



# Dying for the Record

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—By A.J. Ponder

My ears are assaulted by a thin whine, and my eyes struggle open against the painfully bright light. The disorientation lasts a moment longer as everything feels and smells like sunlight and sandpaper all at once. At least the bits that aren't numb.

Still, I've been here too many times not to recognise the sight of crisp white sheets folded neatly over the blanket.

I'm back in hospital. Again.

So, it didn't work then, I think sadly as the doctor approaches.

It's Helen, so I smile. "Hells, you saved me again. You shouldn't have."

Helen shakes her head. I love to see her disapproval; somehow it makes all my visits to the hospital worthwhile. Even so, I'd rather see her smile.

All doctor, Helen smooths back a renegade blonde tendril of hair, and taps her temple implant to show she's recording our conversation. "So, what's the last thing you remember?"

"Well, I was about to hit the ground, and I thought, 'I made it this time, for sure.'" A laugh escapes me. Immediately I regret it, too many people think I'm mad already.

She frowns. "So you think this dare-devil behaviour is funny?"

"Don't put words in my mouth, Doc," I reply with a grin. Silently thanking her because we both know her question gives me an opportunity to prove my sanity. The last thing I need is to go to the nut house. Or be forced to take medication.

"You know, Hells, I really thought everything would work this time."

She grimaced. "You did make a terrible mess."

"Is that your professional diagnosis?" I ask cheekily.

"Mr Johansen. The professional version would take all day and most of the night. I could show you the pictures if you like. The bottom of Mt Cook has never been so...colourful."

I look at Helen. Really look. Her face isn't as rosy as usual and she has a kind of pinched red-eyed sleeplessness about her. But I still love her. If I hadn't been so driven, maybe we could have made it work. Maybe. And maybe it's not so very terrible that I'd failed again. One more chance to say goodbye properly. "Doc?" I start to say, and she flinches.

Something is wrong.

The bedclothes are pressing down, and I'm acutely aware of how they feel on my chest, but my legs still feel wooden, like they're not really mine.

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I try to move them. Nothing. Maybe she didn't manage to save quite all of me this time. She's been warning me of the possibility of paralysis for years. I thought they were empty threats.

My heart thuds.

Not existing is one thing -- I'd reconciled myself to that aspect of my aspirations long ago, but being paralysed would ruin everything. My chest constricts, and so does everything else --

Another thud.

Again I try to move my feet, and finally my big toe wriggles under the covers, and then my legs are moving again. A little clumsy, but still there.

"Piri," Helen says into my concentrated silence, her hand reaching out for mine. "If it wasn't for you, I'd have retired to some tropical island."

My breath catches. When she calls me 'Piri,' it reminds me of when we first met at the top of the university physics building. A popular place to hang out because of the man-made waterfall crashing down one wall. Thrill-seekers loved to leap off the roof, loudly admiring the view as they fell to the churning water below.

I wasn't there so much because it was cool, or even because I enjoyed jumping, although I did. No, I was there because I was a physics major and wannabe inventor desperate to discover something, invent something. Anything. Helen was part of the, oh so mysterious and exclusive, Glory Club. Much younger than the rest of them, she was dazzling, with a way of talking, of being, that was fresh and clean as morning sunlight. It was obvious she was generation zed, or "the baby gen" as everyone else so delightfully calls us. Anyway she smiled at me as if she didn't notice I was all elbows and thumbs, the corner of her eyes crinkling as she pulled on her smoke. It was pretty obvious she was trying hard to emulate an uber-cool twentieth-century movie star.

"Hi," I said, "I'm Piri."

"Piri," she repeated, as if Piri wasn't the dorkiest name on the planet. A moment later she landed the telling blow. "Isn't Piri a girl's name?"

"You're so hundreds of years out of date," I quipped.

"I know," she said; grin wider than ever as she pretended to watch some show-off plummet bare-arse naked from the building. He screamed all the way down the gravity well and into the surf where his personal integrity field activated and he bounced up off the rocks below with an ungainliness that suggested he was a first timer.

Helen's friend -- some top-notch cop who wouldn't normally be seen dead talking to the likes of me -- winked. "Helen thinks the twentieth century was the golden age, that's why she inflicts those cancer-sticks on everyone."

"Smokes don't give you cancer," Helen and I blurted in unexpected unison. Then she added, "Not for centuries." We looked at each other. Maybe it was just a generational thing, but just for a moment it felt like a real connection and I almost said, "Hey, you're the cutest, smartest girl I've ever met -- marry me."

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Hesitation killed the moment and soon after she disappeared and nobody could tell me where she'd gone. Although her fellow medical students were happy to tell me she was an oddball obsessed with nanos as well as completely historical pursuits like obstetrics and surgery. I mean really? There hasn't been a baby for a hundred years, and as for cutting people up with knives - where do I start? Anyway after she left I threw myself into work, even trying my hand at biophysics and later the practical uses of biophysical systems. Still, nothing I did was new. Every theory, every experiment, every opportunity started full of promise, but on careful investigation my experimental hypotheses had all been proved or disproved long before. My dreams of generating cutting edge science were quickly being relegated to replicating tired old experiments on the off chance of discovering anomalies -- so I quit my research job and focussed on invention. Specifically the one thing everybody told me was impossible. I set out to prove it was still possible to die.

