

Try Not to Die in the Meantime

He was dead.

At least, that was what the papers said. It wasn't the first time either. Rich Haggard had died many times during the two miserable decades that made up his life. First was the boating accident. What a cliché way to go out. Then the electric fire that had consumed his house until nothing was left save for a pile of ashes and ironically the fire extinguisher. The newest escapade was by far the most ridiculous.

Rich flicked the newspaper, smacking a hand against the flimsy page. His eyes lifted over the edge to focus on the man sitting across from him.

“Listen to this nonsense, Jamie! And I quote: The car left the pavement at 90 MPH, sliding from the narrow mountain road and rolling five times before it reached the bottom of the canyon. The one victim was identified as Rich Haggard, 23.”

Jamison, Rich's old college roommate didn't bother looking up from his cup of coffee. They'd been through this before. In this case, Rich hadn't even known he was “dead” until he'd seen the front page of the newspaper waiting for them at their usual booth in the diner. He'd bet his apparently spectral life that the waitress Jenny had placed it there intentionally as payback for the mediocre tip he'd left her last week.

Still, it would have been nice to get a somewhat more dramatic reaction out of Jamison. It wasn't like the paper published a story about your death every day. Though, in Rich's case, they just might.

Jamison took a long, contemplative sip of coffee and then raised his gaze to Rich. He sighed heavily. Rich felt a shudder roll over him. He knew that sigh. He'd heard it plenty of times before. It had come when Rich arrived back to the dorm room at 2 or 3 o'clock in the

morning, staggeringly drunk and obnoxiously loud. It came when he didn't bother to show up for final exams because, after all, that wasn't why he was in college anyway.

Jamison was the master of weighted sighs. He was the same age as Rich but had the maturity of an 80-year-old grandfather. Rich knew he was a catastrophic disappointment to his friend, that was half the fun. Jamison was a buzzkill. He always had been. It wasn't his fault though. The poor fool hadn't even gone to a public high school. His parents were too *righteous* for that. Jamison was too righteous for that. Jamison Dutch was a good, old churchgoing boy.

Rich couldn't help snickering whenever he imagined a young Jamison all done up in his Sunday best, feet dangling from the church pews. His laughter died away when Jamison pierced him with a stare that nailed him to the booth.

Jamison cleared his throat again and this time Rich's mind didn't wander. Somehow, he knew he was in for it now. It didn't take long for Jamison to confirm that theory.

"If I were you," Jamison began, "I wouldn't take this so lightly."

Rich snorted, "Why not? It's not like this is the first time this has happened right?"

Jamison leaned forward; his forearms braced against the linoleum-lined table. "You're right. This *isn't* the first time. Maybe, just maybe, Rich, you should take this as a sign."

Rich raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"You're not immortal, Rich. You're going to die someday. Where do you think you're going when you do?"

Rich scoffed. Not this again. He leaned forward until there was only a handsbreadth of space between him and his friend. "I've got a newsflash for you, Jamison. I...don't...care."

Jamison glowered at him. There had been a number of similar conversations between them, all with the same end result. Rich's ridiculous predicament of "dying" only added fuel to

the fire of Jamison's righteous conviction. However, Jamison was patient by nature, and it seemed that no matter how many times Rich dismissed him, he kept trying. Only now, there was a different look on Jamison's face, one Rich had not seen before. There wasn't any anger hiding behind Jamison's eyes. Instead, there was a deep, poignant sadness written on his face. The look sent a twinge of guilt into Rich's chest. His eyes darted to the side, unable to meet Jamison's gaze. This was how it always happened. He didn't want to hear any of Jamison's religious nonsense. He liked Jamison, he was an easy-going, kind person. Honestly, he was probably the only reason Rich had gotten through college in the first place. However, their friendship was at its best when personal issues like religion were kept behind a concrete wall. Still, Jamison kept pressing the issue and Rich always felt just a little guilty when he wrote his friend off.

