

Memories

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Joe Newman saw it at the grocery store. He wasn't even looking for it, he was just looking for a bottle of aspirin and there it was, between two bottles of some pain reliever. MEMORY PLUS was written on the bottle. It said it was guaranteed to improve memory and cognitive function or your money back. He put the name MEMORY PLUS into the web browser on his phone and was amazed at the results. This is what doctors recommended to patients with dementia and other illnesses. Thousands of reviews and nearly all of them weren't just positive, they were five stars.

"Changed my life." said one reviewer

"It's like I'm in my twenties again." wrote another reviewer.

"I got my edge back."

The list just went on and on. It wasn't that his memory was failing, but he was no spring chicken anymore. He would be sixty years old in a few months and his memory was not what it used to be. It wasn't any of the brain diseases associated with old age, it was just the simple fact of getting older. The problem was that he was his company's PR man. He had to be on point at all times. He couldn't be slightly off his game when giving a press conference or taking questions from some attractive but dimwitted reporter. *This was the big leagues. This is what he had waited his whole life for.* He flew all over the country and overseas to promote his company's products. It had taken decades. But he was now the face associated with the brand. He had done dozens of interviews and TV shows, podcasts, you name it. He was the face of the brand.

The big wigs at the company loved him. He had dinner with the CEO several times and had even been out to one of his estates in Canada. They went to a hockey game together. Life was good. He just needed to be able to stay on his game. There were plenty of attractive millennials with boob jobs and perfect teeth that would love to dethrone him. They would kill for his job. That was simply not going to happen. He had spent years in the trenches, as a buyer, then as regional sales manager. He devoted some of the best years of his life to this company. He had a nice nest egg and a very comfortable retirement coming to him, but that didn't matter. He wanted to be the best. He wanted to be *the man* when it came to corporate relations. Recently, he had begun to get several discreet offers from other companies seeking his services. He was in demand. People wanted him, they didn't care how much it cost. This is exactly what he wanted. He just wished it would have come ten years sooner.

He first noticed it at parties. He would see a familiar face and just not be able to recall their name. There was nothing more awkward. It was not a good spot to be in. You never knew who they knew and so on. He didn't forget who they were, just their names. He could even recall the last time they had spoken, just not their names and it was beginning to become a problem.

Turns out, it was very common in people in his age group. If he started forgetting other things, then it was time to worry, but so far, it had just been the names. This went on for a year or more before he finally decided to do something about it. The last thing he wanted was anyone to know he had fallen off his horse, so he decided on a more discreet treatment. MEMORY PLUS was perfect.

He drove home and downed one. The stuff wasn't cheap. Almost fifty dollars for a thirty-day supply, but it was pocket change compared to what he could lose if his memory failed him. Fifty dollars for a chance to stay on top. It was pocket change to him. The bottle said to take one daily, so he did. He did it for a week. He saw no change, so he continued for another week. Many of the reviews pointed out that it wasn't until the second or third week that they began to see real improvements. You had to be patient. Life-changing type stuff usually doesn't happen overnight.

He had married and had children later in life. He met her one afternoon at a company function. Her name was Marjorie. It was lust at first sight. She was just out of graduate school and he was ten years older. Their attraction was magnetic. Within a month, they were living in his condo. It was closer to work than her apartment.

She came to him one night after he had gotten home from a trip overseas. She sat down next to him and told him that she loved him. She also told him she was pregnant with his child. He pulled out a small box holding the ring he had purchased for her in Singapore.

Within two years, he had gone from being a single, lonely corporate guy, whose entire existence revolved around the needs of the company to being a married father of twin girls. He names them Catherine and Sabrina. For years afterward, he was the only one who could tell them apart.

The years of long nights and missed dinners had taken their toll. By the time the girls were ten, his marriage was over. Marjorie told him she wanted out. She loved him, she just wasn't in love with him anymore. She hoped the two of them could be amicable about their split. She still wanted to remain friends.

Joe was devastated, but he understood. His first love was the company. It afforded him the ability to never have to say no to his girls. He had grown up poor and his father left when he was five. He did not want the same life for his daughters. He wanted them to have everything he didn't have and more. The sky was the limit.

He bought them both new cars when they got their driver's licenses. He took them on exotic vacations all over the globe. He paid for tutors and lessons. Nothing was too good for his girls. He wasn't a company man, so much that he was a family man and the company was like his extended family. He had fought hard for years and had even seriously considered leaving for another company, but he stuck with it and it had paid off. Rumor was, he was next in line for vice president. It was all supposed to be hush, but just loud enough for him to hear. It was his childhood dream come true. Some kids wanted to be superstar athletes or astronauts. He just wanted to be in charge of a company. He never actually thought it would be a Dow 30 company. He had an office and a staff to cater to his every whim. He had worked too hard at this point to lose it to some vacuous, social media bimbo. There were plenty of sharks in the tank at his level. The women were the most vicious. It was like they were trading their ovaries for job status. He

felt sorry for these types of women that saw having children as a hindrance to their careers. He couldn't imagine life without his daughters. Having children made life worth living.

He wasn't certain when he noticed the drug had started to work. Maybe he could recall minute details in conversations, or him noticing little things, like what kind of socks she was wearing, or the fact that he could suddenly recall every player on the 1986 Red Sox. Maybe it was none of these things. He kept taking the pill, once a day, same time every morning. It wasn't just the placebo effect, he really was getting sharper.

Damn, this stuff really works. He said to himself one day after looking out over his office window. He remembered the first day he showed up for work in this building, so many years ago, right out of college. He was so nervous, he forgot to put socks on. He remembers asking people on the street where the nearest clothing store was. He could recall the looks on their faces and how most people just walked by him. People could be so cold and callous. He hoped he was never like that to his subordinates. He then remembered buying a homeless guy a hot dog. The guy had stolen a pair of socks and given them to him as a thank you for the hot dog. They were still in the unopened package. That homeless bum probably saved his ass. To think he owes all of this to a guy who lived in a refrigerator box. It was the little details he was able to recall so vividly.

