

“Memories are bullets. Some whiz by and only spook you. Others tear you open and leave you in pieces.”

— Richard Kadrey

VI.

It had been one hundred and thirty six days.

The hospital started to feel like the new normal, and Gillian Cassavoy hated that. What she hated more, though, was what was happening to her baby boy.

Encephalitis—an inflammation of the brain, caused in this case by a strain of influenza—burdened her boy PJ. The four-year-old boy was in the hospital for one hundred and thirty six days at this point, and in a comatose state—unable to communicate, fed through tubes—for more than half that period of time. Gillian spent every single one of those days in a state of manic crying at least once per day, she was surprised she hadn’t dried up and shriveled away from dehydration.

On day eighty-seven, PJ in his comatose state had bit down very hard on his tongue and the tip of it was severed off. She remembered the fear she felt as nurses tried to pry his jaws open, as his tiny mouth clamped onto their hands instead of his tongue. The screams were miserable. The entire experience was, but for some reason, those cries and the feeling of being pushed out of her own baby’s hospital room--those stuck out to her the most.

Seth, her husband, remained at home with PJ’s twin brother Pierce. He was taking it especially hard. She had Pierce record a message and send it to her through the phone. She played the message for PJ, holding it to his ear, as Pierce’s little voice chattered about how much he missed his brother. He brought up how he missed the ‘wolf howl’. Gillian would howl anywhere in the house, and PJ and Pierce would come running to her side, howling back.

Pierce also used the phone call as an opportunity to recall the story of ‘*the pam issident*’ (he meant to say ‘incident’). Gillian remembered how she would leave a room for five seconds--literally, only five--to return and find little PJ on top of the cabinet, or the tables. She ended up coming up with something that would keep him off the tall furniture: she sprayed all of it with Pam. PJ would run and leap at the cabinet he used to climb with ease, only to slap against it with a sticky thud and slide down. It was the most hilarious thing. It was a hot mess to clean up, but it was worth it to keep him out of trouble and eventually, he stopped trying.

As Pierce’s voice talked through the phone to PJ and recalled these fond memories, Gillian noticed tears streaking down PJ’s cheeks from his glued-shut eyes. He could hear Pierce. He felt every word. He was *responding*.

This was the first time she’d cried tears of joy and not those of despair in one hundred and thirty six days. His right eye opened by the end of the phone call. The next morning, it was his left. By the end of the week, day one hundred and forty one, PJ was talking.

The first thing he asked for was Pierce. He just wanted to see his brother.

Gillian didn't remember leaving PJ's bed that entire evening, she just cradled her son and told him how proud she was and how strong he was. She called Pierce every day that week and kept telling him "You saved him, you saved your brother."

Once he was conscious and able to speak, she noticed him speak with a tiny lisp. That was due to biting off the tip of his tongue on day eighty-seven. His brain function was not one hundred percent and the doctors said that he'd likely be visually impaired. On multiple occasions, some doctors said he was blind. Others couldn't be sure.

Gillian tested his vision herself with images of family members they didn't see very often; aunts, cousins, and he could identify them. He even pointed to a pair of long tube socks, adult size, that were hanging on the wall by a pin. These blue and red socks were sent to the hospital with a Superman-esque emblem, replacing the giant 'S' with 'PJ'. Each sock had a little cape on the back, above the heel. She often called him 'Super PJ, Miracle Boy'. He was her superhero.

"That's so cool," he said. She wasn't giving up hope for him just yet. He could see. She had her proof, even when the doctors kept telling her one thing and then another.

One of the nurses, Tessa, pulled Gillian aside that same night. She noticed that Gillian wore a cross on her necklace and suggested praying to St. Lucy, who was the patron saint of eyes. The Cassavoyes were a Catholic family through and through, so of course Gillian took a shot.

The next afternoon was particularly difficult, thoughts flooding Gillian's head about how her son would never be the same goofy boy again. During physical therapy, in which the poor child was all drugged up, he cut the most terrific fart she'd ever heard from any child. While Gillian attempted with little success to stifle her laughter, the male nurse that was in the room with her simply nodded and said, "Oh yeah. That must've felt amazing. I'm sure he'd be proud of that one." That he would have.

And once he was awake again and Gillian was able to tell him that story, PJ couldn't stop laughing for a while. The guy nurse was right. He was so proud of that story, and boy, was his laugh contagious. It was the best feeling in the world to hear it again. Gillian felt renewed in her spirit by his laughter and seeing the kid he was before all of this once again, that she went down to the lobby to pray to St. Lucy. In the midst of her fervent prayer, a doctor walked in representing the eye institute, apparent by the logo on his lab coat. She just started to laugh, and upon his questioning, she explained the irony in praying to the saint of eyes only for an eye doctor to waltz in.

