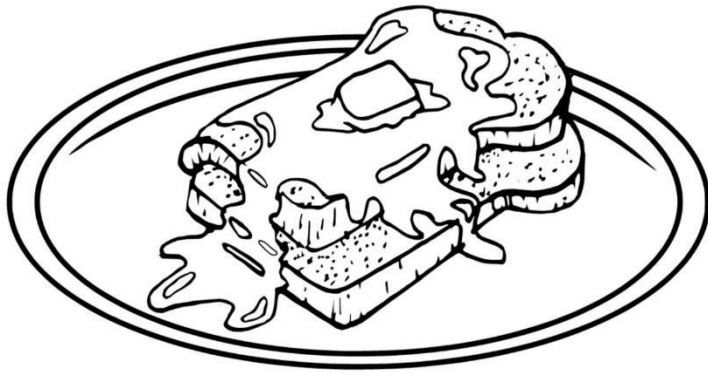


DAN
SCAMELL



WALNUT
RIDGE

WALNUT RIDGE

DAN SCAMELL

SAMPLE CHAPTER

1.

One of the Angels walked past the group meeting room. It was not, of course, a real angel in biblical terms. It was a visual approximation of an angel, and that was what they liked to be called, Angels. Leo Salmon only saw it walk by because he was not paying much attention to what was going on in the group meeting room. He rarely did. Sharing sessions seemed senseless and repetitive to him most of the time nowadays. He tried to give them a shot, but man, could they be boring.

In addition to the woman running the meeting, the *tech*, all the lodgers still residing at the facility were currently in the group meeting room. Their numbers amounted to nine now. When Leo first entered the facility, it was at full capacity with those in need of reprogramming. The mood at that time was light and airy and full of hope. The facility was a necessary stop on the way to the utopia the Angels were offering. Now, it seemed to Leo, all the glamour had been sapped from the atmosphere. That was more or less okay with him.

“Have you been putting effort into your homework?” asked Miranda, the tech running the meeting. She was a human, not an Angel, in her late thirties. She had likely been chosen for the job as much for her knowledge and background in psychology as for her appearance and warm demeanor. Most lodgers tended to trust her quickly and deeply despite knowing virtually nothing about her. Her question was addressed to George, a man who had been living in the facility almost as long as Leo.

“I always do my ‘homework,’” he said, harassed. “Though if it’s homework, I’d like the opportunity to actually work on it at my home.”

Miranda sighed. This was an old and often retreaded subject with long-term lodgers who came through the facility. “As you well know, you are welcome to leave and return to your homes at any time.”

“Right,” George scoffed. “I know. I can walk out the front door and drive myself right back to my house. I can buy a hundred pounds of steak at the supermarket that’s closed down and have a great big cookout with all my friends who have abandoned their houses to board the cross-ships.” He paused before adding, “That is, if I can find a gas station that’s still running between Vermont and New Jersey. If not, I might just break down and starve to death on the side of the road. Of course, then I’d be a ghost. I guess that wouldn’t be too bad. They don’t seem to give a shit about anything anyway.” It was an insensitive thing to say, given that there were three ghosts in the meeting.

The television was on but muted in the corner of the room. Playing was a rerun of a late-night talk show from sometime in the past year or so. There were only about three stations still broadcasting anymore. They were all computer-run and played old programming. The screen

showed a man in a gray suit sitting at a desk, addressing the skeletal, humanoid robot who sat on a nearby couch. The host spoke with a grin and then awaited responses from the robot, which hardly even moved and had only a speaker for a mouth. Clipped to the barrel-like torso of the robot was a nametag reading “Chris.” This was common practice since most of the robot shells were identical and each typically contained dozens of deceased and decanted souls.

As George continued to vent his frustrations to Miranda, who took them with good humor, Leo tried to figure out who the robot on the television might be. It would obviously be someone dead whose soul had been loaded into the vessel, but who? A long-deceased writer? A comedian who had lived fast and died young? Maybe a member of a musical group whose life was cut short?

When Leo returned his attention to the meeting, George had finished sharing and seemed to be feeling a little more relaxed. George knew the reality of his circumstances. He knew that he’d eventually be decanted and carted onto an Ark, one of the large cross-shaped space vessels bound for eternal paradise. He just wanted to be cantankerous and autonomous for a while longer. Miranda was now hearing a share from a woman named Lois. Lois had been in the facility even longer than Leo.

Miranda listened and sadly smiled as Lois prattled on about memories and old friends. Most of the time, it seemed as though Lois was not aware of what was going on or why she was in a strange complex with strange people. She acted almost as if she were simply in some kind of poorly run resort and didn’t remember, nor care, how she got there. In what seemed to be her moments of clarity, which were few and far between, she became disturbingly quiet and withdrawn.

Leo couldn’t remember who had already shared, and he knew that he would have to speak at some point. He used to embrace the fact that the group meetings were limited on time, but now with so few left in the facility, let alone the individual group, he could no longer count on the clock running out.