Everything counts in large amounts.

He knew the pills were working when his daughter called him and asked him to pick her up some books for school. She sounded bummed. She had to do a book report on World War 2. If she didn't complete it, she wouldn't graduate. She had big plans for the summer and summer school was not on the table.

"Well, it's a big subject honey, you might need to be more specific."

"The teacher broke the class up into a bunch of different groups and each group has to present their side of the war. I got the Soviet Union," she said sulking.

"It shouldn't be too hard to get information. I know they lost a lot of people in the war. It's kind of a big deal for them." said Joe

"I'll say. They lost twenty-six million. We lost a few hundred thousand. Kind of puts things into perspective."

"Well, I'll see what I can do. I'm sure the internet has better information."

"Mr. Keller, our teacher said we have to use real books. With paper. We can't even use e-books. He also says we can't use videos. We have to use real books only. Dad, I haven't read a real book since I was like six. Who the hell still uses books?"

"Old farts like me."

"You're not old. You're still hot," said Catherine.

"Cathy, you know, you are my favorite daughter, right?" he said laughing.

He bought her the books and returned home. He only got to see them on the weekends, but he made certain they were all together. He was not just a weekend-only father. He was a full-time dad, twenty-four seven. He took texts from his daughters all the time, even when he was working and shouldn't. They knew he was always there for them, no matter where he was. He decided to pick up a movie on the subject as well. Even if she couldn't use it in the report, it might help her get a better understanding of what had happened. He looked at the cover of the movie. It was about the Battle of Stalingrad, one of the worst slaughters in the history of the planet. Something about the movie bothered him. It was as if he was allergic to it or something. He put it in the bag and threw it in his car. This was definitely not the type of movie his girls would watch. He figured she would just throw it away, but the movie was done in Russian, with Russian actors and subtitles. Might make for interesting viewing. He was getting to the age where he had to marvel at the bravery and courage of the WW2 Generation. They had balls of steel. Much bigger than his. His generation was the ones who gave the world the internet and music videos. Not quite the same thing, but important nonetheless.

He didn't know why exactly, but as he got older, it bothered him more and more that he never enlisted in the military. Maybe it was just an old guy thing, seeing all his peers advertising their service on their hats and tee shirts. It was becoming more and more common with people his age. Being a veteran was cool now, it almost commanded respect. Much different than when he was a kid in the sixties and seventies. Vietnam Vets were treated like garbage. It wasn't until years later with movies like DEER HUNTER and RAMBO did these people finally get the recognition they deserved. Many of them had literally been to hell and back.

He didn't know why it bothered him. The last place in the world he could ever have seen himself was in the Army or Marines when he was younger. The thought of enlisting never even occurred to him. Why would it? How was it going to help his corporate career? If he had enlisted, he'd probably be selling cars or some other middle-aged dead-end job. No, he had made the right decision, he just couldn't figure out what it was about the military that fascinated him so much as he got older. Maybe it was just wishful thinking. The best part about being a legend in your own mind was that the older you got, the better you were. He could barely do a push-up, how on Earth could he have made it through Army training?

He was able to stay at home for the next week, which was a rare luxury. He got invited to the Super Bowl and could take one guest. He could just imagine the fracas that would ensue if he had to choose one of his daughters over the other. That could get ugly quickly. He had no choice but to keep the other ticket a secret. He was going to leave a few days before the game to set up interviews and do promotions. He wouldn't see either of his daughters for the next week. He mentioned the school project to Catherine, just to see where she was at.

"I've done a lot of reading. I read a book by a former Russian soldier who was at a major battle. Really horrible stuff. The Russians got slaughtered. Then again, they did win the war, but they paid a horrible price for the victory. It was a pyrrhic victory, is that how you say it?"

"I guess most battles are. Have you watched the movie I bought for you?"

"Not yet."

"I've got some time before I have to be at the airport, why don't we watch it together?"

"Why not. I'll be home in like an hour. We can make dinner and watch it after."

"Sounds good."

Joe wasn't much of a cook, but he was better than his ex-wife. He couldn't cook much, but he could make what his girls liked. Both girls loved pasta. Pizza was also high on their list. They had perfect figures. He knew there was no way they could continue eating this way and keep their figures. Most women his age who still looked good had to eat napkins to keep their figures. Youth has its advantages.

Catherine came home and Joe had dinner ready. They chatted about their day and after dinner was done, he popped in the movie.

It was done in Russian with English subtitles. Kind of interesting to see a movie from the losing side's perspective. He didn't know why, but from the opening credits forward, he was hooked. He had to remind himself to breathe. *He was that riveted.* It told the story of a Wehrmacht Infantry unit at the Battle of Stalingrad. The director pointed out in the opening credits that for the first week of fighting at the Battle of Normandy, the Allies lost around 3500 soldiers. In the year-long battle to retake Stalingrad, the Red Army lost over a million soldiers. *A million! In one freggin battle!* Joe had never realized that. He liked to think of himself as a man of history and culture. It was a slaughter of biblical proportions. The Red Army eventually encircled Hitler's Sixth Army and forced them to surrender, marking a turning point in the war. Up until this point, Germany had won most of the battles. At one point, they were at the outskirts of Moscow. Germany's fate was sealed after this battle. When General Paulus of the Wehrmacht surrendered, Hitler lost over six hundred thousand men. It was one of the most important battles of the second world war. The producers made it quite clear from the get-go, that it was the Red Army that defeated the Germans in the Second World War, not the Americans. Eighty-five percent of all casualties in the German Army came on the Eastern Front. The fighting was savage. People in his daughter's generation would have a hard time imagining what these people must have gone through. *It was hell on Earth.*

As the story unfolded, most of the kids in the unit were killed and replaced by even younger kids who did not want to be there. No one really wanted to be there. As the German units began to collapse, the situation became more and more desperate for them. There would be no help coming. None of the higher-ups in the Army ever thought this would happen. They considered the Slavic people to be inferior to the German people in every way and yet, here they were on the verge of losing to them. They were surrounded. Each day became a struggle for survival. They were out of food and out of ammo. They had to resort to eating anything that moved. They were eating the corpses of the dead Russian soldiers. The final scene was the most gruesome. The one hard-nosed sergeant who kept the unit together was surrounded by Russians. His choice was clear. He stood up and put his pistol to his head and squeezed the trigger. War is hell. Nothing good ever comes out of it.

