



THE PESSIMAL HERO

A NaNoWriMo Novel
By Darrin Snider



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CHAPTER ONE

*[*POP* ... Hissssss] That's li—[CRACK]*

(That's life)

That's wha people say

*You're riding high in Ap--[*POP* ... Hissssss], shot down in [CRACK]—ay*

But I know I—[CLUNK] change that tune

*When I'm back on [*POP* ... Hissssss], back on top in [CRACK]—une*

By the fortieth play of the song, he decided he'd mined everything he was ever going to get out of it, and it was now the music equivalent of Terminator Goes to Japan. Sinatra's voice, which he had grown up on thanks to his mother, was timeless and would never grow old. The song featured four rather standard chords, with an occasional substitution and even a modulation, so that much had held for an hour or so before he began to feel dizzy from hypnotic repetition. It was a pity that Frank hated guitar solos. The lyrics, on the other hand, had long since lost all meaning. For the first ten plays, he found them inspiring. They started as an "It's okay paly, just get up and keep fighting," message sent directly from on high by one of the coolest men of the 20th century. After twenty plays, a cursory analysis confirmed they had become the sort of misguided psychological advice you can only get from a guy in a tuxedo swigging down martinis in a lounge at 3 AM. After thirty, he was debating whether Sinatra had truly even been a pirate or a poet, as he tried to remember if Ol' Blue Eyes had ever written any of his own hits or had at least been a Naval enlisted man.

Hal O'Grady diligently held his dying mother's hand and fought back tears. He brushed her hair, needlessly, out of her eyes and ran the back of his hand over her cheek.

*I said that's [*POP* ... Hissssss]*

(That's [CRACK]—fe

And as funny as it may seem

*[CLUNK] people ge--[*POP* ... Hissssss] their kicks*

Stomp—[CRACK] on a dream

But I don't let it, let it get me down

[CLUNK] this fi old world, it keeps [CRACK]--nin' around

“What the hell’s wrong with your phone?” His sister, Lucy, asked, gesturing at the iPhone on the all-purpose tray beside the hospital bed. Two circular cracks ran across the screen, embarrassingly resembling the cleavage on a YouTube “first time reaction video” host and “movie lover” who expected her audience to believe she had missed seeing every successful blockbuster movie ever made in her “29” years of life and was really only now watching and commenting on them for the first time.

“Stepped on by a 7-foot landshark. Well, I mean, not a real landshark, just a normal-sized person in a landshark suit. It was completely my fault. I trusted fate to keep it on the chair where I set it and not send it sailing through the air with a double-reverse pike and half-gainer.”

“I meant that song that keeps cutting out and skipping.”

“It’s her copy.” Hal shrugged.

“And it sounds like it’s playing too slow.”

“Her turntable needs a new drive belt, yeah.”

“You mean to tell me you went to mom’s house, dragged that old record player out of the attic, went through all of the boxes to find a scratched-up 45, and held your phone up to the speaker to make a recording?!”¹

¹ This book was conceived and written after my mother passed. This opening scene is loosely based on her final moments and the interactions my sister and I had ... the reality, I think, was a little funnier, but didn’t work for the story. This also explains why the humor in this novel is darker than my usual fare ... and in this draft, a lot of the humor hasn’t been written yet, making it sort of a heavy drama instead of a light parody as intended.

"Well, I set it down on the speaker. I needed both hands to press down on the back panel and hold the power cord in just the right position so it didn't fall out."

"We live in the 21st century. We've got digital recordings, remasters, remixes, mashups, and sampling. Come on, it's supposed to be Frank Sinatra. This sounds more like Christopher Lee after two valiums and a tin of Stillhouse. You've heard of YouTube, right?"

"Look, I read all about Alzheimer's and dementia. They say musical recall is one of the last parts of the brain to go, followed by basic motor control and television commercials. If she's in there at all, she remembers this. The pops and scratches are probably even more subconsciously engrained than the lyrics to her. It has to be this version. It's the one she played all our lives. It's the one she knows. It's familiar."

*[CLUNK] been a pup--[*POP* ... Hissssss], a pauper, a pirate, a po—*

[CRACK]

A pawn and a king

I've been up and down and over and out

*And I [CLUNK] one thi--[*POP* ... Hissssss]*

Each time I fi—[CRACK] myself

*[CLUNK] on my [*POP* ... Hissssss]—ace*

I pick my—[CRACK] up and get

Back [CLUNK] the race

Watching his mother slowly deteriorate over the course of years, Hal decided, led to some crazy thoughts and behaviors, of which this wasn't anywhere near the oddest. On one hand, he was losing his mother, the woman who raised him, the woman he'd known longer than any other person on the planet. On the other hand, this was the last person with first-hand knowledge of what really happened at the infamous "poopy pants incident at the third-grade school play," the last person who knew how badly he cried when Stacy Ling turned him down when he asked her to the 5th grade Spring Dance, and the woman who had single-handedly caught him masturbating in various odd locations at least two dozen times. Sure, he was losing a parent, but then, wasn't he gaining a clean slate at last?

His mother coughed once, then returned to her shallow, uneven breathing.

"Well, not long now, either way, I would think," Lucy offered. "How long have you been playing that?"

"I dunno," Hal lied. "A couple of hours."

"Hours?! Are you seriously going to play that on a loop until—"

Hal cut her off, "I don't know." He sighed and looked at his mother lying there. "Maybe." He squeezed her hand. There was no response. "It was her favorite song."

"You're not trying to speed the process up, are you?"

"Shut up!"

