

# Passepartout

Gem Newman

The building had been white at one time, but now it was a dusty grey, paint flaking away here and there, crumbling brickwork exposed to the elements. The windows sported posters advertising Angel Falls and the Banaue Rice Terraces, photos bleached blue by the sun. A tattered awning sheltered the doorway, which featured a large decal of a European-looking butler with a pencil-thin moustache.

Ian pulled up his mask as he entered. Inside, the travel agency was furnished with grey vinyl benches, wisps of stuffing emerging from cracks in the seats, interrupted periodically by gaffer's tape to ensure distance between absent clients.

A woman emerged from the back to greet Ian as he stepped up to the counter. A short wall of plexiglass separated them, clouded by scuffs and scratches accrued over years of service.

"Good afternoon," she said brightly. "Welcome to Passepartout. Where can we help you go today?"

Ian glanced at the posters on the wall. Milan. Cairo. Mumbai.

"To the movies," he said.

She looked at him for a moment, then glanced around the empty travel agency.

"I'm sure we can help you with that. Could I see some ID, please?"

He slid his driver's license through the opening in the plexiglass. Ian watched as she tapped away at her computer, pausing briefly to compare his face to his photo. Then she came around the counter and wordlessly locked the front door.

The woman sat on one of the split vinyl benches and gestured for him to do the same. He settled himself across from her and she handed his driver's license back.

"So what brings you in today, Mr. La Croix?"

"I need a vaccine card," he said. "Isn't that what brings everyone here?" He glanced around at the faded posters and decade-old travel magazines. "I can't imagine you're selling many trips to Rome these days."

Even with her mask on, he could tell she didn't return his smile. "And why do you need proof of immunization?"

He frowned. "To go to the movies, like I said. To eat at a restaurant. To... to live a normal life again. You can't go anywhere these days without one of those damned cards."

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She nodded. “Do you currently have a card? Any card?”

“Sure, I’ve got the yellow one.” He shifted on the bench so he could dig it out of his wallet.

“This is authentic?” she asked, turning it over in her hands. “Not one of ours?”

“Yeah, it’s from the booster I got last March. But it’s no good anymore. Last couple weeks all anyone will take is the green card, and one of the guys at work was saying he heard something about a blue card coming next year, shot’s supposed to work better against the virus they got in Ukraine.”

She produced a phone and scanned the card’s QR code, nodding to herself. She handed the card back.

“This was your most recent immunization? You haven’t had the shot for C.41.7 or any of the newer variants?”

“Uh, I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

Ian sat back. He hadn’t expected so many questions. He should have been in and out by now.

“I’m not judging,” she prompted. “It’s just important to know.”

“No disrespect,” he said, “but how is that your business? I figured I’d come in, exchange pleasantries, fork over some cash, maybe have to sit through a lecture about government overreach, and then be on my way.”

“That’s not how we do things here.”

“No?” He folded his arms. “How hard is it to just print up a card?”

“Do you have concerns about the vaccine? I’m happy to address any questions you have.”

His eyes narrowed. “I’m starting to have concerns about this place, to be honest. Can you get me a new card or not?”

It was her turn to sit back. She eyed him across the table, then pulled out her phone and began swiping and tapping. There was a distant mechanical hum. She stood and crossed the office, returning with a pale green plastic card. She placed it on the table between them. He could see his name printed over the QR code.

“How much?” he said, pulling out his wallet.

“Tell me why you need it first.”

For fuck’s sake. She wasn’t going to drop it. He looked around the shabby office as he considered how to respond.

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“My plan won’t cover it,” he said finally. The truth was probably best. “They’re fighting the government on it, saying the shot from March is good enough.”

She nodded. “Licensing fees went up again.”

“Don’t know that it matters much, though,” he said. “Everyone seems to be out of the new shots anyway. Can’t keep up with demand.”

