

THE END



WRITTEN BY
DAN BARKER

ILLUSTRATED BY NURE ABBAS

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DISCLAIMER

This novelette contains profanity and extreme violence and may not be suitable for children.

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Reader, if in my writing you find anything to gratify, amuse and instruct, I shall be satisfied.

- GEORGE 'RUSTICUS' HICKLING

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Preface

This story and these characters have taken me on such an incredible journey over the past few months. I am extremely proud of the story that we have told together. Their experience with **THE END** gripped and pulled me in, as I'm sure it will you. I'm extremely grateful to have met and spent time with these characters and was able to tell their story and present it to you. Christian and Louis, I had met briefly before in *Ville Des Ombres*, a flash-fiction series I have yet to finish and I was surprised and delighted that they showed up in this story too.

This novelette would not be available to you without the support and dedication from people in this world too. Those people are my father; Nick Barker, my sister; Kirsty Barker, Jess Lightfoot, Sulaima Golam, Lewis Kirkham and Eden Fitzgerald whose support and at times, animated interested got me even more inspired to release this book. With it now out for you to experience as I did, it wouldn't have been *readable* without the extraordinary talent and skill of Aimee B, whose sharp, smart and keen eye for literary blunders and hiccups have sculpted and refined this story. The illustrations in this book were beautifully crafted by an artist of which I admire deeply. I am extremely proud to have her name alongside mine on the cover of this book. Her art took the story, which was already very special to me, and turned into something that I will cherish deeply. Nure Abbas is the amazingly skilled and talented artist who provides you with incredibly drawn visuals in between the walls of words, of which she also provided paramount assistance in editing.

Just as all my work of fiction, this story was seen, heard, felt and experienced and then transcribed. I have just as much to do with this story as you, the reader does and slapping my name on the front didn't come easy. Though one must conform as not to confuse so the true writers of this story, the characters, will be credited as such here.

I dedicate this, as I do all my work, to:

"... my children, and their children's children for ever, as a legacy to be cherished by them." - GEORGE "RUSTICUS" HICKLING.

I am beyond excited for the stories that will come after this as this experience has moved and empowered me. Thank you to Milo, Rachel, Christian, Louis and Jordi for allowing me to journey with you and tell your story.

Love, Always.

Dan Barker

Hucknall, Notts.
August 8th, 2021

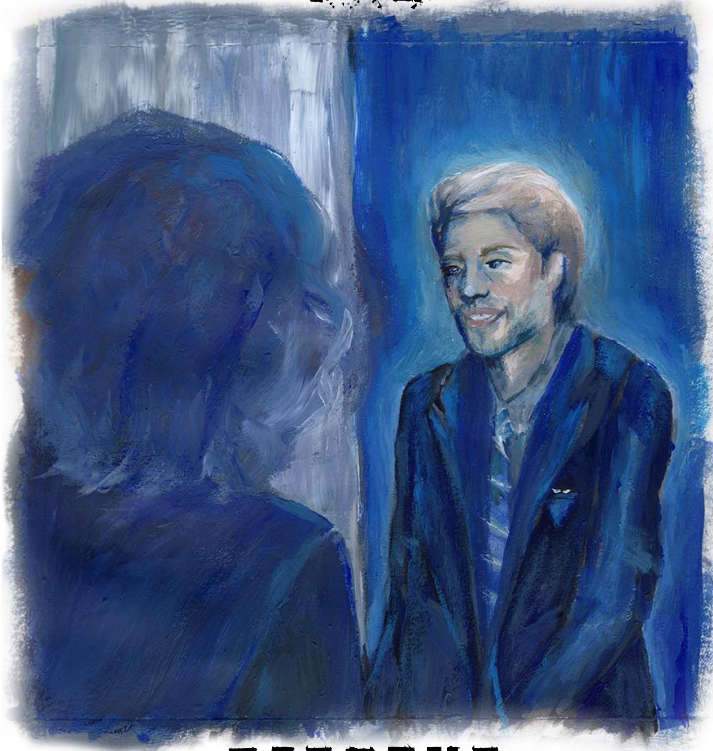
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ONE



BREATHE

BEEP, BEEP, BEEP! The alarm screeched. That meant it was 6:30am, on the dot. *Time for work* was the first thought that popped into Milo's head. Milo worked for Grand Fortune Bank in the centre of Marseille, France. He'd been working there for about 10 years and couldn't stand it. *For once can something new and exciting happen?* He begged and pleaded to whatever God existed.

Milo got up, dressed and left, grabbing his morning coffee before entering the dull, mono-chromatic prison that most call 'work'. He sat down in his cell – *sorry, cubical* – and began booting up his computer. *At least the weather is nice* Milo thought as he looked out of

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the large window opposite his cubical. The sun painted this little corner of the city a lovely golden colour that no one could get sick of.

"Mr Duret!" Milo's boss yelled, a tall, almost nauseously thin man with shoulder-length, dirty-blond, slick back hair.

"Yeah?" Milo responded at equal volume as he stood up from his cubical, his head shooting up like a meercat.

"You have an appointment with a Ms Anna Lazard, in about thirty minutes."

"For a loan, right?"

"Yeah. Don't forget the new policy."

Shit! New policy? "Of course not!"

"Great."

Milo got on well with his boss but it was very strictly, a work-only relationship with not a lot of room to relax, but he seemed like a nice guy.

The next thirty minutes were filled with Milo opening more tabs than his computer could handle and shuffling through enough pages to fill a novel, but he learnt the new policy just in time.

"Milo?" Rachel said softly as she stood by his cubical.

"Yep?" Milo replied as he swivelled around to face the cute receptionist.

"Ms Lazard is here."

"Thank you."

Rachel turned after a smile and began to walk away. Milo grabbed her hand softly and pulled a little, implying he wanted her to come back. She did just that.

"Hey," he whispered with a smile, "How about we get a drink tonight? I finish at four-thirty?"

Rachel took a second but finally responded, glowing, "I'd like that. I finish at five."

"I'll pick you up."