When the movie was over, Joe excused himself and went upstairs to the bathroom. He was shaking almost uncontrollably. He sat on the toilet and began to sob. He turned on the fan so his daughters wouldn't hear him. What the hell was happening to him? No movie had ever done this to him before? This time it was different. This time, it wasn't just a movie, it was as if he was reminded of something that had happened to him once. Then it hit him:

My God, I was there. I was there at the Battle of Stalingrad.

The very thought seemed absurd. It was over seventy years ago. How the hell could he have been there?

But, he was there, just as surely as he is in this bathroom right now. No, it's absurd. He didn't know why he was sobbing, but there is no way he could have been at that place, so long ago. He wasn't even born yet.

Still, the thought stayed with him for days afterward. He tried to forget it and for a few days, he did. He was getting slammed from the moment he stepped off the plane in Miami. By the time the big game started, he was exhausted. The CEO called him and congratulated him on bringing in another account and for what he was doing for the company.

"Joe, I'm pushing hard for you to get VP. You deserve it. You've done so much for us over the years, I couldn't imagine it going to anyone but you."

It was music to his ears. The old man had to clear it by the board, but his opinion mattered, it mattered a lot. This would mean no more traveling. No more time away from home. He had missed so much because he was never there. Finally, the decades of hard work had paid off. He was about to get the keys to the kingdom. Being the vice president of a major corporation is actually better than being the CEO. He didn't want to be the one in charge, no sir, he'd have a giant bull's eye on his back all the time. This way he had the security of a lucrative position, without the headaches that come from being the one who makes all the decisions. He would still have to run everything by the old man, which was fine. He figured it wouldn't be too long before he was offered that job as well. Not that he would take it, he hoped to be retired by then. He would be given very lucrative stock options as a signing bonus. The girls would never have to worry about money for the rest of their lives. They would never have to be put in the situations he had been in. Having to choose between paying the rent and buying groceries was not fun. Being poor is all about having to make choices that are going to end badly, no matter what you do. It was like you got used to losing all the time and you had done nothing wrong. Someone else just did it better.

He was in his hotel room on the last night in Miami. He had sent his assistant out to buy his memory drug. He didn't want to be without it. Strangely enough, he wasn't just remembering being at the Battle of Stalingrad, he was remembering other things as well about his past life. He remembers the castles, the meetings, the chaos. He remembers that horrible time when he was sent to the Eastern Front in a desperate attempt to stop the inevitable. It's ironic.....had Hitler never invaded the Soviet Union, he would easily have won the war. His armies steamrolled over much of the best armies in the world at that time. No one was prepared for the power and precision of the German Army. Maybe, he was not the monster the world had made him out to

be. He was no saint, that much was for sure, but our own leaders weren't much better. Hitler killed millions in five years. We killed millions in fifty or so years of colonizing and nation-building. Were we really any better? He wondered how much our history would be different if Hitler had won the war. What would our books say about us?

He was brushing his teeth when the name popped into his head. It didn't make any sense, but he knew it was important.

Gerhard Burkus.

That was it. One name and yet it meant so much. This was his name in his previous life. He had been on Earth before. This was not his first trip. He had to sit down. He hadn't smoked in almost thirty years and yet now, he was craving a smoke. The nicotine and poison seemed to make everything all better. His assistant knocked on the door. Her name was Mai. She was from Thailand or Singapore or something. First-generation American and very bright..... *and very hungry for success.*

"Mai, come in please, I need to talk to you," he said.

"We have to be downstairs in twenty minutes."

"It can wait. This is important," he said and sat her down in the chair. He realized he was only half-dressed and she might get the wrong idea. He threw a shirt on and sat down in front of her.

"Mai.....I want you to tell me exactly what you did this morning when you woke up."

She seemed a little hesitant about answering.

"I made some coffee. I watched the news. I did some yoga.....why?"

"Okay.....you are certain you did those things, right?"

"Well, ya, I was there doing them."

"Okay. Now, what if I asked you to prove it to me. Could you do it?"

"Well, no, it's like I recorded myself doing all this stuff."

"But, you did it? You were there doing it!"

"Joe, what exactly is your point here?"

"My point is that a bunch of scientists might be asked to prove what you did this morning, just an hour and a half ago. Could they do it? Would they be able to?"

"Probably not."

"Okay, so if they can't prove what you just did an hour ago, or a month ago, they how could they prove what you were doing ten years ago on this very same morning?"

"I would imagine they couldn't."

"What if those same scientists said that you did not do the things you did, but instead, you did push-ups and combed your hair and made your bed. Would they be correct?"

"Well, no."

"So, with all of our technology and know-how, we still cannot even prove to the word, what he did just an hour and a half ago. It may as well never have existed, except it did, 'cause we did it."

"What does this have to do with the conference downstairs?"

"Nothing. Now, what if I were to tell you I was alive seventy-five years ago? What would you say?"

"I would say you are crazy? So you never age or something?"

"No, I was alive, just like I am now, but I was a different person. I looked different. I sounded different, but who I am inside, is the same person. We're just living in two separate bodies."

