

Futurecast

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Anupam held the cell phone to his ear with one hand. With the other, he handed a ten-pound note to the barista. “Yes... yes...” he spouted to his wife at the other end of the call. “Everything is okay.”

“Then why are you going to the police?” she asked.

Profuse voices and occasional, monotone announcements from unseen speakers greeting the late morning, London crowd assembled on the platform at the St. James Park Underground station made intimate conversation a challenge. But he expected the question. A young, apron clad woman sat his drink on the elevated counter, handing over his change as well. He took it and continued. “It is nothing that happened to me—”

“You told me that. But I still worry.”

Retrieving his drink, he then strode from the coffee bar. Others wanting their morning caffeine filled the space. Heading away, those in line gave him no more than a passing glance. Save for his dark skin and hair, he differed little in dress and manner from any other middle-aged Briton. No one any more or less important than the many others awaiting their respective trains or moving to and from the streets above.

Switching to his native Hindi, he made his way through the jungle of commuters. “All I am doing is giving them some information. From my research. I told you this.”

Her terse voice shot through the phone. “Yes. But must you do it while mother is here?”

“It cannot wait. And there will be plenty of time... time...” Approaching the stairs leading upwards from the station, his voice trailed away. Mute and in thought, his last words repeated themselves in his head. Yet he kept moving, eyes fixed upon the clean station floor.

“Are you still there?” his wife asked in a fluster.

“Yes. Yes,” he said, shaking off his musings, now walking up the stairs.

“She’s only here for a week.”

“Yes. I know. We will have time. Time. This evening. Tomorrow.” He looked up. “I am leaving the station now. I will call you when I am done. Please. Everything will be okay.”

“You promise?”

“I do. Talk again soon, love.”

He ended the call. With a sip of hot coffee, he emerged onto the street through the middle of three doors there. The bright morning sun immersed the surrounding buildings. So too the noise of the city itself. Sounds of automobiles, busses and nearby construction reverberated off the facades of the old and new buildings in this part of downtown London.

He moved past others coming in and out of the Underground, onward to the edge of the street. There he paused. To his right loomed the towering glass covered building housing the New Scotland Yard and Metropolitan police. Its modern look stood out over the older structures lining Broadway Street.

With a small step and another sip, he lurched that way. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the pale, weathered blue dome of Central Hall Westminster to his left. Mid gulp, he paused again, examining what he could see of the old church. Then another image popped into his head. Another he saw just a few days before, burned into his mind’s eye. What remained

of the blue dome, the edifice beneath and Westminster Abbey just beyond. The heaps of rubble both had become. Neither looked that way now, the way he once saw them.

“People like us,” he mumbled, remembering his Einstein quotes, “who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.” A mix of fear and curiosity held him in place. A sudden urge to know, to ease his own conscience seized his reeling mind. He drew a breath and spat out his words. “Law number three— Time is an observation. Not a measurement...”

Was just that: an image, a false perception? Finding strength to move, he glided towards the street, just to cross over. He had to know. Know that those wonderful, old buildings were still there, in all their glory, just as he’d seen them a dozen times. Besides, he had a few minutes before he was to meet those officers at the Yard. He stepped off the curb and onto the street.

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Data flashed across the large, flat screen. Transfixed on this one, Galen ignored the other, smaller screens sitting nearby, all save one displaying similar information. He took in the small pictures and bits of data, popping up in distinct boxes upon the screen, each dated and time-coded to the exact second. His head rested in one hand. The other lay next to the thin keyboard. His index finger tapped the desktop in an uneven rhythm.

“Still trying to beat the system?”

The tenor toned, male voice broke through the large, silent room, one where the computers made not a hint of noise. Galen straightened up and swiveled around in his chair. “Hard to do that. These results get filtered through and coalesced by a series of algorithms. Beats me most of the time.” Back to the screen. “Of course, much of the data comes through in

different languages, complicating matters even more. Luckily, computers translate it all into ours.” A glance back. “But nothing yet, Doctor Bodega.”

