

# SOMETHING IN THE SKIES

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**John Boston**

His name was Joshua Welch. Everyone called him "Welchy". Not everyone, but his close friends. He was almost eighteen. Things were going great, right up until the moment they weren't. The Coronavirus was bad, but the effects of the lockdowns were a hundred times worse. He had a pretty good part-time job working for a landscaping company doing their grunt work. Paid ten bucks an hour. That job was gone, and so was the landscaping company. His mother was a college professor and his father sold his artwork. They lived in a very affluent part of town. They had it pretty good. His mother was a tenured professor who taught mathematics and physics. They had a swimming pool and three cars. They, much like the rest of America survived the virus, but they would not be able to survive the depression that came shortly after it. None of the schools and colleges opened that fall. There were still too many cases to risk it. His mother was laid off and his father hadn't sold any of his paintings or sculptures in months. They had bills to pay and no money coming in to pay them. It was a hell of a time to be a teenager.

*"Josh, when I was your age, my biggest worry was making hockey practice on time. Your generation's biggest worry is how you're going to be able to eat tonight. From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step.....or a virus."* his father said.

Josh tried to make the most of it. The family was fortunate. His mom's side of the family came from old world New England money. His grandpa had bought them their house twenty years ago and they were able to pay off their mortgage before the collapse. All they had to do was pay the property taxes and utilities. Just doing that was becoming difficult.

He knew his parents loved one another, he just wasn't sure if they were still in love with each other. They were more like roommates than parents. He figured their marriage could be far worse. None of his friends had parents who were still together. Some were on their third marriages. He figured there would be many more divorces before things returned to normal.

His town of Whitmore was hurting, much like every other town in America. There were two private colleges in town that contributed to a lion's share of their income. The economic dominoes began falling at the beginning of the summer. The local car dealership had closed its doors for good in August. The local and state government offices were still open, but the town's coffers had been hit hard by the depression. The town had to choose between paying salaries to the town employees or paying the police officers. There was not enough money to do both. There were two supermarkets in town that had been devastated by the meat and poultry shortages. Half their shelves were empty. What was left of the police department spent most of its time trying to keep the peace in the stores. Josh had begun reading all about the Great Depression and how it molded and shaped an entire generation of Americans. He figured the Coronavirus would do much the same for his generation. Everyone was at least trying to pretend things were okay. Gas

was so cheap, you could drive almost anywhere for next to nothing. On the surface, everything appeared normal. It wasn't until you began looking closer did the cracks begin to appear.

He and his parents waited in line with hundreds of others at a local food bank, on distribution day. His parents tried to make the most out of it, but he could tell they were hurting.....so was the rest of Whitmore. They got two boxes of food. Dried milk, pasta, pasta sauce, canned peaches, crackers and a jar of peanut butter. *Nothing but the basics.*

"Wow.....well, it's better than going hungry." said his mom.

"Josh, this is how the rest of the world lives every day. Guess we've had it way too good for way too long." *This is the new normal. Venezuela is going to look like an economic powerhouse compared to us.*

Josh recognized several people in line, including one of his teachers, Mr. Drayton. He didn't want to look. Many people in line were wearing baseball caps and sunglasses. They didn't want to be recognized. For many of them, *this was their very first trip to the lower middle class.*

There were luxury SUVs, BMWs, sixty thousand dollar luxury pickup trucks, all looking for a handout. Josh wondered what would happen when the handouts stopped.

*Precisely, just what in the hell are we supposed to do then?*

Whitmore was hurting badly, as was the rest of America, as was the rest of the planet Earth.

Josh went to bed that night watching videos about the country destroy itself. The National Guard was patrolling the streets in most cities.....*and they all had live rounds.* There was a food riot in one of the poorer neighborhoods of Los Angeles that got ugly very quickly when police and soldiers opened fire. Over sixty people had been killed. Most gangs had put aside their differences and were now calling for open warfare against the police and government. He had a hard time believing any of this was real. He and his friends had to grow up real quick. There was no such thing as innocence anymore. He spent most of his days watching TV shows from the 1980s or 90s. He wondered if anyone watching them back then knew how good they had it. His generation was never going to have it as good. His generation would have to pick up the pieces of America and try to remake it into something whole again. Problem was....*his generation was about as useless as a philosophy degree.* Most of the kids his age were glued to video games, vaping and internet porn. He woke up the next morning and looked out his window. That's when he saw them floating over the town. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. It was awesome.....and very bizarre. Like, something right out of a made for TV movie. There were several giant airships floating over town. They had the most colorful skins he had ever seen. Some had massive led display screens on them. They were just parked over town. Like they were refueling or something. He went downstairs and found his father at the breakfast table, watching the morning news on his phone.

"Dad....did you see those ships in the sky?" he asked pouring himself a cup of instant coffee.

"Yeah, ain't that something?" he replied without looking up.

"What are they doing here?"

"News report said the company was doing this big nationwide promotion. They stay in town for a few days, then go onto the next town. I guess they figure that since the airlines are all toast, maybe airships are going to make a big comeback."

"I'd like to get a ride in one. I think it would be cool."

"I was in one once, years ago. It was pretty cool. I got a tour of it and everything. If the price is right, I'm sure people will sign up."

"Are they going to offer tours or something?"

"I'm sure they will. They are supposed to give some kind of a presentation at the park this evening."

"We should go."

"Sure.....oh, I don't know if your mom told you or not."

"What's that?"

"Evelyn is coming home today."

"Oh."

"I don't know how much contact you've had with her over the past few months, but she called yesterday and said she was coming home today."

"That's great," said Josh as he sat down at the table.

"This has been very hard for her. She's a good kid, she's just going through a very rough time in her life."

"I guess Mr. Wonderful wasn't all that wonderful."

"Just try to be nice to her, for us."

"I'll try."

"Thanks bud. We'll go to that presentation this evening. I think it starts at six."

Josh was hearing, but not really listening. He knew his sister coming home was going to be a nightmare. She was the most popular girl in school. She was smart, and pretty and could land just about any guy she wanted. She had a full scholarship to NYU when the virus hit. Her roommate had gotten sick and had to be hospitalized. Life just pretty much fell apart for her after that. She had spent the last six months, bumming around New York, until it became too dangerous. She and her parents just did not see eye to eye on things. She was used to having them pay for everything. That was simply not possible anymore. She used to get a thousand dollars a month to

help pay her bills. Now, she had to volunteer at soup kitchens to help feed herself. She refused to admit defeat and hung on, even in the face of certain failures. She met a guy from Spain who was handsome and charming. They had a whirlwind romance. He was ten years older and never mentioned that he had a wife and son back in Spain. Evelyn was difficult to deal with even before things went to shit. *He couldn't wait to see her now.* He remembers their last conversation. It went something like:

"My boyfriend dumped me or maybe we just dumped each other. I'm broke, I literally have dollars to my name. Some guy offered me five hundred dollars to spend the night with him and I almost took him up on his offer. Everyone in the city had had the virus or knows someone who has. The Mexicans are telling me they're packing up and heading back to Mexico, cause things are actually much better there. Could life possibly suck anymore?" she cried.

"*Welcome to 2023 Evelyn.*" he thought to himself as he hung up the phone.

Yup, that was pretty much how it went. Evelyn was not one who liked surprises. She had her life mapped out from age ten and up until last year, the plan had been executed perfectly. Her plan was to major in dance. She considered herself an excellent dancer and certainly didn't need a degree, it was just being around the other dancers and competing is what opened doors for her. Her parents called it "*networking*". It was apparently the only way to get ahead in the uber competitive world of professional dancing. When Evelyn didn't get her way, she could be rather difficult, for lack of a better term.

Josh walked outside and looked at the airships. He saw his neighbor, Mr. Samuel Kemp on his lawn, staring in awe. He walked over to him.

"Hey Sam."

"Oh, hi Josh. Can you believe this? Never seen anything quite like it."

"My dad says the airship company is doing a big promotion tour."

"So, I hear. They're called *dirigibles*, my boy. They were like the cruise ships of the sky back about a hundred years ago or so. You ever hear of the HINDENBERG?"

"No, what's that?"

"It was a German airship. Like the TITANIC of the skies. Crossed the Atlantic Ocean, it was supposed to land in a field in New Jersey in 1937. Just as the lines had been thrown down for anchoring, it exploded in a giant fireball. A lot of people were killed or burned badly. No one's really sure what caused the fire. The cells of the ship were made of hydrogen. Not helium. Hydrogen is very explosive. The airship industry kind of fell off a cliff after that. No one wanted to be on the next HINDENBERG."

"Wow. I didn't know they were even around back then," said Josh

"Oh, yeah. The newest generation is so powerful, they can move construction equipment. They are incredibly powerful, but their main drawback has always been their speed. They just move

too damn slow for most people. Too bad, they had a lot of potential. Oh, Josh.....I'd like you to meet my granddaughter Lee-Anne, she's going to be staying with me for a while."

Josh turned and nearly shit himself. Lee-Anne was maybe a year or two behind him, but you would never know it by looking at her. The girl was *drop dead gorgeous.....and then some*. The girl was going to be a handful, as his mother would say. Fortunately, she seemed very grounded and down to Earth. He tried to play it cool, like he wasn't interested in her. He shook her hand, then went back to talking to Sam.

"How do you know so much about airships?"

"I guess when you're old, you know a lot about everything. I studied them in college. I majored in mechanical engineering. They were kind of a side hobby of mine."

"Hey, grandpa.....don't you have to pick up my mom?"

"Oh, goodness, yes. Thank you Lee. I almost forgot. Josh, it's been a pleasure. Don't be a stranger." he said and ran over to his car.

