

SCOTT JOHNSON

Half a World Away

FRIDAY.

"I'm not sure where I am."

"Why you're here, Kurt, in the Draining Room."

"What? How did I get here?"

"You've always been here. You've never left."

"But I saw her."

"You saw who?"

"Linda!"

"Kurt, you drained only eighteen minutes and you've been sleeping for thirty."

Kurt suddenly looks scared and worried as his eyes open wider. "Oh my God, did I drain...."

"Don't worry Kurt, you didn't drain anything of Linda."

The Drainer smiles down at him and pats him on the shoulder. Kurt sits up and wipes his sweating brow.

The room is large and grey. Several Drainers surround Kurt, who sits on the edge of the bed, the only thing besides themselves that occupies the big room.

"Do I get to go outside today?" asks Kurt.

"Today is Friday, Kurt; you can only go out on Sundays," says one of the Drainers.

"Oh yeah. But I thought today was...."

"Don't worry Kurt, only three more days." The Drainer pats him on the shoulder again as Kurt gets up off the bed. He starts walking away and he turns his head to look at a grey steel door. The only other door in the room besides the exit door which is at

the opposite side of the room. He lowers his head as he continues to walk to the exit.

"See you later, Kurt," the Drainers speak almost in sync.

Kurt grabs a tray and waits in line in the large cafeteria. There are tables and couches spread out over a rugged floor and the walls are white like in the Draining Room. Kurt moves up the line a couple of feet and then stops again.

"Hey Kurt, how'd the draining go?" says a man who startles Kurt from behind.

"The same as usual."

"How many minutes did you sell?" asks the man

"Twelve, I think."

The line moves again and they both follow.

"Anything interesting?"

"Nah, just me and some college buddies at a party getting drunk," says Kurt.

"So what'd they give you for it?"

Kurt turns to his friend with a disappointed look on his face.

"Five minutes."

"That's it?" the man looks down and shakes his head; "cheapies," he protests.

Kurt holds out his tray and a man slaps a spoonful of multi-coloured food on his plate.

"Dom, what's this oatmeal looking shit on my plate?" Kurt asks with a playful grin.

Dom, a fat, bearded man looks at Kurt with tired eyes.

"It's oatmeal looking shit," says Dom.

Kurt and his friend both laugh and walk away. They walk through the maze of couches and tables and sit at their usual table.

His friend is a tall, skinny man who looks to be about twenty-eight or twenty-nine. Kurt is a little shorter and has a good, strong physique and looks to be about the same age.

"So are you going out Sunday or are you saving?" asks his friend.

"No, I used up twenty-three minutes last Sunday, so I'm starting from scratch again."

Kurt looks sad after he says that and starts playing with his food. His friend looks at him with a cocky smile.

"I sold forty-three minutes just the other day."

Kurt looks up from his food with his mouth and eyes wide open.

"Forty-three minutes!"

"Yeah, and they gave me sixteen minutes for it," says his friend proudly.

"Ray, that's an awful lot to lose in one sitting; you could get yourself sent up for that."

"Ah don't worry, Kurt, I've got a good memory. I could've given them more but my Drainer stopped draining. I guess he felt he was doing me a favour."

"Well he *was* doing you a favour." Kurt looks back down at his food and takes some more into his mouth.

"What did you give 'em?" asks Kurt. Ray starts laughing uneasily.

"Well, I couldn't believe it when they told me what I had given them, it was so embarrassing. It was second year in college and me and a bunch of friends were at a party. This girl Cindy comes up to me and she's just wasted, right. So she takes my hand without saying a word and leads me to the basement. She sits me down on this workout bench and starts taking my...." Ray starts laughing again. "Anyway, to make a short story shorter," they both laugh together and he continues, "the only words she spoke to me were afterwards when she said that it was her first time."

"And they took it?" laughs Kurt.

"Are you kidding, they probably told me just so I could remember it for the next time."

"Wait, you said that you gave up forty-three minutes," Kurt interrupts.

"Well, the actual party before she took me downstairs was forty minutes."

They both laugh what little laughing is left in them.

"Wow, good memory Ray."

"That's what my Drainer told me."

The two of them continue to eat their food quietly. The expressions on their faces do not show much enthusiasm for Dom's cooking.

"So did you get to see Linda last Sunday?" asks Ray.

"No, actually I went to see...."