Jamison released a heavy sigh and slipped out of the booth. He brushed himself off and offered a weak smile. "All right, Rich. I won't say anything else. I know you don't want to hear it."

Rich stood as well, "Look, Jamie, you know it's not about you."

Jamison nodded, "I know."

Rich felt like he should say something else to brush things over, but nothing came to mind. Fortunately, Jamison wasn't one to dwell on things.

"I have to go, Rich, I'm the greeter at my church's service tonight."

"Right, I should get back to my apartment and call the newspaper to try to get them to fix their article. I don't want to be a ghost forever."

Jamison gave a strained laugh, "Right, try not to die again in the meantime."

Rich and his friend shook hands and Rich made sure to leave Jenny a halfway decent tip, going so far as to calculate the correct amount on his phone, so she didn't poison his coffee the next time they visited the diner.

As Rich walked back to his apartment, he couldn't deny that he felt a little unsettled. He had never really felt that way after a conversation with Jamison, even when those conversations were uncomfortable and weighty. He didn't at all believe Jamison's theory that his "deaths" were a sign from above. But Jamison's words settled like a weight on his chest and the feeling that he had disappointed his friend somehow felt worse than reading about his "death" ever could.

His mind was still heavy when he reached his apartment building. He barely noticed the climb up the hazardous old stairs or the loud music blasting from behind his neighbor's door. He only came to when he reached his own door. He reached for his keys before realizing that the door wasn't locked. In fact, it wasn't even fully closed. Rich stared at the door for a long moment. How could he have forgotten to lock his door? He was always careful about it since he didn't exactly live in the best part of town. Then again, he had been running late to meet up with Jamison and had been rushing out the door. Rich shook his head, it had been a foolish mistake, but he hadn't been gone for long, he doubted anyone had even noticed.

Rich looked up and down the hall, then opened the door. The sight that met him made him freeze in shock and incomprehension. His apartment wasn't empty. A big man dressed in dark clothing was standing in his living room rifling through drawers. When Rich opened the door, the old unmaintained wood creaking ominously, the stranger paused and looked up. Maybe Rich should have turned and run right then and there but his body wouldn't move. His already distracted mind didn't realize the significance of his situation or the danger he was in. The intruder slowly turned to face a petrified Rich.

The man looked just as surprised as Rich was. His mouth hung slightly open, and his eyebrows creased together in confusion. He took a step forward, the ransacked drawer forgotten.

“That’s not possible! I saw the paper, I read the article. You’re dead.”

Rich swallowed hard, “So, I’ve heard.”

The intruder shook his head, “No, absolutely not. I don’t take chances with this type of thing. I did my research. You were dead and it was easy enough to find your address online. There was no possible chance of being caught. I still won’t be.”

Before Rich could react or even realize what was happening, the man reached into the pocket of his jacket and drew out a dull black gun. That was the moment when the full reality of the situation finally sunk into Rich’s thick skull. This man, this stranger, was a burglar, a thief, and a dangerous one at that. The man was armed while Rich was completely, utterly defenseless.

“I won’t be caught,” the burglar snarled, “Everyone already thinks you’re dead, anyway. It’ll be easy enough to dispose of the body and it’s not like anyone will miss you.”

Maybe that was true. Maybe nobody would miss him. Rich knew better than anyone that he wasn’t the most likable person. He was loud, obnoxious, and short-tempered. He drank himself into oblivion, snapped at those closest to him, and was overall a general disappointment. The only person that he truly considered a friend was Jamison. But if he were being honest with himself, he wasn’t sure Jamison felt the same way. He couldn’t imagine why someone like Jamison would bother to care anything about him in the first place. Rich was the type of person to ruin any relationship he took part in. It was only a matter of time before he ruined his friendship with Jamison. Maybe he already had.

Most people already thought he was dead. Would Jamison even care if he disappeared for real?

