



# Next Up, On Terry

by K.M. Breay

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I died last Sunday of pancreatic cancer while my third wife Rachel stood out of earshot from the nurse, whispering into her cell phone, making an appointment with her colorist. I was full of morphine so I'm not exactly sure, but I believe the last words I ever heard her speak were 'I have a funeral to attend, Stefan. Now quit being a bitch and bump somebody.' Rachel always got what she wanted.

Hell isn't anything like I'd imagined. There is no devil or gates or flames and in the commissary, where every morning I serve food alongside a telemarketer named Dave Buntz, they have candy and burgers. Almost everybody smokes and carries a cell phone and from somewhere unseen, all day and night, even though I've seen no cars, I hear them honking. There are towering, windowless buildings made of concrete. In the lobby of my building people gather to gossip and place bets on new arrivals around a vending machine that dispenses bricks of cheese. There's the constant smell of smog and failure. Televisions are everywhere and always on. I've seen no animals or children. I arrived alone last week in the dark of night in what could only be described as a motor home with no driver and no bathroom.

In two weeks Dave will have finished his ten years so he just received his Next Life Assignment. He'll be reincarnated as a fatherless baby girl somewhere in Kenya. Ironically, Dave was concerned about the heat and submitted his appeal to the board, telling them he'd prefer Born Poor in Norway or even Ward of the State in Kentucky. The board didn't seem to be paying much attention but afterwards, while sharing a cigarette in the stairwell with a hit man named Chuck Chan, Dave was told that lots of people wanted Born Poor in Norway because of all the free health care and state mandated vacation time. I'll get my Next Life Assignment in fifty years because I was judged to be five times more evil than Dave and all the other Ten-years. That's how it works down here: ten years for guys like Dave, fifty for guys like me. But as Dave likes to remind me, at least I'm not an Eternity, forced to wear a red vest and slacks, wandering around with nothing to look forward to other than another pointless day on the treadmill or an occasional Hitler sighting.

Uday Hussein snores while he sleeps and sits in our room all day watching television, refusing to be seen in his red vest and slacks. He's got that could-give-a-shit Eternity look about him and isn't much for small talk. When I moved in I reached to shake hands and introduce myself, but he just sat down with a scowl, pointed to the masking tape running down the middle of the room and said: "Cross that line and I kill you." I almost pointed out that I was already dead but decided not to make waves with Uday, especially on my first day.

Sometimes when I'm bored I walk over to E-Wing and look at all the nameplates on the doors of the rooms assigned but not yet occupied.

Around the corner and on the upper floors I see rooms reserved for Fidel Castro, Larry Flynt and Dick Clark. I see Rosie O'Donnell and O.J. Simpson's name on the same door and wonder who assigns rooms. A worker nails what looks to be a brand new Michael Jackson nameplate to a door before dropping a half-eaten Hot Pocket, then pushing a whole grocery cart full of nameplates down the hall and around a corner. I see Jimmy Swaggart, Chevy Chase, and Dr. Phil and duck my head into the leaky communal bathroom where one day, after passing on, they will all shower and urinate together. I see both Charles Manson and Star Jones' names misspelled. I see Osama Bin Laden's room and discreetly look back and forth before scribbling under the nameplate: 'We were just fucking with you about the 72 virgin thing.' I turn to leave and bump into a taller than I'd imagined Yasir Arafat who winks at me while lighting a cigarette; we share an awkward smile.

Tuesday morning Josef Stalin slammed his tray down in front of me and demanded an extra plate of chicken wings. While they claim to be strengthening it, the training program here still isn't great, so I turned to my supervisor and, with a raised eyebrow and a shrug, asked for guidance. Troy leaned over, cupped his hand over his mouth and whispered 'give him a few more wings' before turning, tapping his watch and giving a disappointed look to Pol Pot, who was tucking in his shirt, matting down his wet hair and discreetly punching his timecard. I reached with my tongs to place more chicken wings on Josef's tray but he ignored me, answered a call and, while cradling his cell phone between his ear and shoulder, wandered over to a table of arguing attorneys who, when they saw him approaching, got quiet real quick and rose up with their trays and briefcases to leave.

Every week-day at noon I grab lunch and walk downstairs with my Death Report and a pencil to meet my Truth Counselor for Lifewatch. We sit in front of a giant television in a windowless room that still smells like the mini-gym it used to be. Today, Fran stubs out her cigarette, pushes play, and on the screen I see a creative type in media glasses pitching his colleagues ideas for a credit card commercial. Then I see the creative type on the streets of what looks to be Manhattan, saying 'fuck you' to a homeless man sitting on a bed of newspapers with outstretched hands. I tell Fran to stop the tape and point out this isn't my Lifewatch. She looks up from her childlog with a 'don't tell me how to do my job' look on her face. I shrug agreeably but tell her again.