The whole cafeteria is interrupted as the steel entrance doors swing open with a loud bang. An older man is led in by two Drainers. The man looks small and frail and is crying as the Drainers let go of his arms. He starts to run frantically through the maze of tables and couches, looking around like a child lost in a mall.

"Amber!" the man shouts, almost tripping over a chair. "Amber!" he shouts again.

Kurt and Ray watch quietly as the man runs madly through the cafeteria. An elderly woman sitting alone at the table behind Kurt and Ray stands up. She is crying quietly to herself already.

"Alex!" she shouts out. The old man stops in his tracks and spots Amber standing up at her table near the back. She puts her hands to her mouth as if realizing something.

"Oh Alex," she says. Alex reaches her and they hug and kiss.

"I'm sorry my love, but I'm done, I haven't any left. I'm being sent up, my sweet angel."

"Oh Alex, I miss you already," cries Amber.

"I have sixteen minutes, use them and go see our grandchildren," says Alex. He hugs her one more time and walks away slowly, still looking at her.

"Don't worry my love, it will be beautiful. It will be everything we've ever imagined," he says.

"I love you," she says, still crying.

"I'll be waiting for you," he says.

He walks back to the entrance where the Drainers wait for him. One of them puts his arm around him and the other pats him on the shoulder. They exit through the steel doors and the doors close shut with a loud bang that echoes through the cafeteria. Amber sits down and wipes the tears from her face. Kurt and Ray continue to eat their meals quietly.

The corridors and rooms are filled with people walking, talking and playing. Kurt walks down the corridor saying hi to people as they say hi to him. He walks over to a crowd of people who are standing in a circle cheering and raising their fists. He gets within the crowd of people to see two large men wrestling. The muscular, bald one pins down the heavy one. A little kid enters the circle on his hands and knees and gives a three count. The bald man stands up with a victorious smile. The other wrestler gets up and the two shake hands and hug. They both look to the little kid and shake his hand too. Kurt continues to walk through the corridor. Two people seem to be in some sort of debate while two others throw dice against the wall. Kurt turns into a room where a round table sits, occupied by Kurt's friend Ray and two other guys.

"Hey Kurt, we almost gave up on you," says one of the men. He is young like Kurt and Ray.

"Ah come on guys, you know I never miss a game."

"Your money is all set up for you, but since you were the last to show up, you get stuck with the thimble."

"What happened to the rest of the pieces?" asks Kurt with a surprised look.

"Harry's dog ate them," says Ray with a chuckle.

"What? How many of them?"

"Three, including the car," says Ray.

Kurt looks at one of them and asks, "So where is Brando *now*, Harry?"

Harry is an older man with grey hair and is wearing a dinner-jacket and smoking a pipe.

"Oh, he's around somewhere." He looks at Kurt as if he knows what he's thinking.

"Oh come on Kurt, relax. It's not as if he can die or anything," says the other man.

Ray grabs the dice from the board and places them on the table in front of Harry.

"Okay Harry, you roll first."

Harry rolls the dice and moves his piece up the board. The man beside Harry grabs the dice and says, "Hey, did you guys hear about old man Alex?"

"Yeah, me and Kurt were there," says Ray as he grabs the dice.

"You were? Was his wife freaking out?" asks the man.

"No, of course not. What is there to freak out about? I mean, she was crying, but she was generally happy," says Ray.

"Us old ones have to watch it," says Harry.

"Hey Nick, didn't Alex's brother bunk with you before he got sent up?" asks Ray of the man sitting beside Harry.

"Yeah, he was a crazy one. He sold everything before he got sent up. Just like Alex did." Kurt looks up at Nick with a surprised look on his face.

"What? He didn't hold onto any of it?" Kurt asks.

"Not one second." says Nick.

"Wow, I'd never leave empty-handed," says Kurt.

"Yeah, but could you just decide to leave on your own terms knowing that you would not be able to go outside ever again?" asks Nick.

"Do you guys remember a young girl coming in here named Leanne?"

The guys look at Ray, silently waiting for him to continue as he moves his piece up the board.

"Oh, I'll buy that." Ray puts money in the bank and shuffles through a stack of cards.

"Anyway, Leanne was twenty-one when she arrived here and she left right away. She requested to be sent up the second she got here and held onto all of it," says Ray.

"That's what happens when you arrive young; you haven't got a lot to give away. Your best parts take place when you're that age," says Nick. Ray agrees, nodding his head.

"Anyone give anything away that they regret?" asks Nick. Kurt looks around the room waiting for someone to reply but he decides not to give anyone the chance.

