

Chapter Nineteen

The next day I left work at four-thirty exactly, even though the trouble ticket I had worked on all afternoon wasn't finished. There was no way I was going to stay in the office past the end of the workday and get accused of hacking into a coworker's computer. Once was enough.

By the time I got home, it was dark. I fed Hippo and microwaved a frozen meal for myself. After dinner, Hippo asked to go out, but after sniffing the frosty air through the door crack, he meowed in disappointment and wobbled to the mattress, closer to the space heater.

I checked my phone, making sure I hadn't missed a text from Crystal. There was nothing. She hadn't replied. Her Instagram update featured a series of photos: a shrimp cocktail, a glass of beer, a cheeseburger and fries, and the entrance to Joe's Grill and Bar. "Having a blast with my besties tonight," the caption read.

I picked up my jacket and went outside.

"Unlocked." I heard Magic's voice through the door and pushed it open.

"Hey, man," Magic said after I dropped into his chair. "How's it going?"

"Alright," I said, glancing at the TV screen. The sound was off, and for a while, I watched the Fox News anchor open and close her mouth.

"Here," Magic said, and I stared at the joint he held between his fingers.

I'd never experimented with drugs, neither in high school nor college. It wasn't a lack of interest so much as a lack of space; my life was too crowded with commitments. Once I began the job hunt, where most roles required a drug test, the prospect of smoking pot became a liability. But beyond the professional risk, there was a deeper reason: I liked having a clear mind and being in complete control of my thoughts.

Until now. I reached for the joint without thinking and inhaled the bitter-sweet smoke. I coughed and inhaled again. Nothing happened. The mute TV anchor still opened and closed her mouth. Magic scrolled through his phone. The humming of the heat pump drowned the silence. And then my limbs grew dense, my thoughts cleared, sharpened, as if they had been frozen, turned into ice—pure, crystallized. The dim room became even darker, extending, shaping into a long tunnel, with only a flicker of light at the very end.

Magic said something, his voice muffled. I couldn't understand him; he was too far away—at the opposite end of the tunnel. I concentrated on the sound of his voice, struggling to put together syllables, to form the words, to recall the meaning.

“Ha ga on mo he nu?” Magic said again.

“What?” I leaned forward, trying to read his lips.

“How are you feeling?” His voice finally broke through.

“Ah—” I said with relief. The question made sense. I could totally answer it. I opened my mouth and lost the chain of thought. “What?”

Magic's lips stretched into a smile. He gave a slow, deliberate nod. I understood he understood I wasn't in the room but in the tunnel. His arm stretched, and he reached for the joint I still held in my hand. I moved my hand away. He laughed. I laughed too. We both laughed, and I knew we were laughing at me. It made me happy. I didn't remember being this happy—ever. Life was good. This world was the best place to be. And most importantly, I finally grasped the truth I had searched for my entire life. I couldn't say exactly what it was, but I believed that if I remained in the tunnel a bit longer, I'd finally capture it—permanently.

“What's going on, dude? With your life?” Magic said again, laughing. “I didn't think you smoked. Are you coming to the dark side?”

“Well, so here it is—” I said and giggled. “Shit. I'm sorry. So, there it is. No, I don't think I can—” I giggled again. “What is this shit?” I stared at the joint in my hand.

“Dude, you're high. I haven't seen anyone this high before,” Magic giggled.

“Shit. I don't think I can. What did you say? I don't think I can—” I pushed the words out as if they were a substance, a thoroughly chewed food.

“I'm saying, what's going on in your life? Never mind. Forget it.”

“Wait, I got it. My father—” I wanted to tell him about my dad being sick, but it didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered. My job and Evelyn Cox didn't matter. My future didn't matter. Crystal with her house and twelve-thousand-dollar engagement ring didn't matter. I was so happy; I just wanted to stay in this moment forever.

“Dude, I'm starving.” Magic pried the joint out of my fingers and inhaled.

“I have cat food,” I said and laughed.

“Nah, I want a baked potato and nuggets. Let’s go.” Magic rose from his bed.

“Bad idea,” I said and also got up. At least I thought I did, but then realized I was still sitting. “I’ll drive.”

“No, it’s fine, I’ll drive,” Magic said and pulled me up.

“I have the key.” I dangled my car key in front of his face.