Fran asks to see my Death Report, locates my Hell Number, then squints through her glasses at the spine of a tape case on her desk. She tells me she has to get through thirty Lifewatches today while pulling my tape off the shelf and cursing me for putting her behind schedule. She indifferently pops in my tape and walks with her ringing cell phone to the far corner of the room while through a cloud of cigarette smoke I see myself with 70's sideburns kneeling

down to tell my six-year-old son I'll be gone for three nights on business. Then I see myself blow a grand playing Pai Gow, get drunk on Stolli and bang a nameless call-girl in a comped suite at The Flamingo. I sell my sailboat for alimony. I slap my second wife and spit on a cab driver in Buffalo. I cut to the front of a line at a Dallas airport, flash hundreds of middle fingers and urinate twice in my agent's pool. I misbehave. Afterwards, my Truth Counselor turns off the monitor, hands me a workbook and leaves me alone with my McNuggets to work out my problems under a flickering light bulb.

Richard Nixon lets me call him Dick and occasionally spots me while I lift weights in the basement gym. He doesn't use the machines and spends most of his time standing around in a sweat suit, bitching about his new roommate, a slave-trader from Georgia, who, according to Dick, sleepwalks and only showers on Thursdays. Dick is a Fifty-year but yesterday afternoon in the steam room he reminds me of his broad environmental program, tears up while talking about his daughters, and overall makes a pretty persuasive case for being a Ten-year. I place my hand on his bare shoulder and tell him I voted for him twice. He thanks me with a smile and disappears through a wall of steam, wrapped in a towel, a cell phone pressed to his ear.

Today at Lifewatch I'm shown tapes of Terry, the television show I hosted for two decades before I died and ended up here. I watch as a parade of transvestites and grotesques are booed and humiliated. I see heavy women confront angry men and sit through an entire show devoted to toddlers who eat too much. I interview the unloved and the unlucky. I see actors dressed as security guards pretending to break up a fight between three black women and a Nazi from Toledo. I prod, push and preen in front of the camera. I see myself dramatically revealing the results of a paternity test while we broadcast on a screen downstage the triumphant reaction of a tattooed man in the green room. I dangle a microphone beside a disfigured albino wearing ruby red slippers and a dwarf dressed as Toto while they exchange wedding vows in front of a robot. I produce fake tears and ask a woman with no limbs about her sex life. Then I page through my Death Report and in large red font, under a section titled Contribution to Society, find the number Zero.

I'm awoken by the sound of a ringing cell phone in what feels like the middle of the night. With my bare foot I kick the top bunk in an effort to rouse a snoring Uday but realize the ringing is coming from my still unused cell phone, lying on the nightstand next to a coffee mug full of Boone's Farm.

"Who is calling at this hour, please?" I ask, polite but firm. I hear coughing on the other end of the line and in the background, on the television, a man explaining how he's made a small fortune breeding gerbils.

"Terry, tell me one thing." I recognize the voice: it's Dick Nixon.

"Dick, it's three o'clock in the morning," I say, while glancing over at Uday's alarm clock, which sits atop our microwave, which only

works with the lights off.

"Tell me why Jack Kennedy's privileged little can isn't down here with us." I hear him belch softly and the sound of ice cubes rattling around in a glass.

"Dick, I'm not sure how anything works down here," I say, hedging but sounding supportive. "Maybe he's in another section?" I add. "A section for Democratic presidents."

"Cocksucker," he slurs, followed by a long, uncomfortable silence. And then, after taking a couple more pulls of whatever he's drinking, he hangs up.

I can't quite get back to sleep so I walk down the street to the fifty story mall, take the escalator up to twenty, and in front of a Sunglass Hut am approached by a shortish man with liberally gelled hair, wearing a dark suit.

"Josh Greenberg," says the man, producing both a wide smile and his hand. "Huge fan of the show, Terry. You, my friend," he says, gently placing his hand on my chest. "Are a national treasure."

"Thank you, Josh," I say, somewhat indifferently, still groggy from Dick's call and noting the ironic presence of a Sunglass Hut here in Hell, where there is no sun.

"Listen, I'm a talent agent at ICM. Well, was a talent agent," he tells me. "Suicide," he says, while making a gun with his hand and pointing to his temple. "I've been here nine years. I'm a Ten-year. How about you?"

"Fifty-year," I tell him with a shrug. "I just got here."

"First of all, you shouldn't even be here, Terry," he says, shaking his head in astonishment. "You know that and I know that."

I'm flattered and am about to tell him so when one of his three cell phones rings. Josh surveys the caller identification.

"I have to take this, Terry. You understand," he says, while searching his pockets for a business card, presumably to hand over in a futile effort to generate some vague business between us, sometime in the distant future, after we've been reincarnated as children of long-haul truckers in Alabama or Gypsies, or geese. Josh comes up empty and instead tells me with his hand to 'call him,' then turns, and walks towards the food court while his other phones start ringing.

On the street outside of my building, twenty-four hours a day and since I arrived, a bunch of Eternities are doing construction. I have no idea what they're constructing or repairing or tearing down, but there are dozens of men and women dressed in red, operating jackhammers, earthmovers and crawlers in between smoke breaks and the occasional fistfight. I navigate my way through the

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construction and across the street to check out the karaoke bar I've been hearing so much about. Inside, I see half of Milli Vanilli staring into an empty shot glass.