Neither of them said a word after that, just smiled as Rachel walked away. Milo had been thinking about asking Rachel out for about six months now but never got around to it. They were such great friends but Milo wanted more and so did Rachel. She was the first woman that had made his heart glow since his divorce two years ago. She was the only reason he bothered to turn up to this job. *Anyway...* Milo stopped daydreaming and walked over to the waiting area.

"Ms Lazard?"

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The friendly, round lady stood up, "Yes."

Milo led her into an empty conference room.

"So then, Ms Lazard. You're here to talk about loans, correct?"

"That's right, ye-"

Ms Lazard stopped, and took a couple of breaths as a heavy wave of anxiety flooded everyone in the building. Milo felt very dizzy but started to come through.

As if she was speaking for him, Ms Lazard continued. "Sorry, I must not be feeling well."

"Me too, actually."

"It's probably a bug or something."

Milo agreed. That's the only other explanation.

"Anyway," She got back to the point, "Yes, I'd like to apply for a loan. I'm starting my own business, you see."

"Oh fantastic! Let's see what we can do to help." As if angry at this statement, the ground began to shake slightly, like a mild earthquake. The deep rumble got louder and the shaking more aggressive.

"Erm, we should probably get under the table." Milo unsurely insisted, before a horrifically aggressive impact shattered the windows in the glass-walled conference room.

"Are you okay?" Milo shouted, trying to hear his own voice over the high-pitched ringing in his ears. Ms Lazard had passed out. Shaking, he wrestled his way out from under the table; the sharp fragments of glass slicing his palms. He stumbled out into the main area of the bank. Everyone was either screaming or had passed out. *Rache!* He worried before clumsily running over to where she sat. She wasn't there. He travelled around her desk where he discovered her on the floor and unconscious.

Suddenly, a man with a baseball bat came charging through the hole that used to be a window and Milo dropped to the floor beside Rachel, hiding behind the desk. The man began taking what wasn't already destroyed before ordering the first person he saw to open the vault. *Luckily for the man with the baseball bat, the first person he saw was the manager of the bank.*

What is going on? The world has gone to shit. With the threatening man now elsewhere, Milo made a split-second decision. He stood up and hurled Rachel's rag-doll body over his shoulder and began walking as quickly as he could back to his house.

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He laid her down on his couch and fetched a glass of water and a bowl of warm water. He began dabbing her forehead with a damp cloth, which he soaked in the bowl and rung out. Within minutes, Rachel began to cough and sat up slowly, with a hand from Milo.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I don't know, maybe a bomb? Terrorists?"

"I remember going dizzy and numb just before the explosion."

Milo was in disbelief. "You too? The lady I was with, Ms Lazard, and I both felt the same thing. I thought it was a coincidence."

"Then I remember an earthquake and explosion then I blacked out" Rachel explained.

"A man came into the bank and robbed it too" Milo said.

"It must be terrorists."

"I don't know what kind of weapon they're using though."

Rachel tried to stand up but fell back down onto the sofa again.

"Easy..." Milo warned.

"My head hurts."

"Let me get a Doliprane."

Rachel placed the tablet on her sandpaper-dry tongue and took a gulp of water.

"So what happens now?" She asked.

"I'm not entirely sure." Milo reached over and turned on the television.

"Destruction ensues across the south of France as an unknown explosion has killed hundreds of thousands. Brutal acts violence and robbery continue as people take advantage of the chaos."

"Oh my god..." Rachel whispered to herself.

"I need to ring my father." Milo stated before dialling the number. Straight to answer machine. *Is he hurt? Dead?*

"I need to ring my mother." Rachel echoed. Milo handed her his phone. Hers was in her bag, back at the bank. In parallel, Rachel's call went straight to the answer machine too.

"What do we do?" Rachel questioned again, this time with even more of a shaky voice.

"We rest for now. We're safe here, for now." It turns out that this whole experience had really taken it out of them. They had only been awake for a few hours but they were flat out. Rachel was resting comfortably on the couch and Milo was awkwardly squished and

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sandwiched between the couch and the coffee table. After only a couple of hours, they both woke up.

“Breaking news! Was the explosion an asteroid?”

“What?” The half-awoken Milo said.

“Two teenagers caught this footage moments after the explosion in Marseille, before the military arrived.” The footage showed two teenage boys on their bikes riding up to huge hole in an empty field. One of the boys zoomed in on the hole showing a gigantic rock that fit perfectly inside the hole, glowing a deep red colour.

“That’s an asteroid alright.” Rachel agreed with the newscaster.

“What on earth is going on?” Milo questioned in distress. Suddenly they heard commotion outside, which did not seem out of place with everything that was going on, but Milo rose and walked over to his window. People were breaking into homes.

“Shit.” He whispered. But Rachel heard.

“What? What is it?”

“I don’t think we’re as safe as I thought.”

Rachel began hyper-ventilating. *Is she panicking?*

“Are you okay? Try to relax.” Milo told her.

“Asthma.” She managed to say in between struggled staccato breaths.

“God damn it! Inhaler, Inhaler...”

“Bag.”

“Fuck! Okay.” Milo helped Rachel sit upright and began loosening up her clothes. He looked at his phone and noted the time.

“Hey,” he said softly. “It’s okay, you’re going to be okay. Just follow my lead, okay.” Rachel nodded. “Hold your palm out for me.” Milo placed his index finger on the side of her thumb and gently stroked up to the tip. “Breathe in through your nose,” and then began slowly stroking down the other side of her thumb, “and out through your mouth.” He reached her index finger and did the same. He reached her pinkie and slowly slid his finger down the outside as she exhaled with a calm relief. They just stared at each other for a little while.

“Thank you.” Rachel said softly with a glow in her eyes.

Suddenly they noticed a shadow sweep the room and the pair stared at each other, except this time there was no romance.

“Can you walk?”

“Just about.” She must have pulled some sort of muscle when

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she passed out because her leg was in sheer agony.

“Okay, follow me.” Milo held Rachel and helped her walk into his bedroom, where he nudged her to climb into the closet.

