

I.

It has been a long month for Bradley LeJeune—a never ending series of airports, airplanes, hotels and rental cars. In sixteen days, he had been from Mobile to Raleigh to Philadelphia to Cleveland and then back to Houston. And he knew nothing about these places except the stale smell of rental cars, sterilized hotels rooms and dreary trips back and forth to the regional office of his company to train new hire engineers between the flights and the airports. There had never been any time to see anything in these cities except for the airport, hotel and office. There had never been any time, full stop. He had gone straight from high school to college and then college to career without ever coming up from air. Now he found himself just a month shy of his thirtieth birthday wondering what the hell it all added up to. He had never even had time to take a proper vacation. He just traded in vacation days at the end of every year for salary refunds instead. He'd been conducting these lectures for his company now for 7 years. It was starting to feel like an endless loop.

He walked up the stairs to his second-floor apartment just 25 miles southwest of Houston, unlocked the door and opened it. The door squeaked from non-use. The air was slightly less stale than all the hotel rooms he stayed in. He flipped the light on, dropped his suitcase and fell on the floor and lay prone. It was a modest and meagerly decorated apartment that was evidence he didn't spend much time there. There was one classic Pink Floyd concert poster that he had purchased at a poster sale way back in college that hung on the wall, and a small TV that was on a coffee table that had been left there by the previous tenant. There was an old desk with chair that served as workspace, dining table and workbench. There was a simple twin bed in the corner of the bedroom, neatly made. Next to the bed was a radio alarm clock. There was no other furnishing or appliances visible.

He went over to the refrigerator, opened it and looked inside. There were three cans of Dr Pepper. He took one, pulled the tab and gulped it down. He grabbed a pillow and threw it on the floor. He

stretched and moaned. He turned the TV on and started flipping channels-late night talk shows, Star Trek, west coast baseball. He landed on a channel that was playing old episodes of The Twilight Zone all night long. Sometime, just around midnight, he fell asleep to the soothing mysterious cadence of Rod Sirling's ruminations.

II.

Bradley slept deeply, sprawled out on his non-furnished living room floor. From his slumber, he heard the noises-the car speeding up, the slamming doors, and the screaming voices. His brain lethargically processed it and incorporated it as part of his dream he was in the middle of. He rolled over and moaned. But then came the gun shot. He woke up. A few deep breathes and then two more gun shots below him. He popped up from the floor and looked around. There was another gunshot. It was coming from below. He inched over to the curtains and looked out. There was a car in the driveway, a man with a pistol and a lifeless body sprawled on the parking lot.

Bradley ran to the bedroom, locked the door, fell into the closet and closed its door. He grabbed a baseball bat and hid in the corner underneath a blanket. And then came a loud banging at his door and the screaming of a female voice.

"Please Bradley, are you in there. Please help me." She was crying and panting outside his door. Bradley stood up and shuffled towards the door.

There were two more gunshots. The woman's voice was silenced.

He heard the car door slam and its tires squeal. It sped away from the apartment complex.

Bradley continued to hover under the blanket in his closet. He got up, left the closet and moved to his phone to call 911 but as soon as he began to dial, he could hear the police had already arrived below.

He peeked out of the curtain. There were several police cruisers and ambulances below.

He began quivering then shaking. He fell to his knees and crawled back in the closet, grabbed the baseball bat and lay beneath the blanket wide awake but sometimes still in the thick of night, he somehow fell asleep once again

III.

He woke up in the pitch darkness of his closet. He came to his senses and tried to figure out if it had all been a horrible nightmare. He opened the door and inched out. Morning light was coming into the windows from behind the curtains. He peeked out the window. The police were long gone. There was a team of workers below blowing hot water and steam all over the parking lot. Then he walked over to his door and cracked it open. There was blood all over it and the stairs.

He stepped out and knocked on the door across the hallway. A man answered the door. He had thick black hair, a moustache and wire rim glasses, "Good morning, Brad," said the man acknowledging Bradley LeJeune. "Hell, of a situation down there last night."

"Just what went on down there?" asked Bradley.

"That young girl Leslie-who lived below us with her mom. She and her friend were in the city at a dance club. She was with her new boyfriend. Apparently, they ran into the ex-boyfriend. He got jealous and followed them all the way back out here to Sugar Land. Killed Leslie, her friend, the new boyfriend and the Mom."

"Holy shit." Said Bradley.

"Holy shit, indeed, Brad."

"Did they catch the ex-boyfriend?"

