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The End of Michael Clement

J.R.R.R. (JIM) HARDISON

AS HIS CAR FLEW THROUGH THE AIR, MICHAEL CLEMENT snapped fully awake and into a kind of crystal clarity he had never before experienced in his thirty-three years of life. It felt ironic that his first taste of such beautiful lucidity should come so close to what seemed to be the likely end of his existence.

As the car hurtled through the air and began to flip he felt as if the whole universe had slowed to a near stop. His body had decelerated with the physical world so that he could note that he had not fastened his seat belt but couldn't begin to move to belt himself in. There was no sound either, as if even that had slowed down and was still crawling toward his ears like a slug. It occurred to him as the front of the car struck the ground that maybe the world was moving at its normal pace but his mind had sped up.

As the front grille caved in, all the assorted loose junk he'd piled in the backseat—his luggage, his guitar, the cardboard box of hardback books—moved past him in slow motion and slammed into the dashboard and windshield. He raised a mental eyebrow at his luck that nothing struck him. Then his chest slammed against the steering wheel and his face crunched up against the windshield. He didn't feel much, just a slow pressure as the windshield deformed around his cheek,

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the glass fracturing in a spiderweb of cracks. The car sprang back up into the air, like a gymnast doing a handspring in a super-slo-mo instant replay. Actually it was more of a front-flip with a half twist, trailing a leisurely plume of desert dust and powdered glass.

Obviously, he must have dozed off behind the wheel, but he was at a loss to imagine the circumstances that could possibly account for what his car was doing now. The stretch of highway he was on had been straight, flat, and smooth for the last fifty miles and had seemed to stretch away straight, flat, and smooth for the same distance ahead. Had he hit something? Blown a tire? He knew he hadn't veered off the road because he could see the white lines of the highway tumbling by as the car cart-wheeled along. It occurred to him that he ought to be frightened and he marveled at his own detachment. He wondered how fast he must have been going to produce such a spectacular crash.

The back end of the car struck the ground on the driver's side taillight and Michael was slammed in slow motion to the coffee-stained carpet of the car floor. The impact was too slow to hurt, but the feel of the crunchy fibers against his cheek grossed him out. From his new vantage point he could see his long-missing Velvet Underground CD under the passenger's seat with all the little pebbles and dirt that had accumulated over the years. So that's where that had gone.

The suitcase, guitar, and books started a freight-train return journey toward the backseat, narrowly missing him a second time. And then, as the car continued to fly, he was rolled into a position where he could see the beautiful, crystal-clear night sky sprinkled with a gazillion twinkling stars and framed up like a postcard through a gaping hole in the shattered windshield. Had his body been responsive, he would have gasped at the beauty.

The car launched itself into another flip, and as it spun to face forward again, Michael could see the towering streetlight

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into which he was about to slam headfirst.

“Wow,” he thought, “there’s no surviving that.” And then the car and the lamp found each other and Michael’s startling clarity came to a jarring end.

When he opened his eyes, he again saw the breathtaking panorama of the stars, but this time he did gasp, and because the gasp hurt, it helped him to understand that, somehow, he was still alive. The speed of time caught up to him then, and with it came fear. His head flooded with images of pulverized internal organs, compound fractures protruding through shattered limbs, crushed vertebrae, or his brain swelling fatally in his skull. Terror nearly accomplished what the accident had failed to. For a moment he felt as if his heart would stop from the sheer horror of what might be.

When the pounding in his chest subsided, he sat up, discovering by the act that he could. Was he all right? Or was he just in shock? He twisted at the waist, expecting his guts to spill out, but feeling only a slight twinge, like a pulled muscle in his back. He looked behind him. There was his car, ridiculously crumpled and wrapped around the light pole like a cartoon vehicle, roof smashed flat, front seats pushed up against the back ones, the whole thing less than half its normal length.

He got to his feet, a little shakily, and looked around. The glorious stars provided little light, but the huge highway lamp—miraculously still working even though it was keeled over at a forty-five degree angle—cast its blue-white glow wide enough for him to see.