“Stay here.” He whispered nervously as he walked out of the room and closed the door. Milo’s head was as silent as the room, no thoughts at all. He walked into the kitchen and grabbed the largest and sharpest knife he could find. As he pulled it out of the protective case, its metallic ‘shing’ caught his ear. *This one.*

He stood with his back against the wall behind the door, waiting for the intruders.

The only sound in the room was Milo’s heavy heart, thumping in his ears until the door opened slowly, slightly squeaking. Two men walked in with heavy socket wrenches and backpacks that looked quite full already. The wrenches seemed to have a spot of blood on them too. *No they don’t, you’re just panicking.*

This was Milo’s time to shine. His skinny arms raised the knife above his head and he began stabbing the two men, swinging left and right, slicing through their clothes. The men dropped to the floor but Milo kept stabbing them, grunting with every impale.

“Milo! Stop!” Rachel cried, standing just outside of his bedroom and he snapped out of it. He was shaking, almost tearful. He walked over to the couch and sat down, his mouth was wide open and he was breathing heavily, trying to process his actions.

After a few minutes, he stood back up and looked over at the chaos that he had caused and burst into tears. The sight of seeing two people lying on his floor in pools of blood and knowing that he had killed them, knowing that he put more holes in them than cullender, scared him a whole lot.

“What happened?” Rachel asked softly, as she knelt beside his knee.

“I don’t know. I just went silent, in my head I mean, and it just happened.” Milo’s voice was shaky.

“Has this happened before?”

“No of course not, never!”

“Okay, it’s okay. You were scared, you were defending your home and yourself... and me.”

“Yeah. I guess, I was.”

“I don’t think it’s safe here.” Rachel said and Milo agreed. They packed up a bag full of food, first-aid equipment and a torch.

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“How do you feel?” Milo asked Rachel.

“Better, thank you.”

They headed out, now it was starting to get a little darker.

“Where are we going?” Rachel asked, she was frightened about what just happened but she still trusted Milo.

“I have a buddy who has a place in the woodlands.”

“The woodlands? That’s a good few miles away.”

“Thirty.” They packed up Milo’s car with as many essentials as they could think of and hopped in. Being in the car felt safer than the house, just knowing that they could get away and they began to do just that.

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TWO



SIX MILES

They felt safer driving than you'd think. *Maybe it's because we're on the move?*

"Milo, do you really think going through the centre of town is the safest route?" Panicked Rachel.

"I just need to pick up something." He said with a nonchalant tone.

"What?" Before she could go on, Milo brought the car to a hard stop which, because of the speed he was going, jolted both of them forwards and slammed them back into their seats.

Milo burst out of the car running as low as his legs would

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allow him. There was so much violence and chaos; Milo had never seen so many dead bodies in his life, but he ran into the bank and grabbed Rachel's bag and ran back into the car, ducking from flying debris and even gunshots.

"You got my bag?" Rachel said softly with admiration.

"Yep." Milo's reply was quick and sharp as his head was in getting the hell out of there.

It was getting dark now, and they were on the open road. Milo decided to take the dirt roads, all the way around the city in order to avoid traffic and of course, the chaos. It was much safer but *fuck, is it eerie out here.*

In this brief moment of silence they had, Rachel decided to try and get Milo to open up about what had happened at the house.

"How are you feeling? You know, after the house?"

"Okay, I guess. How are you?"

"What happened?"

"I told you, I just blacked out, I wasn't thinking." Milo's tone was getting sharp so Rachel decided best to back off.

"So what exactly do you think caused this... destruction?"

"I don't know. I have a feeling it was a meteorite and people are just taking advantage of the chaos to get away with whatever they can."

"It seems more than that to me."

"What's your theory?" Milo was slightly intrigued.

"I think there's something darker going on, I just don't know what though."

Driving had a kind of peaceful aura about it that calmed Milo down a little but they still had another twenty miles to go. All of a sudden, a faint beeping began to sound.

"Shit!" Milo shouted sharply.

"What is it?" Rachel asked.

"Running out of gas."

"Do we have enough to get there?"

"I don't know, maybe."

The gas lasted them about 20 minutes until the car started to slow and stutter. They had about six miles left and they'd have to walk it.

"Shit, what do we do now?" Rachel asked.

"We're going to have to walk, aren't we?" Milo had a sarcastic

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bite to his response

“What about our stuff?”

“It has to be essentials only. Minimal food. Jordi will have food at his place and hunting is allowed out there *Not that the law matters right now*. Just take the stuff we absolutely need.”

“Okay.” Rachel agreed and they began packing. There wasn’t much argument over what should be packed and what shouldn’t. They both packed their bags as tight as they could with essentials and began the trek to the woodlands.

Milo came across as brave but he felt sick to his stomach, Rachel didn’t know but he suffered from severe anxiety. In fact, that’s how he learned the ‘Take Five’ breathing exercise that he taught Rachel. He was scared about waking in the middle of the night during all the chaos, *though we’re far away from that now*, he quickly dismissed it but the biggest worry was walking through the woodlands in the dead of night. However, if he had learned anything today, he had learned that he could defend himself, *maybe a little too well*.

“Do we have anything to defend ourselves?” Milo asked in concern.

“Not unless you have something.”

“I think I have a wrench back in the boot of the car.” They weren’t far from the car but going to get the wrench would set them back.

“No, we’ll be fine. Besides, there’s no one out here at this time.” Rachel said, making the first decision since what seemed like ‘The End’.

Rachel was still in a lot of pain. She was limping but she didn’t want Milo to see. She liked him and despite what happened back at the house, she wasn’t scared of him, though there were much scarier things happening at the minute.

“How long now?” Rachel asked, tiresome. Milo pulled out his phone and tried to turn the brightness up. It wouldn’t work. His phone was dying.

“Perfect.” He muttered to himself in anger.

“Let me guess...”

“Phone’s dying.” They said in unison. There was nothing left to do but laugh and they burst into a roaring cackle in the middle of a wide-open dirt road in pitch black.

“You couldn’t write this!” Rachel said in between short

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breaths and chuckles.

