

Coming Up Short

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DEDICATION

To my literary
heroes.

ACKNOWLEDG MENTS

Thank you to my
favorite authors.
You have kept me
entertained
throughout my life.

Boogie Man

“Ben? Do you
want to go next?”

Ben looked
around the circle of
curious faces, “No,
I’ll go last.”

Dan was on the opposite side of the therapy circle.

“Surprise, surprise, what else is new?”

Dr. Stevens frowned at Dan, “Dan, that’s unnecessary. We are here to support each other, not be critics.”

“Fine, fine. If Ben needs to go last, again, I’ll go next.”

The balding middle-aged doctor of psychiatry smiled, “Thank you, Dan. Darla, you can go after Dan if that’s okay.”

The woman
with dirty blonde
hair nodded and
looked at Dan.

“Well, let’s
see...” Dan
scratched his chin,
trying to recall
how well he had
slept during the
previous week.

Finch, who was
the longest-tenured

patient of the
group therapy
session, thought
Dan was, as usual,
full of shit. Dan
didn't need to
think about
whether he had
slept, he needed to
make a show of it.

Dan held up a
pudgy hand,
assigning a day of

the week to each finger. “Monday, Tuesday ...”

Finch rolled his eyes, “Jesus, get on with it.”

Dan paused and looked to Dr. Stevens, “Why do you always call me out for speaking out of turn? You never say anything

to Finch for being rude.”

Outside of their meeting room, Ben could hear the wind picking up steam. With the snow blowing, it would be a tough night ahead.

Dr. Stevens stared at Dan,
“Because he is

right. You know
exactly what nights
you slept. Why do
you feel the need
to convince
everyone that you
don't remember?
It's as though you
want to elevate
yourself above your
problem, almost as
though you're
detaching yourself

from your
insomnia.

Deflection will not
resolve the issue.”

Dan responded,
“I slept most of the
night on
Wednesday and
Saturday. Almost
none the rest of the
nights. It’s hard to
function at work
when that happens.

I even feel like...
this is only once in
a great while, mind
you, but it's like I
hallucinate things.
It's scary."

Darla sat back
in her chair, arms
folded over her
chest, measuring
Dan. She pointed a
finger at him and
asked, "Do you

ever tell the truth
about anything?”

“What?” Dan
leaned forward.

Finch
interrupted, “As I
said many times,
he’s full of shit.”

Dr. Stevens
raised his eyebrows
and Finish
quieted.

“Listen, Dan,
hallucinations can
happen because of
sleep loss.

However, this is
the first I’ve heard
about this from
you. I would like
to give you a
chance to think
about your
statement regarding
hallucinations, to

ensure that you
aren't simply trying
to entertain us
all.”

“I'm not!
Seriously, it's
happened a few
times.”

Darla spoke up,
“What did you
hallucinate?”

Dan clamped
his mouth shut.

She shook her
head. “Uh-huh,
that’s what I
thought.”

Darla
continued to speak,
filling the group in
on her week of
sleepless nights. She
explained that
while she had slept

no better than
usual; she did
experience progress
related to
understanding the
source of her stress.
She felt that stress
was a large factor
in her insomnia.
When she finished,
Dr. Stevens
congratulated her
on her

breakthrough and
her honesty,
making eye contact
with Dan as he
did.

Dr. Stevens
gestured to Ben,
“Mr. Mallen, we
are nearing the end
of our session and
everyone else has
spoken.” The
doctor looked at

Dan, “Mostly,
anyway.”

To Ben, he
said, “This is your
third session.

Tonight, I would
like you to share
with us what you
believe causes your
insomnia. Please go
ahead.”

Ben pushed
away the sinking,

tired feeling that
had plagued him
his entire life.

“Well, as you all
know, I’m Ben
Mallen.” He smiled
at the others in the
circle. Only Darla
returned his
friendliness.

“Anyway, you all
have related your
sleeplessness to

stress, it sounds like
anyway. For me,
it's different."

"How so?" Dr.
Stevens leaned
forward on his
chair; his notebook
perched on one
knee.

"Well, I've had
insomnia my entire
life. I think I
mentioned that

before. It started when I was a little kid, the first time I...” Ben looked at the others. This was where he had stopped talking in each of his previous sessions.

Darla smiled at him again and said, “Keep pushing forward until you

get it all out. It really feels better to share your burdens.”

Ben looked at Finch and Dan. They would both jump his ass as soon as he told them his truth, but he was tired and no longer cared what they thought.

“I saw him for the first time when I was eight years old.” He paused. He could tell at a minimum he had Dr. Stevens’ attention.

“You saw who, Ben?” The doctor had his pen perched on the pad of paper in his lap.

“None of you
will believe me,
but I’m tired, so, so
tired of the endless
torture.” Ben took
a sip from the
bottle of water he
kept on the floor
next to his chair.
He had been
nervous to speak
about it in his
previous two

sessions, but now,
he wanted to
confess.

“The Boogie
Man, I saw the
Boogie Man when
I was eight years
old. It was the
night he killed my
parents and
brother.”

Dan sat still,
only blinking his

eyes. Darla looked at him with sympathy. She looked like she wanted to hug him.

“Oh, Jesus Christ on a crutch. Are you serious with this shit?” Finch erupted.

Dr. Stevens removed his glasses

from their perch
on his nose, “Ben,
I want you to stop
and think about
why you choose to
blame a fictitious
character for your
sleep issues.”

Ben snickered
and said, “I knew
you’d say that, but
I don’t need to
consider anything.

I was there that night, and I know what I saw. It's the only time I ever saw him, but he's always with me. He comes to me to torture me, to keep me awake, always with his devious games.”

Darla placed a hand on Ben's arm.

“Ben, I have been a shitty person at times in my life, but I have never come to one of these sessions and lied about anything.” She patted him. “It will take complete honesty for you to feel better. With that said, if you

insist that
happened, I will
support you.”

Dan pointed at
Dr. Stevens, “And
you’re on me? This
is crazy.”

Dr. Stevens
tapped his pen on
his notepad. “You
understand how
that sounds to

everyone, don't
you, Ben?"

Ben looked
around the circle of
faces and stared
into his past. He
said, "He had been
leaving brief notes
around the house.
Little jokes, minor
threats at times,
always implying
some danger.

Every note was
initialed, B.M.,
always in the same
handwriting.

Things would
come up missing. I
remember putting
my baseball and
glove on my bed
after practice one
day. I changed my
shirt, turned back
to the bed, and

they were gone. I
blamed Charlie,
my brother. Of
course, he denied it
and he even let me
search his room.
They were
nowhere to be
found, the ball and
glove were gone.”

“Oh, come on
dude.” Finch
appealed to Dr.

Stevens, “Are you seriously going to let him go on like this?”

Dr. Stevens held up a finger, shushing Finch. Outside, the wind rose and the office building creaked and groaned. Darla found herself looking around the

room and rubbing
the goosebumps
from her arms.

Ben lowered
his gaze to Dr.
Stevens, “I
couldn’t find the
ball and glove for
two weeks. Then
one night, I was in
the shower. I heard
a thud on the
bathroom floor. I

pulled the shower
curtain aside and
the ball fell on me.
It hit me on the
head and plopped
on the shower
floor by my feet. It
scared the piss out
of me.” Ben
shivered,
withdrawing back
into his memories,
“I got out of the

shower as fast as I
could. The glove
was on the
bathroom floor
with a note on it.
The note said -
tonight's the
night.”

Darla held a
hand to her mouth,
“Was that the night
that...”

Ben nodded his head, “He killed them, that night.”

“Dude, I believe your family was murdered, but you probably created this entire story to deal with the trauma. I’m sorry for what happened to you, bro, I am, but

there is no Boogie Man. I think you created a, uh, how do you say it, Doc? A psychosis, that's right, isn't it? He created himself a psychosis." Finch seemed pleased with his diagnosis.

Dan raised a hand as though seeking permission

to speak. “Ben,
you realize of
course that the
initials B.M. are
yours, right? Your
last name is
Mallen.”

“Dude! You’re
right.” Finch glared
at Ben. “The
initials B.M. stand
for the Boogie
Man.”

Dan added, “I believe the legend surrounding the Boogie Man is that he only comes for bad children. Isn’t that how it goes?”

Finch nodded and sat on the edge of his chair,
“That’s right. He only comes for bad kids. You must be

a bad apple, Bennie boy.”

Ben shook his head and insisted, “No. That’s not right. Anyway, since then, he’s always been with me. If I move, he follows. I never sleep. He makes noises at night, writes notes, and

hides my stuff from me. I can't have animals, because he kills them. After he killed my family, I lived with my cousins for a while. I thought I had escaped him, but he found me. For my cousin's safety, I misbehaved until my aunt gave up

on me. She sent me to a home for abandoned boys. It was an orphanage. I was only there for a week when he showed up again. After two of the boys died, the orphanage was closed, and I ended up in a series of foster homes until I

was eighteen.” Ben paused and inhaled, “It feels good to get all this off my chest.”

“The Boogie Man is at your house still?” Darla asked him. She looked more concerned for Ben than she did

worried about
what he had said.

“Yes, he is, so
when I have to get
some sleep, I don’t
go home.”

Dan asked,
“Where do you
sleep?”

Finch looked at
Dan, “You’re not

buying this, are
you?”

Ben ignored
Finch, “I park
somewhere and
sleep in my car,
which is what I
will do tonight
after this meeting.
I’m exhausted.”

“No, you need
to go home. It’s
snowing and

blowing out there.
You'll freeze to
death." Darla's
look of concern
only increased.

"Freezing is
better than what he
does at night,
believe me."

"Ben, what
does the Boogie
Man look like?"
Dr. Stevens asked

Ben the question
while finishing his
hand-written
notes.

Ben stared Dr.
Stevens in the eyes,
“Me. He looks like
me.”

★★★

As Ben walked
out of the office
building into the

snowstorm, Darla
grabbed his arm
from behind.

“Ben, listen, I
already don’t get
enough sleep. I
won’t be able to
sleep at all if I
know you’re out
there somewhere
in this storm,
sleeping in your
car. If you won’t

go home, then I want you to come to my house. You can sleep on my couch.”

Ben smiled and said, “Thank you so much for the kind offer, Darla, but what if he finds me at your house? I couldn’t do that to you.”

“I will be
straight with you
Ben. I don’t think
the Boogie Man is
real, but what is
real is that you’ve
experienced some
tough times in
your life. Even if
he were real
though, I still
wouldn’t feel good
about you freezing

through the night
in your car. So, I
insist. I want you
to follow me to my
apartment.”

Ben asked,
“Aren’t you
worried that I’m
crazy? Finch thinks
I am.”

“You’re
traumatized, but
no, I don’t think

you're a crazy person. Anyway, I can lock my bedroom door, so no worries." She smiled, "That was a joke, I'm kidding. Now, get moving, it's cold out here."

Darla turned away from him and made her way across the parking

lot, not waiting for
a response.

★★★

Darla's home
was much larger
than Ben thought.
It was on the third
floor of an older
downtown
warehouse building
that had been
converted into a

series of
apartments.

“I would offer
you one of the
spare bedrooms,
but I don’t have
beds in them. I
never use them,
but you can sleep
on the couch.”

Darla sat on a chair
in the living room
and clicked off a

lamp next to her.

“Do you mind if we keep the lights off? I have a pretty good headache.

Sometimes I get them after the group therapy. It can be hard to remember all the trauma from my past.”

Ben sat on the couch opposite of her and agreed, “There’s enough moonlight coming in the windows, anyway. It’s relaxing without the lights on, and it is much better than the backseat of my car.”

“You shouldn’t
sleep in your car
anyway, even if we
didn’t have the
storm, it’s not
safe.”

Outside, the
wind battered the
old building. A
continual wave of
snow blew past the
living room
windows.

Ben leaned
back into the
comfort of the sofa,
“Darla, why did
you choose to trust
me enough to let
me stay here?”

Darla crossed
one leg over the
other and massaged
her thigh, “Going
with my gut, I
guess. Like I said,

there are demons
in this world, but
they're not
supernatural,
they're human. I
don't believe in the
Boogie Man, and I
don't see evil in
you.”

“Thank you for
trusting me.”

“You trusted
me too, you know.

You could have
slept in your car,
but here you are.”

Ben nodded,
“True, and beyond
that, I’m so tired,
and it’s freezing
out there. I
couldn’t resist the
chance to get some
sleep. Can I ask
you another
question?”

“Sure.”

“It’s a little personal so if you don’t want to answer, no biggie. I figured since I’m the newbie in the group that maybe I missed you sharing your story in the past. You referred to your trauma and the causes of your

stress. Can you tell me what happened to you?”

Darla sat on her chair; her face covered in shadow. She rubbed at her leg.

Ben offered, “If you don’t want to tell me, I understand.”

Darla stopped pushing at the top of her leg, “It’s not that I don’t want to tell you, it’s just that it’s so hard to speak about. The truth is that I’ve never shared it at group. I told Dr. Stevens that I wouldn’t attend the sessions if he

expected me to share about my past. My stress and trauma are not related to anything that happened to me, it's what I have done to others.”

“I see. I’ve screwed up my share of relationships too,

or at least I should
have known better
than to get into a
relationship
because of...
him.”

Darla stood up,
“Yeah, well we all
have our issues,
don’t we? Let me
grab you some
blankets.”

She wandered
away into a dark
hallway. Ben gazed
out the window. It
was framed by a
layer of frost. The
building across the
street was coated in
a layer of white.
He imagined laying
in the backseat of
his car, shaking and
freezing. He would

still have been grateful to have escaped his monster for a night, but the warmth of Darla's apartment was much better. Darla was nice. She was different, but much more level-headed than either Finch or Dan.

“Here you go.
If you need the
bathroom, it’s the
first door in the
hallway on the left.
My bedroom is the
last door on the
right. I uh...” She
hesitated as she
stood before him,
“I don’t want to be
rude, but you
understand this

isn't anything like a date, right?"

Ben was grateful that she couldn't see the embarrassment spread across his face in the dark.

"Oh yeah. Yes, I didn't think that at all. I'm grateful for a chance to get some sleep."

Darla laughed,
“I mean it’s not
that you aren’t
attractive and all, I
just don’t know
you is what I
mean, so, my room
is the last door in
the hallway if
there’s an
emergency. That’s
what I was getting
at. Sorry for that

awkward
moment.”

Ben waved a
hand, “No, I
understand and
wasn’t thinking
about that, anyway.
Not that you also
are not attractive,
but I can hardly
keep my eyes
open.”

Darla patted
him on the
shoulder,
“Goodnight, Ben.
Get some sleep.”

He could hear
her make her way
down the hall. A
door opened and
closed. Ben kicked
off his shoes and
laid on the sofa. As
soon as he pulled

the blankets over himself, he was asleep.

★★★

At midnight, Darla woke. She sat up in her bed, shaking away a dream and one of the voices that so often pulled her from sleep.

*Why are you
doing this to me?
Please don't!*

The only way
to sleep was to
quiet the voices
from her dreams.

*I'm sorry,
there's no other
way...*

It was a never-
ending cycle. The

act satisfied the
craving. Afterward,
she could sleep for
days, weeks, and
sometimes months,
but the voices
always returned. In
time they always
came back. They
haunted her. It was
her eternal
punishment.

*No, no, no...
Please don't do
this, let me go...*

Darla swung
her legs over the
side of the bed and
stood. She picked
her phone up from
the charger and
made her way
down the hallway
to the kitchen. The
butcher block that

housed the knives
sat before her on
the counter. She
pulled a long knife
from its wood case.
Moonlight
reflected off the
metal blade. She
drew the blade
across the backside
of one hand. Blood
rose in a line.

*You killed me.
I'll be with you
always, Darla. I
trusted you and in
return; you ended
me.*

She smeared
the seeping blood
across the back of
her hand. The pain
wasn't enough to
push the voices
away.

*You'll never
sleep, Darla. We'll
be here forever.*

She clutched
the knife to her
side and made her
way to the living
room.

Blanket's half
hung on the
couch, draping
onto the floor.
Ben's shoes sat near

the windows. The
sofa was empty.

Darla turned to
face the hallway.

“Ben?”

The apartment
was silent.

She stepped
forward. The wood
floor creaked under
her shifting
weight.

“Where are
you?”

A giggle
greeted her from
the darkness before
her.

She pulled her
phone from the
pocket on her
shorts and shined a
light down the
hallway.

“Ben, this isn’t
funny.”

The hallway
was empty. She
stepped into the
darkness and
moved to the
closed bathroom
door. Writing
scrawled on the
door in black
marker greeted
her.

Let's play—B.M.

“Ben, there is
no Boogie Man.
There are only evil
people, people
who hear the
voices of those
who haunt them.”

She tested the
bathroom door
handle. It turned in
her hand.

“Did I
misjudge you as
you did me, Ben?
Are you evil?”

She pushed the
door open. It
swung into the
bathroom. The
phone’s light
showed an empty
room. The shower
curtain was pulled
closed around the

bathtub. She never left it closed.

“Are you hiding, Ben? Did you know about me before you came over tonight, or did you figure it out here?”

She stepped into the bathroom to stand before the curtain.

Darla pushed the phone into her pocket and pulled the curtain open while holding the knife in her right hand. The tub was empty. As she turned toward the hallway, the bathroom door slammed in her face.

“Damn you,
Ben!”

Beyond the
closed door,
laughter and
footsteps receded
down the hall. She
flung the door
open and stepped
out of the
bathroom.

She listened to
the sounds of the

apartment. A clattering noise drew her attention away from the bedrooms. She made her way toward the living room and heard the sound again.

“Ben, I know you’re in the kitchen.”

She got no
response.

Pulling the
phone from her
pocket, she turned
the corner into the
kitchen.

The counter
had become a
display for her
cookware. Every
pot and pan she
owned sat on the

counter. A knife handle stuck out the top of each of them. The butcher block knife rack sat empty. She shined the light into a pan. A steak knife lay inside. Next to it, the handle of a butcher knife stuck out the top of her wok. Next to it, a

sticky note lay on
the counter.

Come find me-
B.M.

She turned
away from the
kitchen, “So you
know huh, Ben?
Interesting that you
aren’t scared.
You’re different,
Ben, I’ll say that,

but I'll still find
you. I have to Ben,
it's the only way I
can sleep."

Stepping back
into the living
room, she noticed
the position of the
blankets had
changed. They
were positioned in
the shape of a man,
stretching from the

floor to the top of
the couch.

She approached
them, knife in
hand.

“Are you going
to make this easy
on me, Ben?”

She grabbed
the top of the
blankets and

yanked them
down.

The cushions
from her chair
sprang loose from
the blankets and
tumbled down on
top of her feet.

“Cute, Ben.”

At the far end
of the hallway, she
heard laughter. A

door slammed. She recognized the squeak of her bedroom door.

She passed the bathroom door in the hallway. Two more steps brought her to the first bedroom door. Written across it was a simple message.

You are Close-
B.M.

Another three
steps brought her
to the second
bedroom door.

Closer-B.M.

She twirled the
knife in her hand
and turned her
attention to her
bedroom door

further down the hall. Using the light from her phone, she could already see a message written there. She stepped to her bedroom door, wondering why Ben didn't fear her. Everyone else had been terrified of her, but

Ben was making a game of it. She considered maybe Ben had come to her house with designs on killing her. It would certainly explain his strange reaction if he was also a murderer. It also explained all the

talk of the Boogie
Man.

Come on in
pookie-B.M.

She staggered
backward from the
door.

Pookie

How could
Ben know?

She flashed
back twelve years.
It had been the first
time. Her husband,
David, was laying
in their bed. She
was in the
bathroom, staring
into the mirror.
She hadn't slept for
three nights. After
taking melatonin
the first night, and

a sleep aid after the
second sleepless
night, she still had
not rested. Reality
had frayed around
the edges. She
dreamed on her
feet, not entirely
awake, but not
asleep either. She
caught herself
hallucinating,
seeing strange and

horrible things.
Her face had
looked so wrung
out that David had
asked her if she felt
alright.

“You look
exhausted, Pookie,
are you okay?”

Pookie. David’s
nickname for her.

Darla had
stared into the
bathroom mirror
and envisioned
herself stabbing
David. It had come
out of nowhere.
She had stabbed
him over and over
in another strange
vision of madness.
She watched the
blood fly across

their bed, spraying
the walls. It was as
though the skies
had opened in their
bedroom and
rained red down
upon them. She
had wondered why
she was
hallucinating their
bedroom when she
had been standing

in the master
bathroom.

She had fallen
off her bed in a
sudden panic and
thrown up all over
the floor. The tears
had flowed, and
she had cried,
screaming David's
name. She had
cried until she had
fallen asleep on the

floor. Eighteen hours later she had woken up, David shredded, dead on their bed, stinking.

Darla had cleaned up the mess and had gotten rid of David's body. Thereafter, sleep had come for the next five months

with no problem.
She had never felt
better, and then
one night, David
began haunting her
dreams. The
sleepless nights had
returned.

*You killed
me...*

She had known
there was only one
way to quiet his

voice so she could finally sleep.

She met a man at a bar who had been hitting on her and brought him home. When she was done with him, she had disposed of his body in the same way she had David. Killing soothed her

restless soul.

David's voice had
gone away for
almost a year that
time.

She read the
message on her
door again and
then flung it open.

“Hi Ben. How
do you know
about Pookie?”

The room was quiet. A small amount of light bled through her bedroom curtains. The room was empty. She stepped inside and pulled the door closed behind her. She couldn't afford to let him get away.

Something
shifted in the
room. She heard a
small laugh. Her
mattress bounced
for a moment and
then was still.

He was under
the bed.

Darla bent
down and turned
on the phone light.
She lifted the bed

skirt up and peeked underneath. Ben stared back at her. His eyes were wide, but not surprised to see her.

“Come out, Ben.”

He raised a finger to his lips and then pointed past her at the

closed closet
doors.

“Ben, I told
you, there is no
Boogie Man. Get
out.”

She raised the
knife into his view
and pointed it at
him.

He inched
forward toward

her. She stood and backed up a step.

Ben crawled out from under the bed and looked at the closed closet doors. He moved away from Darla and wriggled across the surface of the mattress to the opposite side.

“That’s not
going to help
you.”

Ben cringed
when she spoke,
“He’s in the closet.
He came in right
before you. We
need to leave.”

She laughed
and Ben winced.
“Nice try buddy,
but you see, I like

to sleep. I like it a lot, and the only way I'm going to get any sleep is to kill you. I know that sounds harsh, but it's true."

Ben's eyes widened. He made a little choking sound and scrambled to the far side of the room.

“Ben, you...”

The floor
creaked behind
her. Before she
could glance
behind her, she
heard a giggle. Ben
had pushed himself
as far back as he
could go against
the bedroom
wall.

She turned all
the way around.
The closet doors
were open. Red
eyes glared at her
from inside.

“What the
hell?” She stepped
back until she felt
her legs touch the
bed.

The red eyes
moved forward

from the closet.
Two horns grew
twisting from the
top of a
head. Moonlight
washed across its
face.

Ben. The red
eyes were set
deeply into Ben's
face.

“But how?”

She sat back
onto the bed and
peered over her
shoulder. Ben sat
shaking on her
bedroom floor
beneath the
window. His face
was pale. He stared
past her at the
demon who had
emerged from her
closet. She pivoted

back to the red-eyed Ben before her. He laughed at her. His smile exposed rows of jagged teeth.

“Are you the...”

He licked his lips.

“I’m the Boogie Man.”

She raised her
knife before her
and screamed.

Coming Up Short

Come Get Me

The closet door
was slightly open
upon his waking.
He closed it each
night before lights
out, so he knew
that something had
happened while he
slept. It was

unlikely that one of
the guards had
entered his room.

The guards
patrolled the
hallways, shining
their lights through
the small windows
at the top of the
room doors. They
only looked to
make sure each
inmate was in his

or her bed, and
then they moved
on to the next
door and the next.
That was their
routine, night after
night, beyond ten
o'clock, all night.

 Their routine
made it nearly
impossible that one
of the guards had
entered his small

prison, and even if one of them had cause to enter, they would not have messed with his closet door.

Anyway, the door made a lot of noise when opened which would have woken him.

He sat up on the edge of his bed

and stared at the open crack, gaining a glimpse into the black depths of the closet. So afraid of the closet was he, that he refused to put anything in it. His clothes were crammed into his small dresser. Doctor Nalen said his belief about

what hid in the closet were a symptom of his paranoia and a large part of the reason he found himself imprisoned at Mason Hospital of Psychiatry. The other reason was the murder of his younger sister, for which a jury had

found him guilty,
by reason of
insanity. Of course,
he knew the bunch
of sniveling,
judgmental jury
members would
find him guilty
before the trial had
even begun. It had
all been set up to
make him look
guilty of killing

Breanne from the beginning. The little devils were nothing if not creative.

He stared into the closet wondering if they were staring back, out of his eyesight. It was only a matter of time before they would

strike against him
in an attempt to
end his life. Like
Breanne's death, it
would be made to
look like anything
but what had really
happened. He and
Breanne had seen
them, and because
he and his sister
knew of their
existence, they had

both been marked for death. It was only a matter of time, which was why he didn't mind sharing details of them with the Doctors and nurses. The more people who knew of them, the better off he would be in the long run.

The problem was getting people to believe him about their existence.

Proof was difficult to come by, and the one photo of them Breanne had taken had come up missing when she met her untimely end.

He placed his

feet on the cold
floor, half
expecting to feel
the jagged slash of
a claw across the
back of his leg.
When no such
attack came, he
leaned forward on
his elbows and
stared further into
the depths of the
closet. If he were

going to die in the
miserable, sterile
environment of the
mentally
incompetent he
would do so facing
the little monsters,
searching for their
yellow eyes.

At first, the
closet remained
only an empty,
dark space behind a

partially closed
door. He waited,
watching the
opening knowing
that soon, Rolph,
the giant, muscled
guard would be on
his ass about
getting dressed for
breakfast. He stood
and began to turn
away from the
closet when he

caught the slightest
bit of movement
out of the corner
of his eye. He
watched
peripherally as he
crossed the room,
pretending to
check the hallway
through the
viewing glass.

A small talon
hooked around the

edge of the door.

Yes, he
thought, let it be
today that this
ended, one way or
the other. If he
could catch one of
them for only a
few moments he
might convince
Doctor Nalen that
he wasn't crazy,
like everyone else

inside the hospital's walls. He simply needed to wrap his arms around one of them and scream at the top of his lungs. One of the guards or nurses would arrive fast enough that they would see the monster before it could gouge out

his eyes or impale
him to death.

The claw on
the edge of the
door scraped down
its edge. The
exposed talon
combined with the
grating noise was
intended to place
fear in him. They
liked to play games
for weeks,

sometimes months
before killing. He
thought they
somehow got off
on instilling terror
in their victims. He
had lived that life
for three weeks
with Breanne,
unable to convince
their parents of the
monsters' reality.

He ignored the

sounds of the
jagged talon on the
door and began
removing clothes
from his dresser.
They didn't like to
be ignored. He
returned to his
unmade bed,
placing his clothes
on it while keeping
his focus on the
closet door. The

long nail of a scaly
claw raked back up
the door, faster this
time. The sound
was unavoidable in
the small room,
and yet, he still
offered no reaction
or awareness of its
presence.

He slipped out
of his pajamas and
underwear,

standing nude on
the opposite side of
his bed from the
closet. The door
pushed open
another inch. A
yellow-tinged eye
peered at him from
the crack. He
grabbed fresh
undies and pushed
his legs through
them as a hissing

sound emanated
from the closet.

It was losing its
patience with him.

A quick glance
at the closet as he
pulled his shirt
over his head
showed an exposed
fang beneath the
glowing eyeball.

He ignored it
and pulled a loose

pair of sweatpants
up his legs and
then turned his
back to the door as
he sat to slide his
feet into his
slippers.

Clicks on the
floor behind him
resonated around
the room.

It had come
forth from its cave.

Perhaps today
would be the day
after all.

A mewling
sound came from
behind him, and he
prepared to spring
at it. If he could
get a hold of any
part of it and hang
on while yelling
for help, regardless
of how much pain

it inflicted, he
would be able to
get someone to
come running.

The sound
grew until he heard
his name spoken.

“Brian.”

This was not
the first time they
had spoken. The
trick was to keep
them speaking and

out in the open
before they could
work their magic.

“Yes?”

The edges of
the room rippled.
He pushed back
against it, he
needed to keep the
thing moving
closer to him.

“Do you know
why we are here?”

That's right,
keep talking. The
fraying of the room
stopped, and
popped back into
place.

“Yes, because
you murdered my
sister, and you
want to kill me
too.”

They could
manipulate reality.

Once they did that,
he could end up
seeing anything.
None of their
created images
were real, but it
seemed like it.

“No, that was
you. Have you not
accepted
responsibility yet?”

Mental
manipulation. He

crossed one leg
over the other to
keep up his
unconcerned
appearance.

“You say that,
but you forget, I
was there and saw
what you did.”

More clicking
sounds on the
floor. It was
scuttling closer to

him.

It spoke again
but its sounds were
distorted. The
room buckled in
on itself. He
pinched his eyes
shut and pushed
inside of his head.
It was the only way
to buy time, but he
could only keep
them at bay for so

long. He needed it
to come closer.

“You saw
yourself that day.”

He could hear
the echoes of his
sisters’ giggles in
his mind. Her
laughter at his
jokes.

“No, it was
you.”

A little snicker
came to his ears in
his sister's voice.
He opened his eyes
as the white walls
of his prison
twisted into the
yellow color of
Breanne's room.
She sat next to him
on the bed.

“No.”

“Yes, do you

see her?”

It was crawling
across her bed. It
had come to them.

“Breanne, look
out.”

He had swung
at it. He felt the
dull thunk of his
fist connecting.

A crying voice.
Breanne’s voice

asking, pleading.
“Why are you
doing this?”

The thing
twisted the images
in his mind. It
created visions of
his fist connecting
with Breanne’s
blonde little head.

“Stop it!”

On Breanne’s
bed, the green little

devil with yellow
eyes and
protruding fangs
slashed her neck.
She gagged while it
scuttled backward
across the bed,
away from his
swinging fists.
Blood flew in the
air. The monster
slowed time so that
he could see each

drop wobbling in
the air before him.

The demon
exclaimed, “See! It
was you. You’re
the monster.”

The images
melted. Breanne
was crawling away
from him
screaming for their
mother. His fist
connected again

with her head.

He shook his head from side to side, “No, stop trying to make me see these things, it was you.”

The thing behind him ticked across the floor. It was almost at the edge of the bed.

In his mind, it

flew from
Breanne's bed and
hurtled itself
toward her open
closet door.

Brian cried out,
“I know the truth.
Despite what you
show me, you
killed her. You
have powers to
make me see
things, but I know

the truth!”

It came closer.

“You killed
her, Brian.”

He stared into
Breanne’s room,
watching himself
stand up from her
bed, and pull her
body by the arms.
He pulled her into
her open closet and
shut the door.