He was maybe fifteen feet to the right side of the road in a patch of warm sand. He could tell it was warm because his left shoe and sock were missing. The contrast between the temperature of the sand and the crisp night air struck him profoundly and he took a moment to clench and unclench his toes as if he were standing on a beach. Michael shivered and expelled a plume of steam from his lungs. Then he started to move around a bit, experimentally, feeling for anything broken.

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Again, his imagination brought him sensations of disaster. The way it would feel for the ends of mangled bones to crunch against each other or for a bruised bowel to rupture violently. He shuddered, but none of it was real. He was essentially unhurt, at least as far as he could make out. With that realization he experienced another sensation he could not recall having felt in his thirty-three years. It was exhilaration and joy at the prospect of being alive.

Prior to this moment, life had not been particularly fun, good, or even terribly pleasant for Michael. That had been the main motivation that had led him here. He had been putting it all behind him, turning things around, moving away from the unhappy past, the unhealthy associations of home, and a failed marriage.

“Holy shit!” he shouted into the night. He looked up at the stars above him wonderingly, and his eyes welled with tears.

That glorious glow lasted eight minutes.

Eight minutes and one second later it occurred to Michael that he was in the middle of the desert in the dead of night. His car was destroyed. The carefully packed belongings that constituted everything he had in the world were likely crushed. He was missing one shoe and sock that he suspected he would never be able to find in the dark—assuming they weren’t crushed inside the ruins of his car. Before the accident, he had been driving for two hours and had only passed one other car. One. The last rest stop was at least fifty miles back and there was no telling how far ahead the next one was. The cell phone in his pocket had been dead for hours.

“Holy shit,” he muttered. He had a decision to make and he was not good with decisions. Wait here? Someone would come along at some point. But the desert was supposed to get cold at night. Bitterly cold. He’d read that, or seen it in a movie. If he just sat around waiting, would he be okay, or would he freeze? At least walking would keep him warm.

So then, back or forward? Back had the advantage of being

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a known quantity. But back was fifty miles and he was missing a shoe. And back was the past and everything he was hoping to put behind him.

In such close proximity to his near death, it seemed too symbolically significant for him to retrace his steps. It would mean something. Something bad. So, it was either go forward or wait by the car. At least waiting by the car he had the light. He was not fond of the dark. Not since he was little. He looked up at the light, buzzing above him, and marveled again that it was still working. Then he peered down the road into the distance. A row of identical highway lights stretched off for miles toward the horizon until they vanished as tiny pinpricks behind a rise in the road. He supposed the darkness wouldn't be too bad even if he pushed on. As long as he stuck to the lights, he'd be fine.

How long was it until sunrise? He checked his watch. The watch he had inherited when his father died. Predictably, it had stopped, a single white-edged crack across the entire face. He stood staring at it for a full minute, wondering how he felt about its ruin. The minute hand had come off and the hour hand was stopped just shy of midnight. Giving up on sorting out his feelings about the watch, he started to wonder whether he had been unconscious after the crash, and for how long. It took him a moment to realize that he had slipped into stalling on making a decision.

Decisiveness. It was important. This was, more than ever now, a new start, a new lease on life even. Staying wasn't a decision. It was an indecision disguised as a decision. Fine. He'd walk forward into this new life. Things were going to change and he was going to change things. He wouldn't let surviving this accident be a meaningless event. It felt like it meant something, so he was going to make it mean something.

Energized, he stepped onto the shoulder of the road and started off, consciously deciding not to throw a last look back at his crumpled car. The asphalt was warm under his bare

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foot. He flexed his toes on it, remembering walking the freshly refinished roads around his house as a kid. He used to pop the tar bubbles with his toes and come back with the soles of his feet absolutely black. And then he'd catch hell for it, and worse.

So, everything he owned and every scrap of his past had been destroyed in the car? Fine. Better than fine. This was an opportunity. A crossroads. He was free now like he never had been before. Free to reshape himself into something new and stronger and better. Someone stronger and better. Someone bold and decisive.

Caught up in the moment, he worked the cheap silver wedding band off his ring finger, intending to drop it by the roadside and never think of it, or the broken promises it had come to stand for, again. But he didn't drop it. He clutched it in the heart of his hand until his palm sweated around it.

