The Button to End The World

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The Button to End the World
By Thaddeus M. Daniels

It came to her in the night, after she arrived from work and after she slumped into her bed exhausted. Once the morning comes and she looks at the desk near her bed, she’ll see the button on top of the scattered notebooks and paper. Miah’s thoughts kept her up again even as she held her eyes closed. As with many other things, she wanted the day to be over as soon as possible.

The day began late. Miah hadn’t come from her wing of the dorm, into the common area she shared with her roommate until later in the evening.

“Good morning!” Val said, hunched over a box within a maze of boxes.

“Morning,” Miah said back.

Val taped the box shut and stacked it on top of another, clearing the beige floor just a bit. “End of an era, huh?”

“Yeah.” Through the windows, the sun shined on the clear beige walls; it made Miah anxious. Only to escape the anxiety, Miah asked Val, “Do you need help with anything?”

Val rested her hands on her hips. She looked like she’d been packing all morning; her blue sweatpants and pink shirt had wrinkles “I’m pretty much done, thanks though.”

Most of the boxes in their living room were Val’s. Miah had a less organizational approach and a less drama centered one. Val took a deep breath and said, “End of an era. Yup. No more college.”

Miah gave out a snort. “So dramatic.”

“Well, someone has to give life some life and it definitely won’t be you.”

“Is that why you put the button in my room?”

“What? What button? And why would I want to go in your room? That place is depressing.”
“Never mind.” She was like a volleyball, back and forth. Part of her knew Val wasn’t the button’s source but a quiet, repressed part of her hoped it really wasn’t real, that Antarctica was still there. She would ask Val if she’s seen the news, but Val never does. It’s too “gloomy” for her. “I need to tell you something.”

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“Why are you wearing a hoodie? It’s black too, I know you’re melting with the way the sun is beaming at us right now. And the grey leggings weren’t really a choice either. It screams ‘put me out of my misery,’” Val said.

“Can we focus?” Miah said flatly. The sky was clear as they progressed on their walk through campus. The sun burned at Miah, making her glad that she kept her hair in a messy bun, she hated when strands of hair trapped heat. She started hating her hair because of it some time ago. It was just too exhausting to deal with.

“I’m just saying. So, you press it and the world ends?”

“Yeah.”

“Just like that?”

“I think so, yeah.” They passed people sitting in the grass of the quad chattering, most likely reveling in the school year’s end. Trees scattered about stood stiff and brightened; brown bricked buildings stood along the sidewalk.

“So, where is it?”

Miah pulled the button out of her hoodie pocket and held it in front of her. Their pace slowed; they stared at the white words on top of the button’s blood red mushroom head. In excessively big letters the words said, “End the world.” Attached to the main button at the black base was a smaller button with a red mushroom head like the main button, but stamped on it was
something different. It said “Demo.” She pressed it when she first realized the button was there in her room. She never viewed herself as lucky, but she knew that luck was the only thing the prevented the world’s end.

“Would you want to?” Val asked. She was met with a glance and the tucking of the button.

The simplicity of it all made it enticing. Antarctica simply disappeared, there one minute gone the next. Every news outlet was talking about it. To simply disappear was something that would intrigue anyone, even Val admitted that.

“All relationships can be fixed y’know, so if it’s because of you and your mom—”

Miah glanced at her again. She wished she never talked about it to her. Val could never understand any situation that was just complicated and not good versus bad. She liked it at first, needed it even in order to simplify things, to justify things—like telling her mother she never wanted to see her again, among other things. She doesn’t regret that though. “Why wouldn’t I want to?” Miah asked, a branch cracking under her foot.

“Um, because living is nice?”

“Is it?” Miah spoke with a heaviness that she could see made Val uncomfortable.

“Well, it’s nice most of the time, I guess.”

“Not when you have a life everyone else has. One that’s so draining, you can’t go to sleep at night. One where you keep giving and giving just to get the shit you literally need to survive. The world doesn’t give a shit about anyone, Val, sorry to be the one to tell you. People die and everyone moves on.”

Someone walked through the space that grew between them. They turned on the path, back toward the dorms. “Maybe you don’t have a life like everyone else’s. I mean, people try,
and they try longer than you do. You only tried to fix your grades for a little while. And you were only really nice to me for a couple of months; I’d hate to see how you left your other roommates.’

Val didn’t see Miah’s wince. It was true and it was a cycle. People start to scare her when she gets close to them. Only by a small distance, Miah closed the space between them. She knew Val was being kind and not mentioning other things like her struggling with multiple jobs or her leaving behind those she fell in love with or her staying up late freaking out about the future. In her mind, she expressed gratitude by being quiet all the way back.