Upon his inspection, the eye doctor assured her that he believed with all of his heart that with the proper set of glasses, as the brain continues to heal and reroute, PJ will be able to function. But he definitely had nerve damage, and there was no way he'd ever be a 20/20 guy. His body was contorted and his left arm unable to move. The doctors said physical therapy would fix that, a lot of it was necessary though for him to get any sort of normal movement back.

Day one hundred and fifty was the weirdest of the entire whirlwind experience. Lieutenant Hubbard of the US Army, and his team, accompanied by a British journalist named Simon Boyle, gathered everyone into the lobby of the hospital to explain the extremity of the situation outside. Gillian received consistent updates from Seth on the state of things in the city and the surrounding

areas; she heard talk of outbreaks and viruses and insanity starting around PJ's day one hundred and forty two, but she felt like Seth was withholding a lot of information, trying to soften the blow to her in order to keep her from snapping completely. She knew him well enough to know that this assumption made sense. PJ had been her only worry for so long, that it all seemed moot to her.

She'd check Facebook, Instagram, and find so much information and so many different opinions from people who had conspiracy theories on what was actually going on. It was apparently some sort of virus or infection that was making people crazy. Initial reports seemed to say it was invading brain waves. Some believed it was coming from 5G towers and that the government was doing this for population control, others were just posting small little outbreaks where it seemed that the infection was passing through bites. She tried to ignore it, and eventually, for her own mental health and under her husband's suggestion, she deleted her profiles altogether. She needed to focus on their baby boy, not on whatever craziness was happening outside the walls of the hospital.

Based on the severity of Simon Boyle's individual meeting with Gillian (he had them with each of the two-hundred-and-fifteen people living inside the hospital) things had escalated and they weren't getting any better. Simon and his "friends with the US army", as he kept calling them in an effort to keep her comfortable surely, were making the hospital their new base of operations. No one allowed in or out without Hubbard's permission.

Simon kept calling this "the new normal". She didn't like that.

The principle of their meeting was to determine where each individual could best contribute to Lieutenant Hubbard's order within the hospital. Simon assured Gillian that the safety of the patients was their top priority, but for some reason she didn't believe him. She asked about her husband, about Pierce, and about the potential to reunite with them. He didn't have a clear answer for any of her questions, but seemed adamant that she would probably fit best on a reconnaissance and extraction team, which was the first anyone ever told her she'd be fitting for something like *that*.

"Small and nimble, kind sassy for no good reason," Simon muttered, listing off the variety of reasons why she'd be a good fit. "It's a brave new world, but the fire little under your ass would keep you alive. Your boy is a fighter, and he had to have learned it from someone. That's for damn sure."

She argued she shouldn't leave, she needed to stay with PJ. They didn't listen.

"Are you planning to bring others in?" Gillian asked. "I'll stick with you, I'll follow orders if that's what you're all looking for. But only if there's hope that we are going to evacuate people and bring them here and keep them safe."

She couldn't stop thinking about Seth and Pierce, who were out there and surviving on their own. Seth checked in via text every day and they'd talk to PJ over the phone, but Gillian needed them again. She needed her husband's hugs, his tender touch, and she needed her twins reunited. It would mend her broken heart back together again.

It was PJ's birthday. He was fifteen.

He didn't like to make a big deal out of it. This birthday was spent like any other day. He was on fence duty this week.

Declan helped transform the airport into a safe haven and community for those lost and displaced by The Plague, and years of work meant that he was able to install solar panels and wind turbines to provide power. The turbines were already up when Winnie, Anson and PJ arrived, but PJ was able to put his technical prowess to the test in the installation of the solar panels. This was when he grew close to Declan, who appreciated the kid's hard work ethic and empathy. The airport also developed a farm, complete with livestock and crops to feed the survivors. Having lived on a ranch before establishing the airport safe zone with Phoebe, Declan had experience with farming and decided to teach others those skills too.

All of those cows and chickens, though, attracted a different kind of herd. The plagued came in small groups and would pile against the fence. In one instance, the fence collapsed and the airport lost a few people in the chaos. They've since rebuilt, recuperated, but caution has increased. Comfortability was a danger, Declan would warn everyone. And they made that grave mistake and paid the price for it.

