# This Untitled Life-Chapter Five

**by Dan Nicely**

**Dedicated to my lovely wife...**
**who has heard this story a thousand times.**

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## Chapter Five

Cliff was behind a blue and white curtain. It was the first thing he looked at when he opened his eyes. Hospital track held it up and Cliff couldn't help but notice that the curtain track was recessed between the suspended ceiling tiles instead of mounted over them as he had often seen in other clinics and hospitals. Someone had taken extra time with that detail. The overall look was clean and crisp. The two by two ceiling tiles were upper end and fabricated for sterile environments. He noticed a condensation stain on the ceiling tile by a nearby diffuser. He smiled slightly in spite of himself. You can plan and take the time and work hard to get it all just so, and one mechanical diffuser can mess the whole thing up with nothing more than time and moisture. He counted off the tiles…his little corner of the hospital was 4 tiles wide by 6 tiles long. At two feet per tile, Cliff found himself behind the curtain in an eight by twelve foot space. *Never mind the man behind the curtain,* he thought. *Fairly generous space*, he added.

Machines and wires surrounded the head of the bed as if they were some sort of technological crown of electronic thorns, blessing all those in proximity. The mattress on the bed was too thin, but compensated for its lack of comfort with the ability to be raised and lowered at will. It wasn't a full blown hospital bed, but rather the quick down and dirty ER garden variety type. *Was their much money in gurneys?* Someone had left a juice box and a small package of crackers next to the bed on a tray. *Had he given blood or something like that?* The floor covering was chosen by someone with a lack of taste, color and knowledge. The cove base where the flooring met the wall was installed incorrectly in a nearby corner and over time would become a maintenance and possibly a disease issue.

He wasn't sure what to do. He wasn't sure if he should pop up and peek his head through the curtains or just walk out or should he just stay put? He didn't really care. All of these questions and all of these details commanding his experienced eye were nothing more than an avoidance tactic at an almost instinctual level. He knew what had happened. He knew that he cared about this more than he had ever cared about anything in his life. Yet he didn't care at all. He wasn't confused. He had fainted. He wasn't delusional. His wife and son were dead. He was… numb. And for now, the numbness was welcomed and appreciated. He would stay numb if he could. He didn't want to talk to anyone. He didn't want to be consoled. He didn't want to be in a place of pity. He wanted to be alone. He decided to stay put on his gurney surrounded by machines in this cold, death-lit fluorescent space, behind the blue and white curtain with the breathable mesh at the top. It suddenly seemed warm and comfortable and safe and, perhaps, a definite in a suddenly ambiguous universe. He hoped that the world would forget that he was there, behind that curtain on a cheap gurney, completely.

After a few moments, someone peeked in and then pulled the curtain back with a quick tug.

"You're awake. You had a nasty fall when you fainted. I'm Dr. Steinke. I work with Dr. Voight –the doctor you were talking to when you had your mishap. I am very sorry for your loss. May I take a quick look at you?" The doctor was middle-aged, glasses and spoke with a calm and even voice.

"Um…" Cliff wasn't sure what the doc would be looking for. He looked at him blankly for a moment and then did the math, "Sure. Go ahead."

The doctor was methodical and gentle. He rested his stethoscope on Cliff as if he were made of china. He looked at the back of Cliff's head and Cliff was reminded of his youth when his mother would spend considerable time running her fingers through his hair as he drifted off to sleep. Such a good memory. Cliff started to close his eyes.

"Looks good," said the good doc and Cliff quickly snapped back to the present. "Is there someone that will be picking you up?"

"What?" Cliff wasn't sure if he heard the question right. *Someone to pick me up? The only person who would pick me up is now in your morgue!* He choked for a moment. "No. I guess... I will need to figure something out."

"We can call you a cab." Cliff laughed in spite of himself. Dr. Steinke raised one eyebrow over ancient and well worn glasses.

"I am out by the coast."

"Oh. Well, is there someone else that we may call for you?"

"No. I guess a cab is the way to go," Cliff smiled strangely for a moment. The doctor gave him a look as if he were looking at a wounded puppy. He thought for a moment.