Before they went into their rooms Val said, “I think we could’ve been friends if you tried more. But, hey, people come and go right? Oh, and maybe you should leave the button here.”

Miah lied and said she would. They were separated for the rest of the day; the few times they were near each other, they were silent, sound coming only from the refrigerator’s hum. For Val’s sake, she left the button in the living room; it didn’t leave her though. For the rest of the day, she pondered on it, where it could have come from, why it would come to her, and what the peace would be like after she pressed it.

The state of things with Val weighed on her. She wasn’t the first, there were plenty of others that could have become close to Miah. It was just too new. Having someone be so important in her life was bizarre to her. There was one instance where the cycle didn’t occur, and a relationship’s potential wasn’t ruined, but then again it was maintained only by external forces. Or maybe not. Miah couldn’t figure it out; she tried through the day and until nightfall.

It had been a long time since she talked with or even seen Ricky. She stayed on campus during the summers and winters. It had been four years, but he still had the same voice.

“What’s up, Miah, long time no see,” Ricky said over the phone.
She asked him if he would be free and then what was the longest time he ever drove and then if he could pick her up and bring her home.

He whistled, then said, “How long would that be? Going back and forth?”

“Only about five hours.” She pushed out a small laugh.

“Yeesh. I’ll be there at ten.”

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In the morning, it hit her. The end of an era. If the button was near her, she probably would have pressed it then. It was where she left it. She picked it up and put it in her hoodie pocket which was bigger than the last, so it didn’t poke out much. She put on the same outfit layout as the day before; having multiple sets of the same clothes was very convenient for her time and time again. Anything that required too much thought would make her feel like she ran fifty miles, so thinking about the button was like running a thousand miles.

She shoved it in the back of her mind once Ricky arrived. “Hey, cousin,” he said.

“What’s up?” Miah said flatly. Ricky stepped out of his truck and stretched. A soft breeze moved around them and into the parking lot.

“Isn’t there supposed to be a graduation or something?”

“There is but I’m not interested.”

“Yeesh. How come, cousin?”

She shrugged. While it was nice being around him again, the possibility of them talking about things she didn’t want to talk about made her want to escape. “We should get started.”

“Lead the way.”

She set the pattern to where they wouldn’t meet while transferring boxes. She had to avoid any conversation that could lead to uncomfortable topics. Of course, it would make sense
for him to want to talk but she didn’t want that. He would ask her how she had been, why she
was being so weird or if she was okay.

She carried out the last box. Val’s boxes were still a maze; she was still sleeping. Miah
hadn’t told her she would be leaving, and she’d probably panic when she saw her stuff and the
button gone. Miah shut the door behind her anyway.

“What’s your roommate like?” Ricky asked as they finished packing the boxes into the
truck. They got into the truck, ready to go.

“She’s fine. We’re not really friends anymore.”

“Oh. How come?”

Miah sighed.

“Are you okay, Miah?”

“Can we just...a quiet ride would be good for me.”


Miah watched as the campus shrunk in the side mirror. She wished she could go back,
start over. She wished she could keep starting over again and again. Her eyes began to sting, she
shut them to hold back the tears. She leaned back in the seat and reached for the button in her
pocket. She kept it in the pocket and rubbed it, the urge to push surged as the ride continued.

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She woke up from gentle taps, she hadn’t intended to fall asleep, and she hadn’t intended
to end up in the parking lot of the restaurant she used to work at—they used to work at. It still
looked the same, the light brown paint was a little more worn down; the wide windows were as
clear as ever, the double doors looked new but the sign, saying “cookout” in all caps, was clearly
the same one from when Ricky and Miah started. The guy that owned the place, Dave, lived in
the same mobile home community as Miah. She wasn’t sure if he still lived there though. He was
nice to them, offered them a job when he heard money was tight for the two. It wasn't her first,
her first job was tense and abusive. Fast food jobs are often those things. She had rolled with the
punches because she needed the money but then she was offered the job at Cookout.

“Why are we here?” Miah asked. Ricky turned off the ignition.

“Complicated answer. You seem down, really down, so I wondered what would cheer
you up.”

“And this was what you came up with? I hated working here.”

“You didn’t hate it that much right? You liked talking to the people from what I
remember.”

“I’m still stuck on you bringing me somewhere I worked because I’m ‘down,’” Miah said.

“That is crazy,” he laughed and stepped out the truck, “but it’s more complicated than
that.” Ricky stretched, looking into the truck at Miah. “You coming in or what? Dave wouldn’t
mind you being behind the counter again.”

