

The Last Fare

By Sam Beach

The Situation

Most people remember where they were when notable events happened: both Kennedy boys were shot, King was assassinated, Armstrong set foot on the moon, the Berlin Wall came down, and the Twin Towers were attacked. And then came the 'Big Announcement.'

I was on St. Clair Avenue, picking up another drunk fare when the President broke into TV and radio. I remember his voice shaking, just a little. Like your doctor telling you that the disease had spread, and you didn't have much time. He seemed to be apologizing for the bad news, as if he should have been able to stop it. For reasons the scientific community couldn't explain, the dwarf planet Ceres broke from its orbit in the asteroid belt and headed to our little blue oasis in the solar system. I thought the dinosaurs were lucky. They had no idea how little time they had left. We had six months. A hundred and eighty days to strut and fret upon our stage, then to be heard no more.

That news came one hundred and seventy-nine days ago. I'm surprised we held it together as well as we did. Given our violent tendencies, I thought for sure once Ceres arrived, it would find nothing but a burned-out mess, void of life, save the stragglers who managed to outwit the seething masses. Maybe—seeing she couldn't cause the mass destruction she intended—she would pout and go home like a bully denied his chance to torment the new kid in class. Hopefully, those left would start over, make the right choices, and fulfill the promise humanity once held. But no. Facing obliteration, the world pulled together as one, set aside the petty squabbles which fueled war, hatred, and mistrust; as if our eyes had opened to our own folly, too late in the game to win it.

There would be no expert oil well driller and his noble crew to save the day. Ceres is no ordinary hunk of space rock. At 592 miles in diameter, astronomers classified it as a dwarf planet in 2006. Science had long accepted that the asteroid that ended the Jurassic world measured about six miles wide. Ceres—even if it lost two-thirds of its mass on the way in—would still be 200 miles around. Even the microbes would call it a day.

I don't want you to think we didn't try, that we just sat there with a happy hour grin plastered on our faces. The solution, feeble as it was, managed to do one good thing. It rid the world of its Nuclear Stockpiles. They knew we couldn't blow it up, but if we could detonate—at the same time, in the same general area—every single nuke the world powers had, maybe we could shift its path. Even a few degrees, at just the right point, would send it past us like a curveball headed over the plate, then dropping out of the strike zone for ball four, walking in the winning run. I remember watching the night sky when they detonated all those terrible warheads. Have you ever heard a large chunk of rock laugh? I think it's ticklish.

Where are my manners? You must think this is like having a drunk saddle up next to you at the bar and start pouring out his woes. The name on my License is Austin Curtis, but most of the cabbies call me A.C.—except for Harry, the dispatcher. Harry isn't good with names, so everybody is "Jerk Face" followed by a number. I'm Jerk Face Seven. He says that he's going to Hell anyway, so he doesn't have to be nice. One of those statements is wrong. You can decide for yourself which one. I've been working for Southland Taxi for about seven months. Got hired just before the big 'announcement.' I could go on about myself—there's certainly more to tell—but what's the use? My shift's about to start, and I've never been late.

Southland Taxi, December 10, 2018

"What the hell are you doin' here, Jerk Face Seven?" Harry said from behind the cage.

"Almost time for my shift," I answered, heading to the old gray time clock. It read 10:50 P.M., so I had another five before I could punch in. Company rules.

"Yer shift? Da fook makes ya think yer gettin' any fares tonight?" He motioned around the garage full of dirty yellow cabs. "In case ya been under a rock, dis is the curtain call."

Leaning against the cage, I could smell the Gin on his breath. "So, what are you doing here then?" Bloodshot hazel eyes narrowed at me. "Dat's my business, Jerk Face . . . Jerk Face . . ." His lips thinned.

"Seven," I reminded him. "Jerk Face Seven."

"I know who da fook ya are!"

The large clock on the wall chimed 10:55. "Time to punch in," I said, happy to end this conversation. The time clock always hesitated, more so tonight, as if telling me to go home. After a minute, I heard the 'clack' as it gave up and stamped my time on the manila card. Slipping it back into my slot, I walked over to the cage. "Keys, Harry." His head hung down, and for a moment, I thought he'd passed out until it slowly rose. Tears spilled down his cheeks.

"I'm here cuz I ain't got nowhere else ta go," he said, easing the keys through the slot.

Harry Kilgore had no family, at least none he ever spoke of. There were no pictures on the wall inside the small cage, no drawings from grade schoolers, or birthday cards. At that moment, I felt a deep sadness for the man. This old, decrepit garage was all he had. His entire life consisted of that eight-by-twelve wood-framed enclosure. And what a wasted life it had been. As I took the keys, I wondered just how many 'Harrys' would be doing the same thing tonight. Getting drunk alone, crying, sitting in their own self-made cages. I must have had a pitying look on my face.

He straightened a bit, wiped his face with his hand, and motioned to the garage door. "Git outta here. Last thing I need is some jerk face feelin' sorry fer me."

I nodded, made my way over to cab 35, unlocked the door, and started to get in when I felt a presence behind me. When I turned, Harry stood there with his hand out.

"It's been good knowin' ya, Austin."

We shook hands. "Likewise, Harry."

I watched him shuffle back to his cage, step up into it, and uncap a bottle of Jack Daniels. Climbing into the cab, I cranked it over, backed out, and waited for Harry to open the garage door. As it rose, I heard his voice over the PA.

"Thirty-Five out. Ten Fifty-nine P.M."

Once my cab cleared the exit, the door slowly went down, and I heard somebody set off a loud firecracker. At least that's what I'm going to believe.

Emmitt and Mister Brownie

My first fare, an elderly man cradling a small tortoiseshell kitten, shuffled down the sidewalk. I honked once. His weathered face broke into a smile as he turned and saw me pull up alongside.

"Can I take you somewhere, sir?" I asked, after lowering the window.

"Home," he said, bending over as far as he could. "Mister Brownie and I just want to get home."

Nodding, I put the cab in park, got out, and walked over to the passenger's side. Opening the front door, I noticed him hesitate and step back a bit.

