

Word count: 3,225

Until Forever From Now

Paying to pick the day you were going to die had many benefits. Certainty, of course, was the obvious one. Mark sold Jeremy on the value of certainty. Weren't the saddest stories of dying, Mark said, those deathbed confessions about the surprise, the regret of things undone, the messiness of walking out of your life leaving so much crap for others to clean up? The cancer had caused Jeremy to inconvenience too many people already. Lindsay was worn out from taking him to his chemo appointments, cleaning his house when she could, and trying to keep her own household going with three kids and an unhappy husband. What sealed the deal for Jeremy was watching Lindsay's face during his last visit with his oncologist. Dr. Lambeth was enthusiastic that the chemo had made a bit of progress. *Maybe after a short break, we'll try another round and see if we can keep things going in the right direction.* Lindsay's face winced for a second before patting Jeremy on his leg. *Looks like you're going to be around for a while more.*

Certainty was providing other gifts today. Since leaving home that morning, he had focused on every detail of his last trip into the city. Limping out to get the Uber taking him to the train station, he noticed, for the first time, the bright, yellow daffodils planted around the base of the stairs in his building. He held his nose as he went by to keep their scent from kicking up his allergies. That precaution went for naught since the Uber driver, old enough to know better, had

used too much Axe spray. But at the train station, Jeremy managed a smile at the warm coffee aroma as he passed the Starbucks. He couldn't do coffee anymore, and besides, Mark had said he needed to skip breakfast to keep from getting sick. But the aroma promised so much. So, Jeremy hobbled into the Starbucks for some hot chocolate and sous vide egg bites with bacon and gruyere.

On the train, the sweet, tropical perfume of the young woman sitting across from him brought him back to the Fontainebleau in Miami. Certainty would erase that memory for him. All this hassle was worth it for that alone. *What was her name?* Those two nights would always be with him. When Jeremy quit drinking pina colodas, he had told his wife he had grown out of them, but that had been one more lie. Jeremy stared at the young woman's feet, searching for another reminder of Miami. But the woman was wearing a sensible pair of white Nikes. No bare feet. No bright pink nail polish. He stared at her shoes, hoping to see through them to see if her feet were as slender as those he remembered. Without even looking up, the woman turned towards the front of the car to avoid his stare, slipping her feet under the adjacent seat. At the next stop, she got off, taking her perfume with her. The doors closed behind her, the scent diffusing and disappearing. The train resumed towards the city and immediately hit a rough patch of the track, jarring the pain in his body back to life, pushing the memory of Miami away. Certainly, he thought, for the last time.

The smells spiraled downward as the train went below ground, under the river. At his stop in the city, Jeremy pulled himself up the stairs, stopping every few steps to catch his breath. He could have used his oxygen tank right about now, but he had discontinued deliveries this week, saving a few dollars. His struggle for air was made more difficult by a rancid odor cascading down the stairwell from the street above. Once he got to the top of the stairs, he could

see the source, a truck emptying the dumpster behind a Chinese restaurant. The rotten smell filled the air and clung to him three blocks to the front of Mark's building. The doorway was unattended. Mark had said his building had a doorman, but Jeremy didn't see anyone, so he leaned on the door and shuffled into the lobby.

Once in the lobby, Jeremy exchanged the rancid smell of garbage for the smell of bleach and old urine. An unmanned security desk sat in the corner, piled high with restaurant fliers and junk mail. The lobby was not what Jeremy had been expecting. His Zoom calls with Mark came from an apartment with steel trim with large bright windows. Here, the lobby was dark and yellowed. Mark had said his flat had been renovated in the last six months. Jeremy figured that they hadn't gotten to the lobby yet.

Jeremy pushed the button for the elevator and realized that this was much easier than going to Oregon. If two hours on the train and the subway into the city had been this hard on him, how bad would it have been to fly out to Oregon? To see Dr. Whoever and then pay him twice as much as Mark was charging to stick the same needles in the same veins with the same chemicals and get the same result? It might have been nicer in Oregon, though, maybe even a proper hearse, since it was all much more above board in Oregon. Back here in the East, you had to do it Mark's way since the doctors and politicians didn't give a damn about how sick you were or how much of a pussy cancer had made you.

The elevator opened, and two twenty-something guys in oversized down jackets and wife-beater t-shirts started to step out. The smell of weed hit Jeremy hard. The men were laughing themselves silly until they saw Jeremy, his bony frame leaning against the wall next to the elevator buttons. Jeremy knew the reaction by now; the silent stares at his bruised face, the horrified glances at his bones showing through the crepey skin on his arms. It still pissed him off

though, which gave him the energy to stand up straight, to show the young bastards. But he lost grip of his cane, which smacked down on the marble floor, causing the men to jump back into the elevator. They peered around the elevator door, holding it open, snickering while Jeremy tried to bend over and get the cane. Jeremy cursed the pain shooting down his legs from his hips. He fell back against the wall again, exhausted. One of the men bent over and picked up the cane, holding it close to Jeremy, like a man holding a bone for a dog, waiting for Jeremy to be a good boy and take it. The alarm in the elevator started to blare. Jeremy reached his hand out to take the cane, his pale skin wet with the sweat from the effort.