So now here stood PJ, on his birthday, ramming a metal pole through the heads of the plagued. Two down, and he got it jammed in the third's eye. It hobbled backward, away from the fence, and collapsed in the bushes. Moving on to the next weapon in the pile, he produced a fire poker and jammed it through the eye of the next in line. It was so automatic, like second nature.

"Haven't you wondered where Winnie's been?" a voice asked.

Looking over, he noticed Declan stood there. He, per usual, had some sort of firearm slung over his shoulder, but this particular one looked more petite than usual. The weapon he picked up from the pile was a hand-crafted shiv, not PJ's best work he'd admit, but it did the job.

"Not really," PJ shrugged. "I just assumed she skipped her duty *again* to go tanning on the roof. I planned on jumping her with water guns later... Asher agreed to help."

"Harsh," Declan said. "You know Pheeb's and I talked to her?"

"About stepping up and helping out? Yeah, she told Anson and I with a multitude of eye-rolls. Is that why she's been helping in the kitchen a lot?"

"Yeah, and we talked about supply runs. Tanning won't be happening on our time anymore, I can assure you that."

"Then what's she doing now?"

"Something I asked her to do. Something for you, so I suggest you drop the attitude."

"Aw come on, for my birthday? It's really not that big of a deal. And I'm not giving 'tude!"

"You do a lot around here and so many of us care about you a lot. Birthdays are always a big deal."

Declan was so thoughtful. The entire field on the opposite side of the airstrip of the farm and the turbines, was filled with toys and other things to do. He had a team sent out there to grab supplies and rebuild a pool, a swingset, all types of stuff. He just wanted the younger members of the community to be happy, to be comfortable, to have some semblance of normalcy. To grow up as kids should, he always said. PJ was the youngest until Gray arrived.

Weeks had passed since the Bolio boys settled into the airport, became a part of their community, and PJ was the happiest he had been in a while. It had been a whole month at this point, maybe even slightly longer, since the Bolios moved into the airport. They decided to stay, after weeks of meandering and dancing around the point. For the first time ever, really, PJ had people around him that were his age--and low and behold, he actually *liked* them.

It wasn't just that he was friends with them out of sheer convenience; he truly enjoyed their company. Gray humored PJ's obsession with fixing old technology and Asher was always a hoot to have around when he was in the mood to terrorize Winnie. The three of them together just liked to relax, chat, goof off, whatever. They were the first friends he'd ever had. Asher was not quick to settle in, but talk of taking off with Gray in the night died down after the first couple weeks. PJ knew he was starting to like it there, even if he wouldn't vocalize it. 'That'd just be weak'. He was starting to understand how Asher was thinking about things now, too. That sounded like something he'd say.

"Once we're done here, Winnie and I have got something I think you'll be pumped for," Declan beamed.

And just then, as Declan turned to stick the shiv into the face of a plagued at the fence, PJ noticed the weapon slung over the older man's shoulder was colorful and covered in electronic buttons and a panel. That was not something he was used to seeing, and it definitely piqued his interest.

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Winnie hadn't used her silhouette to her advantage in a long time. But unlike using it on the dance floor for her own deviant pleasures, she found herself creeping across a mesh hallway that hung over the food court of the airport with a laser-tag gun in her hands and a hefty vest hung over her shoulders and strapped at the waist. She tried her best to move silently. Someone was nearby. She could hear their breathing.

Then, the music started to explode from the speakers of the food court. It was that George Michael guy again. "Wake me up before you go-go..." PJ loved eighties music. It was times like these where she realized how much she missed that trashy club music.

"You're still in the game?" a voice asked from behind her.

She whipped around, pointing her weapon in the voice's direction. She pulled the trigger on her laser tag gun, lighting up the hallway ahead of her.

"Figured you'd have been gunned down at this point, Material Girl."

The sarcasm from Asher Bolio's voice was evident. He smiled down at her, pointing his laser gun back at her. This would be the set up for a very brutal and intense standoff, if it weren't for the nature of their luminescent faux-weaponry.

"Ah, underestimating me," Winnie said through gritted teeth. "A fatal choice many men before you have made..."

Asher was too quick. He pulled the trigger. Winnie's vest buzzed loudly and its screen read:

GAME OVER FOR POOH BEAR OF THE BLUE TEAM.

"Red team for life!" Asher chanted, pounding on his chest.

He held out his hand for Winnie. She took it, and Asher pulled her close to him, holding his laser tag gun against her back.

"You distracted me!" Winnie whimpered. "That's not fair."

"What can I say?" Asher laughed. "I just have a way with people."

"The only *'way'* you have with people is making them *'run a-way'*," Winnie attempted. Seeing the look on Asher's face reflecting confusion, she tried to clarify, "You know -- like away from you. Oh, forget it."