"Don't fares usually ride in back?" he asked, giving Mister Brownie a reassuring head rub.

"Not tonight, sir." I held the door open for him. "Not tonight."

"Please call me Emmitt," he said, sliding into the seat.

"Emmitt, it is then," I said, closing the door. Walking back to the driver's side, I glanced up and saw the bright speck in the sky. The clock on the old Federal building struck midnight, its gong echoing through deserted streets. Not much time. The closer it got, the faster it would travel, as Earth's gravity tugged at the giant mass. "My name is Austin." I eased my six-foot frame into the driver's seat. "Where's home?"

"I have a small apartment over in Glendale. Serenity Senior Center. Are you familiar with it?"

"I am," I said, reaching over to shut the meter off. Noticing his puzzled look, I smiled. "Rides are free tonight, too." Pulling out onto the street, I reached over and gave Mister Brownie a chin scratch. "The Senior Center is quite a trip. How did you end up in the city?"

"I drove," he said, stroking the cat's soft fur. "I wanted to see the city, one last time." His head turned to the window as we rolled past deserted buildings. I could hear the ache in his voice. "I grew up here. Born eighty-two years ago, right over there in that run-down hospital. Once upon a time, I could tell you about every nook and cranny in this city. Now, it's all just . . ." his voice trailed off. Mister Brownie stretched out in his lap, gave a yawn, and curled back up. "Look at me, getting all teary-eyed over nothing. A few more hours, and there won't be so much as a cinder block left of anything. No one will ever know we were here. The good we did, the horrors we caused. It'll all be erased."

I didn't comment. We drove on in silence for a few miles, then Mister Brownie stirred, opened his green eyes, and let out a pitiful meow.

"He's hungry," Emmitt said, trying to soothe the cat with the tip of his forefinger, "and I don't have anything at home to give him. Maybe I should have just left him in the alley."

"He's a stray?" The look on my face must have been one of astonishment, and the old man laughed.

"Yes. My car ran out of gas over on Saint Clair. I figured I'd be able to find some, but all the pumps were empty, and I'm too damn old to go siphoning. I headed home. Knew I wouldn't make it, but at least I'd be moving when it hit. I heard him rummaging around the trash cans, so I picked him up, named him, and started walking. Only had him for about half an hour when you showed up." Mister Brownie suckled Emmitt's finger furiously, batting at it when nothing came out. "It's too bad this bastard rock couldn't hold off a few more weeks. Be nice to share Christmas with this little fellow. Bet he'd be a hoot climbing up into the tree, chasing wrapped balls, investigating every corner in my place. I have one of those electric fireplace heater things, the kind that really looks like a fire. It'd sure be nice to sit in front of it, listening to carols while the snow fell, and petting my buddy." A small tear ran down his cheek, landing on the kitten's head. "I couldn't let him die without ever knowing love. I just . . ."

I turned my head so Emmitt wouldn't see the effect that story had on me. "Don't you have any family here?" I asked at the window.

"Not here, no." Mister Brownie had fallen back asleep with Emmitt's finger secured in his mouth. "Wife's been dead some twenty-three years. She's buried over in Calvary Cemetery. I planned to stop on my way back, let her know we wouldn't be apart much longer." He shrugged.

"Calvary's on the way," I said. "I can stop if you'd like."

"Nah, no sense in it. I know that whatever hereafter there is, she's waiting on me, and I'll be seeing her soon enough." A small smile lit his face, then disappeared. "Far as kids go, I got five. Three boys, two girls, but they're scattered all over the world. I wasn't much of a dad. Too busy trying to make my mark in the world. Got six grandkids. Haven't seen any of them. There's always a price to pay, isn't there?" He faced forward. "How about you? You got any kids?"

I nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Do you talk to them?"

"I try. They don't listen." I turned the corner onto Blair Street and pulled up in front of the apartment building. Only one light shone, from a third-floor window. I figured that was his, the place with the fake fireplace. "Looks like you and Mister Brownie are home." I got out, walked to the other side, and opened the door. "Can I walk you to your apartment?"

"No, no," he said, waving me off. "I'm sure you got more important things to do tonight."

As he swung his legs out, I helped him up, steadyng his weary frame. Mister Brownie stirred and yawned, finally releasing his grip on Emmitt's finger. "Just a minute," I said, leaning down to open the glovebox. I always kept a few cans of tuna in there just in case I got hungry mid-shift. I handed him two and smiled. "Tell Mister Brownie that this is from Austin Curtis, cab number thirty-five." I reached down to pet him and almost broke down when he looked at me, those big green eyes filled with questions that would never be answered.

"He likes you," Emmitt said. "I like you too. Thanks for the ride, and the company." He gave me a one-armed hug, turned, and shuffled off, cooing to the small bundle of fur in his arm.

I watched him vanish into the doorway, waited until I saw his shadow cross the apartment window, then smiled. "I like you, too, Emmitt Richards. Peace be with you." Glancing at my watch, I sighed. Not long now. Might have time to catch a few more fares before heading to my spot on Davis Hill to watch the finale. Getting back into old 35, I backed out of the drive, turned, and headed toward the city.

The Sound of Silence and a six-pack to go

All the major cities worked hard at keeping their utilities running right up until the end. Cleveland was no exception. Lights, water, gas. All the comforts we had grown used to—and taken for granted—still did their jobs. You could even use an ATM, though the banks had dried up over a month ago. I stopped in at one of the local gas and snack stations, crossing my fingers that I might find a forgotten six-pack in one of the coolers. Clevelanders love their beer. The entire store had been cleaned out, the only sound coming from a pair of small ceiling speakers.

'Fools, said I, you do not know

Silence like a cancer grows

Hear my words that I might teach you

Take my arms that I might reach you

But my words, like silent raindrops fell

And echoed, in the wells, of silence.'