"You don't drive?" asked Josh.

"We can't afford the insurance. Actually, we can't afford anything right now."

"You're not the only ones. I had to eat tuna fish out of a can last night. I hate tuna fish."

"We ate spam burgers. I feel your pain." she said.

"Your grandpa is pretty cool."

"Yeah, for an old guy. Every time I try to get one over on him, he reminds me that he used to change my diaper."

"Grandpas are good like that. I don't really know my grandparents. I guess they want it that way. You're lucky. Yours is cool."

"I think these ships are weird. I mean why here, in Whitmore?"

"Don't know. There's a meeting tonight, if you want to go. It's at the town hall."

"I think I'll pass. Something about these ships just creeps me out."

"Really?"

"Yes. First time I saw them, they creeped me out. I really don't know why. I just don't get a good vibe from them."

"Well, right now, they're about the only business in town that's still operating. Our local dealership shut its doors last week."

"That sucks. It's pretty bad everywhere," said Lee-Anne.

They watched a van pull up and Evelyn get out. She could see the expression change on Josh's face."

"Who's that?" she asked.

"That would be Evelyn, my sister."

"You don't seem too excited to see her."

"I'm just kind of indifferent. She causes a lot of drama wherever she goes. She gets away with it because of her looks." he said.

"Oh, she's one of *those* pretty girls," said Lee-Anne.

"I got to go. It was nice to meet you."

"Likewise. Don't be a stranger," she said and waved goodbye.

Josh was floored. A pretty girl who could hold a conversation and didn't care about other girls around her? That's what you call a keeper. Score one for Josh.

There were a total of about fifty people in the small meeting room in the library. He saw two well dressed men in uniforms handing out flyers. His dad got one and they both sat down. A few minutes later, the presentation began. The man introduced himself as Captain Martin Graham. He was a former US Navy pilot, who was now flying airships.

"Believe me, it's a hell of a lot easier than trying to fly an F-18." he joked.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'll cut right to the chase. I think we can all agree that this is a very difficult and very unique time in American history. Normal just doesn't exist anymore. What was normal two or three years ago doesn't matter anymore. This company was born of much the same type of thinking. We can't go backwards as a society, only forwards. We want everyone to believe in what we are doing, not just rich wall street investors. We want to sell the airship to America, to all Americans. Our ships use hybrid solar-electric engines. They don't use fuel. A modern cargo lifter can move anywhere from 500-1000 tons. Our ships can move three to four times that amount. We will offer full sleeper cabs and fine dining. When you buy a ticket for a trip on a World Zeppelin Airliner, you get your money's worth. There is no first-class or economy class. Everybody rides first class. Everyone has their own personal assistant. Most importantly, we deliver world class service at an affordable price. I'm going to price a first class ticket from New York to Berlin.....okay, the cheapest flight is nine hundred dollars. Our pricing model is unique, in fact it's so unique, I could hardly believe it myself. We will match and beat any first class ticket to anywhere in the world. That's our guarantee to you. We know money is tight for everyone. We are willing to take a haircut if it means winning your loyalty. Loyalty is what makes profits. Loyalty is what makes a business work. Without loyalty.....*you don't have anything*. Let's watch this promotional video together, to get a better sense of who we are and how we operate."

He said and dimmed the lights.

The video was unusual. It was in black and white. It looked like something he and his friends would make fun of, but this video really caught his eye. The company did a tour of one of their airships. It really was like a giant yacht in the sky. It would be hard not to enjoy yourself on this bird. The ship even had a live orchestra playing at dinner. It really would be a trip to remember. He hadn't seen his dad this excited in quite a while. He was surprised to see Sam in the backroom, leaning against the wall. He seemed in awe as well. For a struggling town like Whitmore, his was just what they needed. If nothing else, just the simple fact that there were companies being born, not just dying. People were going to be hired. *People could start living again, instead of just surviving.*

After the film, the Captain and his crew entertained several questions. Everyone wanted to meet him and his crew. Josh noticed that his co-pilot was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. She looked Asian, or maybe Hawaiian.....whatever she was, she was stunning.

"Wonder if they need a starving artist on one of their ships?" asked his dad.

"I wonder if his co-pilot is single," he replied.

"Yes, that is quite a woman over there....oh, hey Sam."

"Hiya boys. Amazing, isn't it? I've been dreaming of doing something like this my whole life. Had to wait a while, but now it's here. I'll be the first one to purchase a ticket."

"Why did they film it in black and white? It just looked weird," asked Josh.

"No, no my boy. It was brilliant. See, when you think of something in black and white, you associate it with times long ago. Happier times. Better times. Back before all of this Corona insanity. They want us to associate their airships with times back when the world made sense. It was a subtle ploy, but a good one. Their whole presentation was brilliant. I know money is tight, but let me tell you if they can deliver, they are going to have more customers than they can handle."

"You really think so?" asked his dad.

"In many ways, an airship is superior to an airplane. No complicated landing, no runways, no traffic control. They are so simple to fly and land, you could learn in a day. They are very forgiving, unlike an airplane. What has held them back all these years has been their speed, they are just too slow. I wonder if people are willing to trade speed for comfort."

"Hey Sam, we got to get going. It was nice seeing you again."

"Likewise, boys. Take care. I'm going to meet the captain. Who knows? Maybe I can get a job on one of those beauties."

"Can't hurt to ask."

Josh and his dad arrived back home to find Evelyn and his mom at the dinner table. You could cut the tension in the air with a knife. Josh sat down and did his best to just stay out of the conversation. He would have avoided them entirely, but he was hungry. If he missed dinner, he was out of luck. He was tired of eating cheese and crackers. He needed real food.

"Aren't you going to give your big sister a hug?" she asked.

Josh gave her a squeeze.

"How you been?"

"About the same. You home for good?" he asked.

"Well, for a while anyway. Not much demand for professional dancers these days....at least not the kind who keep their clothes on."

"Good to have you back. I missed you."

He knew that he had interrupted a conversation.....a rather *tense* conversation that was bound to pick up as soon as he left the dinner table. He just hoped his big sister acted like a big sister and not like the spoiled brat he was used to. *Cause when sis don't get way.....look out below!*

Josh had a strange dream that night.....a very strange dream. He dreamt that he was standing in one of those airships. He was just standing there watching everyone in the dining area enjoy their meal. There were waiters pouring wine and champagne for the guests. The band was playing. A few people were standing near the giant window, looking out below. Everyone seemed to be having such a lovely time. He then turned and saw that one of the staff was partially decomposed. Half of their face was missing. Just rotted off. He saw another staff member who was half skeleton, dragging himself across the floor. He tried to scream, but then he saw himself in the mirror. His face was rotted as well. He ran madly, bumping into several guests who seemed to regard him a nuisance. He had never been so terrified in his life.

*Please Jesus, please let me wake up.....cause if this is real.*

*He bumped into the Captain, Captain Graham, who just looked at him and started laughing.*

*"Hell of a first day, huh kid?"*

He sat up in his bed. He could hardly breathe. He could hear Evelyn downstairs shouting and screaming. He fell back in his bed. He had only been asleep for two hours and now he was wide awake. Josh had never experienced a dream so surreal and yet so vivid in his life. For a few seconds, he really thought he was on that ship.....with those things. Didn't people know they were being served food by corpses? You would think they would have noticed.

He was very upset about the dream, but he was more annoyed at his sister for the way she was acting. It was always about her. He stepped out into the hallway. She saw him at the bottom of the stairs and tried to ignore him on her way up. He got in front of her and stopped her.



"It's not their fault your life didn't turn out the way you wanted it to. Why are you taking it out on them?" he asked.

"Who else am I going to take it out on? I don't do failure little brother, you of all people should know that," she said and pushed him out of the way.

"I already feel bad for your future husband," he said under his breath.

He walked down stairs into the kitchen. He saw both his parents sitting at the table. He didn't have to say a word. He went to the fridge and got a bottle of water.

"Why do you let her talk to you that way?"

"She wasn't screaming at us, she was just.....screaming." said his mom.

"Come on mom. You wouldn't let me talk to you that way."

"I guess we just kind of expect it from her," she replied.

"That doesn't make it right."

"Josh.....Eve has had a very hard time dealing with all of this. All she ever wanted was to get out of this town and make something of herself. She's always been an overachiever. Now, an over achiever is someone who eats three meals a day."

"It's been hard on all of us. I have days when I want to yell and scream too, but I don't. I handle it. I just wish she would do the same." he said and headed back upstairs to his bedroom.

*Please Lord, no more crazy ass dreams about dead people on airships.....pretty please.*

He woke up the next morning at six thirty. The rest of his sleep had thankfully been less chaotic than the beginning of it. No crazy dreams, at least none that he could remember. He looked out his window and could still see the airships perched over his town. He came down stairs into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee. His parents were glued to the TV. The news was not good. Following last week's crash of the market, the government was now limiting cash withdrawals at the banks. No one would be permitted to withdraw more than 500 dollars per day. That was it. If you needed more, you were out of luck. The government was now floating the idea of giving everyone in town a number. You could only go out on days when your number was drawn. The government was expecting another wave of infections this winter and was already trying to head off the panic. They knew the people were going to resist another lockdown, the only question was: to what extent would they resist? Several governors had already publicly stated they would not be doing shelter in place type lockdowns again. Most couldn't afford too. The president had threatened to use whatever force was necessary. Things were quickly going from bad to worse.

"Josh, could you grab the paper? I just want to make sure I didn't miss anymore bad news."

Josh grabbed his cup of coffee and headed back into the living room. He opened the front door and that's when he saw it. He almost dropped his coffee.

