

## New Hope, AK

“Hey Margie,” I said when they finally figured that Pi wasn’t going to hit us directly, but that we were still going to get hit.

She looked up at me and then back at one of her pressure light blocks, gnawing at the corner of it and making it flash red to blue to green, depending on where and how hard she bit it.

“I gotta board up the windows. It might be a little loud, but I’ll be quick as I can.”

I picked her up, set her down in her play pen, and strapped on my headlamp. Flipped on the outside lights, stepped out into the dark. Pi wasn’t too tough for a hurricane. Category 1 probably by the time it hit us. Call it an early Christmas present for Alaska. I got this cheap graphene to hang over the windows. Each board was solid black, and big enough to cover, with a few inches to spare. Not top of the line, but still tougher than shit and lighter than it, too. I could hear Margie crying inside while I was drilling each board over a window, but there wasn’t really anything else I could do. I’d put it off till the last minute, and Pi was going to make landfall in the morning.

It was just me and Margie. Margie’s mom bolted a few months back when she had her mid-life crisis at 29. One week, loving mother, next week out all the time with some “friend”

from work. Week after that I found out they were smoking all kinds of shit, and week after that she was gone. I never did meth or crack or anything like that. Just figured Margie's mom was a good girl in a bad place when I met her, and I believed in love and I believed her when she said she did too. This was always what set me apart from pretty much everyone else in the world. Nobody wanted to be in love. I don't know, maybe it was too tender a thing. We were hard people for the most part. Everybody knew time was running out, and for most of us that meant either a nihilistic life or one spent wrapping oneself in fantasy. Most of us either wanted to buy a bunch of shit and pretend we didn't live at the end of all things, or do a bunch of drugs and pretend we didn't live at the end of all things, or more often than not, just cast ourselves into the sea to avoid the end of all things, altogether.

So it was like providence from on high that Margie's mom said she loved me. She told me she was done with drugs and all that shit. Guess I believed her. Anyway, when she left, she left me with a one-year-old baby and a house I could barely afford, and a handwritten note taped to the door that said

*Real men don't believe in love – don't call – don't write*

and that was that. And, like everything else on the whole goddamned hot-house planet, life goes on. Even if most of it doesn't, and even if what does won't ever be the way it used to be.

By the time I was just about finished with the boards, the wind had picked up and you could smell salt and rain coming up from the west. The city lights rusted the underbelly of the clouds a grimy orange, and in places you could see swirls, faster wisps above or below, going different directions. Every couple of seconds, too, everything would light up purple and white. After a few minutes more, far off thunder.

“Excuse me,” came a kind of high-pitched man’s voice from the street. I pretended not to hear, since I wanted to get done and back inside to Margie.

“Hello,” he persisted.

I turned around to see him, stepping up to the house, right past the sign that said NO SOLICITORS. He was dressed in an old-timey black suit, complete with a fedora, and clutched an old weatherworn briefcase at his side. He at least had a luminescent pin on his chest, so you could see the dumb bastard, which was generally encouraged by the council, to be worn by all citizens of our fair village during the winter months. And to no one’s surprise anywhere, this dude’s pin was in the shape of a cross.

“I don’t want any” I said and went back to my boards and windows.

“You don’t want any what?” he asked, his voice coming closer up the walk.

“Salvation. This is private property, and I suggest you leave it.”

“I see. Sir, I won’t take but a minute of your time. I’m not offering salvation.”

I turned around and sat my ass down on the top step of the ladder. The guy had a chubby face, with big cheeks and a small mouth. He looked like you might be able to call him cheery, if you could see him properly. I flicked my headlamp on high, so I could do just that, but instead all I saw was watery eyes and pockmarks and blubbery skin. He definitely looked more cheery in the dark, but I kept the lamp on anyway. I can only imagine what somebody watching us would have seen. Mr. Religious, staring up at me on my ladder, my headlamp shining down on him like the light of heaven above. He nodded and opened the briefcase. Inside it was a whole bunch of papers. He took one out and handed it to me. In spite of his fat face, his fingers were long and twig-skinny.

“What’s this?” I asked. I rubbed my thumb across the paper, figuring it would have some kind of pressure activated luminescent ink or something. It didn’t. It was just a flyer.

“It’s just a flyer,” he said. “Directions for the lost.”

“I’m not lost,” I said, and stuck it back down in his face.

“No, no,” he protested, putting his little dendrite fingers up in the air. “We’re all lost, and the only way we can be found is through---“

“Yeah, Jesus or Buddha or God or whatever. Look, I told you, I’m not interested in salvation.”

