

“Where Do They Go”

Earth – Golden Acres Assisted Living – Present Day

The lazy afternoon sun was streaming in through the windows of the main parlor at Golden Acres senior care facility, where several of the “Acres” residents dozed in their seats. Doc Saunders sat in the corner in an overstuffed armchair. In danger of falling into oblivion himself, he fought to stay awake, waiting for Evie.

Funny how one can still get excited even at 83. Kids today, heck most people don't realize that we (us old folks) still feel things just like anyone else. We still experience longing and desire. We are still people damn it, just older versions. If you cut me, do I not bleed?

“I am not an animal,” Doc hollered, surprising the resident who had fallen asleep in the chair beside him.

“Of course, you're not,” said Sola, a cute but dim new aide at the assisted living facility. Doc was in no mood for cheery smiles today. His morose mood growing as the seconds ticked on.

Youth is wasted on the young. Maybe he had mixed it up, but he thought he'd heard it said in a movie once. Or was it *love* that was wasted on the young? *Either way...*

Like a welcome breeze on a sticky July afternoon, Evie entered the TV room. Always smiling even when there was little to smile about, she viewed the world with her own special rose-colored glasses. Doc envied her that.

“Hello James,” Evie said and settled herself in the chair across from his. “I read your diary like you asked.”

His smile faltered a little. “And?”

She took his hand and squeezed. “I believe you.”

#

Space. Some point in the not too distant future.

Xiaros stared out the port window into the empty void of space. He couldn't see the little blue planet from this distance, except in his mind, or on the large viewing screen across the hall in the detainment center. He closed his eyes and sighed.

I'm sorry.

The words had become a daily mantra and as such, seemed insincere. But sometimes, on “good” days at least, he meant it.

As Commander General of the eleventh outpost in the Delta Quadrant, he’d been given little more than a fancy title for a job no one wanted, Head Warden of a sparsely manned (and furnished) penitentiary on a terraformed planet. Though he was not earth-born, he was human.

With ash colored walls and low lighting, Xiaros often wondered if a blind man had designed the place. Sleek lines, no edges, the spherical room felt more like a pit rather than the conference room it was meant to be. In the center, a circular glass tabletop hovered mid-air while flat metal disks floated beneath to serve as seating. The palette had been chosen with clinical purpose, or so he’d been told. The absence of color and lack of stimuli were meant to calm and soothe. *More likely to induce anxiety.* He glanced back at the holding cell. Out here in the wastelands of space, they were stuck having to use obsolete technology.

Xiaros laid his transcomm device on the table and faced the viewing screen. Once again venturing to ask the question he’d raised nearly every day since his arrival.

“Why that tape?” Xiaros said referring to the old film reels. The question as much for his own consideration as it was for the man beside him, whose hair to boots monochromatic gray seemed an intentional camouflage to their surroundings. He had a few miles on Xiaros but he was as fit as a man half his age, maybe more so.

“It’s always that tape, sir,” the man responded, his voice as careful and precise as his wardrobe.

“Yes, I know. But why that *one*?” Xiaros didn’t bother to hide his impatience. Though he’d been curious, wondering about the significance of that particular recording initially, he’d grown frustrated by the lack of progress in finding an answer. *What do I expect? What might it contain?*

“I suppose it provides hope.”

“Hope?” The word hung in the air as if it were something tangible like a low hanging fruit, and all one had to do was reach out and pluck it. Or maybe it’s more a question of faith. *Is there a difference?*

“That perhaps a solution can be found.”

“Impossible. There is no cure,” Xiaros said, already becoming bored with the familiar direction the conversation seemed to be heading. He picked up his trans-comm device, his

lifeline to the rest of the universe. “Good intentions aside, the virus did not behave as expected. The mutations make it impossible to kill and the earthlings are stuck with the result, what they refer to as *Alzheimer’s*.”

An unnamed restlessness drew Xiaros to the smoke-black glass wall of the holding cell, the one state of the art system they had out in this God-forsaken part of the galaxy. In the shadows, a face stared back, and he felt a prickle of unease. *Observer or observee? Which one am I?*

He shook his head trying to rid his mind of the image, and wondered not for the first time, whether the face was real or imagined.

“Have you changed your opinion regarding the prisoner’s responsibility?” the gray man asked.

“The sentence is final. Lucky to be alive if you ask me.” Not that anyone had. Xiaros wasn’t so sure about the prisoner being so lucky either, having to serve the remainder of his sentence here. Hell, he’d put in for a transfer himself within six weeks of being stationed here and promising himself he’d put a bullet in his brain rather than spend an entire lifetime at this dead outpost. Besides, when the universe falls to shit, as he expected it would someday - because for him, the question has always been *when* not if - shouldn’t the guilty suffer along with everyone else? Xiaros regarded the gray man, the Assistant Deputy. His subordinate. “Universal Inter-stellar Codes were violated. It’s out of my hands.”

