

Mind Wake

A novel by H. A. Covey

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Based on a true story — though all persons, living and dead, are purely coincidental, and should not be construed.

*To those who seek immortality,
heed the promise of its reward.*

1: The invincibility machine

The plane hit another pocket of turbulence, and I'm already nervous. Frank isn't helping the mood either. He's piss drunk and harassing the flight attendants and making loud, morbid jokes every person in the cabin can hear.

"Hey, beautiful," he says to our attendant, "think I can get another whiskey before I die?"

People are mostly ignoring Frank. I would too, if I didn't have to acknowledge him as my friend. Frank is a oversized, boisterous white man with a long pony tail and coke-bottle glasses. Stupid smart, but obscenely obnoxious, especially when he's "gowed up on brown water" like this. He is an asshole, lovable to a smattering of human beings who get the clown.

The attendant, a slight, graying man in his fifties, turns around to Frank, face flushed, and walks briskly back down the aisle toward us.

“This guy looks like he’s gonna lose it,” Frank says to no one in particular but aloud so that everyone can hear.

“Sir, you’ve been asked several times to return your seatback and tray table to their upright pos—”

The plane hits another air pocket, and the attendant falls into the bosom of the large woman sitting in the seat in front of us.

The FASTEN SEAT BELTS signs turn on above us, and over the loudspeaker the captain tells the attendants to return to their seats and prepare for landing. The gray-haired attendant retreats to the front of the plane, eyeing Frank before he turns to leave.

The fuselage rolls into a slow arc, gliding on the friction of final approach, and with it, Frank leans over the armrest and into my space to talk to the frail old woman in the window seat sitting next to me.

“You better buckle up, sweetheart,” he barks.

I can smell the fumes of Maker’s Mark rolling off his breath.

The old woman looks scared and confused. She’s a bag of bones, so frail she can barely get the metal ends to click together with her shaky hands.

I try looking out the window but can’t see anything, only scattered rain and condensation backed by black. The plane drops into another air pocket, then another. Panic fills the cabin. Someone silently farts. My stomach churns, but I don’t want to throw up in front of everyone.

On touchdown, the landing gear fails, and the plane cartwheels over the tarmac in flames, crushing bone, silencing breath.

—“Sir.”

My eyes opened to the grey-haired flight attendant standing over me, his hand on my shoulder, brow furrowed with concern.

“Sir, I’m sorry we had to wake you,” he said, “but you were thrashing about a little in your sleep.” His forehead wrinkled more, and he cocked his head to the side. “Is there anything I can get you? Some water, maybe juice?”

Still dazed and fevered from the dream, I looked around at the people staring back. The old frail woman leaned away from me against the window, looking scared of me, rubbing her bony hands together over and over. Frank wasn’t on my right. That kid was. Frank was dead.

No, sorry, I apologized to everyone. I was embarrassed but fine, hated flying. The attendant turned away, but I stopped him and asked if it wasn’t too much trouble that I’d have a Bloody Mary to cool my nerves.

By the time the plane landed, I'd successfully sunken into a boozy cushion of tomato juice and vodka but was still thinking of Frank. There'd been a couple weeks of this, him just showing up in dreams.

"On behalf of myself, the captain, and the whole crew," the head attendant's voice announced over the loudspeaker, "let me be the first to welcome you to San Diego National."

I pulled out my phone and waited while everyone stood in line. There were two texts, one from M:

dont text me any more

Not an answer to my question but succinct as usual, with autocorrect disabled to just piss me off, I'm sure.

Just thinking of her roused the sleeping hulk curled up in my stomach. Breathe.

Not talking was good. Not thinking about her was good. We were bad. Breathe.

The next text was from Dr. Z:

Address again is 8122 Coyote Road after Cerrillos. Gate code is 4242. I will be outside the lab, first building on road. Look forward to seeing u soon :)

I entered the address on my phone and decided to stop wondering about Frank's ghost and M, instead starting to finalize what I'd planned to ask in the doctor in our interview.

In no time, I was speeding north out of the city in my rental car, which I'd nicknamed Blue for its navy hue. The six-lane highway was nearly empty of automobiles, and there were as many clouds in the sky as there were cars on the road.

I accelerated, drinking in gulps of warm, muggy bay air, electrified with a feeling I'd not had in a while, that pregnant thrill of anticipation that lives in the first moments of a new adventure. To finally be on-assignment again, to have something to look for-

ward to. I opened Blue's sunroof and let out a great big yawp.

About an hour into the drive, roughly five miles outside the sleepy worker town of Cerrillos, a large pink and turquoise sign appeared on the side of the road ahead:

OHM WELLNESS CENTER

VISITORS WELCOME

After this, Coyote Road. Right before the turn, on top of the mailbox, sat an enormous bleached bull skull that glowed in the high heat of the day. I wondered what it meant.

