

PERMAFROST

by

Gina R. Tracy

PERMAFROST

*Dedicated to Michael Ryan Tracy who has inspired me to write from my
heart.*

*And to the future children on planet Earth who are fighting so hard for
survival.*

PERMAFROST

Permafrost received its first reading at Theatre for A New City in New York, NY and featured the following cast:

The Scientist.....Tanna Frederick
The Cat.....Mary Tierney

Permafrost received its 2nd reading at Theatre for A New City in New York, NY and featured the following cast:

The Scientist.....Alison Fraser
The Cat.....Mary Tierney

Permafrost received its 3rd reading at James Blackstone Library in Branford, CT and featured the following cast:

The Scientist.....Erin Hill
The Cat.....Marca Leigh

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CAST: 1 Woman, 1 Actor any gender

THE SCIENTIST(any age) questioning, sensitive, intuitive, highly
educated

THE CAT shapeshifter, an ancient spirit

TIME: Present day. After the tipping point was breached.

PLACE: A scientist's home on the easternmost Nantucket coastline at the outskirts of Siasconset facing the Atlantic and the distant shores of Portugal and Morocco.

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ACT 1
SCENE 1

Predawn morning in the large living room of an antique home on the western shore of Nantucket on the outer fringes of Siasconset. Shafts of sunlight heralding the dawn stream across a table strewn with books, papers, various objects of an undetermined nature and a litter of crumpled foolscap. THE SCIENTIST is seated at the table, writing in a journal and talking to herself while reading from it and referring to the other matter covering the table.

THE SCIENTIST. We don't have thirty years, Eunice. We might have ten. This is a bad dream, a nightmare you solved way back in 1856... You see these equations? This pile of notes... hundreds... hundreds upon hundreds... I don't know why I talk to you like you're here. I guess I have no one else... and in a way, you are here. I feel like I'm supposed to be here, on this island. And I have a hard time saying goodbye. I was happy here. You know that, don't you? I wrote it in all these papers. My memories... memory... memory. I try to connect the dots... something not adding up in my life... memories... these equations. I went to the shore at sunset, and there was a single swan, floating in front of me. The most beautiful sight... pink and purple sunset reflecting off the calm seas onto this graceful, fragile, beautiful creature.

Lost? Maybe... or maybe that's depression speaking. Why did I read that into its mind? Lost? I wrote it down and looked up. It was gone. How does a whole swan just... disappear? I don't even

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drink. I should drink. I'm writing to a ghost. Not just any ghost: you. A smart ghost. You get to come and go as you want. I'm trapped on this magical island with you. These papers, the leaves turning orange, the occasional bird chirping something that I can't get out of my head. Everyone has gone – I have this room in this mansion on this little island in the middle of the sea, with no one here. Except for ghosts. None of this stuff is mine: the charts, the books, the silver, the crystal, the oil lamps, the photographs, the scrimshaw. The ink wells. The love letters. Something happened here; they all left. Or maybe it's happening now. We feel it – but we can't see it. Do you believe in ghosts, Eunice? Do you just listen to my musings and laugh? “Keep at it, girl. You've got this.

This is just the crazy part of the dream. You'll wake up and voila! It's over. Back to normal.” What do you suggest? Have a drink? Light the lamp? I can do that, you know: light the oil lamp; look at these photographs one more time. I know this place empties out in the Fall, I walk the cobblestone streets and the low tidal line – nothing. No one. I keep hoping if I time it just right other people will show up. They don't. I come back here... write you poetry... wait for you to show up so I can read it to you. Nothing. Maybe you can tell me what happened to that swan. I saw it, right? Maybe I was seeing myself. I used to study the planets. Did you know that? I remember some of that, anyway. I heard voices even then.

Not surprised, are you? You heard them too, I imagine: “Do this, do that, try this, try that... See what happens if you do this, if you do that.” Crazy science. Science, History, Art... Music... My mother played twelve instruments. That's a big deal, right? That's a mathematical mind, they say: music and math. It was useless to her. She couldn't connect the dots. One big dot... missing. That's it: one dot. I would say, “Look at the big picture. Put the broom

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down. Leave the bed alone. No, I'm not hungry." All the stuff we say... to be left alone, eventually. Like I am, here.