#

Earth – Golden Acres Assisted Living - One week prior

Twenty-year-old Miguel Alonzo Ramirez worked at Golden Acres in Mission Viejo, California, although the only gold to be found there was in the urine stained mattresses. The Acres was an old folks’ home, a place where families brought their loved ones to die.

Where Miguel came from, families took care of one another. That was one of the things he found so different in America. That sense of family unity, so strong where he grew up was missing here. Many of the occupants condemned to live out their final days at the Acres rarely, if ever, saw their “loved” ones again. New residents were dropped unceremoniously at the door along with their bags and then it was *adios, sayonara, Auf Wiedersehen*. The family cashed in when grandpa cashed out.

Harsh? Maybe. But Miguel knew only too well the demands of caring for frail elders, in particular, those suffering from Alzheimer's Dementia. The specialized needs of these unfortunate souls could be all-consuming. To keep them safe and - more importantly - happy was, in Miguel's opinion, a responsibility inherited by each of us.

"Imagine if it were your *abuela* or your *tio*?" he'd say.

So, he tried to do his part. Friend, neighbor, grandson, he would be the person they needed him to be. Miguel didn't mind the work either, be it bathing, dressing, or toileting. Someone had to do it. He took pride in his job, though the pay was low and the respect lower still. He believed he made a difference and that mattered to him.

A loud crash interrupted Miguel's thoughts and he went to investigate. Dr. Saunders or Doc, as everyone called him, had knocked over his tray table and was now standing atop his bed unscrewing a light bulb from the ceiling fixture. Puzzle pieces, Fig Newton's and prune juice were scattered everywhere.

Should've been paying better attention. But what set the man off in the first place Miguel wondered.

It was four thirty in the afternoon but thanks to daylight savings, which went into effect just yesterday, it was really five thirty. Sundown. Dr. Saunders was a Sundowner. That's what they call them. Because when the sun goes down, the confusion becomes more pronounced. It's a common pattern in people with Alzheimer's dementia.

"Dr. Saunders, it's me, Miguel. What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm removing the light bulbs so Charlie can't see us."

"Oh. Well, I could do that for you, sir. Why don't you come down from there and I'll finish up." Miguel hoped to divert Doc into another activity knowing it's better to join the person in their world rather than force adherence to ours. This was especially true if the resident was highly agitated, not to mention very big like Dr. Saunders, who weighed in at a buck eighty and still stood six foot two. Rumor had it the former physician had also been quite the champion boxer in his early army days.

Saunders eyed Miguel. "I've already got two bulbs out, there's only one left. I'm taller 'n you too."

"True, but you outrank me, sir," Miguel said and held out his hand to help the man down.

Just then Evelyn ambled by, lost in a haze of pink chiffon. She stopped and stuck her head in the doorway.

“Hello James,” she said, giving Dr. Saunders a little wave with one hand while gripping her walker with the other. She had something of a crush on the good doc.

“Hello Evie,” Dr. Saunders called back. He smiled, she blushed, providing Miguel just the distraction he needed.

“Hello Mrs. Pelletier, your hair looks lovely. Did you just have it done?”

“Why yes, thank you, Miguel,” she said, beaming at the compliment.

“Are you headed to the ice cream social?” Miguel asked.

“I was thinking about it.” She fluffed her new “do” then looked away.

Shorty can flirt. “You know,” Miguel said turning back to his charge, “a lady should have an escort, wouldn’t you agree, Doc?”

And that’s how it’s done boys. Easy peasy. Miguel smiled, happy with the results and followed the pair down to the main lobby. That’s when the afternoon took a sharp left into the Twilight Zone.

Miguel saw Nadia first. Caught in a whirl of long dark locks as a gust of wind blew in with the opening of the door, Nadia swept the hair from her face like a scarf.

He raised a hand in greeting, “Nadia, over here.” They had been “officially” dating for the past two months, though he’d fallen for her the first time they met, last April when her grandmother moved in.

“Miguel.” She rushed over and pulled him aside, apparently able to catch herself before a full-on embrace. “I was hoping to find you here. Have you seen my bunica today?”

“No. I just got in, working level one tonight. What’s wrong?” he asked noticing the way she chewed her bottom lip, a habit she’d exhibit whenever she was nervous or upset.

“We need to talk,” Nadia said and headed toward the main parlor.

