

We are all the lord's children, and he left us in a hot car.
— *Anonymous*

0.1 Prologue

There's puke running down the airbag cover in my passenger seat. The guy, hunched over, full fetus, puking like a baby on my gas-station-vacuumed upholstery. The blue and crimson lights flashing between the blinding whites.

In 2020, feeding the homeless is a revolutionary act.

Next to me, he's just wheezing. The gas station 40-ounce — flooding out the top, mixing with the chunks of a protein bar — that smell is there to stay. Its gulching froth, fizzing on the stomach acids. Listening to that long enough, you forget that he stopped vomiting awhile ago, *too* long. Now, he's fetal, and shivering. And he didn't hold down the protein bar — it's all over the center console — so god knows how much longer he'll keep shivering before he stops for good.

The whole time, the siren behind us, shouting, "*Pull over!*" Like we didn't hear him the first fifty times.

We're vigilantes, not deaf.

My tires screeching against the concrete sidewalks, my small sedan *thuds* — everything inside bounces — myself, the old man, the chunks of protein bar. He groans, pulls his hands behind his head. Or maybe that's the rusting underplate.

He pulls his head closer to his stomach, and the siren still screams, "*Pull your vehicle to the side of the road!*"

The red and white and blue doubles, triples, quadruples — it's too easy to lose count.

We zip by a minivan — the soccer moms, the kids, they barely squeal to a stop as my bouncing car flashes by. The echo of a honk that never ends. The multicolored lights glowing darker.

The suicide attempt bought us one, maybe two, extra minutes. But they'll be back.

Glowing red, the distant Greek plus-sign, the Greek cross, in the distance, it's salvation.

For him. Not me. I'm fucked.

A few years ago, before my passenger door slid across a mailbox and sent it bouncing off, I worked at a parking garage. It was a temp job while I made a transition to college. A woman I worked with, she spent her weekends getting the homeless to rehab centers.

Why? I once asked — because I was stupid — or because my hands weren't gripping the steering wheel hard enough as the tires smoked onto the highway.

She said that most homeless get where they are because of substance abuse. Many of them in this city, they're alcoholics. Ones who let booze get the best of them. She doesn't give them money. She gives them food, and brings them to rehab.

Hitting the brakes so hard we almost flip after the 90-degree turn, I asked, How do you know that?

"Because I was once an alcoholic homeless," she said — someone's shouting at me from the driver's side of the taxi window with a gruff scream.

She helped them get to rehab because someone saved her, and now, she saves other people.

And the red, white, and blue American flag lights creep up on us, just as we dart off the bypass.

After our talk, the whole simplicity of the idea killed me. Rehab — *just* rehab. In a culture that shames rehabilitation, in a culture that implores us to get wasted.

When I was twenty-one — and I can say this, because the hospital's parking lot is one curb-hop away — I saw a therapist. It was after a breakup, during a semester when I almost flunked out. He said, my problem was just stress. He said, word for word, "Get a little drunk. Get a little high. Go to a party. You'll feel better."

My first night drinking booze was three days after that.

In a culture that expects you to get so shitfaced you puke all over a stranger's upholstery, being sober is an act of terrorism.

But — and I can say this, because my car almost rammed into a pillar — the friends you make drunk, they usually go away. The stress you avoid when you black out, it'll catch up to you. And the people you hurt when you give up control of yourself to feel good — they find you. One way or another.

Not everyone gets lucky enough *not* to let an addiction, or a behavior, or whatever you want to call it, ruin their life.

But some of us survive. And when we do, we have an obligation to save others.

The sirens grow louder as I throw open the passenger door. He just falls out, right there on the pavement. There's blood running down his forehead now, just by the soggy cluster of granola in his hair.

It took awhile before I started helping the homeless get to rehab, too. Started simple — *real* simple. Sometimes, you get backlash. You get people who just don't want to be saved. Not everyone is ready for that. Not everyone trusts you — least of all, the people who have hurt, or been hurt (or both).

But more than most people think, they just want a home. They want shelter. Food. Another chance.

*When I found this guy, gradling a manila envelope and downing a brown-paper-bag that turned out to be a Natty Ice, he just wanted a bite to eat. Didn't realize how drunk he still was. I didn't have much on me, just a granola bar that my wife packed. I reached out, and when he grabbed it, right fucking when he grabbed it**, the officer shouted out. Ran over to me.