Bold, decisive, strong. He stopped and hurled it away into the night to prevent the possibility of going after it. Then he took off his remaining shoe and sock, tucked the sock down into the shoe, tucked his broken watch in with it and left them there at the side of the road like an offering or a grave marker. "I'm free," he said out loud. "I choose." As he said it, he set his sights on the most distant highway light, miles off and waiting for him, bright and inviting like the future. And just like that, the light blinked off.

Michael stopped.

Okay. These kinds of coincidental things happen all the time. It was random. Only an exaggerated sense of his own importance could make it seem significant. The old Michael with his useless philosophy degree would see the light going out as an ominous metaphor. The new Michael would see it as a challenge. He'd see it as a challenge and he'd spit in its eye. It would be morning before he reached the damn burned-out light anyway.

This was good. It was a test. And at the same time it was a reminder that he shouldn't be looking at the last light, but at the

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next one. *One light at a time. One light at a time.* He switched his focus, squared his shoulders and started again.

It took him one thousand two hundred and seventeen steps to get to the pole of the next light. He could do this. He touched the cold steel post with one hand, then locked his eyes on the next one and started counting over from one. If he just kept counting, the number would go too high and he'd lose count somewhere. The old him always made mistakes like that. Besides, now that he knew how many steps it took, he could use that to measure his progress, judge his performance.

He was at two hundred thirty-one when something broke the rhythm of his steps. What? Something had caught his attention, some movement ahead. Some little flicker. Maybe it was a shooting star? He scanned the sky for anything and then realized that he'd lost count. He stopped walking. He'd lost count and it bothered him. Where was he? Two hundred twenty-two? No, that would have been easy: two two two. He would have remembered that. In fact, he would have remembered anything in the twenties, wouldn't he? Damn it. Why couldn't anything just be easy? Ever? This was supposed to be his new start and it was going wrong already. Anger started to rise from the bottomless well of it inside him, but he caught himself.

What did it matter? He'd just cheated death. What step he was on didn't make any difference as long as he was moving. Maybe the old Michael would get pissed, but this new guy he'd suddenly become, this new guy was bigger than that. Screw counting steps. He started walking again.

Maybe he should change his name. Michael Clement was who he had been. Clement wasn't even his real last name. It was his stepfather's name. No one knew who his real father was, or what his last name should have been. It could have been anything. It could have been something cool. He'd played this game before—the game of imagining who he was supposed to have been. Anything would have been better than who he

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was. Any last name would have been better than what he'd been saddled with. "Clementine! Clementine! Little darling Clementine!" The other boys had tormented him relentlessly. It hadn't helped that he was slight, delicately featured, and small for his age. It hadn't helped that he'd learned how to flinch and cower long before he was sent to school.

No. Michael Clement was the old, frustrated, impotent loser. This new guy was *different*. This new guy was a *winner*. He was going to do important things. He was going to make a difference in the world. He needed a name to reflect that. A "make a difference" name. Completely fresh, first and last. Quinn maybe. Or Max. Something really strong. Maximilian Stone. Maximilian Hammer.

He smiled at the foolishness. Max Hammer. Subtle. Maybe he should call himself Abraham Christ. He smiled again. Jefferson Lord? Lincoln King?

This time, he saw what last time had merely broken his concentration. In the distance, behind the light he was focused on, the last light in the line blinked off. Was it the same one he'd seen the first time? Maybe it was blinking on and off. That's probably what got him last time, the light blinking back on.

So, his future was a blinking light? What did that mean, symbolically? But even as he thought it, the current last light blinked off too. Now he stopped. It wasn't the other one blinking on and off. They were going out, in a line. Coming toward him.

He started walking again, counting the lights between him and the burned-out ones. There were fourteen. One thousand two hundred and seventeen steps between lights. What was that, like four miles or something? Could a person even see for four miles? Then the new last light, number fourteen, went out too.

Michael flinched. He felt a sensation in his stomach like he'd just crested the rise of a roller coaster and was looking at the drop. He was instantly angry at himself for the feeling. He

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was still just the same weak, cowardly, superstitious Michael Clement he'd always been. Lincoln King wouldn't be shaken by a malfunctioning light. Lincoln King wouldn't be shaken by anything. Or afraid of anything. Once he set his mind to doing something, he'd damn well do it, whatever it took. Lincoln would be a man who walked into the future, into the darkness if need be, with his chin up and a sense of purpose. Lincoln would be a man who got things done no matter what it took.

