

Author Name is the author of *First Book* and *Second Book*, and here's something about those books.

She is a former or current something or other, and she lives somewhere that's probably not as amazing as Scotland with her wife Someone and their dog called Wee Tam. She can be found on the web at mattgimmell.com.

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Title of Your Book

Subtitle if Applicable

Author Name

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This book is a work of fiction. The characters, places,
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*For my captain, Jean-Luc Picard.
Thanks for all the tea.*

Title of Your Book

“The first duty of every Starfleet officer is to the truth.”

Jean-Luc Picard

Chapter 1

(This short story is *Retirement*, by Matt Gemmell, included as demonstration content — please do not republish in any form.)

George Blaine stood facing the toilet, contemplating the tiles. They were white, with patterns in that particular shade of deep blue that he'd always assumed was French.

He let his gaze drop to the falling arc of his own urine. He was in a cubicle, because who needed the pressure? He was 52 years old now, and the doctor had been only too glad to confirm that his prostate wasn't quite what it used to be. Nothing life-threatening, though, the man had said; as if George would be worried about that.

We've all got to die of something, he thought. Even if it's just from staying alive too long.

He pondered that idea for a moment, knowing that his mind was coming back to it more and more often

these days. Maybe it was an adaption, as the body grows older. Maybe it was a kindness, when all was said and done.

He shook his head in amusement at himself. Deep thoughts came naturally at times like this, when you were three solo drinks down, and taking your second piss of the evening. There was that vague sense of padding between you and the world. Time had a certain plasticity, and you could also grasp a kind of elusive clarity about yourself and your situation in life.

All the mysteries of the fucking universe were laid bare when you were standing in a pub's freezing toilet, two floors below the bar in what had probably been a storeroom fifty years ago, asking your ageing body to just hurry up and get on with it.

When it seemed like he'd got all that he was going to, he shook off and zipped up, then rotated his neck to ease the stiffness. His knees weren't particularly great anymore either, and he had a weary dread of having to bend down and get back up again. But there was nothing for it.

The guy in the next cubicle had only arrived a minute or so earlier, and it sounded like he was settling in for a while. He was low-value, which currently meant about five grand, but George would take what he could get. The glory days were over, and it was a young man's game.

Or woman's, right enough.

This pub was the guy's regular watering hole, and it was a Friday evening, which was the one night he ate

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dinner here too. Hence the visit to the gent's. George knew it all. He paid attention. If there was only one thing you learned, it was to pay attention.

George hunkered down into a crouch, being careful not to let the back of his jacket brush against the filthy toilet seat, and with some difficulty he craned down and peered across into the neighbouring space. He saw shoes, and trousers bunched up above them. As expected. George reached into his jacket and withdrew the small, oddly-shaped pistol — it was a pellet gun, really — took a breath, then shoved the barrel under the partition until it almost touched the guy's right ankle. He pulled the trigger.

The sound it made was *pffft*, as if the device was mocking him.

The guy didn't make any sound at all; they very rarely did. George watched the feet suddenly twitch and drum on the rubberised floor for a moment, then they stopped moving, just as their owner's heart had. Chemistry was amazing.

One less cut-out, George thought, and he grimaced while getting back to his feet, the pistol already safely tucked back inside his jacket. He left the cubicle, washed his hands, and went back upstairs.

He blinked to adjust to the relative gloom of the bar, after the harsh lighting bouncing off bright white tiles. It would be a while before anyone found the guy. If George was lucky, as he usually was, the body might sit there on the throne until the place closed. On a Fri-

day, that would be 1AM at the earliest. And it didn't even matter if the guy's bowels had let go.

Prudence called for a discreet exit now, but George had been listening to prudence his whole life. Its voice was shrill and nagging, and after three drinks, thankfully muted. What harm would a fourth do?

He began the short trek towards the bar area, from the food-service seating that bordered the doorway leading downstairs to the toilets. The place had a nautical theme, as so many pubs do, and there was a ship's wheel displayed grandly on the wall. George glanced at it disinterestedly, and it was only when he then let his gaze sweep over the patrons of the various tables he was passing that his step faltered.

There's another one, he thought.

The person in question was a middle-aged woman, deep lines in her face that were from a lifetime of both laughter and concern. She had a glass of red wine, and it bore a smear of her lipstick. If George had to guess, he'd say that the other three at the table were her husband, their daughter, and a lad who was either the son-in-law or who'd take that position within the next handful of years.

But the woman wouldn't be around to see it, because she was a cut-out.

George had started to see them when he reached his thirtieth birthday. Not on the exact day; that's the sort of stuff you read in a story. But around the same time. It was like the ads in magazines sometimes, where they've got something in the foreground that they want

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you to look at — like a watch, or a perfume bottle, or whatever the damn thing is — and they make it stand out by adding a big shadow around it. Makes it look like it's floating above the page. It tricks the eye. They can do it all on computers; big shadow, little shadow, no problem either way. He'd even learned what it was called, years later in a TV programme: a *drop shadow*.

That's what the woman looked like to George. Just the same as she looked to her husband, or her daughter — but with a big drop shadow around every edge of her. A heavy one. Like she was floating right off the page. Only George could see it, and only George knew what it meant: pretty soon, the nice lady was going to die.

For the first few months after he started seeing the cut-outs, George had thought he was going crazy. He'd never dared talk to the doctor about it, but he'd gone for an eye test. They'd found nothing. It took another year for him to decide that it was his own kind of adaptation. It was an environmental awareness, for someone in the trade. George had been a contract killer since the age of twenty-six, and he guessed that if you were around death for long enough, you started to get a nose for it.