“No. Absolutely not. And it’s not complicated; just because I have a few, a few, good
memories doesn’t mean I wanna be here. I’m not stepping out this truck.”

She stepped out of the truck eventually, and she got behind the counter and breathed in
the fragrance she forgot she missed. It was the small of a random assortment of food: pizza,
chicken, bread. She had liked the menu’s chaos. Ricky had gambled on the restaurant’s aura
making her stay. She hadn’t expected it to work so she caved in and offered to stay for just two
minutes. When Miah stepped into the sunlight tangled warm yellow lights that bounced off the
glossy black marble floor and brown walls, she lost track of the time and softly rolled her eyes at Ricky’s smirk.

Miah took the place of the guy at the counter. She couldn’t help but worry though. There were patrons sitting at the tables throughout the restaurant and there would definitely be more coming soon. Since the traffic was slow then, that meant it’ll be thick soon. That’s how food jobs worked. Ricky was in the walled off kitchen behind her helping cook the orders that came in before they arrived. He and the other cooks put the orders in their to-go plates and sat them on the open slot window, the whole counter became filled.

“You used to say you like the high stakes,” Ricky said through the window.

“It’s draining but...maybe it’s the good type of draining.” Miah didn’t tell him that if it got too bad for her, she would probably press the world ending button that rested in her pocket. The door opened and the lunch rush began.

“I haven’t seen you in a while,” one customer said. “You’re still so sweet.”

“Thanks, been a while since I heard that,” Miah said back with a kind grin.

“Thank you!” another customer said as Miah handed them their order. “Sorry for cursing you out that one time!”

“Water under the bridge...if you leave a good tip.” That sent the customers into a fit of laughter.

Loud chatter filled the building. Customers waiting in the thick line talked to each other about the weather, how great the food was, and Antarctica disappearing.

“It’s just so crazy,” one lady said to another. “How does an entire continent go away like that? What is life?”
Her anxiety came back to her. It felt clearer though. She can decipher it now, all the parts of it. She felt lighter but didn’t want it to be because she was there. Once the foot traffic slowed down, Ricky stepped out the kitchen and went next to Miah. “So, how are we feeling?” he asked.

“Clearer.”

“Nice. Can you tell me what’s bummer you?”

“I don’t think I can. It’s just too much.

Ricky leaned against the counter. “Hmm. You’re feeling better, so that’s good.”

“For how long, though?”

“As long as you keep pushing. Sometimes you gotta fight to live your best life.” Ricky folded his arms. “You were like this before you went to school...and before we started working here. Both of those things were good for you, but you got like this.”

“I’m a pessimist, I guess. I never really see things as being good for me. I never see the point in there being a future.” She felt the button within her pocket, she could feel the words.

“No future means no more of the stuff you like.”

“I don’t like anything; I don’t like anyone. It’s all too draining.”

He nodded. “You ready to head out?”

It felt abrupt but she said, “Yeah.”

He was the one who chose to make the ride quiet that time. Every now and then, Miah glanced at him, but he would keep his sight on the darkening road. The sky had started to lose the sun. It was like that the whole way home. He spoke once they parked in the lot, the mobile homes up ahead. “Do you have the energy for box moving?” he said, “I know I don’t. I could come back tomorrow.”
“Yeah.” Miah got out of the truck, and when she went to close the door, Ricky spoke again.

“Hey, you should know, you’re not the only person who gets down. When you say stuff like what you said at Cookout, it could...impact people.”

She realized she hadn’t asked anything about his life, what he’d been up to. She didn’t want to put in the effort though, so she said “Okay,” and closed the door. With her essentials—her phone and keys and the button—she walked home.

It smelled like grass and the air was stiff. The trailer park sat on top of a very wide patch of grass. On three sides, it was surrounded by trees with the parking lot on the last side. Beaten pathways connected the mobile homes to a central pathway of brown earth. She passed by people she had never seen before. They stood outside talking with each other. In the distance, she heard laughing in one direction and violent arguing in another.

Miah made it to the trailer she grew up in. She could see light; Mom must be there. She reached into her bag for her keys. A squeak came from the door’s hinges as she opened and closed it. Mom sat in the living room. The glow of the TV bounced off her eyes. Mom looked at Miah for a moment and then brought her eyes back to the TV.

“Hey,” Mom said flatly.

Miah walked through the kitchen into the hallway that led to the bedrooms. She reached her bedroom door and entered it. She placed her backpack on her bed. Sunlight came into the room through the window. The sun was starting to set, waves of purple and orange brushed the sky. Miah went into her backpack. Her hand wrapped around the button and she pulled it out to look at it. Val didn’t understand and Ricky wouldn’t.
Mom kept quiet as Miah stepped out. Miah walked around the trailer. It sat on a corner of the park, so she was met with the sight of the trees.

