

A Matter of Death and Life

Paul Söder, Chief Actuary for the Department of Sustainable Healthcare, plodded into his cubicle on the third floor of the Obama Federal Building in Chicago, a half hour later than usual. He fumbled with his wireless earbuds and winced as he pushed them in.

The nursing home had called him late last night about his mother, Anne. She had collapsed in the bathroom, no bones appeared broken, but she was in pain so they needed to take some x-rays, maybe an MRI. Paul thanked the weary voice for calling, pulled on some jeans and a sweatshirt and drove to Northwestern Hospital. Several hours later, after he dozed on and off, a doctor with a scraggly beard and a clipped voice explained that his mother had suffered a TIA, a minor stroke. That's what had caused her to fall. His mother stayed at the hospital for more tests. Paul made his way home, occupied with thoughts of how he could rearrange his schedule to go back to the hospital and concerns about his mother's condition.

He'd had a hard time falling back asleep and woke up to the chime of his phone with a queasy feeling. He sat on the edge of his bed, bent over for a few minutes. The lingering smell of last night's dinner, broiled salmon and garlic-roasted cauliflower, added to his nausea.

Though just over six feet, Paul could not see beyond his cubicle walls. His girlfriend, Pearl del Rio, described him as "Söder rhymes with ruder, fifty-something bachelor, lean-but-not-mean, craggy-faced hound dog, no bark but a little bite when he needs to, and a brain addled by all that chalk dust he inhales from rock climbing." Pearl was a former rodeo queen from Albuquerque who relocated to Chicago to attend stand-up and improv classes at Second City.

When that didn't lead to anything, she found employment as an emcee for corporate events, conventions, and retreats.

They met when Pearl joined the same rock-climbing club. During the social hour, Paul kept looking at her sidewise until she took the initiative, ambled over and said, "Hey Rockboy, is that a piton in your pocket, or are you just glad to meet me?"

Paul had straightened up like a jackrabbit on its hindlegs and said, "No. I mean yes, I'm pleased to meet you." He ran one hand over his salt-and-pepper brush cut and stuck out the other. They shook hands and laughed. Paul asked, "Can I get you a glass of wine?"

Pearl said, "Only if they're outa beer. And try to lasso a couple of those sliders while you're at it."

Paul returned with two sweating longnecks in one hand and an appetizer-sized plate with two sliders balanced on his palm. Some napkins peeked out of his shirt pocket. "I'll go back for some glasses," he said.

Pearl pried a beer loose from his fingers and took a sip. "Don't bother, I like drinking from the bottle." Pearl lifted a slider with two fingers and took a healthy bite. In between chews she said, "So, are you gonna ask me out, or should we do-si-do a while?"

Paul hesitated and Pearl took a long drink. He watched her throat as the beer made it undulate. "Yes, I am. My mouth just hasn't caught up to my brain yet," he said.

Their first date was at a country & western bar. The band was playing "Ring of Fire" as the hostess led them to a rickety table in the back. Pearl brushed a hand over her chair to make sure it was dry before sitting down and sang along with the band, "Love is a burning thing and it

makes a fiery ring.” Then she eyed Paul and said, “If you’re trying to get me in the saddle, this is a pretty good start.”

Paul tried not to grin. “I admit to having done a bit of riding, but I can always use more practice.”

Pearl arched an eyebrow. “Do tell. Where and with whom?”

Paul, straight-faced, said, “I don’t kiss and tell.” When Pearl crossed her arms, Paul added, “My college roomie is now a math professor at the University of New Mexico. We ride a bit when we’re not hiking in the mountains.”

Pearl sang another line from the song, “And I fell into the burning ring of fire.” They were pretty much a couple after that.

Paul had a few personal items on his desk. A cube with photos, mostly of Pearl and his parents, a carabiner from a difficult climb in the Mojave National Preserve, and a four-inch-high statuette of the Alma Mater in front of Altgeld Hall at The University of Illinois where Paul had spent many hours in math classes.

His cubicle had large monitors hanging on each of the three sides. Paul sat on the edge of his ergonomic chair, stretched his back, and said, “Good morning, Herxie.” Paul had named his virtual assistant after the Human Resource X Index, the letter X representing life expectancy for people nearing end of life.