Rich Haggard had “died” many times, but he had a feeling this time it would be for real. He looked down the barrel of the small gun, knowing that a single bullet could tear into his heart, his head, or any number of vital organs, snuffing the life out of him in an instant. Suddenly the thought of the newspaper detailing his death wasn’t so funny. The concept of eternity that Jamison so loved to remind him of wasn’t so easily dismissed or scoffed at. Not when he was staring death in the face. Not when he really didn’t know the answer to Jamison’s question.

“You’re not immortal, Rich. You’re going to die someday. Where do you think you’re going when you do?”

Rich didn’t know where he would go but judging by the life he had led; he didn’t think it would be the same place Jamison went. His mouth went dry, and his heart felt like it kicked into overdrive. Jamison had talked about heaven and its alternative plenty of times. Rich had always joked about death and damnation. Now, it was far from funny. He didn’t want to die, and he didn’t want to spend eternity in Hell.

The burglar wasn’t going to back down. Rich was going to die. The realization hit him square in the chest, just like the bullet likely would. He was going to die. He never thought he would come around to Jamison’s way of thinking, but he knew that if there was a God, he didn’t want to be in the wrong when he died. He wished he had paid a little closer attention to Jamison sooner because at that moment, filled with panic and dread, he had no idea what to do. All he could manage was a silent cry to Jamison’s God.

I know I’m the worst kind of person, God. But if You are real, please give me a second chance. Or maybe this is my third or fourth chance. I don’t want to die on the wrong side of eternity.

It wasn't the best prayer. It was probably the most pathetic prayer to go down in history, but it was the best he could do. He supposed at death's door, his best was better than nothing.

The burglar cocked the gun, the sound echoing through the small apartment. Everything was silent save for the dull thrum of bass from his neighbor's music and the pounding of Rich's heart. He took a deep breath and readied himself for the gunshot that would mean his death.

Then another sound joined the music and his thudding heart. It was a quiet sound and Rich was sure the only reason he could hear it was because he was standing so close to the slightly open door. It was the slight pitter-patter of footsteps.

Part of Rich wanted to scream a warning for the unsuspecting person who would likely end up right in the middle of firing range. There was no sense in anyone else getting hurt. However, the gun leveled at his chest made Rich hesitate. If he so much as whispered a warning, the burglar wouldn't hesitate to shoot him. He didn't dare even open his mouth. He could only hope the person would move on quickly and stay out of the way.

The footsteps kept moving closer and closer until Rich could tell the person was just outside the door. Rich held his breath. *Don't open the door, don't open the door*, he silently pleaded. But, lo and behold, the door creaked open. Rich winced, knowing that he wouldn't be the only one to die now. The burglar didn't want any witnesses. Rich wondered who the poor fool who came to pay him a visit could be.

"Hey, Rich, you forgot your phone at the diner, I thought I'd swing by and drop it off since your place is on my way to church. By the way, you know it's not safe to leave your door unlock..."

Jamison's words cut off as he lifted his eyes from the ground and took in the scene unfolding before him.

No, not Jamison. Anyone but Jamison, Rich thought. Jamison was too good to die.

Rich wanted to yell at his friend to run. Maybe it wasn't too late, maybe Jamison could still get away. But Jamison was no fool. He knew exactly what was going on. He saw the gun pointed at Rich and the desperate panic in the burglar's eyes. It was clear that the intruder would fire the gun and Rich was right in the bullet's path. Much to Rich's surprise, Jamison didn't look afraid, and he wasn't paralyzed in shock as Rich was. Jamison's eyes gleamed with resolute purpose.

"You don't have to do this," Jamison told the burglar, "We can all walk away. It's not too late to admit that you're wrong. Murder is a sin and if you kill us, you will have to face judgment someday for your actions. Do you really want to stand before God as a murderer? He forgives even the greatest sins, if you repent, He will forgive you too."