An older man stood in the doorway. A buttoned up white frock covered his black, open neck shirt. The gold letters “Operations Room” stuck out upon the open door. Dr. Bodega glided towards Galen, taking in each monitor with every silent step. One was all but dark, save for a three-dimensional cone flaring out into an ever so gentle curve towards the bottom of the screen. “Nothing wrong in priding yourself in the ability to spot problems before the computer does. Keeps the mind sharp.”

Galen watched Bodega turn and moved off without another word. A large window peered outward opposite the desk and monitoring station occupying his attention. Stopping in front, the doctor scratched the side of his head and all but white hair. Galen went on. “All this comes from a boatload of sources, different points, all processed and synthesized through a number of variables.” His voice echoed through the room. Returning focus back to the looming monitor, he scanned the screen. “No red letters or flags indicating difficulty, issue or deviation. Maybe she hasn’t made contact, Doctor?”

“Perhaps.” Bodega looked out over the city outside the window. From this vantage point, the large inland lake beyond and the lights of the metropolis below stood in full view. “Her mission is to maintain a low profile, interacting with others as needed or when advantageous.”

“There are a dozen... hundred things that could go wrong or delay an operation like this,” Galen said. “I mean...”

He caught the doubtful tone in the dying voice. “You may speak freely, Galen.”

“Has the Security Council asked for a status yet? I know... I know they and the President had little faith in this mission.”

The question was not unexpected. “That may be. But we trained her well. And she has all the information she needs on the computer chip with her. That being said... despite what intelligence we could piece together and all that we learned from Dr. Chattopadhyay, could you blame them for being skeptical?”

“At least we believe in it. So did Anupam. And her.”

Galen and Bodega turned towards the door at the sound of the female voice.

“I guess that’s what counts, Jallata,” Bodega said.

“Anything?” she asked, walking into the room, staring at Galen. She too wore a white frock, open in front, exposing her simple pantsuit.

“No. Nothing. No data confirming or denying her movements—”

“That’s good then,” she interrupted, looking over at Bodega, then at the smaller dark screen and its unwavering cone. The colors of the rainbow moved over it from top to bottom.

“This means she hasn’t been compromised—”

“Or we’re never going to see her again,” Galen added.

No one responded. Walking up next to the doctor, she joined his silent vigil, both now staring outward. Her dark, South Asian skin and jet-black hair reflecting in the window contrasted with Bodega’s pale complexion.

“Galen’s not being mean,” Bodega said in a soft voice. “He’s just as nervous as we all are. That’s how he copes with it. Attempting to disassociate his feelings from the operation. From her.”

She leaned forward, getting a better look at the ground six stories beneath them. “She’s there. We’re sure of that. Aren’t we? I ask, because...” A curious look at the doctor.

Bodega thought about an answer for a moment, then spoke as though relaying a matter of fact. “We haven’t violated any laws by any means. Not yet. But yes, she’s there.”

Silence fell between them. Galen’s tapping away on his keyboard filled the air.

Jallata broke the stillness. “You ever feel that... we sent her on a one way mission?”

He drew in a breath through his nose then spoke. “Every damn day... or minute. Depending on how one looks at it.”

#

The crowded restaurant went still over the past two innings, including the more vocal patrons seated at the bar. Now, silent apprehension replaced the enthusiasm and euphoria displayed earlier that evening. In Chicago, baseball was serious business. Even for those never hefting a bat or donning a glove, or who dreamed of what the future may have been had they done so. Thanks to an error committed by the rookie shortstop, their team fell behind by two runs. At least one and a half innings remained in the game and they had last bats. Alcohol and home field advantage were the only solace the fans had left.

“Hey Kim? Can I get another?” a middle-aged man dressed in the team’s jersey and ball cap asked. He held up a pint, empty save for wisps of foam settling within. A young woman, the object of his summons, stood with her back to him. Her straight blond hair reached halfway down her back.

Kimberly half turned upon hearing her name. She looked her patron in the eyes. He and the others beside him had calmed down. An air of gloom hovered over them.