Miguel looked around to see if anyone was paying attention to them. The two Mr. Gordon’s (Arnie and Lewis) appeared to be deeply immersed in a game of checkers while Mrs. Lupino and Mrs. Jankowski caught up on the latest celebrity gossip on E news. The rest of the residents and staff had gone to the main dining hall for ice cream. Miguel led Nadia over to the couch by the window where he could still keep an eye on things.

“Are you alright?” he asked, brushing back a strand of her hair.

“Where do they go?” Nadia gestured toward the residents sitting in the lounge. “You asked me once. I’ve often wondered that myself and,” she lowered her voice, “I have a theory.”

Miguel leaned in.

“This is going to sound crazy, but I don’t think they are simply remembering the past. I think they are revisiting it.”

“And you base this on...?”

“This,” she said, and handed him a newspaper clipping. Miguel glanced quickly at the faded newsprint but didn’t take the time to read it. Instead, he narrowed his gaze at Nadia, waiting for an explanation.

“There was an incident. When I was small,” Nadia began. “I’d convinced myself it was a dream. Now, I’m not so sure.” She played with a charm on her bracelet, still not meeting his eyes. “I can’t believe it’s been ten years since...it happened. Now, I’m afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Haven’t you heard? It’s been all over the news.”

Miguel shook his head not comprehending.

“He’s being released today,” Nadia said, a sense of urgency surrounding her like an invisible bubble, fragile and ready to break at any moment.

“Who?” Miguel started to ask. “Wait, are you talking about Miracle Merv?”

“Yes.” Her entire body shuddered, and the word came out like a hiss. “That’s one of the name’s he’s been given.”

“Merv the Perv, Chester the Molester, I read about him on the internet. But what’s this got to do with...your theory?”

Mervin Chesterfield had been in a coma for nearly ten years. Two months ago he’d been taken off life support. No one expected him to survive, let alone wake up. But, to everyone’s great astonishment he not only regained consciousness, he made a full recovery, hence the moniker, Miracle Merv. As to the other unsavory nicknames, rumor had it that before his “accident” allegations of sexual assault had been raised, though no formal charges had been brought forth. Whispers connecting him to several unsolved murders also began to circulate and the press was eating it up. Despite the lack of evidence, the sensational story was a ratings boon.

Nadia spoke, her voice soft and contemplative. “You have to understand,” she began. “My mother...she worked two jobs to support us. Usually, Mrs. Norris sat with me after school.

But she was in the hospital and couldn't watch me that evening. My mother had no one to help her. It wasn't easy for her." *You know?* Her eyes seemed to beg. "She didn't have a choice."

"Go on," Miguel prompted sensing her reluctance.

"I told her I would be alright on my own, that I was a big girl. She'd only be gone a few hours. Mom and Tess cleaned office buildings in the evening. They would be home by seven, seven-thirty at the latest and Mom promised to call to check on me."

"Keep the door locked. Don't let anyone in. Dial 911 in an emergency, and all the usual instructions. She didn't want to go. She *had* to," Nadia repeated.

"What happened?" Miguel asked, giving her hand a gentle squeeze of encouragement.

"Nothing, at first. I had a snack, watched TV, played. But as afternoon crept into evening, I became uneasy. Every creak, rattle, and noisy pipe became a ghost or monster. The thought of an intruder never occurred to me."

"Someone broke into your apartment?"

Nadia let out the breath she'd been holding. "No. Thanks to my special protector. My angel. My superhero. I don't know what to call her."

"I don't understand," Miguel said shifting position on the couch.

"My bunica. She lived in San Clemente then, nearly two hours away. It would have been physically impossible for her to come to my rescue in time. But there she was, just when I needed her."

Miguel scrunched his face in confusion.

"I couldn't see her of course. But she spoke to me," Nadia explained. "She told me not to be afraid, that she would take care of everything."

"What do you mean, you couldn't see her?"

"Just what I said. I heard her voice as if she were in the room with me. Except, she wasn't. I was alone. Then, she said something really weird." Nadia closed her eyes as if trying to remember. "She told me that if all went right, I'd have no memory of that night."

"I could hear Buni muttering to herself like she always did when rummaging about. I heard the clank of pots and pans then a scrape as if she'd taken one off the stove. Then a thud." Nadia paused.

"And then?" Miguel leaned forward.

“Buni’s voice came back to me. I could feel her presence if that makes any sense. She told me to go to sleep, that she would stay with me until my mom came home. I swear I felt her stroke my hair.”

“Mom was late. Flat tire.” Nadia shrugged and went on. “The police were in the hallway just outside our door. Mom lost it. I was found curled up under the kitchen table. Alone. The door still locked from the inside. Our new neighbor on the floor above had tried to break in and according to the local papers, he was a registered sex offender.”

Miguel’s eyes widened.