Brian clamped his eyes shut and then opened them. His hospital room was around him for a moment and then Breanne's room reemerged. He gazed into her mirror; his face splattered with blood. The image pulsed, his features

enlarging and
shrinking before
him. In the
background of the
mirror, he saw the
creature standing
over Breanne's
dead body. It lay
twisted on her
closet floor.

“They all knew
you weren't well.”
Its voice was slick,

like the scales on its
hide.

He tensed his
muscles. The
moment was
drawing near. He
would grasp the
monster and cling
to it before it could
kill him, or scurry
back into the
closet. No more
hiding.

Brian raised his voice, “I’ll make sure they all see you for who you are, devil.”

“Lower your voice.”

Brian coiled his body until it quivered and asked, “So, you can keep your identity hidden

from everyone?”

The tap, tap,
tapping sound of its
talons on the tiled
floor stopped.

“No, so you
can get better,
Brian.”

He leaned
forward on the
edge of the bed,
tightening the core
of his body,

bracing for the
battle ahead. He
only needed one
good shot. One
good grasp on it
and he would
scream loud
enough to wake
the dead.

Brian opened
his eyes. He was in
his hospital room.
He could feel it

crawling its way up
to his mattress.

His bed covers
pulled at his rear as
it clutched its way
to his back.

“This all ends
today.”

Brian twisted,
launching himself
at the green
monster behind
him. Its yellow

eyes widened in surprise. One of its claws rose to defend itself too late. He wrapped both of his hands around its neck.

It screamed and made a gargling sound as though it were rinsing its mouth.

“Help...”

There was
movement behind
him. There were
more of them,
always more.

He increased
the strength of his
hold and began
screaming.

“Doctor Nalen!
Come now! I got
him.”

More gurgling

and then it
screamed at him,
“Get off me!
Rolph grab him!”

Pain shot up his
side as the second
one attacked.

He yelled to
the room, “No
more
manipulation!
Now everyone will
see what happened

to Breanne!”

It twisted in his grasp as the second one clutched at him. “YOU happened to Breanne!”

Doctor Nalen’s face replaced the scaly monster’s head. He was lying under Brian staring into his eyes,

gasping. Next to his head, on the floor, was the keyboard to his computer. The vision distorted again, popping away, and the monster was back, screeching into his mind.

The pain in his side grew until his

vision began to
fade. He clung to
consciousness
while he screamed
for the Doctor. He
screamed for the
nurses and he
screamed for
Rolph. He called
to them all. They
needed to see the
truth.

His voice faded

with the images of
the twisting and
lurching monster in
his grasp and then
all was black.

★★★

Dr. Nalen
stared through the
glass into Brian's
room, while
rubbing at the
bruises across his
neck. Rolph stood

next to him.

“Do you want
to keep him
sedated for a
couple of days?”

Dr. Nalen
looked away from
Brian’s dozing
body.

“Yes, and
thank you, Rolph.
You saved me back
there. I

underestimated the
depth of his
delusional state. He
almost killed me.
I'll not make that
mistake again."

Rolph nodded
and clapped the
Doctor on the
back, "It's why I'm
here. You'll get
him figured out."

Rolph walked

away and Dr.
Nalen checked the
room. Brian had
rolled over in his
sleep. He began to
move away from
the view portal
when he noticed
the closet door. It
had sprung open
again. No wonder
Brian was so
terrified of the

small closet. They closed the door repeatedly, only to later find it hanging open. He would need to get maintenance to fix the door so it would stay closed. They would also need to touch up paint the scratches on it.

He leaned
closer to the glass,
focusing on the
bottom portion of
the door near the
floor. As fearful as
Brian was of the
closet, it appeared
that he had done
some extensive
damage. No
wonder he had
been so wound up.

Coming Up Short

Coming Up Short

For Better or Worse

She watched him from across the room as he stared at the TV. He didn't laugh along with the jokes. He didn't offer any commentary as he had for so many

years. She contemplated her life on their lonely farm, what it had been in the past and what it had become. When she was young, no one prepared her for the possibility that one day her partner would lose his mind, lose his

personality, the
essence of himself,
and that she would
be alone. She was
alone as the
caretaker for
someone she loved
with her heart and
soul, someone she
had a family with,
someone she built
a business with,
and someone she

laughed and cried
with, who now
was only with her
physically. The
ravages of
Alzheimer's had
stolen her husband,
other than fleeting
moments such as
they had the day
before.

It had begun
like any other

morning, one new
disaster after
another.

He had called
her to the
bathroom and said,
“Mom, I can’t find
my toothbrush.
What did daddy do
with it?”

She had found
his toothbrush, and
told him, as she did

every day, that she
was his wife, not
his mother. Some
days he would
argue with her,
other days he stared
away, searching his
mind for a clarity
that had long ago
vanished.

She had helped
him do his
morning business,

determined to keep
him in their home
as long as she
could. The doctors
already felt he
should be
institutionalized,
but she couldn't do
it to him. The
thought of him
alone in a crowded
home with a bunch
of strangers broke

what was left of her
heart. It was hard
enough to
contemplate what
life would look like
after the disease
took him from her,
but leaving him
abandoned where
no one would love
him was too much
to even think
about.

At the breakfast
table, he had told
her he wanted
eggs, not cereal,
and when she told
him it was cereal or
nothing, he had
thrown his bowl
across the kitchen.
It had shattered,
milk and wheat
flakes draining

down the
cupboards.

She had cried
then; the tears
flowing like a
busted dam. They
had been building
for a long time and
at that moment,
there was no
alternative. They
came pouring out.

Mary had stood
amid his breakfast
carnage, looking
into his eyes, those
deep blue eyes she
had fallen in love
with, knowing
they were the eyes
of a stranger. He
sat staring back at
her, anger etched
across his face. She
had grabbed up

some paper towel
and turned away to
mop up his mess
when she felt his
hand on her back.

He had said,
“Oops. Did you
have an accident?
Let me help you,
honey. Let’s get
this cleaned up and
then maybe we can
take a walk. It’s a

beautiful morning.
Oh, and I want to
call Ava when we
get back. We
haven't heard from
her for a bit. I
know she gets
busy, but we can't
let her forget her
old parents. Can
we?"

Mary turned to
face him. The

stranger who had
glared at her across
the table was
gone.

“Al?”

“Yes, honey?”

She had
thrown the paper
towels in the sink
and wrapped her
arms around him.

The tears coming
even faster.

“What’s this all
about Mary? We’ll
be okay, we always
are.”

They had
cleaned the mess
together, taken a
long walk, and
upon their return
home had called
Ava as he planned.

It had been a
beautiful morning,
a morning like
those of the past
and a morning she
had desperately
needed. He had
been so clear on
the phone, he had
even remembered
to tease Ava about
the busted wooden
spoon that still sat

on the kitchen
countertop inside
the cup with the
other utensils.

When Ava had
been twelve years
old, Al had taught
her to make the
family spaghetti
recipe. She had
chosen the well-
worn wood spoon
instead of a plastic

one despite its state of disrepair. The spoon had been in their kitchen for years and was splintered at the top of its handle. Something or other had happened to it and it had become fractured from the tip all the way to the spoon part at its

bottom. Mary was sure that if it so much as fell from its holder to the top of the kitchen counter, it would split in two, it had become so brittle.

Mary had tried to throw the spoon out after their spaghetti making lesson, but little

Ava would not allow it. She had insisted that it was her and daddy's spaghetti spoon and was the only spoon they could ever make the meal with, which had of course touched her father's heart. Spaghetti making, only with the old

wooden spoon had become their tradition until she had moved out of the house at eighteen years of age.

Mary sighed as she thought of Al's afternoon of clarity. It had been a wonderful few hours. Of course, it

hadn't lasted, not even into the late afternoon. By dinner, he had regained his glassy-eyed look and sat staring at the TV while she encouraged him to eat his ham and mashed potatoes.

Sometimes she thought if Ava

didn't live in
another state it
would all be so
much easier. Ava
could help her,
especially when it
got too hard to
handle or when Al
became aggressive
and angry. He
scared her when he
got like that. There
was something

about anger and
Alzheimer's
patients that Ava
knew was a reality.
Al had always been
such a peaceful,
gentle man.
Alzheimer's had
turned him into an
angry man. He
lashed out at her
constantly. Ava

being near would
be a blessing.

She typically
followed those
thoughts with a
lecture for herself.
Al's mental state
was not their
daughter's
responsibility. It
was her burden,
through good times

and bad, sickness
and health.

She stood and
walked to the
living room
window and parted
the curtain. The
yard light between
the house and the
barn created a dull
glow in the fog.
The vapor in the
air was thick

enough that she
couldn't see the
barn at all or the
chicken coup next
to it.

It had rained
for three straight
days, so the fog
wasn't all that
surprising. She had
expected it,
however, the stink
in the fog was

different. As a farmer, it was a smell she knew all too well. It was rot. More than likely, one of the hogs had died and was rotting in the pen, which meant she would need to call Ned to help her deal with it. She wouldn't be

able to handle the
dead carcass on her
own. The day
would soon come
that she would
need to accept
Ned's offer to sell
their property to
him. He was a
good man and a
good neighbor,
who had been
tremendously

helpful as she dealt with Al's illness.

She closed the curtains and turned away from the window. Her intent to listen to the radio in the kitchen was ruined when the power cut off. Al's TV clicked to a black screen. The

kitchen appliances
fell silent.

“Great. That’s
all we need.” She
moved across the
room, smacking
her shin on the
coffee table.

“Sit tight, Al,
I’ll light some
candles.”

Mary was surprised he wasn't already freaking out about the loss of the TV and the darkness, but he said nothing.

She pawed around the inside of the hall closet until she felt the box of candles. After pulling it

down, she returned
to the living
room.

Inside the large
box, she pushed
candles of varying
sizes around until
she found the
lighter she also
stored there. Life as
a farmer taught
many valuable
lessons, and one

was that living in the country often came with power loss. She was prepared and had used the box many times before.

“You doing alright, Al?”

She pulled a candle from the box and flicked the lighter. The glow

illuminated the
small room. Al still
sat in his chair. He
scratched
vigorously at the
side of his head.

“Hey! Stop
that, you’re making
yourself bleed.”

Mary lit
another two
candles and set
them on the table

and then made her
way to her
husband.

She pulled his
hand away from his
head. Trickles of
blood trailed down
over his ear.

“What did you
go and do that
for?”

Al looked into her eyes. He looked strangely hopeful. “It itched, but deep. Like something inside my head. Is it possible to get worms in your brain?”

Mary didn’t like the way he looked at her,

“You don’t have
worms in you
anywhere, old
man. Where did
you come up with
that? Did you see it
on TV?”

Al wiped at the
blood on his head
and then looked at
the front door,
“Mom?”

“I’m not your mother, it’s me, Mary, your wife.”

He stood from his chair. “No, not you. Of course, I know who you are. I’m talking about mom, she’s here. Will you let her in?”

Al gestured at the front door.

“Al, your mother has been dead for three decades. She’s not outside.”

He gazed at the front door. A hopeful smile turning up the corners of his mouth. “Can’t you hear her?”

His smile, as he
thought of his
mother, was boyish
and warm.

Looking at his
expression felt like
a knife shoved
deep inside of her
chest.

“No, Al,
you’re ...”

He raised his voice, “I’m coming, mama!”

Al stepped toward the front door.

“Al, listen to me. Your mother is not outside that door. She’s dead.”

He stopped and glared at her over

his shoulder, “How dare you talk about mama that way.”

Mary stood aside and said, “Okay, go look for yourself. Your mother isn’t at our door, and neither is anyone else.”

“Damn right I will. My mother is welcome in my

home. You'd have her stand in the cold." Al stomped his way to the door. After fiddling with the lock, he flung it open.

The putrid scent wafted into the house along with wisps of the fog. With the door open it was much

stronger than it had been before.

Mary stepped next to Al and gestured at the empty front porch. “You see? There is no one out there. Now let’s shut the door before this entire house smells like death.”

Al stepped onto
the porch and
opened his arms,
“Oh, mama, it’s so
good to see you
again.”

Mary looked
past him at the
empty porch. Mists
swirled around
him. She glanced
from Al’s beaming
expression to the

vastness of the gray
world that had
swallowed their
home.

It was the first
time that she had
seen him
hallucinate.
Regardless of her
emotional
attachment, his
days of living at
home may be very

limited. She
privately
acknowledged the
level of difficulty
that would be
involved in caring
for him if he was
going to start
seeing things that
weren't there.

“Al, come
inside and we'll

play a board game.
Okay?”

He turned to
her, “Quit being
rude and say hello
to mama.”

Mary faced the
wall of fog and
said, “Okay, hello
mama, so good to
see you again. I’m
glad you made it

safely, please come inside.”

He smiled at her and opened his mouth to speak as a gray hand reached out of the fog and hooked him around the neck.

Al looked into her eyes and made a small squeaking sound. The noise

he made was the
sound of terror.

She reached for
his arm.

Long black
nails dug into his
neck, as the
weathered hand
clamped around his
throat. Blood
squirted from him.

“Mary...” He choked.

She clutched at him but the pull of whoever had grabbed him was too strong.

Al slipped through her grasp. The taloned hand jerked him from the porch. Mary saw Al leave his

feet, his right shoe falling from his foot. It landed with a thud on the porch. The shape of a tall, thin man moved next to Al like a shadow. The man had his arm wrapped around Al's throat. He turned away and pulled Al after him.

The disturbed mists
swirled where they
had been and then
settled back into
place.

“Al!”

Mary scuttled
backward, over the
threshold of the
door and slammed
it shut.

“Oh God, oh
God!”

She stumbled
to her feet, locked
the door, and raced
across the living
room to the
kitchen, pulling the
landline phone
from the wall.

Listening for a
dial tone but
hearing none, she

clicked the phone
on and off several
times. It uttered no
sound at all.

“Dammit!”

She moved
back to the living
room,
contemplating if
she could get
through the fog to
their car, which
was parked across

the yard by the
barn.

As she thought
about how to find
AL or get to the
car, she found
herself digging at
the side of her
head. The meaty
muscles on her
temple ached and
itched. The itch
ran into her head.

It felt like
something twisting
and turning inside
her skull.

Al's words
echoed in her
mind, 'Do I have
worms in my
head?'

She pressed her
nails into the soft
flesh of her skull.

Mary.

She yanked her head around the room, searching the shadows for the owner of the voice.

“Al?”

Help me.

The voice was not in the room with her, it came

from inside of her
head. She heard
them with her
mind, not with her
ears.

“Where are
you, Al?”

*Outside on the
porch. Let me in.*

Mary made her
way to the front

door and called
out, “Al?”

Inside her head,
her husband’s voice
spoke.

*Let me in,
Mary.*

She stepped
away from the
door.

“Why can’t
you let yourself
in?”

*I hurt myself.
There was a man,
but I got away
from him. Mary let
me in. I’m your
husband. It’s our
home. Help me
before he comes
back.*

She reached for
the door handle,
thought better, and
moved to the
window. She
tugged the curtains
aside and peeked at
the front porch.
Darkness.

“Al?”

The porch was
too dark to see
with the power off.

She pushed the
curtains into place.

*Mary, help
me.*

“You’re not on
the porch. Where
are you?”

*Why are you
locking me out of
my own house?
Don’t you love me
anymore?*

“Of course, I
do, but...”

*My neck hurts,
Mary, he hurt me.
Please help me.*

She picked up a
candle from the
coffee table and
made her way back
to the window.
With the curtains
reopened, she
could see

movement at the
edge of the fog. It
caused a
disturbance, and
the haze shifted.

Mary pressed
the candle as close
to the glass as she
could. The flame
burned away the
slight condensation
from the glass.

The porch
appeared to be
empty except for
the two wicker
chairs that sat
empty in the
swirling fog.

“Al?”

*I'm here, Mary.
Let me in.*

“I don’t see
you. Where are
you?”

She looked at
the opposite side of
the porch, away
from the front
door. The porch
was empty. Wisps
of vapor flicked at
the glass. She
reversed her view,
tilting the burning

flame back toward
the home's entry.
Al's face was an
inch from the
glass.

Mary fell back
onto the living
room floor,
dropping the
candle. The carpet
burned. She
quickly smothered
the flames with a

pillow from the couch and then returned to the window. With the candle in hand and a burning stench in her nostrils, she peered at the porch.

“Al?”

I'm here, by the door. Let me in, please.

“Why did you have to go and scare me like that?” She mashed the side of her face against the window to see as close to the front door as possible.

Mary could see the side of a man’s body. He leaned against the door.

*I'm bleeding. I
need help.*

“Oh, God!”

Mary moved to
the front door and
twisted the handle.

She stopped
and stepped away
from the door.

“How do I
know it's you?”

*Mary, for
God's sake! You
saw me.*

“Your neck, he
punctured it, you
should be dead.”

*No, he
scratched me, but I
got away. Help me
before he returns.*

“Where is
he?”

*I don't know.
Help me, please.
This is taking too
long.*

“Who was he,
Al? What does he
want from us?”

*Mary, please,
hurry.*

“Al, I'm scared.
I want to help you,
but I need to know

that it's you before
I open the door.
Come to the
window."

*Look out the
window, but
hurry.*

Mary stood
before the window
and pulled the
curtains apart. Al
waited on the
porch, looking

back at her. He
leaned against one
chair.

*You see me.
Let me in now,
before it's too late.*

She looked him
up and down. His
complexion had
paled.

“Al, your
shoe...”

What?

“It fell off, I
saw it.” Mary
glanced at his feet,
at both shoes
below his pant
legs.

I put it on.

She glanced at
his neck and said,
“Your blood has

dried on your
skin.”

Yes.

He moved
back to the front
door, out of her
view.

Something
didn't make
sense. Why had Al
taken the time to

put his shoe back
on?

*Will you please
let me in now?*

*You see, it's me. I
don't want to die
out here, Mary.*

She shut the
curtains and
returned to stand
before the
door. She
reminded herself

that Al's pale
complexion was
most likely due to
the cold and fear.
He had been
attacked.

Mary?

She thought of
Al standing injured
on the porch. She
must have seen the
man pulling him
from the porch

through a veil of
panic and
adrenaline. His
injuries weren't as
bad as she
remembered. They
couldn't be, after
all, Al was on the
porch. She had
seen him with her
own eyes.

She twisted the
door handle and

tugged the door open. Al slid past her, into the room. She shoved it shut and flipped the lock into place.

Finally, she leaned against the door, relieved, and asked, “Al, how is it you’re so clear headed?”

*What do you
mean?*

“Your mind.
You are clear now.
Since you thought
you saw your
mother, you’re
thinking isn’t all
muddled.”

Al didn’t
answer her.

She turned
from the door to
face him. He
seemed much
taller.

“Wait a
minute, on the
porch. You moved
but...”

She looked into
his eyes. Those
eyes the color of
the bluest sea were

darker. A blackness
tinged their edges,
threatening to
overtake the blue.

*My legs didn't
move.*

“No, they
didn't. How...”

Al crossed the
short distance
between them,

floating above the floor.

She forced her eyes away from his legs back to his face.

An old man stood before her. Much older than Al. The man before her had no blue in his eyes at all. They were the

black of the darkest
night. His skin was
pale like snow. He
oozed coldness,
and he smelled of
death. He was
death.

*My lips also do
not move when I
speak.*

His mouth
opened and fangs
protruded below

his upper lip. They
distended, pointed,
and sharp.

*I bet you'll
taste even better
than Al.*

Mary screamed
and backed her
way to the
threshold of the
kitchen.

“Who are you?
Where’s my Al?”

*AL is gone.
Soon you will be
too.*

“The stench,
it’s you. You killed
Al.”

I am death.

Mary searched
the weathered face
of the old man

before her. His eyes radiated an intense hatred and hunger. She stumbled as she moved backward into the kitchen. He matched her movement, keeping the same distance between them. His fingers were intertwined at

his waist. A lone
candle burned in
the kitchen on the
counter. It was
behind her near the
large cup of
cooking utensils.

“You’re a
vampire.”

*Some say so,
yes.*

Mary bumped
into the counter.

“Leave my
house.” Mary
reached behind
her, fingertips
tracing their way to
the utensils.

The old man
before her laughed
inside her mind.

*Who are you
to demand of me?
I'm as old as time,
and I am hungry.
I'm starving for
your flesh Mary.*

Her hand
found the cup of
cooking tools. It
tilted sideways and
fell over, spoons
and spatulas

spreading across the
countertop.

*You are old,
but you have warm
blood. I can see it
pulsing through
your veins.*

Mary could feel
his lust inside her
head. His mouth
stretched open
impossibly wide.

Her hand
scooted around the
counter seeking the
spoon. She stared
into the eyes of the
monster as her
hand shoved aside a
plastic spoon, a
metal and plastic
fork, and a metal
cooking spoon.

The vampire
floated closer to

her. It's eyes
ablaze, it's mouth
open, fangs
dripping.

She increased
the desperate pace
of her hand's
movements across
the counter. She
felt the rough edge
of the spaghetti
spoons handle.

*I can already
taste you, Mary.*

His head tilted
sideways. His eyes
locked on hers.
Behind her she
clutched up the
spoon and leaned
its handle against
the edge of the
counter. It split in
half easily, as it had
been threatening to

do for many years.

A part of it fell
away, leaving her
clutching the
rounded spoon part
at its bottom.

The vampires
head reared back.
It hissed and
launched itself at
her.

Mary screamed
and brought her

arm from behind
her back, swinging
at the vampire's
chest.

She felt the
shard puncture the
old man through
his white shirt. His
eyes went wide.
Inside her head a
scream erupted.
She bent over, tears
flowing from her

eyes. Her legs gave way and she collapsed at his feet. She wiped at the water flowing from her eyes.

She gazed at the old man. A black liquid dripped from his mouth.

You...

The skin began peeling from his face. He shook before her as he clutched at his head, his arms, his body. His clothing grew loose, and he collapsed onto the floor next to her. His skin flaked away; his bones crumbled to ash.

The pain in her head evaporated. She leaned against the kitchen cabinet and stared at the pile of clothing and black dust on her floor.

2

Mary had called to tell Ava of her

father's passing.
There had been
tears, but also
gratitude from
daughter to mother
for how well Al
had been taken
care of at the end
of his life.

Mary did not
tell Ava about what
had really
happened the night

the fog rolled in
and the power
went out. Instead,
she told a story of
finding him
deceased, in his
living room
recliner, the old
spaghetti spoon
laying on his lap.
She did not mind
lying, it made Ava
feel better.

As she sat at the kitchen table, Mary reflected on Al's last good moments. The walk they had taken together, and Al's last phone call to Ava were the highlight of his last several months of life. She spread the wood glue on both parts of the broken

spoon and then
held them together
while they dried
and became one
again.

She would give
the spoon to Ava.
The good
memories the
spoon would
provide her
daughter were
worth much more

than her own
memories of the
weapon the spoon
had become.

Coming Up Short

2056

Chippie was a troublemaker.

There was no way around it, and no way to argue about it. With his orange-colored mohawk, his baggy jeans, and the tattoos on his arms, he practically begged for the

wrong attention.
The boy's
appearance and
attitude were the
reasons Mikey's
mom didn't want
him to be around
Chippie. As a
result, Mikey had
lied to her about
what he was doing
with his Saturday.

Fillmore, Utah
wasn't a large
town, but it was
large enough that it
was unlikely
anyone Mikey's
mom knew would
see him with
Chippie. The last
thing any fifteen-
year-old kid
needed was his
mother grounding

him during the summer. School would be back soon enough. He didn't intend to spend his summer bored at home.

Chippie was fun to hang with, and Mikey envied the freedom that the boy had. Chippie's mother

had died when he was five years old, and his dad allowed Chippie to do as he pleased. This was because Chippie's dad was a drunk and had no idea what Chippie was doing at any given moment. Mikey didn't envy that Chippie had no

mom and a drunk
for a father, but he
found himself
considering all that
he could do with
the amount of
freedom Chippie
enjoyed.

He liked how
he felt when he
was with Chippie.
Chippie had what
he called his

‘middle finger’
attitude. He had
told Mikey many
times that he did
not give two wags
of a dog’s tail what
others thought
about him, and
Mikey believed
him. Mikey hung
with Chippie
behind his
mother’s back

because when he
was with him,
other kids feared
Mikey as much as
they did Chippie.
He also didn't want
to tell Chippie no,
because telling
Chippie no was a
scary thing. If
Chippie wanted
him to hang out,
or ditch class, or

smoke cigarettes
and drink beer in
Fillmore park after
school, Mikey
obliged. It was
much better than
having Chippie on
his ass. After all,
Chippie had earned
his nickname by
beating up one of
the biggest thugs in
town.

Chippie's actual name, and what he had been called until dishing out the historic beat down of Shawn Gomez, was Steven Hall. The day that Steven Hall had beat the hell out of Shawn after school in front of most of the high school

(and had chipped his front tooth in the process) he had become Chippie. Steven loved the name so much that he had it tattooed on his right arm. It served as a reminder to every kid in school of what happened to Shawn that day.

Chippie had been
suspended from
school for two
weeks, which of
course hadn't
bothered him at all.
Shawn had
changed schools,
and Chippie had
become the biggest
bully on the block.

For whatever
reason, Chippie

had always liked
Mikey, and Mikey
was grateful. It was
much better than
Chippie doing to
him what he had
done to Shawn.
When Chippie
asked you to hang
out for a secret
mission on a
Saturday, you lied
to your mom and

did as you were
asked.

As Chippie
made his way
across the newly
created Fillmore
Park, Mikey at his
side, other kids,
particularly those
on the skater
ramps, waved a
friendly, and
sometimes fearful

hello. Mikey
observed the looks
they got from the
other kids, and he
knew he was
untouchable.
Grady Smith
watched them as
they passed. Mikey
had mentioned to
Chippie one day
that Grady liked to
pick on him. The

next day after school, Grady had approached Mikey with a swollen lip and apologized for being an ass. He never asked, but it was obviously the influence, and fists, of Chippie that had changed Grady's attitude.

“Hey,
Chipster, grab your
board and hang
man.” A kid Mikey
didn’t know called
out to Chippie.

Chippie kept
walking at a
determined pace
but yelled back,
“Busy today man,
I’ll catch you
tomorrow.”

Mikey watched
Chippie's stiff
orange mohawk
bounce up and
down on his head
in time with his
steps. It stood a
foot tall,
culminating in
blue-tipped spikes.
Chippie told
everyone who
asked that the

colors represented
the sun and the
sky. Mikey had a
feeling it had more
to do with his
obsession with the
Denver Broncos.
Chippie was a huge
NFL fan, and
Denver was his
team, mainly to
piss off his dad who

followed the
Minnesota Vikings.

Mikey loved
the mohawk, and
in the privacy of
his room, often
shaped his hair into
the same design.
To do so, he had
to steal his sister's
hairspray, which
would anger her to
no end if she ever

found out. Of course, his parents would never allow him to have a real mohawk. It was one of the things that his mother hated about Chippie the most.

His mother would shake her head and crinkle up her face as

though she had
smelled something
rotten and say,
“Why in the world
that boys’ father
allows him to have
that hair cut is
beyond me. Never
think that you’d
get away with that,
mister. If you come
home looking like
that, you’ll be bald

in short order.”
She would then
make a snipping
scissors motion
with her fingers to
emphasize her
point.

They reached
the end of the park
and approached the
Fillmore
downtown district.
It was an older area

of the city, filled
with mom-and-
pop shops. The
Fillmore
downtown district
implied something
much grander. The
name was far too
flattering for what
amounted to a
drugstore, an ice
cream emporium, a
donut shop, a

secondhand store,
and several
shuttered
businesses.

“Okay, here’s
the deal, Mikey.
We are going to
implement
operation ‘shit her
pants’ today. Our
intended victim
will be the lovely
young Mikayla

Walters. Trust me,
this is gonna be
hilarious man.”

Mikey felt his
gut twist. When
Chippie targeted
someone, the
outcome was never
good.

Chippie
continued, “You
remember what
little princess

Mikayla did to me,
right?”

Mikey did
remember, but
pretended that he
didn't. She had
humiliated Chippie
in front of about
half of the school
in the lunchroom
on the last day of
school. It had been
one of those

moments when
kids oohed and
then started
snickering. Chippie
had asked her out
on a date. At first,
Mikey had thought
that Chippie was
joking around, but
when Mikayla had
turned him down,
he had turned
bright red. Mikayla

and her posse of girlfriends had laughed and rolled their eyes. Mikayla had told Chippie that if she were a half-dead mutant in an apocalyptic wasteland, she would still never consider dating him.

It was the only time Mikey had seen Chippie stutter and lack a smart comeback response. Chippie had tried to play it off, but it had been obvious to Mikey that Mikayla had hurt Chippie. He had known that

Chippie would get
Mikayla back.

Today was the
day.

“Anyway, this
will get her back
for acting like a
stuck-up prude.
She tried to
embarrass me
intentionally
Mikey, and I can’t
allow that situation

to damage my
well-earned rep.”

They moved
past Smith’s
computer repair
center. Mikey
noticed the city
water restriction
schedule in the
store window. It
reminded citizens
that the only way
they would have

the water they
needed was to
conserve. Lawn
watering
restrictions were in
place for all
citizens, allowing
for only two
watering days per
week. The days of
the week depended
on if your address

ended in an even
or odd number.

Mikey's dad
had complained
several times
saying, "What's the
point? Might as
well stop watering
altogether and
make a rock
garden. The lawn
is all dead,
anyway."

Mikey's dad
was known in their
neighborhood for
his lush green
lawn, so it was a
sore spot for him
that most of his
lawn was filled
with brown, dead
grass. Of course, he
would never really
put in a rock
garden. He was far

too proud of his
lawn under normal
watering
circumstances.

The drought
had been tough on
everyone. Most
people were taking
very short showers
and had stopped
running their
dishwashers.
Bottled water was

hard to find in the
stores, as most
people were afraid
to run their water
at home for
drinking purposes.

Chippie
followed Mikey's
eyes to the water
restriction poster.
“My old man says
that whole thing is
bullshit. The city

has water, they just don't want any of us to have any because they want to put in that water park to attract business from Salina."

Salina was the neighboring town and a constant competitor to Fillmore in

everything from
high school sports
to tax revenue.

Chippie turned
away from the
poster and stared
across the street at
Walters Ice Cream
Emporium.

“Anyway, here’s
what I have
planned.”

They had
stopped walking in
front of the
abandoned old
Mercantile
building. The
locals called it the
Ol' Merc. It had
once been the
closest thing they
had to a grocery
store. When
Walmart had built

their shiny new store on county road 60 between Fillmore and Salina, the Old Merc had been squeezed out of business. That had been long before Mikey had been born, but he had heard the stories from his parents

many times. They both decried the disappearance of the Ol' Merc but they had been shopping at Walmart since the day it opened. So much for small-town loyalty.

“See Mikayla’s bike over there in front of her folks’

shop?” Chippie pointed to a green bike with a large wicker basket hanging from its handlebars. It was parked in front of the Ice Cream Emporium.