“That’s not strictly true,” she said. “There have been times when they haven’t been able to meet demand, but these days the scarcity is mostly artificial. The vaccines are too expensive. We could manufacture to demand, but only if they waived the licensing fees. Or we broke patent.” There was a shadow of a smile in her eyes. “Which would be illegal.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want to break that law,” he laughed, eyeing the counterfeit vaccine card on the table between them.

“Who’s your provider?” she asked.

He told her.

Her brow furrowed. “You work for the city?”

His breath caught. “Yeah,” he said, as smoothly as he could. “Sanitation.” So much for the truth.

She nodded. “You’re lucky. They didn’t balk until the fourth series. You’ve got better coverage than most.”

“I guess so.” He hadn’t really thought about it.

“And you’d get the shot if you could?” she prompted. “You don’t have any concerns about the immunization?”

“What kind of concerns?” he asked. Best to keep the conversation moving. “You mean, like, is this all part of some government conspiracy to tag and track us?”

“Something like that.”

He grinned. “Don’t get me wrong: I don’t exactly trust the government. But given their track-record, I doubt they’re competent enough to pull off a super-plague and somehow keep it under wraps. And if there is some group of rich elites pulling the strings, I can’t imagine ‘destroy the global economy’ is on the top of their to-do list.”

And you don’t exactly need to inject someone with a microchip to track them, Ian thought, eyeing the phone on the seat next to her.

“Sounds like you’ve thought it through,” she said.

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“What about you?” he asked. He was genuinely curious now. “You don’t seem like the type to be out there protesting the mask mandate. Why are you doing this?”

“We’re filling a need,” she said. “Most people would take the vaccine if they could, but in the meantime, their lives are on hold. There aren’t enough doses to go around, and the companies that own the patents have a stranglehold on the supply.”

She stood and moved behind the counter again. “And that’s just here,” she continued. “There are parts of the world that are just getting their first series, countries where buying a shot for everyone would wipe out their entire GDP.”

From where he was sitting he couldn’t see what she was doing, and he didn’t want to appear too interested.

He shrugged. “Well, if you weren’t doing it, somebody else would.”

Plenty of other people were doing it, of course, as she must know. Most were shoestring operations, copying a card and flipping it a few times. This place, though...

He looked up and saw that she’d finished whatever she was doing. She was standing at the edge of the counter, looking at him appraisingly.

The silence between them stretched and began to turn sour.

“So,” he said, gesturing at the green rectangle of plastic. “You’re sure this’ll do the trick?”

“It will.”

“What if they try to scan it? Won’t they see that I haven’t been vaccinated?”

She snorted. “I honestly don’t remember the last time someone actually scanned my card. But if they do you’ll still get the green light.”

“How are you updating the records?”

“We’re not,” she said, sitting down again. “That would be difficult. And very... traceable. The college would have my license pulled before the squad cars even arrived.”

“Your license?” he said blankly.

She pulled out an ID and set it down next to the green card. Dr. Inaya Rashid, MD. She worked at the hospital where his niece had been born.

“So...” he began, taking a moment to process this new information. “So how does it work then? If you’re not updating my medical record, I mean?”

“One of my clerks did a project with the government a couple months ago and got access to the code for the scanner app they’ve got everyone using. Yanked the encryption key or

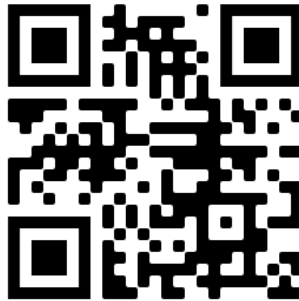
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something. When this card gets scanned, the app won't call out to the health database. It'll hit our server instead, and we give you the all-clear.

"Here, I'll show you." Dr. Rashid grabbed her phone and opened the app. She scanned the card's QR code, and the app's blue background flashed green.

Ian stared at the screen.

**IAN LA CROIX**



*— UP TO DATE —*

This went beyond forgery. This was a cybercrime.

"Of course, anyone with access to your medical records can see your official immunization status," she continued. "So as far as your doctor's concerned, you're still unvaccinated, at least against the most recent variants. But as far as a vaccine passport goes, you're covered."

