

Full Circle:
Electronic Afterlife

by

Alfred R. Taylor

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*To my loving wife, Thuy,
thank-you for ten great years
and two wonderful kids.*

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Disclaimer

When writing historical fiction, it is the author's job to accurately reflect the culture, language, and proper historical context of the era depicted. Unfortunately, the connotation associated with many words from the nineteenth century have become offensive to modern readers. To replace these words with their twenty-first century equivalent would mean sacrificing the historical accuracy and partaking in revisionist history, which would be far more offensive to the reader than the offensive words. It is not the intent of the author to demean, insult, or degrade any person, ethnic group, or nationality. It is the author's hope to reflect the social progress our society has made, entertain the reader, and increase historical understanding. It is not the author's intent to demean or degrade the memories of the historical figures represented, but to reflect the culture of the time as accurately as possible based upon the historical data available.

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Chapter One

Death and Discovery

November 19, 2004

Mark sat in his cubicle staring at his monitor. He was putting the finishing touches on his article explaining the historical importance of the fall of New Orleans when his phone rang. He glanced at the display on the phone before answering it. It read M. Nora. Mark's hand shook with nervous tension as he put his hand the receiver. He stared at the phone for a moment wondering why his bosses, bosses, boss would be calling him directly. Mr. Nora was very reclusive. He rarely left the 42nd floor, and when he did, it was to fly off somewhere on his private jet. Mark's hand was on the phone, but he couldn't make himself pick up the receiver. It must be a mis-dial Mark thought. Then he took a deep cleansing breath and picked up the phone.

"Mark Aaron," he said. "May I help you."

"Mark," Mr. Nora said. "I'd like to see you in my office in five minutes."

"Yes sir," Mark said. "I've never been to the forty-second floor before."

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“No one has, it’s restricted.”

“How do I get up there?” Mark asked.

“No problem. Go to the elevator and press 1, 2, and 3 at the same time.”

“Yes sir,” Mark said.

“And Mark,” Mr. Nora said. “You’re not in trouble, so you can relax.”

The phone went dead. Mark finished typing the last sentence on the article, sent it to his editor, and walked out of his cubicle. He remembered Mr. Nora’s words, and tried to relax. He took several more deep cleansing breaths. He had no idea what Mr. Nora wanted to talk to him about. Mr. Nora gave advice to presidents, and funded more research groups and think tanks than Mark could count. He wondered what he, a mere researcher, could do for a man like that. He probably needs his car washed, Mark thought as he stepped into the elevator.

The elevator doors closed behind him, and he pressed the 1, 2, and 3 together. The music in the elevator changed from “The Music Box Dancer” to classical violin. The elevator shot up at twice its normal speed, and before Mark could settle his stomach, he was on the forty-second floor.

The elevator doors opened to a posh office suite. The room had polished marble floors, gothic ceilings, and marble statues stood on each side of the elevator. The walls resembled a museum more than an office. At eye level, the walls were lined with crystal display cases. The cases contained old photographs, awards, autographed

books, magazines, and artifacts dating from the nineteenth century through the modern era. The floor had display cases containing rare books, sculptures, old clocks, uniforms, photographs, and several objects that Mark could not identify.

Mark looked for a receptionist's desk, but didn't find one. The elevator doors closed behind him, and he took a few steps into the room. He didn't feel comfortable wandering around, so he waited for a moment before he said, "Hello." The sound seemed to echo in the cavernous office.

Mark saw movement toward the back of the room. He moved toward it, and he found himself in an area that resembled a nineteenth century sitting parlor. Mr. Nora wore what looked to be a thousand dollar suit, and sat upon a red velvet sofa of Victorian design. He gestured for Mark to sit at its twin.

"Mr. Nora," Mark said. "This is an amazing collection of historical artifacts."

"Thanks," Mr. Nora said. "It's one of the perks with my job. This is nothing compared to my office in Arizona."

"I didn't know you had office in Arizona," Mark said sitting down on the sofa.

"No one does," Nora replied. "I like to maintain my privacy."

