

For Yesterday's Tomorrow

I am sitting in a large waiting room unsure of where I am and how I got there. It is plain and sterile and smells faintly of bleach and medicine. The off-white floor extends into a kick six inches up the walls and reminds me of a hospital. Almost all the chairs in the room are empty. There are magazines piled neatly on the end tables beside me, the covers of most written in languages I don't understand. I see one written in English with a mountain on the cover offering me an eight- point check list to help me through advanced yoga. But I don't feel like reading.

A man, also middle aged, sits across from me in silence on the other side of the room. He wears cheap tan slacks that are hemmed unevenly at the bottom and a blue nylon jacket that went out of style twenty years ago with white stripes on the upper sleeve. He has a high hair line and a crooked haircut. He glares at me with enough rage that I worry he may walk over and strike me. I know he has reason to hate me but for the life of me I can't remember why.

I avoid eye contact with him, choosing to stare down at the magazine cover pretending to be involved in it. This goes on for a long, long time.

At length a greyish brown creature comes to the doorway examines the room with squinted eyes. It is six feet tall with a stony humanoid face and two large horns curving out and back from the sides of its head. Its body is lean with two arms and two legs, and I cannot tell if it is composed of muscle, wood, or rock, or a combination of the three. It smacks its lips as if peanut butter has forced its mouth closed. As it does this it

sniffs its hands and the air about it repeatedly. The creature is unclothed with no obvious gender. It lifts up a sinewy arm and points a finger at me, motioning me to follow.

I get up and walk a wide berth around the man glaring at me, still avoiding eye contact with him.

Once in the hallway I ask the creature where I am but only get a dismissive wave for a response as it sniffs its hands again. Still smacking its lips it walks down the long hallway in jerky movements and I follow. Its left foot drags across the floor as it walks.

We walk slowly and pass many closed doors, all are a heavy wooden timber with yellowed privacy glass. Behind some, I hear babies crying. Behind others it's adults that cry. And behind even others, there is only silence mixed with intermittent screaming. I cannot decide which are the most disturbing.

We get to a door and the creature opens it then steps back motioning me to go in. I hesitate long enough for it to lose patience and after being shooed I to be shooed I walk inside. The creature closes the door behind me and I hear it shuffle away.

A bespectacled woman is sitting behind a table. She is wearing a green robe with a green shawl accent draped over her as I imagine a Roman would. She has smooth skin and long brown hair and her face feels older than it looks. Her neck confesses her age, as most necks do. In front of her is a large book, opened halfway through with thick pages of parchment. Beside this is a jar of ink and a yellow quill. A large bookcase with similar books stands behind her.

“Mrs. Collins?” I ask. She was my history teacher in grade eight and I am certain she sits before me now.

She smiles at me. “Ansel Linsey. You look surprised. Hadn’t you always said that I was the devil? Or something like that...”

She has a point.

Where there is no bookshelf, posters of the human anatomy hang on the wall with foreign writing describing closeups. Where there is no bookcase or charts, old metal instruments with wooden handles smooth from use hang in one section. Pinchers and saws, pliers and the old-fashioned drills you screw by hand. Beside this is an apron, goggles, and rubber boots. On a wall in another part of the room away from the farm implements, was a small shelf which held a sphere resembling a snow globe sitting on a gold encrusted base, a rainbow-colored feather, and the sun. The sun is small and bright and real. I do not know how I know this is the real sun, but I know nonetheless.

“Mr. Lindsey,” she gestures to the chair in front of her. It has untethered brown straps on the worn arm rests and front legs. I see drops of blood on one. “Have a seat.”

“Where am I?” I ask as I sit down.

“Oh, I think you already know the answer to that,” she says as she lifts up the quill and dips it in ink.

“Am I dead?”

“What are your plans this time, Ansel?” the woman asks ignoring my question.

“My plans?”

She sighs and puts the feather down. A small spurt of ink blobs on the parchment and she looks at it and I think she swears under her breath.

“Yes, Ansel Lindsey. Your plans. Will you be staying with us this time around?”

“Do I have any other options?” I ask.

“Same as always. The faun can come back and get you so you can start over, or you can finish up now.”

“Start over as in go back to where I was before here? Why wouldn’t I want that? Why wouldn’t everyone want that? I sure as hell don’t want to be dead,” I state.