"Great," he said, reaching for the card. "Thanks, Doc."

"Hold on," she said. "We're not quite done."

"What do you—? Oh, of course." He stood, pulling out his wallet again. "You take cash, I assume?"

"We don't, actually," she said, standing and moving to the counter again.

He frowned, surprised, and pulled out a credit card. He could expense it later.

When he looked up, Dr. Rashid was holding a syringe.

"What the hell?" he exclaimed, stumbling back.

"Don't be alarmed," she said.

"What is that?"

"Your vaccine," she said.

"What are you talking about?" Ian said, eyeing the needle. "What vaccine?"

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She frowned. “I just printed you a vaccination record, and you’re asking me ‘what vaccine?’”

“That’s a forgery! It’s not a real vaccine card.”

She sighed. “It wouldn’t be ethical—or good for public health—to give you a vaccination record if you hadn’t actually been immunized.”

“So I’m supposed to just let you stick me with that?”

“If you want that card. Weren’t you just telling me you had no problem with the vaccine?”

“Sure, but... How do I know that’s a real vaccine?”

Dr. Rashid shrugged. “You trust me. Same as you would if you showed up in the ER with a nail in your foot and no record of a tetanus booster.”

“Where did you get it? You can’t find C.41.7 doses anywhere.”

“We manufactured it.”

“You manufactured it?” he repeated incredulously.

She made a face. “Not me, personally, but my colleagues and I have... contacts.”

Ian stared at her. “Contacts who, what, brewed it up in a bathtub?”

“Of course not.” She sighed. “This came from an industrial lab, just like any other vaccine. It’s identical to the dose you’d get at any other site. Exactly the same formula. Same mRNA, same suspension, same preservatives, everything.

“It was just made in a lab with a less rosy view of the current state of patent law than the government.” She frowned. “Or some of the major players in global health, sadly.”

“And what if I don’t want the shot?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You changed your mind?”

“Hypothetically, I mean. What if someone was scared of the government, or just needles or whatever?”

“Then I’d talk to them about it. But the bottom line is: You want that card? This is how you pay.”

Holy shit. He’d heard about the counterfeit cards, but vaccine piracy was something else entirely.

“Look,” she said. “This isn’t exactly a billable encounter for me, so I’d appreciate it if you decided quickly.”

He didn’t know what to say.

“Are... You’re sure it’s safe?”

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Dr. Rashid smiled at that, he could see it in her eyes. She knew she had him.

“Yes, it’s safe. We’ve done hundreds of these, and aside from a sore arm and the occasional headache, no one’s had any complaints. And the way this virus hits? I know we’ve saved lives by now.”

“Okay,” he said, nodding. “Okay, that’s good to know.”

“You don’t have any allergies?” she asked as he rolled up his sleeve. “Polyethylene glycol?”

“Unless you’re injecting me with cat dander, I think we’re good,” he said. “So you’re really not asking for any money?”

“Well,” she said, wiping a swab against the muscle of his shoulder, “we wouldn’t say no to a donation. The vaccines are a lot cheaper if you ignore the patent, but we still need to manufacture and ship them. We’ve been sending doses to Venezuela and Chile, and I know a few of the other ‘unofficial’ clinics are helping get folks in Tunisia and Algeria immunized.”

“Wow,” he said. “Good for you.”

“Okay, just let your arm hang loose,” she said, uncapping the needle. “You’re not a fainter, are you? Do you want me to count you down?”

“No, I’m good.”

The sirens had been getting louder for a while, but it seemed that Dr. Rashid had been too absorbed in her work to notice. She looked up in alarm as the door slammed open and armed police officers poured into the ad hoc clinic. Her eyes darted from face to face, eventually landing on Ian. She slowly raised her hands.

“Sorry, Doc,” Ian said. He grinned weakly, a little embarrassed. “I’ll still take that shot though, if it’s all the same to you.”