

Mitch Album



human
touch

a story in real time

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Mitch Albom

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Chapter Four

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The Series

“Human Touch” is a new serialized story of hope during the coronavirus pandemic, set in the moment we are all living through together. It is being written by Mitch Albom in the present, one week at a time.

A new “chapter” is released every Friday at www.humantouch-story.com. An audio version is available at Audible.com.

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Illustrations by Marina Van Mechelen.



Week Eight

Four men are slouching around a fire in the woods, less than a mile from the corner. One man, whose name is J.P., throws a piece of tree bark into the flames.

“You know this whole thing is because we didn’t close our borders fast enough.” He spits. “The minute someone heard there was a virus in China, we shoulda said, ‘Door closed. No Chinese in the country. No Asians of any kind.’”

Another man, Riley, wearing a hockey jersey under an overcoat, pipes in. “Damn right. They eat bats and snakes. They do all kinds of things with animals. That’s how it starts, you know. That’s how AIDs started. Same way.”

“We should track down every Chinese person in the country,” J.P. says.

“Round ’em up,” Riley says.

“You mean lock ’em up.”

The group laughs.

“Lock ’em up,” Riley repeats. “Yeah.”

“I wish we could do that.”

“Hey, J.P. That was badass, putting that sign on the Lee’s house.”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t know you could spell.”

“Shut up.”

“No, seriously, that was ballsy.”

“Gotta do something. The government ain’t doing squat.”

A third man has been listening to this. He is tall and wiry. His name is Anthony. He stands up, cups his hands together and blows into them to keep them warm.

“Painting signs don’t make you a militia,” he says.

“Oh, no? What does?”

“Guns.”

J.P. looks away. He spits again.

“Well, I ain’t got access to a lot of guns right now.”

The fourth person leans forward, his face illuminated by the fire. A young face. Still in its teens.

“I do,” Buck says.

“Where at?” Anthony asks.

“My grandpa’s place. At the cider mill. He’s got plenty of guns.”

J.P. looks at Riley who looks back at Anthony.

“What are we waiting for?” Anthony says.



CINDY APPEARS at Sam's door. She is wearing a face mask.

"Hey," she says to her husband, "how are you doing this morning?"

"Better," Sam says. "I think something broke last night. The fever's gone. I'm not coughing as much. Still tired. A little achy."

He lifts to his elbows. "But honey...you shouldn't have done that."

"What?" Cindy says.

"Got into bed with me last night. I could still be contagious. I mean, I really appreciated it. I was too zonked out to even open my

eyes. But it made me feel...better. Just having some contact. So thank you.”

“Sam,” Cindy says.

“What?”

“You were dreaming.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I didn’t get into bed with you.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Uh-uh.”

Sam drops into a pillow. “Wow. It felt so real. Jesus. Now I’m hallucinating?”

Cindy thinks about the sign someone put on their lawn. “*CHINESE VIRUS LIVES HERE.*” She thinks about telling Sam. But what’s the point? What can he do except get angry?

“Are you up to eating something?” she asks.

“Actually, yeah.”

“Good.” She turns from the door and yells, “Rosebaby!” – then sees Rosebaby just a few feet away.

“Oh, sorry, didn’t know you were there,” Cindy says.

“Is Mr. Sam feeling better this morning?” Rosebaby asks.

“He’s actually up for some breakfast.”

Rosebaby grins.

“What?” Cindy says.

“Nothing,” Rosebaby says. “This is good news.”

PASTOR WINSTON shuts his eyes for a quick prayer. Then he opens them and walks into the police station.

“Hello,” he says to the woman behind the front desk, “I’m turning myself in.”

“What for?” she says flatly.

“I’m the pastor.”

“The one who held the services?”

He nods.

She picks up the phone, presses a few buttons and whispers something into the receiver.

“They’ll be out in a second. You can sit down if you want.”

“I’ll stand, thank you.”