“My mother won’t talk about it, but she kept a clipping of the story in her jewelry box. I found the article. They ran a new story about the case just the other day. I brought a copy to show you,” Nadia added quickly as if Miguel might not believe her without proof and handed him another paper.

Miguel read it aloud.

“The intruder appeared to have been stopped by blunt trauma to the back of the head, though no weapon had ever been found nor was anyone charged with the attempted murder.”

“Not enough evidence I guess,” Nadia said and shrugged. “I doubt they spent much time looking if you know what I mean.”

Miguel read on.

“To this day, the case remains unsolved. Police are baffled by the events that occurred but suspect the victim was responsible for the unsolved rape and murder cases of three little girls and one missing boy.”

Miguel let out a low whistle. “Are you telling me that your grandmother somehow *visited* you and in stopping the intruder, nearly killed him?”

“You don’t you believe me, do you?”

Miguel rubbed his jaw. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.” Nadia sighed. I know it sounds crazy. But I swear I’m not lying.”

“I know but it’s just so...”

“Unbelievable,” they said in unison.

“Yeah,” Miguel said. “But it’s more than that. If what you say is true, your grandmother crossed bodily into the physical plane. Yet you said you couldn’t see her, you only heard her speaking to you.”

“That’s right.”

“Why do you think?” asked Miguel.

“How should I know?”

“You were there. It’s your theory.”

“You’re the future scientist.” Nadia sighed, sounding defeated. “I don’t know.

Neither said a word. Miguel glanced over at the two Mr. Gordon’s then over at the women watching TV. Donna Fleming, floor supervisor, arrived on scene awash in a cloud of Chanel No. 5 and self-importance, keys jangling, hips swinging, a shiny metallic clipboard in hand.

“Everyone is supposed to be at the ice cream social,” she announced, loud even by nursing home standards.

“Shhh,” Mrs. Jankowski hissed.

“They don’t want to go,” Miguel said and shrugged. Donna rolled her eyes then jotted something down onto her trusty clipboard. Behind Donna’s back, Mrs. Lupino stuck out her tongue. Caught in the act, she gave Miguel a sly grin. He winked in return.

Just then an alarm sounded. Miguel checked his pager, Rainbow Gardens, the locked ward, where those suffering from advanced dementia were housed.

“I’ll see to it,” Miguel said and was off the couch and halfway to the door before Donna could click her pen in protest.

He swiped his card into the key code reader and entered the unit with Nadia right behind him. Miguel found a small group of people huddled around a tiny woman wearing a bright red embroidered Chinese silk jacket. She carried a woven straw bag with purple flowers on the side and was mumbling something about needing bus fare.

“Now what did I do with my change purse? I know I had at least \$14.00 in there. That should be enough money to get me to Santa Ana.”

“Oh,” Nadia gasped putting a hand to her mouth, then approached her “bunica” cautiously. “Buni, it’s me, Nadia.” When the old woman didn’t respond she tried again. “I’m here Buni. Buni?” Nadia looked at Miguel.

He kept his voice gentle. “Mrs. Marinescu, can you hear me?” Miguel placed his hand on her shoulder. “Look at me.”

The old woman turned and pressed the tips of her fingers into the flesh of his bare forearm with unexpected strength. The skin of her hands looking as delicate as tissue paper, her wedding band rolled on a thin finger as loose and lost as she was.

“Can you take me to the bus stop?” She asked looking up at him, her blue eyes so trusting, so hopeful.

“Of course,” Miguel said and smiled putting his arm around her shoulders. In a well-practiced maneuver, he guided her back to her room. “But first we need shoes.”

Everything about Miguel inspired a sense of authority and confidence. Nadia’s grandmother was in good hands. The rest of the staff and residents dispersed. Order restored, calm ensued.

Once inside her room, however, Mrs. Marinescu became anxious.

“I have to go. I can’t stay here. I must get to Nadia.”

“I’m here Bunica.”

But the old woman ignored her and continued pacing and wringing her hands. “No. This won’t do; this won’t do at all. We must leave. But the bus won’t be fast enough. It will be too late. I must find another way.”

Nadia looked to Miguel for help, pleading for him to do something. But he needed more time. He could tell she wouldn’t be easy to distract. *Best to let whatever was happening play out.* As he watched, a change came over Nadia’s grandmother. The pacing stopped and she stood motionless as a statue.

“Buni?” Nadia placed a tentative hand on her shoulder. “Bunica,” she called again and stepped around to face her.

Miguel joined them, coming up on her left side. “Mrs. Marinescu?”

No response.

Miguel glanced at Nadia then back at her grandmother. He tried waving a hand in front of her eyes. She didn’t even blink. *Eerie.* Nothing happened for nearly a minute and he was just about to call for a nurse, fearing she might be having a stroke or some kind of seizure.