I walk past him and take a seat in the corner just as Joseph Goebbels is finishing 'You Light Up My Life' and taking a deep bow before an indifferent, largely Asian crowd. I crane my head to find a waitress but instead see a fat Japanese woman standing near the restrooms, pointing in my direction and shouting 'Terry.' In a matter of minutes I'm staring into a semi-circle of shrieking Japanese women, furiously snapping pictures and feeding me shots of Sake. I'm pleased to be recognized. An hour later I find myself on stage, sweating under the lights and slurring the words to 'Suspicious Minds' while trading winks with a big-chested Eternity playing solitaire with a tableful of marked up Whopper boxes.

This morning they put a paper mache New Arrival hat on my head and lead me and hundreds of other New Arrivals through an unlit underground tunnel that smells like rain. We're instructed not to speak or remove our hats. A man with a British accent says he's starving and we're told that later there will be bread and beans. We walk in silence for a couple hours and I begin to fear the worst: that for the last week we've been on a kind of Damnation Probation and, having failed, are being processed into a more sinister section of Hell, with worse food, more phones and no Karaoke.

And then, up ahead and above a sea of paper mache New Arrival hats, I see that the tunnel dead ends into a set of massive iron doors. Through a bullhorn, someone in charge commands us to stop and the crowd slows, bunching up like traffic. People around me begin to sweat. After a few minutes I hear the sound of something hydraulic decompressing and the iron doors begin to part slowly, allowing a beam of light into the tunnel, which widens as the doors continue to open. Two very frightened men beside me grasp hands.

At the front of the crowd the man with the bullhorn shouts 'fifteen minutes, people' and motions with his arm for everyone to follow as he walks through the doors and disappears up some stairs. I'm one of the last ones through and walk up perhaps fifteen steps and join everyone else on an enclosed landing, all of us standing before a gigantic Plexiglas barrier. "This is Heaven, assholes," bellows the spherical man with the horn, then lights up a cigarette.

Behind a clique of pornographers talking on their cell phones I crane my neck to get a better view and through the glass wall, I see Heaven laid out before me. I see laughing children chasing each other up and down vibrant green hills. I see what looks to be the sun rising in the distance. I see Labradors and Clydesdales and families of running deer. I see an ice blue lake stretching into eternity and an old couple doing the backstroke. I see people of all shapes and colors and ages. I see untouched white snow and sand dunes and a sleeping volcano. I see a pair of donkeys that look to be in love. Then, through some towering Redwoods and a field of wheat, I see a thatch of blonde hair atop a young boy's head.

I push past the pornographers and press my face against the glass and there he is: my son Sam looking lanky and carefree, tossing a football back and forth with an athletic man wearing sunglasses and a Padres cap. He's fourteen all over again but his body is untouched by cancer, strong and lean. I bang on the Plexiglas trying to get his attention but he doesn't hear me. The spherical man with the bullhorn stands, cocks his head and looks in my direction.

I look up to climb the Plexiglas wall but there's no traction and no end in sight. Sam is one hundred feet away but might as well be with The Living. I want to bust through the wall, past the donkeys and dunes and over to Sam. I cup my hands and scream his name while delivering a kick to the glass just as two bearded men wearing official looking uniforms upend me, place me in the back of a golf cart, and drive me in silence through another entrance, into the tunnel and back to my room, where I'm given three Ambiens and fall asleep on the couch watching a Korean soap opera.

In my dreams I'm back with The Living and am given a second chance as a father. Instead of Sam telling me over the phone while I shush a naked chamber maid, this time I stand in the bleachers at Houseman Field and watch him drive his only childhood homerun over the left field fence, then trot around the bases before jumping triumphantly and landing both cleats on home plate. I'm sober and present as Sam is onstage telling Willy Loman he's 'a dime a dozen.' I lie in the snow at Fender Park beside a seven-year old Sam, watching as our cider scented breath disappears into the stars.

And instead of spending the weekend in Saugatuck with the woman who will become my second wife, I'm trick-or-treating through East Grand Rapids with Sam, who is dressed as a pumpkin, his tiny hands outstretched, collecting Tootsie Rolls, eyes wide with wonder. I'm sitting on the edge of his bed, and instead of explaining, with bourbon on my breath and his mother crying in the basement, that I'll be moving out for awhile, I'm telling Sam the next morning we'll drive west until we reach the shores of Lake Michigan, where we'll climb aboard my sixteen foot Sunfish and push off, just the two of us, the bottomless blue lake below, the sun hovering over Wisconsin, the distant Holland lighthouse our compass.

I'm at the rudder while Sam is sitting cross-legged at the bow, wrapped in a red lifejacket, squinting into the distance. He calls to me over the thumping waves and points up into the sky, where I look up to find a single cloud, morphing into Uday Hussein, who is looming over me, unwrapping a Beef Jerky and saying we've run out of toilet paper. It's eight o'clock in the morning and I'm late for work.