“Yeah, how did you know she’d be here now?” Mike asked

before he could
stop himself.

“I’ve been
following her since
school got out,
looking for the
perfect time to do
this. Every
Saturday morning,
she rides from her
house to the Ice
Cream Emporium.
She brings her

parents food and
eats with them and
then leaves at
eleven o'clock. It's
always 11:00 on
the dot. They're in
there now at the
table nearest the
window, eating.
When they're
done, she'll stand
up, kiss them on
the cheek, and

come out. She gets
on her bike and
rides behind the
Ol' Merc."

Mikey
wondered aloud,
"You have been
following her?"

Chippie
sounded irritated,
"Yes, I had to
dude. I needed to
figure out her

habits and schedule
so that I could pay
her back. I'm not a
pervert or
anything."

Mikey nodded
and said, "Of
course, I know
that." The truth
was probably a
combination of
Chippie wanting to
pay Mikayla back

and still obsessing
over her, as he had
been doing
throughout the
entire school year.
Mikey checked his
digital wristwatch.
It was 10:53.

Mikey asked,
“Why does she go
behind the Ol’
Merc?”

Chippie
shrugged and
replied, “Who
knows? It could be
where she keeps
her stash. She
crawls through a
boarded-up
window at the
back of the
building.”

Mikey didn't
say that he doubted

very much if
Mikayla had a stash
of any kind. She
was too perfect, in
just about every
way. Chippie
thought that every
kid kept devious
secrets from their
parents, but
Mikayla wasn't that
kind of kid.

“And she does
this same thing
every Saturday?”

Chippie
continued to peer
at the Ice Cream
storefront. “Yeah,
she sure does, same
thing every week.
Hey!” Chippie
tapped his
forehead, “I have a
thought. Maybe

prissy little Mikayla
is a drug dealer.

That could be why
she goes inside the
Merc every
Saturday. It's like
her base of
operations.”

Mikey
crumpled up his
forehead, “Nah,
not her. Not
Mikayla.”

“Well, you
never know, dude.
It’s always the ones
you would never
suspect that are up
to no good.”
Chippie paused,
twisting his face
into a mask of
serious
contemplation.
Mikey knew the
gerbils were

running overtime
in Chippie's mind.
He also thought
that Chippie
himself was
evidence that
defied his theory.
“Wait a second,
this all makes sense.
No wonder her
parents are so rich.
Think about it.
They're all drug

dealers. It makes sense. Mikayla is probably running their supply to their stash house inside the Ol' Merc."

Mikey smiled, "Yeah, right." He assumed Chippie was joking around.

“I’m serious.
Think about it.
They’re rich dude,
everyone in town
knows it. The
question is how
they got their
money. It sure isn’t
from running an
ice cream shop in
this little town.”
Chippie scratched
at his chin. Mikey

knew there would
be no convincing
him otherwise.

“So, what’s
your plan?”

For a moment
Chippie was still
lost in thought. He
looked past Mikey
from the Ol’ Merc
to the Ice Cream
Emporium and
back again. Mikey

was asking him
again when
Chippie's mind
cleared, and he
tilted his head at
Mikey.

“Oh yeah, the
plan.” Chippie
withdrew a small
package wrapped
in a paper towel
from his pocket
and checked his

watch. “Let’s go
over there behind
that dumpster. He
motioned to a
commercial waste
collection
dumpster at the
end of the alley.
“From there we
can stay hidden,
but still see
Mikayla’s bike.”

They made
their way across the
street. Chippie
crouched behind
the dumpster and
began unwrapping
the contents of the
paper towel.

Mikey
watched, his eyes
growing wide.
“What are you
going to do with

that cherry
bomb?”

“The technical term is M80, it’s an M80. The military uses them in training exercises to scare the piss out of soldiers. That’s what my pops says, anyway.” Chippie pulled the M80 free of the

wrapping. Mikey noticed it was taped to a small tube. “The M80 isn’t our focus though, it’s only the detonator in this situation.”

Chippie held the taped-up bundle before him.

Mikey felt his stomach churn again. The package looked like something intended to be very nasty. He asked Chippie, “What is that?”

Chippie smiled, exposing the tooth with the little wedge cracked out

of it, “This here is
a quarter stick. The
M80 will create the
impact needed to
set off the quarter
stick.” Chippie
tapped the tube
with a finger,
“This is what will
create the big bang
we need to
successfully
implement

operation shit her pants.”

Mikey
swallowed,
“Chippie, what’s
inside that quarter
stick?”

Chippie
snickered, “It’s
dynamite, real
dynamite.”

Mikey took a step back, his eyes never leaving the small bundle.

Chippie leaned toward Mikey,
“Dude, relax. It’s not enough to do any damage.
Dynamite doesn’t actually light on fire. It takes some sort of concussion

to activate it so that
it will explode.

That's what the
M80 will do. It'll
set off the chemical
reaction in the
dynamite to cause
an explosion, but,
before you get all
worried, it won't
hurt anyone. It'll
just scare her,
which is exactly

what she needs.
She's a little too
full of herself. It's
time she got
knocked down a
peg or two."

 Mikey had a
hard time
imagining how a
stick of dynamite,
of any size,
wouldn't hurt
someone.

“Chippie, man, are you sure you want to do this?”

Mikey’s brain was spinning faster than his mouth could keep up, “What if you hurt her?

Where are you going to put it?”

Chippie stood up, “Here, take this five-dollar bill.

Go into the Ice
Cream Emporium
and order a cone. I
need you to
distract them, so
they don't see me.”
Chippie scratched
his head, “On
second thought,
order two cones.
This is hungry
work. While
you're in there, I'll

light the M80 and drop it into the basket on her bike. It'll go off as she's coming out of the store. I practiced with several of these babies at home. I know exactly how long it takes for the M80 to blow, and she always comes out

of the store at
exactly 11:00. She's
as predictable as she
can be, but hurry
the hell up. I don't
want you inside
when it goes off.
I'll meet you back
here behind this
dumpster."

Mikey and
Chippie checked
their watches at the

same time. Chippie said, “10:55. Time’s wasting.”

“Chippie man, I don’t know about this. We could end up hurting someone.”

Chippie turned his back on Mikey, and walked out of the alley, “Don’t

puss out on me,
Mikester.”

★★★

Mr. Walters
handed Mikey the
ice cream cones
with a friendly
smile, “I haven’t
seen you in here in
a while, Michael.
How are your
parents?”

On the other
side of the shop,
Mikayla was
actively describing
something to her
mother and
laughing. She stood
up from the booth.
She was oblivious
of Mikey's
presence inside the
store. Chippie was
right, they had

been eating. Their
plates were empty.
She would soon be
leaving. Out of the
corner of his eye,
he could see
Chippie pass the
front of the store.
He didn't see him
drop the bomb
into Mikayla's bike
basket, but he
noticed him

hesitate on his way
past her bike. As
Chippie had
warned, he needed
to hurry.

“They’re doing
well, thank you for
asking.” He made
his way to the door
of the shop, “Well,
I better get going,
bye.”

Mikey made his way out the door and scurried down the sidewalk to the garbage dumpster. Chippie was already back, waiting for him. He grabbed a cone from Mikey, gave it one lick, and said, “Get ready to enjoy the show.”

Mikey looked
back to the bicycle
parked in front of
the Ice Cream
Emporium in time
to see Mikayla
come outside. Her
mother stood
beside her. Mikayla
kissed her mother
on the cheek. She
walked to the
bike.

“Oh, damn,
this is going to be
good!” Chippie
was almost
jumping up and
down. He stared
over the top of the
garbage bin with a
burning intensity.

“Chippie if it
goes off with her
on the bike it
could kill her.”

Mikey moved to the edge of the dumpster. Before he could move all the way around its side, Chippie's fingers laced inside of his shirt neck and he was jerked back behind the dumpster. The ice cream fell from the top of his cone and

melted on the
asphalt.

“Where do you
think you’re
going?” Chippie
glared at Mikey.

Mikey peeked
over the garbage
can. The smell of
the waste stewing
in the summer sun
made his eyes
water. Mikayla had

walked back to her mother at the door, gesturing about something with her arms. She had on a pair of blue athletic shorts and a pink t-shirt. It was no wonder Chippie had been lusting after her all year.

“Why isn’t it going off, Chippie?”

It should have by
now, right?”

Chippie shook
his head, “Quit
panicking man, it’s
fine. Any second
now.”

Mikey watched
the girl step
backward toward
her bike, her hand
reaching toward
the bike as she

continued speaking to her mother. She laughed, turned to her bike, started to get on it, stopped, and stepped back to her mom. She stood two feet away from the bike.

“Any second now.” Mikey looked at Chippie.

He could see the first signs of doubt creep into the boy's eyes.

“It's not going off, Chippie. Stop this, now! She's going to get hurt.”

Chippie stared at Mikayla, his eyes willing her away from the bike. Mikey tried to pull

away from him,
and Chippie
yanked him back.

“Dude, we
have to warn her,
this isn’t going the
way you said!”
Mikey pulled
against Chippie’s
clutching grasp and
felt his shirt tear in
the back.

Mikayla waved
to her mother.
Mikey could see
her mouth the
words ‘I love you’.

“Shit!”

Chippie shot
out from behind
the dumpster.
Waving his arms at
Mikayla. Mikey
tripped and fell to
one knee. Chippie

yelled out a
warning.

“Mikayla...”

She turned to
face them, the look
on her face souring
as she recognized
Chippie. With her
hand, she grabbed
the bike’s
handlebars. Mikey
could see a look of

concern sprout on
her mother's face.

Chippie yelled
to her, "Mikayla
the basket is..."

"Chippie, leave
me alone..."

There was a
tremendous flash of
light, followed by a
large explosion and
concussion. Mikey

felt a wave of heat
roll past him.

Someone was
screaming. Mikayla
had fallen onto her
side, clutching at
her left arm. Her
mother stumbled
out of the ice
cream shop and
knelt at her side.
Mikayla was
screaming and

crying. Her father
ran out the door, a
look of utter shock
on his face. Her
bike lay several feet
away, the basket
charred and
shredded, the
handlebars twisted.
Mikey noticed one
of Mikayla's shoes
had come off. Her
white sock dangled

off of her right
foot.

She rolled
toward them.
Blood poured from
her left arm as her
mother yelled at
her to lay still.
Mikayla's dad kept
shouting, asking
what happened.

Mikayla looked
from Chippie to

Mikey. She
pointed her right
hand at them and
screamed through
her tears, “You did
this, Chippie! I’ll
get you back, I
swear it! In the
future, I’ll get you
back! I know
where you two
went, and I’ll be

there waiting for you!”

Mikey shook his head, “No, I didn’t do this. It wasn’t me.”

Mikayla’s father raised his gaze from his daughter to them. Mikey could see the hatred working its way across his features.

“You two did this? You did this to Kayla? Why?”

He began stomping his way across the street toward them, “Tell me why you would do something like this?”

Chippie grabbed Mikey’s arm and pulled

him, “Come on,
dude.”

Mikey could
hear a siren wailing
in the distance.

“I didn’t do
this, Mr. Walters,”
Mikey begged him
to listen. “I swear I
didn’t.”

Mikayla
slumped over in

the road, her
crying diminishing.
Her father
screamed and ran at
them. Chippie
tugged on Mikey's
arm again. They
sprinted across the
sidewalk, heading
toward the back of
the Ol' Merc.

★★★

Mikey skidded to a halt behind Chippie. They both stared at the eight-foot-tall wood fence that cut off the alley.

“Now what, Chippie? Now what?” Mikey paced back and forth.

Chippie
pointed to a
boarded-up
window. “This
way, come on.”

Mikey watched
him shove a sheet
of weathered
plywood aside,
exposing a dark
opening. Chippie
crawled through
the opening, and

then popped his head back out, his mohawk crushed against the sheet of wood above him.

“Come on, now!”

Mikey could hear Mikayla’s father huffing his way toward them. The sirens were much louder.

“Dude, move your ass, the cops aren’t going to care if it was your idea or not, we will both do time for this.”

Chippie’s head disappeared back inside the Ol’ Merc and Mikey plunged after him.

★★★

They listened
at the back of the
dusty old
Mercantile for
Mikayla's father.
Either he had not
followed them after
all, or he had
turned back.

Chippie
released a breath
and said, "I think
he's gone."

Mikey moved to the front of the building and stared out the dirty, moth-stained windows. The police had arrived as well as an ambulance. Mikayla was on a stretcher. Her mother held her right hand and

relentlessly patted
Mikayla on her
head while
whispering words
of encouragement.

“We gotta get
out of here, man.
It’s time to go on
the run. You got
any cash or
anything on you?”
Chippie stared at

Mikey, waiting for
an answer.

“Where the
hell am I supposed
to go? You think
I’m going to run
away from my
family because of
your stupidity?”
Mikey felt hot tears
stream down his
cheeks.

Chippie lunged at him and grabbed him by the throat. “You’re not staying here. You’ll rat me out as soon as the cops get to you.”

Mikey shook him off. “Your threats won’t work anymore, Chippie. You can beat me

up in here if you
want to, but I
swear to God I'll
make enough noise
that the cops will
know damn sure
we're in here."

Chippie let go
of him and backed
up a step.

Old shelves
filled with dust and
a few ancient cans

of fruit and meats
were strewn about
the open room. A
freezer door stood
open. The bottom
was filled with
shredded wrappers
and straw, more
than likely the nest
of several mice.
The carcass of a
bird lay broken in

the middle of the
floor.

 Mikey was
disgusted by
Chippie's
selfishness. He
moved away from
the windows
toward a counter
where the dust on
the floor had
recently been
disturbed. Behind

him, Chippie
continued to
observe the scene
in the street.

“There’s her
dad. If we go out
the back, we can
climb the fence.”

Mikey stepped
up to the counter
and saw that it
contained a sink
and an old water

faucet. The bottom of the sink was damp, but the faucet was not leaking. Next to the sink on the counter were several five-gallon water containers.

“Let’s get out of here, dude.”
Chippie continued to push at him.

He stared into the bottom of the sink and replied, “I’m not running. They’d just catch us anyway, and then we’d end up in Juvie.”

Chippie snorted, “Juvie? Who cares? It’s like a vacation in there. My dad says my

cousin Earl has
done several stints
there, and it wasn't
a big deal."

As Mikey
turned to face him,
he noticed a wood
door with a rusty
brass handle on a
side wall. The
number 2056 had
been hand-written
in chalk above the

door. The light
coming from the
front windows
exposed footprints
in the dust that
stopped at the
door.

“Your dad is a
drunk idiot.”

Chippie raised
a fist but stopped
and dropped his
arm to his side.

“You can threaten me all you want, but I will not let you ruin my future. This was all your doing. I know I’ll be in trouble for going along with you, but it won’t be enough to ruin my future. You, on the other hand, are

screwed.” Mikey looked at Chippie and no longer saw the total badass that every kid in school feared. Instead, he saw a pathetic loser.

He continued,
“Do you realize
you haven’t once
expressed an ounce
of concern over

what you did to Mikayla? There's blood everywhere out there. She's strapped to a stretcher, and all you can do is worry about your own ass."

Chippie's voice rose higher than Mikey had heard it before, "She'll be

fine. It was no big deal. A couple of stitches and she'll be good." He turned away, "You run out there and tattle like a little crybaby if you want to, but I'm out of here."

"Did you plan to hurt her?"
Mikey glared at the

back of Chippie.
He wanted to tear
the orange hair off
his head.

“No, I didn’t,
but I’m not sorry.
Every time I
watched her, she
kissed her parents
on the cheek and
got on her bike
and rode away.
How was I

supposed to know
she wouldn't do
the same thing
today or that the
damn M80
wouldn't go off
like it did every
time I practiced? I
didn't intend to
hurt her man, but I
don't feel for her
one damn bit. She
embarrassed me in

front of the entire school. She treats everyone like they're beneath her, including you dude. If it meant getting ahead, she'd tread right over your dying ass. I didn't mean to hurt her, but I'm not sorry. It's frickin Karma."

Mikey walked to the door, “I’m going out there. My mom is going to kill me, but it won’t be as bad as what happened to Mikayla, and unlike you, I am sorry about it. Everything you said about her is true. She’s a

spoiled brat. Her family has money and all that, but it doesn't excuse what you did to her."

Chippie noticed the door for the first time. "Where's that go?"

"Outside."
Mikey reached for the door handle.

“It can’t go outside. We’re facing Milner Insurance. The buildings are connected. It would have to lead into the insurance office next door, but I swear there is no door in that office. My dad drops his insurance

payments off in there. I've been there a million times, and there's no door."

Mikey hesitated and then grasped the handle. He felt a slight tingle crawl up his arm. "Then I'll go through Milner's, but I'm leaving. I'm not

crawling out that window again.”

“Wait, what’s that?” Chippie leaned an ear toward the windows at the back of the Merc.

He could hear someone walking in the alley. Boots crunched in gravel. “It’s probably...”

“Shhhhh!”

Chippie held up a hand.

A radio blurted out static, and then a female voice crackled. They heard a male voice from the alley respond to the call on the radio.

“Oh shit, it’s a cop. He’s out back

in the alley.”

Chippie lunged at the door, knocking Mikey aside. He threw himself through the open door.

Mikey stared into blackness before him. He wondered why Mr. Milner kept his office so dark on

the weekend. He
stood up, resigned
to accept his fate,
whatever it
was. Dusting
himself off, he
stepped into the
open door. His
entire body tingled
as his hand had
when he grabbed
the door handle.
The dark

swallowed him.
The tingles
intensified and
reverberated
throughout his
body. He felt like
he would vibrate
out of his skin for a
moment. The
darkness seemed
unending.
Something moved
past him on his left.

It tugged at his
shirt sleeve as it
passed. Panic
crawled from his
chest, up his throat.
He took another
step forward and
the sensations in his
body stopped. A
light hit him in the
face. He stepped
again and squinted
into the light.

Chippie faced him with his mouth hanging open.

Mikey looked at the dusty room around them.

“What happened?”

Chippie wiped the back of his hand across his forehead, “The Ol’

Merc. We went
from the Ol' Merc
to the..." He
turned in a circle,
"The Ol' Merc."

"How is this
possible?"

Mikey looked
around the room.
The shelves were
scattered about.

The windows were
boarded up at the
back of the store.
He moved to the
windows at the
front of the store.

“What the...”

Chippie joined
him at the
window. “Where
are they?”

The street was
empty. There was
no injured
Mikayla, no
ambulance, no
police, no one at
all moving
between the old
Mercantile and the
Ice Cream
Emporium.

He could hear
Chippie's breathing

increase next to him. Chippie swallowed and said, “Look at the street. Weeds are growing in the cracks and look at that...” Chippie pointed at Mikayla’s parents’ store. “The windows are broken.”

Mikey turned
back to the room
behind them. “The
dead bird.”

Chippie
responded without
taking his gaze
from the window,
“What about it?”

“There was a
dead bird on the
floor, but it’s
gone.”

He left Chippie
at the windows and
walked to the
counter with the
sink. The sink was
empty, dry, and
filled with dust.
The water faucet
was missing. In its
place was a hole.

”Mikey,
something is wrong
here, and have you

noticed how hot it
is?”

He turned
away from the
sink, wiping sweat
from his face. “Yes,
I have, it’s at least
twenty degrees
warmer than it was
only minutes ago.
Let’s go back.”

Afraid to be left
alone, Chippie

followed him back
to the open door.
They stood side by
side, staring into
the empty
darkness. Chippie
stepped across the
threshold and felt
the tingle crawl its
way up his leg. He
placed his foot on a
floor that he could
not see, and leaned

his head forward,
into a blinding
light. Before him,
the Ol' Merc with
the dead bird on
the floor came into
view. Beyond the
bird stood
Mikayla's father
and a cop.

“I swear they
came in here.
There was

nowhere else for
them to go.”

Mikayla’s father
clenched and
unclenched his
fists.

The cop
pressed a button on
the radio on his
shoulder, said
something Chippie
couldn’t hear. He
then spoke to

Mikayla's father,
“They could have
jumped the fence
out back. We're
looking for them
and we'll find
them.”

They moved
toward the back of
the store. Mikayla's
father kicked at a
dust-covered tarp
on the floor and

said, “That God damn Steven is a menace. I want his dumb ass locked up, and I mean for years. He’s nothing but trouble, and I’ve been telling you all this for years. Now, look what happened. Someone is going to pay for this. You

tell the mayor
before this is done,
I'll have his ass
too.”

Chippie
grabbed the door
handle and pulled
the door closed as
he stepped back to
Mikey's side.

Mikey looked
at him with a
worried look

pasted across his face, “Chippie, let’s go back.”

Chippie shook his head, “Mikey, we can’t.”

“Why not?”

Chippie turned to face him. He grabbed him by the shoulders, “We can’t because there

is nothing there.
I'm not sure why,
but there is only
blackness man, and
if I had taken
another step, I
would have fallen
into it. I couldn't
feel anything with
my foot. There is
nothing to see, it's
just dark. It would

have been like
falling off a cliff.”

As Mikey
reached for the
door handle, they
heard a scream
come from the
street outside.
They both moved
to the windows at
the front of the
store.

A naked man
ran down the
middle of the street
yelling, “Someone
help me! I didn’t
do it! I’m not
guilty!”

Behind the
man jogged three
men, all dressed in
the same uniforms.
They each had
black leather boots

and wore jeans.
They had tucked
white shirts into
their jeans. Each
held a gun that was
pointed at the
naked man.

“Stop!” One of
the three men
commanded the
naked man.

He stopped
running and turned
to face them.

“Please don’t
do this. I have a
family. They need
me.”

The man who
ordered the naked
man to stop
running stepped
forward.

“Only the princess distributes water. No one else. This is the rule she has given us, and you broke it.”

The man leveled the gun at the naked man and fired. The naked man flew back, landing in the street.

“Oh crap!”

Chippie grabbed
Mikey and pulled
him to the floor.
Both boys peered
over the
windowsill.

The man raised
his pistol into the
air and fired
another round.

“Let this serve as a
warning to all of

you. The princess
blesses us with pure
water, and it is
distributed at the
drawing. It is the
only way.”

The men with
guns turned their
backs on the man
dying in the street.

Chippie and
Mikey watched as

they retreated
down the street.

Blood began
pouring out of the
man. He held a
hand to his chest
and groaned.

Mikey stood
and hurried to the
front door of the
store.

“Where are
you going?”

“We have to
help him, or he’ll
die.” Mikey
opened the door.

Chippie stood
and asked, “What
if those men come
back?”

Mikey ignored
him and made his

way to the
bleeding man. He
could hear Chippie
following close
behind. The heat
shimmered in the
air. Mikey wiped
sweat out of his
eyes.

The man was
middle-aged and
balding. A hole in
his chest oozed

blood. His
abdomen and the
ground beneath
him were coated in
it. He squinted up
at them and then
held his hands in
front of him. Dirt
from the street had
stuck to the back
of his arms.

“It’s okay, I’m
going to help you.

Chippie come over here and help me.”

Chippie didn't move. Instead, he looked up and down the street watching for more of the men with guns.

The naked man tried to sit up and collapsed back to the street.

“You’ll hurt yourself if you try to get up. Lay still while I figure this out.” Mikey glared at Chippie. Still, he stood, staring at their surroundings, his mohawk mashed flat on his head.

The man
coughed and

looked into
Mikey's face. His
eyes tracked back
and forth between
Mikey and
Chippie. "I'll be
damned. It can't
be, but it is, isn't it?
It's you, both of
you."

Mikey asked,
"What do you
mean?"

He nodded his head, “It sure is, I can’t believe it. You two disappeared back in 2021, and yet you ain’t changed a bit. Look at you both. You look the same as the last time I saw you when we were kids. You have the same

powers as her,
don't you?"

 Mikey looked
at Chippie, who
shrugged his
shoulders. Mikey
sat down next to
the man on the
street. He placed
both of his hands
on his chest and
pressed. A small

yelp escaped the
man.

“Sorry man,
but we need to
stop the bleeding.”
Mikey asked him,
“What did you say
about us
disappearing in
2021?”

The man
smiled, “I can tell
by your voice.

Mikey Milsap and
Steven Hall,
although everyone
called you Chippie.
Maybe I'm dead
already. Is that it? I
died?"

Mikey looked
into the man's face
and felt a sense of
familiarity. "You're
not dead. How do

you know my
name?”

“Because I
grew up with you
guys. At least I did
until you
disappeared.
Everyone thought
you two ran away,
but they were
wrong, weren't
they? You have the
power, same as her,

but you're not like
her. You're nice."

Chippie
stepped next to
Mikey, "I know
you. Ricky
Paulson, right?
You're that kid
who threw up in
homeroom in sixth
grade."

"That's me."

As soon as
Mikey heard his
name, he
recognized him.
“Holy shit, it is
you. But how?”

Chippie asked,
“What year is it,
Ricky?”

Rickey’s
breaths were
coming in short
little gasps. Mikey

didn't like how he sounded.

“2056. You guys need to hide. If they find you, they'll make you go to the drawing of the waters. You need to leave here and go home if you can.” Ricky looked much paler

than he had
moments before.

Mikey had a
hard time getting
his words out,
“2056? That’s the
year?”

Ricky’s
complexion had
become far too
pale. Mikey
realized he couldn’t
hear the wheeze in

his breathing any longer.

“Ricky, you said we had powers like her. Who are you talking about?”

The man’s face had gone slack.

Chippie stepped back, “Oh crap dude, he died,

didn't he? He's
dead.”

 Mikey stood
up. “Yes, he's
gone.”

 Chippie
realized he had
stepped in Ricky's
blood. He began
scraping his shoe
off on a crack in
the road. “I've

never seen anyone
die before.”

Mikey didn’t
like the look on
Chippie’s face. He
almost seemed
excited.

Chippie asked,
“How could Ricky
be so old? Where
are we, Mikey?”

“She said to us
– I know where
you went.”

Chippie
stopped dragging
his shoe across the
road, “Huh?”

Mikey felt the
world tilt for a
moment,
comprehension
dawning. “Past
tense. She said, I

know where you went.”

“So what?”

He began walking across the road to the Ice Cream Emporium. Chippie followed him. “She knew where we were going before we did. We stepped into the future.”

Two of the
three windows in
the store's front had
been busted out.
The interior of the
business had long
ago been trashed.
In the remaining
window was a
poster.

*The princess
has saved us after
the wars. Only the*

*princess can give us
water.*

*The Drawing
of the Waters –
August 1st, 2056,
6:00 pm.*

“Hey, you two
there.”

They turned
around and came
face to face with a
man. He had the

same uniform as
the man who shot
Ricky. He had a
beard and a
cowboy hat on his
head. A gun rested
in a holster on his
hip.

“You need to
go to the park. The
drawing will begin
soon.”

They looked at
each other and
back at the man.
“Okay, uh, yes
sir.”

The man had a
curious look on his
face, “I haven’t
seen you around
here before. Are
you from the
territories?”

Mikey knew
not answering the
man would come
with consequences.
“Yes, this
afternoon.”

The man
looked them up
and down. He
rested his hand on
the butt of his gun.
With his other
hand, he picked

something out of
his teeth and said,
“At least you don’t
look like you have
the sickness.”

Chippie
responded, “No,
not at all, no sir, no
sickness here.”

“Uh-huh, not
too many of you all
left out there that
ain’t sick these

days. Well, you know the princess's policy. Even those from the territories can participate in the drawing, let's go."

He motioned them to move toward Fillmore park. They began walking with him. Mikey chanced a

question, “So, we haven’t been to one of these drawings before, sir. How does the drawing work?”

The man shook his head, “People from the territories never cease to amaze me. Not everyone gets water each week.

The princess can only give so much, so, it's a drawing to see who will buy the water. Of course, you need cash and it ain't cheap. If you don't win the drawing, you will go back to drinking the water from the system and hope for the

best, but we all
know that stuff will
slowly kill you. It
gives you the
sickness. Asking a
dumb question like
that would make
me think you
already have the
sickness, if I
couldn't see for
myself that neither
of you is drooling

or shedding your
skin.”

The man with
the uniform and
gun walked them
through the park to
the skateboard
ramps. The trees
that had been
planted were all
dead or gone, and
the green grass had
long ago died and

blown away. It had become a large dirt field. Only the ramps remained, although they were weather-beaten and worn.

 Mikey guessed there were about fifty people gathered around the base of the tallest skateboard

ramp. They all wore tattered clothing, the colors of which had long ago faded. They were all overly thin and reminded Mikey of the pictures of the Jews from the Nazi concentration camps he had seen in history class.

Multiple men in
black boots, jeans,
and white shirts
gathered around
the perimeter of
the crowd.

“I don’t like
this, Mikey,”
Chippie whispered
to him as they
approached the
crowd.

Ahead of them,
a man started
coughing. At first,
he coughed a
couple of times and
then stopped, but
soon the coughing
worsened. One of
the men with a
gun approached
him and said
something to him.
The man hung his

head but said
nothing in return
as he wandered
away.

A tall man with
sharp features
appeared at the top
of the skate ramp,
and the people in
the crowd quieted.

He looked out
over the mass of

people and said,
“Your princess.”

The people
began applauding.

Chippie
squinted at the
approaching figure,
“Holy crap, it’s
her.”

Mikey watched
the young woman
step into the light.

“Mikayla?”

She looked
over the crowd,
her hands behind
her back, and
smiled. A hush fell
over those
assembled before
her.

Mikey thought
Chippie looked
like he would pass
out.

Mikayla raised
her voice,
“Greetings.”

In unison, the
crowd replied,
“And to you
princess.”

She continued,
“As you know,
water resources are
a precious
commodity,
especially the clean,

purified water I
bring to you.”

Mikey noticed
several of the
people around him
nodding in
agreement.

“You also
know that I offer
you a weekly
drawing to
determine who
may buy this

limited, clean
water. Since the
war, most of the
water you have is
toxic, which has
created a demand
for the water I
bring to you.”

Someone
unseen in front of
Mikey shouted,
“Thank you,
princess! Many

blessings to you
and yours,
ma'am.”

Chippie
whispered,
“Princess,
seriously? Dude,
she’s getting rich
pedaling tap
water.”

Mikey shushed
him.

She smiled
again, “Of course,
blessings. Today, I
have a surprise for
you. It’s a bit of an
offer in truth.”

Those in
attendance stood
still, their rapt
attention focused
on Mikayla.

She held up her
left hand, encased

in a blood-soaked
medical wrap.

Mikey looked
around at the
stunned faces in the
crowd.

A woman
ahead of them
shouted to her,
“Who dared do
this to you
princess? We’ll
have their heads.”

Chippie
grabbed his arm
and began tugging
him through the
crowd.

“The two
young men that are
trying to leave us,
did this to me.
They are from the
territories. They
came here to steal

the water I have
for you.”

Chippie
stopped pulling
Mikey. He turned
to face Mikayla.
The surrounding
people glared at
them.