Paul’s team had developed the end of life index, christened ELI at an impromptu celebration following the project’s approval. He’d been in his position at the Institute for Medicare and Medicaid for barely a year when he introduced the idea to the Director, Lee Chang, in a brainstorming session with her direct reports on future projects.

Paul had explained, “People with a high end of life index, which we want to develop, would be targeted. If the attending doctor approves, patients are transferred to hospice care, removed from life support or any other procedures that would prolong life, and given palliative drugs to ease pain. The objective is a better allocation of scarce resources for other patients who are expected to recover.”

A few people made remarks that ranged from comic, “Life index sounds like a relationship quiz in *Cosmopolitan Magazine*,” to cautionary, “I hope you’re ready for a shit show when the media get wind of this.”

Paul glanced around the room. “I admit this sounds cold-hearted, but in my mind, watching people die a slow death with no possibility of recovery isn’t more humane.”

Lee looked at Paul and nodded slightly. “Any objections or discussion about Paul’s idea.”

Nobody outright had any reasons to table the idea.

“Alright, then,” Lee said to Paul. “Proceed down the road of developing an appropriate index. Draft a formal proposal I can take to the Secretary of HHS. But for optics sake, call it a sustainability index. In case you didn’t know, Secretary Brookmann is a staunch proponent of the right to life movement.”

It had been a much longer haul than Paul had anticipated to develop the index. His team spent seven years creating a suitable database and ELI. Beta testing took another three years. In the interim, a new Director, Maxine Moore, headed the Institute.

Maxine had called Paul to her office a week before a critical meeting on the healthcare reform bill that included ELI. She swung her desktop monitor so Paul could see the screen and said, “Have a seat. Senator Cruise, is about to give a speech.”

Cruise, who many called Senator Missile for his hawkish views, addressed the chamber. “The state of healthcare in America is now in crisis. There are not enough hospitals, doctors, nurses, to treat the growing number of seniors who are living longer than previously expected. We have also experienced greater demand for health professionals due to long-term effects of obesity and drug use. Improvements in the treatment of chronic diseases like Alzheimer’s, cancer, and diabetes have significantly lengthened life for those who would have died, putting added pressure on an overburdened system. From a practical point we already ration healthcare due to long waiting times for some life-saving procedures. As most of you know, my wife Suzi was a heartbreaking example. We *must* review every aspect of healthcare and look for a better method of allocating resources for patients at all stages of treatment, particularly at end of life.”

Maxine said, “Humph, that man fought tooth and nail against ELI during the conference committee meetings. Said it was like a death panel. He’s certainly changed his tune. Wonder what they promised him to change his vote?”

When the bill passed, Maxine asked Paul to represent the Institute and be a spokesperson on matters related to ELI. “Think you can do that? I know you’ve talked to reporters and testified at Congressional hearings about the aging population.”

Paul shrugged. “Wouldn’t you rather have an expert in media relations?”

Maxine nodded her head. “Yes, if I thought we had one I could trust to get the message across.” She paused. “Which we don’t.” Paul started to say something and Maxine raised a hand. “Don’t interrupt the boss, it looks bad at review time. The news people want to talk to an expert. I’ll send you to media training with a coach that used to work with the major news outlets. Barbara’s a friend of mine and mentored some of the best. You’ll do fine.”

Paul might have been reluctant, but Pearl had been thrilled when he called her with the news. “You’ll be a rock star,” she gushed. “No pun intended. First thing, we gotta get you a new suit. Something that isn’t actuary ash grey, some ties without stripes, and a pair of shoes that aren’t wingtips.”

Paul groaned. “You know I hate shopping for clothes.”

Pearl made a tsk sound. “Don’t be such a baby about this, I’ll help you. I know a thing or two about fashion, I used to design my clothes for the rodeo.”

“Just so you know, I draw the line at sequins and rhinestones.”

“Funny—not!

Paul thought his first interview on national news hadn’t gone well, but Maxine later told him it was spot on. The attractive anchor had flipped her long blond hair and assured Paul beforehand that she wouldn’t try to ambush him. She would simply give him a chance to explain why the sustainability measure was needed and how it worked. Paul looked at the anchor’s smiling face, the earnest expression in her warm blue eyes, her deferential gestures, and soft assurances. He didn’t smile back.