*[*POP* ... Hissssss]--at's life*

(That's life)

[CRACK]--tell you, I can't de--[CLUNK]

*I thought of quitting, ba--[*POP* ... Hissssss]*

But my heart just ai--[CRACK] gonna buy it

And i--[CLUNK] didn't think it was worth one single try

*I'd jump right on a big bir--[*POP* ... Hissssss] and then I--[CRACK] fly*

The husky woman struggled a sigh once more. A tear ran out of the corner of her eye. Hal wiped it gently and let several of his own join it.

"It's okay, Mom. We're all here. We all love you."

*[CLUNK] been a [*POP* ... Hissssss]--pet, a pauper, a pi--[CRACK], a poet*

A pawn and a ki--[CLUNK]

been up and down and over and out

*And I --[*POP* ... Hissssss] one thing*

Ea—[CRACK] time I find myself lay—[CLUNK]

on my face

I just pick myself up and get

*Back in --[*POP* ... Hissssss] race*

The woman made two weak, halfhearted coughs. Her eyes flew open. She drew a sharp intake of air and froze, staring at the ceiling.

There was no exhale.

Tha—[CRACK] life

(Tha—[CLUNK])

*That's life and I can't --[*POP* ... Hissssss] it*

Many ti—[CRACK] I thought o—[CLUNK] out but my heart won't buy it

*But if there's no--[*POP* ... Hissssss] shaking come this he—[CRACK]*

July

I'm gon—[CLUNK] roll myself up

*In a big ba--[*POP* ... Hissssss] and die*

[CRACK] My, my ...

There was still no exhale. No blinking. Hal stared in anticipation at the lifeless husk that was once his mother, still staring at the ceiling.

"And so it goes," Lucy said, breaking down at last.

Hal continued to hold his mother's hand, staring confusedly at the lifeless husk in anticipation of her last exhale. "Mom?" he whispered. "Mom!"

The exhale still never came.

"How the hell did she do that?" He laughed slightly through tears.

"You expected something else?"

"I don't know what I expected. I guess something a bit more ..."

"Final?"

"Meaningful," Hal decided.

Lucy shrugged and wiped her face, "That's life," she offered, unironically.

Hal turned off the song and vowed never to listen to it again. He shot his sister an angry look. "That's our mother," he said half-angrily, half out of grief. "She spent her entire adult life caring for others, making a difference in people's lives. She raised a family. She created art."

"And she left us with a garage full of old TV Guides and her collection of mustards from around the world."

"She had dreams she hadn't even gotten around to yet."

"Which probably included cleaning out the attic and getting rid of the moldy boxes of old Frank Sinatra 45s. So, that's on you now."

Hal rolled his eyes. "So now what?"

"Well. Uncle Benito is down in the cafeteria having breakfast," Lucy said, walking over to the wall and pressing the nurse call button.

"Still?! He's been down there for four hours."

"You know how he's got that thing for girls in hairnets."

"Okay, I suppose I should go tell him," Hal said. "He hates you."

"He doesn't hate me. Does he?"

"You killed his cat."

"That cat committed suicide!"

"You ran over it with your car."

"It knew what it was doing!"

"It was sleeping in the driveway!"

"Clearly a sign of untreated depression. All it ever did was sleep."

"Yes. It was a cat!"

#

Hal found his uncle in the hospital cafeteria, right where he expected. He had set up in one corner, staring lecherously over his newspaper at a middle-aged woman behind the cafeteria counter. In front of him were the last remnants of a plate containing lime Jello with marshmallows, salmon pate, and cottage cheese, which he slowly stirred together to form something with the consistency and appearance of the inside of a diaper.

Benito Vasquez was the youngest and last surviving of seven siblings as well as a widower twice over. As soon as Benito saw Hal's facial expression, his eyes sunk briefly, then came back with recognition and familiarity. "It's over then?"

"Yes," Hal sighed, "I'm so sorry, Uncle Benito."

Benito smiled slightly. "It's okay, Hal. I accepted this a long time ago." He took a sip of coffee and stared out the window. "It's a horrible thing, this disease. It takes them from us twice. The first time when the mind goes, and the second months later when the body catches up."

Hal nodded. "It was very peaceful. Just a few short breaths. We were even playing her favorite song when she finally went."

“Well, then, we did what we could. We should be happy knowing that, at least.” Benito smiled and instantly went back to stirring the contents of his plate. “Would you like a Weaver Salad? She just put some fresh ones out.”

Hal looked at the counter where the woman was indeed setting four plates of salmon and lime Jello on a refrigerated shelf, which instantly made a question form in his head. “Oh, my god. How many of those have you had?”

“This is my fourth,” he said, patiently stirring the salmon pate and lime Jello together. “I think my charms are starting to win her over.” He nodded toward the cafeteria line.

“Uncle Benito, I have to ask: What's with the hairnet fetish?”

Benito shrugged. “Some men like nylon mesh over a shapely calf. I prefer it fastened to the head with a tight piece of elastic. Are you saying I'm some kind of deviant?”

Hal shook his head. “I'm not saying anything, just trying to understand it.”

Benito nodded. “A girl in nylon stockings bumps into a table leg or brushes a car door with them, gets a run, and spends the rest of the night crying about it. The girl with the nylon hairnet, on the other hand? This is a woman who can manhandle a gallon jug of corn off of a high shelf above boiling oil with one hand, balance a hot tray of rectangular pizza in the other, and is still keeping an eye on the salmon in the steamer which she will later delicately filet into the shape of a rose petal with the skill of a surgeon before artistically assembling it atop a mountain of banana and marshmallow-infused lime Jello and cottage cheese. This is a woman to be respected, Hal. I can't even make Jello, much less Jello with art inside of it.”

Hal begrudgingly nodded in agreement. “I suppose so.”

“Anyway, I am truly sorry about your mother, Hal. Surely you understand that this is better.”

