

## Ultimatum

We stood side by side, and watched the building burn.

He was a child. No older than ten. The flames rose before us, the heat bare and intense, his tears drying as they fell.

“They’re all gone,” he cried. “Everyone was in there.”

I clenched my fists. It had happened again. The last time was so long ago, I thought maybe, just maybe, I was free, and it was all over.

I should have known better.

I put my arm around the child’s shoulder, and he sobbed into my jacket. I wished I could share in his pain, but I was numb and cold, despite the roaring fire. How would he cry, I wondered, if he knew the alternative?

I pushed the thought away. There was no point considering such things now that the choice had been made. I just had to live with the decision.

“Come on buddy,” I said. “Surely there was someone in there you didn’t like?”

My pitiful attempt at humor made the child cry harder, and I grimaced as the roof of the orphanage collapsed.

“They were all I had,” the child said. “Holly, and Ryan, and Tilly. And Marsha. But now they’re gone.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

I heard sirens. Firetrucks were on the way. They could put out the blaze, but none of the lives would be saved. They pulled up one by one, filling the grounds with flashing light, and jets of water attacked the flames. We watched until all that remained was a smoldering, blackened wreck.

Finally, the child was noticed. The firemen rushed over, followed by a pair of police officers.

“Are you alright, lad? Did you see what happened?” one of the policemen asked him.

“I was just standing here, and the building suddenly caught fire!” the child said.

“It seems impossible. But it must be true,” the policeman replied, nodding. The child was carried away by one of the firefighters, and the policemen returned to their

cars. No one looked at me. The process was complete, it seemed, and I was once again very easy to ignore. I turned from the rubble and walked down the long driveway of the orphanage. It was time to find out where I was.

A town was close by. Most of the buildings had a rustic quality and were very close together. The streets were cobbled, with cars driving on the left side of the road. *Must be England*, I thought, recalling the hills surrounding the orphanage, and the accents of the policemen.

I wandered until I found an inn, and asked the clerk to order me a cab to the nearest airport. She seemed to look through me, as they always did, and I needed to write down my request before she picked up the phone. Once the cab arrived, I gave the driver the same piece of paper, and he checked it repeatedly as we travelled. At the terminal I simply left the cab without paying. With the same invisibility, it was easy for me to walk through security to the plane that would take me home to Toronto. Onboard I found a free seat that was out of the way, and stayed awake the whole trip, trying not to think about the child's cries.

Once we landed, I found my way to the east end, where I lived with Esther and Sean, my wife and son. It was late at night, and I climbed unnoticed into bed. Not that the time would have mattered.

I sighed and stared up at the ceiling. When I was displaced, I experienced a period of semi-visibility that remained until I slept in my own bed. In that time, I could go where I wanted and do what I chose, and no one gave me a second glance. But lately, those distractions were unsatisfying. The weight of my decisions was getting heavier, and if I chose to stay *in-between*, it was to think, and digest the horror before I returned to regular life. And each return was getting harder.

The screams of those within the burning building still echoed in my ears. I could have saved them. But to do so, I would have needed to murder the child before me, with my bare hands. The victims of the fire had been far more numerous, their accumulated pain and terror far greater than anything the child would have felt. But at least I hadn't been able to see their eyes, feel their touch. I chose to save myself, more than them.

It was far from the worst thing I'd done.

Knowing then I would never be free, I closed my eyes, and let sleep overtake me.

The next morning, my day began as if I had never been gone.

I ate breakfast with Esther and Sean, before they went to work and school. My job was done from my computer at home, and I spent the morning in meetings. I went for a walk after lunch to break up the day. Then more work, until Sean returned. A few hours later Esther returned as well. Together we went to the park, and played soccer with a few of Sean's friends and their parents. Then we came home and watched a movie. Once the movie finished, we all went to bed.

There was no happiness in the calming normalcy of the day. It had been so long between the last Ultimatum, I had convinced myself they were finished, and I was free. It was only a matter of time until the next one. Every time I closed my eyes was a gamble. Either I would wake up where I had fallen asleep, or I would be somewhere very different, with a terrible decision before me.

Praying for a morning as ordinary as the last, I held Esther close, and shut my eyes.

It was three months before the next displacement.

Such a length of time was cruel. I almost let myself relax and get into a routine. I had been with my friends the night before, watching the baseball game. Esther had stayed home with Sean, and they were both asleep when I arrived. I went to bed with little thought, and woke up somewhere unfamiliar.

I was in a hospital, and my clothes were the same as always during the Ultimatums: brown t-shirt, rain jacket, and jeans. The same I'd been wearing the gloomy day all of this began.