Sometimes I think I should just put all these notes into bottles and drop 'em into the sea. See where the hell they go. I get distracted: the clouds, the sand, the leaves. When the sun goes down I come back here and talk to you. Like this: I talk, you listen. The grandfather clock is about to chime. Should be about eight o'clock. I count backwards. Not sure why I do that... Feels like the world I live in - all going backwards. Funny, right? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8... you feel like you're getting somewhere. 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1... zero. What does zero mean? Eunice. Sometimes I hear laughing... Ghosts don't laugh, right? So it's not you. Does this house look like a child lived here? I didn't think so either. I opened a sea chest. I found a marble... seemed like a crystal ball into the past. It's right here: looks like a little Earth. We're hovering over it, watching ourselves in slow motion. What are the odds that we'd all be together? Looking at that same marble. That chime should go off... there it is! 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. That's the pattern - follow the pattern. It only chimes once in twenty-four hours. Maybe I'm not really hearing it. Maybe I'm not even here. See, I get to that question, and even though I don't drink I look for the fanciest wine glasses - here they are - two of them: one for me, one for you. Someone left all those bottles of wine in the cellar; I'll go grab one and bring it up here. Never can seem to get the cork out... but somehow I do. And I pour us a toast... to the future. Or the past. It all blends together. You don't drink yours, so I pour it back into the bottle. Maybe you'd prefer a bottle of water, if you can give me a hint where I can get that. I have candles... wine... a few scattered memories... and a fear of impending death.

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All I have at night is wind and my own mind unraveling. I don't know what year it is, if it's September or October, whether I am dreaming or awake. I can't come up with an equation that gets me out of here. You discovered that altering the proportion of carbon dioxide in air would change its temperature: that adding CO₂ to our atmosphere - only you still called it "carbonic acid gas" would raise ambient temperatures around the globe. No credit given to a woman in 1856, of course – you were a hundred and fifty years ahead of your time. I don't know if I'm ahead or behind, alive or dead, and I can't tell if I'm pouring a glass of water or wine. Or water into wine. I'm looking for wine into water, if you really want to know. Stay here for the night? I'm afraid... of being alone. In the dark. I didn't think I'd be afraid of dying alone, but I am.

Isn't everyone? At least I'm not on Mars. Or at the bottom of the sea. Or in a fire, with nowhere to run. I can breathe – I can hear. I just can't think. I can't focus... and when I do I hear cracking – and crying. So much crying. I guess I'm cracking. I can't be right, right? Why did everyone leave here? Why did they forget me? And why don't these equations stop popping into my head. I'm a scientist – and I can't solve any of this. Do you know what these papers mean, Eunice? Do you? I'm going to tear every single one of them up. Destroy it all – all I worked for. I miss everything – my dog – my life – being loved. All of it. That thing called life, whatever it was? I just want it back. To feel someone hold me. Just hold me. Anyone. And rock me to sleep – make me feel safe – one more time. Please? Anyone...

SCENE 2

Morning light streams across the table which has been somewhat decluttered from its predawn state. On or behind the rocker is a

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black mound, barely visible and preferably entirely unnoticed until it unwinds, stretches and makes its presence known. This is THE CAT.

