

THE LAST DAY

Jacob L. Bender

“Scott Eccles?”

“Yes!”

“Please follow me.”

Scott Eccles leapt from his seat, straightened his tie, and surreptitiously placed his fists on his hips in the Superman pose, for he had watched a video online that said doing so can spike one’s testosterone and in turn one’s self-confidence. As he followed the nurse down the hall, his stride made clear: something big was about to happen.

“Mr. Eccles, please have a seat,” said the doctor distractedly as he was shown into the examination room. The doctor for his part avoided eye contact (a submissive tic, Scott had heard), folded his hands, pursed his lips, and fell silent—so Scott seized his chance.

“Doc!” he said with a smile, “Have you thought any more about that opportunity?”

The doctor snapped awake. “Sorry?”

“Why, the Ameriway opportunity!” said Scott. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten. Did you read those brochures I left last time? Now, I’m no doctor, but lawsuit insurance! Doesn’t that practically sell itself?”

“Sell what now?”

“Now, now, now, I know what you’re gonna say, you already have malpractice insurance. Required by your profession, I know, I know, I’ve read all about it. Terrible state of our country nowadays. But how much does malpractice insurance pay you *back*, I ask you!”

“Pardon?”

“That’s precisely the genius of it,” Scott continued, “It’s so simple! I sell you lawsuit insurance, and you sell it to two, just two, others—just

two others, mind you. I automatically collect a portion of the premium from you, and you likewise collect a cut from the two under you. As I'm sure you're aware, most MLMs require up to eight or even twelve recruits before you start collecting what's yours, but with Ameriway it's only *two*. Just your own two legs to stand on! No waiting for months on end, no grinding it out, you start making money almost immediately—growth is exponential, never-ending, worlds without end!”

“Mr. Eccles, I . . .”

“I mean, it's something absolutely everybody needs, right? Not like scented candles, or oils, or meal plans, or any other nonsense like that, no—just the sheer peace of mind that comes from knowing that you'll never have to pay for a lawsuit again! In our easily offended day and age, that ain't nothing to bat an eye at. A single lawsuit, it could just ruin a man—and then everything you've built up for yourself, your big house, your wonderful family, all those sacrifices you made to make it through med school, *swoosh*, gone in a flash.”

“I'm sorry?”

“There's not another system like it. I have an old friend who, after networking for One Health, was NFL . . .”

“. . . NFL?”

“NFL, No Friends Left,” Scott quickly clarified. “He'd driven off everyone in his potential network. He'd gotten mixed up with those One Health folk in the wrong way, you see—which really *is* a scam, I'll have you know—trying to rope everyone into health supplements, preaching the sky falling about how all the nutrients that have been sucked out of the ground by pollution and pesticides and whatnot—I mean, it's true and all, but One Health was going about it all wrong, their network was in shambles, and Henry got the worst of it.”

“Sir.”

“Anyways, my friend Harry—that was his name, Harry—he was broke as a joke, bank was gonna foreclose on his lovely duplex, his wife and college sweetheart was leaving him and everything, but then he

started with Ameriway just a year ago, and can you believe he's already pullin' in ten grand a week? A *week*? Even for a successful doctor like yourself, you gotta admit, that's a pretty hefty chunk of change." Scott paused for emphasis.

"Mr. Eccles, I have your—"

"Yes, yes, the tests," said Scott happily. "Thank you so much for doing those for me! You came *very* highly recommended from my wife's friends, you know. That pain in my lower back, well, it ain't been killing me or nothing, but it hasn't left me alone for *weeks* now, I tell you what. In fact, one good turn deserves another! Doc, why don't Emma and I invite you over for dinner? We can you treat you and the missus to a good ol'-fashioned barbecue and talk more about these exciting opportunities over some cuts of my finest brisket. . . ."

"Mr. Eccles, you have three months."

"Oh, challenge accepted, I can have you turning a profit in two—"

"No, no, I'm sorry, I mean, you have *three months*. That's all." And with that, the doctor at last let loose a flurry of medical jargon that did nothing to clarify anything for poor Scott Eccles save the fact that he had only three months.

"Now that's not funny, doc. . . ." Scott finally said.

"I sent the tests to the lab twice, just to be sure," continued the doctor. "I even reached out to the university hospital where I did my residency, but each time the prognosis came back the same: you have three months. Maybe four. Words can't express how sorry I am."

Scott shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "So, you're not coming over on Friday. . . ."

"I'm afraid I will not."

"Listen, I may need a second opinion—"

"You are right to seek one, and I sincerely hope it'll be different. But it won't."

"But surely there are. . . ."

"There aren't."

“Should I, um, exercise . . .”

“Won’t make any difference.”

“Medication . . .”

“Scarcely any under development. None even close to market.”

“Treatments . . .”

“Experimental. Long shots. Not covered.”

