

RECOLLECTION
TOM PAWLIK



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06:59:45

“Nine-three-one-one-one-seven-five-seven-seven.”

Adrian Colfax heard himself mumbling the string of numbers as he drifted back to consciousness. The sensation was like floating up through an icy black abyss, an excruciating ascent with his chest screaming for want of air. He sucked in a deep breath, opened his eyes, and found himself sitting in an automobile with his fingers clenched, white-knuckled, around the steering wheel and the numbers still on his lips.

“Nine-three-one-one-one-seven-five-seven-seven.”

His limbs felt cold and sluggish, like he'd been asleep for years. And a barrage of hazy, disjointed images peppered his mind—fleeting remnants of a dream that dissolved like a frail mist even as he struggled to make sense of it.

He dreamed that he had been lying in a darkened room somewhere with dim lights blinking nearby. But he didn't know where it

was or why he had been there. Only that his heart had felt strange—old and tired and laden with regret. Like a sponge soaked with too much water, sitting heavy inside his chest.

He also had a vague impression that there might've been someone else in the room, standing off in the shadows. But he couldn't be sure.

The one thing he *did* remember was the odd string of numbers. They played over and over in his head like a melody he couldn't get rid of.

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For some reason they had been important to him, but now he couldn't recall why.

Luminous blue digits on the dashboard clock blinked to 1:01 a.m. Adrian rubbed his eyes and soon recognized his surroundings. He was sitting in a taxi, parked on a narrow side street along a row of adjoining storefronts. A coffeehouse sat squeezed between a massage parlor and a pawnshop. Bloodred neon script in the window read *Java Cove*.

Java Cove. Adrian remembered he used to stop there every night for a cup of joe back when he was a cabdriver in Manhattan. Back when he was working the night shift to put himself through college. Back when . . .

Back when he was in love.

He stumbled out of the cab and surveyed the street. The pavement seemed to sway beneath him. The black sky hovered like a lifeless void just beyond the muted amber glow of the streetlamps. But the sidewalk and storefronts were awash with orange and crimson neon hues, mingled with sickly pale patches of fluorescent lighting.

The coffee shop's proprietor was a hefty, black-haired fellow in an oversize Yankees T-shirt. Adrian recognized him right away: Scotty Leonard. He and Scotty had been good friends back in high school, and Adrian had even been the best man at his wedding. But he couldn't help feeling like he hadn't seen his friend in years, though from the looks of him, Scotty hadn't aged a day.

Adrian was beginning to feel like Rip Van Winkle, waking up after decades of sleep to find that the world had passed him by. Only in Adrian's case, the world hadn't changed at all. It just *felt* older somehow.

The interior of the coffee shop was narrow and cramped. A white counter ran down one side of the shop with a line of cherry-red upholstered bar stools along its length. And a row of tables lined the other wall. A young couple occupying one of the tables near the back huddled over their lattes and engaged in muted conversation.

Scotty was working the counter when Adrian walked in. He still wore the same pencil-thin goatee that he had since high school. Adrian recalled Nancy Casseretti once telling Scotty she thought it made his face look slimmer, but in Adrian's opinion, all it did was accentuate his puffy jowls. And much to Adrian's surprise, Nancy wound up marrying Scotty a few years later. Jowls notwithstanding.

But it all seemed so long ago.

Scotty looked up and waved. "Yo, Adrian!"

Adrian also remembered Scotty's cheesy Rocky Balboa impression, but he didn't respond. He just stood in the doorway, dizzy and disoriented, still suffering the effects of his Rip Van Winkle syndrome. The sight of the coffee shop evoked an odd sensation in him, a dull twinge of distant familiarity—not quite *déjà vu*; more akin to revisiting his old elementary school or some other place from his childhood long since forgotten.

Scotty proceeded to pour him a cup of coffee: extra large, extra black with two packets of Sweet'N Low. That had been Adrian's usual—or so he thought—but he still hadn't moved from the doorway.

Scotty set the cup on the counter and raised an eyebrow. "What? I gotta bring it over to you now?"

"Uh . . . no. Sorry." Adrian slid onto a stool, trying to stave off his confusion. "I'm just feeling a little weird tonight."

Scotty grunted and pointed to the cup. "Yeah, well, that'll fix you right up."

Adrian took a tentative sip and felt the hot liquid flow down his throat. It was as delicious as he thought he remembered it. He closed his eyes while the warmth spread through his chest. Breathing the familiar aroma seemed to bring him back to his senses. Or a little closer anyway.

He smacked his lips. "Man, you wouldn't believe the dream I just had."

Scotty wiped down the counter. "Sleeping on the job again, eh?"

"I dunno." Adrian scratched his head. "I must've just closed my eyes after I pulled up. I don't even remember falling asleep."

"Well, I ain't surprised. You been burning the candle at both ends for so long. What'd you expect?"

Adrian sighed. "I know . . . but it's just for a few more months."

That was probably it. Maybe he was just suffering from exhaustion. His schedule these days was jammed: driving cab at night, going to classes during the day and then studying all evening until leaving for work by ten. And somewhere in there he would try to find time to eat and catch a few hours of sleep.

Scotty leaned an elbow on the counter. "Anyways, I'll bet Kate's ready for it to be done."

Adrian blinked. "Yeah . . . Kate."

Adrian's schedule had left him almost zero free time, let alone time for any sort of romantic relationship. In fact, romance had been the last thing on his mind in those days.

That is, until he met Kate Holland.

