

Unknown Female

A young woman was fighting for her life in a Kansas City hospital. She had been found lying in an alley, badly burned, with charred clothing and no identification or other personal effects. Her burns were healing, but the doctors had been unable to get any rational explanation from her as to who she was or what had happened to her. Then the first cases of an unusually deadly strain of flu were transferred to the hospital from an Army training school. Within days the disease overwhelmed the hospital, swept through the city and began spreading death around the world. The young woman caught it and now she lay on a cot in the makeshift flu ward - aching, exhausted, and feverish to the point of delirium.

It was oppressively hot in the flu ward. The sheets which hung between beds in a vain attempt to prevent the spread of infection only made things worse. She couldn't even see the windows on the outside wall, let alone feel any hint of fresh air. She knew that her body was destroying itself. She knew her immune system was overreacting to the flu virus, tearing her lungs into a bloody pulp in an attempt to destroy the invader. She suspected she was the only person in the hospital who knew exactly what was happening to her body, but that knowledge could not save her. Her chances of survival were virtually zero.

"They said you wanted to see me." A haggard looking priest pushed back one of the sheets that hung beside her bed.

"Yes, Father." She could barely croak out the words. "I want to send a message to my father."

The priest opened a tattered notebook and held a stubby pencil expectantly. He had recorded many such messages since the epidemic began. "What is his address?" he asked.

She gave him the address and then dictated:

Daddy,
Please stop me before October 26th.
Love,
Princess Zanadine

The priest furrowed his brow at this message. "Are you sure this is the message you want to send?"

"He'll understand" she gasped. "Promise me you'll deliver it."

"I promise."

"There's one more thing." She had to pause for a moment to catch her breath. "Don't deliver it for a hundred years."

"But he'll be dead by then!"

“Promise me!” she pleaded. It took all the energy she had to raise her head and grasp his hand.

“I promise.”

She let go of his hand and let her head sink back onto the pillow. “In Jesus’s name?” she asked.

“In Jesus’s name” he replied.

She closed her eyes and seemed to relax. He couldn’t tell if she was asleep or unconscious. Either way, he doubted she would ever wake up. He’d already seen too many young men and women die of this new disease to expect a miracle.

The priest left her bedside and went straight to the hospital administrator’s office. Even if her message was nothing but the ramblings of delirium, she had given him her father’s name and address. That should let the hospital find out who their unknown patient was. A few days later the hospital gave him an update. The woman had died, which did not surprise him, but he was disappointed to learn that neither the name nor the address she had given existed. There weren’t even any streets by that name in the Kansas City area. In the absence of any other information, the hospital had simply listed the body as “Unknown Female (Princess Zanadine?)” on the death certificate. That night, as the exhausted priest performed the sad task copying messages he had recorded from that day’s dying patients to mail to their families, he almost threw away the note from Princess Zanadine. Then he thought for a moment, scribbled a brief description of how he had gotten the note along with instructions to deliver it in the year 2018, and stuck it in the church’s files. It wouldn’t hurt to save it, he thought. After all, he had promised in Jesus’s name.

Fred Brockmore was kneeling in his front garden, weeding marigolds, when he saw an unfamiliar car pull into his driveway. One of the few drawbacks to being retired was that now he was always home when salesmen, kids peddling for school fundraisers, and bible thumpers came to call. Then he noticed the driver was wearing a clerical collar. Priests did not normally go door to door pestering retired engineers. When the man explained that he had a rather unusual message to deliver, one he thought it best to deliver in person, Fred invited him inside for iced tea.

Fred stared at the yellowed note for a long time, trying to make some sense of it. “I do have a daughter,” he told the priest, “but she’s alive and well and her name isn’t Princess Zanadine. It’s Caroline. She lives across town, on the Missouri side of the river.” He looked again at the scribbled explanation that accompanied the note. “That’s my name and my address,” he said. “But this house is only about 30 or 40 years old. I don’t know what was here before they built this subdivision.”