“I don't know. It just makes you think about life. About your own life. You spend decades here on earth trying to make a difference or an impact and then go quietly and pretty much alone without any fanfare. It just makes you wonder what the point of the whole thing is.”

Benito nodded. "You don't have children of your own. To your mother, you two WERE the difference she made in the world. She would not want a procession or big fuss over her life because, to her, you two are the continuation of it. Through you two, it's still happening. She was so proud of both of you: Her daughter, the successful businesswoman, and her son, the teacher."

"I'm a P.E. teacher." Hal sighed.

"There is no difference."

"I coach Jr. High girls' volleyball."

Benito's eyes popped open. "I'm sure she was still proud of you," he said unconvincingly.

Hal shrugged, disappointed. "The point is, you're trying to tell me I have to have children to understand life?"

"I am saying if you live your life, it will make its own meaning, and when it is your time to go, you will see what that meaning is, and it won't seem so bad." He paused and shrugged, "At least that's what those harpies on The View keep telling me, and while Joy seems convinced, I don't believe anything until I hear it directly from Whoopie's mouth."

"So, what do you believe?"

Benito attempted to look serious. "I believe in a fine cigar, a good bourbon, and a beautiful woman at your side. Then, I go to church on Sunday, where I thank God for them before going to confession and apologize for abusing them."

"I think there's more to life than that," Hal said dismissively.

"Is there? I see you kids with your commercials for charcoal water. You pay eight dollars a bottle for water just so you can take a picture of yourself drinking it. You think that is the meaning of life?"

"I never once drank—"

"Then black food is suddenly a rage. You kids start putting charcoal in coffee, in pizza dough, even ice cream. You ruined ice cream just so you could take a selfie with it. Meanwhile, do you know what charcoal does to your lower intestines?"

"Honestly, the charcoal craze was years ago, and I—"

"Do you want to arrive at the gates of heaven, strung out on charcoal, jonesing for a bunt barbecue briquette to suck on? Do you think God will check your MyFace account to make sure you tried the black ice cream before admitting you?"

Hal smirked. "Yeah, well, God and I haven't exactly been on speaking terms for years."

"That's a very cynical thing to say. You no longer believe then?"

"I don't DISbelieve. I just lost faith, I guess. I really wish I still had it."

"You went to a great deal of trouble to make sure your mother's death was comfortable. You could not do that and be a bad person." He patted Hal reassuringly on the back of the hand. "Enough of this talk. You are an orphan now. What are you going to do now? Do you need help with anything?"

"No, Lucy's filling out the paperwork upstairs. Mom made all the final arrangements years ago, so there's really nothing we need to do."

"Well, then you go home. I'll see you at the funeral."



Hal shuddered as he left the sterile, antiseptic smells of the hospital and entered the lowest level of the grimy, exhaust-filled parking garage. Taking a few minutes to orient himself and remember where he had parked, he slowly sulked across rows of cars before finally spotting his in a dark corner, furthest from the exit. As he approached, he stopped to admire the candy-apple-red Porsche Cabriolet convertible parked next to him. It was the type of car that said, "I'm doing just fine after the divorce," or more specifically, "My name is Brad. I'm a 55-year-old financial analyst specializing in breaking down silos and getting to yes." In typical fashion, Brad was taking up two spots in a garage that was already full.

An ominous high-pitched buzzing, faint at first but gradually growing louder, echoed through the garage. Every city resident knew the noise and had come to dread it. Hal steeled himself for the inevitable confrontation and watched as three rental e-scooters rode into view down the ramp from the level above.

“Whazzup, buddy? How about givin’ us a ride in your car?” the apparent leader of the gang said. He couldn’t be more than 17, Hal decided.

Of all the things that could make his day worse, what with your mother having died a few hours ago, getting carjacked in the hospital parking lot was one of the few things that made the list, Hal thought. He regarded the three ruffians, all teenagers, scrawny and still standing with one foot on their scooters, which would give him an advantage should he be forced to fight them. The girls he coached on the volleyball team were bigger, though, to date, their threats to kick his ass had all been hollow.

“So whadaya say, pops? You givin’ us a ride, or do you want us to trash that thing for ya?” The leader pulled something akin to a box-cutting knife out of his pocket. Hal momentarily flinched, thinking it might have been something dangerous. What did they hope to do with that? For a split second, Hal couldn’t fathom why the scooter gangs would be so interested in his ever-trusty 2006 Toyota Camry in the first place. Sure, maybe if he drove an expensive convertible sports car ...

... like a candy-apple-red Porche Cabriolet ...

... and he was the type of douche nozzle who would park it diagonally and take up multiple spots ...

The day was suddenly looking up. “Trash it, I guess.”

“You’re serious?!” one of the kids said.

“I’m not a taxi service, plus those scooters would probably outrun my crapwagon anyway.”

“Doesn’t that have a twin-turbo 3.0-liter flat-six that goes from zero to ‘sorry officer’ in four seconds?”

“Oh! That?” He pointed at the Cabriolet. “You think I drive that? No. That’s me over there, the 2.4-liter, slightly leaky four that regularly gets pulled over for attempted speeding.”

The three ruffians looked at each other embarrassed. “I told you to wait until he unlocked the door!” one said.

“I’ll just let you guys have at it and head home.” Hal smiled and began walking backward.

“Wait! Er – give us your wallet at least.” The youth shrugged.

Without thinking, Hal started laughing and tossed the kid his faded pleather wallet containing seven bucks, a QuickGas Rewards card, his tennis club membership, an expired driver’s license, and a debit card that he would be canceling in the next five minutes. Then, as they tore away at the Porche’s roof and pristine paint job with their knives, he laughed, thinking at least they wouldn’t get the last \$18.44 in his checking account. He casually turned around, walked to his car, and drove home, putting the crappy day behind him.