THE SCIENTIST. Humming – whistling – singing – dancing... I'm alive! I'm free! Twisting, turning, spinning – faster, faster, faster. Can't stop it – upside down – top to bottom. Avalanche – stop! Stop! Oh my God. Please stop! I hear them – I hear them all. Look what I found: I discovered this. I discovered this – this hole in time. I wasn't trying to – I didn't mean to. I'm so sorry. I was going to go down to the shore today – offer myself up to the past. I didn't even make it there. Time has stopped. It's like someone turned the hourglass upside down. And second by second the future is slipping away. New equation: time is finite. Life is finite. If that is truth, why am I here? That's the big one. Maybe I'm just waiting for someone to show up? Somewhere out there... is someone searching for me? They just don't know I'm here. I'm not the last living soul on planet Earth, am I? This is just a black hole I got sucked into, right? Maybe I spun too much... maybe I'm still asleep in my bed back in Iowa. Maybe I'm on a beach at sunset walking my dog. Did I have a dog? Oh my God... did I even have a dog? I don't remember. Did I have a friend – a safe, warm, loving, loyal friend? Maybe it was a sled dog: a big, white, strong sled fucking dog. I fed him, I gave him water... I talked with him. Every day. Damn. Damn it. I should be able to remember that, right? Right... Svalbard. I can't remember my dog's name... but Svalbard... during the siege of Leningrad a dozen scientists barricaded themselves in a room with their most precious treasure: seeds. To protect them from the German Army surrounding the city. Why does that pop into my brain? I'm on an

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island, alone, and I'm thinking about what – seeds? Svalbard – “seed vault”. I must've lost my marbles. Where did I put that marble? In the wine glass. I put it in the wine glass... Eunice? You're here!! You're doing this. I feel you. Eunice – where's the marble?

THE CAT. Look behind the rocking chair.

THE SCIENTIST. I never sat in that rocker. Its creaks give me the creeps.

THE CAT. It's not so bad – just don't get your tail caught under it.

THE SCIENTIST. There it is – I found it! Thank you, Eunice!

THE CAT. Not my name.

THE SCIENTIST. You can see me, can't you?

THE CAT. Yep.

THE SCIENTIST. How do I look?

THE CAT. Relative to what?

THE SCIENTIST. Do I look... crazy?

THE CAT. Define “crazy”.

THE SCIENTIST. Hearing things... Seeing things. Knowing things... before they happen.

THE CAT. You're a scientist. Naturally you see things differently. The invisible becomes visible.

THE SCIENTIST. Like you.

THE CAT. Clever.

THE SCIENTIST. Thank you. I could just talk to myself, you know. You don't have to respond.

THE CAT. That would be lonely.

THE SCIENTIST. I don't mean to talk to myself. I mean, at least I'm not – you know – off my rocker.

THE CAT. That's open to interpretation.

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THE SCIENTIST. So how did you get in here?

THE CAT. Seriously?

THE SCIENTIST. Yeah. Attic? Basement? Window?

THE CAT. I never left.

THE SCIENTIST. All right: you never left? I haven't seen you.

THE CAT. You weren't looking. Do you remember tripping last night? That was me.

THE SCIENTIST. Sure – that's really funny.

THE CAT. You can't see in the dark, can you?

THE SCIENTIST. Nope.

THE CAT. See?

THE SCIENTIST. What do you want?

THE CAT. Really it's what do you want.

THE SCIENTIST. I want this nightmare to end.

THE CAT. Don't we all?

THE SCIENTIST. Is it raining?

THE CAT. No...

THE SCIENTIST. I hear the sound of water.

THE CAT. It's not raining.

THE SCIENTIST. Do you want... where'd you go? Maybe if I just... close my eyes... breathe... manifest myself... back. To a long time ago. That's it... yeah. Yeah. I'm twelve. I'm in a field of corn. I hear my mother calling: "Suppertime". But I get distracted by... what? A cat. I chase it... it's faster than me. It's going so fast... I can't keep up. I'm running and running – the stalks are blocking my path, hitting me in the face. I can't find the cat. My heart is pounding. I'm lost. I'm so lost... I can't get home. It's getting dark. I've lost my paper - I had an equation – it's not there. It dropped... out. I did all that work. My mother is going to kill me. I did all that work. She's never gonna believe me. She'll think I'm lying. "Show your work. Always show your work." But... I lost it.