When the interview went live, the camera focused on a side view of the anchor and Paul perched on stools at a desk. The anchor had crossed her long legs so that her tight red skirt rode up her thigh. The camera focused on her angular face, but now her eyes were an icy blue as she said, “I’m Andi Tun and this is Paul Söder, Chief Actuary for the Office of Sustainable Life at the Institute for Medicare and Medicaid. Paul led the team that developed the so-called death equation, recently the subject of bitter controversy in the healthcare bill.” Andi turned to Paul

and asked him, “Paul, how many Americans are estimated to die this year as a result of the new law?”

Paul clenched his teeth for an instant, then relaxed. “It’s not an equation, Andi, it’s a measure that will save lives. Everyone knows there’s a tragic shortage of medical care and equipment. A knee replacement that’s not life-threatening is one thing. But consider someone who needs heart surgery. That person can’t afford to wait.”

“So instead of putting people on a list, we’re going to let others die for them?”

Paul kept his expression neutral. “No, we are going to look at people who’re at the end of life and evaluate a few things. How long are they expected to live? What is the quality of their life? What resources will it cost to maintain that life? All that information is part of the sustainability measure. Only the attending physicians will make the final decision about moving patients to hospice care.

“Presumably to die with no life support,” the anchor interjected.

Paul laced his fingers. “So that the person can die with dignity without a prolonged, painful life sustained by resources that might have saved other patients.”

Andi touched her earpiece and listened for a few seconds. “What about people who have an advance directive? Suppose they want the doctor and hospital to take whatever means necessary to keep them alive?”

Paul remembered Barbara’s advice and tried to look empathetic. “Most directives are worded something like, I want my life to be prolonged to the greatest extent possible in accordance with reasonable medical standards. The sustainability measure is now the new standard.”

“Won’t some people say that you’re playing God?”

Paul was ready for the question, but still felt his armpits moisten. He shook his head. “Actually, some think just the opposite. They believe it’s unnatural to keep people breathing artificially; better to let nature take its course. The new guidelines are meant to put the care of terminal patients into the hands of doctors with enough information to help them make an informed decision.”

“Won’t the attending doctors be subject to IMM demands? Suppose they don’t agree with the recommendation, but feel they have to go along with the death measure or lose their license?”

“Doctors have always been subject to oversight, nothing has changed. And there is a rigorous appeal process to make sure everything is taken into account and procedures are followed.”

“That’s all we have time for. Thanks, Paul Söder, for taking time to chat with us. Next up, an interview with the parents of a daughter who was taken off life support by her doctor and died. I’m Andi Tun and this is BND, Breaking News Digest.”

Herxie said, “Good morning, Paul” in the soothing and mellifluous voice that Paul had selected from a menu of virtual assistant attributes. The screen facing Paul lit up and started to scroll news clips. The screens on the sides of the cubicle flashed pictures of his rock climbs and hikes in Arches, Canyonlands, and other National Parks. “I think you’ll be interested in this.” A news article appeared on-screen and expanded. Herxie read the headline, “Coastal shoreline continues to disappear under rising sea levels. For the quarter ending 6/30/2050, affected populations decreased 1.6 percent.”

“Grim, for sure,” Paul muttered. Over the past thirty years, 100 million people had relocated to major U.S. inland cities like Albuquerque, Austin, Minneapolis, and Phoenix. Large urban cities like Chicago also had experienced overwhelming population growth, due in part to relocation of migrants from the coastlines of North and South America, Hawaii, and larger US islands like Puerto Rico, and Guam. The migration was leveling off, but crowded conditions and unemployment led to riots about housing and access to healthcare.

Paul had published an article in *Contingencies*, an actuarial magazine, in which he called the changing demographics, the Great Inland Migration. The media picked up the article and started using the acronym GRIM when reporting on the negative effects of the migration.

Paul picked up the digital photo cube and waited for it to display a favorite picture of his mother. She had been at a climate change rally in Grant Park holding a sign, “Earth Can’t Swap Filters.” She looked like a college student with her slim figure, beret, and an orange and blue scarf flying from her neck. He’d been a junior in high school when he took that photo. A line ran through the photo where he had taped the original together.