"Look. I am off in an hour. I can give you a ride home. A cab would be horrendous."

"Doc, come on. That's close to two hours each way."

"No. It wouldn't be a problem. I just need to call my…"

"It's okay," Cliff said quietly. "I'll work it out. But, thank you for the kind offer."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Thank you. I might stay in the city tonight."

"Okay. In that case, I am writing you a script for a sleeping medication in case you have any problems. You can take Aspirin for the bump on your head if it starts to hurt. And, if you follow me in a moment, Jean will have some forms for you to sign at the counter and can line you up with a grief counselor, if you desire."

"Sure." *A grief counselor?* "Um, thank you, but no thank you on the counselor. What about…"

"Oh," the doctor seemed surprised and interrupted him. "The counselors are there for you if you want them. Jean will have and make all of the arrangements for you."

"Okay. Sure. Anything else?"

"No. Here's the script and you can fill that at will. Please follow me."

They walked past others in their own little curtain-rooms. Cliff could see some of the patients through curtains that were partially open. For others he could only see the scrubs of nurses or doctors tending to their patients. There were myriad voices and murmurs and the occasional crying. He focused his ears on the crying and understood. They walked through a door that opened automatically before they got there and turned right. Linoleum, linoleum, linoleum. *Wonder how much the linoleum guy makes?* Finally they arrived at a carpeted area and a row of desks separated by shoulder high partitions. Oak, oak, oak. *Wonder what the casework cost for this place?* A small plaque announced to the patients and their families that the second desk was occupied by JEAN.

"Jean, this is Mr. Atomos," the doctor said with one light hand on Cliff's shoulder. A little unspoken telegraph motion took place between Jean and the Doctor and Jean gave a quick nod and a warm, sympathetic smile.

"Please sit down, Mr. Atomos."

"Mr. Atomos," Dr. Steinke said, "please let us know if you need anything." *What a stupid thing to say.*

"Thank you," Cliff said.

Cliff took his seat for the discharge-slash-pity gig. He knew what was coming even though he had never been through this before. He stepped outside of himself and watched as Jean, with the brown V-Neck showing the line of her cleavage and the tortise-shell glasses that were designed for someone twice her size smiled that same consoling smile and began her explanations. He watched himself listen intently even though he was miles away. He thought about Maria's cleavage. He remembered the last time he devoured Maria's body with his eyes. He remembered the last time he devoured her body with his hands. He realized that he would never do either again. He looked to the side for a moment and saw a young lady walking with a little girl through the nearby lobby.

He had a child once. His boy. The little man who had changed his world in an instant and who was now changing it again. The diapers and all those sleepless nights as Maria would get up, without word, without complaint and feed her son as Cliff watched through bloodshot and sleepy eyes. He remembered standing at the lectern in an auditorium filled with young students and absolutely losing his place in both his notes and his thoughts. Sleep deprivation compounded by long nights in the studios. Then there came the night that Jimmy slept through the entire night –until five A.M. anyway. The next night Cliff and his bride celebrated with champagne and love making. He was tired the following day as well.

The rolling over in the crib gave way to an incessant rocking on all fours. The rocking on all fours gave way to hard work and a day when Jimmy crawled. Then, later, he actually stood with the aid of a nearby couch. The standing gave way to the first, hesitant steps, and the steps gave way to the first drunken walking. Cliff had watched with pure joy as the boy developed. On some days he could not stand to be at the University for a moment. He only

wanted to be at home with his wife and his beautiful son. For the first time in his life, Cliff got behind on his work.

The stuffed animals remained in Jimmy's world but eventually gave way to an irresistible and silent call from the toy cars, the bedtime stories and a thankful fascination with books. Cliff smiled unknowingly –lost in another place and another time as Jean went through her monologue. *How many times has she done this?* No matter. There were big plans. The first camp out was supposed to take place in the coming summer. Cliff had been toying with the idea of taking Maria and Jimmy to Southern California for a long sojourn filled with swimming and surfing and summer sun and sand. He had imagined, on countless occasions, Maria in her swimsuit, Jimmy playing in the sand, grand castles and picnics on the beach. So much warmer and inviting than the more scenic Oregon coast.

