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*March 9, 2047 |*

My name is Allen Levy Quincy. Age 58. Born May 6, 1989. Resident of Canton Number 3, formerly Seattle, Administrative Department of Cascadia.

This document, which may replace any will and testament I have made in the past, is the only intentional act of memory I have committed since the year 2029. I do not write because I am ill or because I leave much behind. I own a hot plate, three goldfish, my mobile, my Callebaut light, my Beretta M9, the furniture in this apartment, and a small library of eleven books.

I sit at my kitchenette island in this quasi-medieval, wired-by-ratification, post nation-state world, my Beretta on my left, bottle of R & R whiskey on my right, speaking to the transcription program on my mobile.

I was sober for so long. Eighteen years. I was sober through what seems to have been the worst of the die-off. Three and a half to four billion people, dead of starvation, thirst, illness, and war, all because of a change in the weather. The military called it a “threat multiplier.”

You break it, you own it—the old shopkeeper’s rule. We broke our planet, so now we owned it, but the manual was only half written and way too complicated for anyone to understand. The winds, the floods, the droughts, the fires, the rising oceans, food shortages, new viruses, tanking economies, shrinking resources, wars, genocide—each problem spawned a hundred new ones. We finally managed to get an international agreement with stringent carbon emissions rules and a coordinated plan to implement carbon capture technologies, but right from the beginning the technologies either weren’t effective enough or caused new problems, each of which led to a network of others. Within a year, the signatories to the agreement, already under intense economic and political pressure, were disputing who was following the rules, who wasn’t, and who had the ultimate authority to determine non-compliance and enforcement.

Despite disagreements, the international body made headway controlling the big things—coal generators, fossil fuel extraction, airplane emissions, reforestation, ocean

acidification—but the small things got away from them—plankton, bacteria, viruses, soil nutrients, minute bio-chemical processes in the food chain. Banks and insurance companies failed almost daily, countries went bankrupt, treaties and trade agreements broke down, refugees flooded borders, war and genocide increased. Violent conflict broke out inside borders, yet most military forces refused to kill civilians. Nation-states collapsed almost as fast as species became extinct. Eventually the international agreement on climate change collapsed completely, and the superpowers retreated behind their borders and bunkered down. The situation was way past ten fingers, eleven holes; it was the chaos that ensues after people miss three meals and realize there's no promise of a meal in the future.

Our dominion was over.

A group of leaders—politicians, scientists, economists, religious and ethnic leaders, even artists—people with a vision, called a secret conference with the remaining heads of state and emerged with an emergency global government, agreed-upon emergency laws, and enforcement protocols. The new laws included a global one-child limit and a halt to all CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The provision of food and health care to as many people as possible was prioritized, along with militarily enforced peace, severe power rations, and further development of renewable energy. The agreement was for one year, but it's been renewed every year for the past fifteen.

Why am I voicing all this? You already know it, I already know it, but I rehearse the events again and again, looking for what we could have done differently; there were so many

things, so many ways we could have avoided most of the deaths, but really, were we ever going to act differently? I pour another drink. I drink it.

I was sober through most of that history. I stayed sober when my ex-wife died of a deadly new variant of the hantavirus that had spread north, and I stayed sober when I took care of my sons. Sober even though they acted like I was the volatile element in their lives and looked only at each other when I spoke to them. When I left for work and listened at the door, they finally became animated and relaxed enough to be afraid of everything else in the world crashing down on them. I tried to be tender with them, to lay my hand on their heads, put an arm around their shoulders, but they'd wince or stay perfectly still. I was sober through all that.

But now I'm drunk.

Last week I went out and got a mickey of whiskey from the bootleg. This week, a bottle a night is barely touching it, so I went down to the corner. It was still the corner. I'm not fussy, I told the guy, just get me out of my mind. He hunched deep in his coat, causing his demi-gray ponytail to fan out at the collar. He sucked mucus in and horked, a gesture communicating both his contempt and camaraderie for his customers. Whole ecosystems have vanished but ...

Ambien, O.C.? I suggested. Triple C, anything. Walking away with four pills in my pocket, I passed a scattering of young women and men trying to get shelter in a loading bay from a wind that peppered us all hard with squally rain. They looked like they were waiting for a delivery. I felt sorry for them and hoped it wasn't long in coming.