Mr. Nora removed the lid from a silver ice bucket and pulled two bottles of Pepsi from the ice. He opened one and took a sip and handed the other one to Mark.

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Mark wondered how Mr. Nora knew he liked Pepsi, but he accepted it, opened it, and took a sip to ease his dry throat.

“Mr. Nora,” Mark said. “My wife and I have plans to fly to Sacramento tonight, I can’t be late getting home or I’ll miss our flight.”

Mr. Nora smiled. “I know,” he said. “I assure you that you will have time to make your flight, if that is what you want.”

“You know about my vacation?” Mark asked.

“Yes, in a way that is why I wanted to see you.”

Mark started to ask a question, but Mr. Nora put up his hand.

“All your questions will be answered,” Nora said. “We’ve got about an hour to talk. Here I have a present for you.”

Mr. Nora reached inside his vest pocket and removed a gold coin roughly the size of a quarter. He handed it to Mark. Mark recognized it at once. It was a King George the third gold sovereign which had been used as currency in the United Kingdom throughout most of the nineteenth century. The front had a picture of King George III wearing a laurel crown, similar to the ones worn by Roman emperors. The date stamped on the coin was 1817 with George’s name and title around the edge. The image stamped on its reverse was of King George, dressed in Roman armor, riding on horseback driving a spear into a dragon. A Latin phrase was stamped around the border, but Mark couldn’t translate it. Based upon the coins weight and appearance, it seemed genuine.

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“Thank you,” Mark stammered.

“Don’t mention it,” Nora said. “I’ve got a mountain full of them back home.”

Mark smiled and put the coin into his pocket, not knowing what else to do.

“Back home?” Mark asked.

“At my main office. I have a little place near the Superstition Mountains in Arizona. I’ve still got over four thousand of those coins tucked away there.”

Mark raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

“It’s true,” Nora said, “but I didn’t ask you up here to tell you how wealthy I am.”

“No sir,” Mark agreed.

“I was hoping I could persuade you to not go on this trip,” Nora said. “I need someone with your analytical skills to work on my new project.”

“What kind of project,” Mark asked. “I’m just an researcher.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Nora said. “I’ve enjoyed reading your articles. I particularly enjoyed your article about the influences of Native American culture on modern society.”

“Thank you,” Mark said. He took a large swallow of his Pepsi.

“What I am proposing is a group that will examine current trends and try to predict what will evolve in the next five to ten years or even a hundred years.”

“What kinds of trends?” Mark asked. “Social, political, technological, fashion?”

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“Yes,” Mr. Nora said. “All of the above. For example, take Robonaut 2 for example.”

“You mean the robot on the international space station?” Mark asked.

“Yes,” Mr. Nora said. “It can work in space for days at a time, with the addition of solar cells on its exterior the battery life will be extended. Human operators on the ground can direct the robonauts to do any task a human could do in orbit. What would that do to the cost of repairing satellites in orbit?”

“The cost of construction in space would drop dramatically,” Mark said. “But without raw materials, the lower labor cost wouldn’t help that much.

“What if a group of robonauts were sent to the Moon or to a nearby asteroid?” Mr. Nora asked.

“I suppose it is possible to use the natural resources of the Moon to construct a habitat or whatever else is needed.” Mark said. “But the six second lag time between the Earth and the Moon would make the robots difficult to operate remotely.”

“Exactly, that would force them to develop smarter robots,” Mr. Nora said. “And the reusable solid fuel rockets make trips to Earth orbit and beyond much less expensive. So, what would that result in?”

Mark thought for a moment before replying, “I suppose raw materials could be processed remotely and sent back to Earth, and given the Earth’s diminishing natural resources, it could trigger another California gold rush.”

Mr. Nora smiled. "I need someone who understands the flow of history to accurately predict the future. I need you to start in your new position tomorrow, and there will be a significant pay raise if you accept."

Mark stared at his Pepsi for a moment, took a deep cleansing breath, and he said, "Mr. Nora, I'm going to have to decline your offer. This trip means a great deal to my wife. Her father's health is declining, and this may be the her last opportunity to see them. I can't take that away from her. I hope you understand."