And then there was the project that was a definite: The first real tree-house was supposed to start construction as soon as the rain stopped and spring arrived. Cliff had drawn up all the plans. It would be the most elaborate tree house ever constructed for a boy, but then again, Jimmy had not been an ordinary boy. He had been the constellations in Cliff's skies. His mother had been the sun and the moon and the remaining stars. He would miss them both and he knew, he just knew, that the light wouldn't ever shine –day or night -again. How could it?

"Do you have any questions, Mr. Atomos?" *None that matter.*

"No, thank you."
"Can we call someone or a cab for you?" *We have been through this once before, haven't we?*

"No, thank you. Thank you for everything. I appreciate it."

"You are most welcome, Mr. Atomos. Let us know if you need anything." More cleavage exposed as she leaned forward with a puppy-dog smile of sympathy.

"Thank you," *But I sincerely doubt it.*

Cliff folded the papers and walked outside to a brisk Portland evening. *How long had he been in there?* He looked at his watch. 8:26, the black face and white dials announced. *Now what?*

He knew of a bar in a lobby of a nice hotel within a mile or two. He had taken Maria there for a wild weekend way back when -pre Jimmy. It was one of his favorite spots in the world. He had no desire to go back to the cabin. Not yet anyway. He also had no desire to make the call he knew he would have to make. *One of many*, he thought. But out of all of them, the one to his father-in-law was going to be the toughest. He pulled up his collar and buttoned the top button of his shirt. He crammed his hands into his pants pockets and started walking. *Did he have his wallet and money?* He did indeed.

The lobby of the Heathman was and is like the rest of the hotel: Understated, bespoke, dark and yet bright, old and comfortable and yet contemporary. Local art hangs on the walls. The hotel has a long and illustrious history and has hosted numerous authors and celebrities. It also has seen its share of the common man. As Cliff entered the lobby he noticed a quick change in the staff behind the front desk. Only later, after he got up to his room, did he realize how disheveled he looked. He called down for a razor and started the taps on what would be a long shower.

Cliff was somewhat freshly pressed (the steam in the bathroom had taken care of most of the minor wrinkles in his wardrobe and the razor had tried in vain to take the wrinkles out of his face and had lost). He went down to the Marble Bar and ordered much gin with a little tonic. *A summer drink in the middle of the winter,* he thought. The original mirror hung over head and looked down at this man without his home. Someone had once told him that the mirror had originated from the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City. *Who cares?*

The bartender was skilled and quickly abandoned any thoughts of small talk. He had enough time in the saddle to recognize a man commiserating with himself. And as long as Cliff was quiet and in control, the bartender kept him supplied. This customer, the bartender noticed was incredibly quiet and seemed to be a model of control. Cliff gave his room number and the bartender gave him cold comfort for change.

Three misspent hours later a very intoxicated Cliff made his way to the elevator where he ran into, coincidentally, another patron who also happened to be flying along at the approximate speed of three sheets in to the wind. The doors opened and Cliff shuffled inside along with the gentleman who had "JC" embroidered on his pocket. JC leaned against one wall and blindly stabbed at the buttons.

"Ah... I mean, um... which floor, buddy?" asked JC.

"Three," replied Cliff who was leaning against the opposite wall and throwing up three slightly waving fingers in the event that his words were too slurred to make sense. JC made a stab and a miss followed by another stab at the button. It looked to Cliff like JC would be stopping on every floor -possibly twice. He started to snicker. JC looked at him through bloodshot eyes and started to laugh as well. Suddenly, without warning, JC disgorged all over Cliff's shoes and lower pants. Some of what was apparently an earlier meal of spaghetti, mixed with the alcohol, splattered off of Cliff's shoes and landed on the adjacent walls.

"Son of a..."