“Apparently nothing” answered the priest. “At least, that’s what Father Douglas wrote a hundred years ago. The note made no sense to him then, and it makes no sense to us now. I’m just fulfilling his promise by delivering it. Again, I apologize for the fact that I didn’t deliver it earlier in the year. To be perfectly honest, I’d totally forgotten about the note. My predecessor told me about it years ago, but it

slipped my mind. It was just a coincidence that it was found by a volunteer who was helping us clean out our files and transcribe important papers onto our computer.”

Fred thanked the priest and saw him to the door after he'd finished his iced tea. Then he picked up his phone and called his daughter. He wasn't quite certain why he had refrained from telling the priest this, but when his daughter was little he had made up bedtime stories about "Princess Zanadine." She loved those stories, and she often pretended to be Princess Zanadine when they had tea parties or played games around the house.

His daughter didn't answer her phone and he was transferred to her voice mail, which was full. No surprise there. She often got wrapped up in a project and worked straight through the night and sometimes through the following day as well. She didn't like interruptions during these focused periods so she turned off her phone. Sometimes it would be a week or longer before she remembered to turn it back on. She was a lot like Fred in that regard, except that in Fred's day you couldn't turn your phone off. His wife would call him at the office, or she would call the night watchman if he was working in the lab and was oblivious to the clock. All that changed when his wife died, though. Suddenly he had full responsibility for a six year old girl. He discovered there were more important things than work, and his life became much richer. He hoped that someday Caroline would find the right man, have children of her own, and experience a similar joy. Someday soon, actually. He'd like to have grandchildren while he was still young enough to remember their names.

He slipped his phone back into his pocket and drove across town to her apartment. He saw her car as he parked in the underground garage so he was certain she was home. He knocked and rang her doorbell for a long time before she finally opened the door.

"Oh, hi Daddy!" she said as she stared at him through bleary eyes. "Come on in." She was wearing a bathrobe and fuzzy slippers, and her hair looked like a tangled mass of brown seaweed. She shuffled into the kitchen as he opened the curtains to let some daylight into the darkened apartment. "Want some coffee?" she called out as she poured the stone cold beverage from a carafe into two mugs which she placed in the microwave.

The coffee revived her enough that Fred could show her the mysterious note. She was as baffled as anyone. "What really perplexes me is that it's signed 'Princess Zanadine,'" she said. "If it had my name on it I'd think it was some sort of a hoax. I still think it must be a practical joke. I mean, neither one of us was alive a hundred years ago, and your house wasn't even built. This has to be a recent note that's just been made to look old, but how'd they get the name 'Princess Zanadine?' I never told anyone about those stories, did you?"

Fred shook his head no. "That was just a name I made up on the spur of the moment. I think I based it on a movie or a sleeping pill or something. It sounded exotic so I used it in the story I was telling you. I didn't think about it until you just mentioned it, but I would have been suspicious if the note had your name on it, too. Millions of perverts could find your name, my name, and my address on the Internet. Creating a hoax based on your real name would have been simple."

They stared at the note a while longer. "Sorry I woke you up" Fred said, "but the date I'm supposed to stop you by is just a few days from now. Does that date mean anything to you?"

Caroline shook her head no.

"Anything happening at work?"

"You know I can't talk about my work, Daddy."

"I know" Fred said with resignation. "I worked on a few classified projects myself."

The conversation then turned to everyday matters. They promised to get together for dinner that weekend, and Fred left to go home. Caroline watched out a window until she saw him drive off. Then she closed the curtains and went back to bed.

The next morning Dr. Caroline Brockmore was a few minutes late to the Virology staff meeting. The Director never seemed to mind her tardiness, she was one of those brilliant scientists who seemed to have a firm grasp of everything but her own schedule, but still she tried to open the conference room door and slip in as unobtrusively as possible.

"Ahh, Caroline!" the Director beamed. "Perfect timing. Douglas was just saying that everything should be ready for you to begin the field work on Friday."

"This Friday?" Caroline asked in surprise. "The 26'th? I'm afraid not. We need to postpone our attempt to collect a sample of the live virus. For one thing, our new vaccine isn't effective against the 1918 strain. For another, the Time Portal isn't nearly as reliable as Oak Ridge led us to believe." She took a yellowed scrap of paper out of her pocket and placed it on the table. "How I know takes a bit of an explanation. . ."