His mother had promised to be home by five-thirty the day the photo was damaged. It was almost seven when he heard the garage door open. He’d heard his mother often say she loved her job as a social worker, but hated the unpredictable hours, particularly when she got home late.

Paul met her as she trudged into the mud room from the garage. He noticed his mother’s drooped shoulders and sad eyes. She brightened at his smile, reached to cup his cheek, then hesitated and dropped her hand. Paul followed her into the kitchen. The bright lights reflected off white cabinets and walls which concealed built-in appliances. In contrast, the gray granite counter tops were streaked with mineral grains of black and purple. The kitchen nook faced a

wall of windows. Trellises filled with clematis, morning glory and roses framed a bluestone patio.

“We’re blessed, Paul,” she said and tossed her purse onto the counter more forcefully than intended and it knocked over her photo at the Grant Park rally. It slid off the counter and crashed face down onto the floor. His mother looked distraught and said, “If you sweep up this mess, I’ll start dinner. Don’t cut yourself.”

When Paul picked up the frame, he noticed some shards of glass had sliced through the photo. He swept up the larger pieces then vacuumed the floor while his mother added to the noise as she slammed the refrigerator door and banged pots and pans.

“Mom, why do you have to work late all the time?” He complained.

“Someone’s got to help people in need. Here, chop these onions,” she said.

Later, when Luke Söder came home from his law office, they sat down to dinner at the kitchen table. Paul glanced at his mother and turned to his father. “Dad, why does Mom have to work all the time?”

Luke stabbed a piece of ribeye and pointed his fork at her. “Yes Anne, why do you?”

She took a few deep breaths and straightened her back. “The people I work with have no place to live, no place to work, no place to go for decent medical care. Why? Because those moron climate deniers have controlled the government for years and years. These people were forced out of their homes and lost everything.”

Luke put down his fork. “But they had a choice. They could have moved to areas with more services.”

Anne's neck flushed and her cheeks reddened. "Luke, where's that? You know thousands had to come to relocation camps like the one we have in Chicago. There aren't enough services for people like us, much less for the indigent. Someone has to help them."

Paul nodded in agreement. "Dad, we're studying the effects of climate change in school. It's unbelievable." He'd seen videos of ragged lines of people waiting for food, medical care, and the prefabricated housing so shoddy that the heat and electricity frequently went out. In the harsh Chicago winters that could be life-threatening.

Anne put her hands under her chin. She locked eyes with Luke, the corners of her mouth in a tight smile. They sat like that until Luke grumbled something and shifted his attention to cutting his steak. "Your mother is a good person, Paul," he said between bites. "That's why I married her. That and because she has beautiful brown eyes when she's not angry. What's for dessert?"

When both his grandparents came down with the flu that year, Paul had begged to go with his mother to the hospital. He had spent most of his summers with them at a lake house in Wisconsin. It was grandpa who took him to his first baseball game. Showed him how to use a scorecard. Paul loved filling the card with numbers and letters. His favorite was 6-4-3 for a double play.

"No one under eighteen is allowed in," she told him. "Besides, they haven't been admitted to the hospital. They're still in a holding area under observation. There are too many sick people and not enough rooms."

The next day, the hospital admitted his grandmother and she recovered. His grandfather was still under observation in the Emergency Department when he died. Before the funeral

service, Paul placed his Grandfather's battered Cubs hat from the 2016 World Series and a pink carnation on top of his chest.

Paul placed the photo cube in the center of his desk and said, "Thanks, Herxie, I'll read the full article on shoreline erosion later. Please reschedule all my afternoon appointments. I'll be at Northwestern Hospital visiting my mother. What's the HRX forecast for the next ninety days?"

A table of numbers appeared on the screen. Paul scanned the rows as Herxie's voice said, "The total number of cases with a high ELI that exceed the benchmark is projected to increase by 10%." Herxie continued reading until she said, "End of HRX report, Paul. Do you want any changes?"

"Thanks, Herxie, no changes. Send a copy to the team."

Paul spent the next hour answering email and following up on various projects until a chyron appeared across the bottom of his screen. Demonstrators were in Daley Plaza, less than a mile away. "Herxie, play the news feed from the Daley Plaza," he said.