"Excuse me... I... sorry... I..." and with that, JC threw-up again. Cliff tried to jump out of the way, but he had no place to go. He slipped on the vomit and landed in it on his back. He attempted to scramble to his feet and ended up on all fours instead. His recollection, years later, would be of the elevator doors opening on the fourth floor, having past the first three without pause. Cliff looked up to see two evening event clad individuals of a certain age staring at him in absolute horror as they slowly backed away. The gentleman in the couple actually said something like, "Good lord, man!" and the woman was heard saying, "Oh. How utterly repung..." as the doors slid silently closed. JC looked at Cliff and they both started laughing.

A few minutes later, Cliff found himself in the fire stairs walking (nearly falling) back down to his floor. After a protracted tour of the hallways, Cliff finally found his room and stumbled inside. He went into the bathroom for what seemed like an incredibly long piss. He could barely keep his body in a standing position, much less his urine in the toilet. He thought of JC and the mess in the elevator and started to laugh. This in turn lead to him peeing ever so slightly on himself, to a greater degree on the walls, and to an even greater extent on the commode and the floor. He realized that he should get his clothes clean. After all, he was an incredible mess and even he could smell the puke from JC. He fished his wallet out of his pants and only managed to drop it on the bathroom floor once or twice. Finally finding a resting place for the wallet, Cliff slipped off his shoes and climbed, fully clothed, into the shower. At some point during his post-drink shower he remembered that his shoes had been puked on and he climbed half out of the tub to retrieve them. Somehow he managed to get both his shoes and his drunken body back in the tub to resume his shower. A great deal of time later, he turned off the water, stripped off his clothes and made his way to the bedroom where he made a phone call.

He awoke the next morning to find his body half on the bed and someone pounding on the door.

"Housekeeping!" He realized that his door was neither chained, nor dead-bolted. He rolled off of the bed and realized instantly that he was no longer twenty years old and that he had somehow aquired the mother of all headaches. His form wasn't completely bad and he did manage to lock the door just as the housekeeper was sliding the key-card into the lock.

"Can you come back, please?" he asked of the stranger on the other side of the door.

"Sorry, sir. I'll come back," said the voice. Cliff sighed in relief and made his way back to the bed. He thought that the room was awfully bright for morning. *What time was it anyway?* 12:30! Cliff rubbed his eyes as he sat on the edge of the bed. He looked up to realize, in absolute horror, that the curtains were wide open and that he was indeed sitting on the bed totally naked. A woman across the street was staring at him from an office window. For the second time that morning Cliff Atomos did a gymnastic routine as he closed the distance between bed and curtains in two-point-three seconds flat. What a great way to start the first day of...

HOLY CRAP! Who did he call the night before? And what did he say? He had better get dressed and get out of the hotel and start making the preparations his wife would have wanted. He had better grow up right now and get through the next couple of weeks. All he needed was his clothes. Where were his clothes? He found them in the bathroom trailing across a sopping wet floor. Crap! Where was his wallet? He found it on the back of the toilet, two inches from toppling into the bowl below. *Steady,* he thought, as he reached out to retrieve his wallet.

He almost had it, but his shaky hand would have none of it. He jostled the wallet right into the toilet. Somewhere, in the back of his aching head, Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* kicked in. He would hear the same music in his mind at the funeral in a few days to come, but for slightly different reasons. For now, he laughed in spite of himself and sang along.

"We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl, year after year." He fished the wallet out of the toilet and went to call the front desk. How to word this, was the question. *"Hi, could you send someone out for a medium sized men's shirt, white that is, and maybe some tan pants –size 36 around the old midriff, no clue on the inseam, but average height? Oh*

*yeah, and some socks. Black. Oh, and wishes of all wishes, since he was already over on his checkout, could he extend that checkout until such a time as his new clothes could arrive? He would gladly pay an additional night's rate.* This would be interesting.

It was easier than he had imagined. Everything and anything could be arranged by the bespoke and efficient staff at the Heathman. No problem at all, sir. Same credit card as on file? He lounged in a robe and waited. And as he did he thought about the call he made the night before. Who did he call? *He knew who it was.* What had he said. *He could probably guess.* So the question now was should he call him back. Should he not call and just try to find a way back to the cabin. He could, after all, rent a car. He picked up the phone and quickly put it back down. Someone was knocking at the door.