CHAPTER TWO

Barry Chase had been sitting in the lobby of Le Club Raquette for ages, waiting for his best friend Hal to arrive for his weekly humiliation. He passed most of the time pretending he didn't notice the receptionist staring at him out of the corner of her eye with a non-committal smile. He had half-perfected his own version and was sneaking glances back at her whenever the ringing phone distracted her. This game was his favorite here at the club, and since he had already mastered almost every other sport shortly after puberty, it was the one that still offered a challenge for him. Hal and Barry called the game "Aquaman," after the original, scrawny orange and green-clad Arian poster-boy from Super Friends, not the ruggedly handsome and charming Jason Momoa who reinvented the character and subsequently messed up their own plans for reviving a third-tier superhero.

There were specific canonized rules written on a bar napkin somewhere, but the general idea was to get a girl to talk to you using only your telepathic powers to get her attention, in much the same way Aquaman could summon fish to rescue sinking oil tankers. Between the two of them, Hal had once gotten a woman to look up from her phone and shoot an annoyed look in his general direction, while Barry boasted a slightly better than 50%-win rate, even higher if one counted the three times he might have caused girls to stumble into a table while walking in an otherwise straight line.

If Barry did indeed possess this superpower, nearly everyone agreed it was completely useless in his case, as someone with Barry's objectively rugged good looks would have a much higher success ratio simply by saying, "Hello," and asking for a girl's number. Still, Barry defended his abilities by saying the ability to get women to talk to him was much more useful than summoning two Marlins to act as water skis when you're already a faster swimmer than they are to begin with.

Hal finally arrived at the club twenty minutes late and looking more downtrodden and confused than usual. Barry rose with his arms outstretched and gave his best friend the biggest bear hug he could. "Hey, man, I am so sorry. How are you doin'?" he asked, hoping it would provide some comfort without trying to sound prodding.

"Hey, Barr, I'm fine," Hal said, patting him on the back. "Thanks for letting me in."

"No problem, but what happened to your membership card?"

"I'll tell you later." He scowled and rolled his eyes.

"You know we don't have to do this. You've been through enough this week without me humiliating you on the court for two hours."

"No, really, I think I do have to do this. I just need to do something that makes me feel normal this week."

Normal for the two of them meant that Barry, the most athletic of the two, would hold back from outright humiliating Hal on the tennis court for the first hour, then slowly pretend to get tired over the course of the second, culminating in him possibly allowing Hal to score a win with the last set, depending on his generosity. Today, however, was far from normal. Though Barry chalked it up to the atypically rough week that Hal had been through, when the second hour came, no matter how hard he tried to throw the match, Hal would somehow always manage to out-underperform him.

"You want to take a break and get a smoothie or something? You seem a little weak in the knees today."

"I'm fine. Just tired." Hal held up his racket, indicating he was ready for the next serve, which he wasn't. The ball shot right past him almost entirely unnoticed.

"Sorry again, man. You know I loved your mom," Barry offered as an excuse for Hal's performance. "Can I ask, did she go peacefully?"

“Very,” Hal said. “It was all somewhat anticlimactic. I was playing her favorite song, and right about the time it ended, she gasped a few times and passed peacefully. That was it.”

Hal served the ball half-heartedly into the net, swore quietly, then, with a bit more enthusiasm, managed to get the second serve in play, if only barely. Barry, forgetting who he was playing for a moment, accidentally returned it with a forehand volley that bounced up against the sound barrier and left a skid mark on the court where it hit.

“Your sister mentioned that. She’s passed the bargaining stage trying to deal with the earworm you gave her and was trying to burn it out by playing ‘Barbie Girl’ on a loop last time we spoke.” Barry apologized by way of a slow lobbing serve that bounced toward Hal.

“I feel like it’s how Mom would have wanted to go. I just wish I could have done something a little grander,” Hal said, then completely whiffed a chance at an easy return with a series of swings that looked more like Pete Townshend playing windmill chords in the finale of “We Won’t Get Fooled Again,” which Barry found ironic, as Hal had been fooled multiple times by just that one serve.

Hal stopped and watched the ball bounce to the far wall behind him, then, appearing slightly wobbly on his feet, wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his wristband.

Barry laughed. “Grunder? It’s already the most ‘Hal O’Grady’ thing I’ve ever heard. You try to put meaning and symbolism in every life event so you can make sense of it. It’s charming but wrong.”

“What’s so wrong about it?”

“Millions of people die every day, many for no good reason. Death can come to get you at any moment. You’re never going to be ready; you’re probably going to be alone and scared, and odds are you’re not going to have someone there providing an ironic soundtrack to give it meaning.”

“Doesn’t mean we can’t try.”

“Don’t waste your life planning your death,” Barry said, his tone serious. He allowed Hal’s return to sail past him to make his point. He retrieved another ball from his pocket and slowly dribbled it with his racquet. “When I was in the Marines, I lost three men in my unit.”

“Huh? You said you never saw combat. You were a security guard at a Naval base in Naples.”

“Not to combat. I meant I physically lost them,” Barry frowned. “Three fresh young privates, straight out of basic, not two days on base. It was my job to show them the ropes, you know, teach them the ways of the locals.”

“In Naples.”

“It’s rougher than you’d think. Anyway, I got bogged down in paperwork and had completely forgotten how green these guys were. The first weekend, they left base with a 48-hour pass and headed straight for Piazza Garibaldi. That was the last time I saw them.”

“What’s Piazza Garibaldi?”