I don't know what he sold me—something new: Mimosa. You'll feel mellow as butter in ten minutes, he said, with no weirdness. I dropped by the bootleg and bought a couple of bottles just in case. Took a slug, wrapped a sweater round one of the bottles so they wouldn't clank in my pack, and headed for home. I started to feel the relief of knowing I had something that would bring relief. A few blocks from my apartment I got dizzy, which happens periodically since my condition started. I managed to make it to a small park and lean against one of the scrawny trees the city planted to replace the ones that keeled over in the last windstorm. I lay my cheek up against its cool, wet bark and closed my eyes. I don't know how long it took for my head to clear, ten minutes, two hours, but eventually I opened my eyes

again. I was staring at the sparse grass at my feet. The earth between some of the blades began to move as pea-sized balls of dirt were pushed up from below. Then I glimpsed what was pushing the dirt—worms—purply-pink, the colour of cold lips.

They finished clearing out the entrances to their holes and popped out, eight of them, sticking up like baby fingers. They were a real demographic mix—from young to old, hermaphroditic to gendered, light pink to medium purple. They waved their stick arms in cheery exuberance and were almost endearing, if you can say that about worms. They smiled at me like they knew me, then glanced at each other in nervous excitement, and one of them counted off, *A one, and a two, and a one, two, three ...* They broke into song, harmonizing like a barbershop octet, with fake British accents:

*Allen Quincy, Allen Quincy,  
Don't be chintzy  
Drop your martyr  
Join the partyr!*

My mind started to thrash about inside my skull, trying to find any excuse not to accept. It was a nice invitation, and I didn't want to be rude.

*I'm working very early in the morning,* I said lamely. *I need my sleep.* The worms dropped their heads, crushed with disappointment, and nodded. I was scared. I'd met those worms before, but not for a long time, not for twenty years, not

since I was sober. I thought they'd be back; they're persistent little buggers. I wasn't sure I could hold them off this time.

I raced home, too alarmed now to try a pill. I flushed all four down the toilet, got my 9mm out of the closet, loaded it, put the safety on, and careened around my apartment, chilled with sweat, weeping, moaning, pressing against the walls. I sank to the floor on the cracked linoleum of the kitchenette, the Cracked Linoleum Trials of Allen Quincy, and cracked. My heart can live with what's in my mind—the heart is a cold and calculating organ—but my mind can't.

I couldn't bear another minute in my head, let alone the rest of my life. Like a man drowning I wrenched my mobile off its dock on the generator and croaked the words, obliteration, memory. The search engine spewed out useless entries: Hacktivists Breach Secret Service Servers, Buddhas of Bamiyan, Damnatio memoriae, Save Our Libraries, Harry Potter's obliteration charm. I voiced, mind-control, amnesia—the results were equally useless. I cried out, forget and scanned the first ten items: forget-me-nots, Lest We Forget, Forget about Location, Location, Location, etc. I scanned the next fifty. At sixty-one I almost smashed my mobile against the wall and obliterated it. I gargled out the words destruction of memory and there, item thirty-two, after Sands of Destruction GameFaqs, Take Back Our Cultural Memory, Orwell's *1984*, and Alzheimer's, the words popped out: "Writing destroys memory."

I felt in that instant that I had just read my possible salvation.

I clicked on the link and sank onto a kitchen chair.



Psycholinguistics scholar Marjan Rohani of Oxford University, in her work on long-term memory, language, and the hyper-connectivity of the internet, re-examines the implications of the assertion by ancient-Greek philosopher Socrates (as reported by Plato) that the process of writing weakens the mind. “It will implant forgetfulness in [men’s] souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks.” (Phaedrus, Plato)

Oh, for such a weakened mind! I poured a giant whiskey and water, downed it, put the Beretta down on the counter, and voiced the first entry into my mobile. Why wait? I’m not nostalgic.

*My name is Allen Levy Quincy. Age 58 ...*

I finished the bottle and blacked out.

This morning nothing seems clear. It’s as though a clumsy acupuncturist was probing my brain all night trying to activate some kind of release. It hurts, but there’s no pain. I text in sick to work—the second time in seventeen years—and stare out the window at a skateboarder on the parking lot roof across the street. His cardigan blows open as he spirals down the interior ramp and pops out into the street, does a quick kick flip off the sidewalk, and disappears.

The world right now—skater heaven. I try to eat a heel of bread, but the smell of the yeast turns my stomach.

How to proceed? This morning it's clear that the words *writing destroys memory* do not mean what they say. How could writing destroy memory? Socrates was indulging in hyperbole. I searched up more about him. He was indignant because the new technology of writing was making students less interested in memorizing poems, speeches, and information and thus weakening their ability to memorize. But memorization is not my problem. The memories that threaten my survival are bolted into the very tissue of my brain. Writing is not going to destroy them.

*Patience, Quincy, patience.*

There's something there. Something in the writing.

*Approach your destroying angels one word at a time.*

I'll approach with caution. If I go at my memories directly I'll never survive. I will take the longer road and lay an ambush. I will describe my world. I will tell you about Ruby.

I am creating this document because of her.