He peeked through the hole in the door and caught his breath. The person he was going to call was on the other side of the door. Cliff swung the door open and let his father-in-law walk into the room. The redness and haggard look of the old man said it all. With no prompting the two men look at one another and began to cry.

Much later as they passed *the spot* on the highway back to the cabin, Cliff began to feel a little thirsty. His headd still pounded that same relentless tom-tom of a beat, but the taste in his mouth had improved slightly. A little of the hair of the dog that bit him might be good. At least he might stop thinking about Charlie and Maria. Would he ever be able to stop thinking about them, he wondered. Pink Floyd kicked in again; *So, so you think you can tell… heaven from hell… blue skies from pain…*

"Wish you were here, babe," Cliff mumbled half aloud.

"What's that?" asked the old man.

"Oh. Sorry. Just thinking out loud. Wishing, you know…"

"Yeah," the old man's voice broke, "I know. Why don't you spend the night at our cabin? None of us should be alone right now."

"Thank you, however I think that is exactly what I need right now… with all due respect. I want some time to think about things and the sooner the better." The old man looked at him hard for a second. Cliff thought that maybe he would run off the road and kill the two of them, too. That wouldn't be so bad.

"Alright, Cliff. But our door is open."

"Thank you."

When he was finally alone, Cliff looked around the cabin. The tree and presents, the stockings by the fireplace -it didn't feel like Christmas at all. All the color had left the holiday. Another song in his head: *No Colors Anymore. I Want Them to Turn Black.* He went to pour himself a drink and he sat by the fireplace. It was cold and dark and empty. The cabin was chilly. He didn't care. He thought about one of the last times he had seen Maria; leaning into him, right in that very spot, handing him a drink. Three emotions hit him in quick succession: he smiled at her memory, he started to cry, and then he became angry. He was tired of crying. He was tired of thinking and of music and of being. He started to drink.

The service, by all accounts, was touching. A congregation of mourners grouped around the family plot outside of Astoria. Cliff could smell the salt in the air every now and then and he could taste the rain that had fallen hours before. He divorced himself from his own body and automatically kept his eyes of the caskets –especially the smaller of the two. Head to toe in black. How many times had he worn a black T-shirt or a black sweater with black pants in studio? It looked so good to be so pale against the power of the dark. Now it seemed so trivial and even banal. He made up his mind while a stranger droned on about God's loving arms. He wouldn't be going back to the University. Death and a life insurance policy suddenly made him independently wealthy. Or, at least wealthy enough to ride out the rest of his days in the cabin. Maybe he would travel. Maybe he wouldn't.

Strangers and friends expressed their condolences. What the hell did they know? Condolences? What they meant was, "Sorry your family is dead." *Really?* Did you even know them beyond a surface skimming of their lives? He heard himself replying with "Thank you." and "Thank you for coming." These strangers. They were aliens. From another world... universes away. Appearing out of nowhere to mourn. Where were they when Charlie and Maria were alive? Why didn't they celebrate their lives? How come they didn't congregate around their living bodies? This new world was the only time for their arrival. *Weddings and funerals,* he thought, *are always for everyone else…and always too little, too late.* .

A big long black limo took him and Maria's parents back to their mansion masquerading as a cabin. Tables and tables of food were lined up. Soft conversation echoed off of hard surfaces and congealed into an indecipherable hum. Some looked at Cliff with the pity he hated. Others had no idea that he was even there. One man near the piano was talking football with another man who glanced at Cliff with eyes of guilt. What was that line from *The Big Chill*? Something about throwing a hell of a party when you die? The big black limo had picked him up at his own cabin. He wondered where the car and the solemn driver were hiding at now. Would they be out front with all the other big cars? Would the driver put on a smiling face tomorrow when he picked up some dignitary at the airport or when he drove a young couple away from a reception towards a passionate honeymoon? If he asked about either the car or the driver, he would be asked to stay and the implication would be that it was his duty to do so. As far as Cliff was concerned he no longer had duties, per se, on this planet. He slipped outside under a pretense of getting some air and started walking home. Half way up the road to his cabin the skies opened up and dumped a diluge of water from their storehouses. He did not run from the rain. His acceptance of this new world was complete.