Winston rubs his hands on his elbows. He thinks about the last two days. When the police came to his office, they questioned him about the church services Sunday. He could not lie. He admitted that he knew about the statewide order not to gather groups larger than 10 people; he did it anyhow. When they asked, “Was there any physical contact?” he said people hugged and shook hands after the service. When they asked, “Did you provoke that?”, he answered this way:

“If showing brotherly love is ‘provoking’, then, yes, I guess I did.”

He sounded more confident than he felt.

“Pastor Winston,” Officer Jimmy says, appearing from the hallway. “Follow me.”

“All right,” Winston says.

A half hour later, the Pastor is charged with “unlawful assembly” and “violation of public health emergency rules.” He is booked, fingerprinted, and offered the chance to post bail, which he does by paying \$500. The officers had warned him in advance and Lilly had

gone to the bank machine – twice – to get money. The bank itself was closed, like all the other banks during this crisis.

“There’ll be a court date,” Officer Jimmy says.

“I understand,” Winston says.

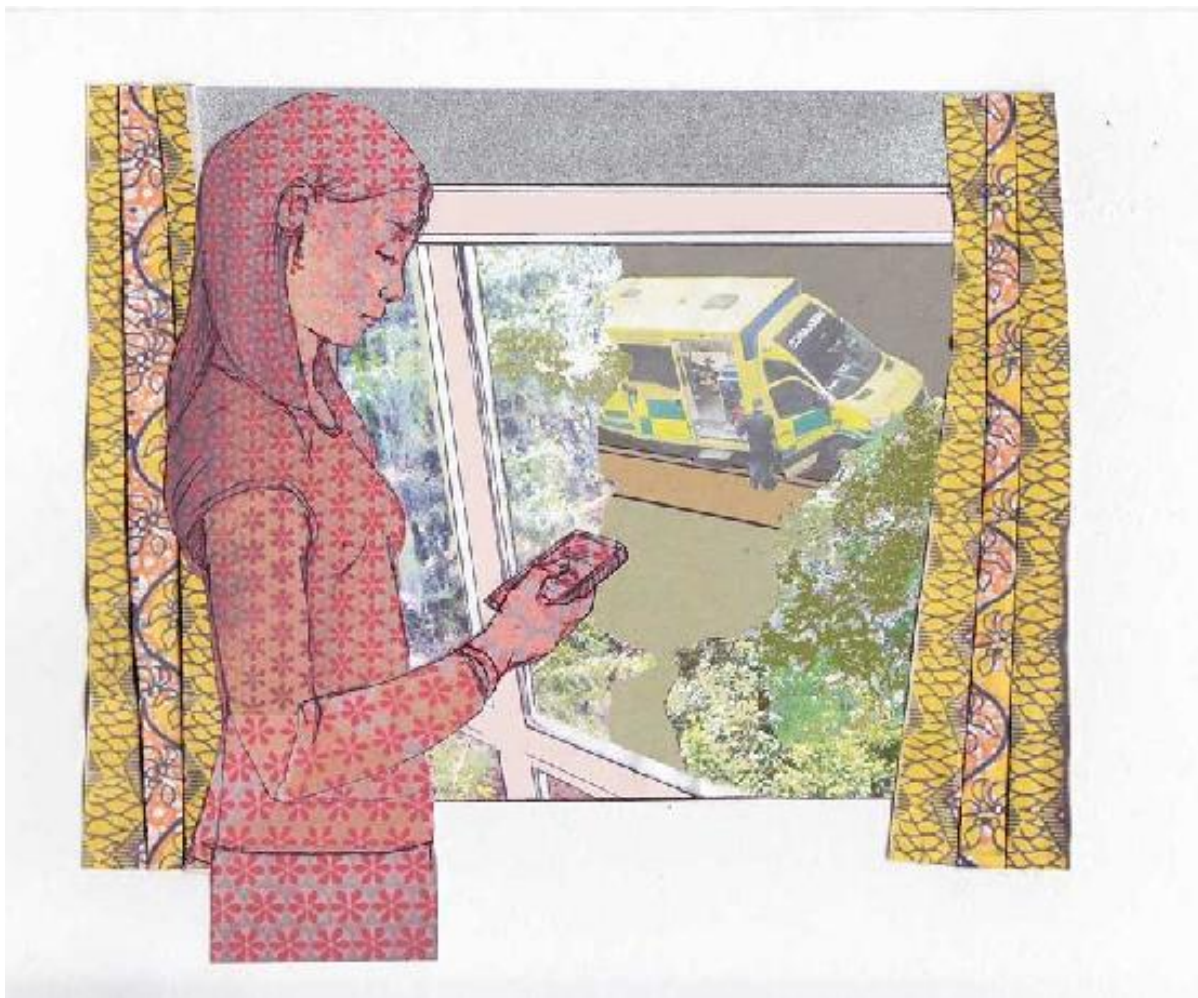
“Till then, just stay around.”