"You mean like reincarnation?"

"Exactly. If science cannot prove what you did just over an hour ago, how could they prove what I was doing seventy-five years ago?"

"I'm not sure if they're exactly the same thing. I mean, wouldn't the scientist say that you being alive seventy-five years ago is physically impossible?"

"What if they said you doing yoga this morning was physically impossible."

"They would be wrong."

"So, what makes you think the situation I just described is any different? You know what you did because you did them. I know I was alive seventy-five years ago because I did those things also, you see my point?"

"I think so. So, you're saying you were alive and walking around seventy-five years ago?" she asked bewildered.

"I don't know Mai, I'm just trying to make a point," he said as he got dressed.

Mai was bright, but reincarnation simply wasn't her forte. He wondered if anyone in that generation with all of its wonderful technology realized that our scientists don't know anything more about the mysteries of the universe than the Romans did.

The more we know, the more we discover we really don't know.

He didn't know if the memory drugs were responsible or not. He kept taking them. It wasn't like in the movies. You don't suddenly get your memory back after losing it. You just get these weird,

vague glimpses. It's not even the memories themselves, it's the emotions you feel about it. Every time he read something about the second world war, or what happened to all those men, he felt a tremendous sadness for the immense loss of life that followed. It was just one big, absolutely pointless slaughter. The only thing that seemed to change, was that instead of having German psychopaths running the world, you now had American psychopaths running the world. We replaced one group of criminals with another. The end result was always the same. The rich and powerful get richer and more powerful and the poor do their dirty work. Most of the people who died in the war had no say in it. They were just told one day to report for training and then were shipped off to die. Like a bunch of bull calves lined up at the slaughterhouse. The rich never get their hands dirty. Even the rich Germans who created this disaster were given free passage to South America. The Catholic Church hid thousands of Nazis from prominent families. The fix was as old as the Garden of Eden. Eve didn't get the short end of the stick because she was a woman, she got screwed because she was poor.

He knew that as a German, he came from a prominent family. He knew everyone in the family was expected to contribute. He remembers his mother never even wept as he left for basic training but instead was so proud of him. Her family was somehow going to save the entire German Republic from itself.

He didn't like the Nazis, but he knew he disliked the communists and Bolsheviks even more.

He hated killing but realized at times, it was necessary.

He just wanted to make his family proud.

In reality, it was pretty much the same for everyone else in Germany. They didn't fight for white supremacy or the Aryan Race. They fought because they had no choice. The people never really seem to have much of a choice. Germany was going to war, he would just have to accept it.

He wondered if there were others like him? There had to be. He couldn't be the only one. What if everyone was born with some kind of amnesia, to make them forget about their previous lives, but MEMORY PLUS brought it back? What if it fixed your memory so well, it made you remember other things? *Crazy things*. Things you aren't supposed to remember.

That was it. This was the big secret no one wants to talk about. We are a bunch of patients with amnesia, running around the hospital, trying to figure out how we got in the hospital in the first place. No one is there to help us, it's all up to us. Most of us simply accept our amnesia and move on. He was the one in a million who was not like the rest of the herd. He was different now. The veil had been lifted. He remembers....or *Ich erinnere mich* as you would say in German.

The stupidity of our world leaders is truly astounding. At times Joe could only shake his head and wonder how these people managed to get their jobs and keep them. Most of them didn't do anything a sharp high school kid couldn't do and even that was too much to ask.

Following the sudden, mysterious death of President Putin six months ago, NATO decided for whatever reason to back the Ukrainian Government in its bid to recover the breakaway republics on its eastern flank. They also had the audacity to instill a no-fly zone over Ukraine. Imagine if Russia backed Mexico's bid to retake the southwestern United States, then told us if you shoot

down any Mexican planes, we will shoot you out of the sky. That would go over like a lead balloon.

President Ulinov of Russia let the Ukrainian units think they were winning and lured them into a carefully selected trap. Just when it looked like the militias would be defeated, the Russian military swooped in and encircled the Ukrainian units, who were decimated in just three days of intense fighting. Most of the Ukrainian military surrendered en masse to the Russians. They were just poorly paid conscripts who wanted no part of this conflict.

It took just seven days and Russian Armor units were outside the suburbs of Kiev. NATO had lost seventy planes and had thousands of its own units encircled, taking a pounding from the devastating firepower of the Russian Military. NATO had found out the hard way that this was not the Soviet Army from the 1970s, with thousands of tanks, yet only a fraction of them were combat-ready with weak morale. No, this was Russia in 2021. It's military much smaller in scale, but also, much more dangerous, with cutting edge technology and a very motivated military. Russia had activated its reserves. It now had just shy of two million men ready to move in Kiev. NATO had been embarrassed badly.

President Ulinov said that if one NATO unit crossed the Ukrainian border, they would be nuked. He was not kidding. The situation had gotten deadly serious.

Our own President had fought the plan from the beginning, some even saying he tipped off Ulinov as to what NATO was doing. The E.U. had supposedly put the entire plan together. They were now being shown for the incompetent morons they really were. If they thought Ulinov was going to back down, they had made a deadly mistake. It was like the eastern front in the second world war all over again.

The grown-ups in the room were doing everything they could to try and keep the disaster from getting any worse. Most Europeans actually sided with Ulinov and Russia. No one wanted any part of this pointless conflict, on either side of the Atlantic.

Ulinov used the NATO units as bargaining chips. He demanded their complete surrender and promised them they would be returned home safely. It should have just ended there, it should have, but it didn't. The conflict could have been over, but our elected jackasses saw a golden opportunity for even more death and destruction. *Congress actually declared war on Russia!* They declared war on a country with thousands of tactical nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert. One single Yasen Class Russian submarine could vaporize every city on the east coast before we even knew what was happening. Joe was stunned, as was everyone else in the room. This situation had gotten deadly serious very quickly. No one in the room or any room in America wanted any part of this totally pointless conflict and yet, all of America was now involved. Our polished turds were now calling for the resurrection of the draft. Not that their kids would be facing the Russians. Their kids would be watching it on TV and laughing at them.