“Sort of Naples’ version of Chicken Breast Hill, only it doesn’t smell as good. Flash some American money around, tell ‘em you’re GI Joe, and you can get anything dirt cheap -- Rolex watches, bootleg CDs, a palimony suit, you name it. Anyway, Steve got strung out on limoncello and was crushed under a statue of Dante he’d gotten into a fistfight with over a grade he got on a paper about The Inferno. Tony entered what he thought was a pepperoni pizza eating contest. Unfortunately, not knowing Italian, he failed to realize he had badly translated pizza ai peperoni del diavolo – The Devil’s Pepper Pizza. He died the next morning on the bidet in his hotel room. Naples has surprisingly strong water pressure that should not be played around with. The last guy, Brian, was the worst. Went in the wrong restaurant and ordered cannoli.”

“That’s dangerous?” Hal asked, now blinking furiously and shaking his head as if to clear it.

“The chef had access to military-grade mascarpone and a serious grudge against NATO. My point is that those guys were soldiers. They had planned to live long lives, but if they died in combat serving their country, that would be okay, too, because it was a good death. They didn’t go through boot camp and all that intensive training to die ignominiously on their first weekend pass in country. Death comes at any time, sometimes unexpectedly. You can’t always make sense of it. Maybe sometimes you can, but sometimes fate has other plans.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Hal said, motioning for Barry to serve.

Barry, deciding to put the exclamation point on his little speech, elected to send a power serve straight at Hal’s midsection. To his surprise, Hal didn’t even try to defend himself; he simply allowed the ball to hit him squarely in the groin, after which he collapsed soundlessly to the court like a rag doll spit out of a dog’s mouth.

It was five minutes before Barry realized Hal wasn’t joking around and something was desperately wrong with his best friend.



Barry spent twelve hours in the Emergency Room lobby, waiting for some word of Hal’s condition. He spent most of it playing Aquaman with the various nurses who came on and off shifts, and he was currently beating the night shift 15 to 11. It wasn’t much of a challenge, so he modified the game and began playing against a pale young woman with a gaunt frame who was bleeding profusely from the side of her head. She was good, he decided. The constant twitching, rubbing of her nose, and scratching at her arms were an excellent fake-out. After an hour, she still hadn’t looked his way, and he was beginning to question his attractiveness to women.

More than this, he was worried about Hal. Had he had some kind of heart attack? As far as Barry knew, there was no history of such things in Hal’s family, and even for a P.E. teacher approaching middle age, Hal always seemed very conscientious of his diet and exercise

habits. Perhaps it was just the stress of losing his mother. Hal couldn't have been sleeping or eating well for the past few weeks as he tried to balance work and end-of-life care for his mom. Barry decided he never should have agreed to keep their regular tennis game. Hal should have been home resting after all he'd been through lately.

When Hal finally emerged from the ER, he was ghost white and stumbling aimlessly down the long hallway to the receptionist's area. His arms clutched a large manilla envelope against his chest as if it contained the universe's secrets, and his eyes had the distant gaze of someone who had accidentally stumbled on them in the fridge after going for a beer. He slowly paced towards the hospital exit in a straight line that definitely would not have passed muster in a field sobriety test. Barry leaped to his feet and ran to catch up with him. "Hey, Hal, you doin' okay? Where are you going?"

"I have to go back to the club and get my car," Hal said somberly, his eyes still focused on something two towns over.

"The club is nine miles away. Come on, I'll drive you."

"No, I'm good. Nice night for a walk." Hal's voice had no emotion in it.

"It's 1 AM, Hal."

Hal simply continued walking straight ahead, staring off at nothingness. "Cool, no traffic. Should make good time," he mumbled. The ER's sliding glass doors parted without protest, and he continued into the parking lot.

"Well, you should probably go back and at least give them your insurance card and check out."

"Oh, they have all that. They said not to bother with it and just go home. I'm coming back in two days for some more tests."

"Tests? What do you need tests for?"

“Oh, just second opinions, even though the experts are already pretty sure. They only poked and prodded me for the last ten hours and took a sample of just about every bodily fluid I have, hoping to find something else.”

Hal crossed the parking lot and the sidewalk and started to walk straight into the street without looking. Barry grabbed his arm and pulled him back to the sidewalk.

Hal seemed to notice him for the first time. His eyes had a fight-or-flight hint of madness in them. “How long have we been best friends?”

Barry thought for a moment. “Almost thirty years. Since the third grade. The whole class, except for something like six of us caught chicken pox. We ruled the playground for almost two weeks. We were the Knights of Chickpoxia: Sir Itchesalot and Sir Scabrevere.” Barry said.

“Yeah.” Hal chuckled and started walking again, this time staying on the sidewalk. “We all got quarantined into separate corners, and Mrs. Harris drew ‘Can’t Touch This’ zones all over the classroom. Then you and Wendy Davidson both got sent home on the same afternoon,” Hal said, staring at his friend accusingly. “I always thought that was an unlikely coincidence and that you ignored the sacred words of M.C. Hammer. You never did cop to that one.” Wendy later became their proverbial “Third Musketeer” and was always hanging out with them. Well, at least until she bloomed early and developed more of an interest in football players a few years older than her and less in the two still awkward kids who were more into watching movies on the couch than all that macho stuff. Of course, that lasted only a couple of years, and by the time they graduated, Hal was still just as unpopular with the ladies, but he was now the star of the high school volleyball team.

Barry smiled sheepishly. “Well, okay, yeah, chicken pox wasn’t the worst thing Wendy gave me, in retrospect.” Unlike Hal, Barry had gotten over his awkwardness with women. “Is that what the tests are? You’ve got shingles or something now?”

“Weinrib-Živojinović Syndrome. Apparently, it’s pretty advanced.”

“Wineribzima what?”

