

**LIKE ALMOST EVERY TRULY HORRIBLE** thing that has ever happened in the history of our world, the end also began with a kiss.

There was nothing now, only a dark, vast absence. An hour ago there were stars, and a sky. There was a planet revolving around a star people called the sun. An hour ago there was life; for better or worse there was a "civilization." People laughed, cried, slept, and loved.

Yesterday morning, David Adams had been just another out of work housepainter doing odd jobs around his small hometown for enough money to keep his electricity on. Floating on the edge of society suited him well as he rotted in his personal failures. He had long ago given up on his dreams of being the next big discovery in the art world. In fact, nothing had brought the creative sparkle out in his dull blue eyes for almost fifteen years. Then he met her.

She was sitting on the hood of his faded blue and rust Detroit relic when he came out of the gas station. He stopped, gaze locked on her, packing his cigarettes for a small eternity before approaching her. Her dirty blonde hair framed her face like wild vines. She was slight and lovely, smelling lightly of vanilla - exquisitely charming for a destroyer of worlds.

She never told him her name, but he'd felt drawn to her nonetheless. Funny, he thought now, how sometimes we're attracted to the mysterious and dangerous as though we have no self-preservation instinct.

All of these things bounced around in his head like a pinball as he floated in the darkness. It occurred to him that he shouldn't be alive. Looking down, or what he guessed must be down, he couldn't

tell if his body was damaged. It wasn't immediately apparent to him if he even still had a body, outside of his conscious awareness.

The terrible force he remembered on his body had passed, along with the deafening sound. The Earth was gone. Now, all he was absolutely sure of was the blackness and a vaguely antiseptic smell. Why was he still alive? Was he even still alive?

"How long are you going to wait?" Her familiar lilt seemed both amused and eager.

Just the presence of the words took him aback. Was he actually hearing them? The voice was most definitely female – her voice – but was it in his mind or was it actually spoken aloud?

Panic jolted him. Confronted with thoughts he was in no way comfortable having, he asked, "Where am I?"

"Nowhere." She answered calmly as though she were telling him what he should already know.

"What?" a shriek as much as question.

"Well, where do you want to be?" There was an invitation in her tone. Could he simply be out of his mind?

"I'm...I'm not sure I understand."

"Right now you're nowhere. But from here, you can go anywhere. Where do you want to be?"

"Did... Didn't everything just end? I mean...the world, everything, it all just...it..." The words left the taste of old pennies in his mouth.

"Yes." Her voice now carried all the impatience of a parent on a cross-country car trip. "You don't think this is the first time the world's ended, do you?"

"I... what? How? I mean how did I get here?"

"There is no here. You just are. We just are. Now stop asking questions and make a decision. Where?"

Exasperated and overwhelmed, David said the only thing that he could reconcile comfortably in his mind. "I want to go home."

He could swear he could hear the smile in her reply. "Why didn't you just say so?"

David sat bolt upright on the green threadbare couch, startled awake by the blaring rhythmic bass of Tool coming from the oversized speakers of Destiny's home stereo.

"So you're finally awake, huh?"

A dream. It had only been a dream. The dirty room came into focus slowly. Reality seemed somehow less real than it had when he'd passed out on the couch.

"You gonna get your ass off my couch? You're sweaty and you smell."

Like the initial burn of a shot of whiskey, the vivid intensity of the dream ripped at his mind, but faded quickly as he focused on the room around him.

"Sorry Des, I guess I just had a few too many."

He shook his mop of black curls in a subconscious attempt to dislodge any remnants of the nightmare from his waking mind.

"Every night you have too many. She's gone, Dave. Dead. You have to accept it sooner or later. I still miss her. I always will, but I don't drink myself to oblivion. You've got to keep living."

"Oblivion." The word had too ominous and familiar a sound.

She was still in her work uniform, and normally staring at her in those tight black pants was enough to take his mind off anything bothering him. But even as he sat and watched her cleaning the living room around him, the memory of his "dream" weighed heavy in his mind.

