

TABULA RASA

E04: Destination; Nowhere

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Episode Three of Tabula Rasa can be read at: <http://bit.ly/1O4UgA3>

"You've reached the voicemail of Smith Williams. Please leave a message after the beep."

"Pick. Up."

Paul leaned back against his seat as the bus picked up its pace. The back of the phone felt warm against his calloused palms. It was expected, given the number of times he had used it in the last couple of hours. He stared at the screen, hoping it would light up any moment now with the number he had been trying to reach. Why he couldn't get through, he didn't know.

He fiddled with the buttons and dialled up the number once more. He held his breath, praying that for once, he would hear a human voice from the other side. And just when he thought he got through, the mechanical voice of a woman made him to want to fling the phone out through the window.

"You've reached the voicemail of Smith Williams. Please leave a message after the beep."

"Damn it, Smith! Pick up!" Paul yelled at the screen.

"Hello, sir."

"SMITH!" he slammed the phone against his ear.

"No sir, I'm Rob... Robert Louis. Right here."

Paul turned around to find the man beside him waving his hand in front of his face. It took him a minute to catch his breath and take a good look at him. He seemed like an average white-collar man in his mid-forties with a receding hairline and a wide smile that revealed his yellow teeth.

"Are you alright?" Robert asked, an eerie sort of concern ringing through his

voice that made Paul slightly uncomfortable.

"Yes, yes I'm fine," he quickly mumbled, setting the phone down on the handle that separated the two seats. Robert slouched back against his seat and sighed.

"Alright then. Good day, isn't it today? Well at least, good day for me. I'm going to meet my family after two weeks."

Paul noticed the glee in Robert's voice as he spoke of his family. He wondered if he himself had a family. All that came to his mind when he thought of the word were faceless silhouettes and they gave him a headache every time he tried to discern their features.

He looked out of the window. It had been quite a while since he'd spotted any sign of civilisation. Barren fields stretched out onto the horizon which was punctuated with electric poles here and there. There was probably a village or a town nearby but this surely didn't look like a place where a clinic could be shifted to.

He dialled up the number once again.

"You've reached the voicemail of Smith Wil-"

"God!"

"Are you going to Ruthford as well?" Robert broke the silence that had taken a seat between them.

Was he? Paul replayed the incidences that had muddled his brain this morning. He had taken a cab to go to the clinic for his appointment with Smith, who was supposed to take an interview to test his eligibility for Tabula Rasa. It was supposed to be a fairly simple affair, and he had reached the location on time except for the fact that when he got there, the clinic was gone. There was nothing left of the building he was confident he had visited even a week

ago. There were a few cranes that stood still at one corner and an empty sign-board that peeked from within the rubble when the sunlight hit it.

Paul had run around the block like a madman, asking shopkeepers, residents, traffic sergeants, whoever he could find, if they knew where the clinic went. It was at one of the record stores across the streets that he came across a familiar face- a man in his seventies he was sure he had met at the clinic's reception once, but he couldn't remember the exact day. He had been kind enough to lead him to the bus station. He bought Paul three cups of coffee from the vending machine and the ticket for his ride and told the driver the address. "He'll take you to the right spot," he had said as the bus started moving.

Paul remembered his last words: "You'll be safe."

"Sir?"

Paul turned around to find Robert staring at him expectantly.

"Hey, give me your phone," he blurted out. All on a sudden he knew exactly what to do.

"Um..are you --"

"No, give me your phone. I need to make a call," Paul repeated.

The urgency in his voice had Robert reach into his pocket and extend his phone towards him slowly. Paul grasped the phone in his hands and dialled up Smith's number for the umpteenth time. It rang for a while and his heart skipped a beat when he heard a familiar voice from the other side.

"Hello?"

"Smith!" Paul screamed.

"Smith, this is Paul. Paul Wickens. I've been calling you all morning."

"Oh God, Paul," Smith

groaned before he hung up.

The bus came to a halt. Paul pressed the loose buttons of the phone frantically as sweat dribbled down onto the screen. He felt an arm on his shoulder and looked up to find the driver standing beside him.

"You need to leave sir," he said slowly, tightening his grip a little.

"What? Why? What is this place?" He looked around. Still no sign of civilisation.

The phone rang once again. This time, Smith picked up on the first ring.

"Just do what the driver says, Paul!" he yelled into his ears and hung up once again.

"Sir, get up now!"

Paul found himself on his feet, being pushed along the congested passage between the seats. The phone was snatched away from him, and he was shoved out into the open before he could even contemplate all that was happening.

"Just keep walking to your left!" The driver said as the doors closed and the bus whizzed past him.

Paul looked around. Lush green meadows occupied the space on either side of the road as far as he could see. An earthen track meandered its way like a serpent through the plot of land on the left and Paul could make out a faint outline of what seemed like a warehouse at its end.

He felt a teardrop trickle down his cheek and his knees trembled. He caught his breath and closed his eyes for a while. The old receptionist's words rang in his ears.

"You'll be safe."

Paul got down from the road onto the earthen track. "I'll be safe," he whispered to himself, before he slowly began to walk forward.