Mr. Nora smiled. "I understand better than you know. I'm sorry that you won't be able to take this opportunity, but I had to try. My legal department has sent you some confidentiality paperwork about this meeting, just sign them and drop them into the mail."

Mark nodded and took another sip of his Pepsi.

"Mr. Nora," Mark said. "I am truly sorry that I can't accept the job on such short notice, but if you have any other opportunities, please keep me in mind."

"Don't worry," Nora said. "In life we gain and we lose, what is important is that we embrace the opportunities in front of us and do the best we can."

"Yes, sir," Mark said.

Mark stood up to leave, but Mr. Nora motioned for him to sit down.

"I have a few things for you," Mr. Nora said. "Please accept them as my way of saying no hard feelings."

Mr. Nora set his drink on the table and pulled up a polyester laptop case with Mark's name embroidered on it,

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and he opened it to reveal a new laptop computer. He closed the case and handed it to Mark.

“It is pre-loaded with all the software you will need.”

“Mr. Nora, Thank you.” Mark stammered.

“I know I’ve kept you late, and I don’t want you to get into trouble with Kylee, so take this coupon for a dinner for two at the Orlando International Airport VIP lounge.”

“Mr. Nora, I can’t . . .”

Mr. Nora cut him off, “Yes you can, I’m your boss, remember. Besides, I’ve loaded some homework on the laptop for you to review. It’s a small document, but I would like your opinion on it. Send me an email and tell me what you think.”

“Yes, sir,” Mark said.

“It was nice meeting you Mark, I hope your journey will be a pleasant one.”

Mark nodded, picked up the laptop case and slung the carrying strap around his shoulder. Mr. Nora got up and walked him to the elevator. Mark looked over at one of the display cases and noticed a black and white photo of a middle aged woman. The photo was signed “Emily Dickinson.” The display included a fountain pen, a small lock of auburn hair, and a poem. Mark pointed to the display.

“That isn’t ‘the Emily Dickinson,’” he asked.

“Yes,” Mr. Nora replied. “Emily Dickinson was probably the smartest person who ever lived.”

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“Sir,” Mark stammered, “If that is authentic, it would be worth millions.”

The elevator door opened. Mr. Nora gestured for Mark to step in.

“I assure you that it is authentic,” Nora said.

“How can you be so sure?” Mark asked.

“I was there when she signed it.” Nora said.

Before Mark could reply, the elevator doors closed, and Mark punched seven. As the elevator plunged down the shaft, Mark thought about Mr. Nora’s last statement.

There is no way that he could have witnessed Emily Dickinson signing that photograph, Mark thought. She died in 1886, and Mr. Nora knows that, but Mr. Nora is too smart to be duped by a fake.

Mark went back to his office and called Kylee. She didn’t answer her office phone, so Mark called her at home.

“Hello,” Kylee said.

“Hey,” Mark said. “I’m going to be a little late getting home. I’m just leaving the office now.”

“No problem,” she said. “I got off work early. I’ve already finished the packing. You got a letter from some company in Montana called ‘Cryocorp’ and another letter from some attorney.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll deal with it after the trip,” Mark said. “I had a meeting with Mr. Nora today.”

“Really,” Kylee said. “I thought he was some kind of recluse?”

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“He does value his privacy,” Mark said. “If I had a hundred billion dollars, I would probably do the same thing. If people can’t find me, they can’t ask me for money.”

“How did the meeting go?” she asked.

Mark paused for a moment looking for the right words. He pulled the gold coin from his pocket and examined it again.

“It was . . . deeply weird,” he said.

“How so?”

“He gave me a new laptop computer, a gold coin, and a pass for the Orlando International Airport VIP lounge.”

“A gold coin?” she asked. “Is it real?”

“It appears to be,” Mark said. “I’ll show you when I get home. Mr. Nora gave me some homework, so I’m going to take a look at it now.”