"I'm sure someone is in another dimension or something."

Milo joked after a long sigh. Rachel's smile dropped.

"Did you hear that?" Rachel asked sharply.

"Hear what?"

"It sounded like a scream." She added in discomfort and to underline and demonstrate her point a young female scream echoed down the empty road. "It's getting closer". All of a sudden, the warm glow of laughter left Milo's body and what replaced it was chilling fear.

"Help me!" The voice begged as the fast-paced footsteps got louder. They started to see an outline of someone now.

"Fuck!" Milo shouted, finally exhaling.

The girl came charging towards them and landed on her knees on the dirt.

"You have to help me!" She pleaded. She was bruised and had a huge gash on her arm. "The fucking thing bit me!" She warbled.

"What thing? That's a human bite by the looks of it" Rachel questioned.

"Whatever that thing was it was not a fucking human!" She screamed at the top her lungs.

"How long have you been running?" Milo asked her.

"Ten minutes? I don't know, I wasn't counting!" She said with the same tone but this time, she was even louder. She began to fade. The scream had taken it out of her, *either that or the running for ten minutes whilst losing blood has finally caught up with her.*

She fell face first on the ground with a sharp thud.

"Shit." Rachel whispered to herself and rolled her over. She gently slapped her face. "Hey! Wake up! Milo, hand me some water." After which she began pouring it over her face and the woman's eyes opened. "Oh, thank fuck for that! Hey, you're okay!" She said with a smile. The woman said nothing, she just stared lifelessly into Rachel's eyes for few seconds. Then, she began to look angry, very angry. Her mouth began to open and she started to groan.

"Oh my god, get back!" Milo screamed and, in a call-and-response fashion, the woman screamed so loud that her vocal cords must have distorted. Rachel leapt back.

"Holy fucking shit!" Rachel screamed.

"Bet you wish we had that wrench now."

"Really." Rachel had split second of hatred for Milo in that

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moment but he redeemed himself by snatching the metal water bottle from the ground and clobbering the girl around the jaw with it. Her jaw snapped out of place but she didn't stop, she came charging towards Milo and dived on him. Milo and the undead girl began wrestling on the floor. *Fuck, she's strong!* Her dislocated jaw clamping and opening with the force of an alligator. He couldn't even hear himself think over the sound of her groans and screams. Thankfully, Rachel came to the rescue with a kick to the temple of the girl. The sound of her bones clicking from the force of the kick was oddly satisfying in that moment. The girl fell off Milo and Rachel ran back round to finish what she started. She relentlessly began kicking the girl in the face, as fast as Milo with the knife. When the girl rolled onto her back from the force of the kicks, she began stomping down on her face, each time her skull got weaker and gave off the sound of thin ice under-pressure. It was Milo's time to intervene.

"Rachel!" He shouted, just as she laid down her final stomp, going straight through the girl's skull.

Rachel tried to pull her foot out of the hole she had just made but struggled. She ripped her foot out snapping the sharp edges of the girl's fragile skull and dropped to the floor. She burst out crying, screaming in distress. Milo got up and sat crossed-legged next her.

"Rachel." He started, speaking as softly as he could without whispering "Thank you. You saved my life." She crawled towards him and pulled herself onto his shoulder and continued to cry. Milo could feel her tears soaking into his shirt.

"I'm so sorry." She muttered to him, her voice muffled by his shirt.

"What for?"

"Going apeshit on that girl."

"*She* went apeshit on *us*."

That made Rachel feel a whole lot better and she used his shoulder as a post to clumsily climb back to her feet.

"I kicked her with my fucking bad leg too." Rachel joked with a bunged-up grin before, quite aggressively, wiping her snotty grin. She held her hand out to Milo, who was still seated.

"I should've helped *you* up." He stated with a smile.

"You did." Her clammy hand locking with his dried-bloodied hand and they picked up their bags and began their, now even slower-paced, walk to the woodlands.

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THREE



THE CABIN

Milo and Rachel could see the woodlands up ahead. *Finally!* Luckily it was a straight road there from where they left the car so there was no need for GPS from Milo's out-of-battery-phone. They had come across no more crazies that tried to attack them; in fact, it was a pretty quiet walk.

As they entered the woodlands, the air got cold, ice cold in fact. The pair hadn't thought to pack coats but forgave themselves for it. They traipsed through woodlands and each footstep was heard. They weren't talking, they were both catastrophising about the different ghouls and creatures that were sure to have them for dinner if they

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were caught walking through 'their' forest. The branches at the top of the trees were colliding with each other in the wind like they were fencing or sword fighting.

"Are you okay?" Milo asked Rachel, whispering in fear.

"I am, are you?" Rachel was whispering too.

"Look, light!" Milo spotted. "That'll be his cabin."

They began walking towards the warm glow of artificial light, picking up the pace slightly, when suddenly a gunshot echoed through the woodlands.

"C'mon! Hurry up!" A voice shouted after being responded to by a few groans and screams that sounded like the young girl that had attacked them.

"Get low." Milo whispered to Rachel and they both crouched in sync. They began crouch-walking towards the cabin. Peeking through the gaps in the trees, they made out a crowd of people.

"There's Jordi." Milo spotted audibly. Jordi was standing on the front porch with two other men either side of him, each holding a gun and aiming it at the crowd of people in front of his cabin.

"Those people," Rachel started, "They're like the girl. Look at them, they're groaning and charging at everything."

Before Milo could reply they were interrupted by a groan, it sounded a little too close for comfort. They shot up and turned around, they couldn't see anything. *Wait, there!* Milo thought as he spotted a man, limping aimlessly a few feet away being masked by the slim trees.

Milo and Rachel didn't think twice. They sprinted towards the cabin screaming. Almost blending in with the others, *maybe too much.*

Jordi, aimed his shotgun without hesitation and shot Milo in the shoulder.

"Milo!" Rachel screamed and dropped to her knees. Jordi continued shooting at everyone else but whipped his head towards the pair, squinting in interest.