Rich's mouth dropped open in shock. Only Jamison could stand before a loaded gun, death imminent, and try to convert the man about to kill him. The burglar looked not just shocked but completely in awe. If the situation had been less dire, Rich might have laughed. As it was, he stayed silent as a corpse.

The burglar gestured at Jamison with his gun, "You religious lot are all the same, aren't you? Well, you'll meet your maker today, boy. I'll make a martyr out of you."

Jamison was not daunted. He held up his hands in a placating gesture, "Please, you don't want to do this."

The burglar pointed the gun at Rich once again, "No witnesses. I won't be caught!"

The man's voice rose in pitch and volume. His finger went to the trigger. Rich looked to Jamison, trying to convey that he was sorry and that he believed what Jamison had told him, had

tried to tell him for so long. A look of relief swept over Jamison's face, as if he understood what Rich was trying to convey.

Rich took a deep breath, maybe his last, as the burglar squeezed the trigger.

BANG!

The shot reverberated around the room. It was louder than thunder, more staggering than a strike of lightning. Rich closed his eyes, but no pain came to him. There was no searing agony coming from a gaping wound in his chest. There was no bright light or fiery furnace. In fact, he didn't feel like anything had changed at all.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Rich cracked open his eyes. There was no doubt that he was still in his apartment. He was still alive. How?

It didn't take him long to find his answer. It, or rather he, was standing right in front of Rich. Jamison. *No!*

In an instant, Rich realized what had happened. Jamison had taken the bullet for him. He had jumped in the gun's path to protect Rich and save his life. In the aftermath, Jamison had been shot instead of Rich. Rich stared at his friend, his eyes widening with horror. Jamison was still standing, his hands grasping his side where the bullet had lodged itself. He blinked once, twice, and then grimaced. Rich could tell his friend was about to fall so he reached out and grasped Jamison's forearms to steady him. Rich's heart was pounding so hard he feared it would burst from his chest. He maintained his composure long enough to help lower Jamison to the ground, propping him up slightly against his knees.

Rich waited for the second bullet to come, piercing his heart, and killing him. It was only a matter of time. Soon, he would join Jamison. They would both die. The burglar would escape, and Rich would find out for sure whether God was real. When he didn't feel the dreaded impact,

he turned away from his friend for a moment and lifted his gaze, searching for the burglar and the gun. He saw the intruder, but the gun was no longer pointed at him. The man was shaking from head to foot, a look of sheer terror was all over his face. He wasn't looking at Rich or at Jamison anymore. He was looking at a point beyond. Rich looked behind him, trying to see what the man was so afraid of. At first, he thought maybe help had come. Surely, someone had heard the gunshot. Much to Rich's surprise, there was no one there. The man continued to stare toward nothing. Then he started to back up. One step. Then another. Then he ran. He didn't look back. He didn't fire his gun at Rich or finish off poor Jamison. He didn't go for the stairs either. Instead, he threw open the window and jumped two stories. Rich heard the impact as he hit the ground, but he didn't get up to see whether the man kept running.

It was only then that Rich realized he wasn't dead, and he wasn't about to die. But Jamison was. His friend looked so, so pale. Blood soaked from the wound in Jamison's side, through his shirt, and stained the ground and Rich's pant leg. Rich realized in a haze that there was too much blood. Jamison was bleeding out in front of him, Jamison who had taken that bullet for *him*. He felt miserable. He didn't deserve any of Jamison's loyalty and he wished desperately that he could take his place. He knew he couldn't. There was one thing he could do though. He fumbled in Jamison's pocket until he found the phone that had started Jamison's involvement in the first place. His hands were shaking but he managed to dial for an ambulance.

Then he turned his full attention to Jamison.

"It'll be okay, Jamie. The ambulance is on the way. You'll be all right."

Jamison shook his head, "I'm not worried. Even if I die, I know where I'll go, a place with no more sorrow and no more pain."