Mikayla
offered, “Grab
them and take
them to the bicycle

behind this stage. If you help me, this week every one of you will have water, free. No charge. Enough water for you and your families for an entire week.”

Hands clutched at them. Mikey tried to pull away and only succeeded

in tripping over
Chippie. Men and
women alike
shouted obscenities
at them as they
were lifted off their
feet and carried to
the back of the
skateboard ramp.

★★★

“It was him,
Mikayla, not me. I
tried to stop him, I

swear.” Mikey
pleaded with her as
his right wrist was
bound to one side
of the bike’s
handlebars with
electrical tape. On
the other side of
the bike, men were
binding Chippie’s
left wrist the same
way.

Mikayla
stepped between
them, a uniformed
man with a gun in
his hand on either
side of her. She
looped the straps of
a basket over the
handlebars.

“You see
Mikey, if you were
trying to stop him,
you would have

done so before you came into the Ice Cream Emporium. You were there to distract me from what he was doing.”

She pointed at Chippie, who stood with his head hanging. His orange mohawk

collapsed over his
dirt-smudged face.

“You don’t
need to do this
Mikayla.”

She looked him
in the eye, “Yes, I
do. I’m missing my
pinky and ring
finger on my left-
hand Mikey.
Where will my
future husband put

my wedding
ring?”

One man
handed her a
package and then
they backed away
while keeping their
guns trained on
him and Chippie.

She pulled the
package open. An
M80 was taped to a

quarter stick of
dynamite.

“Oh shit,
Mikayla, I did
everything I could
to stop him!”

She lit the fuse
on the M80 and
tossed the bomb
into the basket.

“I wish that
were true, Mikey, I
really do.”

Banshee

“Ah, c’mon
mom! Tell us one
more story before
bed. Please?”

Their mother
looked at them as
she rubbed at
bleary eyes. It had
been another very
long day at work.
Of course, after
work had been

filled with helping
both kids with
homework,
making dinner,
cleaning up dirty
dishes, settling the
disputes over who
had been playing
with the spiderman
action figure first,
and finally
bedtime. Bedtime
involved reading a

book and then
telling a
story. Clara had
read them one of
their favorite books
and told many
stories of their
family's history, but
it was never
enough. Little
Mary yawned and
stretched, doing
her best to ward off

sleep. Jayce was wide awake but would crash as soon as his head hit his pillow.

“Anyway, you promised to tell us what a Banshee is, and you never did. I keep asking and asking mom.”

Jayce was determined to nag

her until she
relented.

“Your
grandmother and
her big mouth, I
swear.”

Mary joined
her brother and
whined at her,
“Granny said
Banshees are real
beings, who are
extra tiny, and they

know when people in our family are going to die.”

“Yeah, that’s right, mom. She said that grandpa heard a Banshee crying and that same night he died. Are Banshee really watching us, mom? Do they try to warn only us, or

other families too?
I wonder if
Tommy's family
has a Banshee.”
Jayce went silent as
he considered the
possibilities.

Clara knew
Jayce would make
the Banshee a hot
topic at school, and
if she didn't satisfy
his curiosity, she

would certainly get
a call from Mr.
Wilford, their
school principal.
That was the last
thing that she
needed with Dave,
her husband,
working out of
town. Wilford had
a creepy way of
leering at her over
his glasses. She

would much rather
have Dave deal
with him.

“Okay, look,
I’m going to tell
you about the
Banshee, but it will
stay right here in
this house. If I get
any calls from
school, or even a
weird look from
Mr. Wilford when

I pick you up
tomorrow, you
two will be
grounded until
you're thirty. Do
we understand
each other?"

"Awe, dang it
mom, can't I even
tell Tommy about
it? What if they
have a Banshee in
their house and

don't even know
it?"

Clara
responded to her
son with a pointed
finger, "You are
NOT to tell
Tommy or anyone
else about this.
Period. And
Tommy doesn't
have a Banshee,
anyway. Capice?"

A dejected
Jayce rolled his
eyes, “Yeah, yeah,
capice.”

She turned to
her daughter. “And
you miss?” Clara
began tickling
Mary until she was
about to roll over
the side of her bed.
Through giggles,
the girl

surrendered,
“Capice mama,
capice.”

Clara let her
daughter sit back
up on her bed next
to her pillow.
“Okay.”

Jayce, who was
not known for
tremendous
patience, asked,
“How do you

know that Tommy
doesn't have a
Banshee?"

“Because Mr.
Man, Tommy's
family isn't Irish.
Their heritage is
German and
Swiss.”

Mary crinkled
her nose, which
always meant a
question was

coming. “How do you know?”

“Because Tommy’s mom told me where their family came from. They’re nice people, but only the Irish have a Banshee.”

“So?”
Impatient Jayce kept pushing at

her, “Once and for all mom, what is a Banshee? How do they know when we’re going to die?”

Clara smiled and ran her fingers through his red and blonde hair. “Well, first, this is all made up. It’s not real, despite what your

grandmother says,
but not all Irish
have a Banshee in
their home.”

Mary began
looking around the
room, rotating her
eyes without
moving her head.
“Can it see us
now?”

“No honey,
remember, it’s not

real. The story
that's been handed
down in your
father's family for
generations is the
Banshee only come
to us as a warning.
They warn us we
may die soon.
Banshees are the
Irish version of a
Faerie. They are
supposedly one of

our ancestors who
has been cursed.
The legend in our
family is that it was
a curse put on
Patrick O'Sullivan
many, many years
ago by a witch. A
witch's curse is the
only way that you
can become a
Banshee. She
cursed your great,

great, great
grandfather on
your dad's side of
the family to live
out eternity as a
Banshee. His job
would forevermore
be to warn all
future generations
of O'Sullivan's of
impending death.
It was a
punishment.

Warning his own
family for the rest
of time of
imminent death
was to be like
dying all over again
for him. The witch
cursed him to a life
of death for all
time.”

“Oh, sick!”
Jayce’s eyes lit up.
“What a trip!”

Clara play
punched him in his
arm, “Sick, what a
trip. Who teaches
you these things?”

He shrugged
his shoulders, “It’s
how all the kids
talk, mom.” He
paused for a
moment and an
additional question
occurred to him,

“Is our Banshee invisible or just super small?”

“No, not invisible. They’re little teeny people who move quick and glow in the dark.” Clara could see that Mary still peered into the corners of her room. She rubbed

her daughter's
shoulders. "Now
listen young lady,
this is all make-
believe. It's a
family story that's
been handed down
for generations. It
isn't real, so stop
looking in every
shadow for
spooks."

Mary giggled,
“So it’s all made
up?”

“Yes, it is.” She
held up a finger,
stopping Jayce
before he could
open his mouth,
“Regardless of
what your granny
says.”

“Yeah, but
granny said that the

Banshee cries to warn you and then stares into your face when you're about to die and that it's super scary."

Clara shook her head. This wasn't the first time that she wanted to kick her mother-in-law in the ass. "Your

granny needs to
quit telling you
two scary stories
because you both
use it as an excuse
to stay up late.”

She winked at
Jayce and patted his
leg, “And now, it’s
time to go to
sleep.”

Mary’s lower
lip quivered, “I

wanna night light.
Leave on the night
light, and the hall
light mom, okay.”

Clara hugged
her daughter,
holding her tight
for a moment. She
then kissed her on
the top of her
head. “You will be
fine, honey. I’ll be
right in the living

room watching
TV. If you get
scared, just call me
and I'll run right in
and save you."

Clara laughed,
"I'm teasing you,
you'll be fine."

"Okay mom,
but you'll turn on
the night light and
the hall light, right?
And if I'm having a

scary dream, you'll
come to wake me
up?"

"Yup." Clara
moved to Jayce's
bed and hugged
him, and then
smacked him on
his butt, "Get
under those covers,
Mr. Man."

While both
kids slid under the

covers of their
beds, Clara
switched on the
lamp by the door.
Mary had always
called it her night
light. She then
turned off the
overhead bedroom
light.

“Okay, I’ll turn
on the hall light on
my way to the

living room.
Goodnight, love
you both.”

Both kids told
her they loved her
as she pulled the
bedroom door
partially shut.

★★★

He watched
from the bushes
near the front

porch. Secluded places like this were the best. No nosey neighbors spying through their curtains. No cars driving by on the street to worry about. Away from the city, in the country, people assumed they were safe. This was why

the media called him ‘The Hillside Monster’. The title didn’t offend him, it only encouraged him, and upon reflection, it wasn’t a bold enough label. They had no idea what he really did to the women and children who

had become his
victims.

He had seen
the woman with
her two children
earlier in town at
the supermarket
and had followed
them home. The
pharmacist had
asked her when
Dave would return
from his out of

state work
assignment. It
seemed that Dave
wouldn't be back
for a while, actually
quite a while. He
had followed her
from the store, to
the gas station, and
then here, to her
home. With no
Dave around the
house, this would

be easy. In fact, he would have all the time he needed to have some fun.

A single porch light was on at the front of the house. He had crept through the shadows of the yard earlier. There were no other exterior lights to

ward off intruders,
intruders like him.
A quick push and
tug on each of the
windows had
revealed that all
were locked,
which was no
problem. It would
be easy enough to
break into the back
door. It only had a
single door handle

lock, and those
were always easiest
to disable.

He eased his
way to the back of
the house, slipped
through the
garden, around a
small tree, and to
the back door. His
gloved hands tested
the stability of the
door lock. It

wobbled in his grasp. This would be much simpler than it usually went. By midnight, his appetites would be satisfied, and he would be on to the next small town. By then, he would be hungry again.

★★★

Clara had fallen asleep on the sofa in front of a poorly made movie on Netflix. To be fair, if it had been a good movie, she knew she still would have fallen asleep. She loved her children more than anything, but sometimes they

were exhausting.
Especially when
Dave was away.
Something had
woken her, but as
she rubbed her
bleary eyes, she
couldn't remember
what it had been.
A sound of some
kind, maybe
something in the
movie. She sat up

and used the remote to click off the TV. It was time to turn off the lights and climb into her cold and empty bed. She reached for the lamp and clicked the switch when she heard a sound that triggered her memory. She had

been dreaming of
crying babies. They
were laying all
around her in a
small room,
wailing, and each
time she got them
to settle down and
fall asleep, a loud
noise like
something breaking
would ring
through the room,

and they would all
begin their
unhappy chorus
again. As she stood
in the dark of her
living room, she
could hear crying.

“Mary.”

She knew all
the talk of
Banshees would
either cause Mary
to stay up worrying

all night or to have nightmares. She made her way to the kid's bedroom, veering her way around furniture until she made her way to the lit hallway.

At the kid's door, she listened. If Mary's dream had abated, she

didn't want to
wake her. She had
almost convinced
herself that the
crying sound was
imagined when she
heard it again, but
it was more like
someone openly
weeping. It was
quiet and distant,
almost faint
enough to make

her feel like she
needed to have her
hearing checked.

“Mom?”

She eased the
bedroom door
open and peeked in
at Mary and Jayce.
Mary was sitting up
in bed, staring at
her, her face frozen
in fear. She looked
at Jayce’s side of

the room. He lay on his side, softly snoring.

“Did you have a bad dream, honey? Is that why you were crying?”

Mary glanced around the room while beckoning Clara to come to her. She also held a finger to her lips.

Clara followed Mary's gaze around the room as she made her way to the side of the little girl's twin bed.

Clara spoke softly, "Honey, what are you looking for?"

Mary replied to her, barely above a

whisper. “I haven’t been asleep yet.”

Clara wasn’t sure if she believed Mary, not because she thought her daughter was lying, but because Mary was prone to night terrors. It had been a long time though since she’d had one.

“Was Jayce
dreaming?”

“No. Mama,
the crying, did you
hear it?”

“Yes, I thought
you were
dreaming.”

“No, it wasn’t
me, and it wasn’t
Jayce. It was the
Banshee. I saw it.

We're gonna die,
mom."

Clara sighed
and said, "Now
Mary, we talked
about this already.
You had a bad
dream, and ..."

"No mom. It
flew into my
closet. It is blue,
just like Granny
said it would be,

and it makes the most horrible sounds. At first, it was sitting on Jayce's shoulder, and then it flew right past me and it was crying.”

Clara wanted to believe that night terrors were responsible for her daughter's

inexplicable fear,
but she seemed to
be wide awake.
Usually, when she
had terrors, they
found her sobbing
or shouting
inconsolably. She
had told them
many strange,
incoherent things
while in the grasps
of the episodes, but

Mary wasn't
behaving in any of
those ways. She
was wearily
watching the closet
and then glancing
around the rest of
the room. She was
convincing enough
that Clara found
herself also
checking the
bedroom.

Clara jumped
when Jayce spoke
behind them.

“Mom? What
is that thing?”

Clara and Mary
both turned to see
him pointing at the
top of the bedroom
door. Following his
gaze, she stared at a
small blue glow
that was perched

on the edge of the door frame. She let out a small gasp when it jumped from the door frame to the top of the door. It hesitated and then sprang to the top of Jayce's dresser.

“Can you both see it?”

Mary only
stared at the
dresser. Jayce
answered, “Holy
shit.”

Again, Clara
could hear the
sound that had
caused her to wake
from a deep sleep
on the living room
couch. It was a
tortured, deep

sobbing. She
remembered
hearing her father
when her mother
took her last breath
in the hospital. The
crying in the room
sounded as he had.
It was deep sorrow.
It was the painful
sound of a last
goodbye.

“Jayce, get over here. Don’t move fast, just go slow.”

The boy eased his way out of the bed and tiptoed across the room. He leaned into his mother’s side as she wrapped a protective arm around him. With her other arm, she

reached up and
pulled Mary to her
chest.

“Kids, we are
going to stand up
and go out of the
room. Then we are
going to leave the
house out the back
and get the car.
We will drive to
Aunt Josie’s. On
the count of three,

I want you to stand up.” Clara looked at each of her kids. They nodded in agreement while never once taking their eyes from the blue glowing figure on top of the dresser.

“Okay, one, two....”

A crashing
sound came from
the back of the
house. A dish or a
glass had been
dropped, shattering
on the tiled kitchen
floor. There was a
stumbling sound
like someone had
tripped over
something
unseen.

“Mom,
someone’s in the
house.”

Clara leaned
forward to get her
feet under her. She
stood up, pulling
Jayce and Mary
with her. The blue
ball on the dresser
shot across the
room fast enough
that she pinched

her eyes shut
against it and threw
her arms in front of
her children. The
wailing increased
in pitch and
volume. She
opened her eyes. A
small dark face
hovered before
her. It was the face
of an old, tortured
man. He was semi-

transparent and
blue other than his
eyes. His mouth
was open, and his
wide-open green
eyes pierced her,
imploring her to
move. The sounds
it made grew into a
scream.

Jayce and Mary
had their hands
over their ears. She

grabbed them both
and ran from the
room, turning right
in the hallway
toward her
bedroom instead of
left toward the
kitchen. As soon as
they moved into
the hallway, the
screaming stopped.
Mary was making
little squeaking

sounds. Clara could see terror etched into her face. Jayce ran hard enough that he pulled them toward her closed bedroom door. She reached the door, flinging it open while shoving her kids into the dark room.

“Get behind
mommy’s bed,
now!”

The kids ran as
she slammed the
door shut hard
enough that it
rattled in its frame.
The closet door
stood open. She
blindly reached
into the closet,
groping over the

items on the top
shelf, throwing
anything that
didn't feel like
Dave's old cigar
box onto the floor.
Falling footsteps
grew closer as they
came down the
hallway. Her right
hand hit the box
she sought and
shoved it back

further on the
shelf.

“Dammit!”

Mary was
sobbing behind her
bed across the
room.

Jayce called out
a warning to her,
“Mom, someone’s
coming!”

She reached further into the black cavern of the closet and grabbed the box. Pulling it down, she threw her body across the top of the bed and scooted onto the floor next to her kids. The bedroom door handle began shaking. From the

other side of the
door came a laugh
and a male voice.

“I’m coming to
play lady. I’m
going to play with
you and your
kids.”

Clara pushed
Jayce and Mary to
the floor and pulled
the Beretta from
the cigar box.

“Lay down and don’t get up until I tell you.”

She leveled the gun at the door in the two-handed grip Dave had taught her many years before.

The voice on the other side of the door called out

to her, “There’s
nowhere to hide.”

The door
exploded inward,
shattering into
shards and splinters.
A man stepped into
the room, and
Clara aimed at the
center of his chest.

“I’m not trying
to hide.”

She squeezed
the trigger.

The air came
out of the man,
and he staggered
for a moment,
unsure of what had
happened to him.
He collapsed onto
the bedroom floor,
blood coursing
from his body. The
faint blue glow of

the Banshee
hovered above his
body and then
winked out of
sight.

Coming Up Short

Infinity

April 2014

“Hey cheeks,
get your ass over
here. Where’s this
week’s payment?”

Eddie had
hoped he could
slide through the
junior hall of his
high school
without Munch

seeing him. As soon as he heard his name called, he cringed. He had a significant amount of hatred built up for Michael Munchak, Munch, as he was called by most kids. Eddie wasn't the only kid in school who hated and avoided

Munch. Munch
was the
consummate school
bully and had been
since middle
school. Of course,
he would become a
full-fledged
alcoholic and
derelict in the
future. Someday
Munch would
graduate from

beating up high school kids to thumping drug addicts who owed him money for their stash. He already pedaled pot, shrooms, and other small-time drugs. Word in the school was that Munch had an arrest record and

was on probation,
which made it
even scarier to deal
with him.

“Cheeks, if you
run, my price will
double.” Munch
pounded a fist into
his palm and Eddie
froze in his tracks.
He trudged to
where Munch

leaned against a
locker.

In middle
school, Munch was
the only kid to
stand over six feet
tall and he had not
stopped growing.
Eddie guessed his
height currently
was six feet five
and change.
Besides his

towering height,
he had the chiseled
physique of a full-
grown adult man.

Meanwhile, as
Eddie's mother
often said, Eddie
was a triple-decker
salami on rye short
of six feet tall.

What he lacked in
height, he made up
for in the bulge

around his middle.
The nickname,
Cheeks, was
Munch's way of
highlighting
Eddie's large rear
end. It was an
embarrassing label
for a high school
kid who was
already sensitive
about his physical
appearance. His

mother said that
God had rolled
him in sweetness,
and coated him
with sprinkles,
which was her way
of addressing his
weight and acne.
She tried to make
it a cute thing
when he
complained about
his appearance. He

knew this was
because his mother
didn't want to hurt
him by
acknowledging that
he was a pimped
fat ass.

“I believe you
owe me ten bucks’
big boy.” Munch
poked him in the
roll that hung over
the top of his jeans

and laughed. “You should look at this little financial arrangement as good news for you Cheeks. You see, if I wasn’t taking money from you every week, you’d just use it to eat more. The last thing your stomach needs is another

donut going down
your pie hole. I
should charge you
more for the
service I'm
providing you,
which of course, is
in addition to my
weekly health
checks.”

Munch called it
a health check
when he made

Eddie give him
money. After
Eddie paid him, he
would say, “See?
Lookie there
Cheeks, you’re
gonna be in good
health for another
week.” It was the
same routine over
and over.

Eddie handed
him the money,

and Munch told him how grateful he should be for his continued good health. As Eddie turned away, he caught Gloria shaking her head at him. She had a look on her face that made clear her disapproval. It was a look that said

Eddie was a little
bitch for paying
Munch his
demanded price of
extortion. Gloria
wasn't the prettiest
girl in school, but
there was
something about
her soft brown eyes
and kind smile. He
had maintained a
secret crush on her

since they were in elementary school together. He loved her but she was way above Eddie's dating level. Sam, Eddie's best friend, had a theory about dating. He said that every person had level which was based on physical appearance. Sam's

theoretical model proposed that it was acceptable and much easier to date down a couple of levels than it was to date up. Dating down was a way to get a girl, but the price of dating down was lowering your ranking. If you dated up,

according to Sam,
your ranking
would improve,
but you were
bound to be
heartbroken
because those
above you also
ultimately wanted
to date up. Gloria
would represent
dating up, that was
if Eddie had the

courage to ask her
out. He feared
rejection, and
based on the look
she had given him
in the hallway, she
clearly thought he
was the biggest
wuss in the school.

“Hey, Gloria,
wait up.”

As Eddie
walked away from

Munch, he felt himself getting pulled backward off his feet. He landed on the crowded floor of the hallway. Kids pointed and laughed, which only encouraged Munch.

“Hey, Gloria, wait up!” Munch

spoke in a mocking
high pitched voice.

“Dude, do you
honestly think you
have a shot with
her? She wouldn’t
let you lick her
boots.”

Munch
pounded knuckles
with his sidekick,
Stevie. Stevie
snickered as though

Munch was the
funniest kid to ever
grace the halls of
Jefferson High
School.

“Munch, listen,
I got to get to
class.”

Munch leaned
down close to
Eddie's face. Eddie
could detect the
unmistakable smell

of booze. “Do
you? And what will
happen if you’re
late?”

“I paid you
Munch, like I
always do. Can I
please leave for
class?”

“Oh, I suppose
so, you paid after
all. And I like to be
charitable with the

nerds once in a while. Go learn some more about computers Cheeks. Get outta my sight.” Munch kicked him in the ass as he stood up, and there were more chuckles from the surrounding kids.

Eddie half ran
to his next class
while wishing he
could kill Michael
Munchak.

★★★

“Edward, come
down for dinner
before it’s cold.”

Eddie’s mother
called to him, but
he had no appetite.

Another day of
Munch's hassling
had him in a
terrible mood.

“I'll be down
soon, mom; I need
to finish my
homework.”

He had finished
his homework
during the last class
of the day. Mrs.
Nordmeyer was

retiring at the end
of the year, and she
seemed to have
mentally checked
out before
Christmas vacation.
She didn't care
what kids were
doing in her class.
She was a history
teacher who asked
that kids keep quiet
and busy. Many

kids still screwed around, but Eddie was happy to oblige. It kept homework to a minimum and gave him more time to play Assassin's Creed online.

After logging on to his desktop computer, he heard the customized

new email alert
voice.

“Hey super
stud, someone
wants your
attention.”

He was good
with computers,
and he knew it was
his future. A
degree in IT was
his next
educational pursuit.

He intended to specialize in either networking or programming. His goal was that within ten years of graduating from college, he would go to his first high school reunion as a self-employed man. He envisioned a much wealthier,

slimmer version of
himself wearing
stylish clothes. It
was a lofty goal,
but he was
determined. He
wanted people like
Munch to be sorry
they had ever
messed with him,
and he wanted girls
like Gloria to be
sorry that she

hadn't been willing
to give him a
chance.

He opened his
Gmail account and
checked the new
message. It was
titled, 'Get
whatever you
want. NOW!' He
opened it, fearing a
virus or spyware,
although he had

built internal
protections that he
hoped one day to
market. He was
certain that his
programming
would ward off all
potential invaders,
but he was careful.

The email body
was all white with
one clickable image
in the center. The

image was that of a muscular man with a beautiful, scantily clothed woman sitting in his lap. She was kissing the man's neck, and the look on her face was one of pure desire. Above this image was one simple sentence

THE POWER OF INFINITY.

“It’s
nonsense.”

He moved the
cursor icon around
the image, and
then off, and back
on. The hand
pointer popped on
and off as he
moved. He
thought about how

most people didn't realize that the pointer was technically called a link selector.

“It's probably some freaking life coach, who wants five hundred dollars a month to tell me to work out and eat better.”

He clicked on
the image before
he realized he even
intended to do so.
An explorer
browser page
opened. He
expected pictures
of hot babes and
quotes from
satisfied customers
of some type of
miracle pill, the

kind that proposed
it would grow your
penis by five inches
or trim twenty
pounds of fat
overnight. Or
maybe it would be
the life coach who
would tell him
how to turn his
miserable life
around.

Instead, the screen filled with mist. White wisps of fog moved across the darkest of landscapes. In the background, behind the fog, there was movement. There seemed to be people walking around, but as soon

as he thought he
could make out a
human form, the
image dissipated
and melted into the
fog.

“This is some
weird stuff.”

He moved the
cursor to close the
window but froze
when a soothing,
deep voice spoke

to him from his
computer's
speakers.

“Hello, Eddie.
Welcome to
Infinity.”

The human-
sounding voice was
no doubt a part of
some form of
programmed
artificial
intelligence, or AI

as it was commonly called.

“Hello. What are you trying to sell?”

Eddie waited for the reply. The AI would undoubtedly filter his question to find an appropriate response from a data bank of

thousands of
possibilities.

“I have nothing
to sell, only a
proposal to make.”

“Okay, and
what is your
proposal?”

Again, there
was a moment of
silence. The mists
kept swirling,

partially parting,
and then
thickening again.
Images of men and
women shuffled in
the background
and then
disappeared. They
drifted, like the
undead.

“For the rest of
your life, I will
grant you whatever

you want,
anything, you
name it. I'm like a
genie in a bottle,
only I'm real. I'm
infinity because
anything is possible
within my
network. In
exchange, in the
future, I will ask a
favor from you. As
long as you fulfill

my request your
wishes will
continue to be
granted.”

Eddie smiled.
Someone was
screwing with him.
It had to be
someone with
some serious skill,
though. The
person who created
the interactive

website had some talented programming chops. Of course, there could be a live person on the other end of the connection as opposed to AI. Even the graphics and design of the images on the screen before him

were impeccably
done though.

“Okay, and
how do I know
that this isn’t Sam
or Zander messing
with me? I mean,
you have to admit
this is pretty far out
there.”

Eddie enjoyed
the interaction
with Infinity and

had completely
forgotten all about
Assassin's Creed.

“You tell me
something you
want, and I'll give
it to you
tomorrow. Think
of something your
heart truly desires
and it will be
delivered. When
you see the power

of Infinity, you will believe. No contracts are necessary, just a simple gentleman's agreement."

Eddie smirked, fully believing that at school the next day Sam would ask how he enjoyed his visit with Infinity.

“Okay, I’ll play along. I know what I want. You said any wish, right?”

“Infinity can grant you anything you want. We have an extensive network.”

“Okay, I want Michael Munchak to get his ass kicked. I want him

put in the hospital
for all he's put me
through for the
past six years. Make
that happen and
you'll have yourself
a deal.”

“Deal. Infinity
signing off.”

The explorer
window closed and
the desktop images
of DC Comics

characters stared
back at him.

Superman looked
at him as though
he were also
puzzled by Eddie's
interaction with
Infinity.

“I know Supe,
but it's all crap.”

★★★

Eddie was only
halfway up the
sidewalk to
Jefferson's front
doors when Sam
approached him.

Eddie punched
him in the arm,
“Okay dude, spill
it. The whole AI
thing was
impressive, but not
nearly as much as

the bodies moving
through the fog in
the background.
How'd you do it?"

Sam kicked at
an empty soda can
lying at the side of
the walkway.

"What the hell are
you talking about?
By the way, I
heard that Sich
asked Gloria out,

and she said yes.
Tough break man,
but let's be honest,
you were never
going to make a
move, so the
Sichster might as
well, right?"

Hearing that
Gloria was going
out with Sich, who
was a borderline
jock and major

dumbass, hurt but not for the obvious reason. Eddie thought that if Gloria liked guys like Sich, he had been misjudging her for a long time.

“Yeah, but it’s whatever. She never would have gone out with me

anyway and you know it.” Eddie tried to play Sam’s news off, but the more he thought about it, the more it pissed him off.

“Anyway, tell me about the Power of Infinity deal.

How’d you do it, man?”

Sam said,
“What are you
talking about and
what’s the Power
of Infinity?”

The three-
minute warning
bell rang as the two
boys entered the
first-floor hallway.

“Yeah, right,
okay. Check you

later, on my way to Chem.”

Sam gave a quick wave, “Say hi to Munch for me, the stupid douchebag. Butt Munch is more like it.” Realizing that he had called Munch a douchebag out loud, Sam checked

the faces of the
students moving in
the hall. He didn't
see Munch
anywhere.

“Check you
later.”

Eddie sat in his
favorite chair at the
back of his Chem
class. He noticed a
strange buzz with
the other students

in the room. Kids
whispered
conspiratorial
words to each
other as they
plopped into the
chairs. It was as
though they were
all privy to some
shared secret.

The bell rang,
and Mr. Kinney
began calling out

student's names.
Without looking
up from his
attendance sheet,
he called their
names getting
'here' responses
from Sandra,
Maria, David, and
Lupe.

“Michael?”
When no one
responded, Mr.

Kinney looked over the rim of his glasses at the room of students. “No Michael, which is no surprise.” He moved onto the next name on his roster, calling to Vera. The kids in the class began whispering again. This time he could

hear them use
Munch's name
several times. Eddie
remembered his
conversation with
Infinity.

*I want Michael
Munchak to get his
ass kicked. I want
him put in the
hospital for all the
stuff he's put me*

*through for the
past six years.*

He felt heat
rising in his cheeks.
The worried
feeling of guilt
crept into his
mind. His mother
had taught him to
take ownership of
his mistakes, and
he felt like he
might have made

one, a serious one.
As the class roll call
was wrapping up,
he leaned across
the aisle to a kid
named Abe. Abe
was almost as
obscure in the
school as he was,
but the kid wasn't
a nerd like him and
his friends. Abe

was more of a
loner.

“Hey, Abe.
What’s everyone
talking about? Why
is everyone
whispering?”

Abe’s eyes
grew wide. “You
haven’t heard?
Munch got his ass
whipped, like
seriously bad man.

I guess he got
jumped and some
badass dude put
him in the hospital.
Sarah, you know
the girl with the
braces on her legs?
Well, she told me
that Munch will be
sucking dinner
through a straw for
months.”

★★★

Eddie sat
staring at his
computer monitor.
Batman was
punching the
Penguin, and
Superman
continued to look
as confounded as
Eddie felt. He
opened his email
and clicked on the
message titled, ‘Get

whatever you
want. NOW!' He
saw the woman
sitting on the man's
lap. They looked
like real people,
but their
positioning differed
from last time. She
was turned away
from the man.
They both looked
at Eddie. He could

swear that last time
she had been
nuzzling the man's
neck. A teenage
boy didn't forget
something that
provocative.

Eddie rubbed at
his eyes. The
picture remained
the same.

“Okay, creepy
but doable.”

It wouldn't be
an easy email
template to create,
but its creator
might have gone
the extra mile.
Each time the
email was opened,
the two figures that
comprised the link
to Infinity would
be in different
positions.

He closed the email, reopened it, and then thought better and closed the entire web browser down. He waited a moment and then went even further and shut the computer completely down. If the email template had been

created so the couple would change positions each time it was opened, they should move again once he reopened it. He got up and paced his room.

His mind wandered. It had to be a coincidence that Munch got

beat up. There was no way he could be responsible for what had happened.