“Where would I go?”

“And Pastor?”

“Yes?”

“You’re not gonna try this again on Sunday, are you?”



AN AMBULANCE pulls up to the Myers' home. The paramedics, covered by hazmat suits, help load Ginger, Aimee's mother, into the vehicle. She is wrapped in a coat and a blanket. The paramedics put an oxygen mask over her mouth.

Aimee and Greg watch from the door. Greg is dressed to go.

"I'll follow behind them," he says, grabbing his keys.

"Call me the minute you get there," Aimee says.

"Yep."

She touches her husband's arm.

"I mean it," she says, firmly. "The minute you get there."

The day before, Ginger had been watching soap operas on TV while lying in the guestroom bed. Ava had been at the door, talking to her grandmother about the characters.

"Wait," Ava said, "who is this guy in love with?"

"The blonde," Ginger said.

"I thought she was with the lawyer."

"Shhh."

"For real, Grandma, this is so hokey."

No response.

"Grandma?"

Ava leaned in to see her grandmother slumped sideways on the pillow.

"Mom!" Ava screamed.

Now Aimee watches as Greg's car follows the ambulance. The lights and siren come on. Aimee notices Rosebaby on the lawn outside the Lee's house, watching the vehicles pass.

Great, Aimee tells herself. Now she'll think we're all contaminated.

From an upstairs window, Ava watches the ambulance disappear. Tears are falling down her face. She grabs her phone and texts Troy.

“I’m freaking out!” she writes. “I think I gave this virus to my grandmother. OMG. What if she dies? This is my fault! Call me!”

OLD MAN RICKETTS has the radio on. He stacks invoices on his desk as he listens to the latest numbers. One expert says a million Americans could die from this virus. They can’t make a vaccine for at least a year. They don’t have any effective medicine. It’s in over 150 countries now, and entire economies are shut down, stores vacant, streets empty.

The whole goddamn world is hiding, he thinks. How do you fight a war when you’re hiding?

Ricketts fought in a war. Vietnam. He enlisted. Became a Master Sergeant. He remembers a night of combat when they were shooting machine guns into a thicket of jungle trees. The only thing they saw of the enemy was flashes of returned gunfire, and that was all the enemy saw of them. Kill or be killed. No place to hide.

He pulls up a facemask and walks out front, where one customer is at the cash register, and eight more customers are lined up in the parking lot, evenly spaced apart. Although it is not apple season, Ricketts has kept the mill open because it sells food. In addition to the normal pies, muffins and donuts, he’s selling pre-packaged sandwiches, which people are scooping up, plus gallons of cider, bottles of pop, and water. Credit cards only. No cash. Money

is filthy with germs. Ricketts has a box of gloves by the door that customers must put on.

“What’ll you have?” he asks the tall, wiry man at the counter.

“Lemme get four ham sandwiches,” he says.

Ricketts nods. He notices the man looking all around the mill, left, right, up, down.