"Get those two in, they're human!" He shouted over the gunshots to the man on his right. The man came running over, throwing Milo over his shoulder and almost dragging Rachel up the steps and towards the cabin.

He pulled them inside and ordered; "Stay here!" Before slamming the wooden door and continuing to shoot.

Around five minutes later - it was all a blur for Milo; he was losing blood and timekeeping wasn't exactly at the forefront of his mind

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– the three men came bursting through the door. Jordi took his cap off and crouched next to Milo.

“Louis!” He called.

“On it!” The handsome chap with blue eyes was already in the kitchen, gathering supplies. He came rushing back in, dumping the stuff where Jordi was crouching. He removed Milo’s backpack and cut off his shirt with a pair of scissors.

“Are you brave?” He said with a smile. Milo just nodded in slow motion but Louis was already back at work. He opened a bottle of vodka and began pouring it over his hands and a butcher’s knife. He stuck the tip of the knife into the wound and prized out the shotgun round from his shoulder. He then poured more vodka into the wound and took a needle and some thread and began stitching up the wound before wrapping it in a bandage. He made a sling from Milo’s cut shirt and fixed it onto him.

“I need some blankets and a glass of water.” Louis ordered. “Chris, come help me.” The two men picked up Milo and gently carried him to a comfy recliner. They pushed the chair towards the old log fire and covered Milo in the blankets. Louis gave him some water and turned to face both Milo and Rachel. “You’re going to live” He said with a smile and Rachel let out a very audible sigh of relief.

About an hour had passed and Milo was feeling better, although still faint, but his colour was coming back and he was able to talk.

“What were you doing out here?” Jordi asked him.

“What do you think?”

“The asteroid?”

“It landed in my city.”

“Fuck.” Jordi responded. Chris stepped forward and held his hand out to Rachel followed by Milo.

“I’m Cristian, Christian Dumont and this is my husband, Louis.”

“Where are you guys from?” Milo asked.

“Paris.”

“Paris? What are you doing down here?”

“We came down to visit Jordi, just before the asteroids hit.”

“I’m sorry, asteroids?” Rachel said.

“Yeah, one hit in Paris too.” Louis chimed in.

“Do you have any clue what is going on?” Milo asked the room.

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“Some fucking zombie apocalypse type shit.” Jordi responded, crudely.

“What?”

“It kind of adds up.” Rachel said.

“He’s right. It seems that something, maybe the radiation from the asteroid or something, is turning people into monsters. It’s like it boosts their adrenaline or something because they just don’t get hurt.”

“And that girl! She said someone or something bit her and then she went psycho.” Rachel added.

“We’re living in a zombie apocalypse.” Milo said in disbelief. No one responded.

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FOUR



CAN I TELL YOU SOMETHING?

The lights were off and everyone had gone to get some rest. Rachel and Milo were sleeping in the front room, which scared them both a little. Milo was going through a rough anxiety attack but just sat in silence.

“How you doing tough guy?” Rachel asked gently.

“Not too good.” Milo surprised himself by opening up.

“What’s on your mind?”

“A lot. It’s been a long day.” He said, gazing into the fire.

“True that.” Rachel said as she stood up and came and sat on the arm of his chair. “You’re okay though, don’t worry.”

“Can I tell you something?”

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"Of course, anything."

"When I was seven, we got burgled but we were in the house. I watched my mother get stabbed to death in front of me and there was nothing I could do about it."

"Holy shit Milo. That's horrific." Rachel said with sympathy.

"And now this... It's a lot to process."

"I get that and I'm here for you." Milo took his gaze off the fire and looked up at Rachel. She had never looked cuter.

Christian walked through the front room, interrupting the moment. Milo noticed he had a cigarette in his hand.

"Hey man, you got a spare one?" He asked.

"Of course, I'll just grab one from my tin." Christian responded before jogging back to the spare room. Milo stood up, *just*, and continued looking into Rachel's eyes. He smiled and kissed her on the cheek before heading outside with Christian.

"Thanks man." Milo said as he was handed a roll-up cigarette.

"No worries." Christian responded after lighting his and handing the lighter over to Milo.

"So, how long have you and Louis been married?"

"Just over a year. How long have you and Rachel been together?"

Milo chuckled. "We're not. I mean, not that I, we're not-"

"Ah, that stage, is it?"

"I guess."

"She really likes you, you know. I can see it."

"There's something there, but-"

"No 'buts'. You're doubting yourself. She likes you and I know you like her. Dive in the water man. I did, it'll do you no harm."

"I should, right?"

"You should."

"Thanks." The men just gave each other 'the nod'. "So, what do you do?"

"Have a guess."

"Well, you're from Paris so... You're a Jazz musician or private investigator!" Milo Joked.

"Exactly!" The two men burst into laughter but Christian didn't explain any further.

"Wait, for real?"

"Yeah."

THE END

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"Holy shit man, that's awesome!"

"Thank you. I don't P.I. so much anymore though, but I run a small Jazz club in Paris."

"I'll have to come down some day."

"Both you *and* Rachel." Christian corrected, followed by a wink.

"Both me and Rachel," Milo repeated, "What's it called?"

"*Le Terrier*"

"Sounds beautiful."

"It is. I love it there. I'm very proud of it." The two men continued to exhale the rest of their cigarettes and enjoyed the peace.

"Oh, hell!" Milo said.

"I heard it too." Christian confirmed. Both men heard a groan. "It's just one, it should be fine." But as if to contradict Christian, another two sounded and they were getting louder. Suddenly, a herd of what *I guess we're calling zombies now*, came charging towards the cabin, screaming violently. Christian and Milo threw their cigarettes out and burst back into the cabin, slamming the door behind them.

"Incoming!" Christian screamed at the top of his lungs and mere seconds later the zombies piled around the outside of the cabin like fanatics at a festival-seating concert, their noses and ruined faces pressed against the glass of the windows. Louis and Jordi came bursting out and Rachel stood up from the arm of the comfy recliner, standing in attention with them.

"Holy shit!" Jordi spat in shock. "Follow me!"

