

Beyond the Black

Well, a lot has happened, Reader, since I last took the time to chronicle my misadventures through the end of the world as I know it. As an aside, I really hope Stipe and his song-writing cronies got the full measure of the thing they trivialized. Inherit the wind, assholes.

Spoiler alert here, but I'm done. I've got several notebooks full of scribbles, and that's all you're going to get, you potentially non-existent being. I say potentially, but probable makes more sense.

Why the fuck did I feel the need to do this?

The answer is "I don't know".

I'll give you the last bits, just in case you do exist and want to know, but even scratching that out with my last Ticonderoga number two seems disingenuous. I think really I'm just doing it to put all my current vitriol on these last pages, leaving it and hoping that I can think clearly when I set Mr. Grant Whitman's world on fire.

Yep, her grand-father was a snake. But for continuity's sake, I should probably back up a bit.

It turns out that eighteen inches was the magic number to bury the cubes. When Brin and I got back from

Hmm. Sorry about that. I had to put this down for a bit. Not doing so well. Bear doesn't seem to be able to tell if he's on a suicide or *kamikaze* watch. Are those the same thing? Maybe intent? I don't know. It's not fair, but I'll admit to fucking with him either way. After all, he pulled me out of there. He kept me from her. I'm alive because he did, but that doesn't get him any points in my book.

Hah. My book. This book.

Brin's gone. I guess I can say that, given I just did.

Damn, I can't even tell a story to an imaginary person in the right order at this point.

Focus.

Eighteen inches down. Up to twelve inches down, the cubes were bright as day to Brin. Dimmer between the two the lower Bear dug. At eighteen, gone. It didn't matter how many were in the hole. It took us almost an hour to get through this dress rehearsal. If Bear hadn't had a folding shovel in his pack, it would've taken a lot longer. And yes, I get that it makes no sense. Why could she see the damn things behind hills, or concrete structures, and not 18 inches under the ground? How the fuck do I know? If you're looking for sense in all this, you should have stopped reading a long while ago. Anyway, first point made, finally.

We added seven cubes between where we were and fifteen miles shy of Garnet, according to the mileage sign. We then buried all but three in a field adjacent to the interstate, which we'd rejoined ten miles earlier. At least, I thought all but three, but it turned out that Bear held one back as well. Maybe I'll get to that, or maybe I won't. We didn't mark the hole, and replaced the wild-grass sod plug, but we all memorized the location against nearby landmarks. I tried to convince Brin to add her three cubes to the rest, but she wouldn't have it. I can't blame her, even though it was our downfall. It was very much "Hey, blind person. Go back to being totally blind after tasting sight for a while". What douche would suggest that?

Me.

And even though it might have changed the outcome, there's no way I could have enforced it, nor would I have had the balls or desire to do so. If love isn't blind, it certainly can be short-sighted.

I said that until we knew what her grand-father would or would not do to help us shouldn't have to include an acting job on her part. That didn't sway her at all. I told her I could see the difference between sighted and un-sighted Brin. Why take the chance? She dismissed that too.

"He doesn't know me. *He* won't be able to tell."

Bear stayed out of it, even when it got heated between Brin and I. It was easy to blame him later for that. And her.

But I know at whose feet the blame really lies. Second point made. If these landmarks annoy you, too bad. They're for me not you, anyway.

I wrote this latest over a couple weeks, truth be told. On each re-read, I get how disjointed it is. I just don't care. I've told myself to just stop and pitch it all in the fire a number of times, but here I am, sliver of pencil in hand once again.

I was thinking tonight about a quote from one of the *Lord of the Rings* movies, I don't remember which one. There's this scene, where one of the hobbits is talking to Gandalf right before everything goes to absolute shit. I don't remember what the hobbit says, but the wizard responds,

"This is the deep breath before the plunge."

That's what this feels like. Bear is treating me like a ticking bomb, and I guess he's right to. The fact that he's still around and hasn't written me off as a bad investment mystifies me. That he's down with what we're going to do makes me think that he never really expected to go much further in this world after his daughter died. I think Brin is as much his true north now as she is mine.

Maybe I've given you the impression that Brin is dead, and that isn't true, as far as I know. I sure as fuck intend to find out, right before I crucify her grand-father. How fast he dies will hinge on the answer to that question.

You might be waiting for me to tell you how it played out when we got to Garnet, and first contact was made.

I'm not going to do that. No blow-by-blow. Just enough to get to the third point, and that is this.

Grant Whitman, Brin Whitman's grand-father suckered us. I knew it was coming. I could *feel* it. Every step past exit 21 off the interstate, across the very bridge that Bear had told us about after Evanston, I had felt it. Right up to the buses. But I didn't stop it, because she wanted it.

I let it happen. I let him separate her from us. Again, because *she* wanted it. I saw the moment he knew, and then she was too far away from me for me to do anything but be hauled out of harm's way by Bear, who I grant knows how it felt. Maybe there's some symbolism there. If there is, I don't care about that either.

Maybe you remember way back in the beginning when I told you about my three defining characteristics. I went back in my notebooks, and got the exact quote.

"I was deeply afraid, I was deeply obligated to meet what I perceived were other people's expectations of me, and I was deeply angry."

I am only one of those things now.

There is a release in that, for me at least. I am conflict-free. I know Bear can see it, but I think he is still operating in a world that recognizes consequences. I do not.

To his credit, he's in it. Whatever I say. I can see his doubts play out on the face under the wild beard and unruly mane, but in the end, he just nods. There's a whole psychological study there in itself,

but no one will ever do it. For me, I'm just grateful. As grateful as my fury will allow, that is. There's not a lot of emotional room in me, I think.

And that brings us to the end, Reader. It's the terminus of our journey together and the cessation of these stupid scribbles. AKA Point four.

When whatever agency re-wrote the rules on this blue and white globe hurtling through the universe, and negated the power we had so carefully and arduously explored and exploited, they effectively dimmed our memories of it, as well. Time passed and all those things that had gone silent and inert didn't go away, but their relevance did. And irrelevance is almost as good as invisibility.

Then they sprinkled the power back in, like, "Oh, sorry. Didn't realize this is what would happen". Or maybe someone else did, to right the wrong. Or neither, and it was something else entirely. I don't know that it matters to Bear and I, because we had Brin.

I wonder if they knew there was somebody who could find it all fast. A somebody who would defeat their metering of its reintroduction in their half-assed hide-and-seek game. But then again, I don't, really. Because, fuck them.

Bear and I only had to travel thirty-five miles to reach a National Guard station after retrieving all of our cubes from their burial site. It turns out Bear is a veteran, among his multiple qualifications to play *Jeopardy – End of the World Edition*. Not of any particular conflict, mind you, but time in is time in. Our only complication upon reaching the station was dealing with a pack of feral dogs.

So, here we are, and I'm tired of writing. I leave you with this little bit, *Jeopardy*-style.

"*The End of the World as We Know It*, for twelve hundred, please."

"This is what happens when Jake and Bear return to Garnet after the betrayal."

"What is shock and awe, Alex?"

"That is correct."

End Part Two