“Don’t take too long,” she said. “We have to check in three hours before departure.”

“It shouldn’t take long, Mark said. “I only need to pack my bathroom stuff.”

“Already taken care of,” she said.

“Okay, I’ll see you at home in a little while,” Mark said.

Mark hung up the phone, and he opened the laptop case. The computer was an HP Pavillon with a 3.06ghz processor. It was three times as fast as Mark’s old computer. Mark tucked the computer’s documentation in the pocket on the carrying case, set the computer up on his

desk, plugged in the adaptor, and started the machine. The windows XP screen appeared and went to the desktop. In the middle of the screen was an icon that read, “play me.” A video file opened and Mark saw Mr. Nora.

“Mark,” Mr. Nora said. “I know from our meeting you think that I’m crazy, but I can’t tell you everything at once. If I did, you wouldn’t believe me. You are about to embark on a longer journey than you realize. Whatever you do, keep this computer with you at all times. I will use it to contact you. I will appear to offer you advice when you need it.”

Great, Mark thought, now I’ve got to bring this crazy bastard on vacation with me.

“Mark,” Mr. Nora said. “The answer to the question you didn’t ask is that I’m 162 years old -- give or take.”

The screen blinked and a PDF opened with a two page document titled “A Brief Summary of History from 2004-2372.” The document looked very much like one of Mark’s encyclopedia articles. It started with the fall of the United States in 2065 by internal disputes, excessive taxes, a failure of the public education system, and lack of accountability in government. The United States was divided into two sectors. The new Empire of Japan purchased most of the West Coast a piece at a time to pay off America’s national debt. Then through a series of secessionist campaigns managed to acquire even more territory. Eventually, Japan ended up acquiring all of the land west of the Mississippi.

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What began as a skirmish between NATO and China over mineral resources on the Moon, ended when Washington D.C. was destroyed. The Chinese moved an eight ton near Earth asteroid into Earth orbit on the pretense to extract its mineral resources, but in reality they dropped it on Washington D.C. In the chaos that followed, the Chinese launched a coordinated attack against all of America's nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers. America retaliated by destroying Dongguan, Fushun, and Guangzhou, but what was left of the United States fell to the Chinese. The victory was hollow because the resulting radioactive dust cloud and nuclear winter made most of the Northern Hemisphere uninhabitable for five years. World wide cancer rates skyrocketed, and whole cities had to be moved underground. This resulted in a greater dependence upon androids and robots to work not only in space, but to grow food on the surface as well.

Since the Earth was polluted, a private company, Romanji Industries was given permission by the U.N. to terra-form Mars. Within fifty years, Mars had oceans and a breathable atmosphere. At first androids and robots were sent to grow clean crops to be sent back to Earth, but soon afterward human settlers began to arrive.

In 2345 the neural pattern imaging scanner was invented by Karl Romanji of Romanji Industries. This allowed human memories to be copied into an android. At first, only basic functions such as language and motor skills could be copied. In the years following, the technique was perfected with the Gamma Class androids. The Gamma

Class android contained all of the abilities of a human, but it was incapable of making decisions on its own; therefore, it was asking to be redirected every time it was presented with a new challenge. This became tiresome to its owners, and demand for a fully antonymous android increased.

After several years of ethical debate, the Omega Class android was created. The ethical problem was that too much information was being copied. The Omega Class android essentially had the mind of a human being in the body of an android. It would have all of the memories, emotions, skills, and desires of a real person, but with the enhanced speed, strength, and mental abilities of an android. This created two ethical dilemmas. Since the android being created would have all of the feelings of a real person, it would be, in a sense, re-establishing slavery. The other problem was if one of these androids should find a way to circumvent its directives and start killing people, it would be very difficult to stop.

The debate was resolved when it became possible to selectively block memories that were not important to the android's task. For example, an Omega Class Android intended for combat would only be able to access to the memories of its human donor that pertained to combat training, combat experience, and combat tactics. The human donor's personality, feelings, and non-essential memories would be blocked from the android's consciousness. A control chip was added to prevent the Omega Class androids from disobeying its owner's instructions. The chip sent an electronic version of

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extreme pain to the android's mind until it complied with its owner's instructions.