Two years later I woke from my first coma -- and Helen was there she was by the hospital bed, Helen, a fully trained doctor. She was very prim and professional as she told me off.

I apologised profusely for upsetting her and she accepted my apology, so long as I "never tried to do anything quite so suicidal ever again.

"Can't, Doc," I told her, with a rueful smile so far from believable she laughed.

"Why?"

"Have to have my bit of excitement. It's the only way I know I'm alive."

And strangely enough, even as we were arguing about my obsession, that's when we hit it off. I tried to explain why I was so keen to prove that I could circumvent the brightest minds alive while she talked about the sanctity of life and the difficulties of doctoring in the twentieth century -- from the dangers of surgery and giving birth, to their primitive understanding of germ theory, nutrition, and of course their complete lack of nanos, she made it all seem so ridiculous and brave and pioneering all at the same time. "Now of course the job is much easier," she said with a sad shrug of her shoulders. "Mostly it's nothing more than organising supplements or correctional nano meds. Sometimes I wish -- I wish there was more."

Aha, I thought, you're bored. Being a doctor wasn't stretching your intellect or abilities - and I began to suspect my "accident" had come as an almost welcome diversion. In the half-century or so since then, my little experiments ensured we met up every few weeks or so. Each time she'd say, "Piri, how about you give this obsession of yours a rest for a bit." And each time she seemed to mean it a little more than the last.

Back in the hospital I'm asleep, or mostly so. I hear crying, and then Mum barges in. Not my real mum of course - my birth mum deliberately damaged her personal integrity shield in order to conceive. She knew her actions would invoke the Population in Balance Law, but she was feisty enough not to care. Clearly telling everyone exactly what she thought of their precious law and their PIS suits right up until the judge came for her. When my adoptive mum talks about it, sometimes, just

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sometimes, I think she is jealous. Then she explains why it was necessary to kill my mother without a trial -- but my catatonic great-grandmother must be kept alive at all costs.

“Stupid boy,” Mum says and bursts into floods of tears. “How can you die when you’ve never lived?”

I’ve lived longer than most people in Helen’s beloved Twentieth Century, and still she calls me “boy!” But there’s no point starting that conversation. No, the only thing that will make her happy are lies. I can’t bring myself to do that to her, so I pretend to sleep until she rushes out the door on some vital errand to save her bridge evening.

As soon as she’s gone, Helen emerges from her office and sits down beside the bed. She’s wearing her inscrutable doctor face, complete with folded hands, and I can’t help it. Maybe it’s the drugs, or the stress, or something, but after all these years, after all the times I’ve visited her at one hospital or another -- and even though I know our relationships never work -- the words slip out. “I love you.”

She takes my hand. And puts it back down again. “And you still keep trying to kill yourself. Why?”

I want to tell her I only do it to see her. But that’s a lie. “You know why. Don’t you think it would be wonderful if I made it, if I became the first person in more than a century to actually die? You know, not everybody wants this...this...” I shake my head as words fail me.

Helen opens her mouth, closes it, and opens it again. Bizarrely it reminds me of the goldfish at the zoo. At last she speaks, her eyes planted on the floor. “There are some people here to see you.” I can tell by her tone, hell by her whole posture that I will not like these people. Not at all.

“What people?” I say, resigning myself to yet another visit from the Corrections Department, or worse still, the Ministry of Social Wellbeing. You’d be surprised how many government agencies have the time and inclination to endeavour to put an end to my studies the only way they can -- by declaring me a public nuisance, a danger, or insane.

“I-” Helen closes her eyes and licks her lips, and I wonder how serious this little visit is going to be. Can they really stop me from doing my experiments? I’ve made my anti Personal Integrity Shield Kit as safe for others as possible. From the gravitational correction device to the electromagnetic field and nano disruptors they all need fingerprint activation and have multiple redundancy shut-down protocols in the event of other people being in the same hundred meters. With a little time I guess that could be adjusted. But not accidentally. They would have to know what they were doing, and they’d have to have my live finger. Surely that was enough? Even for the interfering busybodies at the Ministry of Social Wellbeing.

“It’ll be fine,” I mumble with a reassurance I’m not sure I believe. “No-one can do anything to me, not unless I’m a danger to others, and you know what I’m like. I don’t want anyone else stealing my glory. Besides, my work could potentially save

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lives. That has to be in my favour.”

Frowning, she turns her head away from me. “I’m your doctor,” she starts. “And...well, I can’t lie...” She pauses, and I wonder what the hell is going on. What could be so terrible that she’d be too frightened to tell me?

She sighs. “The truth is these people are only interested in you because you are dead. I mean, you died.”

“What?!”

“You died on that mountain. I had to pull together the marmalade that was your brain and build a clone. You not only have a completely new body, but you’ve hardly lost any memory at all. You can thank the electromagnetic imaging unit for that.”