Two beds were before me, divided by a curtain. On the left was a woman who looked to be in her seventies, with sullen features and wrinkled skin. On the right was a young boy, frail and thin, all his hair gone. I waited as the instructions appeared in my head like an unwanted thought, always with that odd, jovial tone, as if the speaker imagined this whole thing was a joke.

*“The old woman lives for one more year and makes the world a better place. Guaranteed. The young boy lives, and his life is full, but flawed. He’ll probably mess a few things up, hurt people, you know. The other you have to kill. What would you do?”*

The instructions faded, and I rubbed my temples. The choices were always like this. Someone must live, and someone must die. Young and old, the many or the few, how far are you willing to go to save them, on and on and on. And the choice had to be made quickly.

Now, the decision. Neither looked very healthy, lying in these beds. The old woman would only live for another year, but somehow “make the world a better place.” The young boy would live a flawed life, whatever that meant. I would never know.

Which was I more willing to kill? Which outcome felt more justified, more balanced? I felt a tingling in my fingers and feet, and the air in front of me trembled. I had to decide now.

Hastily I moved to the old woman. She would only have a year left, whereas the young boy would live a full life. I took a pillow in my hands. In that moment I hesitated, and changed my mind. In her final year this person would make the world a better place, somehow, and that was something worth preserving. There was no knowing what kind of awful person the young boy could grow up to be. I at least had one form of certainty, and decided to take it.

I threw the curtain aside and stepped beside the boy. He was small, barely older than my own son, and looked to be sleeping peacefully. Heart pounding and stomach turning, I smothered him with the pillow.

The monitors screamed, and nurses rushed in. Following them closely was a middle-aged couple, undoubtedly his parents, and they screamed in grief. Beside them the old woman stirred, tears falling from her eyes as she realized what had happened.

Jaw clenched, I left the room, and moved through the hallways. Again, I was all but invisible to those around me. I mulled over my choice. I knew I shouldn’t. Such a thing was redundant with a curse like this. Had I truly made the right decision? The boy’s family had been utterly devastated. I should have taken that into consideration. If the old woman had died, it wouldn’t have been as much of a shock. No matter how much “good” she could have accomplished. The kid had a full life ahead of him! He didn’t deserve to

die so soon, before he'd been given the chance to explore, to prove himself! Guilt tore through me, and in the waiting room, I roared in frustration, overturning chairs and tables. No one even looked.

It would take time to recover from this one. I stumbled onto the street, the people in the waiting room noticing my carnage as I left. The streets were busy, bustling with cars and life. Tall buildings were all around, yellow taxis, bright billboards, people in suits and ties, American accents. I was somewhere in the United States.

I saw a bottle shop nearby. My mind an anguished blur, I threw open the door, and took the most expensive bottle of rye I could see from behind the counter. The clerk simply moved out of my way. Stumbling through the streets, I drank straight from the bottle, reveling in the burn. Soon, the oblivion would come, and I would have peace, if only for a little while.

I raved and bellowed and broke things as I drank, invisible to all, disappearing from anyone's senses the moment I appeared. Soon the rye was gone, and my grief spent. I was sick to my stomach in the middle of the street, then took food directly from the kitchens in restaurants. I found a hotel and slept on the lobby couch, having no energy to steal a key and find a room, though I could have taken any in the city I wanted.

I woke with my head pounding. I looked out the hotel window to the busy street and rushing traffic. A hit from one of those cars or trucks could kill me, but it would only be a brief end to my misery. I had tried, dozens of times, and always re-awoke at the end of the last Ultimatum I had completed, or at its beginning, if the choice had yet to be made. One of many cruel edges to this curse.

Sighing, I realized there was nothing to do but go home. I could stay *in-between* for a time if I wanted to, but if I delayed too long, the true menace of the curse would reveal itself. I shivered at the thought. Getting my bearings, I realized I was in New York City, and chose to take a bus back. The drive to Toronto was about twelve hours long. Enough time for me to meditate, and search for some form of peace.

They were both asleep on the couch when I got home, and beautiful. My only respite. The only constant I could rely on in the mad turmoil my life had become. Would I be freed when I finally grew old and died? There was no way of knowing. The only relief was the love of my family, who were completely unaware of the ways I suffered.

For every time I tried to talk to them about what was going on, their eyes went blank, and in those moments, I was invisible. Then, as soon as I stopped talking about the curse, I would reappear in their senses, as if I had never been gone. The nuances of this thing were insidious, and determined to keep me alone. I had accepted this truth years ago.

Longing to be seen and heard once more, I climbed upstairs to bed, and fell deeply asleep.

I awoke the next day in the same clothes. The significance of this didn't strike me immediately. But within moments I was in a panic.

The Ultimatum was occurring in my own home.