In 2360 the first Omega Class androids were produced. Five years later, a group of Omega Class androids working on Amalthea rebelled. All Omega Class androids in the Solar System were declared illegal and shut down. The resulting law suits bankrupted Romanji Industries and Karl Romanji was sent to prison.

While in prison, Romanji formulated a plan to change history by sending androids back in time to kill important leaders, slow down progress in technology, and allow humanity time to develop wisdom instead of weapons. Romanji may have had good intentions, but the tampering with the time-line resulted in the extinction of humanity.

What a crock, Mark thought. Now I know Mr. Nora is wack-a-doodles.

Mark shut down the computer, put it in its case, and drove home. When he arrived, Kylee already had the car packed. He showed Kylee the gold coin then he hid it in his sock drawer, locked up the house, and drove to the airport. They were met in the parking structure by one of Mr. Nora's employees. He took their luggage, but he didn't offer to take Mark's laptop.

Kylee and Mark were holding hands as they entered the V.I.P. lounge. They were met by a gorgeous young woman with short platinum blonde hair who smiled at them warmly. Her ocean blue eyes had a look of

recognition in them as she gestured for them to stop. Her name tag read “Jane.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Aaron?” the hostess asked.

“Yes,” Mark said. His jaw dropped slightly.

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you for quite some time,” she said. “Follow me please.”

Kylee slapped Mark in the stomach to get him to stop staring at her behind. Jane led them to a table in the back of the room. The table was set with a red table cloth. A glass of Pepsi and a glass of lemonade waited for them on the table when they arrived. The hostess gestured for them to sit.

“Isn’t this someone else’s table?” Kylee asked.

The hostess smiled, “The drinks are courtesy of Mr. Nora.”

“Okay,” Mark said. “But, how did he know what we’d want?”

Jane smiled.

Kylee sat down and took a sip of her lemonade. “Sit down, Mark.”

Mark sat down and put the computer in a chair next to him. Before he could ask for a menu, Jane returned and set down a steaming plate of roast duck in front of Mark. Then she set a plate of sweet and sour pork for Kylee.

“We haven’t ordered anything?” Mark said.

“The food is courtesy of Mr. Nora,” she said.

Mark looked at the plate of steaming food in front of him, “Well . . . yes, this looks wonderful.”

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“Well, if you need anything, anything at all, just let me know.”

“We’re fine,” Kylee said.

The hostess smiled and withdrew to the corner of the room, as if waiting to be summoned. Mark looked at his plate and frowned.

“Stop looking a gift horse in the mouth,” Kylee said.

“Don’t you think that this is deeply weird?”

“So, the man is being generous.” Kylee speared a bite of pork on her fork and held it out to him. “Want some?”

“How did he know what time we would be here, or what you like to drink, or what my favorite foods are?”

“Your duck is getting cold,” Kylee said pointing with her fork.

Mark took a bite of his food. It was wonderful. The rice was seasoned to perfection, the duck melted in his mouth, the green beans were crisp. He didn’t even need salt. It was the most perfectly prepared meal he ever had. Their hostess returned and took away the empty plates.

“It was wonderful,” Kylee said.

She smiled and left two fortune cookies on the table. Kylee opened her cookie and started laughing.

“What are you laughing at?” Mark asked.

“My fortune,” she said.

“What does it say?”

“It says ‘Questioning good fortune only lead to stomach ache.’”

Mark reached over and picked up his cookie. He opened it and read.

“What does yours say?” Kylee asked.

“Mine says, ‘Beware of the Pig.’” Mark said.

“Show me your new computer?” Kylee asked.

Mark picked up the computer case, and took out the computer.

“That’s nice,” she said.

“It’s wonderful,” Mark said. “It runs at 3.06ghz.”

Mark powered up the computer and watched the Windows XP screen appear. When the desktop came up, the message from Mr. Nora was gone. Mark wasn’t going to show it to Kylee anyway because he wanted to keep his job, but he still expected to see it on the desktop.”