He made his way to the bar, and this time he paid attention. There were four more cut-outs in the place. All of them were younger than the woman, and he was pretty sure that one of them — a lad with his hair gelled to within an inch of its life and a ridiculously stern look on his still-pockmarked face — was too bloody young to

be drinking at all. He wasn't ever going to reach legal drinking age, either.

George had learned to ignore the cut-outs, which was what he called the people with drop shadows, because honestly it was depressing. You had to be careful with your mental health. Problems can sneak up on you, and vigilance is the only defence. If there was one thing you learned, it was to pay attention.

He ordered a whisky, which the barman gladly provided with a nod of approval. When you'd had three pints already and could still coherently ask for a glass of whisky, it meant you were having one for the road. George decided to just stay at the bar.

He contemplated the liquid, swirling it around in the glass, watching the tails creep back down. Red-gold and smooth as silk. The smell nipped at his nose, and he felt his mouth watering. He took out his phone and sent a brief text message, knowing that his bank account would be a little fuller by morning, then he put the gadget away again. He wasn't a man for staring at a screen in idle moments.

George took a sip of his drink, relishing the flavour on his tongue and the burn as he swallowed it down, then he set the glass back upon the bar. He lifted his head to look at the array of colourful bottles, exchanged a polite smile with the barman again, then he let his eyes focus on the spotted, aged mirror that spanned the rear wall behind the shelves.

George had a drop shadow.

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His eyes slammed shut, and his mouth was somehow now completely dry. He swallowed anyway, still tasting the whisky. His fingers drummed a staccato rhythm on the scarred wooden surface in front of him. He took a shallow breath, then opened his eyes.

He was still a cut-out.

His pulse had kicked up several notches, but it was already starting to even out. He found that he wasn't really afraid; not exactly. Everyone had to die of something, after all — and he was on his fourth drink.

His reflection looked like it hovered six inches in front of the mirror. A deep, black shadow all around, following the contours of his head and shoulders, chest and arms. A heavy shadow. Which meant not very long left at all.

Somehow, it wasn't even a surprise when his peripheral vision registered the pub's door opening behind him. George's eyes tracked across the reflected bar, and then gooseflesh puckered the skin of his forearms.

It was a man at first. But strangely indistinct.

It might have worn a hat of some kind, or a hood. A dark coat; long. But there was no texture, and George didn't look directly at it. It moved languidly.

With grace and infinite patience, his mind chattered, and he wondered if it was a line from a poem he'd forgotten.

For a moment, it was a woman. Her dress was a void of darkness, flowing like smoke, and the mere suggestion of a face was alabaster. But then it was a man again, and then a shape, and then a man once more. It moved slowly and also quickly. It was barely inside the door, and then it was right up at the bar.

It had no reflection.

The barman approached, having seen movement from the corner of his eye, and he seemed confused. To George, it looked like the younger man couldn't decide whether there was anyone there at all. Then he got an expression on his face as if he'd forgotten what he was doing, and he turned and walked away again.

It was cold. Colder than when you stood in a cubicle, two floors below, doing your best to take a piss. Colder than the dead guy downstairs would be by closing time. Colder than anything alive at all.

And so we meet, it said.

The words were in George's mind, whispered in a voice that was dry with aeons, reeking of inhuman intelligence and dark humour.

He didn't look around. Didn't speak, at least at first. But somehow he knew instinctively that now, if

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any of the other patrons looked at the bar, they would have the same momentary confusion that the barman had, and ultimately they wouldn't see anything at all — not beside him, and not even where George himself stood. Because he was a cut-out now, and his time had arrived.

"This is how it is?" he asked in a small voice, his hand tightening on the whisky glass, and while the thing beside him didn't move at all, it also somehow shook its head.

So this wasn't what they all saw at the end. It was special treatment.

The thing still didn't move. And it also nodded.

"Why me, then?" George asked, the tiniest flare of bravado sparking to life as he almost turned to glance at what loomed beside him. The bravery was instantly crushed by a dread so profound that he felt certain he was going to vomit all over the bar. He locked his eyes back on the whisky glass, which had become his anchor, and the feeling dissipated immediately.

Respect, the thing said in his mind, and George knew what it meant.

From one professional to another. A little clap on the back, from the all-time record holder.

There were worse ways to go. George certainly knew it. Prostate cancer, early onset. Strangled to death for fucking the wrong guy's wife. A heart attack when you were taking a shit. Plenty to choose from. And you had to die from something. He nodded.

"Alright," he said.

The thing beside him said nothing.

George contemplated the whisky glass, and suddenly there was such beauty in it that he thought he might actually cry. Red and gold and smooth. Glittering in the light. He swirled the liquid around, and watched the tails creep back down.

"One for the road," he muttered to himself, and then he took a steadying breath. This time, he did turn and look.

It was a man, and a woman, and neither. It was an outline, and an absence. Its aspect was generally human, but somehow George knew that his mind was offering the interpretation only in desperation, lacking any meaningful comparison to its amassed experiences.

It was dark; the definition of the word. It was the cold, silent end of universes. It was the cessation of time. The conclusion of all life. It was terrible, and without form, and beautiful, and inevitable. It was like nothing he'd ever seen, and it was profoundly, achingly familiar.

George raised his glass. "What are we drinking to?" he asked.

The thing did not move. It did not speak.

To retirement, it said.

George smiled, and nodded, and drained his glass in one final melancholy gulp. He set it down on the bar's surface.

"Alright," he said again.

The thing did not speak. It did not move. It had no real shape at all.

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Then it reached out, and took his hand.

Afterword

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reaching this page. I'm Author Name, the author of this book. This letter is for you.

I hope you've enjoyed reading Title of Your Book. I appreciate the investment of time and trust you've made. Writing is a tough job; what makes it worthwhile is the idea that someone, somewhere, is reading your words.

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Thank you for reading.

Author Name
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Most of all, dear reader, my thanks go to you.