The woman stares at me and I feel the same unease as when I used to be stoned in school and teachers stared at me. I wonder if I’m high right now.

Mrs. Collins folded her hands and put them on the desk. “Well, Mr. Lindsey, the truth is, most in fact do indeed end up going back instead of staying. They promise to make things better. To do things better. To repent and make it longer out there before they come back. But they don’t. They almost never do. They make the same mistakes, and often end back with the same exact reason they landed here in the first place. Just like you always do. The only knowledge most of you have of this is the odd flashback of a repeated action as you redo your entire life all over again. But while you decided to self indulge and start afresh, there are of course repercussions. Your kids cease to exist. And won’t, until you meet your future wife again and get married again and have them again. They will never learn to drive, finish high school, have their own kids and your widow’s grandkids, because in thirty years you will be right back here all over again

asking for another chance like you always do. All because people like you think they can go back and “do things better.” She gave me air quotes to emphasize mocking me.

“Have I been here before?” I ask.

Mrs.Collins looks at her book, tallying up my numbers. Then looks back at me.
“Forty-three times, Mr. Lindsey. Forty-three.”

“Jesus,” I don’t know what else to say.

“No, actually Jesus knew enough to pack it in after his fourth attempt,” the woman answers. I cannot tell if she is joking or not. She certainly doesn’t seem like the joking type.

“So, I go back, repeatedly make the same mistakes, and all life after me doesn’t have a chance to move past where it currently sits.”

“Completely eradicated until you redo things, then halts in perpetuity while you continuously restart,” she confirms.

“And I’ve done this before,” I repeat.

“Many times, Mr. Lindsey.”

I sit and try to take this all in. If it’s a dream this is where I need to wake up. But its no dream, only a nightmare. I am overwhelmed with guilt for the fullness of life I have denied my kids and wife and begin to cry, not the least bit ashamed I am crying in front my junior high teacher.

She looks unfazed. “You do this every time.”

I cry until I am able to control myself, and sniffle in my snot as I wipe my red puffy eyes. "Forty three-times?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Who is the man in the waiting room that hates me?" I ask.

The woman glances at my page and reads. "That, Mr. Lindsey, is Ismael Chelders. He is the man whose wife you made a widow, whose kids you have made fatherless. He has sat here forty-three times as well, always by your doing as you, not he, are the one that fell asleep at the wheel and caused the head on collision. But unlike you Mr. Lindsey, Mr. Chelders has a better memory and remembers being here. Every. Single. Time. And unlike you he has a departed child he would very much like to see again."

I look down at the floor to get away from her eyes and wish there were a yoga book beside me explaining its eight steps.

"What happens if I stay."

She takes her glasses off. She glances at the wall of tools to the side.

"Well, Mr. Lindsey, if that is indeed the case, then you will be judged for your life. The good deeds, and the indiscretions, nothing has gone unnoticed. And I do see that you have been a very busy man, Mr. Lindsey. Very busy. It will cost you.

But I have become very good with my tools, and after the first while you don't notice the pain as much. After enough time it just becomes normal and is all you know. Time will have become irrelevant as I finish up."

I think of my daughter, four old Annie, who just days ago showed me her doll family that she planned to model her future real family after. And my son, Alex, who at seven dreams of being a cop like his old man. Then of my wife Marie, whom I think could have done much better than me in the first place. It was supposed to be her birthday next week and I had plans of surprising her to a concert.

I give a laugh that is half a sigh as I realize we never have and never will get to that concert. Lastly, I think of Ismael Chelders sitting in the waiting room in car crash limbo for the forty third time. I wonder if the faun creature ever lead him down the hallway.

I lift my eyes off the floor to look at her. "Do you have anything to drink?" I ask.

The woman opens a drawer and pulls out a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of rum, planting each on her desk with a solid thump. "Oh yes, Mr. Lindsey, more than you will ever be able to consume." She stands up and with her back facing me grabs two shot glasses. By the time she turns around Mrs. Collins no longer exists and has been replaced with something far more sinister than you can imagine. Or perhaps you can, depending on if you have ever sat in this chair.

I swallow a mouthful of spit and take a deep breath. "We had better get started then."