“It’s gone,” Mark said.

“What’s gone?” Kylee asked.

“Mr, Nora’s homework. It was a crazy message, but now it’s gone.”

“Oooh,” Kylee teased. “Just like on Mission Impossible.”

“It was there,” Mark said.

Mark searched through all of the computer’s directories, but there was no trace of Mr. Nora’s message. Jane brought them fresh drinks, while Mark continued to search his computer. After a few moments Kylee said, “you can play with your new toy later. Tell me more about Mr. Nora.”

Mark shut the computer down.

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“He was a few inches taller than I am, dark brown eyes, looked to be about thirty-years-old, and had the neatest hair and fingernails that I’ve ever seen on a man.”

When the machine powered down, Mark put it back into the case.

“What else can you tell me?” Kylee asked.

“His office is larger than our house, and it is filled with authentic looking historical artifacts.”

“What do you mean authentic looking?” Kylee asked.

“He claimed to have an autographed picture of Emily Dickinson.” Mark said.

“He’s teasing you,” Kylee said. “No one has an autographed photo of Emily Dickinson.”

“Well, he said he did.” Mark said.

“He’s probably testing you,” Kylee said. “Telling you a bunch of foolish stuff to see if you will repeat it.”

Mark smiled. “I told you.”

“Wives don’t count,” she said. “I have a secret message for you.”

“You do?” Mark asked. “What is it?”

“I’m not sure yet, it will take nine-months to deliver.”

“You’re pregnant!”

Kylee smiled and nodded “yes.” “I was going to tell you and my dad together, but I couldn’t wait.”

Jane appeared with a desert tray filled with pastries, cakes, and pies, many of which had pink and blue

frosting. Mark and Kylee exchanged dumbfounded glances at Jane's remarkable timing.

"You don't think . . ." Mark said.

"How could he," Kylee said. "I just found out myself this morning."

They looked at Jane for an explanation. She only smiled at them. When Kylee had finished her second cupcake, she glanced at her watch. It's time to board our flight, she said.

Jane stepped over as if on cue and said, "the VIP boarding area is this way."

She pointed at a door on the side of the restaurant.

Mark got up and grabbed his computer case. Since he didn't know how much the meal had cost, he wasn't sure how much of a tip to leave. He put a ten-dollar bill on the table and hoped it was enough. The service was beyond excellent, and he didn't want to stiff the hostess.

Jane escorted them to the plane's boarding area. She offered Mark her hand. Mark looked into her ocean blue eyes and couldn't help but smile.

She made eye contact with Mark and said, "I'm glad you had this opportunity to meet me, and next time I'll have my opportunity to meet you."

Before Mark could reply, she was walking away.

"That was a deeply weird thing to say," Kylee said.

"That pretty much describes my afternoon," Mark said.

They walked down the boarding ramp and took their seats in coach. They were seated in the middle, just

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behind the wing. Mark tried to get comfortable in his fourteen inch airline seat while they waited at the gate. He passed the time by reading the inflight magazine. He could hear names being called over the airport public address system. After a while, he looked at his watch. It was twenty-five minutes past their scheduled departure time. Mark glanced around the cabin and saw that the plane was only filled to about twenty-five percent capacity. Mark raised his hand and a flight attendant stepped over to him.

“What’s the delay?” Mark asked.

“We had a large group check in, but they haven’t arrived at the gate. We will be departing momentarily. Don’t worry, we will still arrive in Sacramento on time,” he said.

A minute later the flight attendants closed the doors, and the plane taxied to the runway. He squeezed Kylee’s hand nervously. The flight attendants came up and did the usual safety speech. They pointed out the emergency lights on the floor and where all the exit doors were located. They went to their seats in the middle of the airplane. Mark looked out of the window and saw the runway lights moving faster and faster until he felt the aircraft lift into the air.

As Mark was finishing his second in flight movie, the plane shook. The seat belt light came on, and Mark saw a family of four six rows up struggling with their children’s seat belts. Mark smiled and wondered how he would handle being a parent.