Then without warning, Mrs. Marinescu maneuvered like an NBA all-star right past Miguel and into the far corner. She was talking again, whispering. A quick glance passed between Miguel and Nadia with Miguel the first to take action.

“Wait,” he cautioned Nadia, stopping a foot short of her bunica and without taking his eyes off of the woman, he stood mesmerized.

Mrs. Marinescu was hunched over and appeared to be petting a dog, her lips moving in harmony with her hand. Miguel leaned in trying to hear.

“It’s alright Nadia my love. Buni’s here now. You’re safe. He can’t hurt you.”

Nadia gasped and grabbed hold of Miguel’s arm, making him jump.

“She’s there,” Nadia whispered in his ear. “She’s there with me. On the night I told you about.”

Nadia’s eyes were shiny with tears and he knew she believed it to be true. He glanced at her grandmother then back at Nadia who suddenly looked just as far away. He pulled her close and feeling her tremble, he knew Nadia was also reliving that terrible night.

All of a sudden, the atmosphere changed. Mrs. Marinescu became silent, and Nadia stopped shaking. The old woman turned around slowly and faced them. She appeared groggy as if waking from a dream.

“Mrs. Marinescu,” Miguel said, “are you alright?”

She had something in her hands which she kept behind her back. She smiled at Miguel and nodded. Turning to her granddaughter her smile widened. “Nadia?”

“Yes, Bunica, it’s me,” Nadia said and threw her arms around her grandmother.

“Mrs. Marinescu? What do you have there?”

Nadia let go and her grandmother brought her hands out in front of her showing them what she’d been hiding. A cast iron skillet.

“What’s that on the side?” Nadia started to ask then stopped to cover her mouth.

Miguel gave her a curious look, but Nadia just shook her head and pointed.

He brought the pan up for closer inspection. There seemed to be bits of hair stuck to the side along with red goo and matted flesh. Miguel lowered the pan in disbelief.

The old woman grinned. “My Nadia is safe now.”

#

Space Station

The onscreen image faded to black, allowing Xiaros a moment to gather his thoughts. *This proves it. What more do you need?* He wanted to shout, though he knew it would do him no good. This was one of several examples. He would need to dig deeper. Yet, it was this one story that seemed to hold the key.

“What am I missing?”

The deputy said nothing.

Xiaros let out a heavy sigh. “Were you able to retrieve the files on the others?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Bring them up on screen.”

The deputy waved a hand over the console and the monitor brightened. Of the seven residents viewed on the previous recording, Xiaros had only read the dossier on Dr. Saunders, the first man Miguel had spoken to, *the one who flipped his cookies*. Xiaros felt a connection to him.

Dr. James T. Saunders originally from Flushing, New York had served in Viet Nam, hence the reference to *Charlie*, a name coined by American soldiers to refer to the enemy Viet Cong. Drafted into the army, he’d saved the lives of many. But for him, it would never make up for the deaths of the 24 men and women he killed during a midnight raid in July of 1968. Or so he believed. Xiaros knew this segment by heart.

Doc Saunders had a reputation for being tough. As a wartime surgeon, steady hands and the ability to block out the chaos of his surroundings were a must and had become routine. So when the bullets started flying, he’d stubbornly refused to stop operating on the casualties rolling in on the assembly line from Hell. It was this one decision that had – in his mind - cost the lives of all but one orderly and a pretty nun who’d remained to pray for the fallen soldiers. To this day he wears that guilt like a noose, believing that if he’d killed the lights, stopped working and let everyone retreat to the bunker, those men and women would still be alive today. So far, Saunders has not been successful in finding his way back to the steamy jungles of Lai Khe, spitting distance, in a manner of speaking, to Thunder Road.

As for Mrs. Lupino, the little lady who stuck her tongue out at Miguel, she made the trip back and altered the past as did Nadia’s grandmother. Like Saunders, Mrs. Lupino also had a military history, but that’s as far as Xiaros could remember.

“Fill me in on the rest of the players,” he said. “You’ve read the dossiers. You’ve watched the recordings. What do you make of all this?” *What am I missing?*

The Assistant Deputy cleared his throat. “Born Sarah Esther Goldblatt, “Sadie” as she’s affectionately known, served in the WAVE corps as a nurse in the US Navy during WWII where she met her husband, Ignacio Lupino, a brilliant neurosurgeon. Like Saunders, Dr. Lupino saved many lives and was seen as a great man but a terrible husband, according to Sadie.”

“And that’s relevant how?” Xiaros asked.

“For nearly 15 years she put up with his abuse until the spring of 1959 when she finally put an end to it. No one questioned his death. DNA testing did not exist on earth then and who would have suspected sweet and dutiful wife, Sadie, responsible for the murder of the respected doctor?”