"Um, mom....dad.....you better see this," he said loudly.

His dad came to the front door and saw it too.

"What is that?" he asked

Josh bent over and picked one up. It was a large wooden bucket of teeth.....*human teeth*. Not just one, but hundreds. The entire bucket was full of them.

"Somebody has a very fucked up sense of humor," said Josh.

"What is it?" asked his mom. She recoiled in horror when she saw it. "What is that.....are those teeth? Jesus Christ, tell me those are not teeth!"

Josh picked up the bucket and brought it out to the trash. He used a stick to poke through the bucket. After a minute or so, he was done.

"They're all teeth. The whole goddamn bucket is full of teeth."

"I think we should call the cops." said his mother.

"Yeah. You sure that's a good idea?" asked his father.

"No, but this is pretty freggin weird."

The police car arrived about ten minutes after his mother called the police. Officer Demarco and Officer Nigel arrived at the house and walked over to Josh who was sitting in front of the bucket of teeth.

"Jesus.....that's weird. Never seen that before," said Demarco.

"You know what else is weird. Some of the teeth are wooden. they've got to be over a hundred years old. Who uses wooden teeth anymore?" said Josh.

"So, the whole bucket is just teeth?"

"As far as I can tell."

The officers got a tarp and poured the teeth onto it. They counted the teeth. There were four hundred and fifty-two. Two other cars showed up. The entire neighborhood was out. It became quickly apparent that none of the officers had any idea how to go about handling this. One of the officers bagged up all of the teeth and put it in the trunk of his car.

"Come on people, show's over," he said and drove away.

The officers took the family's story, not that there was much to tell. They gave his dad their cards and left a few minutes later. He saw Lee-Anne across the street and motioned for her to come over. She came running over.

"Dude, is it true? Did someone really put a whole bucket full of teeth on your doorstep?"

"Yup."

"Wow, this is so creepy. I mean like, really, really creepy."

"One of the officers said it looked like some of the teeth were old. Like hundreds of years old. That's creepy." said Josh.

"Jesus.....who did you piss off?"

"I wish I knew. If you want to get even with somebody, why would you send them a bucket full of teeth?"

"I don't know. What are you going to do now?"

"Go back inside and finish my breakfast I guess. You want some burned eggs and toast?"

"Not really, but I'll join you anyway," she said

The two went inside the house. Josh had lost his appetite but needed an excuse to spend time with Lee-Anne and this was as good as any.

"Mom, this is Lee-Anne."

"Oh, hi. Nice to meet you. I wish we were meeting under better circumstances. I promise you we don't collect teeth."

"Yeah, that was weird, huh?" she said.

"Please, help yourself. I've been unemployed for almost a year, so most of my time is spent trying to get creative with what little we get from the food bank."

"I think you're doing pretty good. My sister and I roll up bread and soak it in Gatorade. Then, we dry it out and make toast out of it."

"Really? Is it any good?"

"No, it's pretty horrible. I just figure if we keep experimenting, we're bound to stumble onto something delicious."

"Necessity is the mother of invention....or so I'm told." said his mother.

The two ate and watched the news. His mother turned it off, right into the middle of a report about the looming food shortages hitting stores across America."

"My great-grandmother grew up in the 1930s. I never could understand why she was always hoarding food. Never seemed to make much sense. Now, I know. Never thought I'd see the day." said his mother.

Josh knew he had to get Lee-Anne out of there before his mom went full-blown *mom* on them. I'm going to show Lee-Anne around."

"Okay, it was nice to meet you. Don't be a stranger. I promise next time, we'll have real eggs."

"No worries. It was nice to meet you too."

Josh found it odd, maybe even a little hilarious that his parents always watched his sister with her boyfriends when she took them upstairs. She had to leave her bedroom door open. With him, they knew he was such a dork, they didn't even have to worry.

*Josh usually hits the friend zone with warp speed. His parents didn't have to worry about him having a girl in his room. Global warming was a bigger concern to his parents.*

"Have you ever heard of the HINDENBERG?" he asked as they entered his room.

"Actually, I have. My grandfather talked about it all the time. He said if it weren't for that disaster we'd all be riding in airships instead of airplanes."

Josh pulled up a website about the disaster. He had no idea why he thought Lee-Anne would be interested. He had no idea what to do with her. He knew to just play it cool. Let her do the talking, he would do the listening.

"You got any weed?" she asked looking around his room.

"No, maybe my sister has some. I'd ask, but that would mean waking her. She doesn't get up before noon, like ever."

"Really, not me. I like to get up early. I always feel like I've missed out on half the day when I sleep in." said Lee-Anne.

"You play video games?"

"Some. People take them too seriously. I just like to get high and have fun." she said.

Josh wasn't listening. He was fixated on the picture in front of him. It had to be a coincidence. It must be a coincidence, just a very, very odd coincidence.

"Josh? What are you looking at?"

"Max Pruss."

"Who?"

"Max Pruss was the Captain of the HINDENBERG when it crashed. Captain Graham is a spitting image of him. He's the one who gave the lecture last night. He's the captain of one of the airships above the town. They're almost identical."

"Do you have a picture of him?"

"No.....my dad was there. So was your grandpa. Show him the picture and see what he thinks."

"He'll probably say it's just a coincidence. According to this, Captain Pruss died in 1960."

"Yeah, I know, but Captain Graham even had a slight German accent. I figured he was German.....oh my God. Look at this picture. It's him!"

"Who?"

"The guy who was handing out the pamphlets last night. it's the same guy, I'm sure of it....Albert Sammt was the first officer on the HINDENBERG when it crashed. Ask your grandfather. I'd ask mine, but I think he was more into the stewardess, man she was hot. I'm sure, those are the same two men."

"So, then the crew of the HINDENBERG is the same people who were giving the lecture last night at our library?.....and you sure you don't smoke? Maybe shrooms or something."

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but it's them. If it isn't, then it's their doppelgangers."

"Doppelgangers usually apply to one person, not two." she said as she looked through his telescope."

"Josh, why is your telescope pointed towards my house?"

"Oh.....you weren't supposed to see that."

"Are you watching me?"

"No, I was watching Ursa Minor and the North Star."

"Yeah, sure you were. You little pervert."

"Well, it's not like I can watch football or hockey. They still aren't playing."

"I'm going to have to keep my eye on you.....did you ever have a very weird dream? I mean like a dream that is so vivid and powerful, you just couldn't get it out of your head."

"Like a wet dream?"

"No, like something that changes the way you think. Like you know you were dreaming, but you're still trying to make sense of it?"

"Yeah, kind of like the dream I had last night. I dreamt there were dead people serving food to the people on those airships. I have no idea what it was supposed to mean."

"That's so weird that you say that. I had a dream about the ships too. A very weird dream. It was weird and horrible at the same time. I dreamt that I got to meet the Captain of the airship. Not the one you met last night, he's not the real captain, I mean the man who lives behind the golden door. The one we never get to see. The one who controls all of this. Just as I am about to see his face, I wake up. I never get to see his face. Why is that?"

"Don't know. Maybe you aren't supposed to see his face."

"Maybe. Or maybe I am, and I just don't want to because I know it will scare the shit out of me, so my mind wakes me up first."

"Why would seeing his face scare you? What do you think you are going to see?"

"I'm not sure. Something wonderful and horrible at the same time. Listen to me, you probably think I'm crazy."

"No, the whole world has gone crazy. Maybe we are just the only sane ones."

Lee-Anne peeled herself away from the window and walked over to him and kissed him on the lips. Josh wasn't really sure what to do. He definitely didn't see that one coming."

"Why did you do that? I mean I'm glad you did, but.....why?"

"I don't know. I think it's because you and I know their secret. Ever since they appeared over our town, nothing has been right. We are all having strange dreams. You get a bucket full of teeth dropped off at your doorstep. None of this makes any sense. Why are those ships really here? I want them to go away. They scare me. I know it sounds stupid, but that's how I feel. They scare me so much. I know I'm being silly, but maybe I just know something the rest of us don't. I know nothing good is going of this.....nothing. That's why I kissed you because you know. You know what they are."

"Lee, I think they're just a company doing a stupid PR stunt. I mean, come on, do you really think anyone is going to pay money to fly in one of those things? You could probably get there faster if you jogged."

"Well, ever since the government took over the airlines, no one is flying. Most of the planes were grounded because they had to lay off all of their staff and crew. No one is traveling in trains or buses either because of this virus. See, they are just what we need right now. You can travel and still maintain your six feet of distance. Each family could have their own separate cabin. I don't think any of this is an accident."

"So, then why do you think there's something wrong with them?"

"Come on, that weird dream you had the other night and mine, have you ever had a dream like that in your life?"

"It was just a dream, it doesn't mean anything," said Josh.

"No, all dreams mean something. It's like they're some kind of a doorway to another world that we know is there, but we can't see."

"You smoke a lot of weed?"

"No, I've never smoked before?"

"So, why did you ask me if I had any?"

"I don't know.....I'm nervous. I thought it might take the edge off."

"Why are you nervous?"

"I think I like you. You're the first boy I've ever met who didn't ask me for my number five minutes after meeting me."

"So.....are we cool then?"

"Yes. I really mean what I say and I say what I mean. Everybody at school thinks I'm a mean girl. I'm not mean. I'm just honest. I really think those ships are evil."

Josh pulled her in for a kiss. She resisted at first, but quickly gave in. They were interrupted by a knock on his door. The two of them quickly separated. He spun around in his chair and answered the door. He opened the door and saw Eve standing right there in front of him. She poked her head into the room, just to make sure they both had their clothes on.