Spark to dynamite, grit in oyster, cutter of hair, Eve, Pandora, agitator, gestator of mystery, fomentor of change. Ruby.

There was blood on her teeth when she last walked out the door and gave me a look I am still trying to understand. That was over a week ago, when my old strategy for survival finally imploded.

Eighteen years ago I had also been this desperate. I was on antidepressants, going to group therapy, talk therapy, gaming obsessively online, drinking to blackout—nothing helped enough. The army shrink, a pleasant, amoral, over-worked man, told us that repressing the traumatic memories would not work, but obsessively rehearsing them was also damaging—wearing a groove in our brains, so to speak. One day he told us to write Impact Statements. He said we had to find a way to let ourselves *off the hook*. I walked out the door and never went back. The worms had arrived by then and were popping up randomly to serenade me. Suicide was folding back her sheets and giving me the come hither in an inventive variety of poses.

Then too I'd voiced variations on “forgetting” into the search engine, and the results had been equally useless. Finally I'd tried “remembering,” and had landed on an article from the early twenty-first century when governments still funded research not related to immediate survival. The article explained how neuroscientists had discovered that the ability to remember important things depended on the simultaneous

ability to block out or forget unimportant details. Since my need was to block memories that were already lodged deep in my brain, I decided to build an anti-mnemonic firewall by jamming my mind full of unimportant details. It took months, it took discipline, it took abandoning my military career for the job of parking-enforcement officer, it took quitting booze, it took the end of my marriage, cutting off friends, and reducing the already uneasy connection with my sons to an even more reserved and distant one. I shrank my life to an existence so small nothing important could penetrate. In the end I don't know if it was the pure, uncontaminated banality of my life, or the controlled, predictable, tiny scope of it that did the trick, but I got relief.

I went to work. Came home. Good citizen. I lived within my rations and fined those who overstepped theirs. Over time, my shrunken life evolved into a kind of monk's existence minus the religion, but you could have also said—it would be ironic but true—that I lived the life of a hedonist. A celibate hedonist. Nothing like my brother's pleasures before the die-off—the yacht, fast cars, waterfront mansion, and five-star vacations. I was a low-end hedonist. I had no dissatisfaction. I wasn't frustrated about anything. I wasn't fixing anything. I was neither building nor destroying. My desires were simple and I was satisfied in satisfying them. Pleasure filled my life.

At night I looked forward to the task of threading my hands and my foot past small tears in the pyjamas I'd had since Jennifer and I split. They'd been laundered to the thickness of gauze. I took pleasure in the feel of my shabby flannel sheets against the skin of my ankles and in the reflected heat

from the duck feathers in my duvet. Mornings I watched the eruption of goosebumps on my forearms as my skin re-entered the bracing, damp world. I relished tannin from my tea coating the back of my tongue and watery porridge absorbing the acids in my stomach. I fed my fish and was in awe at these slivers of flashing light in my dun apartment. Even the tiny bubbles that appeared in the sponge when I washed my dishes and the shiny patina of my bowl after I dried it were mesmerizingly beautiful. I liked the way my foot fit into the mould of my boot, and I admired the grey, velvety, thin dawn outside my window. My first step out into the street, always a thrill, marked the daily re-entry into a world animated by jittery, soft shadows and continuous breezes. Even my brain, scarred as it is, gave some pleasure remembering what I'd read the night before or tossing up an image of my sons' slender, hairless arms throwing stones into the sea.

All my cats were stuffed in a bag and sleeping well together. I hardly ever went off the deep end anymore, and when I did I usually had warning. Sometimes I even managed to watch myself calmly in an "out of mind" rather than "out of body" state. In those days, before she walked into my life, I inhabited a barebones state of nirvana, watching the flies buzz hypothetically in the cold air and rivulets of water run into cracks of shattered pavement.

But she showed me for a fake. All my equanimity sprang from one thing, and one thing only, which was not that my life was nearing any kind of enlightenment, not at all. It was that I was dead.

The city was quiet with a quiet that didn't exist before the die-off. No traffic or pile-drivers, leaf blowers or airplanes, just the hum of an occasional electric vehicle, the tinkle of cyclists' bells, and the sound of gears spinning. It was dinnertime, and hardly anyone was about. I was on my way home from work, just passing the community dining hall where people eat to save deductions from their monthly power ration from cooking. The hall's side door by the kitchen was wedged open, and the percussion of plates and cutlery and chairs spilled onto the sidewalk, but instead of the usual roar of conversation, a woman's voice addressed the diners over a sound system. I paused.