How true those words were. Too late now. I turned to leave when a thought struck. Maybe back in the storeroom, there might be one straggler. If so, it would still be nice and cold, so back I went, through the large white door. Nothing but concrete and steel greeted me. Wait. Over in the far-left corner, lying on its side. . . Could it be? YES! A full six-pack of ice-cold Budlite. Picking it up, I hightailed it out of the store, tossing a twenty on the counter. "Keep the change!" I yelled over my shoulder, smiling at the stupidity of it. I never stole a thing in my life and wasn't about to start now. I ran right into my second fare for the night.

The author with a bun

She looked to be in her early thirties, with brunette, shoulder-length hair and hazel eyes. As I ran out, she turned away from me, protecting the large swell of her belly. "Hey, mister, watch where you're going!"

"I'm so sorry, Miss," I replied, narrowly avoiding the collision, dropping my precious cargo on the cement walk. I bent over to rescue my friends when she turned back around. I straightened, and after a few seconds, she laughed, reached over, and gently closed my mouth.

"You'll catch flies like that," she said, resting her other hand on her stomach. I must have been staring for quite a while when she patted the top of her belly. "I know, ridiculous, isn't it?"

"Normally, no," I stammered. "Given the circumstances though . . ."

Placing a hand on her back, she winced. "I need to sit down." Finding a nearby bench, she eased down into it and blew out a tired breath.

After putting my beers in the back seat, I walked over and joined her. "How far along are you?"

"Not far enough," she said, turning to look at the moon.

Full and golden, it would have been beautiful if not for the other rock at its side. Tonight, that old moon would watch as its parent died, and this area of the solar system would end up with two hunks of dead rock, silently dancing in space. There would be no mourners.

"I thought the government offered pregnant women options," I said, watching her hands stroke the life inside her.

"They did," she replied, turning to look at me. "If you were far enough along, they'd induce, or do a C-section, so you could at least have some time with your baby. If you weren't, they offered free abortions and aftercare." Her eyes clouded over. "Thoughtful of them, no?"

I ignored that. No way I'm getting into that discussion, this late in the game. "You fell into the gray area?"

Her lips pursed. "I found out about two weeks before they had the big reveal. When they said we had six months, I thought about ending it, but held out to see if the solution they came up with worked. By the time it didn't, it was too late." She labored to stand with my help and rubbed her belly once more. "Thanks," she said, walking away. "I guess we'll head home."

"I can give you a ride. I'm a cabbie."

Peals of laughter broke the silence of the night. "Oh, that's rich. My God, I haven't laughed this hard in months. A cabbie, picking up fares on the last night we have on Earth!" Her laughter slowed to a mild chuckle. "And I thought I was a lost soul."

I smiled. I hadn't heard laughter, genuine or otherwise, in as many months as this woman hadn't given it. "The offer stands. It'd save you from having to sit down every few hundred feet." I watched as she gave it some thought.

"Okay," she said, heading back to me. "You got yourself a fare."

When I opened the front passenger door, she gave me the same look Emmitt had. "Everybody sits up front tonight," I explained, holding the door. "And no charge for the trip."

"Good thing," she replied, easing herself into the seat, her hand protecting the precious cargo. "I don't have any money."

Giving her a smile, I shut the door, walked over to my side, and got in. "Where to?"

"3985 Fleet Avenue. Since there's no charge, you can take your time and go the long route."

Nodding, I pulled out and headed West. "If I can pry, what were you doing in town tonight?"

"Taking care of my dad," she said, her eyes misting over. "I've been here for a couple of weeks. He was diagnosed with Alzheimer's early last year, and when it got bad, my brother and I put him in Horizon Place. They took great care of him, up until two months ago, when most of the staff left to be with their families. My brother Jimmy and I took turns every couple of weeks, coming in to stay with him. I don't drive, so Jimmy would pick me up, bring me in, and go home. When it came his turn, he'd take me home and come back." She looked at the floor. "He died around two this afternoon. I went to give him his mid-day meds and found him sitting up in bed, eyes clear, with a smile on his face. I knew that look. He was having one of his lucid moments. The doctors said those would come and go, but lately, he hadn't had one. When I tried to give him the handful of pills that had become his life, he just shook his head. 'No more pills,' he told me and gently pushed my hand aside. He looked at my stomach, set a trembling hand on it, and raised his eyes to my face. 'Name her Amy,' he whispered. 'Amy.' Then he shut his eyes and . . ."

I saw her fighting the emotions.

"Amy was my mom's name," she said, through choked back tears. "Anyway, I covered dad, said my goodbyes, called Jimmy to tell him, and to come pick me up. I didn't get an answer. Tried all day, then figured he'd just bugged out to parts unknown. He used to do that when we were kids, vanish for days at a time." She composed herself, turned to me, and smiled. "So that's how Amy and I got stuck in the city. I thought I could make it home on foot, but I didn't count on having to stop so much. Glad you almost knocked me down, mister . . ."

"Austin," I replied. "Just call me Austin."

"Okay, Austin. I'm Lisa. Lisa Walker."

When I first ran into her, I thought she looked vaguely familiar. Now I knew why. "Wait, not *the* Lisa Walker, the one who co-wrote that vampire novel, *The Rise of Seth*?"

Her eyes widened. "That's me. I tried to go the traditional publishing route but got nowhere for a year, so I just self-published it. You mean you actually read it?"

"I did. I thought it was damn good. You and the guy you wrote it with."

"Sam Beach," she replied. "But truth be told, he wasn't a real person. The Bloodstone Chronicles, of which *The Rise of Seth* is the first book, seemed so daunting a task that I created a separate persona to help me write them. It worked."

I nodded and laughed. "It sure did." I had a slew of other questions, but asked the most pertinent one. "Where's Amy's father?"

Her face turned to stone. "In Hell, I hope, or soon to be. Son of a bitch bailed on me as soon as they told us we were all screwed." Her eyes closed, and she softened a bit. "We were married for ten years. I wanted kids, but he didn't seem too keen on the idea. Not that we didn't try . . . a lot. Ah, hell, maybe I would have done the same thing in his shoes."