The men eased out of the elevator. Jeremy pushed by them, ignoring their stares and their weed giggles as they left out the front door of the building. He was anxious to get on up to Mark's apartment. Pressing the button for the eighth floor was a chore. The elevator smell had a higher ratio of urine to bleach than the lobby did, compounded by the weed smell from the two men. One time, Mark had gotten Jeremy some weed to try and ease the pain, but he hated the smell, plus it hadn't done a damn thing for him.

Certainty grabbed his attention again when the doors closed. It occurred to him that this was another last time — his last trip on an elevator. According to Mark's timeline of how things would go, in about 90 minutes, Jeremy would be dead. Jeremy tried to think of his most memorable elevator experience. Not exactly a list one kept top of mind. At one of his national conventions, he once stood next to Wink Martindale for three floors at the hotel. That might be tops, but he had others. So Jeremy started to divide his notable elevator experiences into two lists. The first was the list of the times someone interesting was in the elevator with him. The second list was times of anticipation in an elevator on the way to some notable life event. The first night at the hotel on his honeymoon out in Waikiki. Up to the neo-natal unit when Lindsay

was born. Up to the ICU after his brother's wreck last year, the last time he saw him. Of course, that spring break at the Fontainebleau was at the top of both lists. Up to now, though, they had all been round trips for him. He considered the oddity of a one-way elevator trip. Jeremy knew too well that they happened, but most people had no way of knowing that at the time. Jeremy tried to work up some enthusiasm for that gift, another point of validation for this path.

The doors opened. Jeremy stepped into a little nicer hallway than he expected after the lobby and the elevator, making him feel a little more settled. Someone on the floor had made bacon. His first thought was that Mark had cooked some breakfast for him, even though Jeremy's instructions were to fast this morning. He rechecked the instructions Mark had sent him with the date and time of the appointment, along with Mark's address and apartment number, 827. The door immediately in front of the elevator was 801, so Jeremy turned to the right and started down the hallway. Once he turned the corner, he was surprised that the hallway was so short – only six apartment doors on this end of the building, with numbers up to 813. He hobbled back to the elevator, continued around the other corner, and found the same short hallway, six apartments, even numbered to 812. Jeremy checked the number on his paper again. 827 was correct. He labored to go back down each hall, seeing if he had missed a turn or a door to another hallway, but there was nothing.

Jeremy listened to see if he could hear anybody at home on the floor, but it was now after ten in the morning, so he guessed people were at work. As he looked about, he became suspicious that many of the apartments on the floor were vacant. Jeremy pulled his phone out to call Mark to find out where he had made a wrong turn. As he looked up Mark's number, he noticed he had a bunch of text notifications. *Change of password notification. Large purchase notification. Large purchase notification. ATM withdrawal notification. Address change*

notification. Low balance alert notification. Confusion filled his brain. He had used the checklist Mark had provided to arrange everything for Lindsay to make it as easy as possible after he was gone. He had put all his affairs in order, canceled all his recurring charges, and paid down his credit card balances. Last night Jeremy had written everything out for her – passwords, balances, credit card numbers, everything she would need. This morning, he left the information on the kitchen counter next to the note with his list of reasons for choosing this way of ending everything. Now something had gotten screwed up somehow, somewhere, and he wasn't going to be around to clean it up. The whole damn point was about taking care of these things. Maybe he could figure something out once he got to Mark's apartment but before the procedure.

He found Mark's number and called it, but it went straight to a generic voice mail. He hung up and tried it again but got nothing. He propped himself against the wall next to the elevator and texted Mark to figure out where he had gotten off track with the directions. *I'M HERE WHERE R U?* Jeremy texted to the number he had for Mark, then slumped against the wall, waiting for a response. Jeremy slapped at his phone screen, scrolling up and down through all the text alerts, trying to figure out what he had screwed up. One was from his home security system, sent at 8:17 AM, about 25 minutes after he had headed to the city this morning.