They almost marched, out of sync and clumsily, into a cluttered dining room. It had piles and piles of junk everywhere, boxes, papers, ornaments, everything. *The classic I-don't-know-what-to-do-with-all-this-stuff room*, Milo thought. It had two large windows on the east and west side that, at this point in time, had a lovely view of mangled zombie faces that crammed every inch of the glass. Milo couldn't help but think that if they weren't so damn loud and if they weren't so damn fidgety, you'd mistake them for two horror themed paintings, or even two copies of the same B-movie poster.

Jordi moved some of the boxes and papers on the floor and revealed a hatch way. *This is getting absurd now.*

He pulled it up, "Get in."

"Won't they see us? They're looking right in and they seem pretty damn intent on getting a chunk of us." Milo challenged. He was

THE END

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entirely against the idea but if he was right, if they did see them, then they'd be worse off down there, *right?*

"We'll be safe." Jordi asserted with a little grit.

The group heard a bang and the groans got louder; they had broken through the front door. "It's safe, now get the fuck in!" Jordi screamed and they all clambered their way inside just as a herd came crashing through to the room. They tried, but Jordi slammed the hatchway closed just in time and was holding it shut with a piece of rope that was tied to the handle. "Keep going!" He ordered them like a drill sergeant. They were climbing down a metal ladder in pitch-black dark, they didn't know where it ended but it did and finally, Jordi came climbing down, still holding on to the rope, he fumbled his hand across the wall and flicked a light switch. He tied the rope to a hook like he was hitching a horse that had a tendency to wander off. This worried Milo slightly; it wasn't very secure. "Follow me" Jordi said, as he took the lead through a very tight corridor, tight enough to be single file only. They reached a door and they all walked through. Jordi clicked the light switch and revealed what appeared to be an underground bunker.

"Jesus Christ! How long have you had this tucked away?" Milo asked.

"Since Ann and I moved in" Ann was Jordi's wife; she had passed away a couple of years ago.

"It came with the house?"

"The space did but I kitted it out after Ann left us. The space was marketed as a 'basement'.

I suppose it technically is a basement. Milo thought. The next thought on his mind was more practical so he voiced it, "Where do we all sleep? And what about food?" He asked the entire group.

"There is a little food down here, tins and such."

That's one.

"Here." Louis said as he pulled out a big box of old blankets, some okay, others are that scratchy kind.

"Of course!" Jordi said, Milo could almost see the light bulb light up above his head. "We can use the blankets and I have some spare couch cushions in one of these boxes too. We'll have to fashion some beds; they'll be tight and not very comfortable, but they'll do!"

That's two.

Louis, Christian, Milo and Rachel then spend the next twenty to thirty minutes taking some couch cushions and blankets and

THE END

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MacGyvering their beds, with a little help from Jordi, but Jordi was to sleep on the already existing couch that was by the back wall, near the door, which no-one minded. It became apparent early on that there wasn't enough for every one and by everyone, I mean Rachel and Milo. It was a no brainer that Christian and Louis would be sharing but no-one had thought about Rachel and Milo and by no-one, I mean Rachel and Milo, it wasn't anyone else's concern.

"Oh..." Rachel said as she noticed there were only two couch cushions left that everyone intuitively planned to place side by side to form a misshapen rectangle.

Rachel was holding one and Milo was placing the other on the floor. He stood back up and saw her holding the other, "Here, have this one too." He said.

"I can't do that."

"It's okay, I don't mind."

"Are you sur-"

"Or we- I'm sorry you say what you were goin-"

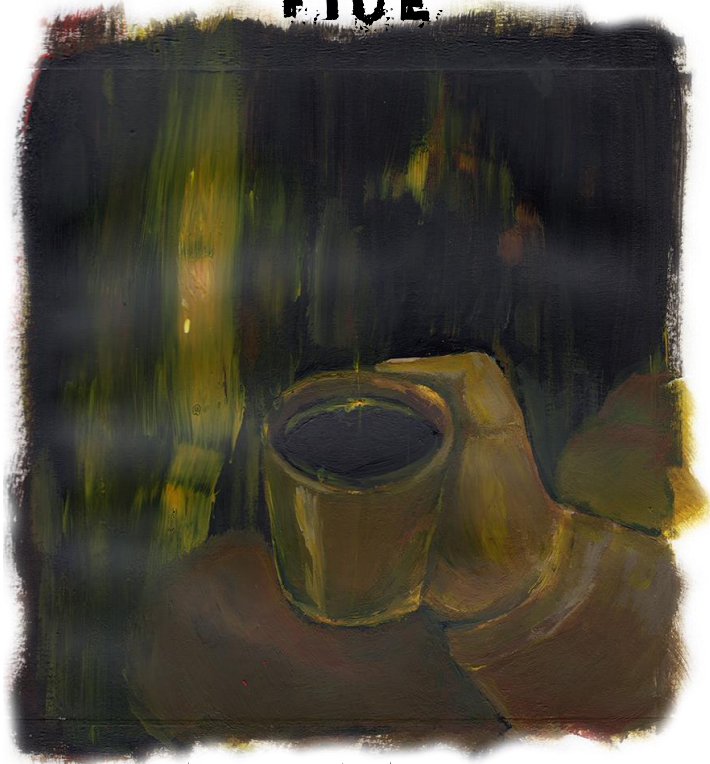
"No you say wha-"

"I was just going to say we could, share, if like it's cool?"

"Yeah, that's cool, cooly, cooly" Rachel said with a smile as she awkwardly used her index finger brushed back the loose straggles of hair that had fallen out of her bun. That whole conversation went on for far too long and was the most excruciating awkward moment Milo had ever experienced but he had a nervous glow of excitement. He turned around and looked at Christian and Louis who both, almost in sync, gave a chuffed smile, a wink and a discrete air fist bump.

THE END
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FIVE



LIGHTS OFF

Everyone was crammed onto their cushions or couch respectively, in almost pitch-black darkness. Milo and Rachel had never been this close, they had no choice but to touch. Jordi was snoring like a foghorn and Louis and Christian were sound asleep in silence. Milo and Rachel were chuckling over the volume at which Jordi was snoring. They were face to face, nose to nose, giggling like school kids on a sleep over.