America doesn't back down. Not now, not ever. If Mr. Ulinov wants a war, we'll give him one!" screamed our President to a roaring crowd at a fundraising event.

Most Americans went about their day, totally oblivious to the nightmare that waiting for them. The war was already over. We had lost. Ulinov could have slaughtered hundreds of American soldiers and he didn't. He had kept his word and allowed them safe passage back to Poland.

Joe wasn't just scared now, he was angry. Angry at our worthless leaders who were putting the entire planet at risk. Ulinov meant what he said: One tank, one soldier, one UAV crosses the border, it's World War 3. Joe watched in horror as a semi competent journalist from a foreign news agency was interviewing the vice president and pointed out that the Russian nuclear arsenal is actually much larger than ours. Even if only half of them worked, they could destroy every American city in less than an hour.

"Okay, sure, well, we'll nuke them right back!" he said defiantly.

The journalist was clearly caught off guard by the man's total removal from any kind of reality. We were now living in the Twilight Zone where reality didn't matter. The rich and the powerful were just making it up as they went along and we the people, had to figure it out for ourselves.

Our president had been backed into a corner. If he did nothing, he would be seen as weak by the rest of the world, at least that's how our media handlers painted it. Joe would rather be remembered as being weak, rather than being remembered as the guy who started the Third World War. He had run on a platform of *America First*. America didn't retreat, even if it meant its destruction. We were a proud people. Patton's statement about "America not tolerating a loser" was just as true now as it was then. Somehow, the media had taken this event and spun it into a catalyst for the President's failures. As incredible as it was, this is exactly what happened. His approval rating dropped like a rock. He was heading into an election season already wounded. Joe wondered if certain people around him reminded him that Americans rarely change Presidents during a war. Maybe this was seen as good insurance against losing. Whatever the reason, the situation was kicked up a notch with the declaration of war by our congress. The voices of reason and sanity were drowned out by the pride and fury of the war hawks. Saving Ukraine from Russian aggression was actually part of the Democratic Party's 2022 platform. Joe had to laugh. A bunch of emo kids with pink hair and nose rings were going to stop the Russian Army. These kids wouldn't last five minutes.

A few days later, someone launched a cruise missile right over Washington DC. It was unarmed but did cause quite a panic. It turned out to be made in Russia. Whether it was the Russians or not, the message had been clear.

Turn down the rhetoric or the next one won't be a dud.

Rather than make everyone take a step back and reflect, it just took it to a new level. The US Military was put at Defense Condition 2, one step away from firing their missiles.

Things had returned to some kind of normal in the weeks that followed. The insanity was everywhere, but it needed a second wind before it got going again. Joe tried like everyone else to simply hope and pray that cooler heads prevailed. Perhaps it was pointless, but he couldn't just sit around and wait for the world to end. He was a busy man and apocalypse or not, he still had work to do.

His assistant, Mai, had abruptly quit, going back to Thailand to be with her family. He wondered if it was the stress of the job, or something else. He had noticed many foreigners doing exactly the same thing, quietly packing up and returning to their native lands. They had more sense than most of us.

They knew what was coming and it wasn't going to be pretty. Joe had strongly advised his daughters to go and live with their mother in Maine. He didn't want them anywhere near the city if the shit hit the fan. Naturally, they refused. Not when they were so close to graduating.

"Come on dad, Maine sucks. I've only got a month of school left. Don't be crazy, there's not going to be any war," said Sabrina.

"He pointed out that they could still graduate and finish their classes in college in Maine, but neither of them wanted anything to do with it. Sabrina's boyfriend was here and so were all of their friends. Their whole life was here. He knew they would never agree to it. The last thing he needed right now was his girls mad at him, even if it meant saving their lives. It would only be temporary. Even if they did survive the initial exchange, their chances of survival were about zero in the frigid Maine winter that would follow. Either way, they were screwed, just like everyone else.

He got the call one night from Alex, the company's PR bigwig. Technically, she worked for Joe, but usually, she was the one who called the shots. She was good at what she did, no doubt, but he never really felt in control with her. Still, they were on the same team and she needed him to do her a little favor.

"Hi Joe.....got a little favor to ask you. You know Marcy May, right?"

"How could I forget her. She could charm a rattlesnake right out of its skin."

"Tell me about it. I need you to babysit her tomorrow night at the Music Awards in LA. Rumor is she's using again and since our company is bankrolling the whole thing, the old man wants you there to clean up her mess."

"Alex, there has to be someone else that could do it and probably do a better job than I could. We aren't exactly on good terms after her last disaster."

"That's what the boss wants. He wants grown-ups there, not other kids. I'm going to send my assistant, Amanda, with you. She's good, a little green, but smart. Just out of school. I already made you guys' reservations. You're going to leave tomorrow morning from JFK."

"Would it do any good to protest?"

"Not a bit."

"Well, I guess I'll call you if there's any drama."

"Knowing her, there is definitely going to be drama."

"I can't wait."

"You do this for me and maybe I'll let you get into my pants," she said jokingly.

"Well, how do I say no to that?"

"We'll see. Oh, you will pick her up at her hotel and escort her directly to the show. She is not to stop along the way. Amanda will handle it all. I just need you there as backup. God, I hope Marcy doesn't fuck this up."

"What do I do if she's higher than a kite?"

"That's up to you. We don't want any drama. Do what you have to. You know how to handle these things."

"Right.....I hope you don't hear from me."

"You're the best Joe. Call me if you need anything."