"What happened to us, Des? We loved each other, didn't we?"

That was enough to stop her in her tracks. She looked over her shoulder with a raised eyebrow before continuing her cleaning. "You did have too much to drink last night, didn't you? We usually don't have to have this talk until the holidays."

She stopped and stood in front of him, taking him by the hands. "What we had was kid's stuff, Dave. Life's about more than that. It's about paying the bills and keeping a roof over your head. It's hard work, and it's everyday."

She hoisted him to his feet and straightened his shirt before pushing him out of her way to fluff the pillows on her couch. As he stepped out of her way, he came face to face with the photo of their daughter on the wall. She'd only been four years old when she went.

The doctors had tried to explain it with mouthfuls of fifty-cent words. They said it was like Progeria, but far more aggressive. On his best day, David couldn't have understood all they told them. She just got old too fast. Her body couldn't handle it.

She'd been so brave, their little Mireille – their perfect little angel. She seemed to understand better than her parents what was happening to her. She'd even told them both goodbye and kissed them just before her heart gave out. It had ultimately been too much for he and Destiny to face as teen parents.

"You need to get moving, Dave. I've got company coming over." She didn't bother to look at him as she spoke, continuing to clean.

The thought of another man being here with her cut him. He grabbed his dirty shirt off the floor and gathered up his things spread out on the coffee table. The scratched silver Zippo Destiny had given him a lifetime ago rolled over a few times in his hand before finding its way into his shirt pocket. Their eyes didn't meet again.

This place held so many memories for him, good and bad, even if it wasn't really his anymore. He'd moved out after the divorce and gotten his own little efficiency apartment on South Grand, but this still felt like home to him. Waiting in the open doorway, he stared at her until she finally acknowledged him with a brief glance and a wave. The door closed behind him with a solid thud that almost hurt to hear.

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The street in front of the apartment building was almost heartbreaking. At first glance, it was nearly the same as he remembered it, but on closer inspection, it seemed far more worn and ugly. Decay had been given free run of the place. To make matters worse, he had no idea where he had parked.

With his car keys in his hand, David paced up and down the street then around the block for about half an hour. He ended up on the corner of East 23<sup>rd</sup> and MLK. He hadn't actually stood on this corner since the divorce.

He got lost for a moment in nauseous nostalgia as he gazed longingly at the corner gas station where he used to buy a sixer of Budweiser and a pack of Parliaments on his way home from work. From here he could also see an all-too-familiar oasis that seemed to call out to him, beckoning – Murphy’s Pub.

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As he entered the dimly lit, wood paneled watering hole, he swore to himself that nothing had changed since his last visit. It had been an age since then, but the *déjà vu* almost gave him vertigo.

He remembered bumping into a dirty lump of a man he had assumed to be a mechanic, almost at the same time he did it. The man worked at Carl’s Garage two blocks down. He knew it like they’d talked about it, but it felt like that happened later. Or was it before?

The name on his oil and grease stained work shirt was Steve, but he appeared to David a lot more like a Raoul or Julio. The dark skin of his arms and face were covered with prison tattoos, and his unkempt dreadlocks were a refuge camp for all species of parasite. How was this man, who he only saw fleetingly, burned into his mind in such vivid detail?

Everything was just too surreal. David stood still blinking for a moment before a familiar voice called to him from the back of the long, narrow room.

Roger was a tall blonde man, whose Norse roots were clearly showing. He raised his hand to motion David over. The two of them had been high school friends and since then often ran into each other in the oddest places. Neither of them had made any real effort to keep in touch over the years, but they rarely went more than a few months without accidentally running across each other.

Their lives had taken very different paths, but David couldn’t deny that Roger usually had the best advice for nearly every situation. He’d seen the divorce coming a good six months before the reality of it crashed in on David.

David couldn’t help but laugh a little to himself, seeing a