

PRELUDE

What you are about to hear is a ghost story. It goes a little something like this. You are driving home all alone. It has been a late night. Sleep calls out to you like a siren. But you have to keep your concentration. A storm has come up, a storm like no other, when the rain falls in curtains of razorblades, and the wind chainsaws the leaves from the trees, and the fog is so thick you could floss your teeth with it. You must have taken a wrong turn somewhere because you are now on a back county lane. A silhouette looms in the glow of your headlights. You slam on the brakes. A hitchhiker. He cuts so wan a figure the beams seem to shine right through him. You could hardly leave him out there to freeze to death. You open the door. He climbs in the passenger side. You try to make some conversation, about what you can't remember, but all the while you're thinking how awfully familiar he looks, in his dripping overcoat and muddy shoes. So similar to that boy who fell through the ice during that skating accident last winter. Or was it that young man buried by the rubble of the crumbling steeple? Or maybe that other troubled soul who fell into a vat of toxic acid and was never to be seen again? You turn around to ask your passenger where he wants to be dropped off. But he is already gone. A pool of raindrops on the seat is all that remains. The lights of the city shine up ahead. It's been a long night. Time to go home to bed.

You are that driver.

And I am that ghost.

Correction. I will be that ghost. Give or take 24 hours. I have until sunrise before I pass over onto the other side. My bags are already packed. The car is ready to go. Darwin sleeps peacefully in his cage. I have it down to a science by now. So I'd like to take this opportunity to indulge in a little reflection. Pen my memoirs, if you will. The reels of tape spin quietly in the background, looped together in the infinity symbol, recording my words for all eternity. My last will and

testament. The suicide note no one will ever live to see. Unless, of course, my nine lives run out. Then only this monologue will remain. My deathbed confession. So think of this as an insurance policy. Out of the ashes my name will rise unstained.

Darwin lies prone on the desk, rigid as a stone paperweight. His leathery hide blends right in with the leather of my arm chair. I have always thought of him more as a chameleon than an iguana. Man's best friend. I stroke the jagged ridges of his spine, tickle the hinge of his jaw as it crunches on the dead flies I have just fed him. Now and then he turns his depthless obsidian eyes in my direction. His ancient craggy visage seems carved from volcanic rock. He watches me with ageless patience, awaiting the signal he surely knows is coming. He's been with me from the very beginning. Could he really think I would now leave him behind?

Houdini himself could not have contrived a more intricate trap to escape from. I have engineered my very own Chinese Water Torture. Behold, ladies and gentlemen, as your humble performer attempts to cheat death one last time. His hands are bound with handcuffs, his arms and legs held back with chains, the water is almost up to his neck. Soon the lid will be nailed shut, giving him only seconds to defy the laws of nature before the oxygen runs out. Thrill as he struggles against his bonds. Gasp as the clock runs down. For it is your own death you are rehearsing here. Through my demise you all live forever.

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I don't have much time. The Feds will be closing in soon. I can hear the helicopters circling above, the sweep of the searchlights beating against the thick black curtains. Police have cordoned off the block and wait behind armoured cars. Soon enough the stillness of the night will be shattered by the echo of megaphones. We have the place surrounded. Lay down your weapons. We only want to talk. Talk, indeed. That's what got me into all this trouble in the first place. I had an audience of millions hanging on my every word. A nation within the nation. Followers who took down my every syllable as written in stone. It is no use explaining to the hostage negotiators outside that all this is an unfortunate misunderstanding, that it was nothing more a pyrotechnics stunt gone wrong that led

to some of my more credulous followers taking some of my more incendiary statements a little too literally that led to this chain reaction of misinformation that has come to a head in this televised stand-off between the deranged cult leader and the special forces vying to secure the release of the poor brainwashed innocents under his control. No use trying to have a rational, civilized discussion. Too many people in high places want my head on a platter. They have no interest in brokering any kind of settlement that will let their prized bounty off the hook. At this point they will settle for nothing less than razing Karlo International to its very foundations.