“I have very good insurance . . .”

“You might as well not for all the good it would do you.”

“I can pay you anything . . .”

“I could bleed you dry. But it still wouldn’t change a thing.”

“So what should I . . .”

“Get your affairs in order. Call old friends. Reconcile with old enemies. Make love to your wife. Visit Paris if you haven’t already. Make peace with your God if you have one. Whatever you must do.”

A pause. “So what you’re telling me . . .”

“Mr. Eccles, I’m profoundly sorry this happened to you, I can run the tests again if you wish . . .”

But Scott Eccles was already wandering out of the office.

Between the hallway and the front door, Scott Eccles’s thinking underwent a shift. Not a gradual one, he had no more time for that, but a seismic cataclysm across the landscape of his mind.

By the time he passed the door frame, he was desperately trying to remember his Ameriway sales pitch—not out of any sort of lingering affection for it but just to hold on to something, anything, as it actively drained from his tongue like water between his fingers. By the time he got halfway down the short hallway, he’d forgotten it completely, and many others besides.

As he reentered the waiting room, he had already forgotten every name in his entire network. And as he passed the magazine he’d been leafing through just minutes before, he tried to remember if he’d wanted to be an astronaut or an archaeologist when he grew up. And as he passed an old lady reading a romance, he tried to remember what the last book was he’d read that wasn’t for a class or a seminar.

And as he stepped into the sunshine, some bored kids in the parking lot snickered because he'd been running his fingers through his hair and the strands of his comb-over were now high in the air. Scott turned abruptly to face them—not in anger but bewilderment, for though he seemed to remember being a child, he couldn't remember what that was like.



As the congregation began to slowly break into parts for the second verse, David Warner, a young graduate student visiting home for the weekend, entered from the west foyer and sat down quietly in the back row for possibly the last time. He wore a weary old white shirt, an un-cinched tie, some stained and wrinkled slacks, and the first sprouting stubble of an attempted beard. Though he refused to tell another soul about it, he was in the throes of a full-blown faith crisis.

And he hated it—not because he felt the faith of his fathers actively slipping away per se, but because of the horrid cliché he felt himself becoming. Just yesterday, he had actually uttered aloud “I’m on a spiritual journey” and winced. Good God, what was next, posting on Reddit? Writing angry letters to Church HQ? Last week, he'd stumbled across some ex-Mormon blog (he could no longer say by accident) wherein someone cited Arcade Fire's *The Suburbs* as his chief consoling comfort as he exodused the Church. Seriously, not even *Neon Bible*. What is it about losing faith that makes folks as clichéd and sentimental as the religion they are leaving?



With a start, Scott Eccles awoke; it appeared he had fainted on the hood of his car, parked under the tree in the shade. His keys were still in his hands. A thin line of sweat had collected on his brow and upper lip. As his mind slowly collected, he briefly entertained the possibility that this had all been a dream. He calmly considered how the shadows

of the leaves weaved across the windshield before him, the sun peeking and shimmering through, all while the branches swayed softly in the wind, almost as though counting down . . . *a moment gone . . . and another . . . and another—*

Scott Eccles leapt to his feet and dashed away from his car in a wild panic.



He already knew the normal litany of reasons people leave, as well as every ready response he'd once relied upon, for example: the Lord uses imperfect men to do his work; Mormon polygamist wives were among the foremost suffragists in the western United States; folks who bring up Mountain Meadows always conspicuously ignore Missouri; declaring that the Book of Abraham is just the Book of Breathings belies the fact that we don't know what the Book of Breathings is either; and he had something for horses in the Book of Mormon, too. He also used to have something inspiring, even Abrahamic, to say about the Church's treatment of LGBTQ people but didn't anymore, not since November 2015. Increasingly, he didn't have a response to any of it.



Though he had lived in the area for years, Scott Eccles quickly became disoriented as he wandered the sidewalks. Oddly, it did not occur to him to pull out his phone for directions. He now realized he only knew this area by the blur of landmarks as he drove them by, or pauses at traffic lights, or how hard he hugged each curve of the road. But on foot, the streams of faceless storefronts suddenly had faces; they became unfamiliar, strange, new. Frightened, he broke into an unpracticed jog.



His dad had long said that the Lord had a perfect church till he let all of us in, for are we not all hypocrites—but lately, the religious hypocrisy was getting to him above all else. He remembered as a teenager getting picked up by his new home teaching companion Scott Eccles outside the Del Taco at the strip mall. They passed a panhandler on a corner, the sight of which sent Brother Eccles off on a long rant about the laziness, unthriftiness, and sinful entitlement of the homeless, how they simply didn't want to work but preferred to leech off of others—all within minutes of him trying to recruit David into his latest pyramid scheme. "Do this right, and you'll never have to work a day in your life again," Brother Eccles had said with a galling lack of self-awareness. David's dad had later instructed him to just laugh it off, to bear with him as the Lord God bears with us—though rumor had it that his dad later told Brother Eccles in private to stay the hell away from his son.