"I doubt that," I said, rounding the bend onto Fleet Avenue. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her shrug.

"Doesn't make much difference now, does it? Who did what to whom. All I know is that my daughter and I are going to go out together. As one." Both hands rested on her stomach. "Grandpa's waiting to meet you," she whispered. "You'll love him."

I found the address, pulled up into the narrow driveway, put old 35 in park, and got out. She already had the door open when I got to her side, but I helped her out. "Let me walk you up the stairs," I said, seeing the steep front porch leading to her door.

Nodding, she let me take her hand, and we slowly ascended the ten gray concrete steps. At the front door, she took a moment to catch her breath. "Thanks for the ride and the help, Austin." She said, then planted a soft kiss on my cheek.

"Wait," I said, as she put her key in the door. "Don't go yet." Running back to my cab, I opened the trunk, fished around, and smiled. Closing the deck lid, I rushed back up the stairs, handing her a small wooden box with a gold crank protruding from the side. "Someone left this in my cab a few weeks ago," I said. "It's not much, but Amy should have a present, seeing that it's close to Christmas." The inscription on top read, 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. For Amy.'

She wound the crank, and the well-known tune chimed out in the crisp air. "It's even got her name on it. How?"

I smiled and shrugged. "Who knows? I think she'll like it."

Resting the music box against her stomach, her eyes widened. "She kicked. She KICKED!" Tears fell unchallenged now, spilling on her teal-colored shirt, as the tune played on. "Thank you. Thank you from the bottom of a little girl's heart."

I watched as she walked into the house, then set my hand on her door after she closed it. "You're welcome," I whispered to the screen. "Both of you." As I walked to my cab, I looked up at the night sky. The moon, oblivious to the event unfolding, grinned down at me while stars twinkled around it. Only the ever-growing sphere, rushing to keep its appointment with destiny, marred the beautiful curtain of night.

Through a clouded lens

The scene that greeted me when I got back into town was one I'd hoped not to see. A few overturned cars—several on fire, some smashed to bits—created an obstacle course I slowly wove my cab through. Buildings smoldered. Their old timbers, weakened by hungry flames, shuddered and gave way, sending brick and mortar crashing to the ground. A semi, flipped on its side, blocked my path. As I put the old 35 in reverse, a man's voice rang out in the destruction.

"What was it all for?" he screamed. "Is this our reward? Erased from the cosmic register, like some misplaced decimal point in an accountant's ledger?"

I saw him in my rearview mirror, railing at the sky, his right fist clenched and shaking at the moon. In his left hand, an empty bottle, and as I drew closer, I could just make out a Golden label pasted across its width. The man staggered, turning when he heard the hum from my engine, and threw the empty in my direction.

"A curse on all who live!" he cried out, falling to his knees in a sobbing heap.

Stopping my cab, I put it in park, shut it off, and removed the keys. No sense tempting fate. This poor soul would be fare number three, and it wouldn't do to have my trusty steed ripped off before I could even get him into the back seat. The bottle, having missed me by a good ten feet, rolled away without breaking and came to rest against the curb. Walking over, I picked it up and smiled. "Glenmorangie. 18 years old. Exquisite taste, sir," I said as I approached him.

His head rose, and he looked from side to side, trying to figure out which one of me was real. "What?" he said, after settling on the right one of us.

"18-year-old single malt Scotch from the Highlands. You have excellent taste. Let me help you up," I said, extending a hand to him.

"Ferk you," he said, slapping at my hand. He missed. "I dun needsh your helph." His words, just a moment ago, clear and well chosen, turned to Robin Williams imitation of a back-alley wino.

"I think you do, my friend," I said, leaning down to pull him up.

"Wha fur?" he slurred, trying to will his body to stand. He failed. "Ish all gonna be over shoon. Shtand...sith . . . lay. What diffrensh does it make now?"

Catching him under the arm as he threatened to slip back down, I slowly edged him over to my cab. "Come on. I'll take you home. Where do you live?"

He broke from my grasp, leaning back against the rear door. "Get jer handsh off me," he said, indignation filling his voice. "Yew dun touch me, or I'll shue!" Waving a finger in my face, he cocked one brow. "An I know lotsha good layers...loiersh...atterniesh." The absurdity of what he'd just said must have dawned on him, and he convulsed in fits of laughter. "Oh, thatsh great. We... we're all gonna die, but I'mma shue you."

I joined him in laughter. It felt good to do so. Reaching for the door handle, I steadied him again. "Well, I'd better find a good attorney, too, then."

Abruptly, he grabbed my shirt, his laughter replaced with heart-wrenching tears. "You dun unnshtand. I'm too young ta die. I got my whooole life ta liver." He nodded. "I was gonna be rish. Own my own tek company. Then my old man getsh shick. I dint wanna take care of him . . . I dint, but then they came out an told ush about thish BIIIG space rock, and how we're all dead. I wentsh ta shkool for four yearsh." He held up his hand in front of my face. "Count 'em four. One...two..." his eyes tried to focus, "and two more. Thash four. I had offersh from BIIIG companish. Then, thish...thish SHIT happensh." He leaned close enough to give me a breath buzz. "Now I can't even gets a job in a freakin DELI!" He shook his head. "Ish not fair."

I watched his face turn pale and stepped aside just in time, as he wasted good Scotch all over the asphalt.

"Okay, let's go," I said, opening the door. "I'll get you . . ." He flopped face down into the back seat, alcohol sedation taking over. "Oh joy. Now what will I do with you?" Patting him down, I found his wallet and opened it, smiling as I replaced it. "I know just where to take you." Sliding him the rest of the way in, I closed the door, hopped into the driver's seat, and headed out of the city.

As I pulled into the narrow driveway, I heard a groan from the back. "Just in time, sir!" I said, shutting off old 35 and heading around to the back. Opening the door, I reached in, slid him to me, and wrapped one of his arms around my shoulders. "Come on, let's get you inside before it's too late." I snuck a glance at the sky. A couple of hours tops. As I dragged him to the steps, his head bobbed up, and his legs stiffened.