Hal stopped abruptly at an intersection, then turned and handed Barry the folder. Seemingly oblivious, he then turned back and proceeded to cross the street. Two cars squealed their brakes and honked at him. He didn’t seem to notice and kept walking.

Barry opened the folder. It contained a couple dozen different flyers and pamphlets. The one on the top caught his eye. It bore the words “The Dying Process: What to Expect” in a calming, scripted font. Barry’s heart skipped a beat, and he darted across the intersection to catch up with Hal. “Uh, man, what do you have?”

“I told you, Weinrib-Živojinović Syndrome. They said it’s extremely rare. Literally one in a million odds of getting it.” He shrugged. “Still, that’s slightly better odds than winning the lottery, getting struck by lightning, or getting the right order from a Taco Bell drive-through after 9 PM.”

“So, what is it?”

“Some kind of abnormal protein that attaches itself to cells, replicates itself in clumps, then attacks the nervous system and eventually the brain.”

“That’s why you collapsed then?”

Barry nodded. “They gave me a prescription to control the loss of motor coordination for the time being, but I’m on a clock. In less than a year, the pills won’t help anymore, and I’ll rapidly start losing muscular coordination. At that point, the protein has hit the brain, causing lesions, which lead to memory loss and dementia.”

“So, what do you need, man? Blood? Bone marrow? A kidney? Just ask, and you can have it.”

“There’s no cure. Like I said, only 200 people in the country have it. They don’t exactly throw millions of research dollars at that kind of stuff.”

"Then how did YOU get it?"

"It's hereditary, Barry. That's likely what Mom died from, but because she was older, her frequent falling and loss of memory were easily explained as basic dementia. They didn't even think to check for an extremely rare disease."

Barry said nothing but continued to leaf through the folder as if looking for an answer.

"I've got a year, Barry. In nine months, I'll have the coordination of a giraffe on roller-skates and the mental faculties of a Congressman. My personality will change, my eyesight will start to go, and I'll be on a rapid descent, just like Mom. I'll only be 35. I can't end up like that, Barry. I can't let my sister go through all this again so soon after the last time. I don't even have my song picked out."

"Hal, we'll get through this. I've got your back," Barry said, putting an arm on his shoulder.

"I know you do, man. I'm gonna go get my car and go home."

"Let me drive you. It's a three-hour walk from here through some pretty dicey neighborhoods."

"I need time to process this. I'll call you tomorrow." Hal said, turning and walking off into the night. Barry watched him go, feeling completely powerless. It was almost midnight. He was now a mile from his own car and still holding on to Hal's folders. At least the latter gave him some reading material for the evening.

CHAPTER THREE

Victoria Montana's life was filled with polite chimes. Two days ago, it was the polite chime from the Karen in a power suit who, on a seventy-five minute commuter flight back to the city, spent fifty-five of them punching the flight attendant button over Vicky's head because she felt she'd been shorted a couple of ice cubes in her Diet Coke. Last night, it was the polite chime of her boss, texting at 2 AM, ordering her to look at a server that had apparently gotten depressed and decided to take itself offline for no apparent reason. This morning, it was her voice-assistant speaker, sounding an even more polite chime waking her up from a two-hour night's sleep and telling her it was time to get ready for work. That one was the worst, as it took her ten minutes to clear her dry mouth and half-sleeping vocal cords to form the words to silence the digital goblin, and even though she was certain it understood her, it persisted with its well-mannered prompting of, "I'm sorry, I didn't quite get that. Please try again."

Now, however, it was the polite chime of her car's dashboard telling her she was almost out of gas and should probably stop and fill up.

From 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Vicky ruled technology with almost unsurpassed skill. Once the sun went down, she was becoming increasingly convinced that the machines had long ago passed the singularity and were merely testing the waters in preparation for their eventual robot uprising. She pulled her car into the local gas station/convenience store/greasy spoon, walked around the side, and put the pump in her car.

Then, she heard the tell-tale buzzing, distant at first but slowly growing determinedly louder. Careful to show no outward sign of recognition, she instantly went on full alert, opened the door to the back seat, and slowly removed the untested taser from her purse. Oh, please, let it be tonight, she thought. Please, let it be tonight. She was a God-fearing woman, and didn't want to harm another human being unless necessary, but the damned thing had cost her \$400, and she was marginally upset that she hadn't had an excuse to even test it yet. There

were a lot of purchases she could have made with that \$400, and she cursed herself for feeling so practical that day.

Three scooters pulled off the road and into the gas station parking lot. The riders didn't appear to be interested in her in the least, so she slid the taser into her coat pocket, selected her fuel grade, and squeezed the trigger on the pump handle. With just a quick, 30-second top-off, she'd have enough gas to get to a better neighborhood. That was when she heard footsteps coming closer and suddenly regretted turning her back on the punks.

"Whazzap lady? How about givin' us a ride in your car?"

Vicky turned and gave the three a look that made them involuntarily take a step backward. She was not a small woman, and after extending herself to her full height, she easily towered over the other three. "Now, do I LOOK like a damn Uber to you?" Her hand instinctively went for the weapon, but at the last minute, she willed it away from the pocket. The problem was, she could only get one of them, and at that point, the other two would either panic and run or turn and beat the hell out of her. Prudence suggested she only had to wait and figure out which was the leader, and that was the one who would soon meet her buzzing barbs of justice.

She still hadn't made up her mind when a voice screamed from across the street. "Hey!" All four turned and saw a half-crazed man running towards them. "You! Funny meeting you here!"

The would-be mugger in the middle, confused at first, smiled and laughed a little. "Hey, man. Hospital garage, right? The guy who didn't own that Porche?"

The newcomer locked eyes with Vicky's mugger in ferocious determination. "Give me back my wallet, you Dollar-Store Evel Knievel!"