“Never been in here before?” Ricketts says.

“No, sir. Cool place.”

“Um-hmm. That’s \$18.50. Just slide a credit card in.”

The man does.

“What’s your name?” Ricketts asks.

The man seems to hesitate. “Anthony,” he says.

Ricketts drops the sandwiches into the bag with his gloved hands.

“Next time you come in, wear a mask, Anthony,” he says.

CHARLENE IS DRIVING to the Kingswood Motel. She glances out the window and sees Little Moses on the side of the road, his arms out as if he’s walking a tightrope. He wears a light-weight jacket over his t-shirt and jeans.

“Little Moses,” she says, pulling up alongside him. “Don’t you have anything warmer than that to wear?”

“I am not cold.”

“How can you not be cold?”

“I am always not cold.”

Realizing she is stopped in the middle of the street, Charlene instinctively checks her rearview mirror. There are no other cars.

The roads are so empty these days, you can stop and have a conversation like this and not really worry about traffic.

“You want to take a ride, Little Moses?” she asks.

“Oh, yes, Miss!” he says.

He hops in the front seat and sees a large box of masks.

“Ooh, are you going to be Spider Man?”

“No, I sewed those,” she says. “I’m bringing them to my grandson.”

“You make a *lot* of sewing!”

She smiles. “How are you always so sweet, Little Moses?”

She drives to the motel, which is a few miles from the corner.

When she first learned her husband had sent Buck here, she was furious. She didn’t speak to him for two days. But in time she realized he had done it to protect her – and himself. Buck had been exposed to the virus in jail, and her husband knew this disease was particularly deadly to people over 70. She already knew of four people in her extended circle of friends who had died from this – just days after showing symptoms. It’s as if the virus showed up, infiltrated you, and took you down, all in the blink of an eye. In some ways, it felt more like poison than an illness.

At the motel, she parks and takes Little Moses’s hand. They enter the lobby.

“Don’t go any further than here,” she says, stopping just inside the doorway.

“OK,” Little Moses says.

A man appears behind the counter.

“Hi. Can I help you?”

“I want to leave a package for a guest,” Charlene says.

“His name?”

“Ricketts.”

The man studies his computer. The door pulls open, an older couple. They see Charlene and Little Moses and immediately back away.

“Sorry,” the man says, “we’ll wait out here.”

Charlene watches the door close.

“It’s like we’re all magnets now,” she remarks. “We repel one another.”

“Mmm?” The clerk looks up. “Oh. Yeah. It’s nuts.”

He makes a face. “Um, we don’t have anyone named Ricketts staying here.”

“What?”

“It says we had someone – Buck Ricketts – but he checked out two days ago.”

“Checked out? Where would he go?”

The clerk straightens. “I don’t know, Ma’am.”

Charlene and Little Moses drive back home in silence. She shuts the engine, lost in thought.

“Miss Charlene, what will you do with the masks?”

“I don’t know now, Little Moses. I should give them to people, but no one wants to get close enough to take them.”

Little Moses thinks.

“I know what you can do!” he says, opening his door.

“What?”

“Use the trees!”

An hour later, Charlene and Moses have hung the masks from the eye-level branches of a huge evergreen. Charlene writes on the

side of the box, “Take A Mask! Stay Safe!”

“It’s like Christmas!” little Moses exclaims.

Charlene walks back to the mill, worried about where her grandson has gone. *No*, she thinks, *it’s not like Christmas at all.*



GREG SLIPS into the intensive care room and closes the door. His mother-in-law, Ginger, is on a ventilator, one of the last ones left. Greg had to convince his boss, Paul, to let her use it.

“You know most of these elderly patients aren’t making it,” Paul had said.

“So we don’t try and save them?”

“It’s not about trying, Greg. It’s about choosing to save someone younger.”

“We’re not God, Paul.”

“No, but we’re gonna be playing Him pretty soon.”