Although, as he thought about it, Munch had gotten exactly what he deserved. The bully had given many kids the same beating that had

been given to him.
The guilt he felt
finally dissipated.
Munch was a
complete asshole.
Eddie had been
giving up a part of
his allowance for
years to keep from
ending up as so
many other kids
had. If someone
hadn't beaten up

Munch, Munch
would have beaten
up some other kid
instead. As he
thought about it,
he concluded that
what had happened
to Munch was
poetic justice,
whether or not he
had caused it.

He restarted
the computer.

While he waited,
he continued
pondering how a
computer program
might have
executed his wish.
It just wasn't
possible. The only
way to truly know
was to make
another wish. If
another wish came
true, there would

be no way that it
was coincidental.

His email
loaded and he
reopened the
communication
from Infinity. The
woman sat on the
man's lap in the
same position as
the last time. Both
she and the man
stared at Eddie. He

clicked on the
man's forehead and
explorer opened.
The fog returned
across his screen.
The arm of a man
could be glimpsed,
and then it faded
away.

“Hello, Eddie.
Were you
impressed by my
work? Your wish

came true, as I
promised. Do we
now have a deal?”

★★★

“Listen,
Infinity, it sounds
like Eddie got his
ass beat pretty
good, but...”
Eddie considered
that he didn’t
exactly want to
offend whoever

was on the other
end of the
connection. If
Infinity had the
power it proposed,
offending it could
be dangerous.

Infinity spoke
over Eddie, “But
you think it could
have been a
coincidence.”

Eddie nodded
at his monitor,
“Yes, sorry, but it
could have been.”

“That’s a very
common response,
but I’m certain that
you agree that if I
were to grant you
another wish
before we
consummate our
deal, that

coincidence will be mathematically impossible. If you make a second wish, and I fulfill it as a way of proving the power of Infinity, would you agree that coincidence becomes highly unlikely, and a statistical outlier?”

“Yes, you
would be correct.”

“Then make
your second
wish.”

Eddie had not
expected the offer
and quickly
jumped at it. He
had already formed
an idea. “Okay. I
want Gloria to like
me. I want her to

dump Sich and ask
me out and I want
her to do it
publicly.”

“And if the
power of Infinity
makes this wish
come true, you and
I will have a
deal?”

“Yes, we will.”

“Done.”



Unlike the first time Eddie made a wish through Infinity, this wish was at the forefront of his mind as he entered Jefferson High School. He looked around the halls for Gloria but did not see her. First-period class

came and went
again without
Munch, but Abe
shared more details
about his former
bully's
hospitalization.
The expectation
was that Munch
would be in the
hospital for
months, and then
he would be

transferred to a rehabilitation center. He had a cracked skull, several broken bones, and the doctors were concerned that he may have suffered some form of cognitive impairment. That all was in addition

to emergency
surgery on his
spleen.

Munch's days
of taking Eddie's
money, of
threatening him
and every other kid
in school were
over. Some other
asshole could fill
the absence of
Munch eventually,

but for the first
time since sixth
grade, he no longer
needed to fear
going to school.
He could use his
allowance for
something other
than paying
Munch.

As for Gloria,
he anticipated her
public

proclamation of
love for him, but
the day progressed,
and he had seen no
sign of her. He sat
in history class
feeling completely
duped by whoever
was behind
Infinity. It had
been a giant scam,
and he had fallen
for it. He still

couldn't figure out
Munch getting
beat up, but Gloria
wasn't in school.
Infinity was a lie, as
he had thought
from the
beginning. He
scolded himself,
noting that it was
when he got his
hopes up that he

typically found
disappointment.

At the end of
Mrs. Nordmeyer's
class, Eddie made
his way to his
locker, grabbed his
backpack, and
began the shuffle
out of the building.
As he cleared the
building's exit, he
almost ran into

Gloria. She was standing at the bottom of the stairs with all her friends. He hesitated for a moment, and then he decided that if she were going to fulfill his second Infinity wish, she could stop him. Why would he make it easy on

her? He kept walking, and as he passed her, she spoke his name. Her voice was soft and hard to hear. He turned to face her. She looked terrified. Her friends looked pissed. The girls on either side of her glared at him, but

none of them
spoke. Gloria
looked as though
she was going to be
ill. She cleared her
throat and looked
at her feet.

“Eddie, I broke
up with Sich. He
uh, he was wrong
for me and I
wanted to know if
you would like to

um,” Gloria looked at the girl next to her. Eddie remembered her name was Sandra. She gave a slight shake of her head and looked away. She disagreed with what Gloria was about to say. “I wondered if you would like to go

out with me?”

Gloria had gone
completely pale
and wiped at a tear
that was about to
escape her left eye.
For the first time,
she looked at
Eddie.

Eddie didn't
know what Infinity
had done or said,
but Gloria looked

like she was the
most miserable
person in the
world, which
completely pissed
him off. He looked
at Gloria through a
whole new lens.
He had been
wrong about her.
She was just as big
an uppity bitch as
the rest of the girls

in school. She
stood before him
acting like
someone was
asking her to eat rat
poison instead of
asking him on a
date. He felt anger
rising behind his
eyes. He had made
his second wish as a
test of Infinity's
power, but he had

also made the wish
for a date with
Gloria because he
had liked her. The
person who stood
before him was not
the person he had
created in his
mind.

A strange
thought jumped
up, like someone
waving a giant

banner in front of him. The power of Infinity was the ability to give him what he wanted, yes, but that had been only part of the power of Infinity. He could get what he wanted alright, but more importantly, he

would now always
know the truth.

He had wanted
Gloria. He had
fallen for those
brown eyes, her
innocent look, and
her aura of
simplicity. She had
impressed him as
being different. She
had always seemed
so vulnerable, and

it all made him
want to be the man
that spent the rest
of his life
protecting her. He
wanted to wrap his
arms around her
and make the
world a perfect
place for her.

And yet, all
along, she had been
an imposter. She

was a fraud. She stood before him acting like the worst thing imaginable would be to suffer the indignity of spending an evening in his company. In a single moment, she made him feel worse than Munch

ever had. The best thing he could do for himself was to gain the upper hand over Gloria by not accepting her invitation.

“No.”

Gloria looked puzzled. For a moment he thought she was going to smile, and

then Eddie could
see the larger
picture dawn on
her. She was as
surprised as anyone
he had ever seen.

“What?”

“I said no.”

Several other
students had
gathered around
them in a circle. As

his mother would
say, it was as quiet
as a fart in church.

“You’re
turning ME
down?” Gloria
stammered and
brushed the hair
out of her eyes.
She looked to her
friends, who were
also brain locked.

“That’s right,
Gloria. You know,
I used to think you
were great. I
thought you were a
classy person who
didn’t get caught
up in all the
popularity stuff.
The truth is that
you’re no different
than any other
idiot in this place.

You are a social
ladder climbing
bitch.” Eddie
thought he needed
to tell Sam his
theory of dating
was correct. Gloria
had been with Sich
as a method of
improving her
dating level. She
had been in tears
only moments

before because
going out with him
would have
knocked her down
several levels. That,
and she thought he
was disgusting.

Gloria's mouth
hung open, and a
small squeak
escaped several
times as she tried to

think of something
to say.

Eddie flipped
his middle finger at
her. There was a
collective gasp
from the kids who
had gathered
around. “Don’t
bother, Gloria.
There isn’t
anything that you
could say that I

have an interest in hearing.”

Eddie turned away from Gloria and her friends. As he walked out of the circle of students, kids began laughing and pointing at Gloria.

★★★

“Hello, Eddie.
Do we have a
deal?”

“Yes, Infinity,
we do. And I have
another wish.”

“Great. What
would you like the
Power of Infinity
to do for you?”

★★★

September
2017

“Yo, Eddie
man. How’s it
hangin?”

Eddie scooted
his chair over so
that Scott would
have room at his
table. “A little to
the left, bro. But
seriously, I’m
good.”

Scott replied,
“I’ll say. Who else
puts as little time
into studying as
you and still pulls
an ‘A’ the entire
semester in every
class, specially this
Calc class? Were
you out partying
the entire night?”

Eddie laughed
and looked at their

professor. Dr.
Walsh was busy
prepping for the
upcoming class. He
glanced at Eddie,
and then put his
head down,
quickly looking
away.

Scott noticed
the tension
between Eddie and
Dr. Walsh and

asked, “Dude,
Walsh is a jerk to
everyone, but
around you, he acts
like a nervous
wreck. He totally
avoided eye
contact with you.
What’s that
about?”

Eddie winked
at Scott, “I don’t

know what you're
talking about.”

★★★

July 2021

“I have no idea
how you got the
lender to go for it
after being denied
two days ago, but
they called today
and you're

approved. The car is yours. Here are the keys. Let's go outside and I'll run you through some of the features, which is a good idea since this is your first Porsche."

Eddie smiled at the car salesman, "Sometimes people

need the right
motivation.”

★★★

November
2024

Eddie sat in a
stiff chair in front
of his boss’s desk.
Will was a
complete idiot.
Eddie didn’t work

closely with Will, but the man had been in way over his head in his role as the lead systems developer. That may have been why the company was moving Will to a different department in the corporation. Soon he would be long

gone, taking his
incompetence with
him.

When word
came down that
Will would be
moving on, it had
been a double
blessing for Eddie.
The organization
had opened Will's
position to internal
applicants only. As

a result, only Eddie and a guy named Jax had applied for the position. Jax was a cool enough guy, but Eddie wasn't particularly close to him and Jax wasn't nearly as qualified. Jax's work was what Eddie often described as

substandard. Even though Jax had also applied for the promotion, people in their department were already teasing Eddie and calling him boss. Even Jax had called Eddie the front runner.

What had surprised Eddie was

that HR had tasked Will with hiring his replacement. Eddie and Jax had each interviewed with Will for the job. Even though Jax had a better relationship with Will than Eddie, Eddie still felt confident that he would get the job.

The differences
between Eddie and
Jax's job
performance were
significant.

Will had finally
called Eddie in to
his office to see
him. Eddie knew
this would be the
meeting that Will
informed him of
his promotion, and

it was not lost on Eddie that Jax had not yet been called into see Will.

Typically, the successful candidate was informed before those who were rejected.

Will looked up from his computer and thanked Eddie for coming.

“Listen, Eddie,
I’m sure you know
I called you here to
discuss my decision
regarding the
promotion. I want
to cut right to the
chase. Tomorrow I
will meet with HR
to inform them of
my decision, but I
wanted to meet

with you and Jax first.”

Eddie nodded.
The conversation
was going as he
had expected.

“Anyway,
Eddie, your work
is impeccable.
Your design
systems are the best
in our division of
the organization.

You deliver a quality product design, and you usually have it done early.” Will looked down at his hands. They were folded together on top of his desk. He inspected them as though there were something of interest on them

and then looked
back at Eddie.

“This is an
uncomfortable
position for me
because I enjoy and
appreciate both
you and Jax for
very different
reasons. Anyway,
Eddie, in this
situation, after
much thought, I’ve

decided to go with
Jax as the lead
systems
developer.”

Eddie was
preparing to stand
and shake Will’s
hand when he
realized what he
had heard. “Huh?
What? Jax?”

“Listen, it was a
tough call but

Eddie, it's a leadership position and Jax is the better leader."

Eddie could feel the pressure that always came before a migraine headache building behind his eyes.

"You know very well, Will, that Jax doesn't put out

near as much work
as I do, and his
work is substandard
most of the time.
What's his error
rate? Huh?" The
storm inside his
brain was building,
and he had no idea
of how to stop it.
He never had.

“Yes, Eddie,
but this isn't a

production
position, it's a
leadership role
and..."

"Oh, come on
Will!"

"Listen, this is
the issue, right
here. Your reaction
right now to this is
exactly why I went
with Jax. You are
temperamental and

your coworkers all expressed that concern to me.”

“You went to our team about this? Are you serious?”

“Yes, absolutely. Their input was important to the process.”

“Well, you are wrong, and this is typical of you, Will. You’re lying through your teeth, putting your crap decision making off on our team. Our team, my team, all celebrated when you told us you were being moved.”

Will shook his head, “I’m not being moved, Eddie, I’m being promoted.”

“That’s another lie. Your new title is a lateral move. It’s the equivalent of your current position, but without the management

responsibilities. Do you think I'm stupid?"

“Okay, well, Eddie, I wanted to let you know of my decision. Jax has an offsite meeting this afternoon, so I won't be able to meet with him until tomorrow

afternoon. I'd appreciate you keeping this under your hat until then. Thank you." Will stood, indicating that their meeting was over. Eddie was being dismissed.

Eddie stood and moved to the office door. Before

opening it, he turned back to Will. “You’re wrong.”

Will tilted his head like a curious dog. “Wrong about what?”

“You won’t need to meet with Jax tomorrow afternoon. By tomorrow morning

you'll be giving me
the job. I guarantee
it."

★★★

Eddie
confidently strolled
into work, late by
about an hour. By
the time he got to
his desk, Sharon,
the team admin,
was already

tracking him
down.

“Eddie, Will
needs to see you in
his office.”

“Thought so.
Sharon, would you
be a dear and tell
him I have a
couple of things to
attend to and I’ll be
in before lunch?”

Sharon
appeared to be
frustrated with
him, “Will told me
to grab you first
thing. I don’t think
he’s feeling well
and intends to go
home as soon as he
speaks to you.”

“Yup. Thank
you, Sharon. He
can wait a little

longer. It won't hurt him."

Eddie placed a headset over his ears and turned away from her.

By two o'clock that afternoon, Eddie sauntered past a glaring Sharon into Will's office. He almost hit Will with the

door when he
flung it open
unannounced. Will
startled and jumped
as though the door
was going to attack
him.

“Eddie...”

“Yes Will, you
wanted to see
me?”

Will scuttled behind his desk as though he wanted to keep a barrier between him and Eddie. For the first time, Eddie noticed the dark bruising around Will's right eye.

“Listen, I don’t want any more trouble. Okay? I

told HR this
morning you have
the job. Just tell
that man I did
what he wanted.
You have the job.
It's yours. I didn't
think that you,
would..."

"Would what?"
Eddie smiled at
Will.

“Would...
Never mind. Please
tell him.”

Eddie walked
back to the office
door and shrugged.
“Thanks for the
promotion, Will.
It’s the right thing
to do. As far as the
man you are going
on about, I have

no idea what you
mean.”

Eddie exited
the office.

★★★

June 2027

“Hello, Eddie.
It’s time for you to
do me a favor, as is

a part of our
agreement.”

A cold
sensation worked
its way up Eddie’s
spine. “Okay.
What do you need
me to do?”

He watched
the swirling mists
come and go across
his monitor. The
vapors grew thin,

and he could see
the endlessly
wandering bodies
shuffling along in
every direction.
They were vague
outlines of
humanity who
appeared to have
no specific
direction. Then the
mists thickened,
and the shapes of

the people
dissipated.

Since getting
married, he only
connected to
Infinity when
Sheila was at work.
Infinity remained
his only secret, and
it was a secret he
kept from
everyone. Infinity
belonged to him

alone. The great element of his life that helped him maintain balance. The scales of the world had long ago been tipped to the favor of the elite. Ordinary people stood no chance in the big picture. Infinity equalized those scales. It

neutralized the
advantage of those
who held the
power. He knew at
some point,
Infinity would
come seeking
repayment for all
that he had given
him and now was
that moment.

“I will email
you two addresses.

Tomorrow night at 8:30 be at the first of those addresses. A woman will exit the home at that location by 8:45. When she does, she will walk north to the bus stop at the end of the block. Before she gets there, you will take her purse. She

will guard it
closely, but no
matter how you
have to do it, you
must get her purse
and remove the
money she has
from it. Throw her
purse away in a
dumpster
somewhere and
then deliver the
money to the

second address I
send you.”

“You want me
to mug a woman?”
Eddie had never
thought Infinity
would ask him to
do something as
brutal as stealing a
lady’s purse.

“Yes. What she
has in that purse
does not belong to

her. She's a thief,
and we will return
the money to its
rightful owner.
Failure to do this,
Eddie, will come
with
consequences."

Eddie knew
that if he did it, a
part of him would
die. His remaining
decency would be

gone. Some
barriers once
crossed, there was
no returning from,
but he owed
Infinity.

Everything that he
had that was of
value to him came
because of a
request made of
Infinity, including
Sheila. He had

married way over
his head. Several
levels above what
nature had
intended, and he
wasn't about to
give any of it up.

“Okay, send
the addresses.”

★★★

The woman
opened her front

door and scanned
the street in both
directions. She
peered into the
darkness, looking
far and wide, but
didn't see him
tucked into the
recess between two
buildings. As she
stepped outside,
small arms wrapped

themselves around
the woman's legs.

“Bye, mama.”

“Bye, honey.
Do what Mrs.
Sutton says, and I'll
be right back.
Okay, baby?”

“Okay,
mama.”

The woman
pulled the door

shut, made sure it was locked, and then stepped down her stairs and began walking in Eddie's direction. Having seen the small child, Eddie reminded himself that he needed to be careful not to hurt the woman. He pulled the ski

mask down over
his face as she
approached. As
Infinity predicted,
her purse was
pinched tight
against her body.
Every few steps she
took, she checked
over her shoulder
to make sure she
wasn't being
followed.

He waited until she was right next to him. She was close enough that he smelled her perfume. He reached out and pulled her into his dark space. At first, she came easily. She had been watching behind her, but she had

not been paying attention to the alcoves in the buildings' exterior. He had caught her off guard and she was completely surprised, and then her fight-or-flight response kicked in and she fought. She began screaming, and he had no

choice but to
clamp one hand
over her mouth to
quiet her. He
looped an arm
through her purse
straps and began
pulling her. She
kicked him and
tried biting the
hand over her
mouth. If not for
the gloves he wore,

she would have
broken his skin. He
knew he couldn't
risk the fight
carrying on for
long, but he didn't
want to hurt her.
She kept kicking
and resisting.
Finally, he lifted
her off her feet and
tugged her into the
darkness between

the buildings. As he did, she stumbled into him and fell backward, her weight tugging on her purse. The straps held for only a second, and then they snapped. The purse flew into the air. She landed on her rear with a thud and he

grabbed the bag
out of the air.

“No! Please, I
need to pay my
rent and buy my
baby’s medication.
Please don’t.” She
sat in the dark. The
light from a nearby
streetlamp reached
only her face. He
knew she was
telling the truth.

Fear was carved
into her face, but
she was not afraid
of him. Her fear
was created by the
worry of what
would happen to
her and her son.
He began to hand
her the purse, and a
tear slipped down
her cheek.

What if he was
wrong?

He hesitated.
What if she was
lying? What if
Infinity had been
telling the truth,
and she had stolen
the money?

“Please don’t
take that. We will
have to live on the
streets again.”

More tears
were flowing now.
She seemed so
genuine, but so had
Gloria so many
years before.

Eddie turned
away with the
purse in one hand.
The woman's cries
faded into the
night as he ran.

★★★

“Was the
money stolen?”

The figure of a
woman bumped
into the figure of a
man. They collided
and then resumed
their walking,
moving away from
each other. The
fog on his screen
swallowed them
both up.

“Does it
matter?”

“Yes, it does. I
need to know I did
the right thing.”

Infinity was
silent for a
moment. Then the
voice he had
known for so long
asked him a
question that he

struggled to
answer.

“Was it right
that you asked for
all that you
wanted?”

★★★

September
2027

“Hello, Eddie.
I haven’t heard
from you for a
while. Do you
have all that your
heart desires?”

“Yeah, Infinity,
I’m good. I got
your email. What
do you want?”

“I have a favor
to ask of you,
Eddie.”

Eddie sighed.
He feared that this
day would come
again. “I haven’t
asked you for
anything since I
delivered that purse
for you. I want to
be done with this
Infinity. That
woman, she...”
Eddie remembered
the look on her

face. It had been terror, and he had caused it. “What happened to her? Is she okay?”

“Tomorrow I need you to be at an address I will email you. You need to be there by 10:00 pm. You will break into the home at that

address by 10:15 pm. In the master bedroom, you will find a man sleeping alone. You will take the pistol he keeps in the drawer next to his bed and you will kill him.”

“No. I’m not murdering anyone. No way.” Eddie reached for the

power button to
shut off his
computer.

“Eddie. If you
shut me down or
fail to deliver on
your end of our
agreement, it will
constitute a breach
of our contract.”

Eddie
disagreed. “We

don't have a
contract.”

“We have a
gentleman's
agreement and that
is all that is
required.”

“Okay, and if I
decide I'm ending
our agreement?
Then what
happens?”

Infinity did not
hesitate with his
answer, “I’ll end
you.”

★★★

The front door
lock was flimsy and
easy to break.
Eddie stepped
through the dark of
the house. As
Infinity had said, a
hallway was to his

immediate left. He was to walk down that hallway to its very end and enter the last door. In that room, he would find the man sleeping, and the man's handgun in the night table drawer. Once in the hallway, he noticed an open

door to his
immediate left.
Standing still, he
could hear a faint
rustling sound and
then a voice. He
leaned up against
the doorframe and
peeked into the
room. The soft
glow of a
nightlight partially
illuminated a little

girl's room. She was sitting up on one elbow patting a stuffed animal bear she had lying next to her. Its head poked out of the covers.

“Go back to sleep, Billy, it was just a noise. Like Daddy says, we don't need to be

scared of every
little sound we
hear.”

Eddie walked
back out of the
house. “I’m not a
murderer. This has
gone way too far.”

He formulated
a plan. He would
tell Sheila that he
had a surprise
vacation planned,

and they were
leaving
immediately. They
would drive into
the mountains and
stay at a remote
rental cabin. He
could do some
fishing and
thinking. Escaping
Infinity would
eventually require a
permanent move

and a new job. He would need to destroy every online account he had ever created. All email, online bill pay, all of it would need to be eliminated. As far as the technology in his life went, he would need to recreate himself.

Anything that
Infinity could use
to find him would
need to be
destroyed.

★★★

Eddie and
Sheila slept in their
rental cabin. He
dreamed of
Infinity's voice. It
called to him, softly
at first, but the

digitized voice
grew in volume
until it screamed at
him.

“EDDIE! I
DEMAND A
FAVOR,
EDDIE!”

In his dream,
the unseen entity
of Infinity chased
him through the
woods surrounding

the cabin. Eddie
jumped in his sleep
and woke up. He
wiped sweat from
his forehead and
checked his watch.
It was nearly three
in the morning.
Sheila snored softly
at his side.

Swinging his legs
out of the bed, his
foot caught in the

sheets and he almost fell to the floor. He stood up and groaned. The bed was too soft and had given him a backache. His throat was dry and scratchy. He wanted a bottle of water from the cooler they had left in the kitchen.

In the kitchen,
he bent over the
cooler. Water
bottles floated in
melted ice. As he
stood up, he knew
someone was
behind him before
he heard the
floorboard creak.

“Get your arms
up, asshole.”

Eddie dropped the bottle. With his arms above his head, he turned in a half-circle. A masked figure stood before him. The man had a gun leveled at his chest.

“Don’t hurt my wife. She knows

nothing about any of this.”

Eddie could see confusion in the eyes of the man. It was the same confusion he had when he had stolen the woman’s purse.

“She’s asleep in the next room. It’s not her fault, and

she depends on me.
Without me, I
don't know what
she will do, and
you're not a killer,
are you? You're
just some guy who
got an email one
day and then found
himself with the
unlimited power to
get whatever he
wanted. But then

he started asking
for favors, didn't
he? You're here
because of Infinity,
right?"

The man
blinked, and the
gun started to
shake, "You're
lying. You killed
my mom. He said
it was you."

Eddie kept his hands over his head, “No man, Infinity lied to you. He tried to use me the same way. He wanted me to kill a man. I went there to do it, but he had a little girl, so I ran. It’s why we’re here. I wanted to get away from

Infinity because I
couldn't kill for
him.”

The man held a
hand to his head.
His eyes squinted
as though he were
in pain, and the
gun tilted toward
the floor. “No.
You killed my
mom.”

He raised the
gun. The look in
his eyes had
changed. Eddie
heard the explosion
of the gun and
then he was
swallowed by
darkness. He
realized his eyes
were squeezed
shut. He opened
them. The man

was gone. So was
the cabin. He stood
in darkness. Fog
moved and shifted
around him. He
waved a hand and
it swirled the
moisture in the air.
A woman walked
by him. He turned
to her.

“Hey, where
are we?”

She kept
walking. Her head
hung low. Her face
was slack and
expressionless. She
mumbled under
her breath.

He grabbed her
arm and turned her
toward him. She
stopped shuffling,
her head shaking as
she spoke to

herself. She stood
before him in
faded, gray rags.
He became aware
of how thin her
hair was. He could
see patches of scalp.

“I’ve been here
so long, so, so
long. There is
nothing.”

Eddie asked her again, “Where are we?”

She continued to mumble. Thick mists grew between them. He waved a hand again, chasing it away.

“There is nothing to wish for here.”

Eddie placed a palm under her chin and lifted. A tooth fell between dry, cracked lips bouncing off his wrist.

“Where...”

She looked at him, “We’re with him. We are here for Infinity.”

Coming Up Short

Coming Up Short

Lake of Favors

Mason pulled the for sale sign out of the front lawn and stared up at his new purchase. He had already moved into the house during the day. As dusk approached, he realized he had almost forgotten to

pull the sign out of
the front yard.

Unpacking had
garnered his
attention, and
although he still
had much to do,
he wanted the sign
removed. It was
hard to call a place
home that still had
the appearance of
being for sale.

Small town
America had
appealed to him his
entire life. It was
only when he had
gotten his remote
marketing position
that he made the
move away from
the city. His days
of barhopping were
long over, and he
had stopped

enjoying the hustle
and bustle of
crowded
downtown
Denver. He had
never fully
embraced an urban
lifestyle, anyway.
The only attraction
to living amongst
the throngs of
people was the
hope that he would

meet his future wife, but that had never happened. He had finally surrendered and accepted that maybe he was destined for a solitary life of bachelorhood.

Mason had hired a real estate agent and looked at

several properties
that he liked,
contemplating a
couple of them.
When he found
the large two-story
house nestled on
the shore of the
Lake of Favors, he
had offered a full
price contract that
day. The house had
spectacular views

of the lake and sat
outside of the town
of Favors,
Colorado. A five-
minute drive was
all that was
required to reach
the local diner, the
gas station, or the
post office. From
the lake to the
small town on
route five, there

was a breathtaking
view around every
corner.

He looked past
his house at the
setting sun. It cast
an orange glow
that made the lake
look as though it
were on fire.

“Hi there,
neighbor!”

Mason turned toward the voice behind him, tripping over the for-sale sign. “Hi, sorry about my clumsiness, I didn’t see you coming.”

The blonde woman before him tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and giggled, “I

didn't mean to
startle you,
although that was a
pretty nice
recovery. I thought
you were going to
fall.”

Mason knew
his jaw was
hanging open an
embarrassing length
of time, but he
couldn't help

himself. The
woman before him
was a goddess.

She extended
her hand to him,
“Anyway, I wanted
to say hello. I live
next door.” She
pointed at the
ranch home next
to his house. “My
name is Mila. It’s a

pleasure to meet
you...”

He stared into
her eyes while
continuing to
pump her arm up
and down. They
were the blue of
the deepest sea
with tiny flecks of
gold in them. She
had the slightest
trace of freckles

across her face, and
long golden hair
that bounced as she
moved.

“Yes, it’s a
pleasure to, uh, to
um...” Mason
looked down at her
hand, realizing he
was what was
causing her curls to
jounce around her
head. “Oh geez,

I'm sorry. You
must think I'm
some kind of ill-
mannered
neanderthal. My
name is Mason,
and I promise I'm
not usually this
awkward."

He could feel
his face flush red.

Mila laughed
and patted his arm,

“Not at all, I
thought it was
funny. You’re cute
when you’re being
a neanderthal.”

He couldn’t
help but shake his
head. He wiped a
hand across the
gathering sweat on
his forehead. “If
you don’t mind my
asking, how long

have you lived
here?”

“I don’t mind
at all. I’ve been
here for the past
four years,
although I
inherited the place
when my dad
passed. It was his.”

Mason looked
into her eyes, “I’m
sorry.”

She waved a hand at him, “Oh, I miss him, but I have accepted it. So, is there a Mrs. Mason? Or a little Mason Jr?”

She looked up at the house.

“No, it’s just me. I work from home, and I got sick of Denver, so

here I am.

Although, I would
like to have a Mrs.
Mason someday.
How about you?”

She smiled,
“Me?”

“Is there a Mr.
Mila?”

She winked at
him, “Not yet. I
had a boyfriend,

and we were going
to move here
together, but that
didn't work out.
Mark, his name
was Mark.”

Mason said,
“I'm sorry to hear
that.”

She smiled at
him, “Are you?”

He felt the
burn of
embarrassment
cross his face again,
“Well, maybe not
entirely.”

She smiled and
laughed. It was
light and musical.
“Well, I better get
back inside. I was
in the middle of
some chores.” She

turned away and then paused. “Me too by the way.”

“You too?”

“Yeah, me too. I’m looking for Mr. Mila. If I could just find a nice handsome gentleman.” Her eyes trailed up and down his body. “Maybe I’ll see you

out on the lake
tomorrow. I like to
go out and catch
some midday sun
this time of year.
Would you be
available at noon?
You could come
with me.”

“I am
completely
available at noon
tomorrow.”

“Great.
Goodnight,
Mason.”

Mason watched
her walk all the
way to her front
door. He liked the
way her hips
swayed. She was
light and graceful,
like a ballerina.

★★★

Mason and
Mila sat in her
small rowboat
admiring the views
of the San Juan
mountains. They
loomed over the
houses perched
around the lake.

“It’s beautiful,
isn’t it?”

Mason nodded
his head, “It is, it’s

why I bought here.
I don't see me ever
leaving. The lake is
so calm and
peaceful.”

Mila fiddled
with one oar and
asked him, “The
lake has still waters
unless you make a
wish. Did your
realtor tell you

about the Lake of
Favors legend?”

“No,” Mason
said. He watched
her slender hand
spin the oar in its
clasp. Tender, he
thought. She
wasn't aware of
what she was
doing, and still, she
was so tender

about the way she
touched the oar.

“Well, at one
time, this was all
Ute Indian land.
The Utes called it
the wishing lake.
The legend says
that if you row out
to the center of the
lake and make a
wish during the

day, it may come true.”

Mason laughed,
“Well, where do I begin? I have many things I could wish for at this point in my life.”

“The Utes said that if you watch the lake on the evening of your wish, it will let you

know if your wish
has been granted,
so get to thinking,
Mason, here we
are. The lake of
favours awaits your
request.”

She gestured at
the surrounding
water.

“And how does
the lake tell you
that your wish will

come true?” Mason asked.

“The lake becomes disturbed. It ripples.” She closed her eyes and faced the sun, “At least, that’s the legend.”

Mason heard her but found himself lost in the curve of her long

neck, and her pale skin as it reflected the sun's heat.

She opened her eyes and turned toward him, "If you make a wish though, be careful."

He realized she knew he was admiring her physique. She

didn't seem to
mind.

“Why?”