“A bit melodramatic.”

“Perhaps, but here’s the thing, she did not kill him the *first* time. No. She put up with the abuse while the great doctor continued his research and ultimately found a cure for cancer.”

“Wait,” Xiaros said turning from the screen to face the subordinate, “the earthlings never found a cure. Not according to their history.”

“That’s right,” the Deputy said in his characteristic no-nonsense manner. “But, when Sadie revisited her past, she changed the future, setting off an unfortunate chain of events. And not just her own.”

“What do you mean?”

“How many people were impacted by the loss of this man’s contribution to medicine? How many more would’ve benefitted had he lived?”

“I don’t suppose we’ll ever know,” Xiaros said absently scratching at his elbow. “Nor could such a thing be tracked. Too many variables, the data endless.”

“So are the ramifications.”

Xiaros was well aware. Like a giant net which encompasses every person in the universe, each thread held together by the one it touches. We are all connected. One pull threatened to unravel the whole.

“I believe this one example says it all,” said the deputy. “The alternative could not have been predicted.”

“The alternative?”

“Mr. Sullivan, Sully to most everyone he knew, died of an aggressive form of brain cancer in the summer of 1962. This created a vacancy at the Safeway Coach lines which was filled by one Francis P. Hodge. Frank Hodge was a school bus driver. He was also a drinker.”

“Your point?” Xiaros interjected. The man was a stickler for details. Though Xiaros could appreciate thoroughness, the assistant bordered on compulsive, regurgitating the most minute particulars with computer-like accuracy.

“Hodge drove the bus that little Benjamin Lupino rode to and from school. The impact from the train made his death and those of the other twelve children aboard instantaneous.” The subordinate let out a little sigh and bowed his head slightly. “Poor Mrs. Lupino. She could not have known that by killing her husband she would kill her only son too.”

Xiaros paused to consider her fate. “For her, the memory loss of Alzheimer’s has been a blessing.”

“That’s topping the crap cake with a cherry, if you’ll pardon the expression, sir.”

Xiaros gave an almost imperceptible shrug at the comment.

“You see it, don’t you?” the assistant asked. “These travels cannot continue. The repercussions--”

“I get it,” Xiaros interrupted.

With the potential end of the universe at hand, courtesy of the impending implosion of the third rock from the sun, the result of countless jumps through time and space - can anyone say butterfly effect - what other conclusion could be drawn? Altering history, no matter how well intended could only lead to a quantum fuck up, which is the reason why Xiaros believed his beloved little planet was destined to someday collapse. Xiaros didn’t know whether to be scared or thankful since he remained stuck in the forgotten Siberia of deep space. Earth was far away and yet he wondered, like a pebble lobbed into a pond, how wide might its ripples spread? *Will I feel it when it happens?*

“What does it all mean? A cure?”

The deputy shifted.

“I sense you have more to say on the subject.”

“If I may, sir.”

“You may.”

“I don’t think anyone’s expecting young Miguel to find a cure.”

Xiaros raised a skeptical brow. “What else is there?”

“A way to make it work,” the deputy offered, spreading his hands before him. A simple gesture, but oddly reassuring. “If we knew how these people traveled, perhaps find a way to *tap in*, someone could go back to when the virus was first introduced to their world and prevent it from ever happening.”

Xiaros snorted, then laughed. “Paradox be damned, right? You had me going. For a moment I thought there was something the boy actually had a shot at accomplishing.”

“Someone can go back. But not the boy.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You haven’t always been a penitentiary warden.”

The tiny hairs on the back of Xiaros neck unfurled like dominos in reverse. Whatever was coming, he had the feeling he’d heard it before. He got up and approached the holding cell, his own face reflected in the glass. His eyes narrowed as another revelation assaulted him.

The deputy coughed, reminding Xiaros of his presence. “Have you thought of something, sir?”

Xiaros turned toward the deputy, then back to the cell. The glass door slid open with a slow hiss.

Empty.

“I never needed a transfer, did I?”

The other man shook his head. “Three months ago you were a gifted immunologist. Now, you are here at this outpost of which there are only the two of us. I’d say the changes you’ve undergone are...promising, if I may be so optimistic. But I guess you wouldn’t remember that, would you?” the deputy said.

Xiaros’ face darkened. *Two of us?* He stared into the empty cell, the sickening realization settling over him like something sticky and uncomfortable. “It’s better to join the person in their world rather than enforce adherence to...*yours?*”

“Yes,” the deputy agreed.

“I’ve been infected?”

“It was your idea. Sir.” The deputy hesitated then added, “Perhaps you already know someone who would be willing to take that trip with you.”