The sun was particularly hot today, which was unusual this late in the fall. Yet Scott Eccles did not think to remove his suit jacket, nor loosen his collar, nor remove his Sunday shoes, no matter how they blistered his feet as he staggered down the broken pavement. Though he was profoundly uncomfortable, he nevertheless experienced a primal, unthinking need to feel every part of his aching body while he still could.



If the rumor was true, then his dad was especially gutsy, for Scott Eccles was a member of the bishopric at the time. Of course, was not his spot on the stand a tacit sort of institutional approval for whatever Brother Eccles represented? Did the Lord God Almighty really inspire the bishop by his Holy Spirit to select *him*, that snake-oil salesman, as a counselor? And did the stake president really feel inspired to call and

anoint such a bishop? And then who called that stake president? And up and up the ladder he went, and David wondered—and feared.



So many thoughts and memories had already drained through his pores that it was with a most curious and vague sense of recognition that he paused before the stake center. That *had* been why he had worn his suit that morning, was it not? So as to not need to change between the doctor's office and the two-hour block? Why had it not struck him as unusual that the doctor would ask him so urgently to come in on a Sunday morning? But he was past all wonder now. Without either wanting or not wanting to, his feet stumbled toward the entrance; he gripped the door handle hard, trying desperately to feel it as familiar.



Mechanically, habitually, David Warner partook of the bread of the sacrament, and he felt nothing—and what's more, he feared he had never felt anything to begin with. When a certain friend on the edge had once argued that his faith was based on no more than “subjective experience,” David had blurted out, “But *everything* is subjective experience! We *never* know if what we're experiencing is real or not! We *all* walk by faith alone.” That's just basic Descartes, he said, Plato's allegory of the cave, the plot to *Inception*, or *The Matrix*, first-week Philosophy 101. David had applauded himself for his sophistication and cleverness. But now, all he could see was that his friend had a point all along—it *was* all just subjective, and his faith was vain.

As the testimonies portion of the meeting began, David leaned forward on the bench, rubbed his face, and offered one last silent prayer: *God, if there is a God, if there was ever a God, I need a sign.*



But nothing felt familiar. Not the blue carpets, not the white brick walls, not the correlated art that hangs in every North American chapel. Not even the faces of the congregation, no matter how many years he had seen each of them, no matter how each of them stared back as he stumbled down the aisle—with a shock and catastrophic regret, he realized he didn't know any of them at all.



David's heart groaned within him; Scott Eccles was going to bear his testimony first. Rolling his eyes, he decided he might not even wait until the end of the meeting. If this was the best sign the Almighty could deliver, then this indeed was the Last Day, Great and Terrible, of his association with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



Standing awkwardly before the podium, the words did not come to him as they usually did. An uncomfortable silence fell upon the congregation.

Then Scott erupted, in convulsing sobs that filled the chapel. Hot tears streamed down his face, his cries reverberating through the feedback of the microphone. He crumpled forward onto the podium and continued to cry out loudly, showing no signs of ceasing. His shoulders, his whole being, shook terribly. The bishop leapt to his feet and tried to help Scott stand back up, but Scott only slid off the podium and continued wailing wildly and recklessly on the floor. Even the bawling babies in the chapel fell silent as the congregation sat transfixed, an awful knot twisting in their collective stomachs, for all they could make out between his heaving sobs was, "We're all gonna die, we're all gonna die . . ."



The responses varied across the ward. Some left sacrament meeting early, in a disturbed and distraught haze. Others felt a profound pity for Brother Eccles and wondered if maybe they should bring by a meal, even as they were fully aware of how little such a gesture might mean—both to him and themselves. Still others couldn't help but feel a touch of resentment toward Scott, who had so ruined their one desperately needed hour of peace a week, while others were just grateful that something new had happened at church for a change.

As for David Warner, he sat in absolute silence the rest of fast and testimony meeting. After the closing prayer, he stood up slowly, deliberately, and then paced out the building, ignoring all greetings. In the parking lot, he fumbled with his keys and dropped them to the ground. Instead of bending down to reach them, he gazed up and beheld the sun shimmering through the trees as the branches swayed softly in the breeze. Abruptly, his eyes began to water, and his soul swooned within him. Slowly, he brought his fist up to his teeth, and with a swelling in his breast and tears on his cheeks, he whispered: *The Church is true, the Church is true, thank God Almighty, the Church is true . . .*

JACOB L. BENDER {jacobbender83@gmail.com} is also the author of the novella *And All Eternity Shook* (ShipsofHagoth, 2022), wherein the character of David Warner first appears. He holds a PhD from the University of Iowa and is currently an English professor at Middlesex College in New Jersey, where he lives with his wife and two children.