“The Utes said
that the lake is like
a person.

Sometimes the
most violent
people are calm on
the surface. It's
what waits under
the surface that we
should fear.” She

winked, “I’m sure
this isn’t the first
time you’ve heard
that appearances
can be deceiving.”

Mason leaned
past the edge of the
boat. The water
was murky up
close. “Makes you
wonder what’s
down there

granting those wishes.”

She flicked water at him, and he sat back up. She smiled, “I’m sure we don’t want to know.”

He wiped her splash of water from his chin. “If appearances can be deceiving, what I

want to know is
what's under your
surface. Is this the
real Mila?"

Mila grinned,
"That Mason, you
don't want to
know for sure."

"Maybe I do.
I'll tell you what,
I'm going to make
a wish..."

“Be careful.”

“Oh certainly,
because my wish is
for you. I wish that
you find that
handsome
gentleman you are
seeking.”

★★★

The sun set as
Mason dozed on
his patio. He

dreamed of being
in a rowboat in the
middle of the Lake
of Favors. The
waters were still. A
fish broke the
surface near his
boat. As it jumped
from the water, it
screamed at him.

“It’s down
there, Mason, deep
down there.”

The fish fell
back into the
water. The wind
started blowing.
Bubbles rose and
shattered the
smooth surface of
the lake around
him. The boat
rocked. He reached
for the oars, but
they were gone.
He could feel panic

rise in his chest.
Something
knocked against
the side of the
boat. There was an
oar bobbing in the
water. He reached
for it. He wrapped
his fingers around
it. Something
under the surface
touched his hand.

It was wet and
cold.

Mason woke to
gusts of wind. He
stumbled his way
inside to bed.

★★★

With a cup of
steaming coffee in
hand, he noticed
the black Jeep in
Mila's driveway.

He came outside to check for damage from the wind, but had diverted his attention to the Jeep. It sat as a harbinger of imminent doom.

As he considered who could have arrived at Mila's in the

night, she came out
of her front door.

“Oh, hi
Mason.”

She walked to
him, glancing over
her shoulder at her
house. Keeping her
voice low, she said,
“How are you this
morning?”

“Good, looks like you have some company.”

Mason thought she looked guilty. She looked down at her feet. As she began to speak, the door to her house opened and a tall, shirtless man came outside. He gazed at her from her

porch and then
called out, “Hey
babe. Where’s the
sugar?”

Mila noticed
Mason’s raised
eyebrows.

The man
jumped down from
the porch and
crossed the front
yard, right hand
extended. “Hi

there. You must be
the new neighbor.
I'm Mark."

Mason shook
his hand, noticing
the tattoo of a
dragon that
appeared to be
taking a bite out of
Mark's right
shoulder. It
reached toward his
neck.

Mila cleared her throat, “Yes, sorry for being rude. Mark, this is my new neighbor, Mason.”

“Nice to meet you, Mark. Well, I better get back inside, I had come out to check the house after last night’s storm.”

Mason stepped back toward his front door, “You two have a good day.”

Mark gave a wave and grabbed Mila’s right hand, pulling her home. As Mason shut his front door, he made eye contact with Mila. She

mouthed the word,
‘sorry’ as she was
led away.

★★★

Mason paced
his living room, the
cup of coffee
forgotten and
growing cold in his
hand.

“It’s my fault
for making that

damn wish. It
frickin came true. I
wished she would
find a handsome
guy, and she sure
did.”

He shook his
head and continued
to talk to himself,
“Just my luck, the
good-looking ex
comes back into
the picture.”

He made his
way into the
kitchen and placed
the cup on the
counter.

A thought
occurred to him.

He stared out
the window at the
lake, and the little
boat tied to his
dock.

“My wish...”

Without
noticing the spills
of coffee on the
counter, Mason
scurried across the
yard to his boat.

★★★

Mason sat in
his boat at the
center of the lake.
He stared at the

back of Mila's
house.

“I wish Mila
will get rid of
Mark.”

He thought of
the tall and dark
Mark with his
beard stubble. He
imagined what had
gone on in her
house throughout
the night.

“Yes, I want
him gone.”

★★★

Moonlight
shined down on
the calm waters of
the lake. Mason
did not sleep. He
grew frustrated and
finally stood up
from his deck
chair.

“Wishes come true, my ass.” He laughed and shook his head. “I’m a fool.”

He turned to reach for the back door when he heard it. Faint, remote splashing sounds. He pivoted back to the lake. Ripples in the

water slowly made
their way from the
center of the lake
to the shore.

★★★

The Jeep was
no longer in the
driveway. Mason
peered through his
living room
window at Mila's
front yard. She was
there, weeding a

flower bed. She wore blue athletic shorts and a white tank top. It occurred to Mason that every movement she made was smooth and delicate in a deliberate way. Observing her was intoxicating.

He opened his
front door.

Hearing him exit
his house, she
stood and made
eye contact with
him.

She opened her
mouth, closed it,
and then started
again. “Mason, I’m
sorry about
yesterday.”

“No reason to be sorry. How are things going with Mark?” He tried to play it cool, but his gut was twisted into knots.

“Oh, I got rid of him. Same old Mark. That was never going to work.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” She
smiled, “Do you
think maybe you
and I could have
dinner together?”

He could feel
relief flood through
every cell in his
body. “I’d like
that.”

“How about
tomorrow night?”

“Sounds great.
What can I
bring?”

“Just your
handsome self.”
She stood, “I’m
going to run to the
store right now. I
know exactly what
I want to make us
for dinner. See you
tomorrow!” She
walked away and

then paused, “By the way, I was asking you over, uh, not as neighbors, but more like a date type of thing. Is that okay?”

“It’s perfect.”

She giggled as she sauntered to her garage.

Mila backed her car out of the garage and down the driveway. Mason waved to her, making no attempt to hide the cheesy grin on his face. She waved and drove away as her garage door closed.

Mason thought
of the lake and he
thought about his
wish.

He wanted to
make another wish.
He heard a
crunching sound
coming from
Mila's house and
then heard the
garage door reverse
its course.

Walking back
toward her
driveway, he
noticed a shovel. It
had fallen into the
path of the
overhead door.
The door had
retreated up its
tracks. He bent
down and picked
up the shovel and
set it in the garage.

The black Jeep
sat inside.

Mason looked
down the
driveway. Mila's
car was nowhere in
sight.

He stepped
further into the
garage and made
his way to the Jeep.
Its doors were

locked. The inside was empty.

He moved to the front of the truck. Rusty red dots speckled the concrete garage floor. They trailed away from the front of the SUV to a small freezer by the door to the house.

*I got rid of
him.*

Mason crossed
the garage to the
freezer. It was
white and at least
five feet wide. A
small red smear
painted one corner
of the appliance
near the floor.

*Same old
Mark.*

He checked the driveway behind him again and then hooked his fingers under the freezer lid and lifted.

That was never going to work.

The freezer was full. Bags of ice layered the top. He pushed at a bag of ice. It moved an

inch. He pushed harder, and it slid across the bag next to it. The black, pointed teeth of a dragon etched into blue skin greeted him. Above the dragon's head, a knife handle protruded.

Mason gasped
and staggered back
from the freezer.

★★★

“It’s all my
fault. I wished she
would get rid of
him and she did.
She never would
have done that if I
hadn’t wished for
it.”

Mason's hands
still shook. He
made his way to his
kitchen table and
plopped down.

“Jesus, I turned
her into a killer.”

He stood up
and moved about
his kitchen, too
much nervous
energy to sit.

“Maybe he got violent, and she had to defend herself.”

He stopped in mid-stride.

“I can fix this. I can wish it away.”

★★★

He perched himself on the bench in his boat.

The boat floated in
the center of the
lake.

“I wish Mark
had never come to
Mila’s house
and...” Mason
thought about
Mila. He pictured
her smiling at him.
He envisioned the
way she pushed

stray strands of hair
from her face.

“And I wish
Mila would fall in
love with me.”

★★★

The moon
floated above the
lake, gray and cold,
casting its
judgments. Bubbles
burst to the surface.

Ripples spread,
rolling toward him.
The middle of the
lake churned,
volatile and
explosive. A misty
shadow rose from
the waters. It
hovered, forming
the shape of a man.
An arm separated
from the figure and
pointed at Mason.

Before Mason
could get inside his
house, the figure
collapsed back into
the water. The lake
once again became
calm.

★★★

“Thank you for
having me over.
I’ve been wanting
to spend more time
getting to know

you.” Mason sat at the table facing Mila. Behind her, the dining room sliding glass door offered a separation between them and the night. He could see their reflection in the glass. He liked the look of them together.

Mila winked at him and raised her glass, “You aren’t the only one.”

Mason asked, “So you said that you were in a relationship, but that it didn’t work out?” He looked up as though he were contemplating his

memory of what
she had said,
“Mark, I think you
said his name was
Mark. If you don’t
mind my asking,
how long ago was
that?”

“It’s been
several months. I
last saw him at
Christmas, so,
what, seven

months ago or so?”
She took a drink,
“Anyway, that was
the last time I saw
him.”

Mason recalled
the figure rising
from the lake.

“I see. I’m glad
that you’re single,
and I’m glad to be
here with you
now. Thank you

for making dinner,
it's delicious.”

Mila snapped
her fingers, “I
knew I was
forgetting
something. The
dinner rolls.”

She stood and
made her way
behind him to the
kitchen. Even in
the glass's

reflection, he could see the subtle shift of her hips. She walked with a confidence that didn't show when she spoke. She seemed so vulnerable, but her body language was that of a woman who knew exactly what she wanted.

He watched
her load the bread
into a basket and
fold a towel over
the top of it.

“Remember
that day on the
lake, I told you
that you didn’t
want to know
what’s under the
surface of the
lake?”

Mason
remembered the
way she had been
so subtle and yet so
flirtatious.

“Yes, I do.”

He observed
her in the glass.
She walked toward
him.

“Do you
remember what
you asked me?”

He had
wondered what
was under the still
waters granting
wishes. He had also
wondered what
desires lurked
under her calm
exterior.

*It's what waits
under the surface
that we should fear.*

“I believe I
wanted to know
what was under
your surface.”

*Is this the real
Mila?*

She stood
behind him and set
the bread on the

table. With her right hand, she began kneading his shoulder.

“Do you still want to know?”

Her fingers trailed up his neck to his hair. Warm shivers made their way from his neck to his groin.

“I love your touch. Yes, I want to know.”

She was smiling at him. Her eyes locked on his in the glass while her fingers crawled through his hair. Her left arm raised and then slashed down.

Pain exploded from his neck. He couldn't turn his head. He couldn't swallow or talk. The floor rose to meet him as he collapsed off the chair. He felt for the source of pain. His fingers closed around the handle of a knife. It was

jammed into his
neck.

An image of a
dragon rose in his
mind. A dragon
floating across a
blue sea. The
dragon faded,
morphing into the
shadow that hung
over the lake. The
shadow pointed at
him.

Mila sat down
on the floor in
front of him. She
wiped something
wet from his
cheek.

“Now you
know, Mason.
Now you see what
lives under my
surface.”

Coming Up Short

Listen to Me

Dane peeked
into the kitchen,
seeking his wife of
twelve years. Their
son's birthday party
was in full swing in
the living room,
and he needed the

birthday candles for the cake. Cheryl had gone looking for them fifteen minutes earlier and had not yet returned. When he told Jake that he was going to go see what was keeping mommy, he was instructed to get all six candles.

Apparently, turning six years old was a much bigger deal than he had remembered from his youth.

Cheryl stood at the kitchen sink, staring out the window into the backyard.

As he approached her, he

could see that she was off in la-la land again, as she had been several times since the accident.

“Hey, babe, are you doing okay?”

He rubbed a hand up her back and felt her flinch at his touch. She slid away from him while offering a

fake smile and an insistence that she was fine.

“Listen, what happened was a very serious and scary situation, and I know you’re sick of hearing me say this, but I think you need to talk about it.” Dane watched Cheryl’s

face.

She still seemed far away. “Yes, Doctor Daniels, I’ll do so right away.”

He smiled, “You can be facetious all you want. I’m only trying to help you. Do you realize that you have not once talked about what

happened when...”

He hesitated.

Her facial
features twisted at
his mentioning the
two-and-a-half
minutes that she
was clinically dead.

“You know
what I mean. Look
at how you reacted
just now when I
even mentioned it.

You retreat if I
bring it up, you
pull away every
time I try to touch
you. You have
some emotional
issues to deal with,
and I don't blame
you for that at all.
If I had died and
come back, I
would too. I'm
only asking you to

think about it,
okay?”

She looked at him with a haunted expression, “I will, I’ll think about it, but today is about Jake turning six. Our friends and family are out there, so let’s go make a great day for our son.”

She turned
away from him to
leave the kitchen.

“Cheryl?”

She paused
without turning to
face him. “Yes?”

“Where are the
candles?”

★★★

The birthday
party had been a

tremendous
success. Jake had a
happy day. He had
accumulated too
many new toys and
had stuffed himself
full of cake and ice
cream. All in all, a
happy day.

Cheryl came
into the living
room and sat next
to him on the

couch. She looked at the TV, which flashed the ‘video two input’ message on its screen.

She asked him, “What are you doing?”

Dane held up his cell phone. “I want to check out some videos I took today. Did you see

the look on Jake's face when he blew out all the candles in one shot?"

She nodded, "Yeah, he surprised himself."

His phone finally synced with the TV, and the image of the video popped up on the TV. He used the

remote to turn up
the sound. On the
screen, Jake was
tearing wrapping
paper from a
remote-control
truck his
grandmother had
given him. Around
Jake, several of
their family
members were
chatting about

various things.
Behind the boy,
Cheryl was
watching him
while one of their
neighbors, Mrs.
Lewis, was chatting
with her about
something. More
than likely, filling
her in on
neighborhood
gossip.

Dane could
smell the aroma
drifting from the
coffee cup Cheryl
clenched in both
hands on her lap.
Without looking,
he could tell it was
coffee, but it had
the distinct smell of
Amaretto. He
paused the video
and looked at her

cup. The milky
color reminded
him of the way he
made his coffee,
not how she made
hers.

“Is that
Amaretto and
cream?”

She looked at
the cup in her lap.
“Yes. Why?”

“Nothing, I

was just wondering
when you started
drinking amaretto,
or cream?”

She sipped
from the cup.
“What do you
mean?”

“You hate
amaretto. It gives
you migraines, and
you tease me about
my use of cream in

my coffee. You have always called me a sissy coffee drinker because you drink yours black.”

She seemed confused for a second and then became defensive, “Yeah, so does that mean that I can’t try something

new?”

“No. Not at all, it’s different, that’s all.”

He turned back to his phone and pushed play on the video, his mind distracted by Cheryl’s coffee. So much had changed about her since the car accident that

had totaled her new Explorer. She had been in the hospital for a month. She still moved a little stiffly if she got up from sitting too long, but the scars on her legs were healing nicely. Much faster than her emotional scars.

He recalled the scene of the accident from when he had arrived. The Ford SUV had been upside down in the gully at the side of the road. The ambulance was pulling away, and he could see the paramedic

performing chest
compressions
through the rear
window. He had
known in that
instant that he may
lose her. They had
kept her heart
beating all the way
to the hospital,
where she had
coded for almost
three minutes

before getting her
heart jump-started
with electricity. He
had anxiously
paced the waiting
area in the hospital
that first night,
expecting the
doctor to come out
and tell him that he
had done
everything that he
could, but Cheryl

had passed. Instead, the doctor had told Dane that Cheryl's heart had stopped, and then restarted and had been beating steadily since, but that she had a long road of recovery ahead of her.

He had anticipated a slow

physical recovery
and even
emotional trauma
from such an
impactful event,
but he had not
foreseen her
absolute refusal to
speak of the
accident or the
three minutes that
she had been dead.
He worried that

she might have
lingering brain
damage or some
cognitive
impairment that
the doctors weren't
aware of yet.

He forced
himself to quit
dwelling on the
negative and focus
instead on the
video of the

birthday party. Jake was currently laughing about the stuffed Elmo he had opened. It had been a gift from one of Jake's former preschool friends.

He smiled, remembering how Jake had latched onto the Elmo and

hugged it. He
wished Jake would
never grow up
sometimes. It
would be
disappointing
someday when
Jake outgrew his
youthful
innocence. In the
video, Jake
wondered aloud if
Elmo would ever

change his color
from red to lellow.
He had always
loved how Jake
couldn't say the Y
sound yet. Jake's
friend had told him
that, no, Elmo
would always be
red.

As the little boy
told Jake no, his
voice was covered

by a long,
stretched-out
sound that seemed
to grow in volume
and then abruptly
cut-off.

“What was
that?”

Cheryl blinked
her eyes and said,
“What?”

She had not
been paying

attention to the
video.

“Listen to this.”
He backed the
video up and
pressed play.

Jake asked
about the
possibility of Elmo
ever being lellow
and his friend
began responding
when the sound

stretched over the
video again.

Cheryl only
muttered,
“Hmmm.”

He backed it
up and played it
again. “Does that
sound like my
name?”

Cheryl
responded, “No, it
sounds like

interference or
maybe even
someone who was
standing behind
you.”

He played it
again. “Listen, it
starts with a D
sound, and then
there’s an A, but
it’s all stretched
out.”

“Yes, but there

is no N at the end.
It's not your name.
I think it's
interference of
some sort."

He stopped the
video and
terminated the
blue-tooth
connection
between his phone
and the TV. "I
suppose you're

right. It couldn't be a voice anyway because it actually sounds like you. It sounds like your voice, but in the video, you were across the room, behind Jake, being bored to tears by Mrs. Lewis."

Cheryl agreed.
The blonde curls

bounced up and
down on her head
as she nodded,
“Yes, she’s
insufferable.”

She stood and
stepped around
him. “I’m going to
bed. I’m tired.
Goodnight.”

He watched
her leave, thinking
about all the times

he had been critical
of Mrs. Lewis and
her nosey ways,
only to have
Cheryl defend her.
Cheryl had always
loved Mrs. Lewis,
and they had been
particularly close at
one point. As he
thought about it,
he realized Cheryl
hadn't been over to

have coffee with
the old woman
since coming home
from the hospital.

★★★

Dane held his
phone out to
Cheryl over the
island in the center
of their kitchen.
“Check it out! Our
son finally scored
his first goal. Of

course, it was in practice and not a game, but it's still a big event. Jake ran upstairs to change his clothes, but he'll be down in a moment to tell you all about soccer practice so be ready to be amazed."

Cheryl took the phone from

him and pressed play on the video. Dane opened the fridge to grab a beer while listening to the sounds of cheering parents coming from the small speakers on his phone. He could hear himself yelling, “Go Jakey! Go!”

There were
cheers from other
parents on the
recording as Jake
scored his goal and
then the sounds of
the other people
cut off as a voice
rose above the
crowd on the
phone.

“Daaaane!
You...”

He shut the
fridge door and
turned to Cheryl,
who looked tired
and terrified. Her
eyes were wide,
but she was trying
to cover her
surprise at the
sound from the
phone video.

“You heard
that, right?”

He grabbed the phone from her and played the video again.

“Yes, I heard it but...”

“It’s your voice, tell me it isn’t, listen.”

He held the phone out to her as his name was spoken again. “It’s

like the voice from
the birthday party
recording. Listen,
it's my name, but
it's stretched out. I
swear it's your
voice.”

Cheryl listened.
She had composed
herself, but he
knew that the
voice on the video
had bothered her

the first time they
heard it.

“No, I still
don’t agree with
you. It’s not my
voice, and how
could it be? I was
right here while
you were at
practice. It’s
impossible. I don’t
even think it’s
saying your name.

It sounds like it,
but you're reading
too much into it."

Jake ran into
the kitchen,
jumping up and
down. "Guess what
mom? Just guess
what happened."

Cheryl bent
down to him.
"What happened,
Jakey?"

“You have to guess, mom! Take a wild guess.”

“Ummm, let me see. You met your future wife at soccer practice?”

Jake crumpled his face and acted like he was gagging. “Eww, gross mom! Yuck, no, it’s something

good.”

Dane watched
their interaction,
smiling, thrilled to
see his wife
looking engaged
and happy,
thoughts of the
strange voice on
his phone gone.

★★★

Dane set his
phone on the

corner of his
dresser and
approached Cheryl
as she dressed. She
pulled on a pair of
sweatpants before
he could get close.
He knew she felt
self-conscious
about the scars on
her legs, but she
had said nothing to
him about it. He

could tell because she always had them covered. In reality, the scars from the surgery to repair the broken bones were rapidly fading, and he thought she had gotten lucky. They could have been much worse.

He reached his

arms around her.
She pulled away,
giving him a half-
smile.

“Sorry, I’m just
not comfortable
enough with
myself yet to...”

“To do what?
Get a hug from
your husband?”

Her face
reddened. She was

getting angry, but he didn't care. He had been patient with her for a couple of months, but the distance she had created was growing old.

“I'm just feeling ugly, Dane, I need some time.”

“I'm willing to give you time,

Cheryl, but I'm getting sick of your refusal to talk about anything. We can't discuss the accident, your death..." She stepped back from him, looking like she was going to throw up.

Dane continued and

stepped closer to her. “That’s right, Cheryl, I said it. You died.”

“Stop it!”

“No. We need to deal with what happened, not hide from it forever. You died, and it scared the hell out of me. I sat in the hospital waiting

room thinking I'd
never see you
again. You have no
idea the relief I felt
when the doctor
told me you had
stabilized and
would ultimately
recover. I thought
you were gone
when I saw the
EMT's giving you
CPR, and..."

Cheryl
slammed her fist
onto the dresser,
knocking his
phone onto the
floor. “STOP IT!
STOP IT! STOP
IT!”

She looked at
his phone lying
between her feet.
“You have got to
be kidding me.”

She picked up
his phone and
handed it to him.
“You’ve been
recording this
conversation?”

Dane
stammered and
said, “I didn’t
know we would
fight. I wanted to
see if the voice,
your voice, would

be on a recording again.”

“Well, play it. Go ahead. If you’re that obsessed with this silliness, go ahead.”

He turned off the phone and shoved it into his pocket.

Cheryl looked at him and said, “I

know I'm distant. I
know I'm not my
old self yet, but I
have a damn good
reason. I died,
Dane. I was dead.
You, on the other
hand, have no
excuse for this..."

She gestured at his
pocket. "This
craziness. I don't
want to hear any

more weird videos
on your phone. I
don't want you
recording anymore.
I want you to be
normal and be
supportive. I can't
help what I'm
going through.
You hearing ghosts
on your phone of
your wife, who
isn't dead by the

way, is more than I
can handle, so
please stop.”

She walked out
of the room,
leaving him to stare
at her back as she
pulled a shirt over
her head.

He moved into
the master
bathroom and
pulled the door

shut. After turning the sound down on his phone, he played the video of him and Cheryl from moments before.

“Stop it!”

The recording of Cheryl yelling at him was still louder than he wanted, so he pushed the

volume down
button.

On the
recording, as he
responded to
Cheryl, his voice
dropped to the
point that he was
almost mute.

“No. We need
to deal...” Instead
of his voice
continuing, he

could hear Cheryl speak. It was soft sounding, but urgent and once again elongated, as though someone had delayed the audio playback.

His eyes grew wide as he listened to the recording.

He reversed the recording and

played it again.

The frantic Cheryl who had stood in front of him arguing over the use of his phone was replaced by a Cheryl who was attempting to gain his attention. This Cheryl didn't sound angry, she sounded scared.

“Daaaane! You
have to get out!”

★★★

Dane sat in the
living room
recliner on the
other side of the
room from Cheryl,
who was engrossed
in an old Steve
Martin film. The
movie was
hilarious, but she

did not laugh. She only watched along as though she had never seen the film before. Her engagement with the film was of interest, given that Cheryl had always hated the famous comedian. She told him once that Martin wasn't

funny; he was juvenile. More than once she had refused his films and Dane had ultimately given up asking her to watch some of the Martin classics with him.

He looked at his phone screen, which was lying in his lap. The video

recording counter
was still moving
upward. It had
been recording for
fifteen minutes. He
looked across the
room and caught
Cheryl watching
him.

He smiled at
her. She returned
the smile, a look of
curiosity on her

face.

He casually grabbed his phone, clicking off the recording at the same time. He stuffed it in his pocket and excused himself from the room saying, “I’m going to check that sprinkler that’s been giving me

trouble.”

Dane made his way to the backyard. The sprinklers were all running fine, as he anticipated. He walked behind the garage and made his way to the shed. He stored his lawnmower and garden tools inside.

Standing in the opening to the shed, he monitored the back door to the house. Turning his body sideways to block any view of his phone from the house, he withdrew it from his pocket.

He pushed the play button on his

most recent
recording.

“Dane! Honey,
you have to get
out. It’s not...”

Cheryl’s voice
faded until he
could only hear
Steve Martin’s
frantic complaining
about how
expensive
weddings had

become.

★★★

Dane and
Cheryl drove home
from dinner,
winding their way
through post-rush
hour traffic. They
had a delicious, but
mostly silent, meal
at Cordova's
Mexican restaurant.
It had been

Cheryl's idea. Of course, Cheryl had always hated the restaurant, but he was not at all surprised when she suggested it to him. Her tastes, likes, and dislikes had all undergone an amazing and distinct change since the accident.

He pressed a
button on his
steering wheel,
changing radio
stations until he
finally found a
channel playing a
Sia tune. He liked
Sia and turned up
the volume.

He had done
his best during
dinner to get

Cheryl to share
conversation with
him, but it led
nowhere. In the
old days, she would
talk so much
during a meal out
that inevitably she
would need a
takeout box for
most of her meal.
On this evening,
she had downed

her entire plate and ordered dessert. He was grateful to see the return of her appetite but unnerved by all the change.

He pulled into the garage and pushed the garage door remote.

“Let me come around and help

you.”

As he expected,
Cheryl flashed the
new, plastic smile
of hers at him,
“No, it’s okay, I
got it.”

As she jumped
out of his
Trailblazer, he shut
off the recording
on his phone.

Once inside, he

paid Lisa Smith her usual babysitting fee and told Cheryl he would be right back. He set his keys and phone on the table by the front door and walked the teenaged girl the half block to her parents' house.

Lisa told him

all about how much fun she had with Jake during the evening and that the boy had fallen asleep right away when she sent him to bed. He thanked her for being available on short notice and said he'd see her next time.

Dane watched her step inside. He waved goodbye to her and her mother, Linda. It had always been convenient having someone they trusted to stay with Jake who also lived so close. He had told Linda once that that when Lisa

finally grew up and moved away; he didn't know what they would do for sitting. Lisa was good with Jake and he liked the girl very much.

He walked the short distance back home at a leisurely pace, not in a hurry to go inside. He

would only be
alone in the house
again, even though
Cheryl was there.
As he approached
the front door, he
remembered the
recording he had
made on his phone
during the drive
home.

Dane moved
inside the dark

house and closed
the door. He
thought Cheryl
must have
determined it was
bedtime, since
every light in the
house had been
turned off.

“Dane.”

He heard
Cheryl’s voice
calling to him from

upstairs. Stepping
away from the
table by the front
door, he called up
the stairs to her,
“Yes?”

“Come
upstairs. It’s been a
while. I thought
we could have
some fun.”

Dane wanted
to ask her to repeat

herself but didn't
want to do
anything to ruin
the moment. He
moved up the stairs
faster than he had
in a long time and
entered the
darkness of the
master bedroom,
closing the door
behind him.

Cheryl lay in

the bed, under the covers.

She laughed,
“Come on, what are you waiting for? Hasn’t it been long enough already?”

He made his way to his side of the bed, discarding clothes as he went.

Cheryl cozied

up to him and
lightly kissed his
cheek and then the
corner of his
mouth. The
warmth of her
body felt good but
unfamiliar.

Behind Cheryl,
he heard a hissing
sound.

He lifted his
head from the

pillow, and Cheryl
nuzzled his neck.

”What’s that?”

She withdrew
from his side as the
hissing sound gave
way to faded,
distant music.

Sia.

“Is that
from...”

“Yes, dear, it’s

your phone. It's
the recording from
tonight, in the car.
I thought you
might like to hear
it."

The music on
the phone faded
out. In its place,
Cheryl's frantic
voice grew from a
whir to words.
They hissed and

morphed for a
second and then
became crystal
clear. Her voice
was loud, as
though his phone
were on the pillow
next to his head.

“DAAANE!
YOU HAVE TO
GET OUT! ITS
NOT ME
LIVING WITH

YOU. I'M
DEAD..."

A droning
sound like
electrical
interference
overtook Cheryl's
voice and then she
returned, less
frantic, filled with
sadness.

"I'm dead
Dane. It's...my

body, but
not...ME!"

He began
kicking the covers
off, pushing against
Cheryl.

Something
sharp and cold
pressed against his
neck.

"I told you to
drop it, Dane."

The feeling of
pressure increased.
He felt a trickle of
something roll over
his Adam's apple.

“You should
have listened to
me.”

No Stars

“It’s sure
something isn’t
it?”

Marvin, who
went by Marv,
stared at the
mountain peaks
before them. The
mountains

surrounded the
Colorado valley
they had lived in
since he had semi-
retired. Mount
Evans' peak could
be seen looming
above the tips of
the forest pines like
a vengeful God.

He had reached
a point in life that
he had wanted

sixty-hour
workweeks to
become a thing of
the past, so they
had moved to
Colorado. The
view before them
was the deciding
factor in saying
goodbye to the
architectural firm
that had employed
him for twenty

years. Since moving, he worked on the occasional project for past clients, but largely spent his time outside enjoying the beautiful views and the pine-scented air.

“It sure is.
We’ve been here

now for seven
years, and it still
takes my breath
away.” Marv’s
wife, Amelia, who
he had always
called Millie,
answered him as
she stared into the
distance. They
watched together
as the sun began its

final farewell to the day.

“The views are magnificent, but I was thinking about how life changes as you age.” They sat together on their back patio. Their chase loungers were side by side. They each had a table on the patio,

but those were on the outside of their chairs. When they had purchased the house, he had originally placed the tables in the middle of the chairs. That hadn't worked for him, though. It felt like a barrier between the two of them,

so he had
rearranged the
furniture.

He reached out
to Millie and took
her hand from her
lap and held it. She
had always been
the calm in his
storm. His friends
called her his
lighthouse.

He squeezed her hand, “This is the highlight of our day now, but when we were young, the highlight of our day was drinking and partying. We started when the sun went down and didn’t stop until it came back up.”

Millie returned
his squeeze. “Yes,
and that partying
that you are
referring to is what
brought us,
Emmie.”

“Yeah, and
now it’s her turn to
stay up all night
and welcome the
sun back to our
side of the world.”

Millie laughed,
not taking her eyes
off the snow-
capped peaks
before her. “Well,
your daughter gets
that from you, not
me. You were, and
still are, a terrible
influence, mister.”