“He sounds like a train when he exhales” Milo whispered, interrupting himself with a little giggle.

“And he sounds like a broken tractor when in inhales!” Rachel

THE END

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returned.

“What are we doing?” Milo joked.

“We’re blocking out the pain and anxiety of the past couple of days by acting like kids.”

“Wow, okay. Didn’t think we needed to get that deep.” Milo responded with a smile, not that she could clearly make out such a feature in the dark, but he was confident she heard his tone of voice.

“How’s your war wound?”

“Sore, but better thank you.”

“Good.”

The awkward silence began to stew, but Milo thought about the little talk he and Christian had earlier; how he should *‘dive in the water’*. So, he did, he closed the few centimetres of space that they had between them and he kissed her. She kissed him back. He felt as if he was swimming, floating even, on the ocean, being carried by the calm current, nowhere to go, nowhere to be, just drifting, glowing with peace and serenity.

The next morning everyone awoke at around the same time. It’s safe to say that Louis is not a morning person, he was sharp-tongued to almost everyone. Not mean or nasty, but in the *‘I’m-not-in-the-mood’* mood. One thing that kept most of them up was Jordi’s snoring and what sounded like a helicopter that was flying too low for comfort.

“Do you have coffee?” Christian asked

“Now that is the question!” Milo added.

“There’ll be a tin somewhere, but no way of boiling the water.”

Jordi answered, almost letting them down easy.

“Cold it is!” Milo decided!

“How do we know they’re still up there? Don’t they burn in sunlight or something?” Christian questioned. He does not like cold coffee, he drinks it black.

“That’s vampires.” Jordi answered with confidence.

“But they’re rotting” Rachel added.

“What’s your point?” Louis spat.

“Well, we know that things decay faster in heat, so why don’t we ramp the heat up and boil the fuckers instead of boiling up some coffee.” Rachel continued.

“She’s smart.” Jordi vocalised, pointing at Rachel and looking at Milo. “That could work.”

THE END

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"But we're trapped in here too." Christian debated.

"Heat rises, as long as we stay down here, we should be okay."

Louis shot back.

"But how do we heat up the cabin without going up?" Milo asked.

"The master controls for the heating are down here, I can bypass the thermostat and ramp up the radiators" added Jordi.

"I'm not sure radiators are going to do much." Louis said.

"They will if I put them on full, the cabin is insulated."

"Let's do it!" Christian said and Jordi got up to turn it on. He walked over to the boiler in the corner near Christian and Louis' make-shift bed. He reached his hand through the maze of copper pipes and put all his weight on the tip of his index finger and thumb to turn the tiny steel valve. The huge copper tank began buzzing.

"There. That should do it, this think kicks out quite a bit of heat as it is," he said slapping the side causing a metallic bang to resonate among the walls of the copper chamber, "so watch yourself when you go near it." Everyone nodded in recognition, the body language equivalent of '*roger that*' or '*copy*'.

About thirty minutes had passed and it was safe to say that everyone was hot and bothered and the addition of the heavy stench from decaying-in-heat zombie flesh, was certainly not helping. Suddenly they began to see the holes in their plan. *Man, we could do with some breathing holes right now.*

Despite the heat, obvious frustration and tension, everyone was still making an effort to get along. Even Louis had seemed to have passed through his morning grumpy stage.

"Look man, can I have a cigarette? I'm gasping." Christian almost begged Jordi.

"The air is tight enough already, let alone the cigarette smoke." He responded. "If you want a cigarette, you go outside."

"Are you crazy?" Christian said, asking in a tone that made it seem that it was actually a genuine question.

"You didn't mind insinuating that it was safe earlier."

"I asked a question!"

"Hey, hey, there's no need for us to get angry and fall out with each other, we have to stay on the same page." Rachel insisted to the two men.

"I'm going up." Milo announced out of the blue.

THE END

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"Milo, They're still up there!" Rachel pleaded.

"Rachel, we don't know that."

"We can smell them!"

"You can smell a *dead* body too."

"They're already dead!"

"They're mutated." Christian chimed in.

"Exactly, they're mutated." Milo chanted in background vocals for the Jazz musician's point. "We can't stay down here anymore! I'm sick of it! It's hot, cramped, uncomfortable and we have no supplies anyway!" He ranted.

"We all go up, together, as one" suggested Louis.

"That sounds fair" agreed Jordi.

"Fine, it's settled then?" Milo asked. Rachel just nodded, she felt sick to her stomach, and not because of the stench or the heat this time.

Jordi got up and he walked over to the tank, wrapping a blanket around his forearm and hand, the scratchy kind, and maneuvered his arm through the structured, geometric, glowing-hot, rats' nest of pipes and shut the heating off. The incessant hum of the tank slowly juddered off, reminding Milo of the sound his car made right before it stopped, and the room was eerily silent, no-one said a word. Milo didn't know what everyone else was doing, but he was trying hear if there were still crazies stomping about upstairs, he didn't hear a thing. "Sounds like we're safe." He announced.

"We don't know that yet" warned Jordi, and he led the way back through the narrow corridor. Behind the chipped, yellow ladder was an old wooden chest. He opened it up and gave everyone a gun in a first come, first serve fashion. A shotgun for himself, a shotgun for Louis, a pistol for the others. That's all he had. He passed around the appropriate ammo and he and Louis shared the shotgun ammo like they were passing a joint outside of *Le Terrier* on a cool Saturday evening. They used to hang out like that all the time before all of this went down.

They began to climb the ladder, one wrung at a time, each person feeling the left-over sweat left from the hands of the person in front of them. Rachel had it worse; she was last.

With the rope tightly wrapped around his fist like he was walking an excitable dog, Jordi placed his shoulder on the hatch way and opened it a slither, peaking through a gap smaller than a letter box.