"Yeah, it's all over the news."

"Haven't turned on the TV yet."

"They chased him all the way down to Corpus. Cornered him in his car on the harbor side of the bay. He took the easy way out and shot himself in the head."

"God damn, Bob, what's this world coming to?"

"I know what you mean."

"All of this over a bit of jealousy"

"You said it, Brad. This world has gone wrong. Gone totally into the shit can."

Bradley nodded his head in agreement.

"OK, Bob, thanks for the story. I knew that you could give me the scoop." Said Bradley. He turned and started back to his door but then paused. He looked back at his neighbor, who was still watching the workers wash the blood off the concrete parking lot with a steam hose, "Bob..." Inquired Bradley

"Yeah, Brad?"

"How old was she?"

"Who, Leslie, downstairs?"

"Yeah."

"She was only nineteen."

Bradley LeJeune shook his head and walked through his door. He took one look back over his shoulder and noticed that another set of workers were already busy putting a fresh coat of white paint over the blood-stained banister. He closed the door and began to cry.

IV.

Bradley took a shower. He washed the musty smell of rental cars and hotel bedding from his body. He cleansed the tears from his eyes. He let the hot water clear his throbbing mind. He got out of the shower, wrapped himself in a towel, wiped the condensation off the mirror and looked at himself. His thinning blonde hair needed a haircut, his brown eyes were bloodshot, and his face was about 3 days past due for a shave. He looked much older than he actually was and on top of that, he felt like it too.

He dressed, packed a few clothes into a rucksack. He went to his closet and opened a small safe and put several mementos that were close to his heart in the rucksack as well. He searched through several drawers on his chest and found the passport that he'd never used.

Then he headed to the door, turned around and took one last look at his apartment. There was nothing for him here anymore. Nothing left that couldn't be replaced or would be missed in the slightest. He opened the door, walked across the alley again and knocked on his friend's door.

His friend Bob answered again. "Yeah Brad, what can I do for you?"

Bradley took a key off his keychain, "Here Bob. Here's my apartment key. Feel free to take anything in there that strikes your fancy."

"Why's that Brad? Where ya off to?"

"Don't know."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Don't know that either. But like I say, you're welcome to anything in the apartment. I'm sure the apartment management will

clear it out after a few months of unpaid rent anyway so you might as well go in there and have your pick before then.

"OK, Brad. If you say so, I will." Said Bob taking the key.

Bradley put out his right hand.

Bob received his hand and shook it, "Good luck Brad. I know where you're coming from. If I was a younger man, I'd be doing the same."

"Take Care, Bob."

"will Do, Brad."

And with that Bradley LeJeune walked down the stairs, very carefully circumnavigating the painters who were covering the blood. He got in his car. He turned it on, pulled out of the parking lot and left the Eagle Lake Apartment Complex behind him forever.

He drove to Houston. When he hit downtown, he hopped on to Interstate-10 and headed west. By the time that Houston was in his rearview mirror he had a plan formulated in his mind.

First, he was headed to The Grand Canyon. He had begged his parents to take him there for years, but they always had some excuse they would throw at him as to why they couldn't do that. Yes, The Grand Canyon was first on his list. And he'd stay there in a tent for however the hell long he wanted to stay. He wouldn't teach any classes, answer any emails or make any appointments. He'd just lay on his back and count the stars at night while listening to the coyotes howl in the distance.

From the Grand Canyon he'd head to San Francisco and see the Golden Gate Bridge. And from there, he was going to drive down to Los Angeles. Once he got to Los Angeles, he'd abandon the car, get on an airplane and fly to New Zealand. Why New Zealand? Because it was just about as far away from Houston, Texas as one could get. That and because of Mimi.

"Mimi" had been his next-door neighbor while growing up. Her husband was named "Bugs". They were an older retired couple. The Old Man, Bugs, had been a G.I. in World War II. He had met Mimi in New Zealand and brought her back to America with him. She had always told Bradley how beautiful her home country was and how she longed to go back there one day. After Bugs died, she died shortly thereafter without ever having the chance to set foot in her home country again. The images she had planted in his mind as a child still held onto his memories and emotions all these years later. He longed to connect these images to reality.

So, he knew out there, far across the Pacific Ocean, that something or someone was waiting for him in this place called New Zealand. And when he got there, he doubted he'd ever come back to crappy Houston, Texas. His job could go to hell. His parents would have to get used to it. His friends wouldn't miss him. All the other details would fall into place.