He clicked on the link in the text to look at the live video from his security system camera. As the video started to play, his legs gave way. The video showed Mark standing at the kitchen counter in Jeremy's apartment. Mark was looking through the stack of documents Jeremy had left for Lindsay, working on Jeremy's laptop. Jeremy grew dizzy from processing what he was watching. *You fucking bastard.* When Mark got to the letter Jeremy had written for Lindsay, he stopped to read through it and then, with a satisfied smile, folded it and slipped it into his

binder. *A trophy for the little bastard.* Mark returned to working on Jeremy's computer. Jeremy's phone beeped again. *Balance transfer complete.*

Jeremy slumped against the wall in the hallway. A surge of nausea came over him, and he threw up in the corner of the hallway. His ruined body slid to the ground next to the pool of vomit. But instead of the acrid smell of stomach acid and egg and bacon, his mind carried him away from the hall. He was back again to the scent of the tropical drinks and sunscreen and Miami. His eyes closed. Again, the morning beach sun was peeking around the corners of the heavy drapes of a room at the Fontainebleau. His body, young and tan again, lay alone in the king bed. The sliding door to the balcony was open behind the drapes. Far below, the waves tumbled over and over into a pleasant rumble. She was on the balcony, waiting for him to awaken. Through the edge of the glass door, he could see a single, slender bare foot; each toe painted bright pink. In the room's dim light, his clothes lay piled on the chair next to the bed, and beyond the chair was the door to the hallway and then to the elevator. For the thousand millionth time, he turned his back to the light, pulled on his shirt and shorts, and carried his shoes with him as he slipped out the door. When the elevator opened, he met a woman with a few wisps of salt and pepper hair sneaking out from under her big straw hat. She pulled on a jeweled pink leash to corral a tiny brown chihuahua out of Jeremy's way as he entered the elevator. She looked him over, shoes in hand, shirt untucked, and knew everything. She turned towards him with a smile that begged for consideration and attention. Instead, Jeremy kept his focus on the numbers in the display as they counted down to one.

The elevator opened into a sprawling lobby in chaos on the first floor. Women were screaming, pulling their children back from the pool area. Outside, through the big windows, two bellmen gleamed in the brilliant sunshine. They shaded their eyes as they looked up the outside

of the hotel, searching and pointing. Two security guards were up in the landscaped area near the pool, pushing down the hedges, trying to get to something behind the palm tree. Sometimes, when recalling that day, Jeremy imagined that he could read their name tags. One of the guards reached into the hedge, and a bare leg came into view, with splashes of bright pink on each nail and a darker smear of blood along the calf.

Jeremy turned away and fought against the crowd of onlookers surging towards the pool area. He moved onto the street into the wet morning heat of Miami in the spring. He walked faster and faster. *NotmyfaultNotmyfaultNotmyfault*. The wail of the ambulance in the distance sped up his steps. *I had to go. She set me up. She wouldn't even tell me her name*. The well-rehearsed lines ran around in his brain again and again as he watched himself walking towards the self-parking lot of the hotel. Every crack on the sidewalk grabbed at his feet, pulling him down until he stumbled forward. Just before the moment where he sprawled on the south Florida asphalt, he came back to this moment, back in this miserable hallway in the city. His nose dripped sweat, creating tiny little clear pools in the brown gravy of his vomit an inch below his face.

The dull throb of the elevator's motors started up far below. Jeremy could hear the slow progression of the elevator rising, coming for him, coming to return him to everything he had said goodbye to. Another 911 call was coming. He closed his eyes, fighting for his mind to take him back to Miami and the warm bed and sunlight streaming around the drapes. Everything began to overlap, the sound of the elevator's advance providing the soundtrack of his mind's vision of Miami. His phone chimed in unison with the faint *tings* of the elevator passing each floor, each text signaling another triumph for Mark. But Jeremy's mind was now years away from the hallway. *I should have gone to her on that balcony*.

Jeremy tried to rise from the bed, to throw his legs over the edge closest to the balcony instead of the edge closest to his clothes and the door and his escape. But his mind, honest to the moment, would not let him rewrite that day. His legs tangled up in the silky-smooth sheets of the bed. The more he thrashed, the more he was entangled. The rumbling progress of the elevator made him more frantic. Finally, before the elevator's doors opened, there was a silence. Jeremy's memories floated in the space provided by the silence, praying for another version of those moments in Miami. He laid still in that king bed, staring at those beautiful, slender toes bouncing with their last moments of life. Suddenly something new filled his head, a thought that raced throughout his body and soured his stomach again. He had not been chosen. He had been *collected*. When she walked up to him at the bar around the pool and slipped her room key under the coaster of his beer, she was merely collecting him on the way to her room. It had been no different than Jeremy collecting coffee smells and sous vide egg bites this morning on the way to the city. Now, he could see her feet were bouncing not with life but with impatience. She was not waiting for him to wake and come to her, but to leave. Jeremy could see her looking at the ocean, lifting her face into the wind, smelling the salt air, feeling the warmth of certainty, listening intently for the room door's solid click as Jeremy pulled it closed.

The bell pinged as the elevator doors opened. He heard the rustling of someone wrestling with shopping bags, a sound that he tried to imagine into the sound of angel wings. But it was not an angel that came around the corner and yelled out *son of a bitch* when he saw Jeremy collapsed on the floor. It was then the light about the drapes faded, as did the sounds of the ocean, and his stomach churned with the disappointment that he might live forever.