

# MÖBIUS

*Repeat after me.*

BY J. W. ALDEN

I've watched you die a thousand times. The first was the hardest. I watched the birds from my hotel balcony, tracing every arc and dive, marking each wire they touched, each windowsill. If one of them hadn't landed on the stoplight above you, I might never have noticed you crossing the street. I might never have noticed the van, a blurry streak of silver barrelling your way.

Your first death was the hardest, but it was the most beautiful. I had to see it again.

Chaos touches those around you, extending outwards like ripples in a pond. The birds scatter into the air. A man walking his dog on the sidewalk drops the leash. A woman three paces behind you stumbles backwards with hands over her mouth. Teenagers huddled around a nearby storefront reach for cellphones, one to dial 911, the others to snap pictures.

The look in your eyes never changes, that sudden dilation just before fluttering to a close. They shimmer like starlight, even as your head snaps back and auburn wisps tangle in the windshield wipers.

The driver's name is Will. He's 42. He has a wife and a daughter. He told me over a cup of coffee at the bar he'd been in that afternoon. He seemed nice. Not the killing type, I think. But a conversation won't change what happens, no matter how many times we have it. This last time, we talked about God and destiny and drunk driving, just before the quantum beacon beneath my ribcage came to life and brought me to the beginning again, as it always does.

It's not Will's fault. He's a slave to this moment, entangled. Like you. Like me.

They told me that this could happen. Over the years, I heard stories of beacons blinking out, operatives lost. Never the whos, whens or whys, only that it's happened before and will happen again. I shrugged away those warnings, certain I'd never get caught up

in extracurricular voyeurism. Tracking the H7N9 mutation was too important. Or so I believed then.

But the mission grows stale. I'm weary of chasing birds, watching money change hands. I observe the same moments again and again, unable to do anything but watch, learn, report. Just once, I want change. *Permanent* change that won't be erased when the beacon chimes and the machines bring me home for a pat on the head — or back



to the start for another try. They keep saying the government will let us *prevent* the outbreak one day. But we've been at this for years, and it's clear we're just going to keep watching. We're not the heroes they said we'd be. We're just filling in the history books.

I don't know what it is about you, your death, your moment. But the first time I called out and you looked up as the silver streak took you, pointed your chin in a slightly different direction from the previous hundred times, I knew I'd never free myself of this.

I tried to learn your name once. You scowled, unaware of the favour I'd done you. Silver drifted by, your fragile form unassailed. It didn't matter. My interval expired, and the beacon chimed. I woke again in that hotel, across from that intersection, ready to watch you die or not die for the thousandth time.

It will go on like this until I can accept the futility of it. I can weigh your fate again and

again, or I can turn away, carry out my task in your time, and make my report — leaving you, Will and all the others forever at the mercy of this moment.

I've seen it from every angle now. Each time, I come closer to doing what must be done. Each time, I wonder how long they'll let me do this. They must have drilled this scenario. There must be some contingency. Maybe the next time my beacon goes off, I'll wake with a bright light in my face, people in lab coats and army uniforms asking how many tries it takes to find one lousy bird. Or maybe I'll just keep going, on and on, until I decide I'm done.

At the very least, my suspicions have been confirmed, one death at a time. It's not about you. Never was. We cling to each heartbeat, each fleeting moment, desperate to make use before they're gone. But I've found one I can have and hold, one I can love and abuse and make my own. Maybe even one I can change.

You? You just happen to be there for it.

I'm not sure why you smile this time. Maybe it's the way the sun hits my shoulders. Maybe it's the bounce in my step as I cross the street.

For the first time since the first time, I realize how unaware you are of this moment we're caught in. You don't know about Will. You don't know about the dropped dog leash or the camera phones. You don't know that I've saved your life again and again, that I've let you die a thousand times. You also don't know how the beacon works or what a piezoelectric power source is. You don't know that it will cease to function when my heart stops beating.

Your smile fades when I wrap my hands around your shoulders. A trembled shout leaves your lips as I shove you backwards onto the sidewalk. I mouth a silent apology for robbing you of this moment as I step into the path of the van. Your eyes grow wide, but it's not the starry shimmer I notice this time; it's the silver streak within. ■

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