“No, this isn’t about salvation, or any of those other things. This is about being lost and finding yourself. There is only one person who can help you do that.”

“I suppose that person is me?”

He laughed one short, loud laugh, like the shot of a pistol. His face twisted, like what I’d said wasn’t much more than the ignorant question of a child.

“You? No, not you. Mystic Dan Hawkins.”

I have to admit that I didn’t have any words for that. I probably sat there with my mouth opening and closing like a fish – a bad habit I always had when I was looking for words. I finally found some.

“...Are you gonna tell me anything about Mystic Don Hawkins?”

“*Dan*,” he corrected. “Mystic *Dan* Hawkins. No – you can come see for yourself.”

A big wind came up from the west, so big you couldn’t really call it a gust. It must have been forty or fifty miles an hour, and it made all the trees shake and rock. The man’s fedora lifted up off his half-bald head and took off down the street. He made a squeaking noise as he tried to catch it and missed. Then he ran after the wayward hat, stumbling across my yard,

hopping onto the sidewalk, and then he was gone, off into the darkness. I was expecting to hear his voice come back at me, telling me he'd see me there or think about it or some such, but if he did, it was swallowed up in the wind.

I finished the last couple of windows fast as I could, keeping an eye on the road to see if the guy was coming back. He didn't, and the wind picked up even more, so much so that it was hard to stay on the ladder. When I was satisfied old Pi wasn't gonna huff and puff and blow my house down, I went inside. Margie wasn't crying anymore; just sitting there watching a cartoon with some weird squiggly faces, talking about numbers and letters. There was a red scroll going across the screen about the hurricane and staying indoors and away from windows.

I slumped down into the loveseat next to Margie's playpen, and opened the flyer, which I'd folded into a tight triangle out of old habit and tucked into the back pocket of my jeans. It was on glossy white card-stock, and had a picture of a middle aged lady at the upper left corner. Under her pleasant, mostly non-threatening smile were big red letters: I ONCE WAS LOST BUT NOW AM FOUND. To the side of her face was a quote, presumably from her, in small print that read:

I was lost. Lost, lost, lost. I had nowhere to go. I lost my family and I lost my house. I lost my will to live, and then I even lost that. But finally Mystic Dan Hawkins found me. I have a purpose now, and even in the long nights, every day is filled with the brightness of being.

Underneath that was an address: 17 West Hill, New Hope, AK.

"Shit Margie," I said, tossing the flyer on the end table next to the couch. "Hurricanes wash all kinds of trash up on the shore."

Margie watched me, and then she burped and farted and laughed at herself, offering up a flashing neon building block to me.

“Sure, sure. Let’s do this. I build it up, you wreck it down. You take after your mother.”

#

The next day and a half or so was filled with naught but the near constant rush of wind and rain blowing against the sides of the house. The boards held up on the windows, and with the exception of some of the shingling on the roof, there wasn’t a whole lot of damage to my house. Good thing I didn’t put up the Christmas lights.

My dad used to reminisce about building a snowman with his old man. How they had this whole routine where they’d hang wreaths and lights around the house, and all manner of holiday tchotchkes like snow globes and mistletoe and garlands. Then they’d set up a real tree in the corner of the living room, while listening to old Christmas records. My grandma would make beef stew and they’d warm up with that and hot cocoa and sit playing games by the fire, every December 1<sup>st</sup>. It always sounded so perfect, and I was jealous of that in a weird way. It was so different from my upbringing. Mom and Dad stuck together for me and my brother’s sake, and every day was just a paradise of substance abuse and this weird, cavernous silence between them that could swallow up a whole room and everyone in it. We never did anything familywise. Me and my brother kept to ourselves, and the only time that cold, stony tension would break was on the crest of a nasty sneer or a back-handed compliment from one parent to the other.

So, yeah, I wasn't giving Margie a perfect childhood like my dad's, but look what that got him. 50 years of silence and separate beds and a quick visit to the coroner's after one drunken night in the backyard too many.

When the winds finally died down and the news said the worst was over, I went out to see the damage. There was a family next door with a teenage daughter who was old enough to babysit, so I stopped over to see if she wouldn't mind watching Margie while I went out to see if anybody needed help. I think she must have been happy to get out of the house, cause she bolted without me even having to offer her cash, which is almost unheard of with this kid. I didn't blame her. Her parents reminded me a lot of my own. Anyway, I just needed to get away for a while, too. But I framed it in altruism and the desire to help others, because that's always been the best excuse for a little selfishness, as far as I'm concerned.