Greg looks down at Ginger now, her eyes closed, the large plastic tube and mask obscuring much of her face. He allows himself a rare moment of emotion. His face contorts. He starts to cry. He loves his mother-in-law. She has always embraced him, told him he was a good match for her daughter, stayed out of their arguments. She was funny and lively, kicking her legs out with the kids, showing them how she used to dance in the revues.”

Now here she is, so quiet, taken down by this *thing*, this invader, that has filled the hospital to its breaking point. There are corpses in body bags being stored in spare rooms, because funeral homes and morgues are closed or overrun. Every day they run out of something else. Nasal swabs. Reagents. PPE’s. Greg remembers, during his intern years, spending a month in Guatemala and being appalled at how basic medical care was so absent. Never in his life had he expected to see something like this in America.

A knock. The door opens.

“Dr. Myers?” a nurse says. “We need you in the OR right away.”

DANIEL WALKS up the driveway carrying two large pizzas. He wears gloves and a face mask. He yawns, smelling his breath as he exhales into the fabric. He’s been working non-stop lately. It seems like people start ordering pizzas by noon and don’t stop until the shop closes at 9.

He rings the bell. The inner door opens. He recognizes the teenager in a striped bathrobe. His hair is disheveled and his eyes are red.

“Whoa, hey, Troy,” Daniel says.

“Ricketts,” Troy says. “Whassup?”

“What’s up with you, man?”

“Aw, man. This has been the worst.”

“You got the virus?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s it like?”

“Man, it knocks you out. Fever. Coughing. And it aches like a mother.”

Daniel is suddenly very aware of keeping the door closed between them.

“Sorry to hear that,” Daniel says.

“Yeah, it sucks,” Troy says. “Don’t worry. We paid by credit card so you don’t gotta open the door. Just drop the pies and bolt.”

“Thanks.”

“Dude,” Troy says. “You see Ava?”

“We went for a walk last Saturday. The families on the corner, I mean. I saw her then.”

“She doing all right?”

“I guess.”

“You see her, tell her I miss meeting her in the woods, OK?”

Daniel shrugs, feeling suddenly a little jealous.

“And Dude?” Troy adds.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t tell her I look like crap, all right? Lie.”



CINDY PARKS her car at the market and grabs her purse. Rosebaby often does the shopping, but Cindy was going stir-crazy in the house, so she offered to do it. She sits for a moment with the engine running, listening to the NPR news. She hears an expert predict that the disease could get worse if people don't continue to stay inside and isolate from one another. He says hospitals will collapse. He mentions how many doctors and nurses have gone out sick or even died themselves trying to handle all the virus patients.

When the interview finishes, the anchor changes subjects and introduces another expert, this one on China, who begins to talk

about wet markets and animals and how infections there spread to humans. Cindy shuts the engine. She pulls a mask around her mouth. As she steps out, she makes eye contact with a middle-aged woman in a maroon sweat suit, who seems to scowl. At least it looks like a scowl to Cindy. She is suddenly acutely aware of her Chinese features. Her heart begins to race. She thinks about that sign on her lawn. *CHINESE VIRUS LIVES HERE!*

She thinks for a moment, then takes a scarf from the front seat and wraps her dark, straight hair. She reaches in her purse for her sunglasses, which are large and cover her eyes, eyebrows, and parts of her cheeks and forehead. She slips them on, then steps towards the line.

LITTLE MOSES is dreaming again. He is back in the clouds, playing with a Spider Man doll. He looks for the other kids, but there are none.

“Little Moses?” a man’s voice says.

It is the same man from the earlier dream, with the wrinkled face and the earrings.

“*Ou dwe dormi,*” the man says. You need to sleep.

“Are we going to see the people again?”

“*Si ou vle fè sa.*” If you want to. “*Bah mwen meh ou.*” Give me your hand.

Little Moses feels himself rising above the clouds. Below, once again, people begin marching his way, more than he can count.