“I died? That’s awesome, you always said...”

She bites her lip, and I want to say something, but the whole thing is just too unreal. I’m in territory I never knew even existed. Her jaw moves -- but sticks half open as heavy footsteps barrel down the corridor.

“Piri, I should have said something earlier. I’ve always had this obsession with life in the twentieth century. But when I di...”

The door bursts open and two corrections department officials traipse in, followed by half a dozen police officers, some guys from search and rescue, and a whole bunch of people I vaguely recognize from Helen’s Glory Club, including a judge.

That can’t be good.

They all look very serious and formal as the judge walks right up to me and claps his hand down on my newly reconstituted shoulder. I flinch as he says “Piri.”

I’m expecting him to say, “You’re under arrest.” But he doesn’t. What he actually says is even more shocking. “Congratulations, you’ve made it at last. Welcome to the Glory Club.” The others all cheer. Suddenly they’re grabbing drinks from a wall cabinet and raising their glasses in a toast -- even as the horrible realization continues, ever so slowly, to dawn.

“Death and glory, mate. Death and glory,” they shout, thumping my newly reconstituted shoulder with a bit more force than is actually comfortable.

I smile weakly. Surely this is some horrible joke?

“By the way,” a police officer says -- no, not just any police officer -- this is the Chief of Police and the man’s smiling with a bonhomie that I just can’t reciprocate. Not right now.

“I recognize that look on your face, fellow glory-hound, I truly do,” he says. “And so if it’s the record you’re after, as I suspect you are, then currently I’m the most dead at four-”

Somebody coughs loudly.

The Chief of Police rolls his eyes. “-but club rules are you can’t go the same way twice. So only three of those times make the official count. Still, that tops everybody else.” He laughs heartily at his own terrible joke. The rest of the Glory

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Club make a good-natured effort to chuckle, well everyone except Helen, who is glaring at him.

“Doc here, of course, doesn’t approve,” the judge says with a grin. “Apparently she’s too fascinated by life, which is why, I guess, she’s only managed the once -- and that was by accident.”

“By accident?” I whisper. There were, and are, so many safety systems... and she’d done it by accident. Bad enough there’s a club of people who have made it before me, but the girl I loved, still love, died before I did -- without even trying. Without wanting to. It all seems so unfair.

“How?”

“Experimental nanos.” The Chief shakes his head. “Such a terrible waste, what with her believing all that twentieth century mumbo-jumbo about souls and the sanctity of life. Anyway, have another drink.”

Numbly I hold a glass out.

“To Doc,” the Chief roars, even though Helen clearly hates this. “Thanks for letting us have these private little gatherings, and for keeping everything on the hush-hush. We don’t want anyone slipping into our little club too easily now, do we?” Shouts of, “Hear, hear!” echo around the room, almost masking the sound of thin pitched crying as Helen slips out the door.

The Chief doesn’t seem to notice as he holds up his glass again. “Yes, Helen’s the best damn physician we’ve ever had. And she always worked especially hard on you, like she had a fever. I swear that without her, you’d have died at least three times by now.”

“Helen? Helen!” the judge roars, throwing up his hands in exasperation. A rescue worker points to the door she just exited and the judge rushes after her. “Helen, just enjoy the moment for once. Please.”

There is no answer, only demanding, insistent sobs.

“Oh, my god!” The chief of police shouts. “What have you done?”

Everyone seems frozen in horror as I force myself out of bed one step at a time. Someone grabs my arm, a search and rescue worker. “Still wobbly, huh?” she says, with a look that says, “yup I’ve been through that before.” And somehow it helps -- even though a part of me is raging mad. How could nobody have said anything?

I make it to the room where Helen is crying. No, she’s not crying, something else is. A doll-like thing is thrashing its limbs violently in some sort of sealed chamber.

“What the hell did you do this for?” says the judge, pushing his way further into the room. He taps his neural implant and curses loudly, as if the thing is hurting him. “You know the penalty?” he says at last. His voice flat, like it’s not even him that’s speaking.

Helen nods, tears streaming down her face. She looks past the judge. “It’s yours, Piri. I couldn’t have done it without -- not without everything you did.”

“I’m sorry too,” says the judge. “I have been informed...I must invoke the

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Population in Balance Law of twenty ninety-two.”

She doesn't even look surprised as the man raises his hand like an old-world gun.

“No!” I stumble forward to shield Helen -- too late. Helen staggers backwards, her shield flaring brightly -- from the inside.

Disbelief seizes me as nothing more than a translucent skin hits the ground. Even so there's a part of me wants to know exactly what is happening. I hate that part of me. That part doesn't matter any more. What matters now is that Helen found my personal integrity field disruptor and used it in order to conceive. She must have.

And that means it's my fault I'll never wake up to see her face again. I feel physically ill as the Chief of Police turns around to the stunned onlookers of the Glory Club and mutters, “I'm not sure -- should real death count more than once?”

“I don't think that was the achievement she was after,” I say bitterly as the first baby for over a century wails louder than ever.