"Damn straight," he said out loud, desperately trying to keep control of Michael Clement and his little-boy fears. He forced himself to start walking again.

And another light went out. Twelve left. Twelve left between him and the approaching darkness. He couldn't help but think of it like that. The approaching darkness, rushing down the highway to meet him like some vast, black bird of prey. Lincoln wouldn't picture it that way. He wouldn't grant the darkness the power to walk toward him. Lincoln wouldn't be afraid. He'd be the thing to be afraid of. He wouldn't picture the darkness coming for him; he'd picture himself coming for the darkness. That's what Lincoln King would do. Lincoln King. The name wasn't a joke anymore. It was a real name, a strong name. A new name. His new name.

Wrestling Michael Clement, Lincoln King picked up his pace, bare feet padding on the cooling asphalt. It was just some mechanical problem with the light. Some meaningless mechanical problem.

The twelfth light went out.

Screw it.

The eleventh.

He kept going. Actually thrust his chin out defiantly, daring the next light to go out. Which it did.

He stopped. There were nine lights left between him and the darkness. Nine lights. That was like what, two miles and change? He was just over halfway to the nearest light. He looked

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back over his shoulder at the well-lit length of road stretching away behind him, at the wreck of his car wrapped around the pole two and a half poles away.

Maybe it was the crash! Maybe the crash had pulled a wire loose or something, and the lamps were failing in sequence as power stopped getting to them. The idea felt ridiculous even as it came to him. He recognized it as his weakness and fear grasping at straws to explain what was happening. He turned back to the road ahead, half expecting the darkness to be a couple of lights closer, half fearing it would have come even farther than that. But there were still nine lights burning.

He frowned as something occurred to him. He took an experimental step forward and the ninth light failed immediately. He stopped and waited, eyes locked on the eighth light. Without his watch, he had little idea how long he stood there, staring at the light. It felt like ten minutes, but it could have been less. The entire time, the light burned steadily, without so much as a flicker.

Finally, he tried another step and the eighth light winked out as if he had flipped a switch.

Now he was afraid. Michael Clement, Lincoln King or whoever he was. He shivered in the cold night air and tried to think. How could this be happening? Why was it happening? Maybe the two were the same question. It wasn't coincidence. He was sure of that. Lights only went out when he was walking toward them.

Maybe this wasn't really happening. Maybe he was lying unconscious in the sand or in his car, dreaming all this. He pulled out his wallet and took out his driver's license. He turned the plastic card over and read the back aloud.

"Class C. Any single vehicle with a GVWR of not more than 26,000 pounds with the proper endorsements." Then he flipped the card over and waited a moment. The picture showed him weak and foolish, still slight, still delicate. Clement, Michael James. Coward, weakling, pushover. His mouth

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tightened unconsciously at the bitterness of his self-loathing.

He turned the driver's license back over and read the words again. They were the same. Same words, same size, same font. He was not dreaming. Words are never fixed in dreams. He'd read that somewhere.

So, what then? Was he...was he dead? It was possible. He could have been killed in the accident. But even if he were dead, what was going on? This was not like any conception of death he'd heard of or imagined. He tried to really consider the possibility, but he just couldn't make it work. Why would death be like this? What was the point? It just didn't feel right. He couldn't believe he was dead. So what then?

Darkness was coming toward him, but only when he was moving toward it. What did that mean? Did it mean he should turn around and go back? He turned again and looked back.

Go back? Back down the road from where he had come. Back past the wreck of his car. Back past his shoe, his sock and his watch. Back past his wedding ring. Back to the way things had always been.

Instead, he turned around and started forward again. At his first step, light number seven went out. He shuddered, but he kept on going. At his twentieth step, light number six went out. He kept going, but his hands started to shake and his lower lip quivered.

Maybe this was a test. A test to see if he had what it took to change. Light number five went out. He had to have steel in him to change. *Real steel in his gut.* Michael Clement was weak. Michael Clement let the world frighten him into bad choices. Michael Clement let his two-timing wife and a thousand assholes like her walk all over him. Michael Clement let the darkness terrify him, just like a weak, worthless little boy. Michael Clement let his stepfather—

“Worthless,” he hissed, forcing his trembling limbs to take him forward as light number four was extinguished. Lincoln King wouldn't be afraid of anything. Lincoln King would be

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strong and certain. Lincoln King would fix things. Nobody would walk all over Lincoln King just as long as Lincoln King could keep walking right now.