Xiaros opened his mouth emitting the equivalent of a squeak then slumped down onto the floating disk which the deputy had most considerately pulled out for him. He gripped the trans-com device in one hand then felt for his weapon with the other. The time had come to make a decision. End it now or continue to analyze the recordings hoping an alternative solution would present itself. How easy would it be to pull the trigger? He placed his thumb on the button and raised the weapon. *Was it even loaded?* Then it clicked. Not the weapon, but the answer.

He'd been infected. That meant he could go back. *Potentially*. He still didn't know if it would work, even with a willing host. But there it was. The one word that the deputy had dangled before him earlier like a carrot on a stick. *Hope*. But how far back should he go?

"You are starting to make the connection. I can see it."

"Yes. But...What will happen to the others if I go back? All the way back?" Xiaros said, referring not only to Dr. Saunders and Mrs. Lupino but also to Miguel and Nadia. *Especially Nadia*.

"It is a risk, sir. But ultimately the responsibility lies with you. It always has," he added softly.

"I was afraid of that." Xiaros fingered his weapon one last time. "I never meant to hurt anyone. I only wanted to help."

"The earthlings have a saying for that."

Xiaros looked up, wide-eyed. "Yes?"

"The road to hell is often paved with good intentions."

#

Earth Present Day – Golden Acres Assisted Living

"Are you sure you want me to have this?" Miguel asked, taking the book from Dr. Saunders.

"I trust you."

Later that evening, after all the residents were in bed, Miguel retrieved the book from his locker and sat down. He opened to the page that Doc had bookmarked for him.

Diary of James T. Saunders, MD.

My son gave me a tablet last year. Said I could read the newspapers without getting my fingers dirty. Buy thousands of books without the need for shelf space. He said I'd enjoy the games, like solitaire or maybe even the word puzzles. To be honest, I found the shoot 'em up

games like Snood and Space Invaders far more entertaining. My grandson showed me those. Some of the games were supposed to help with memory. But I hate to break it to him (and anyone else reading this) but once the damage is done it can't be reversed. Still, I suppose some of the games could help stave off ... oh who are we kidding? This disease is eating my brain and there isn't a GD thing anyone can do about it. Which is why I am writing this now. Journaling. Not something I ever bothered with before, but now I have time, limited as it may be, to sit and record my thoughts. It's hard to only look back and yet to look ahead is both pointless and heartbreaking for I am angered by the things I cannot change.

I used to hate this place. "The Acres." God's waiting room. But then I met Evie. Without her, I couldn't have stood it. She is a fine woman. She must've been a real looker in her youth, though I can see it still. Look beneath the wrinkles and the unfair ravages of time and you too will see the beauty there. She makes my heart race and flip-flop and no, it's not due to my chronic A-fib, an irregular heartbeat that is now well controlled with medication thank you very much.

When I'm with her, I feel young again. Or at least, I can recapture the feelings I enjoyed in my youth such as longing, joy and even hope. Why is that? Perhaps I shouldn't question it for its good enough that I feel this way. I thought I couldn't feel anything except maybe anger. My emotions and moods are manipulated by this illness and I can go from anger to elation within seconds. As a former doctor, I know this is part of the disease though I don't always remember. That's what I really hate. Not remembering. But sometimes, I'm myself and even more so when I am with Evie.

There was an incident the other day. They tried to keep it quiet but word spreads around here faster than an intestinal bug. They (the ones in charge) think we don't know what's going on, but they would be surprised by how much we see and of how much we are aware. I would like to talk to someone about what happened to that woman in the locked ward, how she came by a cast iron skillet. Even more so, I would like to talk to someone about what's been happening to me, but no one ever listens to an old man.

Miguel turned the page, eager to read on.

Second journal entry of Dr. Saunders

I wanted to write this down quickly before I forget. If I shared this with anyone, they would chalk it up to a dream, or perhaps my deteriorating mental state. But I swear this was not a dream and I don't believe it was a hallucination caused by my dementia.

Last night I had a visitor. He looked like a man, though I don't know if he was human. He was not a ghost, nor an angel or a demon though I admit that for a moment, I thought he might have been the Angel of Death come to take me away. Funny that I would think such a thing. Me. A man of science. I haven't been to church since I was a boy and had raised my own children with more secular notions. I guess when we near the end we revert back to religion. Whatever gives you comfort. But this *man* was none of those things. He told me he had been here before and by *here* he meant earth. I guess that makes him an alien, and not the illegal sort.

The man said, "I thought I was providing you with a gift, a chance to re-live your best days."

This *gift*, as it turns out, resulted in Alzheimer's disease.