One thing was for sure, Christmas was gonna be cancelled this time around. The power was out to half the town, and I'm sure it would have been for us, too, except for the generator I put in last year. As I got closer to downtown, I could see that the streets were trashed. Most of the buildings and even trees had survived, but the streets were flooded in a wash of pine boughs and plastic snowmen tilting back and forth in the water, white and menacing. In the darkness, they leaned out at me whenever my light hit them, wide grinning faces on a black sea of detritus.

I stopped at a house on Derby Mountain Drive to check on Vern, an old lady who used to live next to us. Vern was one of the few exceptions to the malaise of soullessness that afflicted the town. I usually helped her mow the lawn or move shit around her house when she needed it. She would smile and nod and invite me in for tea or cocoa. One time, I asked what her full name was, since I couldn't figure out what the hell Vern was short for. And she'd just given me a wry smile and a wink and said, "just Vern". She answered on the first knock, and as soon as she

opened the door, I could see she was totally fine. It was a diluvian nightmare outside, but of course, Vern's was lit up and cozy with hand-knit quilts and some kind of apple-spice air freshener set to overdrive. Vern was pushing 80, I think, but she was Alaska-spry. She had a full head of curly white hair, and crazy green eyes that must have turned all kinds of heads in her younger years.

“Did you curl your hair today, Vern?”

“Of course I did. Always got to look my best.”

I smiled, the first unforced smile I'd had in a while, and leaned up against the side of the doorframe. I loved Vern like a grandmother, but I really hated going in and getting trapped in an extended conversation on politics and, especially, whether or not I was going to find another lady.

“You need anything?” I asked.

“No, I can take care of myself. Maybe you could bring that sweet little girl by sometime for me.”

“You bet I will, Vern,” I said. “I'm gonna keep going. I got to check on a couple more places.”

“Sure,” Vern nodded. “Just don't leave Margie too long. And don't be a stranger.”

“I sure won't,” I answered, going down the steps.

When I got back down to the sidewalk, I decided against heading home. The truth was that Vern was the only person I felt the need to check in on. Everybody else I either didn't know, didn't care to know, or else I knew they could take care of themselves. But I did want to check out one place.



I never really spent much time on West Hill. Our town was small, only about 10,000 people or so, but it was big enough that there were places you didn't much get to. After the old world was over, those who survived the wars, disease, fire, flood, and famine made their way north all over the planet. Now there was this little ring of civilization all hugging the Arctic circle. It was mostly Americans, Russians, and Chinese. Yeah, history's greatest champions. But there were no more wars. We'd all had enough of that. We mostly just kept to ourselves in towns like New Hope, self-sufficient, but big enough where there were enough of us to help each other out.

As it was, the West Hill was what you'd call the bad part of town. It was actually to the north, with the mountains to the east and the ocean to the west, but someone somewhere along the line called it the West Hill, and the name stuck. The houses were almost all two stories with wood siding, and except for varying degrees of weathering, they were all identical. A lot of them had bare front yards, a lot of them with children's toys or broken appliances scattered across the lawn. If I hadn't known the trash was always there, I'd have thought the hurricane hit harder here. As it was, the power was out; and with the exception of some small battery powered lamps illuminating a handful of windows, it was pitch black. This was where the poor people lived. End Times Ghetto, some of the kids liked to call it. We had tons of social safety nets in New Hope, but some people you just can't help. They all lived here, by choice. Mostly it was just drunks and dope-heads, or the occasional incredibly lazy dipshit who just didn't want to have to lift a finger, ever. Margie's mother, if she was still alive, most definitely lived in one of these shit shacks.

On my way up the hill, I heard something shuffling down toward me from the other way. I balled up my fist, ready to rumble if need be, but as the shuffling got louder, I saw it was just an old man with wispy white hair sprouting up from his head and his bare, saggy chest. From the

smell of him, he'd been drinking for maybe a decade straight, and at some point in the not too recent past, had shit himself. He started to follow me, but when I turned around and asked him, as politely as I could, what the fuck he thought he was fucking doing, he bolted, and I kept going.

I shined my headlamp on the house numbers as I went past – 3, 5, 7, 9: all non-descript in their various states of decay. 15 was a house with a couch on the porch, with two people not-so-quietly fucking on it. I went quick past that one, so as not to interrupt Romeo and Juliet, and this was it. 17 West Hill, New Hope, AK.

I didn't really plan on going up to the door originally, but with the wildcat lovemaking next door, I found myself walking up to the house. I was really hoping that the lady on the next porch wasn't Margie's mother. Or maybe I was hoping that. Maybe that's why I went up to the door anyway. Just to make sure. But it wasn't her. At least I was pretty sure. She seemed a lot skinnier and older than Margie's mom, though I couldn't get a really good look. As soon as I shined my headlamp on them, they fumbled and swore and backed up awkwardly, trying to cover themselves with their arms, before stumbling into the house. I'm sure they thought I was a cop.