He knew what
she was going to
say, and she was

right. He had been a wild child in his youth, but she had partied right alongside him back in the day. When they found out she was pregnant with Emmie, that had all come to a halt. She had demanded that they settle down and provide their

daughter a home,
and that was her
influence on him
to this day. She led,
and he had happily
followed along.

“I am a little
worried about
Emmie though.”
Millie finally
peeled her eyes
away from the
fading green and

blue valley below
them to face Marv.
“I just don’t like
James.”

“I know, and I
understand, but
you know we can’t
choose who she
loves.”

Millie sighed
and returned her
gaze to the valley.
The San Juan

River snaked away
from them. It was
surrounded by a
forest filled with
Pine, Spruce, and
Aspen trees.

During the day, the
colors were vibrant
and beautiful. As
the night
awakened, the trees
were swallowed in

shadow and
darkness.

“Well, I sure as
hell wish I could,
and if I could, I
sure wouldn’t pick
James.” She shook
her head, reflecting
her obvious
distaste. “I really
liked Chad. Wasn’t
he the nicest young
man?”

“Oh, I don’t
know, hon, I
thought he was a
little ass kissy.”

She crinkled
her nose at him,
“He wasn’t an ass
kisser. He was just
interested in
learning about
you.”

“No, he was
ass-kissing.” Marv

began mocking
their daughter's
former boyfriend,
“Oh Mr. Sanford
sir, it's so cool that
you have stayed
busy in your
retirement. Oh,
Mr. Sanford, how
do you stay focused
on architecture
when you live in
such a tremendous

location? Why, if I were you, I would spend all my time staring at these gorgeous views. Blah, blah, blah, he was an ass kisser.”

“Okay, okay, you win, Chad was an ass kisser, but he was a lot more likable than James. Would you do me

a favor and grab
me an iced tea?”

Marv
recognized his
wife’s desire to
change the subject
for what it was.
“It’s almost dark.
Do you want to
stay out here for a
bit?”

She nodded her head, “Yeah, if you don’t mind.”

“Nope, not at all. Be right back.”

She watched him get off his lounge and head for the kitchen. She loved her husband very much, but she didn’t agree with

his assessment of
their daughter's
current boyfriend.
James was an ass.
The feeling she had
when she was
around him was
one of distrust. She
couldn't put her
finger on it, but
something about
him bothered her.
Her constant

prayers were that
Emmie would
dump him.

The sun was
almost behind the
mountains. She
tilted her head up
to stargaze. It was a
nightly routine for
her to stare out
into the giant void
of space and
wonder. She

wondered what it
was like beyond
Earth. She
pondered how far
each of the little
blinking lights was
from them. As she
imagined how
spectacular it
would be to travel
to faraway galaxies,
she noticed the
stars above her

blinking off. It was
as though an
invisible giant had
pinched them out.
They continued to
blink off directly
above her and it
was spreading. She
watched as the
little lights
disappeared to the
south.

“These days we
get tea at home,
instead of booze at
the bar. At least we
also get the view.
We couldn’t afford
a view like this in
our youth.” Marv
handed her the
glass of tea and
kissed her cheek.
“Aging has its
advantages, but we

sure were the King
and Queen of ‘one
for the road’,
weren’t we?”

Millie heard
him but couldn’t
take her eyes off
the disappearing
stars. “Look up
there, Marv. What
do you see?”

Marv followed
her gaze. After

staring at the sky
for a moment, he
answered, “Dark. I
see darkness.”

“No. Okay,
wait. Let me ask a
different question.
What don’t you
see?”

Marv didn’t
understand what
she was getting at,
but she had a

peculiar look on
her face. He had
seen the look
before. It was her
what the hell is
going on look.
When they were
dating in college,
Millie had walked
in on her
roommate
throwing herself at
Marv. Her

roommate's name was Faith, and she had been flirtatious with him from the very first moment he had met her.

That day, he had been waiting at Millie's apartment for her to get out of class. They were going to have dinner. Faith had

been coming on to him as usual and had wrapped her arms around him from behind as Millie had walked in the apartment door. He shuddered as he recalled the feeling it gave him. He had been worried that Millie would

blame him and end
their relationship.
Instead, she had
told Faith to leave
and not come
back. Within a
week, Millie had a
new roommate.

He checked the
night sky again.
“I’m not sure what
you mean,
honey.”

“Marv, the stars. I was sitting here star gazing when they blinked out, right above me. They were there, and then they started... going out. I watched them blink off one by one going to the south.”

Marv pointed
toward the
horizon, where the
sun had been
minutes before.

“There are some
stars over there.”

“Yes, I see
them, but look. It’s
like there is a
straight line there.
On one side there
are stars and none

on the other. It's
like something
came and turned
off the lights in part
of the sky."

He hadn't
noticed it initially,
but she was right.
There was a line
where the stars
disappeared and
there were no
other stars in the

sky above them.
He looked over his
shoulder at their
house. The sky was
black to the
roofline. He also
noticed the gutters
seemed to overflow
with leaves and
pine needles. He
wondered how
long it had been

since he had
cleaned them out.

“Do you feel
that?”

Marv cleared
his thoughts,
“What’s that,
honey?”

“I thought I
felt a vibration...”
Millie paused, set
her glass of tea on

her table, and
grabbed the
armrests on her
lounger. “Wait,
yeah, there it is
again. Do you feel
that?”

“No, but look
at your tea.”

The surface of
the liquid was lit
by the back-porch
light. He could see

little ripples and
waves across its
surface. He noticed
the same thing
when he set a
beverage on their
kitchen counter
while the
dishwasher was
running.

Millie moved
her gaze from the
glass of tea back to

the night sky.

“Something is up
there blocking out
the stars.”

Her entire
chair began to
skitter on the patio.

“Honey, get off
the chair. We need
to go inside.”

Marv could feel
the vibrations

moving up his legs,
into his chest and
arms. Millie stood
up from the
lounger. As she
started to head for
the house, her
chair stopped
moving and the
funny feeling that
had been building
in her stomach
stopped.

“It stopped. Do you still feel it, Marv? Was it an earthquake?” She sat back down to see if the vibrations would begin again.

“These days we get tea at home, instead of booze at the bar. At least we also get the view.

We couldn't afford
a view like this in
our youth." Marv
handed her the
glass of tea and
kissed her cheek.

"Aging has its
advantages, but we
sure were the King
and Queen of 'one
for the road',
weren't we?"

"Huh?"

Marv was
standing next to
her, smiling.
“What’s wrong,
honey?”

Millie checked
the table next to
her lounge. The
only glass of iced
tea was in her
hand. The tabletop
was empty.

★★★

“Marv?”

“Yeah,
honey?” He sat
back down on his
lounger.

“What just
happened?”

“Well, you
asked for the tea,
so I brought it to
you. You asked for
tea, right?”

“Yes, but...
no. I mean yes, I
asked for the tea,
but you already
brought it to me.”

Marv laughed,
“Why yes I did,
and it’s in your
hand.”

“Marv, this
isn’t funny.” She
scolded him. “I
asked for the tea

and you brought it out. And the stars..." Millie set the tea on her table and looked up to the night sky. It was filled with the same stars as earlier in the evening.

"They were gone, Marv. The stars had been there, and then they

disappeared. They started blinking out and you came back and said what you said about the tea...”

“Wait, what did I say about the tea?”

“You know what you just said about tea at home instead of booze in

a bar. Exactly what you said, but you said it before, and then you said it again now. Only the first time, you came out here, and the stars were blinking out, and then we felt this vibration. You felt it too, and then it stopped.”

Marv sat up in his chair so that he could face her.

“Honey, are you alright?”

“Marv, this isn’t funny. How did you do it?”

“Millie, you’re worrying me a bit here. I didn’t do anything. I mean, think about it for a

second okay. If I
said the same thing
twice, and I
brought you tea
twice, where is the
second glass of
tea?” He pointed at
her table, and the
one glass.

“I know but,
you could have...”
She sat up and
looked under her

table. Only shadows from the porch light greeted her. She looked back at Marv, who stared slack-jawed at the sky. “Marv look at me.”

“Uh, honey, I think you should look at this...” He pointed a finger above them.

The stars began
winking out, as
they had before,
disappearing to the
south.

Marv asked
her, “How did you
know this would
happen?”

“I told you. It
happened
already.”

She felt her
chair vibrate.

“Marv, tell me you
can feel that.”

A deer sprinted
through their yard
a few feet away. It
had a wild, terrified
look in its eyes.

The animal cast
them a look of
warning as it
sprinted by, and

then it entered the forest on the other side of their yard. Its puffy white tail bounced between the trees and then was gone.

“It’s running from something.”

Millie felt as though she was having an out-of-body experience. It

was more than a
feeling of déjà vu.
It felt like
something that
happened before,
and yet it was
different.

“Marv, feel
your armrests. Do
you feel that
vibration? It’s like
energy, like an
electrical hum.”

Marv
continued to stare
into the forest
where the deer had
departed their yard.
He placed his
hands on the
loungers' armrests.
“I feel it. It’s
growing stronger.”

As she watched
her husband, their
chairs began to

slide around on the
patio. They
bounced until they
faced each other.
She climbed off the
chair and he
followed her lead.
She checked the
sky again. It was
pitch black. As
before, there were
only a few stars in

the distance on the horizon.

Marv reached out a hand to her, “We need to go inside.”

The tea glass teetered on the edge of the table and then fell. It shattered on the concrete. She looked to the sky

again and thought
she was seeing
ripples in the dark.
The black of the
sky seemed to fold
against itself and
then bent back into
position. She
blinked her eyes to
clear her vision.
Upon opening her
eyes, the vibrations
stopped. She

checked the sky
overhead. Stars
blinked back at
her. The sky
looked as it always
had.

“Marv?”

Marv’s lounge
was empty. She
knew he would
come from the
house with tea. She
heard his steps and

could feel him
behind her.

“These days we
get tea at home,
instead of booze at
the bar. At least we
also get the view.
We couldn’t afford
a view like this in
our youth.” Marv
handed her the
glass of tea and
kissed her cheek.

“Aging has its
advantages, but we
sure were the King
and Queen of ‘one
for the road’,
weren’t we?”

★★★

Millie accepted
the glass of tea
from her husband.
“Thank you. Marv
sit down. I need to

tell you
something.”

He smiled at
her, “Of course,
honey. What’s
wrong? You act as
though you’ve seen
a ghost.”

“Something is
wrong.”

Marv looked at
the glass of tea in

her hand. “You asked for tea, right?”

“Yes,” She checked for the broken glass at the foot of her table. It was gone. “This is wrong. It’s all happened before.”

“What?”

Millie sat down and grabbed Marv's hands. "Marv. Listen to me. I want to tell you something and I'm completely serious about it. You're going to think I'm kidding or messing with you, but I'm not. Okay? This is serious."

He could see
the worry on her
face. “You’re
scaring me, Millie.
Tell me what you
want to say.”

“This has all
happened before.
You have brought
me that same glass
of tea three times
now. Soon, we
will see the stars

above us disappear.
It will be like
they've been
turned off. They'll
start winking out
above us, and it
will continue
happening in that
direction." She
pointed to the
south. "Something
huge is above us.
The ground will

start shaking and
we will feel
vibrations.”

As Millie
explained to Marv,
they felt their
chairs rattle. Marv
had been listening
to her, not
understanding, but
the vibrations
changed the look
on his face.

“What the hell
is going on,
Millie?” He felt the
seat of the chair
and then the
armrests. His eyes
grew wide.

“Marv, look at
the sky.”

He seemed
reluctant to do so,
but finally tipped
his head to the sky.

“Oh, my God, the stars. You were right, they’re turning off like someone threw a switch.”

Millie decided that this time would be different though. She refused to take her eyes off her husband.

“Millie, get up.
We need to go
inside. It’s on top
of us!”

She lost her
balance as she
stood up. She
could see the
ripples in the night
sky, and then Marv
grabbed her and
pulled her close.
Their chairs and

tables began
bouncing next to
them. The glass of
iced tea fell to the
concrete and
shattered. A tall
plant rack near the
patio door fell
over. Several
potted plants
seemed to explode
across the patio.
Millie and Marv

ran, but as in a bad
dream, their legs
gained ground
slowly. A shovel
Marv had left
leaned against the
house bounced up
and down and
finally rattled across
the patio. It was
getting harder and
harder to stay on
their feet. Marv

reached the patio
sliding door and
threw it open.

They both
collapsed inside and
leaned against a
kitchen cabinet.

Their dirty dishes
from dinner had
already clattered off
the counter and
fractured on the
tiled floor. She

could hear bottles
in the hall
bathroom
exploding.

Marv sat on the
floor next to her
while he pulled the
door closed.

She yelled to
him, “Where’s
your phone? We
need to call
Emmie.”

Marv got the door locked and faced her. He held her face in his hands. She could feel the vibrations coming through his arms.

“Millie. Listen to me. You know we can’t do that.”

“Marv, what if this is everywhere?”

We need to reach her and tell her to lock herself inside and...”

Marv raised his yelling into her face. “Millie! Emmie has been gone for a year. She’s dead. Now stop this. Stop it now!”

Millie stared at
her husband; the
surrounding
destruction
forgotten. “She’s
not dead. Why did
you say that?”

Tears fell from
Marv’s eyes,
“Yes.”

“No, she was
just here and ...”

“Yes.

Remember? She
had come here to
tell us she was
pregnant.”

Something
large fell over in
the living room
and she heard
breaking glass. The
dining light fixture
swayed back and
forth.

“No, we were worried about that, but she isn’t ...”

“Yes. She came to tell us she was pregnant, and we saw that fucking tattoo on her arm. It was ‘JA’, for James Anderson. His initials. James was a drug dealer. Someone shot her

to send him a
message.”

“No, that can’t
be. Why are you
saying this?” She
tried to wriggle
free of her
husband’s grasp,
but he pulled her
closer.

“She was shot
at the convenience
store in town,

Millie. You know
this is true. You
remember Millie, I
know you do.”

She buried her
face in his chest
and began
weeping.

His arms
released her. The
warmth of his body
faded. She
squeezed her eyes

shut even tighter
and felt for him.
There was nothing
but vibration.

“Millie, open
your eyes and get
up. We need to go
inside. It’s on top
of us!”

She opened her
eyes. They were
on the patio.

Everything was
bouncing.

★★★

He helped her
off her lounge. As
she got to her feet,
she lost her
balance. He
grabbed her and
they ran for the
patio door. She
glanced over her
shoulder at the sky.

The starless night
waved. Energy
rolled across the
black sky, shifting
the darkness. Marv
pulled her away
from the plant rack
as it toppled.

Behind them, she
heard the glass of
tea crash to the
ground. Marv's

shovel bounced
across their path.

“Marv, we’ve
done this before.”

He pulled her
through the door,
and they collapsed
against a kitchen
cabinet.

“Marv! We’ve
been here before.
This has all

happened already.
Something is out
there. It's..." The
same crash as
before came from
the living room.
The hall bath was
being destroyed.
The dining room
lights swung
wildly.

"Millie, I need
to lock the door."

“Honey,
Emmie, is she...”

Marv locked
the door and
collapsed next to
her. He pulled her
close to him. She
wrapped her arms
around him and
buried her face in
his chest.

“Let’s not talk
about that now.”

“Marv, tell me.
What happened to
our daughter?”

She could feel
him sigh.
Silverware rattled
in a drawer next to
their heads. A
cabinet had popped
open and several
pots and pans flew
out into the room.

“Millie, you
know she’s dead.”

“James?
Drugs?”

She could feel
him nod his head.

“They shot her
because of James.”

Marv was
taking quick
breaths. “Yeah, and
she had gotten that

damn tattoo of his
initials on her arm.
We knew he was a
shithead. We
should have said
something to her.
Maybe we could
have saved her.”

Something
heavy hit the
outside of the
house and they
both jumped.

“And she was pregnant?”

“Yes, honey, she had just told us that day. You remember, she left our house after telling us and was shot at the convenience store. They had to have followed her there. I never said this

before, but when
you got your
cancer diagnosis a
week later, I
thought my life
was over. If I had
lost you after losing
her, I would have
died. It would have
ended me, but you
beat it honey and
we have to beat
this. We have to

hang on until this
is done.”

She pulled
away from him and
looked into his
eyes, “My
cancer?”

“Yes. Millie,
are you okay? Did
you hit your head?
Why can’t you
remember any of
this?”

“I don’t know.
I’m scared. What
kind of cancer did I
have?”

As he pulled
her into him light
flashed through the
room. She could
glimpse the lamp
his mother had
given her fall to the
floor in the living
room. There was

no source for the light, but it flashed brightly and was gone, leaving a trail across her vision.

She threw her arms around him and yelled, “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“That light, it
was so bright.”

“I didn’t see a
light.”

She shuddered
in his arms. “When
is this going to
stop? What’s
happening to us?”

“Hang on,
honey. We have to

beat this. We need to survive.”

Something from the back of the house crashed to the floor, and Marv melted away from her.

“Marv?”

She reached out for him and opened her eyes.

The patio.
They were back on
the patio.

★★★

“Millie, open
your eyes and get
up. We need to go
inside. It’s on top
of us!”

He pulled her
across the patio as
the vibrations

increased. Plants
exploded and
furniture toppled.
Her iced tea fell to
the concrete and
shattered. An
electrical hum was
all around them.
Plants exploded
nearby. He pulled
them into the
house.

“Marv,
everything keeps
repeating. We’ve
done all of this
before.”

Pots and pans
fell from a cabinet.
The dining light
fixture swayed as
before.

“I know.”

Marv reached
for the patio door
lock, but she pulled
his shoulder,
turning him to face
her.

“You know?”

“Millie, we
were up there.”
Marv pointed at
the sky through the
patio door glass.

“We were
where Marv?”

“We were up
there, with them,
in that thing. Don’t
you remember?”

“No.”

“Millie, we
were up there. I
saw you. They had
you strapped to a
table. They were

horrible, small and
pasty. Their eyes
were so black. We
were hooked up to
machines and
something was
going into our
veins. You were
crying out and...
and look, Millie.”

He raised the
sleeve of his shirt,
and she could see

two puncture
marks on his wrist.
“They were doing
something to us.
You were puking
up black stuff. You
heaved and heaved.
I didn’t think it
was going to stop
and then we were
back here, back
outside again.”

She shook her head, “No. It can’t be.”

He grabbed her face and forced her to stop and look into his eyes, “Yes. It’s real Millie. They got us and I don’t know how we got back here. We have to survive.” His hands

fell away from her face, and he looked at the shaking house. Things fell and collapsed around them.

“This damn mess.”

“Marv, listen to me. They’ll get us again. What are we going to do?”

“This damn mess, we’ll be cleaning forever.”

“Marv, listen, honey, please look at me.” He watched the dining room fixture. His eyes rotated back and forth with its rhythmic swinging.

“Damn mess.
It’s just a big fat
damn mess...”

“Marv? Stop,
okay? Marv?”

Marv melted
away from her. He
seemed to fade as
though he were
becoming
invisible.

“This
damn...”

★★★

“Dammit! This
is going to take
forever to clean up.
This damn mess.”

She could hear
Marv cussing from
somewhere in the
house, and then
the patio door

opened. It made a distinctive squeal when it slid on its track. She opened her eyes. Bright light flooded their bedroom. The dresser looked like a set of stairs with its drawers hanging open. The bottom drawer was all the way out, the

middle drawers
were partially
exposed, and the
top drawer was
only slightly open.
It had vomited
Marv's underwear
across the room.
She swung her legs
out of bed and
stepped on the side
of their clothes

hamper that lay on its side.

“Oh, no.”

She remembered the vibration, the low hum that had been all around them. She recalled running to the house while seeing something. There had been

something unseen
but present.

“The sky.”

The sky had
been blacked out.
There were no
stars. The sky had
been distorted.

“It rippled.”

She hurried
from their
bedroom and

down their hall,
along the way
noticing the
disaster that the
bathroom had
become. The floor
was coated in
liquid soaps and
pills from open
prescription bottles.
Rounding the
corner into the
living room, she

almost tripped over
the large hutch that
had been a
wedding gift from
an uncle of hers.

The books that had
been on the hutch
were spread across
the room as though
a giant had thrown
a fit. The living
room furniture was
no longer where it

had been the day before. One window curtain was hanging from its rod at an odd angle.

The sliding glass door was open, and she could hear Marv, still upset over what had become of their house.

Upon seeing her,
he threw his hands
in the air and
gestured at the
broken plants and
upturned patio
furniture.

“How did we
sleep through an
earthquake? Look
at this mess. It’s
going to take

forever to clean
this up.”

“We didn’t
have an
earthquake.”

Marv looked at
her as though she
had lost her mind.
“Well, I didn’t do
this, and I’m
guessing neither
did you, so...”

“Marv, did we sit on the patio last night?”

He stopped kicking at a broken plant pot. “Yes, we were out here like usual. Why?”

“Did you bring me iced tea?”

“Yes, I sure did. The broken

glass is over there
by your chair so
don't come out
here barefoot."

"Why
wouldn't I have
brought my glass
inside before we
went to bed?"

Marv started to
say something,
stopped, and then
raised his

eyebrows. “I’m guessing you forgot it.”

“These days we get tea at home, instead of booze at the bar. We sure were the King and Queen of ‘one for the road’, weren’t we?”

Marv looked at her. He seemed stuck.

“Do you remember saying that?”

“Yeah, when I brought you the tea.”

“And after you brought me the

tea, what
happened?’

Marv stared
past her, searching
his memory. He
looked worried
that he couldn’t
remember.

“I don’t know,
oh...” He snapped
his fingers, “I
remember. I
showed you the

spider bite I got,
and you told me to
spray some
Benadryl on it.”

“What spider
bite did you get?”

He lifted his
arm to show her
the two red,
swollen marks on
his wrist. “This
one.”

“That’s not a spider bite.”

He shook his head, “Yes, it is, it’s a bite, and you told me I needed to ...”

‘Marv, how did I get the same bite in the same place?’
She held up her arm.

He was back to looking lost and confounded. “I don’t know. Millie, what happened here?”

“When did we lose Emmie?”

“What do you mean, lose her?”

She stepped onto the patio to

face him. “When did she die? What year was it that she died, and I found out about my cancer?”

“What the hell are you talking about? Emmie didn’t die, and you never had cancer. Are you okay? Did you dream this?”

“We didn’t
dream any of this
Marv.”

Behind her, the
sound of the front
door slamming
shut echoed
through the house.
She could hear a
voice mumbling
something and
then footsteps.
They both turned

toward the open
patio door. A shape
emerged from the
dining room to the
threshold of the
patio door.

“Holy shit,
what happened
here?”

Millie choked
back a sob,
“Emmie?”



Millie wrapped her arms around her daughter and didn't want to let go. Emmie laughed and asked, "Mom, are you okay? I saw you the day before yesterday. You act like you haven't seen me in years."

Marv smiled at his daughter, “She had a bad dream, I think. She thought you were dead.”

Emmie hugged her mom back and patted the top of her head. “I’m not dead mom, but from the look of the house, I was wondering if you

two were. What happened here?”

Marv
answered,
“Earthquake, had
to be.”

“Sorry dad, but
if we had an
earthquake
everyone in town
would have felt it.
There was no
earthquake. Are

you sure you guys
didn't throw a
party last night?"

Millie reached
for her daughter's
arm. Emmie knew
what Millie was
trying to do, and
stepped back,
putting her arms
behind her back.
"What are you
doing mom?"

“Emmie, let
me see?”

“How did you
know? Did James
tell you?”

Millie looked
from Marv to
Emmie, “Tell me
what?”

Marv stepped
toward his

daughter, “Yeah,
tell us what?”

Emmie moved
her arms back in
front of her.

“Okay, well this is
part of why I came
by anyway so I
might as well show
you.”

Visions of a
black, undulating
sky filled Millie’s

head. “You have the marks too?”

“What marks?
No, I got a tattoo.
Well, actually
James and I both
did. I got his
initials, and he got
mine. Look!” She
raised her sleeve,
exposing the ‘AJ’
tattoo near her

elbow. “We did it as a celebration.”

Marv looked at Millie as though he was trying to remember something of great importance, something just out of reach. “The tattoo.” He looked beyond them into the afternoon sun,

“The sky, there
were no stars. They
were here and we,
we were... up
there.”

Emmie said,
“You two must
have been partying
all night. Neither
one of you is
making sense.”

“Emmie, you
said you were

celebrating
something?” Millie
stepped next to
Marv and held his
hand.

“Yeah, now
don’t freak out.
When I leave here,
I’m going to meet
James in town at
the convenience
store. Paul is going
to drop him off

there. We're going
to gas up my car
and then drive to
Manitou Springs
for some private
time and a
celebration.

Anyway, before I
meet him, I
wanted to tell you
our news. And
before I do, I want
you to know that

we are both serious
about getting
married. I know
you two are still a
little unsure about
him but I ...”

“You’re
pregnant.” Millie
could feel Marv
clenching her hand
in anticipation of
Emmie’s answer.

Coming Up Short

“Yes! How’d
you know?”

Coming Up Short

D1707

“Hello?”

Dan Simmons
stood in the open
door to his home.
Before him were
two men in dark
suits. He knew
neither of them,
nor did he like the

look of angst on
their faces.

“Dr.
Simmons?” The
taller of the two
asked.

“Yes, that’s
me.” Dan tried to
lighten the
seriousness of the
moment by
smiling.

“I’m agent
Farrow and this is
agent Maxwell.”
The tall man with
dark hair and a
deadpan look
flashed a badge.
The large, printed
letters, FBI,
jumped out at Dan
like the sudden
appearance of
taillights while

driving on a foggy night.

Dan, no longer smiling, asked, “Is there something wrong?”

The other of the two men, agent Maxwell, said, “A moment of your time, inside?” The man gestured to Dan’s living room.

“We’ll be happy to explain.”

Dan nodded, a lump in his throat.
“Yes, of course, please come inside.” He stepped aside and waved the men inside.

They followed him into his living room. The room featured an

expensive flat panel TV and shelves of old books. The one window in the room was only partially open, creating a dim atmosphere.

“Please, have a seat on the sofa.”
Dan sat in an overstuffed chair opposite of the FBI

agents. “Can I offer
either of you
something to
drink?”

Agent Farrow
shook his head and
answered for him
and his partner,
“No, thank you.”

Dan looked
from Farrow to
Maxwell, the
silence stretching

out. It occurred to him that their silence could be a tactic to set him on edge. He refused to take the bait. He would happily wait them out. Dan had seen many TV shows about stupid people walking blindly into the trappings of law

enforcement
officers. He leaned
back in his chair
and strummed his
fingers on his legs.

Agent Farrow
stared at him as
though he were
trying to penetrate
and read Dan's
mind. Finally, the
agent withdrew a
small notepad,

licked his thumb,
and turned to a
fresh page. The
agent asked Dan,
“Do you know
why we are here
today, Dr.
Simmons?”

“No, not a
clue.”

“You were
recently on a flight
from Miami, back

here to Denver.
We can't seem to
find a departure
flight listed for you.
Did you fly to
Miami from
Denver and then
return on flight
D1707?" Farrow
asked. The agent
looked from his
paper to Dan, pen

poised over the
small pad.

“No, I didn’t. I
drove to Miami. I
wanted to take a
small road trip on
my way to visit a
friend.” Dan
answered.

Maxwell
interrupted, “How
did you get your

car back to
Denver?”

Dan replied, “I
didn’t take my car.
I drove a rental and
dropped it off at
the airport. I’m
sure you can check
the records. I
rented through
enterprise.”

“And who did
you visit in

Miami?” Farrow asked.

“Like I said, a friend.” Dan’s brow wrinkled with apparent confusion. “What is this all about? I know it’s not illegal to take a road trip or to visit a friend, and it is still legal to fly the

friendly skies, so
what's this all
about?"

Agent Maxwell
glanced at Farrow,
but his look was
not returned.
Farrow continued
to focus on Dan.

*He thinks I'm
lying.*

“Dr. Simmons,
you didn’t answer
my question.”

Dan looked
from one agent to
the other. “I’m
sorry, but do I
need a lawyer?”

Farrow
responded, “That’s
not for me to say,
although, if you
prefer a lawyer,

that's fine. You have that right, of course, although we're not here to charge you with anything. We simply need your help in gathering some information."

He's the one lying.

Dan nodded. “I
drove to Miami to
visit a friend. Her
name is Leona. I
stayed at her house
and then returned
to Denver by air.
It’s that simple.
Now, I have
answered your
question. I would
like mine
answered. Why are

you here
questioning me?”

“We’ll get to
that in a moment.
This Leona you
visited in Miami.
She would be
Leona Lewis, Dr.
Leona Lewis. Is
that correct?”

“Yes, she is a
psychiatrist. Does

that matter?” Dan asked.

Maxwell observed, “She is a psychiatrist, like yourself.”

“Yes, we became friends in med school. Now, will you explain to me why we are discussing my recent travel?”

The agents
shared a glance.
Agent Farrow
nodded to
Maxwell. The
shorter, younger
agent spoke in
quick clips. It
reminded Dan of
shorthand writing.
“There were only
five other
passengers on your

flight. There were
also two flight
attendants, a pilot,
and a co-pilot.
Counting you,
there were 10 souls
aboard flight
D1707. Your flight
was two days ago.
In the two days
since your arrival,
all the other

persons on flight
D1707 have died.”

Dan scowled at
the agents and
tilted his head.
“How in the world
did that happen?
The odds of
everyone else on
that flight dying
have to be
astronomical.” Dan
contemplated the

agent's words. "Are you accusing me of killing the people on my flight? Because I..."

"We aren't accusing you of anything. We simply need anything you can tell us to help our investigation."

Maxwell stated.

“For instance, did you notice if the other passengers were eating, or drinking something that you did not consume?”

“How did they die?” Dan asked.

Agent Farrow said, “You see, this is about a little more than

everyone else on
that flight dying.
The issue is how
they died.”

“What do you
mean, how they
died?”

Agent Maxwell
sighed and set his
pen on his lap.
“Each of them was
found dead after
having smashed

their heads against
a wall.”

The agent
stared at Dan. The
look on his face
was one of
continued
measurement.

*He is doing
more than
gathering
information. He
suspects me.*

“Are you
saying these people
beat their own
heads into a wall
until they died?”
Dan asked.

“Yes, so it
seems.”

“So, these
people from my
flight, they all died
from self-inflicted
trauma to the

head?” Dan asked.
“You’ll forgive my
skepticism here,
agents, but this
seems highly
implausible.”

Maxwell
snorted. “Yes,
which is why we
are here. It seems
impossible.”

Agent Farrow
scowled at his

partner and said,
“Unfortunately, it
is true, which is
why anything you
can recall from
your time on the
flight could be of
great importance.
You are the only
remaining witness
to the events of
that flight, and the
flight is all those

people had in
common.”

Dan
contemplated the
agents’ words.
They each looked
at him as though
he were behind
bars, on exhibit.
He didn’t believe
they were only
there to seek
information.