“Sure thing, Bob. Le’ me get this order out.” Turning back, she hefted two plates of wings fresh and hot from the fryer. The smell emanating from each stung her nose. Extra hot sauce on both orders added to the other odors produced by the kitchen.

Bob shot her a smile. He then glanced back up at the flat-screen television above and just behind the crowded bar.

“Man,” Harry said, shaking his head. “If they can’t pull this out... goodbye playoffs.”

Bob nodded, but said nothing to his dark-skinned friend seated to the right.

“Hey, they got time. Top of the order coming up!” A younger man seated to their left added his own take on the situation.

“Here you go Bob.” She sat a full glass in front of him. “And I made sure I put a good head of foam on that.

Taking in his sober grin, he said nothing, returning his normally, scheming glance back to the game. On occasion, he’d render a compliment on the amount of foam, suggesting beer went down better with a good head. She wasn’t stupid. The not too subtle attempt to slip in a covert sexual reference was obvious. Used to such inferences, she and the ladies working in their scanty uniforms played along, to a point. It made for better tips. However, sports took precedence over subdued perversion tonight. Besides, she was half his age. He married and father of four.

“Hey, me too Kim. And I want a head as big as his,” the young man said, clad in a jersey of the home team as well.

With a cocked grin and narrowed eyes, she chuckled. “Sure thing Tony.”

He leaned back and smiled. At the taps, she caught him glancing down. As usual, he went about giving her backside a glance. Her attention back to the flowing ale, she felt his eyes taking in what he could see of her nylon-covered cheeks peeking from under her immodest, revealing, uncomfortably tight shorts.

Mid pour, the crowd let out a cheer. Their glee filled the air in one sudden pulse. Looking straight up at the large flatscreen, the first batter just pulled off a base hit in the bottom of the

eighth. Setting down the now full glass, she let out a cheer. Whipping around, she raised one arm, jumping up and down in triumph. Her modest yet well-proportioned chest moved with tantalizing subtlety under the tight, black muscle shirt bearing the restaurant's logo: Beachers-Bar, Food & Cheer!

"Hell yessss!" she said, watched by those now admiring her cheerleader impression with equal intensity as the game moments before.

Bob felt a hand slap his arm. Turning, Harry gleamed with pride.

"Didn't I say they could pull this off!" Harry then said.

With a smile now on his face, Bob nodded, watching Kimberly return to the taps. At least things were looking up.

She placed Tony's over-foamed drink in front of him. "Here you go, handsome." A compliment, wink and smile added to his order. Tony was a sucker for that and she knew he would give her a big tip. Despite the uncomfortable vibe his eyes gave off, this was business. Turning back around, she glanced up. The lower left side of one of the screens displayed a small caption showing the score as five to three, bottom of the eighth, no outs, a runner on first. Number 6 Ty Bond now at bat, with Mat Lumus on deck and Percy Peralta pitching on the mound. She listened as the announcer went on about their playoff hopes resting on what might happen next.

A sudden, compelling urge rolled over her. She felt her eyes flare, springing wide without effort on her part. Her left hand clenched into a fist. Remaining fixed upon the screen, she drew a few shallow breaths.

Spinning around and pointing at her regulars, she moved away. "I need ta visit the little girls' room. So be good till I get back."

“But ya might miss something,” Harry said, leaning back with arms crossed.

“Oh Harry.” Kim strode towards the back of the kitchen, heading to the employee break area and bathroom. “Bet they pull it off. Six to five with a whole inning to spare.”

“Ahem!”

“Hell yeah!”

“Let’s hope so.”

“Hurry back Kim...”

Those hearing her voiced a few comments. Some gave her backside another look as she stalked away.