"I did once." They all look at Kurt.

"It was my first time and I wasn't sure how it worked," Kurt lets out a big sigh and then continues. "Anyway, I gave them a piece of Linda and me in Australia." Ray looks at Kurt with a surprised look.

"You gave them a piece of Linda?" he asks.

"It was only three minutes. My Drainer said something about us walking through a park in Sydney or something."

"I'll never give 'em anything of Judy and me," says Nick.

"Seriously?" Harry asks as he looks at Nick.

"I'm still getting rid of my marriage to Gwen. A little bit at a time," says Harry. Ray starts to laugh as if he knows something the rest don't know and Kurt looks on curiously.

"I'll only keep one part of our marriage."

"What's that?" asks Kurt.

"The day I caught her in bed with what's her name."

Ray lets out a loud belly laugh, no longer able to hold it in.

"What's her name?" repeats Kurt. They all start to laugh, especially Harry.

"So why are you keeping that one?" Kurt asks.

"Maybe it will convince them to send her *down* when she arrives," says Harry kind of angrily, but still laughing.

"Ah come on, they don't do that," says Kurt.

"Ah, they don't tell you that they do that, but I bet they do. I mean, come on Kurt, do you think they would tell you if they did, and cause a major panic in this place? Besides, the Drainers don't have a say in it anyway, they just open the door." Kurt grabs the dice and starts to roll, but Harry is still staring him down.

"The fact is we won't know until we're there." Harry finishes and it's all quiet as they continue to play. Harry grabs the dice after Kurt moves his piece and rolls them. He moves his little metal horse up the board.

"Anyone own this?" No one says anything and he cheerfully counts out some of his money.

"Then it's mine."

Saturday.

Kurt lies in bed in the darkness of his room. He can hear Ray snoring from the other end of the room. Kurt gets up and walks to the bathroom. He turns the light on and leaves the door open a crack. He stands in front of the mirror and splashes water on his face.

Suddenly he can hear the door of their room open and footsteps entering the room. Kurt moves to the door and peeks out. He can see a Drainer sit down on the edge of Ray's bed. The Drainer puts a gentle hand on Ray's shoulder.

"Ray, Ray. Wake up Ray," says the Drainer softly as Ray slowly opens his eyes from his sleep. He looks at the Drainer as he rubs his eyes.

"It's time Ray, it's Saturday." The Drainer smiles at Ray, who smiles back looking more awake and excited.

"Just come down when you're ready; we've got it all set up." As the Drainer gets up to leave, he pats Ray on the shoulder. Kurt watches on as Ray turns on his back and stares at the ceiling. Kurt quietly closes the bathroom door completely and looks in the mirror.

"Soon Linda, just one more day," he says to himself quietly and then splashes more water on his face. He grabs a towel and dries his face. He puts it back up on its hook and walks out.

"Hey Ray, I just heard the good nn...." Kurt could've finished what he was going to say, but Ray had already left.

Kurt leaves his room and walks down the corridor. The corridors are again filled with people talking and playing. People say hi to him and he says hi back. He turns the corner and notices Harry sitting on the floor with his back to the wall and listening to his Walkman. Harry spots Kurt coming towards him and slides his headphones off his ears.

"Hey there Kurt buddy."

“Hey Harry, what’s up?” Kurt sits himself down beside Harry.

“Nothing much, where’s Ray?”

“It’s Saturday, where do you think he is?” says Kurt with a touch of annoyance.

“Oh yeah, good for him.”

“Yeah.” Kurt lowers his head and then looks around as if trying to hide his face from Harry.

“Hey, hang in there buddy, tomorrow’s your day.” Kurt looks at Harry with a smile and then looks away again.

“Are you goin’?” asks Harry.

“I don’t know, I’ve only got five minutes so I might decide to save.”

“Are you playing tonight?”

“Yeah, I’m playing,” says Kurt.

Kurt looks over at Harry, who already has his headphones back on and is tapping his feet to the music. Kurt smiles, shaking his head, and turns to look down the corridor. A young boy and girl play catch with a tennis ball.

“Hey Ray!” Harry shouts out and Kurt is startled as he jerks his head and through the crowd of people emerges Ray. He has his head down and his hands in his pockets. Ray walks by without noticing them.

“Hey, Ray ... Ray!” shouts Harry.

Ray finally turns his head and nods, but keeps on walking.

“Ray?” Kurt says. Ray turns his head back and looks at Kurt.