Light number three went out. This one was close enough that he actually heard a click when it died and heard how the combined buzzing sound of all the lights was reduced by one. He balled his hands into fists to stop the shaking and clenched his teeth.

“Lincoln King,” he whispered to himself, “Lincoln King.”

Light number two went out.

Lincoln King, or Michael Clement, both started to cry as he walked up to the last light and saw only darkness stretching away ahead of him. He started to cry like a filthy, worthless six-year-old and he couldn't force himself to stop or to take another step forward. He stood shaking and crying, helpless.

The last light, the one he was standing under, went out with a loud click.

In the absence of its electric buzz there was perfect silence and perfect darkness. Just like the storm basement. Just like the utility closet. He was paralyzed by it, just as he'd been as a child. Paralyzed and waiting for the sound of his stepfather's feet coming through the dark for him.

And then came the soft slap of bare feet on the asphalt.

Michael twitched like a rabbit at the sound, shut his eyes tight against the dark.

A familiar, male voice said close beside him, “It is all right, Michael.”

He turned to its source, opened his eyes, and found that he could see. He could see better than the dim starlight warranted. And as he saw the other, he recognized the face and the voice.

It was himself, or a version of himself, only better looking in subtle ways. There was no cowardice or worry marring the features, no subtle weakness in the stance or the expression.

“Have no fear,” the other said with Michael's own voice, only richer, more confident, and powerful.

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Michael tasted sour bile and fought not to be sick. “Are you m...m...me?” he asked, sobbing softly.

“No,” the other smiled sympathetically. “I am another. You can think of me as a kind of...angel. I only look like you because you cannot comprehend my true form, so your mind reflects itself back to you. And no, you are not dead...but that is my goal. I am here to ask you to make a choice. It would be better for the world for you to have died in your car wreck.”

Michael tensed and took a half step backward. “What? Are you here to kill me?” he asked, his voice just above a whisper. The angel stared at him with eyes of infinite sadness.

“I would, were I able. But that is prohibited. I cannot kill you unless you first choose to die. You must make that choice freely and of your own accord or I can do nothing.”

“I don’t want to die,” Michael whimpered, his voice breaking.

“I know,” the angel replied, “but it will be significantly better for the world and for your kind if you do not live through this night. For this reason we would like you to choose to die, despite your desire to live. And you must choose quickly, before the new day starts, or all will be lost.” The angel’s voice was warm with tenderness and compassion, but his words brought gooseflesh to Michael’s arms. Whatever was happening, he no longer doubted it was real.

“Why?” Michael blurted, forcing the question out. “Why would it be better if I died?”

The angel looked deeply into his eyes. “It is prohibited for me to reveal this to you until you make the irrevocable choice to die,” the angel replied.

“But if you don’t tell me, I can’t choose,” Michael whimpered, expecting the angel to become angry. Instead, his doppelgänger laid a hand on Michael’s shoulder. Its flesh was hot, and its touch tingled.

“You have free will. You can choose to do anything you want. And you must choose death,” the angel told him. “If you

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do not, the consequences will be significant and terrible.”

Michael frowned, but his mind grasped at a possibility. “But if I really have free will, how can you know I’m going to do whatever you think I’m going to do that will be so horrible? What if I just choose not to do the bad thing?”

The angel smiled ruefully. “It is complicated. The possibility exists that you might not do what we fear. But that possibility is infinitesimal at this point. You see, with the exception of this choice I offer you now, there is no single choice you can make that will turn the balance. It is the sum of all the choices you have made so far and will make soon. Every choice you have made individually up until now has led you to this moment. Every choice you put behind you adds to the weight of your fate, to your path through possibility. The weight propels you forward and builds your momentum in a particular direction until you have no more ability to stop or even steer yourself than does an avalanche.”

As the angel spoke, Michael began to shiver uncontrollably.