"Can I help you?"

"Mom said you had the key to her car. I'm going to run an errand for her," said Eve, still in disbelief that her baby brother had a hot girl in his room, sitting on his bed.

He gave her the keys and she just smiled and winked at him.

"Hey, I got to go, I have to make sure my grandpa takes his heart medication, Old bastard might just keel over on us if he doesn't. Can I call you later?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure."

"Well, I need your number?" she asked.

He took her hand and wrote on it with a marker.

"That way you don't lose it." he said.

"I'll put it in my phone."

"Cool. Go check up on Sam, I like the old guy."

Eve watched her walk out of his room and down the stairs. She still couldn't believe it.

"Way to go little brother. She's cute.....don't knock her up, okay?"

"We've barely kissed."

"WHAT! You kissed her! Wait till the rents hear about this. Pretty soon, you're going to have to keep your bedroom door open too."

"Please don't tell mom and dad."

"Okay....for now. Hey, could you loan me five bucks?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out some money. There was a total of three dollars and seventy-six cents.

"It's all I got. Don't spend it all in one place," he said and closed the door on her.

He decided not to text her that night, he didn't want to appear to be too attached, even though he was dying to talk to her. He watched the news, which was depressing as hell. He kept thinking about the giant bucket full of teeth, which made the local news. No one in the family was interviewed, but they did talk to the officers who responded. They also thankfully did not mention the name of Welch, or their address. All in all, it could have been much worse. His parents told him to just ride out their fifteen minutes of fame. He was flipping through the channels when Lee-Anne texted him.

"WHATCHA DOIN?"

"NUTHIN. JUST CHILLIN," he responded

"I SHOWED THE PICTURES TO MY GRANDPA. HE SAYS THERE IS DEFINITELY A RESEMBLANCE, BUT THAT'S ALL. HE SAYS HE IS GOING TO TRY AND GET A JOB ON ONE OF THOSE SHIPS, BUT HE CAN'T FIND ANY INFORMATION ABOUT THE COMPANY....LIKE NOTHING."

"THAT'S WEIRD."

"I KNOW, RIGHT."

"IS HE GOING TO BE LIKE A JANITOR OR SOMETHING?" asked Josh.

"NO, HE ACTUALLY WANTS TO BE A PILOT. HE'S NUTS."

"THERE COULD BE FAR WORSE JOBS OUT THERE."

"I STILL THINK THOSE SHIPS ARE STRANGE. THEY HAVE SIGNS ON THEM. LIKE FLOATING BILLBOARDS YOU CAN RENT."

"JESUS, THEY THINK OF JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING, DON'T THEY?"



"GOT TO GO. C-U TOMORROW?"

"DEFINITELY. SWEET DREAMS." he typed and put down his phone.

Even though it was still early for him, he was tired. He didn't sleep well last night and was thinking of turning in. He walked outside and looked up at the ships. All he saw were lights and the giant neon sign underneath. In big bold letters, it read: *AT GRAND ZEPPELIN AIRLINES, WE DON'T JUST FLY THE FRIENDLY SKIES, WE OWN THEM!*

"Yeah, sure you do," he said and headed back inside.

*In his dream, the crew of the airship has murdered the passengers. They are just rounding up the survivors. They make them watch as the crew kills them one by one. There is blood everywhere. Josh is frozen in fear. It's like he's a part of this even though he's not. He wants to scream, but he can't. You can't have sound in your dreams.....at least that's what he's told. He watches one of the crew stab a woman and her husband to death, then tries on some of her jewelry. Josh turns to run away, but he bumps right into Captain Graham.*

*"Josh, nice to see you again. Do you like what I've done to the place?"*

*He is trying to scream as loud and as hard as he can. He's trying and trying, but he can't. His mouth and vocal chords just won't respond.*

*"I hope you and your family enjoyed our housewarming gift!" he said and patted his back.*

He sat up in his bed. His heart was pounding. His mind was racing.

*What the hell was that? That wasn't a dream. Not like any dream he's ever had. It was something else.....yes indeed. Maybe Lee-Anne was right. Maybe there is something just a little bit askew about those mysterious airships above them. Maybe he ought to do a little snooping. Just to make sure everything is on the up and up.*

He texted Lee-Anne.

"DUDE. JUST HAD THE WEIRDEST EFFING DREAM EVER!" he said and hit the send button. Much to his surprise, she texted him right back.

"ME TOO. IT WAS ABOUT THE SHIPS!"

"I KNOW. WHY DO WE KEEP HAVING THE SAME DREAMS?"

"CAUSE THEY'RE EVIL. I THINK WE SHOULD TRY TO WARN PEOPLE!" she wrote.

"NO ONE IS GOING TO BELIEVE US. YOUR GRANDPA WOULDN'T EVEN BELIEVE US."

"I'M SCARED."

"ME TOO. WE HAVE TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THEM."

"OKAY. I'M GOING TO TRY AND FALL BACK TO SLEEP."

"SWEET DREAMS."

He put his phone down and lay back down. He was tired, but he was almost afraid to go back to sleep. He would rather be any place in the universe, but back on board those ships. It was like being in a mental torture chamber.

He awoke the next morning and discovered that he had slept in. It was almost seven o'clock. He felt much better. He needed the sleep. He had a hard time getting back to bed last night after that terrible nightmare. He can't remember the last time he'd had a nightmare quite that bad.

He headed downstairs to the coffee pot. His mom almost always got up before he did and made coffee. Not those new coffee makers with the cups. He liked old-school coffee made in a coffee maker, with regular old-school coffee and regular creamer, not of that fake flavored crap. He poured himself a cup and was watching the news. The government has now instituted price controls on all the food, due to skyrocketing inflation. Every time the government tried to make it better, they just made it ten times worse. He had finished his first cup and was about to pour a second when he heard what sounded like a loud whack coming from down the street.....then he heard a woman screaming. He and his mother ran outside and looked around. A few houses down the street, they saw somebody's car that had run right into the tree on Mrs. O'Leary's front lawn. He and his mother ran over. Another neighbor across the street, Mrs. Donahue, who must be nearly eighty, was screaming her head off like she was thirty years younger.

*Old bag has quite a set of pipes on it.* He thought as he ran over to her.

"Are you okay, dear.....what happened?" asked his mother.

Mrs. Donahue only pointed to the car.

*"I think she's underneath,"* she said quietly.

Josh looked at his mother and they both ran over. As they approached the car, they could see a man slumped over the wheel. Josh pulled him back and checked his pulse, it was weak, but still there. He looked down and saw Mrs. O'Leary's feet. She was underneath the car. He froze and looked at his mother, who wasn't doing any better.

"Josh, run home and get your father.....and get his big floor jack in the garage. She said softly.

He did exactly as he was instructed. He didn't run, he sprinted, past two neighbors who had come to see what all the fuss was about. He went in through the kitchen and was about to holler at the top of his lungs when his father came downstairs.

"Dad.....some one jus ran over Mrs. O'Leary.....she's trapped underneath the car."

His dad looked at him for a second, then they both ran outside. Josh told him he was going to get his floor jack that could lift over six thousand pounds. His dad had tried to pawn it months ago, but everyone in town was trying to pawn their stuff and they couldn't take it. He lifted the jack

onto his dad's lawn cart and pulled it down the street as fast as he could. By now, several people were gathered around the car, trying to lift it off of her. He and his dad lifted the jack out of the car. There happened to be a small, but sturdy piece of wood in the cart. He put the wood on the jack and began pumping. When they had cleared enough room, he and several others pulled what was left of Mrs. O'Leary out from underneath the car. Not much blood, just a very twisted and mangled body. No one in the group said anything, several of them were crying.

It was only a minute later when two patrol cars arrived at the scene of the accident. They lifted the driver out of the car. He was not conscious. Mrs. O'Leary was pronounced dead at the scene by the EMTs. She was killed almost instantly. The police theorized that the driver simply passed out at the wheel. His car became a four thousand pound killing machine at that point. Mrs. O'Leary was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. She had gone outside to let her dog out and get the morning paper. She had lost her hearing in one ear. She probably never heard the car coming right at her until it hit her. Josh had never seen a dead person before, let alone a newly minted dead person, as in just ten minutes ago, she was alive and didn't have a care in the world. Now her body was a mangled mess. She looked almost like a rag doll. Lee-Anne came running over. She threw her arms around Josh and tried to hold back the tears. She didn't want him to think she was a crier. She wanted to think she was one of those *alpha female types*.

"Jesus.....what a morning," said Josh.

Lee-Anne and his mother gave each other a hug. They watched silently as her body was loaded into the back of the ambulance.

"EMT's think the driver had a heart attack." said one of the officers.

"I know those damn ships are responsible for this. They caused all of this to happen. They caused that liquor store owner to be killed last night too." she said angrily.

"What are you talking about?" he asked

"I just saw it on the news when I heard the crash. Two shit bags tried to rob Bob's Liquor store downtown. The clerk pulled a gun out of the safe and shot the two, but not before they shot him as well. The bad guys are dead and the clerk is fighting for his life."

Josh didn't quite see her logic here. Things had been steadily deteriorating in Whitmore and nearby towns for the past several months. Some towns had gone decades or more without a recorded homicide and now they had several just in the past year. The entire fabric of society was coming apart. Josh wrote it off to the depression, not to the airships. Many counties in New Hampshire were forced to release inmates and nonviolent offenders for fear of the virus and then simply because they didn't have the money to keep them incarcerated. They were now beginning to result in thousands of inmates being released into society all at once. Some adjusted, some simply had no choice but to fall back onto their old habits.