Paul saw angry people pressing against a police barricade in front of the Picasso sculpture. They had raised fists and were yelling at the police officers who held riot shields, wore helmets with visors, and had on black body armor. Billy clubs dangled from one side of their utility belts and holstered weapons hung from the other. Some of the protesters carried signs that read, 'Respect My Rights or Expect More Fights.' A few had sealed garbage bags that looked bulky but seemed relatively lightweight and easy to move.

A reporter wearing a pink protective vest over a light gray jump suit held up a microphone. “This is Eyewitness News and we’re in Daley Plaza. I’m talking with community activist, Angela Chavez. Angela, what’s behind this demonstration?”

Angela’s denim coverall outlined her ample figure. The sunlight reflected off her signature purple snow goggles. She pursed her cupid’s bow lips, then spoke with exaggerated articulation. “*Nothing* is behind us. We are in *front* of the situation.

“We want the same rights as other citizens of Chicago. We are tired of hearing no. No housing, no medical care, no jobs, no schools. We lost our homes and were relocated here because the government has been in bed with big business for years, polluting the air, the water and the land. It ain’t cos...mic, it’s an...thro...po...gen...ic. Mother Nature is hurting, and she is mightily pissed. The politicians created this mess and now’s the time to clean...it...up.”

Angela raised a fist and faced the crowd. Protesters with garbage bags opened them and spilled the contents. All of it was plastic refuse: empty water bottles, discarded packaging, and other empty containers. The air filled with debris as people scooped up items and threw them over the barricade where they landed in front of the Picasso. Some items collided and fell on the police. A few officers unclipped their holsters.

Paul heard a soft chime and Herxie said, “Paul, your meeting with Dr. Frank Edington begins in ten minutes in the Halley huddle room.”

“Thanks, Herxie, I’m on my way. Coffee, please.”

“Sure thing, Paul. I don’t sense a receptacle.”

“Paul picked up a sapphire blue mug marked with *facts not appearances* in gold letters. He put it on a saucer-sized hot plate in the corner of his desk. A few seconds later, hot coffee streamed into the mug from a spigot that protruded from the cubicle wall.

Paul reached for the mug and said, “Herxie, call Pearl.”

When Pearl answered, she stifled a yawn.

“Sorry, Pearl, I don’t have a lot of time. I didn’t want to call too early, and now I have a meeting in a few minutes.” Paul rattled off the facts about his trip to the hospital last night and his mother’s condition. Pearl said she would check up on his mother in the hospital after lunch. She was leaving in a few minutes to attend the rally in the Daley Plaza. She wanted to hear Angela Chavez speak.

“Thanks, Pearl, I’ll meet you at the hospital. I’m cancelling my afternoon meetings. Be careful at the rally. I just saw a video of the protesters and things might get a little dicey with the police.”

Paul walked out of the cubicle carrying his mug and phone, the screen behind him went blank. Edington was sitting in the huddle room when Paul rapped on the door frame. He noticed Edington’s bushy beard and sideburns were grayer than their last meeting. Edington held a tablet in one hand and a pastry in the other, his stomach pressed against the table.

“Frank, good to see you. When was the last time? That Danish looks good—I didn’t know we started serving sweet rolls to our guests.”

“Probably the International Congress of Actuaries in Zurich. I introduced you to my mate, Jack, the President of the Institute of Actuaries.” Frank put down his tablet and reached under the table. He held up a white bakery box by a wire holder. “These I brought—help yourself. Nothing against the Danes, but this is a French pastry, Kouign Amann. Not as good as Patisserie Saint Anne in London. By the way, there was quite a row a few blocks away. I saw the local constabulary go by when I left the baker’s shop.”

“Paul sat down across from Frank. “Yes, I was watching in my cube. It was tense for a few minutes, but it was all theater. I hope everyone stays calm, Pearl’s on her way to the rally to hear one of the speakers. Listen, I had a rough night. My mother’s been hospitalized, so I need to go see her after lunch. You still can meet with other team members. My apologies for the inconvenience.”

“Not at all. I’m very sorry to hear about your mother and hope she’s back on the mend soon.” Frank picked up his mug and then set it down.

“Need more coffee?”

Frank flicked his hand at the mug. “This is tea, although it has a distinct aftertaste of coffee. Since time is of the essence, let’s get down to it. I’m anxious to talk about the database you used to develop ELI.”