During a pause in the inanity that was Lois’s share, Miranda cut her off to announce that there would be a new lodger at the PDF, or Pre-Decantation Facility. This information had just come in on her tablet computer, which was always cradled in her arm. She gave the group the familiar spiel about accepting the new lodger and making them feel welcome. It was an innocuous and impersonal reading designed to keep new lodgers from being accosted or overwhelmed in their initial days.

“We ask that you welcome”—Miranda checked the information on her screen—“Frances to Walnut Ridge.” Walnut Ridge was currently the official name of the facility. It was an intentionally disarming name like those given to nursing homes or drug treatment centers—places you put sick people who you didn’t want to see being sick. “Please open your hearts and help her integrate into our community while also respecting her boundaries. As a fellow child of God, she is your sister—”

“Ain’t never knew I had no sisters, Ma!” shouted George. He shouted this exact statement every time a new lodger was announced in his presence. He seemed to find it hilarious. Sometimes, a newer lodger would chuckle at his interruption, but mostly, everyone just ignored him. He seemed ecstatic that he was afforded one more chance to fire it off. There had been no new lodgers for weeks, and none had been expected.

“—and we appreciate your help and patience in welcoming this lost sheep into our flock,” finished Miranda.

To Leo, all the religious, God-stuff felt a little shoehorned in. He had never really come around to the way the Angels liked to push the Christian aspect of their appearance into the nature of their mission. Maybe, Leo thought, the lodgers' acceptance of the confused, quasi-religious mumbo-jumbo was an integral part of the pre-decantation process. It wasn't worth questioning it at this point. With few exceptions, those who came to Walnut Ridge, no matter how ornery or insane, inevitably transformed into loving and tolerant creatures with seemingly infinite optimism. Sometimes, the change was obvious. Other times, it was simply a personal observation. Whatever mysterious machinations the Angels had devised, whether brainwashing or true enlightenment, appeared to work like a charm.

Quiet filled the room for a while after Miranda's speech. When Leo adjusted his legs in his chair, the sound of the faux-leather upholstery sliding against the cotton of his pale-blue medical scrub pants seemed very loud. He stopped mid-movement and wound up with one leg awkwardly hanging half-crossed over the other, not wanting to make more noise.

"Leonard," Miranda said, "how are you feeling today? We haven't heard from you in a while."

Leo shot a glance at the clock on the wall—five minutes until four. He had almost made it. "Well," he started, staring down at his socks, one of which had turned itself upside down on his foot, "I suppose I'm feeling about the same as usual. Just, um"—he paused—"usual." Against his better judgment, he looked up at Miranda. She was smiling serenely at him. He averted his gaze as he tried to think of something to say—something with any shred of substance.

"I guess I've been, just"—*Say something*, he thought. *Anything!*—"excited. About getting decanted and, and joining all those people on the ships." There, he thought, that ought to work for now.

"Oh?" said Miranda, with slight concern. "I'm glad to hear that. Though, your rhythmic feedback hasn't shown any marked changes." She swiped her hand across her tablet's screen, seemingly checking for information about Leo's false enthusiasm.

"Well," Leo stammered. "That is to say, guarded excitement, of course. Or else I wouldn't still be here." He gave a painfully fake laugh and looked around the room for something. Reassurance? Permission? A smile?

He hopelessly surveyed the room from one corner to the other, taking in all that there was to see, searching for some unseen salve for the discomfort of having to continue sharing. He saw George zoning out and staring at a wall. He saw Lois doing her needlepoint and mouthing words to herself. He saw, sitting on an end table, a jar of translucent blue fluid, which was Alphonse, a decanted human who had been sent back to the PDF for reasons not entirely clear. He saw Rhonda staring at the muted television. He saw the window high on the wall. Through the window, he saw the sky, which was purple. He saw Brock looking at both Leo and Miranda since his eyes never pointed in the same direction. He saw the robot shell that currently housed the three remaining ghost lodgers at Walnut Ridge. None of what he saw offered any clues as to what his next move should be.

"I'm," Leo started again, thinking of something true to say. "I'm glad that we'll be having peach cobbler with dinner tonight."

"Thank you for your share, Leonard," Miranda said mercifully. "I like the peach cobbler as well."

Leo looked back out the door to the hallway and caught sight of two Angels leading a female to the technician's station. She was dressed in a black T-shirt and a purple skirt over black

and purple striped leggings. The entire ensemble was torn up and caked with mud. From where Leo sat, it looked like the woman had broken twigs in her hair and scratches on her face and arms. George, who still smoked despite being on detox meds like the rest of the lodgers, coughed loudly. The woman at the desk turned sharply and looked into the group meeting room. Her eyes met with Leo's. He felt paralyzed. Her gaze had locked him in place, and he was powerless to turn away or blink. Her face was unreadable to him. Disgusted? Determined? Dejected? At length, she turned back to the papers she had to sign at the desk.

Leo seemed to regain control over his muscles again, and his body relaxed almost entirely. Though, after a moment, he realized with horror that for the first time since arriving at Walnut Ridge almost nine months ago, he had an erection. He wished more than anything at that moment that he was wearing jeans instead of scrubs.