“Valid argument,” Magic agreed.

I turned the key, and the world dissolved into static. Time didn't flow; it jumped. One second I was staring at the ignition; the next, I was drifting down a street of identical dark houses. Nothing looked familiar. The blackness swallowed me again. When I reconnected with reality, it was a different street, also unfamiliar.

“Stop driving in circles, dude,” Magic said.

“I don’t remember where the fast-food place is,” I admitted.

“Just go straight. Don’t turn anymore.”

A cat ran across the road, and I slammed on the brake. Magic, who wasn’t wearing a seatbelt, hit his chest on the dashboard, barely able to extend his arm to the windshield.

“What the fuck, dude?” he said.

“The cat,” I said, pointing to the middle of the road, which was empty.

“Let me drive,” he said and opened the passenger door.

There were quite a few cars in the driveway despite the late hour. A white Toyota truck waited on the opposite side of the road, left light blinking. Magic turned right but wasn’t able to fit into the space behind the Jeep, leaving the trunk partly jutting into the road. The Toyota driver honked. Magic rolled the window down and flipped him off.

The Toyota driver honked again.

“Asshole,” Magic said and spat out the window.

The Jeep in front of us moved, but Magic didn’t.

“Scoochy-scoochy,” I said, pointing at the empty space in front of us.

Magic ignored me. The Toyota driver pressed his horn, slicing the silence with a long, angry honk. Magic snorted. The Jeep was now at the digital menu board, with at least three car spaces between us. The Toyota driver rolled his window down and shouted something I couldn’t understand. Magic flipped him off again.

When we finally drove to the bright digital board, Magic took his time to read the entire menu, or at least that’s what it felt like.

“Can I get one hundred Number Ones, please?” he finally said.

“What do you want on it, hun?” a woman's voice came from the speaker.

“Everything.”

“What kind of drink?”

“Coke.”

“It will be nine hundred and twenty-nine dollars. Pay at the next window, please.”

“I changed my mind. I’ll just order pizza,” Magic said to me, driving past the window.

I woke up in the middle of the night, disoriented and in pain. My bones ached, every muscle screamed, as if my body were being pulled in different directions. I’d heard stories about drug addicts getting off drugs, suffering through excruciating pain. But I wasn’t a drug addict. Last night was my first time using any kind of drug. And shouldn’t weed be harmless? Unless it wasn’t weed.

I leaned on my elbow, groping the floor with my fingers, hoping to find my phone where I usually left it. The floor wasn’t there.

I leaned back on the pillow. Something else wasn’t there—no Hippo’s snoring, no humming of my old desktop computer. The scent of the blanket covering my chest was wrong—stale, sour.

I closed my eyes, trying to remember what happened after Magic and I left the restaurant’s drive-through. The memory was incomplete; only short, random episodes remained. A bike driver waving his arms in the air, screaming something, even though his words didn’t have meaning. My reflection in the mirror, a brush in my hand, Magic asking me where I was going. Me trying to explain to him that I couldn’t use the bathroom without combing my hair. The smell of the worn carpet in Magic’s living room and me demonstrating yoga poses I didn’t

know I was capable of. A training recon mission, a helicopter crash, the death of my friends—their bodies scattered across a rocky surface. But this memory wasn't mine; it was Magic's story.

I finally realized where I was: in Magic's living room, on his couch. I sat, planting my feet on the floor, trying to find my phone and sneakers. After a few seconds of rummaging in the dark, I found them.

"Hey," I called quietly. Magic didn't answer, but I heard him mumbling something in his dreams.

I stumbled to the door and went outside. The frosty air bit my cheeks. A half-moon hung in the west, and impossibly large stars flickered in a cloudless sky. I circled the house and pushed the door to my basement. Turning on the stove light, I took two aspirin and drained a glass of water. My body was drenched with sweat, even though I was shivering from the cold. My organism was trying to get rid of the poison I'd inhaled last night. What was it, anyway? It couldn't have been dope. Or could it? I didn't know.

I wrapped myself in a blanket and lay down next to Hippo, who greeted me with a sleepy meow. The dream enveloped me, but a new wave of pain pulled me back to reality. I was going to be tired tomorrow. I briefly considered taking the day off but dismissed the thought immediately. I had to go to work, even if only to submit a leave request—Thanksgiving was approaching fast, and I wanted to see my father, to learn about his health from him, not through a third party. Maybe things weren't as bad as my sister said. My mother liked to exaggerate. My sister, too.