For the record, most cops don't care if you feed your fellow man. He wasn't one of them. He ran over faster than I have ever seen a cop run.

Got right up in my face.

Demanded I explain what I was doing.

Giving this guy something to eat— But it wasn't good enough.

I don't hate cops.

He nearly slipped off, dry heaving in the lobby, as I screamed out, "*He needs help! Someone get him help!*" Because once you've seen someone die from overdose, you do everything possible not to see another.

The nurses rushed over, and took him off my shoulders. And behind me, the automatic doors hissed open, blaring the siren.

I don't hate cops — but by the time my fist b-lined into his throat, the old guy was already around my arms, already coughing up chunks, and reaching out behind him for the handle of *Jack*.

He should have died. But despite everything, he got here. He made it. Whatever happens to me is, well, whatever. Acts of service are the modern-day assassination.

But, still, he made it.

The pattering of shoes, and *Hands on the ground!* and the clicking of handguns surrounded me. My knees hit the cold tile. My face kissed a chunk of some soggy, dehydrated raisin. My eyes closed tight.

The Children of the Lord

The human race on Earth died when one guy developed a bad cough.

That's it.

That's how we go out. Not with a scream, nor a whimper — but a cough. Just a cough.

That's how Earth loses its children.

They say that those of us who left this planet got along just fine. That the reptilian overlords, their blue skin and ever-changing forms, welcomed the rest. But by the time they got here? Well, there wasn't anyone who was ready to leave.

So they left us.

Because we *asked* them to.

The rest of us, the ones who were smart enough to send their children, or their children's children, far beyond the solar system, they made out great. And not because they lived past the supernova that engulfed the earth. Not because they lived beyond the Buddhist, fatalist, accept-what-you-won't-change bullshit. No, they're lucky.

They get to remember what life is like when you lose communication.

Here on Earth, we forgot what that was like. Long, long ago. We communicate, we share ideas, we better ourselves. What we're really doing is running.

We communicate to forget that we're all afraid of being alone.

The closer we get, the more we share ideas, the more secure we feel. But remember — remember your ancestor, who spoke in grunts, and drove a rock into his neighbor's skull. Remember, he knelt and prayed, his hunt bleeding out by his knees. He and all his kind worshipped their hunt. Then, they worshipped the plants and crops. They worshipped small gods in their homes. Then, big gods.

But they weren't connected. Not like we were.

When we communicate, we replace our gods with knowledge. And when we lose our connectivity, there, we find the gods again. So, the smart ones, those of us who left, give them some credit. They found something that the humans left on Earth never wanted to find again.

Before you call them delusional, ask yourself if you're really just jealous.

But, look, some of us never get to leave a legacy behind. Our ancestors had gods, who died, when other gods invaded. We have therapists, who give bad advice, until boards of directors take their licenses.

Some of us, when we were young, we had therapists who told us things like, *There's nothing wrong with you. You're just stressed, overworked. Go out and get drunk. Get high. Reconnect with your friends.*

Some of us took that advice to heart. We drank because people liked us when we drank. We blacked out, and woke up in our vomit, because the next day, people asked us to hang out again.

We all have our legends.

But not every unbelievable story is bullshit. The humans here on Earth stayed and died. The ones who left were saved by aliens. And before all that, in the center of the city, they took a human. It was the first and only time.

In the middle of the crowded city, everyone chatting at outside bistros or fixed on their phones. Only a couple, one shorter, scrawnier guy, in a white collared shirt and tie. A younger woman, her hair cut short and oily, a sleeve of a silverfish tattooed on her arm. An entire city full of people, and just the two of them noticed.

This guy walked away from them. He reeked, his clothes torn up, skin leathered, drainflies buzzing around him. He just trodded off. It wasn't clear what he said to them, but they kept watching him. Walked up, and up, the hill, in the middle of the afternoon, the sun shining down from the top.

The girl pointed, not at the guy, but something just beyond him. The outline of someone, wearing a full jacket, like an FBI agent. Her arms crossed, and so did her partner's, as they both squinted, blinded by the sunlight.

At the top, the figure in the suit reached out his hand, and the older man took it. Completely washed out by the sunlight, he turned to the couple, at the bottom, and smiled. His lips moved, and surely he was trying to tell them something.

Then, the light intensified — and the two were gone.