"No way," he said, hoarse but somewhat clearheaded. "I can't go in there. She . . . she'll kill me. Please...."

"No, she won't," I reassured him as we climbed the steps. "In fact, I'll bet she'll be overjoyed to see you." When we got to the door, I propped him up off to the side and rang the bell.

A minute passed before the door opened. "Austin? Did you forget something?" Lisa asked. Surprise turned to shock, then to joy as I brought her brother into view.

"I found something you thought you'd lost," I said. "He's had a rough night, so be gentle."

Tears rolled down their cheeks as they wrapped their arms around each other. Jimmy touched her belly. "How is she?" he asked.

"Amy." She said, covering his hand with hers. "Her name is Amy."

I watched Jimmy's shoulders heave. "Sis...dad....dad's...."

"I know," she replied. "I was there when he went. I tried to call you, but you didn't answer, so . . ."

His head lowered, and he started to speak, but she stopped him with a finger against his lips. "It doesn't matter now. You're here, I'm here, Amy's here. Go inside. I'll be there in a minute."

He turned, looked at me, and nodded, then walked in.

"I don't know how to thank you. I'm typically good with words, but . . ."

"It's part of my job," I replied. "Page 18 of the cabbie's handbook. Find lost sheep, bring them home."

She smiled, leaned over, and kissed my cheek again. "Thank you, Austin Curtis. Maybe we'll see each other in the . . . whatever."

"Maybe we will," I said. "Maybe we will."

As she closed the door, I headed down the stairs and glanced up again.

"I think I can squeeze in one more."

The last fare

Cruising down East 17th Street, I spotted a young boy sitting on the steps of Saint Peter's. He looked to be around eight or so, wearing a light blue Cleveland Indians jacket, jeans, and tennis shoes. I pulled to a stop at the curb and rolled my window down. "Are you all right, son?"

He looked at me but didn't move. "I'm a little cold."

I got out and walked over to him. "What are you doing out here all alone? Are your mom and dad inside the church?"

Giving me a cautious look, he shook his head. "Nobody's in there. Gates are locked and, well, I came down here to talk to God. But I guess he's closed now."

In my mind, there was never a good reason to have locked gates on a church, especially this morning. I pulled on the heavy padlock and sighed. "I'm Austin," I said, taking a seat on the cold steps beside him. "What's your name?"

He put some distance between us, blue eyes darting around. "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers. Mom says bad things can happen."

I couldn't really argue with that. Unfortunately. "She's right, they can," I said, blowing into my hands. "But sometimes good things can happen too."

His head tilted, sending a bit of sandy blond hair over his forehead. "Like what?"

"Like you can make a new friend. Friends are important."

He glanced up at the moon, a confused look on his face. "I don't get it, Mister Austin. What goods making a new friend if we're all gonna die soon?"

The brutal logic of children.

"I don't know the answer to that. I guess to feel connected to someone else, even if it's for just a little while." It was the best I could offer.

"Okay," he said, scooting back to his original spot on the step. "My name is Robert Franklin Steele, but only my mom calls me that, and when she does, I'm in for it. Most everybody else calls me Bobby." He stuck out a small hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Bobby," I said, giving his hand a good shake. "What are you doing here alone?"

"I told ya, I need to talk to God. I wanna ask him to stop this."

"How do you know he can?" I asked, sneaking a peek at the sky.

Bobby's face crinkled. "Duuurr . . . cause he's God."

He had me there. "Bobby, don't you think God's heard from an awful lot of people in the last few months?"

"Probably," he replied with a shrug, "But he ain't heard from me so I gotta do my part. Wouldn't be right to expect other people to do all the work. My dad says we all gotta pitch in."

"Your mom and dad sound like smart people, Bobby. But you know, you don't have to be inside a church to talk to God. You can talk to him right out here."

He shook his head. "Nope. Momma says he gets better reception inside, and I don't want him to miss it. Like sometimes, when dad and me are watching an Indian's game, and the picture gets all fuzzy and the sound cuts out? Dad has to climb on the roof to adjust the antenna until it comes back. But when we GO to a game at the ballpark, there's no problem."

I smiled at the analogy. "I can see you're a huge fan, Bobby. I bet you really enjoy going to ball games, having a hot dog, maybe an ice cream."

His face fell. "I'm not allowed to have that stuff," he said, lowering his eyes. "Mom says none of it's good for you. I sure would have liked to try some ice cream." He looked back up at me. "What I really wanted was to see them win a World Series. They're so good, I thought they'd do it this year, but then my dad said the players had some sort of meeting and voted to not play anymore after those rockets didn't work." His eyes sparkled as he talked about his team. "See, that's why I just gotta get in there to talk to God." Reaching into his jacket, he pulled out a plastic dinosaur. "I mean, look here. This is a stegosaurus. A dinosaur. God gave them a hundred and fifty million years, but my biology teacher says we've only been here for a couple of million. Don't ya think we deserve at least a few more million, Austin? I mean, heck, if God can give us that, I'm sure my Indians would win a World Series, maybe even a few of them. And when I got older, I could have some ice cream."

A loud click rang out behind us, sounding like the hammer of a pistol. I stood up, shielding Bobby from harm, but there was no one. Peeking out from behind me, Bobby let go a 'whoop' and dashed through the now open gates before I could stop him.

"Bobby, wait!" I called out as he ran up the steps.

Once at the front door, he stopped and turned. "Mister Austin, can you wait for me? I won't be long, and I need a ride home. Momma's probably gonna tan my hide, but . . ."

He dashed through the twin doors before I could say another word. He was right, his parents were probably worried sick about him, but I doubted he'd get any kind of punishment if they were the good people he painted them out to be. After he vanished, I walked up to the lock, examining it carefully. No sign of tampering; as if someone had opened it with a key.

Fifteen minutes passed—I was going to give Bobby twenty, then go in and get him, when he came walking out. His face, ashen as if he'd not been in the sun for years, was devoid of expression. He stopped when he got to where I stood. "Can I go home now?" His voice shook a bit.

