

N.A.I.D.

“Rhino, elephant, or hippo?” said the woman behind the desk.

Two ahead of Stogen, the patient made his selection. “Hippo, I think. I heard they make it quick.” The patient trembled, his thin legs trembling like pencils in pipelines.

The woman looked at the patient for the first time. His pants ballooned around him, but she took no notice. Instead, the clerk removed her glasses to remove a stain on the lens with the hem of her shirt. She sighed. “They *can*. Sometimes within seconds, but not always. We did have a patient who was finished off by the vultures when the hippo swam away after biting him. He bled out for a while. The crocs would’ve gotten him but they took a baby impala before that so they weren’t really hungry right then. What can you do, you know?” She shrugged.

“That must have been terrible!” the patient cried.

“It’s what he signed up for,” the woman said. “Besides, it’s still natural whether a hippo does it or a vulture. And think of the experience! The sun. The weather. The animals. You don’t get that every day, now, do you?”

“I suppose not,” said the patient.

“Who could say they spent their last minutes in Africa, surrounded by all that majesty and beauty?”

*No one could say that, Stogen thought. Because they’d be dead.*

“Anyway, the hippo’s quick. Don’t get a death more instant than that, if you want it natural.”

“The hippo, then,” said the patient, a little more confidently.

The intake clerk clicked a single key on her computer, then said, “Hippo it is. We wish you a happy, satisfying death.” She waved him away with the swat of her hand. “Move along now. Next!”

A wheelchair-bound woman no more than twenty rolled forward to take the hippo-man’s place, but now she turned to Stogen, who had begun to sweat. “I thought I could do this, you know? I thought this was the right thing, but now I’m not sure. I mean, a *hippo*? My god, what was he thinking? And now we’re all here and it’s like picking a hairstyle out of a magazine, all packaged to make it look better, but I don’t know. I don’t know. It’s never the same as what you want it to be. Never. And I don’t even know what I want. How can I? I’ve never done it before. And if I chose the wrong thing, I can’t go back. Oh my god. What are *you* going to do?” She clutched Stogen’s fingers as if they could save her from whatever ailment had disabled her. Worse, she clutched Stogen as if he could tell her what to do and that whatever he said would be the right thing.

Panic seized him. His throat crackled and he coughed out mumbling reassurances he himself did not feel.

“Hurry up,” ordered the clerk. “We don’t have all day.”

The line behind Stogen had grown to hundreds, all in a hurry. They made dramatic glances at watches. A frustrated sigh slithered down the line, gathering in volume, so that those at the tail end of it shouted their impatience.

The clerk glared at the woman in the wheelchair.

"I just need a minute," said the woman. "Let him go ahead of me." She pointed not at Stogen but at the much younger man behind him wearing headphones, humming to an old rock tune Stogen recalled from his own youth.

The kid, for he was not much more than that, paused the music and pulled the silver globes off his ears. "Thanks," he said to the woman in the wheelchair. "Peace and all that." He scratched his head with a finger. Sniffed the air. Chewed invisible gum. He leaned on the clerk's desk. "What are my choices again? Animals and?"

The clerk gritted her teeth and stood. She called out to the crowd. "Please, people. Have your selections ready. We have a list a mile long and indecisiveness hurts everyone. Please read the menu before you reach triage. For those of you who can't see the board, brochures and QR menus are available, brought to you by our sponsors, Transport Canada and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Working hard to give you a better commute and affordable housing, one step at a time. Let's give them around of applause!" Her arms flapped wildly to a smattering of unenthusiastic applause.

"I'll clap when they lower taxes," complained the man behind Stogen in combat uniform. He was missing a leg but otherwise seemed perfectly healthy. "You work so hard and for what? They just take everything from you anyway. Can't live like that." Stogen glanced at the amputee's nametag. *Rapio*, it read. Rapio stamped his crutches against the floor, then said again, "We can't live like that!"

"Or feed our children!" agreed a woman several people back. She, too, was thin like the hippo man, but had a grey face not unlike that of a spoiled fish. Several ragged children clung to her feet.

"See what you started?" growled the clerk. She glared at the headphone kid, then thrust a finger at the sign above her head.

There, in letters two feet high and spanning the length of the room, read: Natural Assistance In Dying. Below this, in smaller letters: *From M to N, One Letter Makes All The Difference*. The message was flanked by bubbles promoting such messages as *Go Out In Style!* and *Do It For Your Country!* and *Let Nature Take Its Course!* and *Die for Free!* Between the bubbles in a column the height of a man, were the options: *Animals, Weather Systems, Extreme Sport, and Psychopaths, along with subcategories of each.*

Headphone kid said, "Psychopaths aren't natural, are they? That'd be murder."

The clerk resigned herself to another lengthy explanation. "Psychopaths *are* a natural way to go Mr—?"