“What do they want?” he asks.

“*Yo bezwen ou.*” They need you.

“Why?”

The old man squeezes his hand.

“*Sa a pral fè mal. Pa reveye.*” This will hurt. But don’t wake up.

Moses feels a flick of pain. He flinches. Then the pain is gone.

“*Ti gason brav,*” the man says. Brave boy.

“Are you God?” Little Moses asks.

The man smiles broadly, revealing gaps on both the top and bottom.

“*Bondye tap gen tout dan li om,*” he says. God would have all his teeth.

He strokes Little Moses’ forehead until the boy’s eyes close and the world turns a solid white, like a thick snowstorm.

Hours later, when Little Moses wakes up, he looks at his finger and sees a tiny spot of red.

IT IS SATURDAY. Aimee has organized another walk. It has been eight weeks since she last hosted one of the corner’s get-togethers. Eight weeks since she made the two types of chili and the cornbread and the brownies and everyone hugged and kissed and ate off each other’s plates.

Now they are outside, bundled up against the April wind, each family standing on its respective corner, getting no closer than that. North, south, east, west.

“Should we go left this time?” Aimee yells.

The neighbors agree and start to walk. The Ricketts are on the left side of the street, a good 10 feet ahead of Pastor Winston and

Lilly, whose kids trail behind. On the right side, Aimee walks with Greg, who is taking his first day off from the hospital in a week. Ava and Mia are next. Well behind them, Cindy walks with Little Moses. Rosebaby lags behind.

“Daniel,” Aimee yells, trying to kick start a conversation.

“How’s the pizza business?”

“It’s crazy busy,” he yells back.

“I’ll bet.”

Silence.

“I heard this stay-at-home order could go on until June,” Charlene says.

“That ain’t for sure,” Ricketts says.

“June?” Daniel moans. “I’m not gonna make it.”

“You’ll make it if you have to,” Ricketts says.

Silence.

“Listen,” Cindy suddenly blurts out. “Do any of you know about the sign that was on my lawn?”

They look at her, exchanging glances.

“What sign?” Greg says.

“It said ‘Chinese Virus Lives Here.’ Nobody saw it?”

“Oh my God, Cindy!”

“No.”

“Oh, Jesus. When was this?”

“Last week. None of you saw it? I was really shook up. I pulled it out of the ground and hid it in the garage. I mean, what do you all think? People like Sam and me had something to do with this? Who the hell thinks like that?”

Silence.

“Cindy that’s awful,” Lilly says.

“Yeah,” she snaps. “Yeah. It was.”

“Did you call the police?” Aimee says.

“No.” She exhales hard. “I didn’t want them coming to the house acting like they were going to get sick.”

She suddenly stops walking. “You know what? I’m not really up for this today. I’m gonna go back and be with Sam.”

She turns and hunches her shoulders. Her pace quickens as she leaves the group.

“We understand!” Aimee yells after her.

“We love you, Cindy!” Lilly adds.

Silence.

They turn a corner, adjusting their positions.

“Jesus,” Greg mumbles. “Who would do that?”

“Aimee,” Lilly says. “How is your mother?”

“The same,” Aimee says. “She’s on the ventilator. It’s killing me not to be able to see her. I mean, when does that ever happen? That someone you love gets sick and you’re not even allowed to visit?”

Her voice starts to crack and Greg rubs the back of her shoulder.

“I’m so sorry,” Lilly says.

“We’ll be praying for her,” Pastor Winston says.

“You won’t be praying in church, will you, Pastor?” Ricketts says. “You’re done with that now, aren’t you?”

Winston digs his hands in his jacket pockets. “I don’t believe we’ll have services tomorrow,” he says.

“You did hear about Jean, didn’t you?” Ricketts says.

“What about Jean?”

“She has the virus. Isn’t she a regular at your church?”

Winston swallows. He looks at Lilly, whose eyes are bulging. *Was she there last week?*

“I, uh, didn’t hear that,” Winston says. “I’ll call when we get back and check in with her.”