"Funny," Asher said blankly. He didn't actually think it was very funny at all. Winnie knew. In all honesty, she didn't think it was very funny either. She's said better, but something intimidating about Asher made her not as good at the snippy comebacks as she usually was.

"You think offering me as a hostage is going to do you any good? PJ isn't gonna back down. Especially now that he's blaring his music, and -- I must assume at least -- you're the last one left. He must be in the zone now. And when the pressure's on, you *choke*, you always do..."

"We'll see about that," Asher said, a confident smirk creeping onto his face.

He couldn't help but hum along to the 80's bop.

Unlike Winnie, he actually found this stuff infectious.

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It wasn't his music that PJ Cassavoy blasted over the airport speakers, it was his mother's. She had a collection of music so wide in variety on her iPhone, and it was the only relic of his mother that he had left. But now, he *owned* it. It was now unabashedly his. Without music, he truly believed that he'd be in a dark pit of despair, without any hope, and very likely dead. Music was the first thing that PJ believed kept him alive this long. He often insisted, to the disbelief of all, that his lucky sock was the second reason he's stayed alive this long. The red and blue tube sock had a cape above the heel. His mother told him he got the sock, and its long-missing match, when he was in the hospital a decade ago. That sock represented everything Gillian thought PJ was: a hero, a miracle.

The third? The best people in the entire world--nah--the entire universe, always had his back. Even before his current little family unit, even before Winnie (who saved his life), he had his mom and she was the sweetest, prettiest lady ever. He didn't remember much about her, other than her eyes, her smile, her heart. He knew that his mother loved her children very much. Her face haunted him often. Not in the sense of a ghost taunting him. She haunted him in a comforting way. She was always with him.

He was the type of kid who empowered the people around him, who made them feel their best, but never was able to understand or identify his own worth. It was always other people's responsibility for his survival in this harsh world. He considered his personality traits weaknesses on

par with the epileptic seizures and nightmares that plagued him. He tried to masquerade these feelings of unworthiness with music: Everything went back to the music.

He heard a door crack open, even through George Michael's swooning voice. A red light zipped past his face, and he ducked under the table.

"Come on out, Jammies," Asher's voice echoed. "I've got your precious Winnie..."

PJ suddenly heard the buzzing of Asher's vest going off. Asher read his screen:

GAME OVER FOR ASH KETCHUM OF THE RED TEAM.

"WHAAAT?!"

PJ leapt up, seeing Asher toss Winnie aside carelessly as he spun around to see who shot him. She stumbled, catching herself before she fell. Winnie was hollering, laughter erupting from her in a way none of them had heard before.

"You forgot somebody--your own brother!" she cackled. "Your big head got in the way once again, Ashy-boy!"

Gray Bolio stepped from the shadows, smiling. Winnie wrapped the little guy in a big hug, and he laughed--an uncomfortable laugh (he was not quite used to getting the one-up on his big brother nor was he quite used to a hug like this), but a genuine laugh nonetheless.

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PJ approached the table, enjoying one of the pre-wrapped, mass-produced cupcakes he'd been gifted by Declan. These sort of treats were saved for occasions like this. He looked at the table and soaked in just how lucky he felt. Declan sat at one end of the table with Phoebe, while Winnie, Anson, Asher and Gray were at the other. These people were all so important to him and so valued. He bit down into the plump cupcake as he pulled up a chair next to Gray, clapping the small boy on the shoulder blades. Upon impact, he leapt in his chair a bit, startled.

"You killed it!" PJ said. "I'm impressed. Declan said you took him out, too? You're a living, breathing sniper among our midst."

"Thanks," Gray stumbled through a nervous smile.

Declan got up with a stretch that gave more audible cracks than he would have liked anyone to acknowledge. He announced, through a yawn, "I had fun, but it's time for this old guy to go to bed. These bones aren't what they used to be, I ache in places I didn't even know I had. I hope you had a good birthday, PJ."

"I did, thank you."

Declan leaned in and whispered, "Be nicer to Winnie, this was her idea. She's trying her best."

He winked at PJ, tousled his hair, and then started saying his goodnights to everyone else.

"How's it feel, Peej?" Anson asked. PJ had a ton of awful nicknames--Peej was probably his least favorite of the sour bunch. Picking a favorite, though, was like picking the least repugnant turd from a pile of shit. "To be fifteen?"

“I think I’ve surpassed the average life expectancy, so that’s pretty dope,” PJ answered. He lifted his juice box and announced, “Cheers to fifteen.”