"Who?" The three scooter thugs exchanged glances and broke out laughing all at once. "Man, get outta here with that tough guy stuff," one said, extracting a knife from his

boot and showing it to Hal. That was the one, Vicky thought, her trigger finger getting itchy. Just need to wait until he's sufficiently distracted.

She noted the expression on the newcomer's face. It was not fear at all, but some kind of unspoken desperation. He didn't appear drunk or under the influence of anything, but he was definitely not in his right mind. He confirmed this by extracting a squeegee from its plastic holster of washer fluid, like Arthur retrieving Excalibur from the stone, and began waving it at the three gang members, covering them with droplets of blue liquid. "Look, man, I don't give a damn about your knife. I've just had the worst friggin' day of my life." He twirled the squeegee furiously like a samurai sword and held it above his head like a fur trapper with his favorite seal club. "Have you got a gun on you? Because if you don't have a gun, I don't have the patience for your tough-guy act right now. Now, give me back my wallet!"

In the back of the group, the tallest of the three hurriedly removed his backpack and began fumbling through it. Oh hell, Vicky thought. She'd been watching the wrong guy, and the little punks did have a gun, after all. What a stupid bluff. While the newcomer still transfixed them, she put her left hand in her pocket and grabbed the butt of the taser, wishing she had assessed the situation earlier and knocked the kid out long before things had escalated as far as they had. Instead, she found her attention too had been drawn to the squeegee-wielding ninja, finding herself oddly curious to see what his next move was going to be. She tried not to visibly roll her eyes when the tallest of the scooter punks pulled three wallets out of his backpack and held them up, offering them to the crazed man.

"That one in the middle," the man confirmed, and the boy obliged by tossing it to him. The man opened it, inspected the contents, and gave the three an insane glare. "There were eight dollars in here!" He shrieked, putting the wallet in his back pocket with his left hand and raising the windshield-cleaning implement up with his right.

All three would-be robbers suddenly began backing away. Their leader pulled his own wallet out of his pants and tossed it to the squeegee warrior. "Here, man, take mine," he said, voice shaking.

The man caught the wallet, confused, and before he could even protest, the three had turned and run away, leaving their scooters on the sidewalk next to the store's front door.

Vicky stared at the man, who stood motionless, his face a maze of puzzlement, determination, and pride. After about 45 seconds, he finally lowered the makeshift weapon, which he twirled once in a figure-eight before placing it back in the bin where he had found it. He then turned, regarded Vicky, and in a calm, soothing voice asked, "Are you okay?"

"Punkin', I was about to ask YOU that."

The man shrugged. "Just a bad day, that's all."

"That's why you're walking around alone at 2 AM in a neighborhood where white people like yourself come to die?"

"Yeah, I guess so. They didn't hurt you or anything, did they?"

Vicky shot him a quizzical look. He actually thought he'd saved her. She decided not to mention the taser in her pocket and let him keep his imagined victory. He looked like he needed it more than she did. "No, no, they didn't. Thanks to you."

He smiled and nodded. "I need a cup of coffee." He opened the would-be criminal's wallet and extracted a five-dollar bill. "You want a cup of coffee?" He didn't wait for an answer and proceeded into the store.

Vicky shrugged and nodded, then followed him inside. He seemed to have nothing but good intentions. She should at least make sure he wasn't homeless or starving or anything.



The two sat awkwardly in one of the booths at "Jon Howard's Gas and Go Diner, Convenience Store, and Car Wash." Vicky watched the man closely for any additional signs of mental illness, but didn't notice anything unusual beyond the fact that he had mindlessly put about eight sugars into his

coffee over the prior ten minutes, but so far hadn't taken a single sip. Occasionally, he would pick up the gang leader's wallet, look at it, and return it nervously to the table without opening it. "My name is Hal O'Grady," he finally offered as if confessing. "I suppose if you want to turn me over to the police for mugging those kids, I won't argue or try to escape or anything like that."

This was all too much for Vicky, and she couldn't help but laugh hysterically. "Vicky Montana," she said between fits of hysteria. "And what makes you think the police give a damn about you mugging a scooter gang? Hell, I was there, Punkin'. You accidentally robbed them, at best. You're just damn lucky to be alive. What were you thinking trying to start a fight with three of them over eight dollars in a wallet? In fact, no, give me that thing!" She snatched the wallet off the table and started going through it, triumphantly extracting a driver's license. "Anthony Pearson," she said, reading his home address and personal stats. "Your life is about to get real interesting, now, Misdemeanor McGee."

"You're going to turn him in?"

"Heck no!" She squinted in disbelief and shook her head. "I'm gonna spend the next six months making this detention hall Brubaker WISH the police cared enough about this skinny ass to arrest him. My crew and I live for jobs like this."

"Wait, you're in a gang? What, are you? Organized crime?"

"Hackers, Punkin'. We're kinda famous on the dark web. I don't suppose you wouldn't know anything about that kind of stuff, though." Her eyes squinted as she regarded him closely. "What are you, a youth minister?"

"Jr High schoolteacher."

Vicky raised one eyebrow, impressed. "Okay, maybe you do know then."

"Girls volleyball coach," Hal added matter-of-factly. "In the suburbs."

"Oh." Vicky recoiled slightly. "Well, I don't know how Buffy and Heather settle things out there, but by this time tomorrow, I'm gonna have this boy's power, water, and phone shut off. Then I'm gonna sign him up to get hourly visits from Army recruiters, Jehova's Witnesses, and window salespeople. You ever try to get rid of a window salesperson? You can't. Worse than raccoons in your attic. Then next

week, I go all biblical and get him up close and personal with the Ten Plagues of Vicky. I have a friend who can get cockroach pheromones by the gallon. Put some of that in a free cologne sample and mail it to him? Ol' boy will be more popular than the dumpster at a Mexican restaurant wherever he goes for the next two weeks."