Silence.

Greg stops to tie his shoelace. The others continue ahead.

“Dr. Greg,” he hears Rosebaby whisper. He looks up. She is holding something that looks like a vial.

“What’s that?” Greg asks.

“Blood.”

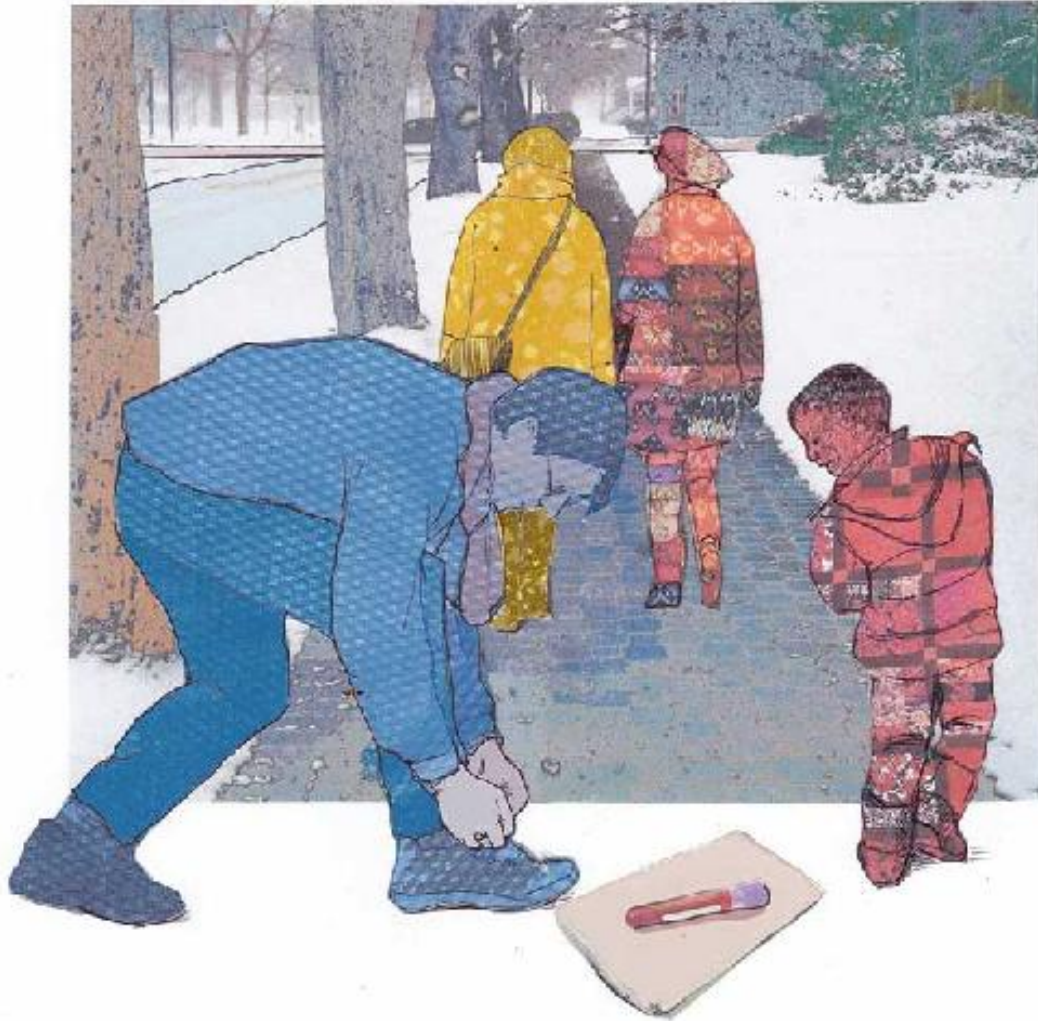
“What?”

“For Ginger.”