"You want to get out of here?" he asked

Lee-Anne simply nodded.

Josh told his mother that he and Lee-Anne were going out for a while. He went back to the house and grabbed his phone. He had no idea where they were going, but he knew they had to get there fast. Lee-Anne called her grandfather and told him she was going out for breakfast. Josh had salted away about fifty dollars for a rainy day.....today it was pouring out. They walked to the local diner in town and sat down in a booth. He recognized the waitress. He had gone to school with her younger sister. She took their order and their menus. Josh reached out and held her hands. He knew to play it cool, but that's easier said than done when you're nineteen and infatuated with a girl. She took his hands in hers. It was pretty much official, they were now dating, and they would worry about the ground rules later.

"I can't believe Mrs. O'Leary is dead. I've known her since like....forever. We used to go trick or treating at her house. She always had the best candy. It was homemade. She had these candy apples. They were the bomb."

"I know you think I'm crazy. I can't explain it, it's just this feeling I have. I know those ships are just bad. They are like someone's nightmare escaped and now we all have to deal with it. That's what they are.....a nightmare."

"You really think that. That's what you honestly believe?" he asked

"We both had the same nightmares about them. In mine, I was watching the crew murder all the passengers. They were killing them for no reason, other than they thought it would be fun."

"That was pretty much the same dream I had, only I don't think they were doing it for fun, I think they needed all those bodies for something. I just wish I knew what for."

"They're for the captain. He uses their bodies for something. God, listen to us. We're going to make quite a pair."

"I wonder who else has the same dream?"

"I'm guessing no one. Everyone I talk to thinks they are awesome, including Grandpa. I haven't seen him this excited in years. Not since we got free cable. I must have talked to over twenty people. Not one seemed to care."

"Maybe they were just too scared to talk about it."

"You weren't."

"With you, no. I wouldn't just talk about my dreams with anyone."

"I guess that makes me special."

"It makes you very special," he said and leaned in to kiss her. She kissed him back.

"I better not just be a booty call to you," she said

"I'm not really a booty call kind of guy. I'm more the hot and heavy type."

"Have you ever had a girlfriend before?"

"Once, in the sixth grade. I'm an Aries, she was a Libra....it just wasn't meant to be," he said as the waitress brought their food over.

He figured Lee-Anne would go slow with her food, but she didn't. she loaded up with syrup and just about everything else on the table and went to town. Josh had to play catch up.

"Pancakes are my crack," she said stuffing a big piece into her mouth.

Josh had never seen someone eat pancakes so quickly and done it so eloquently in his life. She was young, but you could tell the skill was there. He just hoped she would keep him around long enough to show off some of her other skills.

The waitress came over and dropped off the check. Josh grabbed it and stuffed it in his pocket. Lee-Anne just smiled.

"I got this one. You get the next one."

"Josh Welch.....I had no idea you were such a gentleman."

"Momma didn't raise me to be a pig," he said finishing his pancakes.

He got up and dropped a dollar on the table for a tip. He walked up to the register and was still chewing his food as he fumbled for his change. He dropped some money on the floor. One of the customers at the bar reached over, picked it up, and handed it back to him.

"Thanks," said Josh

"No problem. That's quite a lady you have over there. You're paying, smart, very smart. No one wants to bang a cheap skate these days." he said sipping his coffee.

Josh just turned away and smiled at him.

"Josh.....come over here." said the man at the counter.

Josh turned around and leaned over.

"My name is Paulson. I work for the government in one of those super secret departments you aren't supposed to know about. I was kind of hoping you could do me a favor." he said.

"What kind of favor?"

"I was wondering if you could get on board one of those blimps that are hovering above this town here. Do you think you could do that?"

"I don't know, why?"

"Josh, I'm not supposed to tell you this, but those blimps have enough weaponized smallpox on board to kill everyone in this state. We can't do a damn thing about them. Air Force could take them down in seconds, but it's too risky. If you can get on board, maybe you could tell us where the smallpox is. Anything would be helpful."

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked Josh who looked like he just got hit by a hammer.

"I'm here every morning for breakfast. I'll be expecting your report....remember: *mums the word*," he said and made a locking motion over his lips as he left the diner.

Josh walked back to the table. Lee-Anne knew something was off.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"You aren't going to believe the conversation I just had with one of the customers," he said.

They left the diner and walked home. Josh tried to recall every word the man said while it was still fresh in his mind. None of it made any sense.

"Wait....he said the word smallpox?" she asked.

"Yeah, except he said it had been weaponized, don't know what that means."

"I'm sure it's not good," she said.

"He wants me to get on board and look around and report back to him at the diner."

"Why do you have to do that?"

"I'm not really sure. He seemed to think I could get on board somehow."

"So, you can get on board, but the CIA can't?"

"Yes, I believe that was the gist of it."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"No, no, it really doesn't."

"Maybe he's just nuts?" she said

"Yes, I'm starting to think that is definitely a possibility," he said.

Josh held her hand all the way home. When they got to Sam's house, they went behind the fence and kissed for nearly five minutes. Josh had an erection the size of a Saturn Rocket. He decided to cut the fireworks a little short, before she noticed his issue.

"I better get home and check on mom."

"You don't want to check on the rest of your family?"

"I'm sure they'll be okay. Mom is very emotional, this has to be hard on her."

"Call me tonight?"

"Of course," he said and kissed her goodbye.

Josh walked home and let himself in. He saw his parents sitting at the kitchen table. He could tell by the looks on their faces that something was wrong.....*very wrong*. He could tell his mother had been crying. Maybe she was just overwhelmed by what she had seen this morning.

"Hey guys.....what's wrong?"

"Josh.....how do I say this.....you're father just confessed to me that he has been seeing another woman for the past five months," she said.

Josh just looked at his dad. He was floored. He didn't know what to say or how to say it.

"Um.....ok."

"Yeah, he just dropped this on me as I was preparing lunch.....like our family didn't have enough shit to deal with. So, for right now, I've asked him to leave."

"Leave where?"

"Anywhere but here."

"Well, I guess that's fair. He is the one who cheated," said Josh.

"I'm going to do whatever she wants. None of this was her fault. I guess I just got lost in the moment or something?"

"Or something." his mother said.

"Right....well, I'll let you two sort this out. I've got some work to do. So, I'll see you around Dad." he said and got up out of his chair.

Josh walked up to his bedroom. He lay down on his bed and immediately texted Evelyn.

"DUDE.....DAD HAD AN AFFAIR!"

He waited. A minute later she texted back.

"WHAT? ARE YOU SERIOUS?"

He just smiled and continued typing.

"YUP. MOM KICKED HIM OUT."

"WAIT THERE. I'M COMING RIGHT HOME."

This was one of the few times in his life when he desperately needed his older sister. He didn't have to wait long. She pulled into the driveway about fifteen minutes later. She passed by their father as he was leaving the house. Josh watched them. Evelyn said nothing to him as he passed by. She ran into the living room and hugged her mother. Josh came down the stairs a minute later. His mom was sobbing. It was the most uncomfortable family moment since their grandfather had died suddenly a few years ago.

"What did he tell you?"

"I was making stuffing, the kind with the apple flavoring you all like. He just puts his hand on my shoulder and says he has something to tell me. She's twenty-four! Twenty-four! I have underwear older than her. Yes, they bonded over art and now he's madly in love with her. Says she's his soul mate.....if she's his soul mate, *then what the hell am I?*" his mom said between sobs.

"Jesus....that prick. God, why do men suck so bad? Josh, could you help us out here?" asked Evelyn.

"I don't know Evey.....I guess we just think with the wrong head sometimes."

"Oh.....he did mention something else."

"What?"

"He said they haven't had sex yet out of respect for his family and how all of this will affect us.....isn't that sweet? Your father has got to be the most considerate piece of shit I know."

"Wait.....they haven't slept together yet? Isn't that a good thing?" asked Josh.

"No, I doubt it. It's just a matter of time from what it sounds like."

"It might mean that he's still in love with you."

"He says he loves us both, but with me, he has love for me, but with her, it's different."

"Wow, this is a mess. Look, Mom, I know he's my Dad and all, but that doesn't mean I'm going to take his side in all this. You haven't done anything wrong. He's the one who screwed up."

"I knew we were having problems, but I never saw this coming. Things just keep getting worse. We barely made the property taxes this month. We have to use food pantries to feed ourselves. I haven't bought anything for myself in months. Your father feels like a failure. I think when he couldn't provide for us, it killed him. I knew he had a wandering eye, I knew that when I married him, but like most naïve twenty-two-year-olds, I thought I could change him. Let that be a lesson to you kids: *tigers can't change their stripes. Your father is a born fuckaholic.*"

"I'm really sorry Mom. I wish I knew what to say." said Eve.



"I guess we are now in the other fifty percent of the marriage curve, the half that didn't make it. How can he think he's going to be better off? He knows he won't be. He's old enough to be her father. She's going to come to her senses and kick him to the curb. I know your father can be very charming. No one knows better than me, but I also know that you need more than just charm these days, you need money and he doesn't have any."

"Or does he?" asked Evelyn

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know all of the art pieces he's sold over the last five years? Maybe he sold them off the books, with no paper trail, cash only. In his line of work, it wouldn't be too hard."

"I don't know. I always just assumed he was telling me everything. He'd just give me the cash and that was it. I never questioned any of it. Maybe I should have. I guess I just didn't want to know."

"Look, Mom, we got your back on this one. I was so angry at him that I couldn't even speak to him. Have you called a lawyer yet?"

"Do you think I should?"

"You want to do it before he does. I know they're slimy, but when you need them, you need them and I think right now, you need them," said Evelyn.