"Sure can," I said, leading him to old 35. "Did you get to talk to God?"

His face remained unreadable. "I just need to get home."

I started to open the front door, but he moved to the back one.

"I'm kinda tired. Can I sit in the back?"

I opened the back door, he climbed in, then turned, and gave me a weary smile. "My address is 9406, Reno Avenue."

"Gotcha," I said, closing the door. By the time I got around the front and sat down behind the wheel, Bobby curled up in the back seat, fast asleep. Silence filled the twenty-minute drive, with only the shallow breath from a sleeping child to keep me company. As I pulled into the driveway, a woman came running out of the house.

"Please help us!" she pleaded, with tear stains on her cheeks. "My son is . . ."

I placed my finger against my lips as I got out of the cab and walked around to the other side. "Shhhh," I said, opening the door slowly. "I have him right here." Reaching in, I hoisted his limp body up, resting his head on my shoulder.

"OH MY GOD! Is he . . .?" She couldn't finish that thought.

"He's just sleeping," I assured her, transferring Bobby over to his mother. "I found him on the steps of Saint Peter's. We talked a bit, he told me where he lived, and I brought him home." No need to explain anything else. What transpired was between the boy and his God. "You might want to just let him sleep through this," I said, taking another peek at the sky. "He'll be luckier than most."

Kissing his cheek, she nodded. "We were going to give him some Benadryl. He takes it for his allergies, and it usually puts him to sleep in about fifteen minutes. We don't want him to suffer." She looked at me and smiled. "Thank you for being so kind." Just then, her husband came out, and she shushed him. "Bobby's home," she said. "Let's go inside and get ready." As she headed up the stairs, he hesitated, looking at me.

"You're both very welcome," I said. "It's been my pleasure to know your boy, if only for a brief time."

He smiled, followed his wife and son in, closing the door behind them.

I watched the small bungalow for a minute, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Walking back to old 35, I opened the door, then stopped, and looked up. It was as if someone had hung a sign on the world, and this monstrosity wanted the first crack at it.

Going out of business sale.

One night only.

No reasonable offer refused.

Everything MUST go!

Showtime

The dirt path leading up to Davis Hill was almost invisible now, with the grass and overgrowth not taken care of in so long. It used to be the local 'Lovers' Lane' where the young crowd went to try their hand at the time-honored game of baseball. (Guys on offense, girls on defense.) Tonight, it served as a front row seat to the last show on Earth.

I always liked being the only person in a theater, so I'd wait a few weeks when the newest blockbuster came out, let the crowds dwindle, then pony up the nine bucks and enjoy the show from any seat I chose. Tonight's feature would be free and open to the public for a single engagement only.

The dash clock read four in the morning when I pulled up to my space, shut old 35 off, got out, and sat on the warm hood, leaning back against the windshield. The last report I heard on the radio said that Ceres had pulled even with the moon, but that was a good four hours ago. Given its speed, I put it about fifty-thousand miles away, or roughly an hour and a half. Just the right length for a good popcorn flick. Another thirty minutes or so, and it would look like we had two moons. It appeared close enough now so even a pair of binoculars would let you pick out the potted surface, scarred from the hits it had taken over billions of years. Bad case of cosmic acne, this one had.

Having forgotten my beer, I hopped off the hood, walked to the back door, opened it, and bent down to retrieve my early morning breakfast. I froze. There, lying on the floor, was Bobby's Stegosaurus. Reaching in, I grabbed it, along with my Bud Light, and hopped back up on the hood. Popping a top, I raised the can to the sky. "Here's to what was, and what will never be," I said, chugging the contents in one gulp. It sure tasted good, but that might have been psychological, knowing I wouldn't have any more shortly.

The low crunch of soil beneath slow rolling tires caught my attention. "Crap," I murmured. "I don't want any company." I slid the six-pack (down to five now) off to the side and turned to see who had the nerve to invade my personal space. A shiny blue cab pulled up alongside me, its windows blacked out, the gold stencil letters along the door telling me all I needed to know. Global Taxi Service.

On the roof, a brushed aluminum duty sign flashed the call number ICA11, then switched over to "OFF DUTY." Global Taxi ran the whole show. No cab, anywhere in the world, rode the streets without Global knowing its location. Talk about a monopoly. The rest of us were just parts of a larger whole. I had a few run-ins with Global's drivers. They were a cocky lot, in their white suits, vests, and blue ties. I figured this one came here to give me a hard time about knocking off early. I thought about hitting him with an empty beer can.

I scratched that idea when I saw who came out of the driver's seat. The man himself, I. A. Manford, President and CEO of Global Taxi. I almost didn't recognize him without the stark bleached suit

and shoes. Sporting jeans, a red flannel shirt left out at the waist, he could have passed for a lumberjack, if not for the snow-white hair and beard.

"You're a couple of weeks too early, Santa," I said. "Unless you think it's funny to pass out toys that kids will never get to play with."

He walked over, stood by the front of my cab, and put his hands behind his back. "You're upset. I get it."

"You get it?" I hollered, hopping off the hood after grabbing a fresh beer. "No, I don't think you do get it. I had four fares tonight. An old man who rescued a kitten, just so he didn't have to be alone when it happened. A pregnant woman who had to watch her father fade away, piece by piece, until there wasn't enough left of him to find. Now she has to face the end without ever looking into her daughter's eyes, without ever bandaging a scraped knee, or holding her together after her first heartbreak. That same woman's brother, unable at the end to reconcile the logic of being a good person. He had set a course for his life. A good one, a just one. I found him drunk and screaming, took him to his sister's, so they could face it together. Those were bad enough, but you know what's worse?" I grabbed Bobby's dinosaur off the hood and shook it in Manford's face. "A little boy who can't understand why God would give these lumbering beasts a hundred and fifty million years, but not save his own creation. A creation he claims to love more than even the Angels themselves. A little boy who has never tasted Ice cream or gotten a tummy ache from one too many stadium hot dogs. And yet, I found him on the steps of a locked church, wanting to get in. To beg that same God, that God who didn't seem to care, to not let this happen." I spun around and hurled the plastic dinosaur over the cliff's edge, then pointed up at the growing menace hurtling down from space. "This," I said, not caring to hide my anger any longer. "This is wrong. And the sad thing is . . ." I walked up to him, eye to eye. "You know it."

