you've gotten there in one piece.”

“That's not funny.”

“You know what I mean,” I said as I hugged him. “Be safe.”

I watched him until he was out of sight. He walked down the empty street with the weight of his predicament burdening his shoulders. Now a stranger to himself as much as others. I wondered if he'd make it and if I'd ever see him again. I wondered if I'd make it. I was tossed overboard by a tide ready to swallow me up. The lights out front cutout which meant Oliver was closing up. It was dark and I was without any driftwood to carry me to my island home. In the morning I would pick up the last of my things from school. As I got to the end of the block, I looked down at the snow caked on my boots and thought of the last thing I said to Vincent.

“Oh and hey,” I shouted out.

“Yeah,” he turned around.

“Don't forget an umbrella.”

“*Why?*”

“They say it never stops raining in Houston.”