I will be long gone before they arrive. Self-extinction has always been the mantra of the Karlo Technique. The first step towards rebirth. And my reincarnation is imminent. But before I take leave of this earthly shell, I would like to take stock of what I'm leaving behind. I almost had it made. Best-selling self-help author. Number one talk show host in the country. Founder of the world's most exclusive bible college. Spiritual advisor to the president. Confidante to the First Lady. Living breathing messiah. Who else can lay claim to that kind of resume? I was on track to go down in history as one of the most influential people ever to have lived. And now I have to say goodbye to it all. In my street sermons I was fond of reminding my listeners that the material world is nothing but an illusion. It's easy enough to preach detachment from material things when you've got no material things to detach yourself from. But when you've built an empire with your own bare hands, when you've invested the capital gains of several lifetimes into the project, lifetimes you will never get back, no matter what the mystics say, then the letting go is not so easy. I had been so smart, so strategic, so careful not to make a foolish move. And it all blew up in my face. But that's what I get for falling in love.

On the floors below me my followers lie curled up on their mats, slumbering as peaceful as lambs. Of course, this may have something to do with the gallons of cyanide they ingested a few hours ago. They lie there in pitch darkness and freezing cold, readying themselves for the million light-year journey through the black frozen wastes of intergalactic space once they leave their earthly vessels behind. None of this was my doing. I only wanted to tell the world my story. Instead I end up with a

UFO death cult on my hands.

I should have seen it coming. As soon as I announced the Great Visitation they started arriving, in busses and on trains, in wagons and on rickshaws, on crutches and on stilts, martyrs-in-waiting ready to throw themselves between their light giver and the godless globalist overlords plotting his destruction. It was just the excuse the authorities had been waiting for. Here was irrefutable proof that this messianic madman was luring the nation's children to serve as human shields in a final confrontation that could only end in bloodshed. As officers of the public good they could not stand idly by and wait for that to happen. By presidential decree special forces began making preparations for an all-out siege on the offices of Karlo International.

Things were escalating far too rapidly for my tastes. I had to put the brakes on the situation. Thus last night I delivered my final sermon. Before a packed house of disbelieving true believers I announced that the continued existence of The Karlo Kosmology was hanging in the balance. The collective wrath of our myriad enemies was directed at one person and one person alone. Myself. Therefore there could only be one solution. For Karlo International to continue to exist, Karlo himself had to be removed from the equation. My work was done. As of midnight tonight I would be reunited with the Grid. I would henceforth retire to my chambers to begin my ascension.

In the meantime I will be long gone on a red-eye flight straight into the heart of the Bermuda Triangle. Some might call it reckless. Some might call it irresponsible. I call it my gift to the world. To disappear forever. It is the only choice. The life insurance will discharge all debts on my account. The Feds will have their man, now presumed deceased. And I will decouple myself from a host of lunatics I never wanted anyway.

This I can come to terms with. I've had a good run. Time to quit while I'm ahead. Somewhere there is a safety deposit box with a sterling fresh birth certificate, newly-minted driver's license, unused social security number, VISA card, and a thick wad of traveler's checks. Out of such clay a man is raised. This will be it for me. I'm

ready for retirement. Too much running around. Way down south a white-sanded beach calls my name, in a tourist town long forgotten, where the neon signs flicker at dusk and the happy hour lasts all night long, and the waiters never ask for you by name. It is there I will live out my days, at peace with my legacy.

I need a vacation as it is. All this self-sacrifice makes a stone of the heart. Stress will do that to you. Turn you hard and cold. Thirty three years old and I am already an old man. Same age as Jesus when he died. Just one of many things we have in common. Like him I have died and risen too many times to count. Paid for the sins of my fellow man more times than I'd like to remember. All that hard living takes its toll. I see skeletal trees in the height of summer, bruises on the freshest fruit, crow's feet and widow's peaks in the faces of my friends and neighbors. Everything I touch turns to ashes and dust. I have witnessed too much. Too much to ever go home again.

So I must bid farewell. See you on the other side. But before they start carving my headstone, I'd like to set the record straight. So first, one last trip down memory lane. Let us follow the tape to the end of the reel. All the way back to where it all began.