Unmoved, Manford shook his head. "I didn't do this."

A round of applause broke out off to the side, and we both turned to see who dared eavesdrop on a very private conversation. Leaning against a tree was someone I never thought to face again. His clapping continued as he stepped away from the tree and made his way over to us, giving me a wink as he stood at my side.

"Hey, bro. Long time no see. Loved your speech. Got me right here." He pounded his chest with his fist.

I could see Manford's jaw tighten. Apparently so did Luc, as his hands went up. "Whoa, now. I come in peace. Here I am in Sydney, enjoying the summer sun, when I get wind that you two are having a little pow-wow. I just had to see this for myself." Sporting shorts, sandals, and an 'It's five o'clock somewhere' T-shirt, he looked like a tourist who fell asleep on a ship and got up on the wrong side of the world. Slicked back black hair supported a pair of Ray-Bans, which he took off, folded, and stuck in his pocket. Looking around, he shook his head, then turned to me. "Cleveland? Really?"

"What do you want?" Manford asked, bringing his hands from around his back to rest at his sides.

"A moment with my bro, if you would," he said, turning and placing an arm around my shoulder. "C'mere. We need to talk." When we got about ten feet away, he stopped and stood in front of me, his back to Manford. "Okay, look. Like I said, your little speech back there . . . feels, bro. Feels. But it's not gonna work."

I tilted my head, crossing my arms over my chest. "And I suppose you can do better?"

He nodded, placing his hand on my shoulder. "Oh yeah. Problem is, I gotta get something in the deal. Make me an offer."

I laughed and looked up at the sky. "We don't have time for deals."

He glanced up as well. "Touché. All right, fine. See, I know which buttons of his to push. I can get him to at least consider it."

"Right. You think he'll listen to you, instead of me? Explain that, please."

His upper lip curled. "I've had a lot more practice. Besides," he leaned over and whispered, "I know where the bodies are buried. If you get my meaning."

I didn't.

He shook his head. "Or not. Look, just sit back, keep your trap shut, and watch." He started walking away, then turned and smiled. "Don't try this at home, kiddies. I'm a professional."

I watched as he slowly walked up to Manford, stopping with only a foot or so between them. Leaning my back against a tree, I listened.

"I never thought I'd see the day when you'd stoop to my level," he started.

Manford lifted a silver brow. "Beg pardon?"

"You're cheating."

"How do you figure that?"

"You must be getting senile." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "That isn't how this game is supposed to end, and you know it. I told you ages ago that this world would be mine, eventually. Now you're starting to see my numbers go up, and for the first time in your droll existence, you're feeling the heat. The tiny possibility that you might actually lose!"

Manford laughed. "You're delusional. As always."

"Am I? You know I'm right. The scales were tipping in my favor, and you panicked. Hit the reset button, tipped the chessboard over, however you want to label it . . . you cheated."

"As I told Austin," he replied, tipping his head in my direction. "I didn't have anything to do with this."

Luc shook his head. "Don't play semantics with me. Maybe you didn't fire that eight-ball here, but you saw a way to cancel the game before it ends. That's cheating. Cheating is bad." He leaned over into Manford's ear. "Bad belongs to me!" He took a step back and grinned. "You want everybody whispering behind your back, tossing a knowing look your way, as you walk down the halls?"

Leaning back against his cab, Manford smiled. "If you want to play the game out so badly, you stop it."

"Lame, dude. Lame. You know I can't do that. But I can do something else. I can let everybody remember what we both agreed they should forget. I can bring those memories back in living color. And if that happens . . ." I watched his eyes blaze with pent-up fury. "You think the first war was bad. You ain't seen bad." He backed up, took a breath, let it go, looked over at me, and smiled. "I'm headed back to Australia. Figure I got a couple of good hours yet." He looked up and whistled

low. "I'd say you all got maybe thirty, forty minutes tops." Turning back to Manford, he put a hand on his shoulder. "You do what you want. Just remember what you once told me. There are always consequences."

I watched as Luc walked back to the tree he appeared in front of, singing at the top of his lungs.

I come from a land down under
Where beer does flow, and men chunder
Can't you hear, can't you hear the thunder?
You better run, you better take cover.

He vanished into nothingness, and I made my way back over to Manford. "Well?" I asked, hands in my back pockets.

After a moment, he shook his head and got back into his cab.

As he started it, I walked over and rapped on the window. As it lowered, I bent down to see his face. "I endured the pain of dying the first time because you told me it was necessary. What's your excuse this time?"

He answered my question with only a low whir of the window motor, then he too disappeared. I stood there a moment, feeling a tear release from my eye, took a breath, and headed back to my cab. When I got to the hood, I frowned, looking all around old 35, under it, on the roof, then stopped and burst out in laughter. I turned my head as the sphere grew larger by the second.

"That son of a bitch stole my beer," I said to it as if there were anything it could do. "He stole my . . ."

6 p.m. Tuesday, December 25, 2018.

A gentle snow fell, coating everything in a blanket of pristine white. Everything that shouldn't be there anymore. The past two weeks were a flurry of activity, as the world tried to make sense of what happened. Or more precisely, what didn't. Science, at a loss to explain it, offered the only hard evidence it had.

Ceres missed us by 20,000 miles, heading off past the Sun. It hadn't curved, evident by there being no change in its extrapolated path. It was as if the Earth stopped in its own orbit, just long enough to let the dwarf planet pass, then started up on its merry way once more. Of course, that is physically impossible, given the laws of motion, gravity, and a slew of other technical terms no one could understand. They did warn, however, that as it passed the sun, the sun's gravity bent Cere's orbit into a new path, one which would once again threaten Earth. In 10,000 years or so.