First, she retrieved her purse from the break room. Next, into the bathroom as the crowd erupted again. Inside, their jubilations shot through the not-too-soundproof door. Sitting her black pleather handbag on the sink, she then rummaged through it, seeking her cell phone. But not the good one. Not the multi-generation, touch screen phone with all her favorite, hip social media icons on the main screen and unlimited text and calling. That she kept elsewhere. Instead, she produced a small, maroon-colored folding phone, the type displaying only the time and date on the drab, plain, monochrome screen. A simple device. The one only her eyes ever saw. If her friends discovered it, the word dork would come to mind.

She gazed into the old mirror above the sink. Her hazel eyes stared back with blank resolve. So too her young face, which bore no expression.

Flipping open the phone, she headed into the stall adjacent, closing the rickety metal door behind. However, she didn't sit. Instead, she leaned against the wall facing back out, peering through the narrow space between the stall door and the rest of the partition, making sure no one else came into the bathroom. It took only a moment to dial the eleven-digit number. She brought

the phone to her ear, whipping her head slightly to the side so her long, straight, blond hair didn't get in the way. With benign patience, she listened as the call went straight to voicemail at the other end.

Reemerging into the kitchen, sights and sounds of ecstatic celebration greeted her return. All the men and few women there not employees exchanged high-fives, hand slapping and hugs. The kitchen staff joined in the rejoicing. Those tearing away from their jubilation for a moment noticed her through their revelry and look of surprise on her face.

“What...” she said, approaching the bar. “What the—”

“You missed it Kim—”

“It was beautiful man—”

“Three run homer!”

Kim looked up at one of several televisions hanging over the bar. Similar displays of enthusiasm by the home team in their dugout and the crowds in the stands filled the screen.

“And you called it Kim!” Tony yelled, leaning over the counter, arms outstretched, hoping for a one-on-one hug from his favorite bargirl. “You must be psychic!”

She noticed the score on the bottom of the screen: six to five at the bottom of the eighth inning. The home team was now winning.

“Wow,” she said, unaware of Tony still waiting to thank her in his own way. “Go figure.”

#

The studio apartment held nothing of the personal touch. Spartan furniture dotting the room provided nothing more than a place to sit or lie down. The lone man using the bleak abode needed nor desired any comforts. No television, computer or internet adorned the dim room. The old air-conditioning unit barely kept the Texas heat at bay even on full blast. Even the bed where

he sat possessed only the bare necessities for sleep: single pillow, white sheets and thin blue blanket. Both bore stains no washing would remove. It was far more comfortable than the single chair adjacent the small table next to the stove.

And there he waited. Doing nothing but looking at old pics filed away on his deactivated cell phone.

An older man and woman on the screen stared back at him. Both smiled, bathed in warm sunlight, holding each other. A swipe of his thumb produced a young man, not much older than himself. Both bore the same sandy brown hair, pronounced chin and slender build. He wore the school's colors, its mascot blazed across the chest of the colorful jacket. Another flick and another pic. The young woman and he sat upon the grass. Both happy and carefree.

Bits of their last conversation popped into his head...

"Why are you doing this? Why... Preston!" she asked, her askance stare burned into his mind.

"I've told you. You don't want to understand—"

"Abandoning your parents, brother, life... ME!"

He closed his eyes. With one drawn breath, he exhaled and mumbled. A prayer would help him regain focus. He asked for patience and strength. The waiting. That irked him. Not what she or his family thought. Not what the future would think of him.

The sound of a vibrating cell phone upon the table cut through the air with the fury of a thunderbolt. He whipped around. Part of him wanted to dash towards it, thankful the word had finally come. Another part of him tensed up, afraid of another delay. All the while, the phone rattled away.

With a dying roar, the vibrating stopped.

He rose with cautious speed and glided towards the table. Halfway there the phone let out a small chime. Now towering over the tabletop, he took up the simple, flip-style cell phone, glancing at its small screen. One voice message received. His heart beat faster. His breathing moved from shallow breaths to a staccato pant. Without further thought, he flipped open the phone and pushed out the numbers to retrieve the belated message. With growing elation he repeated each word rendered by the monotone sender.

“After midnight here.... 1215 to be exact.... Watching The Next American Star on demand.... See you next week.”

He smiled. It was time.