"Thanks," I said, not hiding my sarcasm and wanting to punch him in the face. I accepted what he said as the truth, however, and wanting someone to blame for the awful nightmare illness that had befallen me, why not him, if he wanted to cop to it?

He asked me if I would like to go someplace to talk as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He suggested a coffee shop or a diner. You know what I said?

"You buying?" I asked, as if we were old friends or colleagues and that we were going to grab a drink after work. As a matter of fact, that is exactly what we did.

"Close your eyes and think of a place," this stranger said and then took my arm.

When I opened my eyes we were sitting in a booth near the back. Dark, smoky, decorated in varying shades of red from the carpet to the walls to the vinyl seats. The waitress came over. *Mei Ling*? My breath caught. She smiled and asked us if we would like something to drink.

"Tea," I started to say and then added, "Two shots of whiskey, Seagram's 7." She nodded and left the table. I tracked her movements as she sashayed between tables making her way back to the bar. Had she always moved so seductively? At this point I still thought I was dreaming, but who cares? I'm not complaining. We were in this little place on Doyers street. Chinatown, New York as it was in 1955. They had the most wonderful noodle bowls.

The man cleared his throat and I tore my gaze from *Mei Ling*, curious to learn his secrets. "So, what did you want to tell me?"

“For starters, I want to apologize.”

For what? I thought, caught up in this wondrous moment and then I remembered. *Alzheimer’s disease.* It was his fault. “Go on,” I said and leaned back in my seat waiting.

The man repeated that he’d only wanted to provide *us* with a gift. A chance to relive our fondest memories. In hindsight, the obvious question I should’ve asked was *why?* But I didn’t. Instead, I listened to what he had to offer and found that I accepted his explanation. Xiaros, that’s his name, told me how he’d brought what he’d thought were benign organisms to the planet and released them into the air. The virus mutated. Alzheimer’s disease was the result. He then revealed his plan to “undo it.”

I don’t truly understand the science, diseased brain or not and I can only hope it works. He warned me it would be risky, but I have nothing more to lose - except myself.

Miguel had reached the end of Doc’s narrative, closed the book and put it back in his locker. The old man had asked him for his help, but it would be dangerous. Not only could Miguel get fired, but more importantly, the old doc could get hurt. *Still, if it worked.* What’s more, Miguel believed him. A week ago, Miguel would have dismissed the idea as a deeper descent into the clutches of this cruel illness. But after the incident with Nadia’s grandmother, how could he not believe? *How could I not try?* The benefit outweighed the risk. Besides, it wasn’t like the old man had asked him to assist in his suicide. No, Miguel just had to help the good doc to stop taking his Alzheimer’s medication. *Not like it helps.*

Miguel went to Saunders’ room, but the old man was asleep. No matter, Miguel had already made up his mind. He would honor the man’s request. What were a few days?

Earth. 3 Days Later.

Twenty-year-old Miguel Alonzo Ramirez worked at Golden Acres in Mission Viejo, California, an old folks’ home, one of the nicest ones in the area. He enjoyed the work and would miss it when he moved on. Just then Dr. Saunders entered the parlor.

“Miguel, I’m glad I caught you before I left. I have something for you.”

“I was going to stop by after my shift,” Miguel said.

“Would’ve been too late, my flight leaves at 3:00.”

The good doctor was finally retiring. Reaching into his pocket, he handed Miguel an envelope. Miguel nearly dropped it when he saw the sum on the check.

He looked up and stammered, “I, I couldn’t.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You can and you will. Medical school is expensive you know.”

Miguel was at a loss for words. Dr. Saunders chuckled. “So, how’s Nadia?”

“She’s great, coming home this weekend as a matter of fact. She and her grandmother are visiting Romania. Nadia’s been accepted to the grad program at UCLA.”

“Glad to hear it, Miguel.” He clapped the boy on the back, walked to the door then paused and took a final look around.

“Sir? Did you forget something?”

Dr. Saunders smiled. “Nope.” And it was unlikely he ever would again. Donning his hat, he gave Miguel a wink then walked out of “the Acres” for the very last time. With his face upturned to the sky he closed his eyes against the setting sun, took in a breath and then headed to his car where Evie sat waiting for him.

Xiaros watched Dr. Saunders drive away. Where to, he didn’t know. Didn’t matter. By restoring things to the way they were, the way they were meant to be, he’d done right to the people he’d wronged.

He liked this reality better. He was aware that he was the last, the only witness to the events that had unfolded only days ago and already he was starting to forget what had happened. He expected he would forget all of them in another month, as a result of his successful trip back. But he didn’t want to. Xiaros jotted a final note, closed his journal and then tucked it into his bag and headed into a café for a latte. He’d spend the remainder of his days on the little blue planet, happy and at peace.

The End