17 West Hill was just like all the other ones. The main difference was that it was freshly painted, which was nice. Maybe blue or green – it was hard to tell in the dark, with only my headlamp giving off any light. But you could see the window frames were a clean white. There was a single candle lit in each of the windows, like per standard Christmastime tradition, and it took me a second to realize that it didn't look like any of the windows had been boarded up for the storm. I supposed it was possible that they took the boards down already, but I doubted it. Maybe Mystic Don Hawkins had a whole lot of faith that ol' Pi wouldn't break out the windows.

If he did, he was right. There was something dark and metal hanging over the door, and as I got closer, I could see it was one of those cheesy new age suns based on the old Aztec hieroglyphics.

“Hello!” came a voice from one of the windows.

I didn't see a face, but a second later, the front door opened. It was a man, short, balding, with a mangy beard. He was wearing a sleeveless undershirt and an oversized pair of jeans. He stepped forward and ran a thick hand through a crop of hair that wasn't there. His eyes were quick and dark brown.

“Are you lost?” he asked.

“Are you Mystic Don Hawkins?”

“*Dan*. Mystic Dan Hawkins, and yes.”

“Then I'm not lost.”

“I beg to differ. Come in, and let's get you found.”

He went in, and I went in. Not sure why, really. I guess I hadn't been out much, and it'd been a long time since I had any kind of adventure. So why not wander into some weirdo's house on the West Hill? Inside was a pungent mix of garlic, sweat, and sage. The candles that I had seen from the street were real, which was strange. Nobody used real candles – they weren't reusable and you could get rechargeable ones for a buck each that would last years. There were bundles of herbs hanging down from the ceiling by each window, and I can only imagine what a fire marshal would have to say seeing them all, hanging only a few feet from so many open flames.

“Have a seat,” Don Hawkins said, pointing to an old recliner in the corner. I sat.

“I got your flyer,” I said.

He walked out of the room and into the kitchen, and I could hear him rummaging through cupboards and drawers.

“Oh yes,” he called out from the other room. “Friend Solomon told me you might be by. You are the man on the ladder, correct?”

“Yeah... Friend Solomon?”

“Yes. He’s a good man, even if his wardrobe is a bit outdated.”

He came back into the room with a mortar and pestle, and a plate with a sage bundle and a long wood match. He set everything down meticulously on the coffee table between us, then pulled up a kitchen chair. I started to ask what he was going to do, but he hushed me. He closed his eyes and furrowed his brow, inhaled deeply, and then swung his arms in a wide, sweeping circle. He carried on like this for a minute or two, waving his hands through the air, before finally bringing them together in a loud clap. He held them together, and I could see in the dim light that his muscles were straining. He was pushing his hands into each other with everything he had.

He exhaled, shook out his arms, and put his forefingers and thumbs on the sides of his head, like he was concentrating on some lost thought. He opened his eyes, almost completely black in this light, and stared at me. I wanted to think he was staring right into my soul, but he wasn’t. He was just looking at me. He drew the match off the plate, and scraped it along the rough wood grain of the coffee table until it flared up, bright and yellow. His face looked ominous, I guess, with those shadows dancing across it. His eyes widened as he lit the sage. He watched it intently until it was going pretty good, and then he snubbed it out in the mortar, filling the room with heady smoke. He handed me the bundle.

“Does this cost money or anything?” I asked.

“No. I want to help you. If I do, then you can help me later. Hand out pamphlets, spread the word, things like that. If we uncover deeper mysteries that you want to delve into, then you can feel free to donate your time and... yes, perhaps money. I promise to help you uncover all that you seek.”

“Sure,” I nodded. “Why the hell not?”

I took the bundle, and he instructed me to inhale as deep as I could, to let go of everything, and let the smoke purify my mind. I did, though I didn't feel any different. It was just plain old sage, not weed or anything. Then, he pointed at the mortar, and I dropped the smoking stub of sage into it. He ground the ashes roughly with the pestle, and then emptied the contents onto my palms. He clapped his hands again and told me to do the same, and I did. Then he held his palms out toward me, face up, and I put my hands on his. He stared at me while I held my hands there. Finally, he inhaled deeply, as if drawing all the mysteries of the world up into his nasal cavity, and spoke.

“Why are you here?”

“Aren't you supposed to tell me that?”