Rich felt a lump form in his throat. He squeezed Jamison's hand. "I know, Jamie. You deserve to go there too. All... all you've done for me. You're the best friend I could ask for and I completely don't deserve you."

Rich heard the sound of sirens outside and released a breath of relief.

"Just a little longer, Jamie. Just hold on a little longer."

Jamison sucked in a sharp breath and sat up a little. He focused on Rich with a severity that garnered full attention.

"Have you thought about what I told you, Rich?"

Rich didn't need a further explanation to understand what Jamison meant. He heard the paramedics racing up the stairs.

"I have, Jamie. I think you might just be right and I'm more than ready to hear you out."

The last thing Rich saw before the paramedics swept into the room and pushed him aside, was the smile on Jamison's face. The next few minutes went by in a blur and all Rich could do was stand on the sidelines, useless. Finally, the paramedics lifted Jamison onto a stretcher and carried him away. Rich followed numbly at a distance until he found himself in his car driving towards the hospital.

It was hard to focus on the events that had transpired. He couldn't quite keep his mind in one place. He was probably a hazard to other drivers, but he was desperate to reach the hospital and make sure Jamison would be all right. The drive felt unbearably long, and it gave Rich plenty of time to think. Chief among his thoughts was his cry out to God during his greatest distress. He had never imagined that he would believe in God but the fact that he was still alive seemed enough proof. Jamison had saved him and when the burglar could have fired a second shot, he had run away instead.

Now that he had accepted the fact that there was a God and that He had saved him, Rich was frustrated that he hadn't listened to Jamison sooner. He knew why of course. There were plenty of reasons, he didn't want to believe in God. First and foremost, had to be his father. The man professed to be a Christian, yet he still treated Rich with mental and verbal abuse. Looking back, Rich never should have set his father as an example for Christians. The man was nothing like Jamison, who had always looked out for Rich and treated him as an equal and a friend. College hadn't exactly encouraged him to seek after God either. Everyone there thought it was pathetic and uncool. And, if he were being completely honest with himself, drinking was a major barrier. He'd never seen Jamison drink before. Jamison had quoted the Bible's verses about drunkenness to Rich many times. After the events of the night, Rich knew he would have to stop. He wondered what would have happened if he had returned to his apartment drunk that night. He knew the answer without hesitation, he would be dead.

There were a lot of ways he could have ended up dead. Jamison still might die. Rich had seen Jamison praying for people before. If someone was injured, sick, or struggling with any number of things, Jamison wouldn't hesitate to lay hands on the person and pray aloud for them to be healed. Rich had seen it in college when Jamison joined the campus crusade and dragged him along to one of their events. He had even seen it on the street as they were walking to the diner. It had always made Rich uncomfortable but with Jamison's life at stake, he figured he should at least try.

He cleared his throat once, twice. Then began his prayer.

“God, I know You're real now. I'm sorry that I didn't accept it earlier. I know I don't exactly have any brownie points with You, but Jamison does. He's dying, God, because of me. He saved me. I'm going to change God because I know I've been wrong. I promise I'll change.

Just please, save Jamison. He's better than anyone I know, and he loves You more than I can imagine. So, please, save him."

Rich felt ridiculous speaking out loud alone in his car. Still, part of him felt like his request had been heard. If Jamison did survive, Rich resolved to really hear him out. He wanted to hear everything that Jamison had tried to tell him for so long. He wouldn't dismiss Jamison's words any longer. He resolved that he would do things right and repent completely for everything he had done wrong. He knew it would take a while, but he would do it, no matter how long it took.

A few days later, Rich was sitting beside Jamison's hospital bed. His friend had been drifting in and out of consciousness for the past few days. Several rounds of painkillers administered after a long surgery to dislodge the bullet left Jamison in a dreamlike state. The doctor and nurses assured Rich that his friend would be all right. The bullet hadn't hit any vital organs and since it had stayed lodged in Jamison's side, he hadn't bled out. In fact, it was a miracle that Jamison was still alive. Rich didn't deny that a miracle was exactly what it was.