“Dad,” I said into the darkness. “Did you have a good life? If you had a chance to go back and start everything over, what would you change?”

I listened. There was no answer. Hippo snored, the water dripped against the metal sink in the kitchen, and the old ceiling creaked under the weight of time.

If my father had any regrets, I didn’t know about them. He wasn’t someone who sulked over the past. There are people who are purely focused on the future. My father was one of them. His thirst for knowledge never diminished; he never stopped being amazed by scientific discoveries, and he always knew what he wanted.

Not me. I could barely put together a list of things I didn’t want, with my job currently moving to the top of the list. And the worst part was that my future was tied to it. The purchase of the house depended on having my job, Crystal’s happiness depended on the purchase of the house, and my own happiness depended on Crystal’s mood. Maybe not entirely, but a large part of it did.

Maybe a few months ago, I believed I could take the girl out of the village—in the literal sense—but recent events proved my assumptions wrong. I had to get used to the idea that I was stuck in this town for good. Stuck, trapped in the job I despised, without any real prospects, without the future I once envisioned and believed belonged to me. I was dismantled, crushed by the weight of my own arrogance, left without any hope of ever getting back on track. If everything I had planned and built could be so easily broken, if all my ambition led only to this failure, then what was the meaning of all of this? What was the meaning of life in general?

“The meaning is different for everyone,” I heard my father’s voice. “This is why we have so many theories and assumptions, so many religions, schools of philosophy, political views, and ideologies.”

“I understand that,” I said into the darkness. “But shouldn’t there be an ultimate meaning, one for everyone? Because look at us, Dad, just look at us. We learned how to feed the world and fly into space. We figured out how to split the atom and harness solar energy. We can build bridges, paint masterpieces, and predict the future of our galaxy. And the only remaining question is why?”

I waited for my father’s reply, but it didn’t come. Last night, in Magic’s living room, for a split second, my mind was so clear I thought I was close to discovering that ultimate truth. If only I pushed a little harder—focused the lens of my mind—if only I had been able to formulate my question then.

“Why are we here?” I said again.

Maybe there was no reason at all. Maybe we lied to ourselves. We lied because it was easier than admitting there was no meaning. We simply came to this world, we lived, and we died. We spent our lives climbing from the dump we were born in. Not even from the dump, but to the top of the garbage pile. We climbed, tearing our feet, stripping our claws. We pushed each other down and were pushed down. And then the ones who managed to get to the top looked down at the rest with disgust.

And what was the point in all of this? What *was* the ultimate goal? Maybe Magic, with his marijuana and endless complaints about masks and vaccines, was more correct than any of

us. He'd found a comfortable place at the bottom of the pile, watching everyone else with resentment. My father would call it a lack of ambition. But at least Magic would never destroy others to get ahead. And who knew, maybe his choice was a hundred times more rational than those who willingly went into the meat grinder, who twisted and jammed, being sucked dry by the machine which, in the end, would spit them out as unnecessary waste. Patty was right, too. The cycle would never stop. New generations would come to replace us, climbing to the top, falling, climbing again, towards the same goal—power.

It was pointless searching for meaning behind all this. It was easier to follow the beaten path instead of looking for your own. And perhaps there was simply no meaning. Because look how many people tried to find it and failed. Perhaps all this was meaningless from the very beginning to the very end.

Remembering the conversation about the global government Magic and I had a while back, I rose from my mattress and logged into my computer. Searching through my history, I found the website I had accessed a while back. At the bottom of the page, I clicked the button—One Republic Chat. I expected the browser to crash as it did last time, but instead, a chat window popped up. I started typing.

“A strange thought occurred... That all our life we seek the meaning of life, but in reality, it doesn't exist. There are many religious, social, philosophical, and political speculations; many have tried and still try to offer their own theories and beliefs. And most of the time, we choose something that fits better with our own perception. Because... Well, if the question pops into our mind, it needs to be answered, right? And as a consequence, we live a lie. The meaning of life doesn't really exist. Because if it did, we wouldn't be searching for it for centuries.”

I pressed the enter button. My text appeared under a title: Posted. It remained there for a few seconds and then faded away as if it had never existed.