“Sure, where do you want to start?”

“As you know, we’re facing similar issues and want to develop our own ELI in the UK. The National Medical Services, my benevolent-but-not-generous employer, wants to know how rigorous are the standards applied to the data. They want to avoid, shall we say,” he chuckled, “*rigor mortis* when developing our own.”

Paul stretched his arms in front of him and rolled his head. “We get challenged all the time on that. The database uses fifty years of experience collected by CMS and IMM. We developed tools and qualitative analysis software to code the data with a high degree of accuracy and consistency. It was a massive job and a headache for everyone involved.”

Frank brushed crumbs off his shirt front and said, “I can imagine. You know personal data protection laws are very stringent in the UK even after one has shuffled off this mortal coil.”

Paul looked puzzled then said, “Oh, you mean after death. We have an exemption in the US so that healthcare information can be disclosed for research purposes. That didn’t prevent years of legal wrangling before that exemption became part of the healthcare bill.”

Frank started to reach for his mug then caught himself. “I don’t relish talking about that issue with the local magistrates myself. Nor with the regulators now that we’re part of the EU again. I’m a bit fuzzy on how you use the database. Can you give me an example for a hypothetical one-off?”

“Ok, consider somebody who is at the end of life.” Paul drained his coffee mug. “We look at the life expectancy for the diagnosis, and consider the value of future medical costs, the current medical condition, family medical history, and other relevant data. We then run Monte Carlo simulations that plot out the present value of medical costs for each expectation of life using experience from the database.

“We use those results to generate an index for that person. The higher the index, the greater likelihood the person will die with substantial medical costs to simply prolong their life. An index of 100 means we’re 99% confident that death is imminent. As a result, any patient with an index of 100 or more is immediately transferred to a hospice—but always with physician approval.”

“Well, that makes a lot of sense, Paul.” Frank picked up another pastry and said, “We cold-hearted actuaries can manipulate equations and data and create standards that look brilliant to us, but appear dodgy to the average person.”

Frank paused to eat a bit of pastry. “Let’s say you have a Mother Teresa type, and someone who sets off a bomb in the Tube. Mother Teresa has an index of 101, and the bomber

has an index of 99. The average bloke would probably want to keep Mother Teresa alive and pull the plug on the bomber.”

Paul tilted his mug and frowned when he remembered it was empty. “A couple things. In your example, the bomber has an index very close to 100. Comparing someone that near the threshold with someone just beyond hasn’t really been an issue. The real question has been, does Mother Teresa deserve special consideration? The Congressional hearings covered that. When asked about it, I told them you just can’t play favorites. If there’s a double standard or room for special cases, it would open the door to legal challenges, political shenanigans, and religious influence. The system must apply equally to everyone, to saints and sinners alike. Otherwise people will lose confidence and the whole thing would fall apart.”

“So kind-hearted Paul Söder would let Mother Teresa die?”

“Probably not.” Paul waited a beat and said, “That’s why we need an index.”

Frank rocked a few times in his chair. “Yes, the Bard said it best, ‘I must be cruel, only to be kind.’ Shall we break for lunch? Based on the quality of this tea, I vote we skip the cafeteria and dine elsewhere. Perhaps on that famous Italian beef and a beer served at a proper temperature?”

Paul tapped his phone. “Herxie, please arrange a Tuber for 12:30. Dr. Edington and I are going to Al’s Beef for lunch. Hold all calls except from Northwestern Hospital and Pearl.”

Herxie’s soft voice came through the phone’s speaker, “Sure, Paul, arranging a Tuber now.”

Frank shook his head as if confused. “I don’t fancy the thought of riding around in a giant potato.”

“Actually, it’s a combination of the letter t in Tesla and Uber. Tesla has a contract to provide electric cars to Uber in Chicago and people started calling it Tuber. You’ll like Al’s, they serve Guinness on tap at *cellar temperature*.”

The waiter at Al’s wore his gray-streaked blond hair long on top of his head, like wheat blowing in the wind, but shaved on the sides. He had a tiny titanium dumbbell in his right ear and a Newcastle FC jersey over a sturdy torso.