Rich spent most of his time at Jamison's bedside. He felt like he owed it to the man who had saved his life. That, and he was desperate to talk to Jamison as soon as he woke up. Rich found himself praying during most of those long hours. He started listing all the mistakes he had made and the sins he had committed. The longer the list grew, the more uncertain he felt about things. How could God accept someone like him? His behavior hadn't just been wrong, it had been outright rebellious towards God.

Late on the first full day of Jamison's hospitalization, his pastor came to visit. Rich had never met the man, but he seemed friendly enough and he didn't ask Rich to leave while he visited.

“You must be Rich, I’ve heard a lot about you,” the man said.

Rich bet he had, “All Jamison’s frustration, I’m sure.”

The man offered a kind smile, “I won’t deny that. But Jamison has also told me what a good friend you’ve been to him.”

“A good enough friend that I got him shot.”

The pastor laid a hand on Rich’s shoulder, “A good enough friend that you called an ambulance for him and have been at his bedside ever since.”

Rich looked at his friend, no longer pale after multiple blood transfusions but still frail and worn.

“Yeah, I guess.”

Jamison’s pastor reached into a bag at his side and withdrew a Bible.

“This is Jamison’s, I figured he would want it when he wakes up.”

The man handed the book to Rich.

“You might find something interesting in it, in the meantime. Jamison keeps extensive notes.”

Rich hesitantly took the book, feeling like he was intruding on something private and precious. He’d seen Jamison carry the Bible around like a favorite child. In college, his friend had read a few chapters every morning before he did anything else.

The pastor rested a hand on Jamison’s forehead and silently prayed over him before nodding to Rich and departing. It took some time but eventually Rich did open the Bible and once he had opened it, he couldn’t seem to close it. It was only when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jamison’s eyes crack open that he finally set the book aside.

“Rich?” Jamison asked, his voice hoarse from disuse.

“I’m here, Jamie. How are you feeling?”

Jamison shrugged and then winced. “Sore.”

Rich smiled just a little, “A bullet wound might do that to you.”

Jamison blinked a few times. “I’m not dead then. Neither are you.”

“Not even close.”

Jamison looked around the room until his eyes landed on the open Bible lying next to Rich.

“Rich?” Jamison asked, “Have you?”

He didn’t need to say anything more. Rich nodded, unable to form words to express his change of heart.

“Kind of. I mean, not officially, I guess. I’d like to though.”

Tears started to form in the corners of Jamison’s eyes. Rich jumped to his feet.

“What’s wrong, Jamie? Are you in pain?”

Jamison shook his head and wiped the tears away, “No, it’s not that. I’m just so, so glad. You have no idea how much I’ve been praying for you. You’re my best friend, Rich. I wanted you to know the same peace and joy that I do.”

Rich had to turn away to hide his own tears. He sniffed hard and swiped his eyes.

“Right, well, how do I go about it, oh faithful one?”

Jamison snorted, “Close your eyes and repeat after me. God, I know I’ve sinned and fallen short of Your glory. I know that You sent Your Son to die on the cross for me. I repent of my sins and ask You to come into my life. Amen.”

Rich repeated the words, feeling like his heart was cracking open. By the end, he could hardly push the words past the lump in his throat. Jamison grabbed his hand and squeezed it gently.

The moment was interrupted by the door swinging open. It was Jenny, the waitress from their favorite diner. She strode into the room with purpose, a newspaper grasped at her side.

“You’ll never believe this!” she exclaimed, flinging the paper onto Jamison’s bed.

Jamison opened the paper to read it. A raucous laugh escaped from him before he handed the paper off to Rich.

Puzzled, Rich flicked the paper open and stared at the front page. In bold, black letters the headline read:

Jamison Dutch Dead from Gunshot Wound.