Hal gulped. "Remind me not to get on your bad side."

"Hey, nobody messes with Vicky Montana. At least, not twice. You got your mad skills with window-washing implements. Mine are a bit more subtle, but just as dangerous."

Hal smiled to himself. "I guess that whole thing was pretty stupid, wasn't it?"

"What's so important about that wallet that you had to have it back?"

"Well, my Club Racquet membership card was in there, for one thing. And without a valid driver's license, those are practically irreplaceable."

"Yeah, right. You're some tough guy who goes all Charles Bronson on three hoodlums for stealing his country club card. I don't think so, Punkin'. What is it? Some kind of personal grudge, or just unresolved anger issues over a bad line call?" She looked at him expectantly, using a facial expression she found made most people trust her instantly.

Hal took a sip from his coffee and looked out the window at nothing for a moment.

"What would you do if nothing mattered anymore, and you knew you were going to die?"

"We're all going to die. I don't think those punks are killers, however. Might whoop your ass, but I doubt they'd kill you."

"Not what I meant," Hal said, looking her in the eyes for the first time.

Suddenly, it all became clear. "Oh, Punkin', I'm so sorry."

"I just found out a few hours ago. I think I'm still in denial." He waved off any further discussion of the details. "But, the question stands. What would you do? I'd really like to know."

Vicky sat back and thought for a moment. “Well, I definitely wouldn’t waste my time going to some revenge kick to get my wallet back from a scooter gang.” She took a sip of coffee and thought about it some more. “I think I’d probably just make it all about me. Screw friends and family. I’m not going to be a burden to them. I’d probably make a list of all the things I want to do and all the places I want to see, then sell everything I own and hit the open road. Then, when I got through the list, I’d find a quiet place to disappear to.”

“I kinda like that idea,” Hal said. “It makes a twisted kind of sense, really. Like a cable news headline, only backed up with a lucid explanation.”

Vicky nodded. “They say you die twice. Once when they put you in the ground and again when someone says your name for the last time. Now, to me, that means you better go out doin’ something that keeps ‘em talking for a few years. I mean, unless you’re famous enough, they named a building or a street after you or something. You don’t have any streets named after you, do you?”

Hal was deep in thought now, and Vicky was worried he was going to a dark place. She hated to pry. This was a stranger, after all, but he seemed like a nice person dealing with a lot more than anyone should have to deal with so young.

“So,” she continued, “that’s me. Any thought as to what you’re going to do? I assume you’re wandering the streets in the middle of the night because you have no family or anyone else to help you carry this load.”

Hal sat up abruptly. “No, I mean, good God, you’re right, I didn’t mean to dump any of this on you, I—”

“Punkin’, it’s fine. I was a mother once.” She patted his hand gently. “To be honest, I kinda miss taking care of folks. Plus, you did save my life and buy me coffee.” She tried to look him in the eyes, but he seemed embarrassed by the entire situation. “You really don’t have anyone?”

“No one that I can burden with this. At least not right now.” He sat up straight, took a deep breath, and sipped his coffee.

“So, what are you going to do, then?” she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe just cash in my savings. Have a big party. Invite everyone I've ever known – people I haven't seen since I was a kid. Call it my 'going away party.' I just won't tell anyone where I'm going."

Vicky shook her head. "Now, that sounds depressing."

"Why? I'd make it open bar."

"Because that's living in the past. You have a unique perspective. Look, if you're in an amusement park, and it's closing in an hour, do you gather everybody up, grab a cotton candy, and talk about how much fun you had all day? Heck no, you go on the best ride again, or better yet, you go on the ride you missed out on because you were either too scared or just didn't get around to it. If you have to, you grab your squeegee and push someone out of line to get on it."

Hal smiled. "Okay. You have a point there."

"Of course I do. Now, what you need to do is start making a list. Don't just list the places you want to go. List the experiences you want to have. Think back on all the times you felt really alive, the times when you said to yourself, 'Wow, that was great. I've got to do that again someday.' Then you don't wait around. You start on that list as soon as you can. Don't waste any more days." She opened her purse, pulled out a business card, and wrote her phone number on the back. "Now, I don't normally give these out to strange men, but you seem harmless." She slid the card to Hal. "You call me. Any time. If you get low and don't think you have anyone to talk to, or if you have a great experience and want to tell someone about it, or even if you just want to talk. Call me. Like I said, I kinda miss bein' a mamma."

Hal regarded the card for a moment and slipped it into his pocket. "Thanks, Vicky. I'm glad I met you."

APPENDIX

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darrin Snider is an award-winning Internet radio and podcast host, cloud engineer, analytics wizard, mannequin wrangler, recovering software developer, and resident expert on the Indianapolis local music scene. His hobbies include baseball, strategy gaming, the occasional RPG, voraciously reading everything in sight, DX-ing exotic radio streams around the world, quantum physics, day trading, comic books, old-time radio, the technological singularity, biking, cooking/baking, wuxia/chop-socky flicks, cyber/technoculture, imported teas, transhumanism, dead programming languages, and speed-writing first drafts of novels (mostly to get the NaNoWriMo certificates) which he locks away as part of some grand retirement scheme should he live that long.



AFTERWORD

I am offering these first three chapters of the "latest (not final) draft" free of charge to anyone interested. If you enjoyed them, drop me a line, and I'll add you to a list to receive a copy of the final book and possibly some other goodies along the way. If you're a publisher, potential alpha reader, or bookworm like me that doesn't care if it's a bad draft, and you would like to see the full outline or other existing parts of this novel as a prelude to helping edit or publish it, I can probably make that happen too.

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