Frank raised his eyebrows at Paul and peered up at the waiter. “Well, here’s a welcome sight for a lad away from home. Are you a Geordie, mate? A native of Newcastle?”

In a strong Chicago accent, the waiter said, “Nah, I’m from the South Side. The jersey was a gift. Can I getcha something to drink?”

Paul ordered them both pints of Guinness and Italian beef sandwiches with sweet peppers. When the waiter left, Frank watched him walk all the way to the kitchen. Paul’s phone chimed and he snatched it off the table. They exchanged glances while Paul had a short conversation during which Frank heard him say, “Hi Pearl, everything alright? What? What did you say, it’s kind of noisy in here? An explosion! Are you hurt? Thank God for that. Where are you? Sit tight, I’ll be right there.”

“Sorry, Frank, I have to leave immediately. There’s been some sort of attack at Daley Plaza. Pearl’s okay, she called from the emergency department. Go ahead and meet with other team members. I’ll try to call you later.” As Paul rushed out of the restaurant, he tapped his phone. “Herxie, order a Tuber for me ASAP to Northwestern Hospital.”

On the ride over, he tried to call Pearl. Her phone went to voice mail. He gave up after a few tries and sent a text, where are you? Paul stared at the screen, then typed bndnews.com

into his browser. The website had interviews with Chicago PD, Mayor Kwame Reid, and a few demonstrators.

By all accounts, an explosive device went off in the middle of the crowd of demonstrators. Mayor Reid estimated there were over a hundred people injured and at least eight deaths, but they were waiting for more information. While no group had claimed credit for the attack, a *Chicago Tribune* source credited right wing extremists opposed to the migration camp.

The driver slowed as they approached a sign with EMERGENCY in red letters and turned onto the side road leading to the entrance. Ambulances and police cars jammed the service drive. Paul leaned forward in the backseat of the Tuber to get a better view of the first responders and paramedics unloading demonstrators wrapped in bloody bandages and blankets. A policeman directed traffic and motioned Paul's driver to keep moving, pointing toward a parking area where several TV trucks idled. Reporters shouted questions hoping someone would respond, their camera operators waiting to get it on tape. Paul's phone chirped and he read a text from Pearl, with your mother now. Paul told the driver to slow down and jumped out of the Tuber while it was still moving. He sprinted toward the entrance.

A burly policeman put a hand on Paul's chest and the other on his pistol. Paul waived his ID and told the officer that his mother was a patient. The officer called someone and glared at Paul until he received a response. He nodded at Paul and passed him to a female security guard whose clothes reeked of deodorant and frying oil. She led him through a set of double doors that unleashed the sounds of doctors and nurses shouting orders, people moaning, and some screaming in pain. Paul inhaled and almost gagged at the odor of antiseptic and something else faintly metallic that he realized must be blood.

They wound through corridors filled with people on cots waiting for treatment. Paul thought he recognized Angela Chavez. A nurse was checking a tube that ran from a bottle of clear liquid to her wrist while a doctor looked at her chart. As Paul walked by, he heard the doctor say to the nurse, “See if we can get this one admitted, she’s in really bad shape.”

The security guard pointed to a room and left without looking at Paul or saying a word. He eased the door open and saw two beds crowded into a room that was probably meant for one. Pearl stood next to one of the beds holding his mother’s hand. He noticed a bandage on Pearl’s right elbow. The other patient seemed to be sleeping, her mouth agape. Paul could barely see his mother’s face behind the ventilator as he snaked through the machines.

Paul kissed Pearl’s cheek. “Looks like you got thrown from that bronco.”

“At least I landed sunny side up,” she said and showed him the scrapes on the seat of her jeans. She gave Paul a one-armed hug.

“Seriously, Pearl, are you hurt bad, is anything broken?”

“No, praise the Lord. The explosion started a stampede that knocked me down. Fell mostly on my rear end and elbow.”

Paul looked down at his mother. “How is she?”

Pearl shook her head and bit her lip. “They won’t tell me, Paul. HIPAA privacy and that whole rigamarole. She hasn’t opened her eyes since I’ve been here.”

Paul looked around. There’s no one here, he thought. Then he noticed a computer with patient information a few feet from the hospital bed. He scanned the wavy green lines. Along with the strange symbols and numbers, he found a familiar abbreviation: ELI = 95.