Just like that, the next few days were no longer his. Work was like a prison sentence we all have to live out. It's not our lives anymore, it's living someone else's life and doing what they want. No one is ever born free, they just have a very long chain on their ankle.

He gave the girls the good news. They were more amazed that he was going to spend the night with Marcy May.

"The Marcy May? Dad, she's like super famous. Her videos have over a billion views. *A billion, with a b, dad.*"

"I'm her babysitter for the evening. I'll try and get some selfies with her."

"You have the best job in the world dad," said Catherine.

The girls were already texting their friends with the good news. Joe already had two suitcases packed and loaded with whatever he needed. He one for short trips of five days or less, then a bigger one for anything more. He was pre-screened by TSA, so he didn't have to wait in the security lines and he always flew first class if he flew commercial. This time he was flying out with a bunch of other executives on a small, private jet. They were served lobster and champagne. Being on top of the corporate food chain had its advantages.

Joe arrived at the airport and was in the air half an hour later. He made small talk with the other executives on board. He was no longer the same, old Joe Newman. His mind was being pulled and stretched in ways he never thought imaginable. Not only was his memory supercharged, but his other memory was also now working as well. He had upped his dosage now to two pills a day, instead of one. He was completing crossword puzzles in minutes. He was remembering things that happened to him when he was only a boy. This stuff didn't just work, it lit the fire for a whole bunch of new changes in your body. It transformed you into the person you were meant to be. Such incredible results for such a small amount of money.

He was remembering all of his lives now. He had been on Earth several times before, each time in a new era, with a new set of challenges. He knew he was a gay for pay prostitute in 18th century Paris, where he died of syphilis. He was a soldier in General Hannibal's Army when he crossed the Rubicon. He was also alive many, many thousands of years ago in what is now Egypt. We only know about the new Egypt, the one after the flood, not before. Back when they had electricity and large scale agriculture. Back before the flood had wiped all the mighty ice age civilizations off the map. He was an old soul. One who had seen his share of successes and failures. He could recall of them now, just as he could recall what had happened to him this morning. The veil was completely lifted. He was Joe Newman 2.0.

He arrived in LA and was chauffeured to his hotel room. He met Amanda, who was a knockout. They exchanged numbers and hashed out some kind of a plan. Amanda would be her fake friend for the evening and Joe would just act as her manager. Amanda thought it best that it seem like she is the one in charge, as most young people see older people as a threat. Joe had no problem with that.

"Just make sure she doesn't do anything stupid. It's three hours. We just need her sober and coherent for three hours." he said.

Asking Marcy May not to do anything stupid was asking for a lot. She was an incredible musician when sober, but once she found the needle, it had been a downward spiral. She had so much money coming in, it made it easier, but also harder to quit. Joe had listened to some of her music on the flight over. Not his cup of tea, but at least she could sing. That girl had one hell of a set of pipes on her.

He checked in with Alex and found his way down to the hotel bar. There was a TV on and he soon found himself glued to the screen. He couldn't believe what he was watching. Our President had given the Russians a 48-hour deadline to withdraw from Ukraine or NATO would respond. Respond with what he didn't say. He didn't know if it meant posting nasty comments online or launching missiles. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Everyone in the bar had stopped and was now watching the TV as well. It was like a bad dream that just kept getting worse. One that never ended, no matter how scared you got.

"Jesus....I got a nephew in the Marines. He just got his orders to deploy to Poland. This thing is getting uglier by the day." said the bartender.

"The hell are they going to do? Just march across the border? They'll get blown off the face of the Earth?" said one patron.

"Maybe that's their plan. Use some of the kids as cannon fodder, so they'll have an excuse to launch the nukes." said another.

"This is insanity. Just insanity. This whole thing should never have happened." said Joe in disbelief.

"The house is going to vote on reinstating the draft tomorrow. I'll move to Canada before I let my kids die for these idiots." said one of the customers.

He and another customer got into a heated argument and Joe just quietly slipped away. The world was spiraling out of control and no one seemed to know how to make it stop. He remembers it being just like August of 1939. No one back then ever thought that we'd be on the eve of one of the biggest slaughters in human history. This time, everyone knew it was going to be a horror show, but no one seemed to know how to stop it. He remembers thinking that Hitler will just take over the cities in Poland where the Germans lived. That was all. It won't go any farther than that. No one in 1939 Germany wanted to go to war either, yet nobody was willing to stand up to the Nazis. Now, no one is willing to stand up to the American War Machine and the media complex. The architects of genocide and their enablers. The ones who would make coloring books about mass murder and genocide. The ones who think the only bad war is an unprofitable one.

Everyone knows the names of Borman, Goerring, Himmler, yet so few Americans knew about Lockheed Martin, or Northrup Grunman, or BAE Systems. The death merchants. The ones who bribed congress to buy their expensive toys and then siphoned the money into private bank accounts away from the prying eyes of the IRS. We spent more money on war and death and destruction last year than we spent on every other department of the federal government combined. We love war, we just don't like the aftermath that comes with it. All the broken lives and broken dreams. Once you are crippled by war, you are of no use to the war merchants. The mercenary armies of Erik Prince had nothing on companies like KBR, GK Sierra, Prosecur, or Triple Canopy. They were the ones who did the bidding of the defense companies so that Americans wouldn't have to. Even they wanted no part of the Russian Army. This was going to be a slaughter of biblical proportions. Joe knew this was going to end badly, yet he and billions of others around the world were powerless to stop it. It was like we were speeding straight ahead towards the iceberg in frigid waters and the captain is totally oblivious, but everyone else knows exactly what is going to happen.

He went back to his room and lay on his bed for several hours, waiting to hear the massive, crackling explosion of a nuclear weapon detonating overhead. It could come at any time now. There would be little to no warning. He hoped and prayed that behind the scenes, the two governments were doing everything they could to defuse the situation. He hoped, but there would only be one way to really know for sure. Time was running out for everybody.