“Kurt, are you going tomorrow?” Ray asks. Kurt looks puzzled and shrugs his shoulders.

“I don’t know yet,” Kurt calls out as Ray turns back and keeps walking. He rounds the corner and disappears out of sight.

“What’s wrong with him?” Harry shouts through the loud music. Kurt gets up onto his feet.

“Harry, I’ll see you tonight.” He heads down the corridor and starts running.

“Yeah, don’t forget about the game,” shouts Harry, but Kurt is already gone and Harry continues to tap his feet to the music.

Ray lies on his bed, staring up at the ceiling with his arms folded across his chest. The door opens and Kurt steps in.

“Ray, what happened buddy?”

“I requested to be sent up, I leave tomorrow.”

“What? Why? What’s wrong?” asks a concerned Kurt. Ray lets out a sigh and rolls over on his side.

"It's Connie, she's met somebody, she's with somebody now." Kurt looks at him with a sympathetic grin.

"I mean, I always wished this for her: to be happy and move on with her life. But now that I've seen it, it's just not the same anymore." Ray turns over on his back again and looks at Kurt.

"What did you do when Linda started seeing that shrink?"

"Doctor, he was a doctor," Kurt corrects him.

"Whatever."

"Well it was hard at first, but I kept telling myself that it was what I wanted for her. It didn't last long and before I knew it she was on her own again and that made me feel even more sad." Kurt finishes with a sigh as if thinking back to that time.

"Yeah, I know what you mean, but I think it's my cue to let go. I just got to let go, Kurt." Kurt turns his face away from Ray.

"Yeah, I'm sure one day I'll be able to let go."

"Well, whenever you decide, I'll be up there waiting." Kurt turns back around to Ray with a smile and a tear already halfway down his face.

"Thanks buddy."

Sunday.

Kurt walks down the corridor. He notices Harry in the same spot as yesterday, listening to his Walkman and tapping his feet.

"Hey Kurt, have a good one," Harry shouts out as Kurt walks by him.

"Thanks Harry, I'll see ya in a little bit." Kurt turns around the corner and people notice him as he nods and says hi.

"Have a good one, Kurt," says one person.

"Hey Kurt, have a good one pal," says another.

He turns another corner and walks down a set of stairs. At the bottom of the stairs stand two Drainers in front of a door.

"Hi Kurt."

"Hi guys." The Drainers open the door for him.

"Have a good one."

"Thanks." Kurt walks through the doors and enters the large room. In the middle of the room is a bed and a Drainer who stands beside it.

"Hey Kurt." Kurt turns around and Ray is in the room and walks towards Kurt.

"Hey Ray, are you leaving already?" Kurt asks with surprise in his voice.

"Yep, all set to go," Ray says with anticipation.

"Are you scared?" Kurt asks.

"No, I'm sure it's beautiful," says Ray, full of confidence.

"Are you gonna see Linda today?" asks Ray.

"Yeah."

"Well, have a good one buddy."

"Thanks Ray. So I guess I'll see ya when I see ya," Kurt says with a sad sigh. Ray extends his hand and Kurt grabs it and they shake. A Drainer calls out to Ray.

"Ray, we're ready when you are." Ray turns to the Drainer and then back at Kurt with a strong look in his eyes.

"Kurt, hold on, you have no reason to let go. Hold on for as long as your heart allows and enjoy every minute out there." Kurt looks at him with a smile and a tear.

"I will." The two of them hug and pat each other on the back. They break and Ray starts walking toward the other end of the room where the grey, steel door waits for him.

"Thanks Ray," calls out a Drainer.

"Yeah, thanks Ray," says another. Two Drainers escort him to the door. One pats him on the back and the other shakes his hand.

"Thanks Ray, we appreciate everything. We won't forget you Ray. It was a good life."

The door opens and Kurt still stands in his spot at the far end of the room watching. Ray slowly walks to the open door.

"Bye Ray, thank you," say two other Drainers. Before he leaves he turns to the Drainers.

"No, thank you." Ray walks through the door and disappears as it closes behind him. Kurt looks on in astonishment.

"Kurt." A Drainer catches him off guard as he places his hand gently on Kurt's shoulder and leads him to the bed.

"We're ready now." Kurt steps up on the bed and lies down on his back.

"Are you ready?" asks the Drainer. Kurt looks up at the Drainer and smiles.

"I'm ready." The Drainer hovers over him.

"Have a good one," says the Drainer. Kurt closes his eyes in anticipation.

"I will."