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It's gone. No one is going to believe me. I did the math. It's science: CO₂. It's math – fucking math. I did it, Mom: I did it just like Eunice – air pump – two glass cylinders – four thermometers. I tested carbon dioxide against ambient air. The cylinder with carbon dioxide trapped more heat and stayed hotter longer. I connected the dots between CO₂ and global warming! Eunice Foote discovered it over a hundred and sixty-three years ago; I just carried it forward, accelerated it. Last year Greenland lost one million tons of ice... every minute. That was enough to cover the Republic of California in over four feet of water – more than five hundred and thirty-two trillion litres – that's about two hundred and thirteen million Olympic-sized pools... seven a second. That's why I'm here, isn't it? It's some kind of penance, some punishment for learning the truth. I was a whistleblower. They probably had to drug me just to shut me up. Gave me this beautiful memory of a place long gone just to pacify me... so I wouldn't tear the fucking walls down. Well, great, Mom: I ended up drugged out, just like you. Happy now? Looking down on me, seeing me like this: drowning in my own tears, with nothing but wine or salt water to drink? That it? You couldn't solve this shit? Well, neither can I. So, joke's on me. Hope you're yuckin' it up: thought I broke the chain, but I just continued the curse. I did bring it to a new level: The end of civilization. The end of humanity. Even as the kids were marching, fighting for this not to happen... can you imagine? Kids – sitting in front of Parliament buildings for days on end, taking on the oil companies... the politicians who'd sold them out; the black-bellied cowards who looked the other way, enjoyed the good life, and sold their grandchildren's future – all the grandchildren's of the earth – for nothing more than a few pieces of silver. So... now I need a drink. No water – but I have wine: lots of wine in the basement wine cellar to turn into water if

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I only knew the trick. Greedy fucks! And thanks a lot for the Ivy League education; that little piece of paper really comes in handy now. No one to brag to. Wasted – wasted. All that precious time – one more equation. Look for the curve – follow it. Up, down, up, up, up. Ice melts from the heat generated by all that carbon dioxide... it changes state and turns into water. You showed me that when I was what: four? Pour hot tea over a glass of ice: it melts. Pour cold tea over ice: it stays cold. Pour water over hot rocks: it changes state again, and voila: steam. Did it really take all that time? Nature doesn't trust us anymore, Mom. Eighty percent of the greenhouse emissions generated by humans have happened in the last sixty years – throughout my whole life, like clockwork, it kept striking louder and louder, harder and harder at the atmosphere that shelters us. Why did you let it happen? I'm asking a simple question - the equations were all around you – you went to Antarctica, you studied this shit, I saw the photographs. You were onto something, weren't you? What scared you off – who bought you out? Big oil? China? Russia? What were you onto, Mom? Just answer that one simple question. Are you listening?

THE CAT. I hear you. Look for the telescope – the answers are there. That's it: it's standing on the books. Find the one that's bound in animal skin – that one. Open it.

THE SCIENTIST. “PERMAFROST”. This book is empty. Why is this book empty?

THE CAT. There were too many.

THE SCIENTIST. All these books are empty. Why did someone buy these books and then not use them?

THE CAT. You. I couldn't provide for you. If I published the research I'd be forever on the run. Whole governments wanted it buried. Global corporations. It was a ticking time bomb: undiscovered virus microbes, frozen in time, trapped for fifteen

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thousand years. Smallpox, Spanish Flu, Bubonic Plague, Anthrax, Mercury Poisoning, decaying Nuclear Waste... all atop the permafrost. Awaiting some future thaw... I buried it.

THE SCIENTIST. They gave up.

THE CAT. NO! I chose. I chose life. I could save you, or I could save the planet. I was pregnant – with twins. At least I could have you. I went into hiding... you were never supposed to know. You were just so damned smart.

THE SCIENTIST. I feel so stupid.

THE CAT. You are not stupid. There's a lot of stupid out there, but you missed that DNA.

THE SCIENTIST. Do you remember how I wanted an electric car? How I wanted a solar powered car? I remember thinking, "If everyone just did the right things, maybe we could all work together to stop the clock."

THE CAT. Do you remember seeing the world for the first time? The moment you opened your eyes? I was there. I thought, "Dear God, I hope I made the right decision. Maybe someone will solve it all." They kept putting it off. Like me, you were worth it. Every breath I took was for you, after that moment. I used to sing for you – do you remember? I would sing and sing, until one day you sang back to me; you started repeating my sounds. They blended together until I couldn't tell where your sound and mine ended and began.

