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## “Closure” by Matt McGovern

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A rapidly advancing veil of clouds followed by snow swallowed the full moon that had lighted Willem Leo’s way earlier in the night. Now everything was black and swarming with stinging ice pellets driven by a ragged wind that twitched and jerked like a mortally wounded serpent.

The conditions made Willem virtually blind, but he struggled onward anyway. He knew where he was going—he had been there before—and he knew what he had to do, as his three friends before him had known.

Snow filled his tracks as soon as he made them. Cold pressed against his face, turning it tight and raw and numb. With gloved hands he clutched a small leather pouch.

*“Should have dressed warmer,”* he thought, then wondered, *“Does it really matter?”*

His worn wool overcoat would keep him warm enough—alive enough—until he completed this long overdue task. He paused, took a deep breath, felt the cold bite of a thousand razor-like teeth in the linings of his lungs.

“So this is how it ends,” he said aloud—but there was no one to hear him; there hadn’t been for quite some time . . . not since everyone started dying.

He slogged on. What town had this been—Norridgewock, Skowhegan, Newport? He knew somewhere beneath a foot of freshly-fallen snow was old State Route 2, yet it was as though the road had never been built, as though no human had ever driven its twisting path through the heart of Maine.

He stopped again, chuckling—not because anything was funny, but because everything that had transpired was so incredible, so fantastic. Who would believe it? His story was the stuff of bad cinema, pulp novels, and mindless afternoon soaps: four friends from the backwoods of Maine, four kids who grew up to do amazing things, to lead remarkable lives, to . . .

He coughed. A jarring pain in his chest reminded him to keep moving or else freeze solid.

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Of the four, only he remained—which to him seemed most fitting. After all, he had started the whole thing, so he should be the one to end it . . . to bring the closure that might allow someone, somewhere, *sometime*, the chance to start again

“I wish *we* could do it all over again,” he grumbled, shaking the pouch vigorously. “But I guess that’s one wish too many, huh?”

In the darkness, he strained to see the small bag. What was inside was the last of its kind, the fruit of his years of hunting and trying to put things right, the embodiment of all of his—all of the world’s—troubles.

“No,” he said emphatically. Wishing was exactly what started this mess.



He remembered strolling at dusk one late summer evening, 25 years ago—a Friday he recalled—with Rachel Rogers, Karin Steadman and Richard Hay. They were hiking the length of a wooded path behind his house, on their way to a secluded field that overlooked a small pond—a place they visited often to muse about the future and to ponder “Why?” and “What if?” A swollen, nearly full moon—looking bloated and yellow—clung to the horizon. The four were enjoying beers they had acquired earlier in the day from a willing 21-year old. They were talking about their upcoming senior years, plans for college, and making outlandish wishes they hoped might come true.

*“Whatever I do,”* Willem remembered wishing. *“I want to make a difference in people’s lives. I want to leave a mark on this world.”*

Had he ever.

That’s when *they* first appeared. That’s when a strange monolithic stone suddenly materialized at the edge of the pond and four amorphous shimmers of translucent color emerged. The *visitors*—as he and his friends came to know them—promised amazing lives full of contribution, purpose, and the chance to make a difference. All Rachel, Richard, Karin, and he had to do was believe in the *visitors*, accept *them* . . . and invite *them* into their hearts. No one else would ever know.

It had all seemed so easy, so right.

To this day, Willem could not recall why he and his friends had not run screaming, panicked into the woods. He wished they had.



Willem's feet were starting to ache. The cold weighed on them, squeezing out the warmth. He had to resume his march.

He knew the stony obelisk was still at the edge of that small pond somewhere along his snowy route. In the last few years, his friends—once the *visitors'* spell that gripped them for a quarter of a century waned and their memories returned—had each journeyed back to the monolith, renounced their *gifts*, done the right thing. Now it was his turn.

He staggered forward on feet numbed to the point of frostbite. About an hour later, during a lull in the wind, he spotted a towering structure.

He had arrived.

He ran a hand over its smooth face. The stone reacted to his touch, as he knew it would. If only he had remembered sooner, if only he had been able to do this 10, 15 or 20 years earlier; if only he had not been so wrapped up in his own dreams and selfish desires—in the good life the *visitors* had made possible—that he lost touch with where and how it all began.

If only . . .

Despite the cold and snow and his thick glove, the surface felt warm. A few feet above his head he discovered an especially hot spot.

“Bingo.”

Turning, he glanced blindly over his shoulder—one last attempt to view the dark, hostile, wintry world he was about to leave. Pellets of snow greeted him with uncommon fury.

“*What was the point?*” he wondered.

The *visitors* had destroyed everything—but for what purpose? They, too, had departed once only he, Rachel, Karin, and Richard remained. “*Maybe there was no point,*” Willem thought. “*Maybe the visitors simply preyed on the weak and the willing . . . and we were eager to please.*”

He pressed his hand firmly into the hot spot. The monolith groaned. It glowed first maroon and then white hot.

Willem stepped into the radiance. Tendrils of light ensnared him, smothering him in their talon-like grip.

Memories began to stream . . .



He saw himself at a book signing, posing for a photo-op, grinning, joking with the crowd minutes after he learned his first novel was a bestseller. He saw himself waxing philosophic on some cable news program, the latest talking head, the latest so-called expert. He saw himself hard at work in his New York studio, fielding calls, spouting rhetoric, the country's preeminent left-wing radio personality. How many millions had he swayed? When had his listeners—as he had—finally realized they were living in a world of books and academia, not the real world of guns and armies, where muscle was needed to protect one's way of life, where only the strong survived?



He saw Rachel as a young woman, marrying a junior senator from California. He saw her later standing by the senator's side as he took the Presidential Oath of Office. He saw her as First Lady espousing her own pacifistic views—views that soon became synonymous with her husband's—in one of her numerous speeches that fueled world doubts as to America's national resolve and its position as a super power. When had Americans forgotten that anything worth having was worth protecting?



He saw Karin graduate from medical school, saw an interview she granted shortly after accepting a position at the Centers for Disease Control. Willem knew she had helped isolate one of the world's deadliest viruses, engineer a cure, and had been nominated for the Nobel Prize. He also knew terrorists later used her work to synthesize an incurable version of the virus; a virus the media aptly nicknamed the "beast."



He saw Richard boarding a plane with his new Saudi wife; she was heir to an oil-rich family, with ties to the Middle East—ties that ultimately helped unleash the "beast" on the world.



Willem saw the countless faces of the dead and dying—images the media replayed endlessly for as long as there had been a media—as first the United States had been devastated and then, unchecked, the virus had killed every warm-blooded creature on the planet in the span of 10 years.

All but one.



"Here you bastard!" Willem snarled.

He held the small bag high, triumphantly. Inside, the last vile of synthesized virus—the remnant of youthful wishes—began to bubble and simmer.

"*Closure*," he told himself. "*Closure and a new beginning.*"

He leapt into the radiance . . . and disappeared.