He picked up Marcy at exactly six o'clock. She seemed fine, even shook his hand. Amanda did all the talking. He hoped she wouldn't remember him, they had only met once before a few years ago when her career was just starting to take off. He hoped the drugs and his beard would make her forget. He just walked behind them, with the rest of her entourage. They got inside the limo and Joe sat in the front seat. The driver put up the divider. He knew they were drinking, but hoped Amanda would know when to turn off the tap.

They arrived at the music awards building early. Marcy was the co-host, along with a kid named "Thaddeus". It should be simple. She's only on screen for half an hour at most. She reads some cards, hands out some pointless awards, and then it's back to her hotel room. What could possibly go wrong?

Turns out, quite a lot. You just can't depend on a junkie, for anything.

Marcy decided to just shoot up a little, *just to take the edge off*. Twenty minutes later, she was a hot mess, unable to stand and borderline incoherent. Amanda was going into panic mode. Young people are fine when things were going their way, but it takes someone with some experience to know what to do when things don't go their way. Amanda lost control, Joe knew he had to step in and take the reins.

"Amanda, calm down, go find Armando, the guy is running this thing. Tell him we need him down here ASAP," said Joe.

Amanda literally ran out of her dressing room. Marcy and Joe just looked at each other. Marcy was half-dressed and sat down next to him. Her eyes got wide and she finally recognized him.

"Hey, I know you. You were the guy at that big party a few years back for the phones," she said.

"You couldn't even stay sober for three hours. Three fucking hours? Marcy, I think you might have a drug problem." said Joe as he brushed her aside.

Armando and Amanda came running into the room. Armando took one look at her and then looked at Joe.

"Clean her up," he said looking at Amanda.

He motioned to Joe and the two of them stepped outside.

"Tell me this is not happening? I thought you two were watching her!"

"I didn't follow her into the bathroom. What's done is done. She can't go on. No way."

"What do you mean she can't go on? She's the star of this show! She has to go on." he pleaded.

"Our company is footing the bill for this whole party here and I say no way. You want to get into a dick measuring contest with me, I can guarantee you're going to come up short. There has to be someone else you have in reserve, just in case. They're kids, they aren't going to care who reads the envelope and hands out the award."

"She is supposed to perform her new song tonight. Her fans are expecting her to perform tonight. That's why she's here. No one cares who reads the award card, but she has to perform."

Amanda came out a minute later. She closed the door behind her.

"She says she performs best when she's slightly high. She says she just needs an hour or two at the most. She wasn't supposed to perform until the very end of the show, so we should be okay."

"She couldn't even pee and hit the bowl right now, how can she sing in front of millions of people? Asked Joe.

"Says she does it all the time and doesn't understand why everybody is freaking out."

"Okay, but we still have the problem of who is going to go on stage with Thaddeus. The only reason he came here is because he gets to meet Marcy," said Armando.

"There's no one else here that can do it?"

"Wait.....why don't you go. I recognize your face from the phone commercials. If I recognize you, other people will as well. It won't seem too unusual. Your company is paying for all this. No one would suspect a thing. In fact, we never actually said she would host. We just mentioned Thaddeus. It might work. I know you can work a crowd."

"The kids won't want to see an old fart like me on stage."

"It's thirty seconds. You aren't the star of the show, the bands are. No one is even going to remember you after tonight."

"I've got to run it by a few people, but it looks like we don't really have any choice."

"If you have a better idea, I'm all ears," said Armando.

Joe told Alex what was happening. She didn't like it but knew they had their backs to the wall.

"That's why you're there. In case something like this happened. You really saved us, Joe."

"Guess I have to put on my game face. Good thing I got this ten-dollar haircut," he said.

The music awards were a whole lot of eloquent nothing. Dancing, fireworks, extravagance....for people that had no reason to be famous. Most had little if any real talent. Not that talent was required to be famous. Back thirty years ago, the A-Listers from Hollywood would be in attendance. It was pretty much required of them. Now it was just social media stars and professional bull shitters. Everyone was taking selfies. Joe realized that this wasn't about celebrating the musicians, it was just a big photo op for the Millenials. Mass media emphasized quantity over quality. You didn't have to be good at what you do. You just have to be good at selling yourself. That was all that mattered. Gotta get those likes and thumbs-ups.

Joe was no stranger to crowds, even hostile crowds. He met Thaddeus, whose first question was:

"Where's Marcy?"

Joe politely explained to him that she was rehearsing and didn't want to be disturbed. It was a big night for her.

"You interrupt her during rehearsal and it won't be pretty. Once you're on her shit list, you're done. There's no getting off it, doesn't matter who you are." said Joe.

He understood and Armando went over what was required. Just read the cue cards and read the winner. That's it. It was not rocket science. Joe just didn't have a good feeling about this kid. Whether it was his green hair or the fact that he was appearing in front of a live audience and was dressed like it was laundry day.....something about him sent off warning bells.

"Armando, be ready to cut to a commercial if this kid does anything stupid," he said on their way out to the stage.

He just looked at Joe and nodded. No one expected Mr. Thaddeus to do what he did. Joe realized that many millennials watch videos about people like Mohamed Ali or Jackie Robinson and equate their struggles with whatever imaginary struggle a teenager in 2021 has to go through. They want to be remembered like these pioneers. Instead, they just come off as well, kids."

Thaddeus was not allowed to carry the envelope. He read the teleprompter, then Joe read his lines. Just as Joe was about to open the envelope, Thaddeus went off cue.

"Hey everyone, I just wanted to say.....FUCK RUSSIA," he screamed into the microphone.

"Thaddeus, what the hell are you doing?" asked Joe in shock.