THE END

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"Looks clear," he announced with a whisper, "but keep 'em peeled." He slowly lifted the hatch way and climbed up top gripping his gun and aiming as soon as his sweaty hands were free. The rest of the group joined and they went walking around the cabin like navy seals. The coast was clear, but the cabin was ruined, they had destroyed the place. *Out of anger?* Milo thought. Whatever happened they seemed to have drove them away. *It's a pity they didn't take their god-awful stench with them too.* In fact, there was no sign of anyone, it looked like someone had broken-in, and then left before they could be caught. They suddenly noticed that Christian had gone, he wasn't with them.

"Christian?" Louis called, a little worried, though it did seem safe. But in a flash, Christian came back with a cigarette behind his ear, handing one to Milo.

Whilst Christian and Milo were out smoking, the others continued searching the cabin for any signs of mutated or undead people. They all had an uneasy feeling. Milo and Christian did too but they had a way of blocking it out.

"You going to write a song about this?" Milo joked with Christian.

"If I ever find my way back to my piano. Do you play?"

"I play a little sax, but I haven't touched it in probably five years."

"How come?"

"Sick of life, I had no motivation for anything. Why'd you think it took me so long to ask Rachel out?"

"Was this enough of a shake up for you?"

Milo chuckled, "I think this did it."

"What do you do?"

"I *worked* in a bank."

"Worked?"

"Yeah, figure if the world ever goes back to normal, I'm going to quit. I don't know what I'd do, I just know I'm sick of it and all this shit has been a wake-up call that anything can happen. We are all probably still in mortal danger. I can't bear the thought of going back into those walls knowing that I could die at any second."

"I feel you."

"The only scary part is not knowing what I'd do without the security of a salary."

"I'll pay you."

THE END

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Milo burst into another chuckle and once again, Christian didn't explain any further, forcing Milo to invite him to explore. "You'll pay me?"

"Yeah."

"What for and why?"

"Come work for me, join my band. We need a sax player, that's the thing our horn section is missing; horns."

"Oh man, I can't move to Paris, I got a job-"

"Do you?"

"I don't, going to quit. But-"

"You're making excuses again Milo. Dive in the water-"

"It'll do me no harm." Milo finished his sentence. Once again, they gave each other the nod and put their cigarettes out before, this time, calmly walking back indoors. Just as they did Rachel, Jordi and Louis were standing around the television.

"Hey, come look at this." Rachel said and Milo and Christian joined them. They had put on the news.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, this is an important announcement. Ladies and Gentlemen, this is an important announcement" the newscaster repeated, *"It is now safe for all to leave their homes, the United Nations have this special announcement."* The news cut to a United Nations representative, who stood centre stage with the world's leaders behind them.

"The world has been shaken and devastated by an infestation of mutation among the population. Many people have died, and many people will continue to die in secure facilities around the world in the aftermath of this horrific event. Thankfully, due to the military, all branches from all countries, this event is now over. The military and secret service risked their lives, many of which did not survive, to eliminate this threat. Thanks to the input of NASA and other space agencies around the world, the asteroids that landed, devastated the globe and caused this travesty, have been destroyed in a safe and secure fashion. It will take a long while for us all to process and settle back down, but when you fall asleep tonight, you can do so knowing that you are safe."

THE END

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EPILOGUE

The event became known as **THE END**. A brief moment in time when the gloves were off, chaos ensued and terror bewitched the lives and homes of the world.

Thankfully, Milo, Rachel, Christian, Louis and Jordi all survived. Jordi cleared up his I-don't-know-what-to-do-with-all-this-stuff room and decked out his basement, ready for next time. Milo and Rachel moved to Paris together and Milo took Christian up on his offer to be the sole soul sax player in his band, playing every night at *Le Terrier*.

THE END

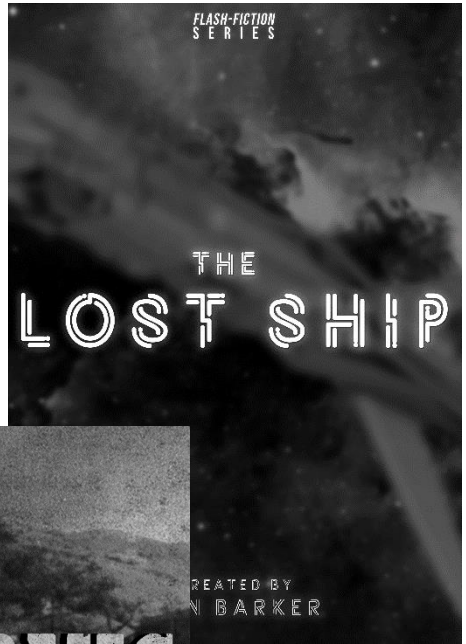
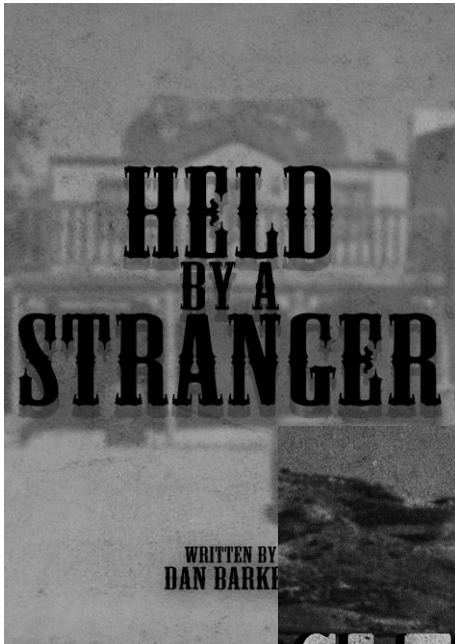
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About the Author



Dan Barker was born in Nottingham, England on January 4th 1999. He is the author of *Held by a Stranger* and the creator of *The Lost Ship* flash-fiction series. He is also the founder of the *George Hickling Restoration Project* whose mission it is to find, restore and share the great poetry of George 'Rusticus' Hickling, Dan's 4th great grandfather. Dan is also a writer, musician, producer, graphic designer and filmmaker. Dan's core values are represented in his phrase, "Love, Always."

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