"I kind of figure he'll come crawling back in a few months, once his chick realizes what she's gotten herself into. He's too old and she's too young. Unless he's loaded, it ain't gonna last."

"Well, I hope he does come crawling back. Let him know what it feels like to be on the receiving end for once."

Josh headed back upstairs. He hugged his mom and told him he was always there for her. He meant it too. He hated his father for what he had done to her and the rest of them. It would seem the whole unto death do you part now meant...*until something younger and prettier comes along.*

He was in the middle of texting Lee-Anne when his sister came into his room and sat down on his bed.

"How is she?"

"She's a fucking wreck."

"Man, what a day. First, we have to pull Mrs. O'Leary's dead body from underneath a car, now this. Can't wait to see what tomorrow brings."

"Did you know?" asked Evelyn.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean did you know dad was having an affair?"

"No.....not really?"

"Josh.....come on."

"One night last month, we were at the college dropping off these girls. They were renting out the dorms as apartments because the college is still closed. So, I'm sitting in the parking lot, and who comes out of one of the apartments but Dad? I wasn't sure at first, but the closer I got, I knew it was him. It was late at night. So, yeah.....I kind of had my suspicions."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"What am I supposed to say? *Dad, are you screwing somebody half your age?* I guess I just didn't want to know."

"I'm hearing that a lot around here from you and mom. Well, this is what happens when you don't want to know.....you end up knowing for certain at some point."

"Look, you don't get to criticize. You left all of us as soon as you graduated. You left the next week. I didn't even see you for a whole year. You didn't call or text. You just dropped us. You can act all high and mighty, but the truth is you left us behind. You abandoned us too, you just did it differently, but the results were the same. You have no room to talk." said Josh.

Evelyn started laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"That night you saw dad coming out of the apartments....."

"Yeah, so what?"

"Well, it's just that...."

"What?"

"We're assuming it's the same person he left mom for. It could have been someone else entirely," she said laughing.

Josh took a step back. She was right. In more ways than one.

In his dream, he is standing in front of the same golden door that Lee-Anne described. He can hear nothing but the faint sound of child-like laughter. He turns the golden knob on the door and pushes it open. He walks inside and sees a child's nursery. He sees a nurse give the baby a bottle and walk away. She smiles at him as she passes him.

*Like all of this is perfectly normal.*

He can hear a baby laughing. He cannot see the inside of the crib. As he gets closer, he sees some kind of long tentacle-like arm or leg emerge from the crib and then relax. Josh is frozen in fear. He sees Lee-Anne walk over to the crib and grab the baby, holding it up and hugging it. She goes to hand the baby to Josh, but he won't go near it. That thing scares the hell out of him.

"What's wrong silly? Don't you want to hold your own son?" she says.

Josh opens his eyes and sits up in his bed. It has taken him only a few seconds to leave the dream world and re-enter this one.

"Well, that was weird." He says and reaches over for a water bottle and downs almost half of it. He walked over to the window and looked out at the airships that were still hovering over his town. The neon billboard on one was fully lit and it had a message:

*There was silence in heaven*

*When the dragon fought with the Archangel Michael.*

*The voice of a thousand thousand was heard saying:*

*Salvation, honor, and power be to almighty God.*

*A thousand thousand ministered to him and ten hundreds of thousands stood before him.*

*Alleluia.*

Josh rubbed his eyes. He wasn't quite sure what to make of the message. He texted Lee-Anne, but got no response. He decided to go back to bed. It was 3:30 in the morning. No sane person should be up at this hour anyway.

Problem was, he couldn't go back to bed. Not with all that had happened yesterday. He had to pull a dead woman from underneath a car and his parent's marriage had imploded. He was angry at his father. Angry at his mother. Even angry at his sister with her new "*holier than now*" attitude. The family had been in trouble even before the virus hit. It was just the final nail in the coffin.

Josh didn't have many close friends. He had a lot of acquaintances and people that he high-fived every day, but very few people with whom he could really talk. His closest friend in high school was his gym teacher and track coach, Mr. Mancini. After he graduated, he told Josh to just call him by his first name which was Jeff, but old habits died hard. Mr. Mancini had watched Josh go from a chubby, out-of-shape freshman who could barely complete one lap around the track to its star runner who was capable of running a sub-six-second mile. He was the only one in that school who believed in him.

*"Josh, success isn't measured in how much money you have or how pretty your wife is, no my boy.....success is simply measured in obstacles overcome to get to where you are today. Just look at what an incredible runner you've turned into. Who would have thought that was possible four years ago? Well, I did. I knew you had it in you. You got the secret sauce, don't forget it."*

Josh never forgot it. He remembers the first time he broke a six-second mile. He nearly shit himself and puked afterward, but he did it. He beat everyone else in school that day. He was no longer the dorky fat kid who watched reruns.....he was Josh Welch, track star.

In many ways, Mr. Mancini was the father he never had. They would sit outside on the bleachers and just talk about life. He remembers one talk in particular. It was about marriage.

"How do you know the woman you marry isn't going to divorce you?" he asked.

"Well, you don't, but I've always felt the best indicator of staying married is how long your parents stayed married, if they were married at all. If your parents were happily married, then that is what you think is normal. If they were constantly fighting and divorced, then that is what you would think is normal. You will do whatever you think is normal for your situation. So, my advice is to marry a girl whose parents were happily married and chances are, she'll do the same for you." said Mr. Mancini.

He should probably have seen it coming. His mother's parents had been together for nearly fifty years. His father's parents split up shortly after he was born. He never even met his real grandfather, only the man his grandmother married years later. That is what his father thought was normal.....marital chaos. Still, he chose to have an affair. He could have chosen to be a good husband, but who does that nowadays? It's just so much easier to start over. His dad wasn't a bad guy. In many ways, he was a pretty cool dad. They could talk for hours about baseball and girls. He was the *cool dad*, not the *real dad*.

He faded in and out of consciousness for the next few hours until the sunlight began poking through the curtains and into his room.

He got dressed and headed downstairs. He made a pot of coffee and poured himself a cup. He walked outside to get the paper since he was the first one up. He looked up at the billboard on the airship. It read:

IF WE STAY LOCKED DOWN IN OUR HOUSES, THEN THE VIRUS HAS WON!

They did have a point. The economy had been fully re-opened for months, but the businesses had no customers because no one had a job and if they did still have a job, they were not going to take cruises, or eat out at expensive restaurants. They weren't buying new cars or sending their kids off to expensive private colleges like the ones in Whitmore. The country was barely being held together. The bailouts and stimulus programs came fast and furious, but nothing seemed to work. The national debt of the United States was now approaching 30 trillion dollars and that was just the treasury bills that could be tracked. Add another 30 trillion for Social Security and Medicare, along with the pensions. The country was coming apart at the seams. Even in a very affluent area like Whitmore, the old left/right, blue/red divisions were alive and well. There was now a private militia comprised of ex-military and ex-law enforcement as well as many members of the community who were training for war. Against what enemy was the real question. The state police didn't have enough troopers to try and stop them, they also didn't want to be blown to pieces. The budget cuts had been harsh. The towns simply didn't have enough money for police or firefighters anymore. New Hampshire was not like other New England states when it came to firearms ownership. You could own as many guns as you liked and carry them pretty much

everywhere. Whitmore was full of stuffy university types who would cringe at the thought of owning a gun, but now, these were the type of people who were waiting in line to buy one. Ammo was hard to find as well. Everyone in New Hampshire was preparing for the worst case short of a nuclear war.....*this was about as bad as things could possibly get.*

He walked across the street to Lee-Anne's house. He was surprised to see his father walk out of the house. The two of them stopped and stared at one another for a moment.

"Dad," Josh said.

"Hi, son. I spent the night at Sam's."

"But Sam isn't here. Lee-Anne said he went to help one of his sons move."

"Yeah, I just slept on the couch. Can we talk later, I just want you to get my side of it, that's all."

"Sure, just give me a call. I won't be too far."

His dad headed outside and across the street to their house. He knocked at the door, then let himself in. He walked into the kitchen and caught Lee-Anne getting dressed. He stopped for a moment.....*this was weird, he just wasn't quite sure how.*

*His dad had literally ran out of the house and now Lee-Anne is putting her clothes on? Yeah, kind of weird.*

"So, my dad stayed here last night?"

"Yeah, he called Sam. He said it was alright."

"That's kind of weird isn't it?"

"He had nowhere else to go, what was I supposed to say?" she said putting on her shirt.

"I don't know, it's just weird."

"He's your dad, not mine."

"So, what's for breakfast?"

"Eggs and toast. I see you made coffee. I Haven't had coffee in months."

"First thing I did when I had money was buy coffee. The whole world might go to hell in a handbasket, but I must have my morning coffee." he said and helped her make breakfast.

"Did you have any nightmares last night?" he asked.

"Sure did, how bout you?"

"Yup. That's three nights in a row. Must be some kind of record."

"Well, you haven't heard the best part?"

"What?"

"The airship company is having a hiring event in town today at the high school. You can start work tomorrow. I expect half the town to be there."

"You've got to be kidding me," said Josh in shock.

"Nope, my grandpa, Sam, is beside himself. Says he is going to be there as soon as he gets back into town this morning. Everybody I know is applying. Everybody but us that is."

"We have to warn people. Lee, we can't let anybody get on board that airship."

"So, then you believe me now?"

"Yeah, I guess I do. Maybe all of this shit happening in town is coincidence. Maybe it isn't. I'd rather be proven wrong than proven right, cause if we're right, then God help us all."

"How are we going to stop them?"

"I don't know. We have to find that guy who said he works for the government. He's our only hope."