I was alone in my bedroom, lying on a fully made bed, everything arranged too cleanly, too perfectly. Never had Ultimatums occurred simultaneously like this. I sat up, shaking, and went downstairs.

Esther and Sean remained beside each other on the couch, eyes closed as if sleeping. I heard the damnable voice in my head, clearer than ever.

*“Ok, got a real messed up one for you. You're going to hate me, I know it. Wife or kid. One's gotta live, the other's gotta die, and you have to do it. Who are you gonna choose?”*

“I won't,” I said. I looked at my family with love. The suffering would be unimaginable. But for them, I would do anything. I sat on the floor and hugged myself.

The space in front of my eyes wavered as it had years ago. I had been walking home in the rain when I blacked out, and woke up somewhere far away, with the first choice before me. I thought it was some hallucination or dream. If so, it was utterly convincing, and from that day my curse began, with all its patterns and nuances.

The face materialized when I refused an Ultimatum, forming like a translucent projection in the air, and was laughing, completely unaware of my existence. A man, dark haired and bearded, no older than twenty-five. A face I hated more than anything. Then his voice in my head, urging me on.

*“Come on, what's your pick?”*

Then another faceless voice, as if coming from somewhere behind me, that always accompanied the vision.

*“Dude, what the hell. That’s some messed up shit. This is just getting personal.”*

And now came the true consequence of the curse. Whenever I refused to decide, the face would stand still, as if the projector had paused, and I would feel as though I was being split apart, cell by cell, in dire, excruciating slowness. It started as a tingling in my fingertips and toes that evolved into a burning sting, one that worked its way through my arms and legs and into the rest of my body, growing deeper and more intense every second. No matter what I did it would not leave until I made a choice, and would reappear if I stayed too long *in-between*.

This time I resolved to be strong. There was no way I could make this choice. The other Ultimatums had been horrifying, but I could always return to the comfort of my family. Without them, I was lost. So I gritted my teeth, and endured the rising hell.

The agony crept into my shoulders and hips. I sat on the floor, refusing to cry out. The face of the Ultimatum Giver remained frozen in coy mischief as the fire poured into my chest and stomach. This was the furthest I’d ever gone before my resolve broke and I eagerly made a choice. Tears streamed as I resisted still, and the pain sunk deeper.

It flayed my organs and bones, like thousands of tiny, red-hot knives, and I felt as though my liquified remains ought to be seeping through my pores. But there was no mark, no indication of the unceasing torment. It crept up my neck. I tried to steady my breathing as it moved through my jaw, my teeth feeling as though they were breaking apart. I finally cried out. Then through my nose and eyes and into my skull, a vibrating, incendiary, horrifying feeling, until the crown of my head was consumed, and every part of me was a receptor for unspeakable anguish.

I could take no more.

Mind raving, I got a knife from the kitchen and stood before my family. One would have to die for this to end. Or perhaps both? That way, only *I* would have to live with the pain of their loss. Yes, it was the kindest, easiest way!

I looked at their beautiful faces. I knew I would have to be quick, or else the Ultimatum would end while the other still lived. I raised my arm, shaking with anticipation.

And turned the knife on myself.

The blade skewered my heart. I fell to the floor, bleeding and convulsing. I knew this wouldn't end the Ultimatum. I would just wake up at its beginning, and the process would start again, though I would be spared from the pain for a time. Yes, this I could do. I would never be able to take their lives. But I would be able to take mine, over and over, until the world's end or my own madness. It was a price I would happily pay to keep them safe. I smiled as life faded from me and the pain finally dissipated. I drifted as if falling asleep, uncaring, blank, and free from suffering, if for just a short time.

So began my new curse.

It was as I imagined it to be. I woke in my bed, heard the instructions, and saw the face. Downstairs was Esther and Sean. They looked so peaceful in their stasis. I grimaced as the pain consumed my body, digging and sparking and grinding as it moved, worse than electricity or fire, worse than blades or nails. I endured. But never for long. Every time, something within me broke, and I ended it. I used various tools with my house to commit the act. Knives, drills, walls sockets. I found there was little difference between them, and no fear. Just a desperate need.

Every re-awakening I wondered if I would break the cycle and take their lives instead. The frozen, floating face with its infuriating smirk was always before me, and each time, I refused to give it the satisfaction. I would rather experience this repeating torment, over and over, than enact the Ultimatum. It was the only way.

As the cycle repeated, I learned how much time I had before my psyche was pushed beyond its limits. About half an hour. I began to get creative with the time. I would run from the front door, seeing how far I could get. I reached the lake, and then drowned myself. I got to the highway, cars honking and swerving around me all the while, before throwing myself into traffic. I ran downtown, raving beneath the city lights, terrifying those around me, and died at the subway station. But soon these distractions lost their appeal, and I remained home to suffer with dignity.