After climbing up the dirt road and a few washboard switchbacks, the gate appeared. I punched in the security code, drove another two switchbacks, and was almost to the top of the hill when a beige modular building appeared ahead.

As promised, the doctor was standing outside waiting for me, Dr. Zandra Zaxybayeva, the preeminent

endocrinologist and author of the eponymous Dr. Z's series of health books for women. We'd met at a book expo outside her publisher's booth, and she'd called me a week afterward to pitch a story about a set of trials she'd been running that were near completion, but which had already produced results that I'd frankly had a hard time believing when I heard them. That was exactly what I told her over the phone.

"Come see for yourself" was her response.

Why the hell not? I thought. Might be a good story, if not just for the welcome distraction.

Standing there at about five and a half feet tall with thick heels on, the doctor was more than half a foot shorter than me. She exuded, however, a much larger stature and, now in her sixties, had the wizened crow's feet of a woman who'd seen her fair share of suffering and burden in amassing her own multinational brand and fortune.

"Hello, you made it." Her light olive skin accentuated a wide bright smile, teeth as white as the skull at the

bottom of the hill. Her cat-like, almond-shaped eyes had striking brown irises speckled with yellow, but her most prominent feature was her curly salt-and-pepper hair, which cascaded over her shoulders and down the entire length of her back.

She held out her hand and grasped mine firmly. “So good to see you again,” she purred.

Had to see this for myself, I told her.

“Well, thank you for making the trek. You will not be disappointed. I came down from the main house to start here at the lab first so that you could see the operations right away for yourself. Please, follow me,” she said, pulling open the door and motioning me through.

I entered an empty waiting room that was bathed in soft ambient light flooding in through frosted skylights in the raised ceiling. Southwestern hues and tribal patterns of adobe and turquoise cover nearly every surface — walls, tables, chairs, lampshades, tissue boxes. Every corner was rounded, too. Everything was soft.

“As you can see,” the doctor motioned to the waiting room, “we cleared the schedule for you today. Come with me to the back, where all the magic happens.”

I followed her through the reception area to double doors that led into an even larger room, this one much whiter and brighter. My gaze immediately fell on the shiny black chamber taking up the entire middle of the lab, a mirror-polished cube that stood floor to ceiling in height and was just as wide. It was like nothing I’d seen before.

“I would like to introduce you to the future,” Z said proudly, gazing maternally at the black monolithic chamber, her brain child. “We call it the Invincibility Machine.”

Next to chamber sat a technician at a tall table, headphones on, hunched over a laptop, staring rapt at his screen and typing feverishly onto the keyboard, unaware yet of our presence. Compared to the tiny figure next to it, the chamber looked Brobdingnagian, like the cover of children’s book in which

the young protagonist is sitting next to his time machine awaiting their next big adventure.

Come, I want to introduce you to Dennis, one of my most promising postdocs.”

Before we made it to him, he caught a glimpse of our reflections in the mirrored black of the monster chamber and stopped what he was doing to swing around in his chair. He took off his headphones, music still blaring what sounded like techno, and stood up to greet us, staring at me intently the whole time.

“Well, I see our illustrious writer is here,” he said in a guttural Irish accent. “We’ll all be famous now.” he said in a half-mocking tone, though it was hard to say given the accent.

Dr. Z laughed awkwardly and put her hand on his shoulder. “Meet Dennis, our resident genius. He does it all around here: hardware, software, welding, prefab, coding, you name it.”

We shook hands.

“Actually, Dennis,” the doctor squeezed his shoulder, as if silently telling him *not now*, “we weren’t sure about the article yet.” She looked at me. “But that’s why we’re here, yes?” Her eyebrows arched in anticipation. “Well, are you ready for your first session?”

My session? In the machine? I was confused.

“Well, you can’t write about it if you haven’t experienced it for yourself, can you?”

No, I told her. She was right. I just hadn’t expected it yet. After all, I’d just arrived.

“Nonsense.” She wasn’t taking no for an answer. “We’ve cleared the afternoon of trials. It’s all yours today.” She looked at Dennis discerningly. “If we’re prepped and ready, Dennis, let’s begin the intake process. Is the script for the pneumatics clean?”

He nodded in affirmation, though seemed a bit perturbed by this question. “Aye, I was finished with all that this morning.” The he gave me a grin and winked. “Just wanted to polish my bioacoustics algo-

rithm for our writer here before he has his first go down the ol' rabbit hole.”

The doctor clasped her hands together. “Wonderful. I’m so excited to show you what we’ve built here. Well then, let’s have a go, shall we?”

She moved to the door of the massive black chamber and pressed her thumb up against a small panel that caused a hidden door to hiss open and slide away. It was pitch dark inside.

“Well, are you ready for the experience of a lifetime?” Z asked, her smile wide, one eyebrow cocked devilishly.