“What do you seek?”

“I'm not lost, if that's what you mean.”

“You're lost. You're looking for something.”

“No.”

“You wonder, though. I feel it. You wonder what it all means.”

“What all what means?”

“Existence. The universe.”

“No. I have a pretty good handle on that.”

“You want to know what happens when the sun never comes up. When you die. When the world is nothing more than the ashes on your hands.”

“No. The lights just go out then.”

He kept staring at me, but the look in his eyes had changed. He drew his hands back and his tone shifted from quiet and mystical to clear irritation.

“Why did you come here?”

“I was... I was in love with somebody. I don't know. I want love.”

“Love? From me? That's not what I do.”

He crossed his arms and leaned back. He looked away from me and started bouncing his left leg up and down impatiently.

“No, not like that,” I continued. “I want to know that love still exists. You know, true love or whatever? Don't people ask you about that all the time?”

He snorted, in a mean-spirited way, and stood. He picked everything up from the coffee table and went back into the kitchen, cursing under his breath the whole time. I sat there, not really sure what to do. He came back, shaking his head.

“You can go.”

“Are you serious? Nobody asks you about love?”

“Love? No! Nobody gives two shits about love! We are – *you* are – at the end of the goddamned world! Billions are dead and the rest of us are all dying! There's a hurricane in Alaska in December and it's almost a hundred degrees outside! All anyone cares about is how to make themselves feel a little *less*, or how to fuck a little more, or else they want to delve into the eternal mysteries of the great beyond! Love? I'm sorry. You're a fucking moron.”

He picked up the chair and hauled that into the kitchen, too. He didn't come out for a long time, but I didn't get up. I was mulling over what he said. When he did come back in, he threw his arms in the air.

“You're still here?! Get out! If it's love you want, there's a whorehouse next door where you can fall in love with whatever gutter rat you want.”

I agreed that it was probably best that I left, so I did. It was not the first time I'd heard something along those lines. I never understood how everybody was just fine living in their little pretend Christmas worlds or Mystical Don Hawkins worlds or drunk druggie worlds, but the second I mentioned love, everyone just spat in my face. Margie's mom always got a little colder, probably did her drugs a little harder, whenever I talked about anything remotely resembling love.

“Hey baby,” came a voice as I walked past the couch-fucking house.

There was a skinny girl coming down the sidewalk toward me. She had ratty blonde hair and sunken in cheeks. She was wearing a low cut ripped up t-shirt, a miniskirt, and black boots with a lot of pale white leg showing in between. It was not Margie's mom.

“You got a light?” she asked, pulling a joint out of her bra.

“No. I said, and kept walking.

“Hey,” she called after me. “You need anything? You know? I can love you right.”

I stopped and turned back to her. Her mouth curled into a painful looking smile, and she came toward me. She put her hand up on my chest.

“You can love me?” I asked. “What kind of love?”

She stretched up so her lips were right next to my ear.

“Any kind of love you want, baby.”

“I don’t think you can give me that.”

“Give you what?”

“Real love.”

She pulled back and studied my eyes. Hers were weak and bloodshot. She cocked her head to one side and then laughed so her little chest convulsed, and her matchstick legs wobbled like she might fall over.

“Love, huh? You should go talk to the guy next door,” she said sarcastically, and walked back inside.

When I got home, it was getting close to noon, and the power was starting to come back online. On top of that, the dark was letting go. Off to the south and east, orange and blue light crept across the sky. I paid the sitter and said goodbye, and then took Margie up in my arms and carried her around the living room, pacing and thinking. She held on to me tightly and smiled and bubbled spit at me, and I knew then what I wanted to do.

I strapped Margie into the baby-carrier backpack that her mom had bought when she actually wanted to be a mom, and Margie and I hiked out back. There was a grove of trees that I could walk through, and though the ground was muddy and slick, I went up the thin path that led away from the house and back toward the mountains. There were a few spots where I had to step over downed trees, or pull some broken branches off the path, but it didn’t take too long before me and Margie were up on a big slab of rock at the foothills of Mt. Bradley. Most of the mountains normally blocked the view to the east, but here there was a crack between them where you could see all the way to the horizon.

I took Margie out and held her close. To the west, we could see the darkness broken up by a handful of lights starting to come on. They reflected off the flooded streets and the town



was filled with rippling, sparkly canals. Bing Crosby rose up through the steamy air, barely audible, but impossible to miss. Margie smiled. To the south and the east, where the sky was lightest, we watched as the tiniest sliver of midday sun broke the horizon. It floated there for a minute or two, above everything in the world, and then slipped back down into the night.

#