"Uh, sorry, it's Lucas Brently, with a Y. Just Luke, though."

“Okay, Mr. Brently, you see, psychopaths are human, no?”

“Uh-huh,” said Luke, warily.

“And they require chemical treatment to make them sane. You see where I’m going with this?”

“Uh . . .”

“If they don’t treat the psychopaths, it’s natural if they kill you,” said Rapio helpfully. “There were lots of ‘em in Bosnia. You just gotta know how to deal with them.” He thumbed the trigger of his finger gun, then blew the muzzle, wobbling slightly when one of his crutches left the floor.

“Ah!” said Luke. “Not sure that one’s for me. Let’s see . . . weather events, no . . . animals, definitely not. What about extreme sports? Do I get to pick which one?”

The clerk smiled. “A popular choice, Mr. Brently. Yes. There are many selections within all our categories, the ones on the board are just the most popular. Now, there’s the Barkley Marathon — it’s a hundred and twenty mile race with an almost twenty thousand meters of elevation gain. These numbers are estimates, understand, and you’ll compete with absolutely no training, of course. Participants in this one usually go quite quickly with a nice and tidy heart attack, but sometimes dehydration. That’s a killer. Or there’s the . . . let’s see . . . you can try your time at big wave surfing — I heard that one’s quite refreshing when you can breathe. Oh! You look like a heliskier. Ever try it?”

Luke shook his head.

“Excellent!” said the clerk.

“But I don’t think I like the cold,” said Luke. “I’ll go with the marathon. Always wanted to try running.”

The clerk nodded, pressed a button, then bellowed, “Next!”

The woman in the wheelchair squeezed his hand. She said desperately, “I’m Amanda. If you know my name, at least I’ll be remembered until you . . . you . . . you know. Why are *you* doing this anyway? You look perfectly fine. You don’t look hungry.”

“I’m not,” admitted Stogen, who had a well-paying job that he quite enjoyed.

“And you’re not sick?”

Stogen shook his head. “Not to my knowledge.”

Amanda narrowed her eyes. “Married? Wife left you? I heard there’s a lot of people that — *you know* — when that happens.”

“Yes and no,” said Stogen. “I have a nice wife and she still loves me and I still love her.”

“Then why?”

“Please,” said the clerk. “If you all make your selections in a timely manner . . .”

Amanda spun and blazed at the clerk. “How could you? He’s not supposed to be here and you’re forcing him.”

“It’s your *turn*,” glowered the clerk. “He’s not the one stalling, and we don’t force anyone to do anything at N.A.I.D. The decision is yours; we just let mother nature take her course so that everyone benefits.”

“How does everyone benefit?” argued Amanda. “Weather? How does dying in a hurricane benefit anyone, huh? Or frozen on top of Mount Everest? I heard about that guy. He’s still frozen up there. What good does that do anyone? Or being killed by a psychopath? I mean, I get not being all sad and sour in a room with drugs being pumped into your system while everyone cries over your slowing heart, but why to any of it at all? Why don’t we just let it be? Isn’t that how it’s supposed to be?”

The frustrated crowd gathered to listen.

“Yeah, why?” shouted a woman further down the line.

“Tell us!”

“Y-you don’t have to be here,” the clerk mumbled. “You have a choice, of course.”

It was Rapio who said, “Do we really, though? You feed us drugs because you think it’s unkind to lock us up for doing them. What does that do? Creates more addicts, which you want, right? Whether we die with your little computer system here or die on the streets, it’s the same. If we’re not *here*, well, damn it if suddenly our emergency rooms aren’t full anymore. There’s one problem solved. How’s that for psychological warfare, huh?” He tapped his temple. “And if we don’t do drugs, then you get us on taxes.”

“Or equalization payments!” hollered a man behind Rapio. “We’re screwed no matter what we do. Work hard all our life and they just send our money out east, that’s what it is, and we have no say in anything. What’s the point of living?” Several people shouted their agreement.

A frail old woman raised her cane. She said in a heavy accent, “I don’t knoo about the paeements, but I know about incompetence. May-bee the money you send us would be enough if we got our sheet together. May-bee not. The reech just take more, anee-way. Put mee down for psychopath, please. Eeef I’m going to be throttled, at least ‘e won’t get my mon-ee.” She stepped out of line and said, “Anne-Marie Polin! I look forward to a satisfying death.” She shuffled slowly away on teetering, arthritic hips.

The clerk entered Anne-Marie Polin’s choice and said, “Next!”

Stogen grasped the handles of Amanda’s wheelchair. “You want I push you down some stairs?”

Amanda laughed. “Tempted, but no thanks. I don’t know. This all seems so . . .”

“Wrong?” said Stogen.

“Capitalistic.”

“In a round about way, I suppose it is.”

“Why are you here?”

“There was a help wanted ad for psychopaths,” he said.