THE SCIENTIST. This - contraption – can see energy from stars that died long ago. And here it sits, waiting for someone like me to take a peep – figure out what it is I'm looking for – zero in on it and voila! Happy ending. I need another drink. Maybe I can use this telescope as a big microphone... and blast, "I love you life! You crazy atoms of memories of love!" I loved the sunsets... the sand... the beaches, the birds, the waves, the breezes... breathing.

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Just to be able to breathe. Finding sea glass, wondering what flowers will wind up in the vase. Who gave what to whom. My favorite flower was daisies: they reminded me of snowflakes. And stars. I always tried to count the petals. Count the snowflakes. Count the stars. I ran out of numbers. One thing they always taught me at that Ivy League school was to keep counting. Nothing is finite. Or is it?

THE CAT. No, things are finite. I didn't bring my crystal ball but last time I checked there were a lot of grey areas changing to black. Diseases like Malaria from the Plasmodium Parasite, Zika, Chikungunya, Dengue Fever, West Nile Virus, Vibrio Parahaemolyticus, Borreliosis – Lyme Disease - you don't need Tarot cards, or a Ouija board, to figure it out. Yeah, I would say some aspects of life are finite. But what do I know? Be alert – stay near a fresh water supply – pick your friends.

THE SCIENTIST. Now I can definitely hear you. Great!! Now I'm seeing AND hearing you... I'm like a clairaudience beginner.

THE CAT. Beginner? You can hear me – you can see me. That's more of an advanced – or developed – sense.

THE SCIENTIST. How long have you been here?

THE CAT. Long? That's a loaded question. Define "long".

THE SCIENTIST. Define long: seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years...

THE CAT. Centuries.

THE SCIENTIST. Centuries? I'm not scared of you.

THE CAT. Let's hope not. I should be familiar to you.

THE SCIENTIST. That's kind of creepy: familiar. Black cat. I never had a black cat.

THE CAT. You don't remember.

THE SCIENTIST. I never had a black cat.

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THE CAT. You may not remember. I am a bit insulted. More than a bit. Perhaps you're not as advanced as I... felt.

THE SCIENTIST. Do I look advanced? I probably look like a fully certifiable nut case. I'm talking to you, but I'm seeing three children playing on a beach... Yellow bucket, green bucket... seaweed, shells, sunburn, ponytail, rocks, splash... jetty... sandcastle. It took us all day. We left it there, with a big moat to protect it. Came back and it was gone. Not a trace of it. We searched the beach... couldn't even figure out for sure where it was. Totally obliterated. We didn't get to take a picture. It's all up here... unless my memory fails me too. There's a question: which goes first? My short-term memory, or my long-term memory?

THE CAT. Maybe looking into the future will help – that way everything is behind you. That's what I do: move forward. I have no spine, so of course it's easier for me.

THE SCIENTIST. You are not even here. You're not!

THE CAT. Purrrfectly possible.

THE SCIENTIST. You're a shape-shifter...

THE CAT. Hmmm... can't label everything, but it certainly sounds plausible. Likely, even. Do you only believe what you see? Doesn't explain everything. Look at the permafrost: Here - Not here. Buried – Uncovered. Do you read?

THE SCIENTIST. I went to Yale. Yeah, I read.

THE CAT. Can you predict the future? That's the real challenge. If you can do that, reading is secondary.

THE SCIENTIST. Okay, great: you're here to tell me I wasted my time, that I'd be better off if I was a clairvoyant, or a shape-shifter, or a frozen cave-cat. Then the truth will just appear. Everything solved – hocus- pocus – boom solved. Boo! Scat! Be gone!

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THE CAT. I was gone... in your memory, anyway. But... I never left.

THE SCIENTIST. Groovy. This is hard enough... by myself. Adding you to the conversation? Too complicated.

THE CAT. Show her the letters.

THE SCIENTIST. I should have a drink. And another piece of paper... and... see what comes out on the page. Automatic writing. Yeah: I'll write you away. Happy ending... I'll just manifest it. I'll just turn the global temperature down to – what? I'll imagine all the methane back into the earth.