He had to admit she had been the best thing to happen in his life thus far. They had met at a Christmas party ten months earlier. She walked in with a gaggle of girlfriends—all tight black skirts, high heels, and mascara. But not Kate. She had a natural kind of beauty that didn't seem to need all the extra effort. A real girl-next-door

look: short blonde hair, cherry lips, and the most incredible crystal-blue eyes he'd ever seen in his life. Looking into them was like staring up at a cloudless sky through a clear sheet of ice.

That was the night he had fallen in love. That year was the best Christmas he'd ever had. They saw each other as often as his schedule allowed. A few hours here and there. A dinner, a walk, a movie.

Kate graduated that spring with a degree in finance and was now working for a big firm downtown. Some sort of analyst. Adrian had to admit he'd been a bit jealous, considering that he'd been working on his degree since before Kate had even started college and was *still* working on it now after she had finished. But such was the lot of the youngest of six kids born to a lower-middle-class Catholic dockworker from Queens. When it came to college, he had to either rely on grants and scholarships or work his way through. And since Adrian had never been very gifted academically, he'd been working on a four-year degree for the last six years. But now at least the end was in sight. At twenty-four, Adrian was finally in his last semester and should be able to graduate by the end of December. It took a little longer than he had expected but at least he wouldn't have any college loans to pay off when he was done.

Then hopefully by spring he would find a better job, save some cash, and be ready to propose to Kate. Maybe even as early as next summer. She had been patient and supportive with his schedule, but he knew his long hours were taking a toll on their relationship. He was feeling stressed and she was feeling lonely.

"So what's this about a dream?" Scotty's voice jostled Adrian out of his thoughts.

Adrian bit his cheek. "I can't remember much of it now, but it was so vivid."

"If it was so vivid, why can't you remember it?"

"All I remember is that it was vivid."

Adrian related what little he could recall about the strange room

he had seen in the dream. And then he described the mysterious set of numbers. "What do you think they mean?"

Scotty shrugged. "Beats me, but my cousin Pam is one of those psychic palm readers. I bet she could tell you what they mean."

"Seriously? A psychic?"

"She's got a little shop a couple blocks from here. She's usually open late; you should stop and see her."

"Sure," Adrian grunted, "because it's not like I have to work or anything."

Scotty glanced at his watch. "She's probably still there right now. Just tell her we're friends and maybe she'll even give you a discount."

"Y'know, you're absolutely no help."

"Dude, I'm serious. Go over and see her."

"I don't believe in that stuff."

Scotty sighed and shook his head. "Y'know, you need to be a little more open-minded about things. Pam's not one of those fakes. She even worked on a case for the FBI once. A kidnapping or something. And she knew stuff about us that she would've had no way of knowing."

"Like what?"

"All kinds of stuff. Like when my brother's wife was pregnant with their youngest kid, she said there was a problem with him. Some kind of health problem. And then six months later, little Toby was born with Down syndrome."

Adrian wasn't buying it. "That doesn't mean anything. Saying a baby's going to have a 'health problem' is not like predicting Down syndrome. The kid could've been colicky and you could still say she predicted it."

"Y'know, come to think of it, he *was* a little colicky too."

Adrian groaned and rolled his eyes. "I think I've heard enough advice for one night," he grunted. "I gotta use your can."

He slipped into the tiny restroom at the back of the coffeehouse.

But as he closed the door, he immediately had the feeling that he wasn't alone. The dingy turquoise tiles and white sink seemed to waver as a sudden chill shuddered through his bones. He shrugged it off and washed his hands, but as he splashed water on his face, he looked up into the mirror . . .

And gasped.

He found himself staring at a reflection that was at once alien and vaguely familiar. Like some pallid ghost of his future self, a puckered, leathery countenance gazed back at him. Dry folds of skin sagged around the corners of his vacant brown eyes and white wisps of hair wafted across his mottled scalp. A plastic tube hung from his nostrils down along the sagging folds of his neck, and a flimsy white hospital gown draped over his knobby shoulders.

Then he saw someone else standing behind his reflection. A shadowy figure leaned against the back wall of the bathroom. A gaunt, pasty-skinned man in a black coat with dark hair and a grim half-smile across his lips. He held up a silver pocket watch that dangled on the end of a chain.

His lips parted. *Time's a-wasting.*

But the words came more like a whisper inside Adrian's head than actually spoken aloud. He spun around.

"Nine-three-one-one-one-seven-five-seven-seven." He heard himself hissing the numbers in a shaky breath as he stared at an empty wall.

He turned back to the mirror but the man with the watch was gone, and the only thing he saw was his familiar and much younger reflection staring wide-eyed back at him. He breathed in long and slow. His heart pounded against his ribs as he struggled to catch his breath, fighting through the rush of adrenaline in his veins.

What now? Was he hallucinating? Or was it just another symptom of his lack of sleep? After a minute his pulse slowed and he wiped the cold perspiration from his forehead. His headache was gone, but now it was replaced with something else.

RECOLLECTION

A cold, gnawing fear.

Time's a-wasting.

Adrian had a sudden sick feeling that there was something he was supposed to do tonight. Something important, with someone's life depending on it. But now he had forgotten what it was. His temples stung with a sharp jolt as a memory hissed inside his head like a weak radio signal.

"Just be careful trying to change the past. You might not like how the future doesn't turn out."

He thought he had heard those words in his dream. He was in the bed and saw a dark shape in the corner of the room. It approached the bedside and moved into the light. The man with the watch! Adrian recalled a hazy image, a pale face staring down at him. Studying him. Maybe sizing him up, Adrian thought. Almost as if he wanted him to do something.

Or . . . was it to *not* do something?