How long had it been? How many times had I died, re-awoken, and died again? Hundreds? Thousands? Tens of thousands? It no longer mattered. This was my reality now. Whenever I wondered why, I looked at them on the couch, preserved and perfect, and stared at the floating face, my eternal enemy, my madness, my anchor. I remembered it was all because of him, whoever he was, and his absurd challenges. No longer would I



play along. No longer would I put innocent people through needless anguish and heartbreak. I would bear this now, for my family, and for anyone else caught in the horrible choices I had to make. I suffered for them all.

Through the cycles I did not hunger and did not tire. Not in the conventional sense. But a new weariness was setting in, one that could only be attributed to age, and a wearing of the spirit. I felt old, though my body was young. I had endured so much, and continued to do so. There was no longer any fervor in the suicides. Just a duty, a methodical precision.

I woke from a cycle, one of thousands, perhaps more, and moved to the kitchen to get a paring knife. Then I sat in the living room chair facing Ester and Sean. The spot had been chosen countless cycles ago to ride out the pain, until it was time to reset. The knife sat on my knee, ready to be jammed into the base of my skull at the back of my neck, a quick way to enact my false death. I sat, waiting for the pain to begin, as it always did.

I felt tingling in my fingers and toes. I breathed in and out, eyes closed, embracing the familiar feeling as it crept through me. I regarded each nerve and cell as they were engulfed in agony, but didn't move from my spot, didn't thrash or rave, as I had done countless times before. The pain washed through me, horrifying as always. But I just let it be. I breathed as it moved into my chest, up my neck, and to the top of my head.

My hand twitched. This was a familiar breaking point. But I was tired. So unbelievably tired, in a way that no sleep could ever satisfy. So I kept my eyes shut, and left the knife on my leg. Behind my eyelids the smirking face could still be seen, but my anger and hatred were spent. I would no longer fight. I would accept, and maintain this vigil.

Time lost all meaning as my sense of body vanished, until I was just a floating ball of grinding fire, watched over by the frozen, translucent façade of my adversary. The flames raged, screaming and tearing at me from within, but I gave them no power. I just sat, feeling it all, for longer than I could tell.

And the fire began to change.

The biting spikes diminished, giving way to a new sensation. One that seeped from within my head, down my neck, into my chest and stomach, through my hands and feet, until it was all I knew.

*Bliss.*

Radiant, euphoric, and pure. Not in place of the pain. The bliss *was* the pain. Just seen from a new angle. The way it always had been.

I tried to open my eyes, but they were gone.

I was being pulled elsewhere. My consciousness was not returning to the body I knew, but inhabiting another, one distant and unfamiliar. My old self faded, and I awoke with a new frame of mind, new perspectives, and new memories. The smirking face remained before me, gaining colour and opacity, and now, beginning to move.

I was at a bar, drink in hand, sitting across from my friend. We had known each other for years, coming here regularly for beers and banter. He was looking me in the eyes, smiling devilishly beneath his beard.

“Well, what’s your choice?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think I’m giving you one this time.”

“What! You have to! You said, and I quote, ‘I’ll always answer your questions. Even though they’re dumb, they pose interesting moral dilemmas I want to test myself against.’ End quote.”

“You know how drunk I was when I said that? Now I’m saying something different. I can’t choose between my wife and son. There’s no way. It’s been interesting, but I’m done with all these crazy, messed up choices of yours.”

He laughed. “You’re taking this way too seriously. It’s just a game! One that gets you thinking in new ways. It’s fun!”

“Sure, fun for you maybe. But I’ve had enough. Words have power, you know that? Lately, I’ve been thinking more and more about the true implications of these questions, imagining if someone had to make these choices. Do you have any idea what that would do to a person? It’s insane to even bring ideas like this into the Universe. Where do you even get them from?”

“I couldn’t tell you. They just pop into my head, and I’ve gotta share. But if they’re making you this uncomfortable, I’ll stop asking” He shook his empty beer bottle, and grinned. “Next round’s on me for all the suffering I put you through, how about that?”

I raised my glass. “Cheers, ya maniac.”

He laughed as he stood, and the world faded into oblivion.

I awoke in bed.

Sitting up, I saw everything was as I remembered it to be, all that time ago. My wife slept soundly beside me. The room was arranged how we liked it. I was wearing my bed clothes. I waited. No faces, no voices, and no tingling in my hands or feet. The air seemed lighter, more comfortable. Esther rolled over sleepily.

“What is it?” she mumbled. I couldn’t help but smile.

“Nothing, love. Just happy about the choices I’ve made.”

Sleep returned easily. And from that day on, always did.