"That guy.....he's our only hope, huh? Then, we're pretty much fucked."

"Do you have a better idea?"

"No, not really."

"Then let's go. We gotta find him before it's too late. By the way, you have the nicest ass I've ever seen on a girl." he said pulling her in for a kiss.

"You sure know how to charm the ladies, Mr. Welch," she said and kissed him back.

Josh had no idea what to do or how to go about doing it. He wasn't certain that the ships were evil, he just had this very unpleasant feeling about them.

*Kind of like how you would feel if you were sitting next to Ted Bundy or Charles Manson on a bus.*

They found him at the diner, exactly where he said he was. They sat down next to him. He motioned to the waitress for another cup of coffee.

"Hi," said Josh.

"Hi yourself. You got anything for me?"

"No, not really. They're having a big hiring event in town today."

"So, I hear."

"Well, wouldn't that be a great way to get on board?"

"It would be if any of you were going to be allowed on board," he said sipping his coffee.

"What do you mean?"

"They've done this in other towns, yours isn't the first. They screen a bunch of people and make all kinds of absurd promises. They tell them they have to take a physical first. For some reason, only a few people ever pass it and are hired. They're looking for something. Blood type, DNA, genetics, we just don't know. Most of their jobs are just manning phones and social media. No one ever gets near the ships."

"My grandfather is a pilot. He's also an engineer. If anyone was going to get hired, it would be him."

"We thought the same thing. Had half a dozen people with decades of flying experience behind them go through the interview process. Not one was ever hired. One of them worked for a commercial airline for twenty-two years. He could fly those things in his sleep."

"So then, why are they doing this?"

"We think they're looking for something, we just don't know what. You can go through the process if you want, but I doubt you'll ever be allowed near the airships."

"Well, they have to hire somebody, they just don't fly themselves. Besides, if you have a hundred people on board, then wouldn't you need a crew? Who's going to cook their meals and clean their rooms?"

"Kids, I've been following them for two years. I have yet to meet a single person who has ever been on board one of their airships. We'd give anything to get a person on the inside. I've been trying, but nothing seems to work. We did have an informant on board about six months back. He seems to somehow fallen off the ship at ten thousand feet. Poor bastard fell right onto the New Jersey Turnpike at almost two hundred miles per hour. Only way we could identify him is through his company-issued security badge. Jesus, what a mess. He looked like human scrambled eggs."

"Do you really work for the government?" asked Josh.

"Yup."

"Can I see your badge?"

"Right here?"

"Please?"

"Why?"

"You're just not exactly what I expected from a government spy. You're pretty half-ass about everything," said Josh.

"I get the job done. James Bond only exists in the movies. Most spies are just like me. We do just enough not to get fired." he said. He pulled out his wallet and put it on the counter. Josh opened it. Sure enough inside there was a giant gold badge that said: DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE UNIFORMED SERVICES.

"James Paulson.....is that your name?"

"One of a few I have."

"Okay, James, if these ships are really as bad as we think they are, why doesn't the government stop them?"

"Josh, I'm going to let you in on a little secret here. It's a biggie," said James.

"What is it?"

"The United States is run by a bunch of totally incompetent assholes. They couldn't blow out a candle without screwing it up. My boss calls his boss, who calls his boss and eventually it makes its way up to the White House. Then, the president makes his decision and it then goes back down the chain until it reaches me. I can't even fart unless I get permission first. You see the problem we have here?"

"No, what?"

"I can't be James Bond. I can't even be Scooby Doo. My boss has to worry about pleasing his boss who has to worry about pleasing his boss and so on and so forth. The government has ten people to do the job of just one person and all ten people have the same job, which is not to get fired. If you don't screw up, you can't get fired. That's why no one can make a decision nowadays. Trust me, working for Uncle Sam is a good gig. Everybody knows this. You get paid a lot and don't really do a damn thing. See my gun?" he said and exposed his jacket. Josh could see a 9mm in his holster.

"Yeah."

"If I shoot somebody, I have to justify it to a dozen different people, from a dozen different agencies. They are going to look for any little mistake I might have made and use it against me. In reality, this gun may as well be empty, cause no one with half a brain would ever use it, unless it was them or me."

"I'm not really sure what all this has to do with the ships."

"Point is Josh, when the entire U.S. Government is made aware of something and has to act, it's like trying to move a giant sedated dinosaur up a steep hill. Every little movement takes forever because this agency has to talk to that agency who talks to that agency, then it goes up to the White House. Now, in that time, the bad guys have plenty of time to react and make their move.



That's the problem we face here. The bad guys don't have to justify their actions to anyone. They can do whatever the hell they want. We can't. Everything has to be approved by someone above us and by someone above them."

"But, you said they had some kind of smallpox on board. Isn't that reason enough for the military to get involved?" said Josh.

"It's a rumor, nothing more. I can't take a rumor to my boss who is going to send it up to the President. If I had evidence, it would be different. That guy that was thrown off the ship, that was his last message to me before he died. Unfortunately, without some kind of proof, we don't have anything."

"Come on, the FBI could just show up with a warrant and demand to see the inside of the ships, couldn't they?"

"Well, that's exactly what they did at their main hangar in Texas. Claimed they were acting up on an anonymous tip involving drug smuggling. Searched three of their ships. Used bomb dogs and everything. Know what they found? Not a damn thing. Somebody tipped them off that we were coming. They have friends in the right places. So, we have to be very careful if we make a move. We don't know how far their intelligence network goes."

Josh sat back on his stool and looked right at Lee-Anne. Neither of them really knew what to do. They were in miles over their heads and their only lifeline.....wasn't really much of a lifeline.

"Have you tried the pie here? I'm guessing it's pretty good," said James.

"Why do Lee-Anne and I keep having these horrible nightmares about those ships? I mean horrible dreams. It's almost like we aren't dreaming, but we're really there?"

James looked around and leaned in closer to Josh.

"They are into some very, very weird shit. I mean very weird shit. Ritual occult magic. Demonology, Satanic worship. You name it, they're doing it. They're a cult. A doomsday cult of some sort. That's why they can always find us, it's like they have some kind of sixth sense. Of course, it's just my opinion. My boss says I have to have proof before the military will act. I tell him we may not have time. I don't want to put any pressure on you here, but you might be my last chance. The fate of the free world could be riding on your shoulders here Josh-y boy."

"Okay. I'll try to get inside. Where can I reach you?"

"If I'm not here, stop by my room at the motel outside of town. I'm in room six. Bring some weed or beer if you come." said James.

"Can you pick this one up?" he said and handed Josh the check.

"Um.....sure."

"Thanks.....you guys really out to think about working for the government. Easiest money you'll ever make," he said

They watched him leave the restaurant. Neither one really knew what to make of him.

"Was he really a spy?" asked Lee-Anne.

"No, I think he's just a government employee. If he's a spy, he really sucks at it."

"Why is he leaving all of this up to us? What the hell are we supposed to do? Why is this our problem?" she asked.

"Because no one else is going to stop them. That's why it's our problem. No one even sees what's right in front of them. No one ever stopped to think about the damage these lockdowns would do until it was too late. No one thought we should test the vaccination before we give it to hundreds of millions of people. It caused more deaths than the virus. No, no one in 2023 thinks. If they did, we wouldn't be in this mess. It's almost like thinking is just un-American nowadays." he said.

"Do you have enough money to pay for his bill?"

"Barely. No money for a tip though," he said looking into his wallet.

The road to the high school was packed. Josh's senior year had been cut short due to the virus. The school reopened for two months, then had to close again when some students and teachers got the virus. It had not been opened since October. The parking lot was completely full. The line was hundreds of people long. Everyone in the area was hoping to get a job with the company that had promised free meals and travel to its employees. Lee-Anne pointed out that so far, the company had not done a single flight with passengers. They had some fantastic airships, but they had to be remodeled for living compartments, kitchens, lounges, etc. They also had to take out massive insurance policies for the passengers in the event of a crash. So far, none of that had been done. You would think these people would have done their research on *Trans-Zeppelin Airlines*, but it would seem not. All they needed to hear was that the company was hiring and paying a decent wage. That was enough for most people.

He recognized several people in line. They got in line and waited. Sure enough, it started raining. Neither of them had an umbrella. By the time they got inside the building, they were completely soaked. He got a number and sat down in the bleachers. They waited another fifteen minutes until their number was called. They went over to a booth and sat down next to someone named Junius. He was very well spoken and did an excellent job of selling the company. He never mentioned specifics, just specific enough for them to want to investigate further.

"Believe me, we know how hard it is out there. We're doing our best to help America recover," he said.

"Is there any way we can work on the ships?" asked Josh

"Of course. We have to test everybody for the virus. We also give everyone a complete physical with lab work. We have to know they can tolerate working at extreme altitudes. Not everyone can do that. It's very demanding on the body. Most major airlines make their flight attendants take a physical as well."

Josh and Lee-Anne got a phone number to call within 48 hours to see if they were moving on to the next phase of the hiring process. Junius said the company hoped to hire two hundred people from this area. Maybe more if they were needed.

They stopped at James's motel room outside of town using Sam's car. They found James watching TV and eating popcorn.

"Do you guys want to watch *Titanic*? It's like my favorite movie," he said.

Josh filled him in on what went down at the high school. James was half listening, mostly just watching the TV.

"We tried following their money trail. An operation this big must be burning through cash like it's water. Nothing, not a damn thing. We can't access their accounts without a warrant and that would just tip them off. They went public a month ago. Nothing. Everything is one hundred percent legal as far as the SEC is concerned. It just doesn't add up. None of it does. it's like they just appeared one day with everything in place. All their equipment and buildings and staff. Like it just appeared out of thin air."