The chairs were still there. A stack of two plastic chairs beside a stack of four plastic chairs. She used them as stairs throughout her childhood. They were still able to hold her weight after all the time that passed. She stepped to the other side of the trailer’s roof. The sight was still the same. To her right were trees. To her left and ahead of her were other trailers. The sunlight reflected off their tops. She could see the plains of land beyond the park. The grass was darkened by a cloud moving overhead.

Miah looked up. The colors had moved around a bit. Clouds in the sky had gold highlights along their edges. The part of sky further away from the sun held a blue glow. Closer to the sun were waves of reddish-purple. She wanted this to be the last thing she saw. The button rested in her hand. She brought her head down to look at it but saw her mother looking at her from down below. She met her mother’s gaze.

“You didn’t say anything back when you came in.” Mom said.

“Arrest me.”

Mom stared at her for a second. She let out a small chuckle. “I knew you would get like this when you finished school. How did you get up there?”

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing does.”

Mom ignored her statement and started looking around the trailer. She walked around it; the chairs came into her sight. Miah heard the chairs bending as her mother climbed up. Mom grunted a few times. Finally, she came onto the top and sat beside Miah, who kept her eyes to the sky. Mom looked at Miah, away from her, back at her, away again, back at her again.
Miah could see her looking at her and then at the button in her hand. “What’s that?” Mom asked. She read the button. “If that really could end the world, would you do it?”

“Yes, and I’m about to.” Miah said back.

“Why?” Mom waited for Miah to answer. She continued when she realized she wasn't going to. “The last time we talked—”

“I remember.”

They were quiet for a beat. Mom broke the silence. “Four years was a long time to think about what I said. I’m sorry.”

“It’s too late to be sorry.” Miah still looked to the sky; all that was left was the orange shine.

“Well, still, I shouldn’t have said all those things.”

“If you think I’m going to apologize, you’re wrong.”

“You said some messed up things too, Miah.”

Miah shot her eyes at her, “And I meant it. You were barely a mother to me most of my life, you moved us from one place to another, you did nothing but work and then came home and slept. You missed graduations, proms, everything.”

“Stop it! I not saying I’m perfect, but I was a good mother. I was doing my best, and I was doing it for you. It was all for you.”

“I know.” Miah gripped the button harder; it blurred in her vision. “Took me some time but I know that now. I’m sorry about what I said, I just get so angry about it sometimes, I think it really messed me up.” The sky behind them had begun to darken, in front of them the sky held its light.
“Is that why you would end everything?” Mom asked. “Nothing’s all the way messed up.”

“I am. I was a bitch to my roommate. She would try to like me, to know me and I wouldn’t let her, just like all the other roommates and the people I met.” She wiped the moisture from her eyes and said, “I guess people scare me. And Ricky—” She sighed, “Why was I mean to Ricky? I don’t even know. I’m such a dead weight.”

It’s now or never. She can’t go into the night with all the weight on her, all the thoughts raveling around.

“I want to start over.” Mom said.

“It’s too late.”

“No, it’s not. Let’s start over, I can help you through this, Miah. Miah, ever since I started moving us around, I think you started being scared of changes, of what’s in the future.”

Tears streamed down Miah’s face. She felt like she was spinning. Everything piled on her: how long it had been since she talked with Mom and Ricky, the way she kept Ricky at arm’s length, the exhaustion from school and work, Cookout, the smell of the food she and Ricky would get for free and eat while talking about anything at all, the day she left for school excited but horrified at the same time, the way she was always those things all the time. How could she end it?

“It feels like the world is ending.” She couldn’t hold it back anymore. Mom instantly came closer and put Miah’s head between her neck and shoulder. Miah bawled as her mother rocked her back and forth.

“Let it end.” Mom said kindly. “Let it end so it can start over, but better this time.” Miah shifted the button to her right hand, held it tightly and wrapped her left arm around her mother.
Then Miah knew what she wanted to do. She knew that things couldn’t end just yet—

She felt a breeze. A breeze moved through her right hand where she was gripping the button. She shifted herself in her mother’s grasp. She looked at her hand. It was gone. Her tight grip was suddenly holding nothing.

“You okay?” Mom asked.

“...I will be. Everything will be.”

The sunset was in its last minutes of life. Darkness surrounded it so that all that remained was a small golden disc. Together, Miah and her mother watched as the sun fell deeper away, withered while it grew, and bloomed somewhere on the other side of the world.