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PJ Cassavoy was not actually asleep. He considered a state, somewhere between sleep and wake, in which he would fall back into the past and relive it. It felt like being in front of a television, with surround sound shattering the eardrums and 4K Ultra HD picture quality causing the eyes to melt away and ooze out of their sockets.

Other nights he’d actually dream and those dreams were often random and as normal as dreams could be: sometimes he was having a conversation with Winnie or Anson, but on a beach instead of at the airport. Sometimes he was just walking through the woods with an animal he’d never seen before.

Some were weird, some were like living a normal day, but they all had something in common: no sense of consciousness or awareness. But this state was far different. The things he saw in his sleep during these periods were the same event. He’d been told before, by Anson, that this was a symptom of PTSD. It happened sometimes once a week, sometimes twice, but it wasn’t every day.

In his re-entries, as he called them, PJ was aware of himself in both states. He was his current self, sitting like a passenger outside of his body, watching his younger self. It could only really be described as being like watching a *really engrossing* movie, knowing full well that a character is going to do something wrong, or have something bad happen to her, and being powerless to stop it. You’ve seen the movie before, but you want to change the ending and save the character, so you desperately scream but she just won’t listen. But this person wasn’t a character in a movie, nor even behind a TV screen; this person was tangible, in front of him, and this person was him.

PJ wondered if re-entry was anything similar to what the Plagued were experiencing. They were bitten, infected, and changed. Upon that change, PJ wondered: what happens to the spirit, the soul, or whatever you want to call the basic semblance of human personality and characteristic? It’s drained away, but flushed to where? Are they forced to live outside of their body, watching a new master take it over and use it for destruction and mayhem? He shuddered at the thought.

At the corner of Hoffs and Drawlar was a construction site that never got finished. Re-entry PJ stood outside a particular culvert, which was made of reinforced concrete. The rain beat down and created a rhythmic tapping as it slipped down the sides of the cement culvert and slapped the dirt ground below it.

Distant lightning illuminated the pipe, shedding light inside and exposing a scared little boy for only a few seconds before the flash dissipated and darkness claimed him again. Despite the darkness, he could see the scared little boy. He saw himself: Past PJ was two years younger and looked a lot younger than his age. Even Re-entry PJ could tell the difference.

The lucky sock is Past PJ's rampart, the constant between the two editions of the same boy. Re-entry PJ approached the culvert, and as he got closer, the dream started to contort and change in a whiplash-esque fashion. Past PJ suddenly stood outside the other end of the culvert, back to Re-entry PJ, with his fists balled. He was standing in the rain, and heading toward something. A shadow far off in the distance, a silhouette wrapped in a mustard yellow raincoat.

The re-entries always ended the same. Re-entry PJ would be void, he'd become someone else. He'd check out his hands. The softness, the painted pink and red nails that were far too long to be his own. He was in the perspective of Winnie.

She'd notice Past PJ's teeth, his slightly crooked canines. She noticed his wet, long, and gangly hair that completely covered his face. She noticed the way he hunched himself inward, in the shape of a bracket, as if it were protection from the world. She noticed the blood in a pool beneath him. She noticed something else, something that was blurred away as if scribbled out by a giant eraser, and this thing made her scream.

Then PJ would wake up, thrown out of his re-entry. He'd find himself in bed, a dripping mess. Sometimes he'd scream himself awake, too. This was one of those nights.

"PJ," Winnie's voice said from the bed beside his. "PJ, it's Winnie."

"I know," he panted heavily. "Could you come here? Please?"

Anson didn't move from his spot in the bed they shared, but Winnie slithered out of the bed and knelt down next to PJ's.

"Re-entry again?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I wish I could..."

"What did you see that night? In my re-entries... at the end, I'm you. I'm always you."

"We've been over this before..."

"It made you scream."

"I just saw you. Hurt. That would make anyone scream."

"I just want them to stop, Winnie."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I want to know where she went. That was the last night I saw her."

"Maybe she's still out there. Maybe she's looking for you," Winnie's voice was quiet, unsure. And then, with more confidence, "You mean a lot to me, I hope you know that. We're in this together. As long as you'll have me, I'm here."

"Of course I'll have you," he said. "I'm sorry I've been so mean to you."

They exchanged no more words that night. He put his head against hers, and softly wept until fading to sleep again. She tucked the blanket over him, and climbed over Anson back into their bed.

Her sobs were heavy, but silent. The only difference was, Winnie wasn't able to fall back asleep. Her tears lasted all night, until morning sun leaked in through the blinds of the window. She knew she had to put her game face on. It was a new day.