We have to call back in two days. We'll know if they are interested in us." said Lee-Anne.

"You've got youth on your side. That and they can pay you next to nothing" said James.

"I saw my sister Evelyn there. She was getting real flirty with one of the company staff," said Josh.

"Is she hot?"

"Kind of."

"She'll probably make it to the next round. Pretty girls always get hired," he said, stuffing popcorn into his face.

"Don't you think I should say something to her?"

"Is she good at keeping secrets?"

"Not really."

"It's up to you. I heard somebody left an entire bucket of teeth on your front steps. Is that true?" asked James.

"Yup."

"That's kind of weird."

"I know."

"So, if your sister did manage to get on board, you know her life wouldn't be worth shit, not unless she joined them," said James.

"James.....is what you're telling me facts, or just wishful thinking. You do know the difference between the two, right?"

"Look kid, I've been following them for almost two years. I don't have all of the pieces of the puzzle, just a few, but the few I do have are pretty damn scary. I just wish I knew what they were planning. I think they might be looking for recruits for their Satan cult. I've got just as many questions as you have, that's why it's so important for you to get on the inside. You guys are my only hope at this point. Maybe your sister, as well. Trust me, these guys are bad, really bad. It's up to us to stop them." said James.

"I just don't know why it's up to us to stop them. Isn't that what we have police and the military for?" asked Lee-Anne.

"Guys.....there is no one in any position of power in and I do mean anywhere on this planet who is not bought and paid for.....except maybe that Kim Jong whacko in North Korea. If they aren't bought and paid for, they die. Simple as that. It's an inconvenient truth of everyday life. Our leaders are no different. Remember, somebody, very high up in our government tipped them off about the Texas raid. That kind of information doesn't come cheap. I've often wondered the same thing. No one wants to believe something like this could ever happen. We've had our fill of bad news over the last two years."

They left James to his movie and his popcorn. They caught a ride from a friend of Lee-Anne's who drove by. They were both tired of walking. Since most people their age couldn't afford to drive, walking was the new *in thing* to do.

They didn't say a word about James, or about the airships while they were in the car. They went over to Sam's house. They could finally be alone. They made out passionately. Josh figured this was as good a time as any to lose his V-Card, but had no protection. The last thing in the world he wanted was to be responsible for anyone else when he could barely take care of himself. Just as they were about to strip off their clothes, they saw Sam's car pull into the driveway. Josh looked like he had just lost the championship game in Little League. Maybe it was for the best. His head just wasn't in the game right now. All he could think about was what kind of monsters were on board those ships and what horrible things they were going to do to the unsuspecting crew and passengers.

*Nowhere to run at twenty thousand feet is there Josh-y boy?*

They had put their clothes back on and were walking down the stairs when Sam came through the front door. He looked somewhat upset.

"Well, guess I'll have to keep looking. They didn't want me. I was too old. They didn't come right out and say it, but they kind of did. If I can pass the same physical everyone else can, I fail to see how I am too old to fly?" he said as he poured himself a drink.

"Sorry to hear man. I don't think they wanted us either," said Josh.

"I know I am not in their target age group, but I have flying experience. How many of their applicants have that?"

"I got to head home Sam. Good seeing you. Hang in there, I'm sure something will break for you soon."

He and Lee-Anne walked outside. Once they were around the corner, they kissed for nearly a minute. Josh could tell, they were rapidly approaching *hot and heavy status*.

"Text me before you go to bed, okay?" she said holding him close.

"Sure.....miss you," he said and pulled away.

He walked across the street to his house. He opened the front door and walked inside. He went into the kitchen to grab a drink. He saw Evelyn and his mother and father sitting at the kitchen table. Eve was grinning from ear to ear. She wasn't just smiling.....*she was beaming*.

"What's up?"

"I GOT HIRED!" she screamed and threw her arms around him.

"Oh, I'm sorry.....I guess you didn't make it, huh?"

"I guess not."

"I am going to be a stewardess on Trans Zeppelin Airlines. I haven't had a job in two years and now, I'm living my dream. We are going on a worldwide Tour. Florida, Mexico, Hawaii, Japan, and Russia. Look, I know I haven't been the easiest person in the world to get along with these past few months and I'm sorry. God, this is like the first good thing that's happened to me since I graduated. I'm so excited!" she said and threw her arms around Josh.

He said nothing and just pretended to be happy for her. Much to everyone's surprise, she announced that she was leaving tomorrow at noon. She was going into one of the ships. It was on-the-job training. She started tomorrow.

"Honey, that's great. Please keep in touch this time." said her mother.

The more Evelyn spoke, the more convinced Josh became that he would never see his sister again. He knew this would be the last time she saw his sister alive.

"Eve, you know.....you don't have to take this job. There are plenty of companies that are hiring," said Josh

"Yeah, name one."

"It's just that we don't really know anything about this company. They haven't even done a single flight yet with passengers."

"I know. That's the best part. I'm going to grow with the company. I play my cards right and get in on the ground floor and who knows, in a few years, I could be running that place!"

"It's just that there are so many unknowns. Maybe you should just hold off until you know more about them."

"Josh, are you crazy? This is like the opportunity of a lifetime. I got my dream job during the second great depression. Who would have thought that was possible? God, I thought I'd be working in a waffle house or something. I have so many texts to send out." she said and hopped down off her stool.

"Josh, what's wrong? You aren't sore because she got hired and you didn't, are you?" asked his dad.

"No.....no. I just worry about her sometimes. She doesn't really think things through." he said sulking.

"Who would have thought that the kid that had to be told not to eat LEGOS would turn into such a grown up? You just continue to impress me." said his mom hugging him.

Josh headed upstairs and knocked on the door of his sister's room. He looked and saw how happy she was. He hadn't seen her like this in years. He knew it would be pointless to try and warn her. She wouldn't listen to anything he had to say. He could try talking to his parents, but they would be pretty much in the same boat. He felt like her death would be his responsibility. He felt like a coward for not saying anything. He sat down in his bed and picked up his phone.

"MY SISTER GOT HIRED! SHE STARTS TOMORROW." he typed.

"OMG! ARE YOU SERIOUS? WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?" she replied

"WHAT CAN I DO? SHE WOULDN'T LISTEN TO ME ANYWAY. THIS HAS ALWAYS BEEN HER DREAM, TO SEE THE WORLD."

"SO SORRY BABY." she typed back.

"I NEED TO SEE YOU." he typed.

"RIGHT NOW? AREN'T YOUR PARENTS HOME?"

"AFTER THEY GO TO BED. WE SHOULD FINISH WHAT WE STARTED."

"YOU ARE SUCH A GUY."

"NO, I'M *YOUR* GUY." he typed.

"I'M A VIRGIN." she typed.

"REALLY?"

"YUP. NEVER GOT PAST SECOND BASE."

"ME TOO. I'VE NEVER EVEN GOT PAST FIRST BASE." he typed

"I FEEL LIKE YOU'RE THE ONE." she typed.

"I KNOW YOU ARE THE ONE FOR ME."

Josh was flipping through the channels on the TV in his room when he saw James' mug shot on the screen. The newscaster was in front of the motel where James was staying.

*Tonight, we bring you the disturbing story of man pretending to be working undercover for some unidentified branch of the government. He tried to use his badge to get free coffee and donuts. The cashier called the police who quickly discovered that the man who was using the name James Paulson, was in fact, a wanted criminal from New York state. His reasons for being in the area are unknown at this time....." she said.*

Josh just laughed. How could they have been so stupid? He was probably going to say he needed some money to keep the operation going. He wanted to text Lee and fill her in, but all he could think of was closing his eyes and falling asleep. He had never been so tired in his life. It was like someone had just drugged him. He put down the remote and was asleep minutes later.

*He opens his eyes to find Lee-Anne standing naked at the foot of his bed. He grabs her and throws her down onto his bed. The sex is fast and furious. They both climax at almost the same moment. He didn't even wear a condom. Not that it matters, because this is just a dream. All of this is just one terrible, wonderful dream. He's going to wake up in the morning and everyone will be having breakfast and watching the world fall apart. Cause there are no monsters and devil-worshipping cults. Stuff like that doesn't happen, not to people like the Welches. Not to people who have suffered so much already. God doesn't hate like that. If only Josh could convince himself of that, his life would be so much easier.*

His family stood on the bleachers and watched the new hires walk on board the ship. Evelyn turned to all of them and waved frantically. They all waved back. Lee-Anne was there as well, just to keep him company. She pulled him closer and whispered in his ear.

"Did you wear a condom last night?" she asked

"No. did you want me too?" he asked

She just shrugged and waved back at Evelyn. Everyone was waving as they watched the valedictorian of her class board the giant airship. They watched it take off and disappear into the clouds. Josh remembers that day vividly. It was the last time he ever saw his sister or anyone of the 48 people who boarded the ship that day. In the years following he chaos of the Corona virus, most governments were barely functioning. Hundreds of people vanished while in the

employment of Trans World Airlines. Most were never found. An arrest warrant was issued for the CEO and founder of the company, but he too seemed to have vanished without a trace. Each year on that day, a candlelight vigil is held for the victims. Josh just hoped she died quickly and didn't suffer. He survived the third world war and was elected to state government, where he lobbied furiously on behalf of everyone who lost a loved one to the mysterious airships, who seemed to have simply vanished without a trace. He remembers what James told him, he had never forgotten it, because as he cycled through life, it became more and more apparent.

*"Everyone nowadays is bought and paid for, if they aren't they die, that's just how the world works, like it or not."*