"FUCK RUSSIA! FICK RUSSIA! FUCK RUSSIA!" he began chanting. Pretty soon, everyone in the audience was saying it along with him. Joe wasn't sure what it was about this kid that angered him so much. Suddenly, he was back in that frozen city in 1942, fighting for his life against the Red Army. Some of his soldiers tried to run away and sneak back across enemy lines. He shot them before they could escape as a warning to others. Mutiny in the German Army would not be tolerated. It was like August of 39' all over again. Same delusional kids fighting for the old men. Same players, just with different faces. Same horror, same result. Another generation is scarred forever, only this time the whole world was a hostage. In an instant, he exploded. He grabbed Thaddeus and smacked him as hard as he could. He had about seventy pounds on the kid and nearly sent him off stage. He grabbed the microphone as everyone looked at him.

"Think war is fun kids? Think it's just like in the movies or your video games? You don't get to just turn it off when you're bored, well, do you?"

Some of the kids started booing him. It didn't matter, he didn't care. He just didn't want them to have to go through what he did. No one should ever have to go through what he did.

"How do you think this is all going to end? Do you really think this is going to be like Saving Private Ryan? Do you kids know what it feels like to take another human life? How horrible it feels? How it stains your soul forever?

Do you think you're doing the right thing because everyone else is doing it around you? You think you're going to be a hero huh? Let me tell you what will happen to you over there: you are going to die and no one is ever going to remember you. Your mommy and daddy get a nice folded American flag and their lives are destroyed forever. There is no pride in taking a human life. You should not be proud of killing someone who has done nothing to you. You don't even know each other and here you are killing one another. War isn't like it is in the movies. You don't get to be the hero of the story. You are nothing more than a bunch of puppets, being led to slaughter by the person holding your strings, only by the time you realize this, it will be too late. You'll be up to your ass in Russians.

"Fuck you, man. You're a Russia lover, just like our President," said Thaddeus, climbing back on stage.

Joe didn't know if what he said had any effect on the audience. The mob had suddenly died down. They hadn't expected Joe to do what he did. Joe didn't expect himself to do what he did. Something had turned in the room. Joe was finally getting through to them, not all of them, but some.

"It was so cold that winter.....it was so cold and we were so hungry. We were eating their bodies to stay alive. Ever eaten a dead body, kids? It ain't fun. We killed them, then they killed us. Pretty soon, we forgot why we were killing each other. It was all we knew how to do. War doesn't just kill you kids. If you're lucky it does. For the rest of us, it strips away every last little bit of humanity you have left in you and turns you into something terrible. Why on Earth are you going to die for someone else? You think the people who want this war are going to do any of the fighting? You've got to be kidding me. You do all the fighting and they make all the money, only this time, it's different. What if Hitler and Stalin each had nukes? Maybe, I'm just an old man who spent more time in the trenches than he should have. War is so horrible, it stains your soul to the point that it will follow you in your next life. You will never forget it no matter how many lives you live."

Thaddeus realized Joe was now the star of his show. He had stolen his thunder, but not for long. He swung at Joe, who ducked and he hit one of the dancers behind him. The two were fighting on stage when Thaddeus tripped and fell on top of one of the cameramen. Joe knew he had to pull the ripcord on this one. He prayed that they had cut to commercial. This was not the fifteen minutes of fame he wanted. The entire show had turned into a fiasco. Some of the audience members were on stage taking selfies with Thaddeus, some with Joe. By the time security and police had restored order, Joe was in a limousine, back to his hotel. He knew what was coming next, but he didn't care. Some things are more important than a job. He wasn't afraid of losing his job, he was afraid of seeing another generation die in a pointless war. Another generation ruined. They had fallen for the same lies he had. Youth is as much a curse as it is a blessing. Amanda tried calling him, but he didn't respond. He didn't want to talk to anyone right now.

Alex showed up at his hotel room the next day. They had stopped streaming when Thaddeus started his rant, but the entire video of Joe and his speech was leaked online. By the next day, it had over a hundred million hits.....*in just 24 hours*. Joe had become an internet sensation by accident. He had achieved the kind of status most of these kids only dream about.

She told him herself that he no longer had a position with the company. She sat down on his bed with him.

"I know I'm supposed to be this super cold and heartless bitch, but I just can't help what I feel. You did what you thought was right. You spoke from the heart. You shouldn't be fired because you gave your opinion." she said.

"Alex. No one wants to hear the truth anymore. They didn't want to hear it in 1939 and they don't want to hear it now. Guys like me.....we just don't belong in this world."

"I didn't even know you were in the Army."

"I wasn't.....well, at least not recently anyway."

"I got a phone call from some group called STOP THE MADNESS. It's an NGO, but a very anti-war group. They would like to meet with you. I think they want you to come to work for them."

"I appreciate the offer, but at this point, being anti-war is like pissing into the winds of a hurricane. It's just a waste of time. If a billionaire wants it to happen, it's going to happen, regardless of what we the people think. We don't matter, because we aren't successful sociopaths. Our opinions don't make policy. I can warn people all day long until I'm blue in the face and it won't do any good. Some people just have to make their own mistakes. That's been the hardest part in all of this. Watching these kids make the same mistakes we did. It's heartbreaking." said Joe as he sat down next to her.

"What war were you in?"

"The Second Atlantic War on the Soviet Front. I died there, along with everyone else in my unit," he said

"Joe, that was like eighty years ago," she said.

"Not for me wasn't."

"Um, ok. Look, the president said today that they have broken off all diplomatic relations with Russia. All flights to and from Russia have been suspended. I think the fighting could start at any time." she said, sounding nervous.

"None of these kids even really know what they're fighting," said Joe

"They're fighting the Russians."

"No, that's not true. No soldier ever really fights their enemy. They're fighting to maintain their humanity, in the most inhumane conditions imaginable." said Joe.

Alex just looked confused. Joe knew she would never understand, not now or ever. You just had to be there to understand.....and remember it in your lives afterward.