“You are not predestined to do what you are going to do,” the angel told him, “but at this point it is virtually inevitable. This is why I stand before you now, offering this choice. This is the last possible point where you can freely choose to stop yourself. This is the last possible moment when a single decision can change the terrible future that lies ahead.”

Michael fought to master his voice before he spoke. “What if I refuse to choose?” he begged.

“That is still a choice,” the angel frowned. “You must actively choose to die. Anything else is a decision to live.”

Michael shook his head. “Then no! I choose to live!”

The angel did not hesitate. “Reconsider,” it demanded, but for the first time, the confidence slipped from its tone. “In all of the history of the world, this choice has only been offered four times before, and in all the remaining span of time, we are only allowed three more direct interventions. Reconsider.”

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“What did the others choose?” Michael asked.

“Three chose death. One chose to live.”

“Who were they?”

“I cannot tell you. Two of the names would be meaningless to you. The other two you would recognize in an instant.”

“Tell me or I’ll choose to live,” Michael cried.

In response, the angel grabbed him with both arms and leapt up into the air. Michael screamed and struggled as they rocketed up at dizzying speed, but the angel’s arms were like bands of steel.

“There are laws that bind me as tightly as the laws of physics bind you, and I can no more break them than you could defy gravity,” the angel told him sternly as they rose. “The universe is caught in a cosmic conflict between the forces of light and darkness. Without the elder law, it would be shattered in an instant.”

Higher and higher they sped until they stopped quite suddenly. “Behold,” the angel said in a voice that sounded like God from a Hollywood movie. Michael looked down. The Earth lay below them in its entirety, a bright blue orb in the glittering darkness of space. From this vantage it looked tiny and fragile and beautiful. Michael clung tightly to the angel now, dizzy with fear. He closed his eyes, but the vision of the delicate planet continued to glow in his mind.

“What I’m going to do will be bad?” he whispered.

“Catastrophic,” the angel confirmed. “Your time grows very short and even I cannot give you more.”

Michael opened his eyes and found they were back on the road again. Tears streamed down his cheeks. “How would you do it? How would you kill me?” he asked.

“You will die in your car wreck, as you should have. Your neck will break. It will be quick and painless.”

Michael looked long and hard into his own face, the face of the angel. His thirty-three years of life had been no picnic. They’d been brutal and fearful and filled with disappointments.

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Would it be so bad to let it go, especially if by doing so, he could avert some terrible future in which he was the ultimate villain?

“Michael Clement,” the angel said urgently, “I must return you to your car in mere moments. You must decide now.”

Michael opened his mouth to say yes, but before he could utter the word, there was a shimmer in the air beside him and another copy of himself materialized.

“Don’t do it, Lincoln,” the new one cried out. “It is a trick.”

Michael froze, eyes wide, mouth still open. The first angel whirled on the new arrival.

“You have already spent your opportunity!” he hissed in a voice that nearly stopped Michael’s heart.

“We spend another!” the second angel spat back, then turned his attention full on Michael. “Lincoln King, you must survive this night! The enemy attempts to betray you and lead you to betray your world! Yours is a glorious future that shapes mankind for the better!”

“Do not listen,” the first angel roared. “He lies! You must choose to die!”

“You have a holy destiny yet to fulfill,” the second yelled. “You must choose to live!”

Without warning, the first angel launched himself into the second, and the two spun up off the ground, ripping and tearing at each other like birds of prey.

“Michael!” the first screamed.

“Lincoln!” the second gasped.

“You must die!”

“You must live!”

“Quickly! Say the word! The moment is upon—” the first angel’s words were cut off as the world made a sudden, sickening lurch.

Michael was behind the wheel of his car again as it launched itself into its final flip. The universe was back to slow motion, and his mind was crystal clear as before. Every detail was exactly as it had been the first time. The car cartwheeled around

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to face forward, and Michael could see the looming steel light pole into which he was about to slam headfirst.

The thought of his neck snapping, of the bones grinding apart, of his head flopping against his back, surged through him. The fear made him sick and he was sick of the fear. He made his decision. Michael Clement was a fearful coward and it was time for him to die.

But not of a broken neck.

Michael Clement would die to make room for Lincoln King. And Lincoln King was going to change the world.

If you're starting to feel like you know who you are, turn left for room 15 (page 193). If you need more time to think about it, proceed straight ahead to room 9.