In the corner of his eye, Mark saw a brilliant flash of white light, a heartbeat later, the plane was tumbling out of control. Soda cans, dinner trays, beverage carts, and flight attendants were flying around the cabin like socks in a dryer. Mark felt something brush his face. The oxygen masks had deployed, but the plane was tumbling too much to grab one. Mark felt the stomach churning drop of a roller coaster. Frightened screams cut through a series of sharp pops and bangs. Then Mark realized that some of those screams he heard was his own. A moment later the plane's tumbling slowed, the plane righted itself, and then came the impact. Mark was thrown up against the seatbelt so hard he thought his pelvis was broken. The back section of the plane separated from the front at the rear exit door. Everything aft of the rear exit door was gone. The rest of the plane slid along the ground for what seemed like an eternity. The cabin lights went out, and for a few seconds the only light in the cabin was being produced by the fire outside and the electrical shorts inside. The nose struck something that crushed everything in front of the business class. Then the plane finally skidded to a halt.

Mark felt Kylee pulling at his seat belt. Mark reached down and unbuckled it. He was hurting in places he didn't know he had. The emergency lights came on, and the exit by the wing was clearly visible.

Kylee shouted at Mark. "Can you walk?"

Mark didn't answer her, but he tried his legs and found the to be barely sturdy enough to walk. The plane was tilted on its side, so one cabin door was too much of a

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climb to reach and the other was partially covered in dirt. Kylee took his hand, and they moved along the seats to the exit door. It was there wasn't enough room to crawl out. Kylee tried to squeeze through, but the hole wasn't even large enough for her size four frame.

Mark looked for another exit, but the dim light, panicked passengers, and the debris from the crash made visibility difficult. He moved forward toward first class, but found it to be impassable. He looked back at where the tail section used to be, and only saw dirt and debris. Kylee was frantically digging with her hands to enlarge the hole to crawl through. Mark looked around for something to dig with. He saw his computer lying in across a seat. He picked it up.

“Leave it,” Kylee shouted.

Mark carried the computer to Kylee. Opened the case, and dumped out the computer.

“Use this to scoop out the dirt,” Mark said handing Kylee the case.

The other passengers began gathering around the exit door. Mark tried to bend down to help Kylee dig, but was pushed out of the way by a frightened teenage boy. Kylee had expanded the hole large enough to squeeze through.

“Go,” Mark said.

Kylee didn't hesitate. She scrambled through the hole. Smoke from several small fires began filling the cabin. Mark's eyes began to water. He heard a shout from the front of the cabin. When he looked up to see who it

was. Two other passengers pushed him aside and crawled over the seats to get to the exit.

Mark moved toward the sound. The family he had noticed earlier were still in their seats. The father had a bad head wound, and the panicked mother was trying to get her kids out of their seat belts.

Mark grabbed moved into the row and disentangled a three-year-old girl from her tangle of seat belts and oxygen masks. By the time he had finished, the ginger haired mother was picking up a five-year-old boy. Mark picked up the girl and started moving toward the exit. The mother hesitated when she saw her husband lying still in his seat.

“Lets get the kids out of here,” Mark said.

She still stood there.

“Now,” Mark shouted.

She took a few careful steps toward the rear door. Mark could hear Kylee calling his name. There were only a few passengers left inside the plane. Mark followed the ginger haired woman toward the exit. She pushed her son through the hole. She turned toward her husband, but a big meaty arm pulled her through the hole before she could protest. Mark sent the little girl through the hole, and turned to go back for her father.

Mark heard Kylee’s voice. “Mark!” she shouted.

“I gotta go back for someone!”

Mark moved back through the smoke toward the father. He slipped on the uneven floor and grabbed at a piece of the broken ceiling for support. The weight he

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added to the panel caused it to break free from the airframe. An exposed wire touched Mark's chest. The pain he was feeling before was nothing compared to this. Every nerve in his body felt like it was on fire. Then the darkness swallowed him.