You have to OPT out—One Pure Thing—one pure thing to dedicate yourself to, she proclaimed. Freedom or love or nature or community. Opting out gives your life simplicity and purpose. I am opting out for freedom. That's my cause. A trolley full of dirty dishes went by and one of the wheels jammed on a potato peel, so I missed the next part of the speech to the clatter. I started hearing her again at ... never belonged to the corporations, and it doesn't belong to the government either. OneWorld is good enough right now but, she snapped her fingers, like *that* it could change, and what could we do about it? They have all the information, all the records of our civilization in their control, and we have nothing but what we know in our heads and the few books remaining in our libraries and on our bookshelves. That knowledge belongs to us. We made it. Tomorrow we march

for the right to elect representatives to protect our birthright!  
Noon at the old post office!

I've always hated politics. Even before. I get restless at the mere mention. So I simply took it as a sign that things were getting better if people had the energy to demonstrate and continued on my way home. A few blocks later, as I was stepping carefully over a large slab of broken pavement and listening to the wind snap sheets of plastic tacked across the broken windows high up in the old post office, a new sound penetrated my consciousness. *Clack, clack, clack*. It was the kind of sound you don't realize you haven't heard for ages until you hear it, and then you instantly realize how long it's been absent.

The contact of the high heels with the paving was stable and assured, so not a spike heel, I assumed, yet the pitch of the contact was too high and airy for a thick heel. The pace was quick though not clipped or striding. Purposeful.

I am a large man and can defend myself against most members of my species, prosthesis notwithstanding. I am blessed with a dense skeleton and well-defined muscles whose only limitation is lack of flexibility. My hands have the weight of hammers. I don't fear being overpowered by an antagonist but, since my illness, I only have two minutes before I break down. Crying doesn't do it justice. Torrents, gasping, mucousy sobs and tremors. I am trained in Krav Maga and I'm quick, so I haven't failed yet.

The steps came up behind me on the left and a perfume, a complex scent—tea, cloves, freshly mown grass—expanded

its radius around me. I knew exactly where she was without looking.

When she passed I could have turned my left hand sideways and grazed her hip with my thumb. I had an impulse to reach for her wrist. My eyes slid to the left and saw her naked foot in a red high-heeled sandal, the skin of her heel callused and slightly cracked, her baby toe turned out. The grey-blue light of the cold January dusk made her skin almost fluorescent. The tendons and muscles of her foot seemed hyper-defined and taut in their attachments to the small bones. Her foot so enchanted me that I only thought to look at her face after she had passed. The back of a large army-green bomber jacket with black trim and gold-buttoned epaulets, possibly from some kind of uniform, flapped open above a brown dress with a fringe of rags. She marched to the end of the block, dark ponytail swinging, turned right, and looked directly at me before disappearing down the street.

I hurried to the corner, hump and stump, hump and stump, but the street was empty. I turned my mobile on to see the time: five-thirty p.m.

I climbed the three floors to my apartment by memory because the only light inside the stairwell is from a skylight. I fumbled my key into the lock, turned it, and opened the door. The living room was dimly visible in the blue glow of other people's lights spilling in from the building's courtyard. My furniture: a green velvet easy-chair, beat-up even by today's existential standards, stuffing bubbling out at the arm and seat cushion; a worn leather ottoman;



a white bookshelf that's wobbly because the hardware's reamed out the disintegrating particleboard; a wooden bar stool; a table with three chairs; my charging station; and flashes of gold under the cool light of my aquarium. I took my coat off and hung it on a hook by the door. That hook, a classic bronze one like we used to have in school locker rooms, is the only change I've made to this apartment.

Billions die from starvation, thirst, disease, and war, violence is done to the mind, a human life shrinks to the emotional range of a hummingbird guarding his territory, cataclysms come and go, yet someone of the opposite sex walks by and really looks at you and your whole world comes to a stop.

I swear that with that first look from the end of the block she saw me—the soul I was born with, the man I had become, and the thorny crosshatch of my life—wounds received and wounds delivered. She saw my strength and my—I won't say weakness—my ruinedness. In that instant, when she looked back, I *knew* she was interested in me. I mean, why not? With my fake leg, the scar on the left side of my face, a body on the downhill slide past fifty, sterling-grey highlights in my hair, and riveting, half-dead eyes, I'd be hard for any woman to pass up, let alone a woman with bare legs striding through the evening haze in red heels.

I went into the kitchen and opened the coolbox. I pride myself on keeping it neat and stocked only with the essentials, yet sometimes I still can't seem to find anything inside it. I could hear my mom—Close the fridge, you're

letting the cold out—not that it matters anymore, at least not in winter, because the temperature inside the coolbox is virtually the same as inside our homes.

I stared at a carton of eggs, a packet of sausages, half a bottle of goat milk, and a bowl of puckering apples, unable to remember what I wanted. The sound of heels on the sidewalk echoed in my head, accompanied by the image of pale, slightly blue feet.