Over and out

As for me, I had a manic couple of weeks as people began reassembling their lives. I must have pulled in four grand in tips alone. (Uncle Sam's gonna love me come April) People closed out their bank accounts, keeping the money hidden in their homes. Human beings. The eternal optimists. Southland Cab became a beehive of activity with Harry belting out one cab number after another,

as they left for fares and arrived for fuel. The crew even had names now. I guess that really was a firecracker I heard that night. Yeah, that's the ticket.

Christmas decorations went up in record time, and if you hadn't lived through the almost, you really wouldn't know anything had changed. Well, some things did. Saint Peter on 17th street took down their fence, leaving their doors open at all hours. They, and other churches around the world, were certain of how the Earth survived. God heard their prayers. He did, but it took the Devil to make him listen.

Little Bobby Steele had a whopper of a Christmas. Santa brought him an official Cleveland Indians bat, signed by the whole team, and season tickets behind home plate for him and his dad. He also got a new Stegosaurus to replace the one he lost somewhere. Christmas dinner consisted of turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing, corn, and for dessert, apple pie—with a scoop of ice cream. Bobby said grace, as he would every night for the rest of his life, ending with "Please God, let the Indians win the World Series."

Amy Dustina Walker was born at 12:05 on Christmas morning, the first of several babies to come into a changed world that day. Jimmy helped Lisa through her labor and doted on his new niece. She has another present waiting for her when she gets home. An email from Steiner and Roth Publishing. One of their agents had read 'The Rise of Seth' a week before the world found out it wasn't going to have another birthday. Now that the crisis passed, they want to know if she would be open to discussing a publishing contract. I think she will be.

I decided to check in on Emmitt Richards and Mister Brownie. Their apartment building had just begun filling back up, but his floor was still vacant, save the two of them. I got concerned when my knock wasn't answered. I tried the handle, found it open, and slowly stepped in. His place was neat and clean, decorations strung here and there. A small tree sat in the corner by the electric fireplace. Emmitt was right; it really did look genuine. A leather easy chair sat in front of it, reclined back, and I quietly moved toward it.

Mister Brownie was asleep in Emmitt's lap, the old man's hand resting on the cat's back. I touched his shoulder and sighed. 'Emmitt Richards, 82, has gone home to be with his beloved wife. He leaves behind five children, six grandchildren, and Mister Brownie, his companion of two weeks.' That's what his obituary would say if there were newspapers back in production yet. I called the Hospital, told them what I'd found, but that there was no real hurry. They were glad, as most of the staff had gone to mass, but someone would be there as soon as possible.

I reached down, petted Mister Brownie, and he woke, stretched, and looked at me with those big green eyes. He crawled up Emmitt's body, licked his face once, twice, then turned to me and meowed. It was a sound I will never forget. I picked him up, scratched his chin, and gave him a kiss on the head. "Let's go, Mister Brownie," I said, wrapping him in my coat. "I know just the place for you."

I took him back to the garage, presenting him to Harry. "Here ya go, Harry," I said, smiling as Mister Brownie curled up on his lap. "Now you won't be alone anymore." He looked up at me, not even trying to stop the tears. "Merry Christmas, boss," I said and turned to leave.

"Oh, wait a minute," he said, rifling through a stack of papers. "I got a special request. Guy called, said he'd be on the corner of Superior and 9th street. He wanted you specifically. I told him it might be a while, but he said he'd wait. Sounds like ya got a fan, Austin."

I took the slip of paper from him and tilted my head. Specials, as we call them, happen sometimes, but this was my first one. "Okay, I'm on it," I said, heading to old 35.

Harry wasn't paying any attention, being too busy looking online for cat toys, trees, and litter boxes. As I pulled out, he must have glanced up. "Thirty-five out. Two A.M."

As I rounded the corner of Superior, I saw a man standing by the curb, waving me down. I pulled up alongside, and he got in the back. No more front riders. Company rules. I flipped the meter switch, hit the "Occupied" light, and turned around. "Where to Mist—you have to be joking."

"Just drive around a bit, my good man. Don't be concerned with the meter. I'm good for it."

"Luc, what are you doing here?" I asked, my good cheer draining quickly.

"Just looking to take a ride around Cleveland. See what you find so . . . enticing about it." He smiled and waved his hand forward. "Toot-toot. You can't make any money just sitting here. Well, you can, but that's not right, is it?"

I shook my head and pulled out onto the deserted road. We made small talk. I pointed out several of the city's landmarks; some new, some old. As we got to Progressive Field, where the Indians play, he asked me to stop. He got out and walked slowly around the front. When he came back, I turned around. "What was that all about?"

"I wanted to see if the stories about a curse were true," he answered, flicking a bit of snow off his pant leg.

"Are they?"

"No. Just a run of rotten luck. But I think that'll change in 2022, new name and all. Call it a hunch."

I shook my head, and we continued the sightseeing tour.

"All right, I've seen enough," he said, after another half hour. "I'll get off here."

'Here' was one of the worst parts of town. Though Cleveland had made great strides in cleaning itself up, polishing a once tarnished image, there were still pockets of bad, like in every city.

"You sure?" I asked, slowing down. "This isn't exactly a good part of town."

As the old 35 stopped, he smiled, donning a pair of black leather gloves. "I'll feel right at home." He must have seen me roll my eyes and shook his head. "I'm considering taking a vacation of sorts. Maybe a year. Let the world heal a bit from the shock it almost had." He got out, walked to the front, and leaned in, handing me a hundred. "Just a year, mind you. Then it's business as usual. Keep the change." He started to walk away, then turned and came back. "Oh... and tell the boss he'd better start working out. I know I will." With a wink, he vanished into the frigid air.

"A year." I sighed and headed back into the heart of the city. "Maybe he'll get lost."

On duty

The streets are quiet now, but I'm out here, watching for fares, making sure lost lambs find their way home. The way it should be. The way it was written.

35 out.