THE CAT. Show her my letters. It's all in there. She can beat this. Go to the telescope, and then do right. Right. Do right. Always do right. The stakes are high – especially now.

THE SCIENTIST. You know what I miss the most? Hope. I miss hope.

THE CAT. I know. I'm here for you. You just can't see me.

THE SCIENTIST. I woke up and it was gone. I plotted out sea rise – 8 feet. Oh, shit. No one expected the permafrost to melt in this acceleration...

THE CAT. I did.

THE SCIENTIST. MIT... Yale... Harvard... Oxford... Cambridge... We all fucked up.

THE CAT. Don't blame yourself. Blame me. Open the journal. Read the letter. The one thing I wanted to leave you... was hope. A world filled with hope – safety – magic – wonder – awe. Love. Warmth. I just want you to forgive me for not managing my anxiety. It was a driving, primal need: I had to be loved. I tried to earn it... it's not something you can earn. A degree... in love. I stumbled... so many times. I put myself first. It's in the letter. I never sent it. I wrote it when you were born. Within minutes,

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anyway. Read it – at least I’ll know you know how much I loved you. Close your eyes: I’ll read it for you.

TOGETHER. Greetings from the great unknown. I might be a little doped up on pain killer. At least it worked. I was told I’d been hallucinating woolly mammoths. Siberian tigers. Nematodes – roundworms over 40,000 years old. They said I was in a coma... but I saw them all around me – giant creatures long extinct – Yukagir Bison – Stone Age cave art come alive all around me. I was back at Villars, in France, staring at the paintings of the creatures long gone... still in high school yet communing with the distant past and immediate present simultaneously. That was the moment when I heard you cry for me. You were years away from being born – I was no more than sixteen – but I heard you. And that sound of crashing glass, as if all eternity was shattering around us. I was certain I’d be deafened by the cacophony – my body started shaking, my core temperature dropped – I think I died. Then later, when they let me hold you, I was so afraid I’d drop you and all that crashing noise would engulf me again. Total collapse: I was like an ancient glacier crashing under the weight of my own fear. Years later I got a letter that your father, who was away studying Arctic melting, had been buried alive in an avalanche. He never met you – one of the top scientists in the world, killed by the very thing he loved most. It all came back: the research, the papers, the sacrifices that mankind would make, one way or another. I chose to shelter you from all that – gave up my own career – to give you a better life. To avoid becoming the target of the big oil conglomerates. And I wouldn’t trade my choice for all the tea in China. You have been my light in the darkness, my Hope in this hopeless world. I knew it from the moment I felt you kick. It’s taken me years to write this all down – I never quite knew what to say. I still don’t. Please forgive me – I

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buried the science – else they’d’ve killed me. And you. I always knew... Don’t run from your fear like I ran. Be happy. Be glad that you’re alive, and love at least one small creature with all of your heart. Then, like me, you will always have Hope. Without that – all we have is extinction. Don’t let the bastards win. Love...
Mother.

THE SCIENTIST. She did love me. It took her all those years just to write me a letter? You can lose an entire ice shelf in twenty-four hours... and this took years? “Buried the science...” What a selfish, stupid woman. Love, love, love – bullshit. I call bullshit on that lie. (Rips letter). If she loved me she’d have fought all the way to the end. She would never have let my father go off to some Godforsaken glacier, just to die without ever holding me. Ever. Hey, all you frozen men – frozen viruses – frozen repository of life: I call you out of hiding. Come and get me. Take me on. I have nothing to lose. Bring back the Ice Age. Right here: light up the Northern Lights and slide your dead asses right down here. Let’s get this over with: a good, old-fashioned mud-wrestle. Bring all your memories with you – am I the last human being left still standing? Face me! You think you can just crawl in and out of my brain and destroy me? Wrong. Wrong... you’re wrong about me: I can take it. I have this thing – it’s called a soul. You can’t have it. This will not be a dead planet. I’m still here... so it’s not dead.

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—
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