“Roseybaby, wherever you got that, you shouldn’t be—”

“Listen to me closely,” Rosebaby says. She eyes the neighbors who are out of earshot. “Do you think I was born to clean another woman’s house? In Haiti, I was a nurse. I know medicine. I know how to draw blood. This is from Little Moses. If you are wise and you wish to save Aimee’s mother, you will take it.”

She lays the vial on a cloth napkin and walks away, keeping her distance. Greg, still bent over, looks at Little Moses as he passes, who is looking back at him and smiling the strangest smile.



“YOU SURE this is safe?” Anthony says.

“They’re out walking,” Buck says, leading them through the back door of the cider mill. “Follow me.”

“I’m curious, Buck-o. Why you want to steal your grandpa’s guns?”

“He put me out,” Buck says. “Like a goddamn dog, he put me out.”

The others shrug. Buck guides Anthony, Riley and J.P. down to the basement. In a large closet filled with boxes and hunting gear they see a gun cabinet.

“He keeps them in there.”

“You got the key?” Anthony says.

Buck pauses. “No. But I bet he keeps it around here somewhere.”

“Idiot! You don’t know where he keeps it? What if he comes back?”

Buck rustles through the closet shelves. “It’s probably here. Hang on.”

“Do we really need a gun?” J.P. asks.

“You want to make a point to that Chinaman?” Anthony says. “Or do you want to have a cappuccino with him and talk things over?”

Riley looks around nervously. “Just hurry up, man. Your grandfather is *not* someone I want to screw with.”

Buck stops. He pulls a hunting jacket off a hanger. He reaches into an inside pocket.

A smile crosses his face.

“What did I tell you?” he says, pulling out a key.

END OF CHAPTER FOUR

Pay It Forward

If you're enjoying "Human Touch" so far, would you consider, if you're able, adding a human touch of your own by donating any amount to help my hometown city of Detroit battle the wave of coronavirus that is overwhelming it? Our citizens are struggling - and dying - in high numbers. "DETROIT BEATS COVID-19!" focuses on first responders, seniors, poor children and the homeless.

Thanks, as always,
Mitch Albom

DETROIT BEATS COVID-19!

You can donate to help Mitch Albom's hometown of Detroit through SAY Detroit, a 501(c)(3) charity he founded in 2006, right now at www.humantouchstory.com.

The **DETROIT BEATS COVID-19!** project will devote 100% of the proceeds to fighting Covid-19 in the following ways:

- By creating a mobile testing center in Detroit
- Feeding 2,000 homebound seniors weekly
- Continuing education for more than 100 impoverished children

- Helping to operate a quarantine center for homeless citizens
- Funding the creation of reusable, washable masks and mask protectors for first responders
- Feeding medical and hospital personnel on the front lines through the purchase of food from local Detroit restaurants at risk of closing

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Tuesdays with Morrie

The Five People You Meet in Heaven

For One More Day

Have a Little Faith

The Time Keeper

The First Phone Call from Heaven

The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto

The Next Person You Meet in Heaven

Finding Chika

About the Author

Mitch Albom is the author of numerous books of fiction and nonfiction, which have collectively sold more than forty million copies in forty-seven languages worldwide. He has written seven number-one New York Times bestsellers – including *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the bestselling memoir of all time, which topped the list for four straight years – award-winning TV films, stage plays, screenplays, a nationally syndicated newspaper column, and a musical. His most recent work is a return to nonfiction with the New York Times bestseller *Finding Chika*, a memoir about a young Haitian orphan whose short life would forever change Albom's heart. He founded and oversees SAY Detroit, a consortium of nine different charitable operations in his hometown, including a non-profit dessert shop and food product line to fund programs for Detroit's most underserved citizens. He also operates an orphanage in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, which he visits monthly. He lives with his wife, Janine, in Michigan. Learn more at www.mitcalbom.com, www.saydetroit.org, and www.havefaithaiti.org.

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