“Agents, if I
may be so bold,
you both seem to
believe that I had
something to do
with the death of
these people. You
say you are here to
gather information,
and yet, your tone
and the implied
message in your
questioning

indicate you suspect me.” Dan smiled at the two agents. “Now, I can assure you I have seen none of those people since that flight, and for the record, I don’t appreciate how you are making me feel.”

Farrow asked,
“And how is
that?”

“Irritated, to be
honest,” Dan
answered.

Farrow held up
his hands. “Maybe
we have gotten off
to a poor start here.
We aren’t accusing
you of anything.
We would simply

appreciate some
insight into the
flight.”

*Liar. There is
only one thing to
do.*

Dan
rhythmically
moved his fingers
up and down his
legs. His fingers
tapped his legs, his
thumbs crawled up

to meet them, then
his fingers
extended forward
further on his legs,
tapping as they
went. He did this
twice and then slid
them back up his
legs toward his
groin before
repeating the
pattern.

“I’m sorry to hear these people perished in such a drastic way. Are you certain they did it to themselves?” Dan’s eyes widened.

“What if someone killed these people and I’m next?”

Farrow
maintained his

stone face and said,
“You don’t seem
too worried about
that happening.”

“Well, if there’s
a killer running
around eliminating
everyone from that
flight, I’ll be very
worried.” Dan’s
fingers continued
their play, his pace
slowing. “And you

did it again just now. There was some implied meaning behind that statement.”

Farrow glanced at Dan’s hands and then back to his notepad.

Maxwell asked, “Did anything on your flight seem unusual?”

*You mean, did
I have a reason to
kill these people?*

Dan moved his eyes toward the ceiling. He thought about his flight and the idiot who had sat in front of him who had started the trouble. “The only thing I can remember, and this

would be unrelated to the strange deaths of these people, was the guy sitting two rows in front of me.” He made eye contact with agent Farrow before adding. “Isn’t today a nice day? The sun isn’t too bright, but there’s enough

light out to make
for a pleasant day. I
find days like today
so very calming.
It's like the roll of
the ocean tide. I
get that same
feeling on days like
today. It's like
listening to ocean
waves lapping at
the beach with the

warm sun on your skin. It's relaxing.”

Dan looked at the front room window where subtle sun rays pierced the glass. By the time he glanced back to the two agents, Farrow already had his pen back in hand. “Yes.” Farrow’s

gaze drifted for a moment and then his eyes cleared. “I mean, yes? The guy on the flight?”

Dan’s fingers continued to slide up and down his legs. His fingers extended, thumbs meeting them before they reached forward

again, only to
withdraw his hands
up his legs, in the
same endless loop.
“He was an
obnoxious, older
guy.” Dan softened
the tone of his
voice. “I’m sure it’s
nothing, but he
and I had an
adverse interaction.
Now, I’m sharing

this with you
because you asked
if there was
anything out of the
ordinary on my
flight, but I can
assure you, I never
laid a hand on any
of those people. I
wouldn't even
know where to
find them if I

wanted to harm them.”

“Tell us about this adverse reaction you had with Mr. Evans,” Maxwell said.

“Yes, Mr. Evans, that’s right.” Dan crinkled his nose. “He was a rather unpleasant fellow. I took an

instant dislike to him, but I didn't say a word to him until he became confrontational.”

“Why was Mr. Evans confrontational?”

Dan sighed,
“He was drunk.
He was hassling
one of the flight
attendants, and

when I spoke up
on her behalf, he
became even
angrier.”

“And how did
the flight attendant
respond to your
help?” Farrow
asked.

Dan noted
Maxwell, who was
lost in the pattern

his hands made in
his lap.

“Actually, not
all that well. After
all the rude
comments from
Evans regarding
her skintight
uniform, she had
the gall to blame
me for his
behavior.”

Maxwell
blinked and forced
his head up. He
squinted his eyes at
Dan. “Why would
she blame you?”

Dan replied,
“Mr. Evans was
becoming more
and more
disagreeable. When
I interjected in the
argument and he

became even more hostile, she blamed me. It's as simple as that." Dan took a deep breath, slowly inhaling and then letting the air out in a sigh. "Did you know it's healthy to take a moment each day to breathe deeply? It's a way for the body to

slow its internal
rhythm, and the
brain to release
tension. Tension
adversely affects
your muscles. You
need to release
your stress, or it
will consume you.
I suggest you try it.
You both seem so
tense. Take a
moment to let that

tension escape you. Just think of the rolling ocean tide I mentioned. The ocean tides roll slow in and out in a pattern.” He continued moving his fingers on his legs. The agents followed his glance. “The tide rolls in and it rolls

out. Just like my
fingers. In and out.
The subtle motion
of my hands and a
slower pace of
breathing bring
calm and the
release of stress.
Breathe deep and
try it.”

Farrow opened
his mouth while

staring at Dan's hands. "I, uh..."

Dan lowered his voice to a whisper. "That's right. Breathe deeply. Fill your lungs and release with your breath all the stress that resides inside you. It is as though you

have not a care in
the world.”

Agent Maxwell
inhaled as he
watched Dan’s
fingers do their
dance. Farrow
slowed his
breathing until his
chin dipped to his
chest. He
straightened his
head up and

blinked his eyes.
He seemed
confused for a
moment, as though
he were trying to
recall something
important. “Uh,
the... Uh, the
guy.” He blinked
again. “Why did
Mr. Evans?” The
agent searched his
mind for the words

that flitted out of reach. “Why would he become more hostile? Isn’t behavior modification what you do for a living?”

I knew that was coming. Yes, agent, keep breathing and follow my hands.

They're so hard to ignore.

“Why, yes, it is, agent Farrow. Thank you for your observation. For the record, I got him to calm down. It is not an instant process, and as I stated, he was intoxicated.”

Maxwell wiped
a hand across his
mouth, his eyes
dull. “How did
Mr. Evans make
you...”

“Make me
feel?” Dan asked
the agent. “He
made me feel just
as you two made
me feel by coming
into my home with

such wild
accusations.”

Farrow
straightened in his
seat. “We aren’t
here to, uh,
accuse.... How did
you calm him
down? Mr. Evers,
Evans...”

“The better
question is, how
did I get all the

passengers to calm down.”

“Why did you need to calm the other passengers?” Farrow asked. His eyes lacked the spark they had when he had first entered Dan’s home. The agent tried to stay focused, his eyes

tracking Dan's
hands movements
along his legs,
unaware of his
partner's soft
snores. Maxwell's
head lolled against
his shoulder.

“Because one
by one they joined
the fray, some
arguing with the
flight crew and

some fighting with each other. One of them was fighting with Mr. Evans.”

Dan smiled. “It was quite the entertaining flight. At least in the beginning. But you know agent Farrow...”

Dan drew his words out, so that

one melted into
the next. “None of
that matters. In
fact, nothing
matters at all. Can
you feel your
shoulders relaxing?
They’re slowly
slumping.”

Farrow’s
shoulders lowered
before he
attempted to

straighten them.
He sat up straight
on the sofa for a
moment, and then
his shoulders
drooped again. He
yawned, “We’re
so... I mean, me...
I’m so...”

“You aren’t
tired, agent
Farrow, you’re
relaxed. Can you

hear the waves of
the ocean? Listen
to them as your
eyes follow my
fingers. Do you see
my fingers
moving?”

“Yes.” Agent
Farrow squinted
through the slits his
eyes had become.

“Are your arms
heavy? So heavy

that it is almost impossible to lift them?” Dan asked.

“Uh-huh.”

Farrow tried to jot a note down. The pen slipped from his fingers and landed on the carpeted floor. He yawned. “How did you do it? How

did you calm the passengers down?”

“The same way I have been relaxing the two of you,” Dan stated.

“Yes.” The agent blinked his eyes. He tried to focus on Dan’s fingers through blurry vision.

“Agents Farrow
and Maxwell, listen
carefully to my
voice as it gets
quieter and quieter.
My voice floats on
the ocean breeze.
Follow it. Stay
with it. The only
energy you will
spend will be to
keep track of my
voice. I want you

to repeat my words
because they are
the truth, and you
will recall them as
the truth.”

As Dan spoke,
both agents
repeated his
message from
across the room.

“Very nice.
The waves of the
ocean roll in and

out with my
fingers. Now close
your eyes.” Dan
instructed. He
halted the pattern
his hands had been
playing out on his
legs. Both agents’
eyes drifted shut.

“Good, very
nice. The tide rolls
in and you breathe
deeply, the tide

rolls out and you
release your breath
slowly, sending
with it all the
toxicity in the
world. All that
matters is the
motion of the
ocean. It is you
alone on the beach.
The sun hides
behind a small
cloud. The day is

warm. Your toes
dig into the sand,
feeling the grains
scrub away the oils
on your skin. As
the oils are
cleansed by the
sand, your memory
fades. Only one
thing matters and
that is to breathe
with the sound of
the ocean tides.”

Both men's
 chests rose and fell
 as he spoke.

“The sand
 cleanses you. The
 skin on your feet is
 refreshed, your
 memory empties
 with the oils from
 your skin. You lay
 in the sand and
 allow it to cleanse
 your entire body.

As the sand rubs
against you, you
only remember
who you are.

Everything else is a
fading dream. Your
breathing continues
to slow to match
the pace of the
rolling ocean tide.

The tide brings
with it relaxation.
It is in the air, and

you breathe it in,
deeply and slowly.
Memories are
fading, stress does
not exist. The sand
has scrubbed it all
away. The tide
rolls in and it rolls
out.” Dan watched
the breaths of the
agents deepen and
slow.

“I have one important instruction for both of you. You must carry it out or you’ll never hear the ocean waves again.” Dan paused. As expected, both men had frowns on their faces. “Do you want to keep

the sounds of the
ocean with you
always?”

“Yes...”

Dan smiled and
spoke above a
whisper. “Good.
Soon, I will snap
my fingers and you
both will wake up
understanding that
our time together
is done. You will

have successfully
interviewed me
and very much
appreciate my
innocence and the
information I have
given you. You
will recall that
nothing out of the
ordinary happened
on flight D1707
and that it is a most
unfortunate

coincidence that
the passengers died.
The case is closed.
There is nothing
else to discuss.”

Both men
nodded their
agreements.

“Now, there is
one last thing, and
it is the most
important thing.
You will

remember this last thing. You will make a priority of this instruction but will not remember it until you hear my name. When you hear my name spoken for the first time after you leave here today, you will recall my instructions and

you will happily
and pleasantly
follow them,
precisely. Do you
understand?”

“Yes.”

“After I give
you these
instructions, I will
snap my fingers and
you will remember
nothing other than
the deaths of the

passengers of flight
D1707, which was
an unfortunate
coincidence, and
you will remember
my forthcoming
instructions. When
I snap my fingers,
you will tell me the
interview is done.
Upon leaving my
house, the very
next time you hear

my name, you will
have an action to
take. Do you
understand?”

Farrow spoke
in a low, mushy
voice, “yes,
instructions... most
important.”

“Yes, good.”
Dan leaned
forward, raising his
voice. “The next

time you hear my name...”

A few seconds after speaking, Dan snapped his fingers. The agents stood from the sofa and thanked him for his time and made their way to his front door.

As the two men made their

way down his
sidewalk, Dan
heard agent
Maxwell say, “He’s
a nice guy. It’s
always good when
we can resolve a
case and move on.
I appreciate his
help.”

Farrow nodded
his head. “Yes, he
was very helpful. It

was a terrible
tragedy about flight
D1707, but at least
we know it was all
a big
coincidence.”

★★★

Agents Farrow
and Maxwell sat at
their office desks,
facing each other.

“Where have you two dipshits been?”

Farrow looked up to see special agent Lukather standing over him. “Doing our jobs, Puke-a-ther.”

Maxwell snickered at his partner’s insult.

“Neither one of you knows what your jobs are. You haven’t solved a case in two months.” The older, pudgy agent rolled his eyes at them.

“We were working on the flight thing.”

Lukather
laughed, “Oh yeah,
your X-files case.
You know you
guys get assigned
the shit detail
because you suck,
right?”

“Shut up Puke-
a-ther.” Maxwell
said.

“Well, did you
and Frank Hardy

here solve the case
of the dead airline
passengers?”

Lukather elbowed
Farrow in his ribs.

“There was
nothing to it. Case
closed.” Maxwell
stated.

“How can
there be nothing to
it?” Lukather
shook his head.

“You two amaze me, you know that? Did you even go talk to that shrink? What’s his name?”

Farrow felt a jolt go through his body as he thought about the psychiatrist. He opened his mouth and looked at

Maxwell's pale
face.

“Dr. Simmons,
wasn't that it?”
Lukather asked.

Maxwell and
Farrow stood up,
staring at each
other over their
desks.

Lukather
glanced from

Maxwell to
Farrow. “What’s
up with you two?
You look like
you’re half-dead.”

Maxwell
pivoted with
Farrow and walked
together across the
room.

“Hey,
dumbasses, where
are you going? I’m

talking to you.”
Lukather called to
them.

The two agents
walked to the far
side of the office
area and began
slamming their
heads into the
cement block wall.

“What the hell?
Hey! That’s not
funny!” Lukather

ran toward the two
agents. Blood had
begun flowing
down the white
wall. “Hey! Stop
that!”

Coming Up Short

Coming Up Short

Please enjoy
the first seven
chapters of my
thriller novel
Wicked Games!

Wicked Games

Torture, Kill

One

*May 15, 2020,
11:00 pm*

*New Haven,
Connecticut*

Each of the
twelve in the room
wore a black
blindfold across
their heads. They
were aware of the

presence of the
others, but
unaware of exactly
how many or who
sat in the chairs
next to them.

Every person in the
room had
volunteered to be
there and had paid
substantial sums of
money to take part.
Excitement buzzed
through the air like
an electric current.

They had all
been driven from a
remote motel,
blindfolded in the
dark of the night.
After winding
down several roads
and taking too
many turns to
remember, they
had arrived, one by
one, at their
destination. Each
was guided by
invisible hands

through the
hallways of the
building until they
sat in their
designated chairs.
This day was, of
course, a month
after submitting
their nomination
file by traditional
mail to the
provided P.O. box
address. Each of
them had
nominated

someone they
knew for the
game.

Some were
new to this game;
others had
participated many
times. It was a
game for the elite,
for the wealthy.
Those present were
corporate CEOs,
inheritors of old
family money, and

those of newer
tech money.

Somewhere
nearby, a door
opened and closed.
Footsteps clicked
across the floor. A
pounding sound,
like that of a
judge's gavel,
emanated from the
center of those
seated. A computer
modulated;
digitized voice

began speaking.
For those in the
room who had
been here before,
the deep voice was
unsurprising, but
still instilled fear in
the heart. For those
first-time members
of The Club, the
voice sounded as
though it had been
born of hell.

“Welcome. We
will call to order

the proceedings of
The Club and the
beginnings of a
new game.”

Between the
words of their
director, the room
was as silent as the
death that would
soon come.

“All members,
both current and
new have been
completely vetted,

and all victim
nominations
received. As a
result, the game
will commence.”

All twelve
present knew not
to speak. It was the
first rule of the
game. Anonymity
was the key
component of The
Club.

“Henceforth,
all rules to the
game are final.
There will be NO
deviation.”

Each time the
rules changed, but
only slightly.
People shifted in
their chairs in
anticipation of the
rules review.

“One. The
secrecy of The

Club comes before
all other matters. If
a nominated
victim, or any
member of the
public becomes
familiar with, or
aware of, The
Club, or its
members, without
prior director
consent and proper
vetting, the
offending club

member will be
tortured, killed.”

Silence again,
no shuffling of feet
on the floor or
bodies moving in
chairs.

“Two. The
nominated victim
must be someone
of acquaintance to
the nominating
member. You must
know the

nominated
personally. All
twelve nominations
are verified as valid.
Thank you.”

Each of the
twelve thought for
a moment of those
they had
nominated as
participants in the
game. Some had
vengeance on their
minds. Some had
financial reasons for

their selection, and
some had simply
drawn the name of
their nomination
from a hat.

“Three. As
always, your
nomination will
NOT be your
victim. You
CANNOT torture,
kill your own
nominated victim.
Instead, you will
torture, kill another

member's
nominated
victim.”

This rule was
known by all in
attendance and did
not come as a
surprise. It was to
protect members
from the inquiries
of law
enforcement.

The voice
spoke again, deep

and resonating,
“Four. You may
work with another
club member, only
after approval, to
torture, kill your
randomly selected
victim. That aiding
member
CANNOT be the
nominating
member of your
victim. The reasons
for seeking help in
your torture,

killing do not matter. If you choose to utilize this provision, you MUST gain prior approval by use of the burner phone you will be provided.”

Behind blindfolds, several people nodded as this rule was customary. Several of the members

present had indeed used this provision, especially in their first couple of games.

“Five. Your torture, killing MUST be filmed in a digital format and shared with all other club members through the password encrypted site. This site will be

provided to your temporary email account after tonight's meeting. If you fail to film your torture, killing, or fail to provide the video content to other club members, you will be tortured, killed. Your identity must be protected in the video. If you fail to

protect your
anonymity in the
video, you will be
tortured, killed.”

The room was
again motionless.
All in attendance
had either filmed
their previous
games or were
aware of this
requirement. It was
not a problem, as
all were pleased to
display their skill

for other
members.

The voice drew them out of their thoughts. “Six. If you fail to torture, kill your assigned victim, you will be tortured, killed in their place.”

The members nodded their agreement. It was a part of the security

of The Club. All were guilty of murder and thus equally interested in protecting anonymity. No one would ever speak of their acts to others, or law enforcement, if they were as guilty as every other club member.

“Seven. You will ONLY have

two months and
two days from
tonight to
complete your
torture, killing. If
you fail to torture,
kill your assigned
victim in two
months, and two
days, and upload
your recorded
video, you will be
tortured, killed.”

Movement this
time on the chairs.

This was new and represented a much tighter timeframe than ever before. There had typically been at least six months of provided time to befriend the victim and lure them into a place of trust.

Someone in the room cleared her throat, but no one

spoke. They all
knew better.

More footsteps
entered the room.
Each member felt
the traditional
manila envelope
packet placed in
their laps.

“The file of
your victim,
nominated by one
of the present
members, is in

your lap. All relevant data, phone numbers, addresses, email, places of work, etcetera are provided as always. How you contact your victim is, of course, up to you. It is your game. Your charge is to follow all rules and torture, kill your assigned victim in

the two-month,
two-day, provided
time allowance.”

The members
all clutched their
files in their hands.
Some hoped for a
certain physical
profile in their
selected victim.
Others did not
care. For many of
those present, it
was about the
game. They craved

the killing. Because of their wealth, and a lifetime of getting whatever they wanted, life had become boring. The power that came with astounding quantities of money was intoxicating, but after that power became the everyday normal,

new excitements
were sought.

One member
thought of the first
time he had made
an employee strip
naked and run
through his
mansion singing
the star-spangled
banner. He had
laughed for days.
Another member, a
woman, thought of
the time she had

bought an entire
backwoods bar
crowd drinks for
beating a random
man into a coma.
One man in the
group of twelve
had purchased all
his employees BB
guns and enticed
them with large
amounts of money
to hunt and shoot
each other

throughout his
country estate.

As satisfying as
those events had
been, they were
rare, and paled
compared to the
power of murder.
The ability to
choose when
someone would die
was the ultimate.
To sit and watch
the life drain from
their eyes while

they begged and
pleaded for
reprieve was
beyond compare.

The pounding
sounded, indicating
the meeting was
over.

The voice
spoke one last
time. “You will all
return to your
motel rooms. You
must wait in your

room for one hour,
and then you may
leave to pursue
your game.

Remember, it is
the charter
responsibility of
The Club members
to ...”

The voice
waited.

The members
present shouted in

unison, “Torture,
kill!”

Coming Up Short

The Games Begin One

*June 20, 2020,
8:05 pm*

*San Francisco.
California*

“I’m so glad I
met you.”

“Me too, baby.
Can I get you
another drink?”
She asked him.

Mike smiled
and held up his
glass. “Can do.
Whiskey, neat.”

“If I don’t
know that by now,
I should turn in my
girlfriend card.”
Sheila peeled his
wandering hands

off her waist and stood up. She moved behind the sofa, her back to him, facing his minibar.

He called to her, “Hurry with the drink. It doesn’t taste as good as you, anyway.”

She looked into the mirror over the

bar. He faced away from her, watching the old movie droning on the TV. The back of his balding head reflected the overhead lights, even though he had set them low for mood lighting. He thought tonight would be the night. She could tell. And he was

right, it would be the night, but it wouldn't be the tumble between the sheets he expected.

She withdrew the packet of white powder from the pocket of her shorts and tapped some into his drink. It dissolved in the alcohol. He would have one

hell of a headache
in a couple of
hours. Of course,
by then, that
would be the least
of his worries.

“You’re a great
kisser, but I guess
you know that
already.” She
walked back to
him, thinking that
she couldn’t wait
to smash his giant
ego into a million

pieces. It had only been a month, but she had grown to hate him. Middle-aged, moderately wealthy, and full of himself. He thought he could have any woman he wanted. In his view, the thickness of his wallet compensated for the thickness of the

roll around his
middle.

She looked at
him as she rounded
the sofa. Fat and
hairy – every girl's
dream. In reality,
he sucked as a
kisser, but he had
no clue. He was
used to being told
what he wanted to
hear. Feeding his
ego for the last
month and a half

had been easy.
What had not been
easy was keeping
his hands from
wandering too far.
Each time she had
been with him, he
had pushed the
envelope a little
farther. He
disgusted her.

His money had
caused him to lose
all perspective of
himself. He had

disillusioned
himself into
believing that he
was quite a catch.
He believed she
should feel blessed
that he would give
her the time of
day, even though
she was tall, thin
and model
beautiful. His type
was the reason she
killed and had thus
been very fortunate

to draw his file for the game. It would be a pleasure.

He snickered at her with the overconfident, upturned smirk he used whenever he thought about how great he was at something. She wanted to cut his lips from his face so that he could no longer flash the

cheesy grin or try
to suck her lips
from her face.

He laughed and
reached for the
drink. “I may have
been
complimented a
few times on my
smooching abilities,
but don’t get
jealous, honey.
These lips are all
yours.”

She saw the look on his face as he stared at her chest. In her mind, she could hear him saying, ‘I’m a one-woman man.’

“You know I’m a one-woman man.” He sipped from the tumbler she had handed to him.

She nodded,
“So you’ve told
me, a few times if I
remember
correctly.”

He drank
again, tossing half
of the whiskey
down his throat.
“Oh, you don’t
believe me?”

“Well, I want
to believe you, but
I’ve heard these

things from men before.”

He raised his glass to her, and the corner of his mouth upturned again. “I’m different. I’m the real deal, babe.” He patted the sofa next to him, and she sat down.

He placed a hand on her bare

thigh. “Now,
where were we?”

He leaned
forward, and she
scooted back,
creating enough
separation to keep
him off her.

“Don’t be shy,
sweetheart.” He
used a sleeve to
wipe at the sweat
that had developed
on the top of his

head. It turned the
arm of his shirt
from navy blue to
dark blue.

“Oh, I’m not
shy, but I’m also
not easy. If you
want this...” She
waved an arm
before herself,
indicating her
athletic physique.
“Then you’ll be a
good boy and do as
I say.”

“Oh, I like that idea. So, what would you like me to do?”

She said, “I would like you to finish that drink and then... watch me.”

The corner of Mike’s mouth turned up. “Okay, I’m game. I like a good show.”

He swallowed
the rest of the
drink and set the
tumbler on the
coffee table.

She imagined
removing his lips,
nose, and eyelids
with her favorite
pair of scissors as
she unbuttoned the
top of her blouse.

“Ooh.” Mike’s eyes were glued to her chest.

“Do you like that?”

“Yesh, yes.”
He shook his head and laughed.

She undid another button on her top.

He reached for her, and she

swatted his hand
away. “For now,
you’re only
watching, baby.”

“Teasher.” His
head lolled to one
side, and he
quickly
straightened back
up and leaned
forward.

“No, no, no
big boy. If you
want to see more,”

she completely
opened her top,
“you’ll sit back and
enjoy the show.”

He sat back too
fast and corrected
himself before he
could tilt off the
couch. “Wow,”
He giggled, “That
booze is strong.
Makesh me feel a
little headed. Uh,
lightheaded. Thash
what I meant.”

“Are you too drunk for this, Mikey?”

He shook his head. “No. I like a woman in charge. Do you want to be in charge?” He pointed a finger at her, and then his hand collapsed back into his lap. He stared at his arm, recognizing its inability to do as

his brain
instructed.

Sheila leaned
forward. “What’s
wrong, Mikey?”

“Too mush
booze...” The
greed in his eyes
had been replaced
with
incomprehension.

“Oh, that’s too
bad, Mikey.” She

began buttoning up
her blouse.

Mike struggled
to pull his face
even with hers.
“Wash did you do
to me, Sheila?” His
head tilted down
and then bounced
back up as he
fought the drug
flowing through
his veins.

“Me? Oh, well,
I slipped a little
something into
your drink, you
over-bearing
dumbass. By the
way, I’m not
Sheila. My name is
Darla. Not that it
will matter to you
much, but I
thought I should
set the record
straight. Oh, also,
you suck as a

kisser, and pretty much everything else. The only reason anyone pays attention to you is your money. Also, for the record,”

She picked her phone up from the coffee table and glanced at a message, “I happen to be wealthier than you. Far, far wealthier.”

She poked him
in his fat gut. He
mumbled
something and
tilted back on the
couch. She noticed
for the first time
that he had
unbuttoned his
pants while she was
pouring the drug
into his drink.

“Oh? Were
you expecting that
I would want

anything to do
with that thing?”
She laughed, typed
a response message
on her phone, and
then set it down.

“You’re a pig.
The twenty million
you have in the
bank is not
impressive to
someone worth
one hundred times
that.”

He attempted to raise an arm. It twitched and then lie motionless in his lap. “Bish.”

She agreed.
“Oh, yes, most definitely, I can be. Many would agree with your assessment of me. Here’s a little secret for you, though.”

Darla leaned forward, placing her lips next to his ear. She noticed his eyes tracking her. “I don’t care what they, or you, think. Not at all.”

She sat back up. “You see, many people will tell you they don’t care what others think, but they’re just being

defensive. It's a way of protecting their egos, their feelings. Me, though? Well, it's different with me. I actually do not care at all. And would you like to know why?"

He stared at her, incapable of reacting any longer.

“I’ll take that
blink as a yes. The
reason is that I am
incapable of caring
what others think.
I don’t have
feelings. Like not at
all. I can take or
leave most people,
although I have to
say I have grown
to hate you quite
passionately, which
is rare for me. I
don’t typically feel

anything for
others.”

She poked his
gut again, knowing
that he was
sensitive about his
weight. “So, I
don’t care what
people think or
say, because I feel
nothing for them. I
had a psychiatrist
tell me one time I
had sociopathic
tendencies. It was

so funny.” She
paused for a
moment, lost in
thought. “Right
before I slit his
throat I said to
him, ‘tendencies?’ I
have no tendencies.
I one hundred
percent do not care
whether anyone
not named Darla
lives or dies, and I
am one hundred
percent

sociopathic, at least
by the standard,
accepted definition.
That's not a
tendency, it's a
fact."

The doorbell
rang.

Darla picked up
her phone again
and smiled. She
looked at Mike.
His eyes had shut,
and he snored.

“Mike, you are in for one hell of a surprise. My friend is here, and he is a lot like me. He doesn’t care what others think either. He particularly hates men of all types. It’s a long story but his dad beat him severely as a child for many reasons and it turned him into a

monster. A wealthy
monster, but a
monster
nonetheless.”

She stood and
moved toward the
stairs in the corner
of the basement
theater room. “My
friend is going to
join our party,
Mikey. I’ll be right
back. Don’t go
anywhere.”

She giggled all
the way to the
door.

Two

*June 20, 2020,
11:23 pm*

*San Francisco.
California*

Mike heard
laughter, though it
was muffled. It was
as though someone
had stuffed cotton
into his ears. The
sounds were
muted, and barely
understandable,
over the high-
pitched ringing
tone that seemed to
be everywhere.
Confusion
bounced around

inside his head. He wondered where he was, that he would wake up to the sound of a man and a woman talking and laughing.

The woman's voice was familiar to him. The man not so much, but the woman, the way her laughter rose and then cut

off, was something
he remembered.

He tried to
open his eyes.
Bright light
invaded his brain.
His head began
pounding. He
clamped his eyes
shut and tried to
rub them with a
hand. His arms
were under his
back. They tingled,
as though they had

suffered from blood loss for a long time. Why had he slept on his arms?

He tried to pull them from under him, but they would not move. He could feel a dry material cutting into his wrists, which caused him to tug harder. Whatever held his arms under him

only dug into his skin more.

“What the fuck?”

A raspy voice startled him until he realized it was his own.

“Well, hello there.” The woman’s voice, much closer to him than before.

He pried his
eyes open against
the invading light.

Her face was
instantly
recognizable.
“Sheila? What’s
going on here?”

She smiled at
him in a way he
did not recognize.
“I’m afraid you’re
going to need a
few more minutes

to come around.
That was quite the
nap you had.
We've been so
excited for you to
wake up, we could
hardly stand it. Oh,
and you'll
remember soon,
but my name is not
actually Sheila. It's
Darla. I know it
was wrong of me
to deceive you, but

I don't much
care.”

Mike glanced
around the room.
Too much of his
vision was blurry to
see clearly. He
asked, “We?”

“Oh, yes, how
rude of me. I
invited a friend
over for our
party.” She looked
over her shoulder

as a shadow
loomed closer. A
man appeared. He
was tall and
physically fit, with
a face chiseled in
the mold of
Roman Gods. His
dress was formal.
He wore a jacket
and tie. His entire
outfit, including
shirt, slacks, and
shoes, was black.

“This is George. He’s been a friend of mine for a long time. In fact, George and I have partied like this a few times.” She patted George on the side of his face. “Haven’t we Georgie?”

George did not speak. Instead, he nodded his agreement.

Mike blinked
his eyes and
focused his gaze on
George's hands.

“Why does he
have on gloves?”

Shelia giggled
and held her hands
in front of his face.
“You mean, why
do he and I both
have gloves on?
Well, that is to
keep from leaving

evidence. Georgie,
would you hand
me the tools?”

George handed
Sheila, Darla, a
large black bag.
She grabbed it by
its handle and set it
down by Mike’s
face. She unzipped
it and withdrew a
long, sharp pair of
scissors, and set
them on his chest.
After digging

around inside of the bag again, she pulled out a shiny metal hammer and several chisels. These were also laid out on his chest.

“Hey! What the hell are you doing?” Mike began wriggling his body from side to side, tugging

against the binds
around his wrist.

“Oh, you can’t
do that, Mikey.
Georgie, show
Mikey what
happens when he
forgets his
manners.”

George leaned
over him and
swung a fist down
into his face. He
heard his nose

crunch and blood
squirted into the air
as though someone
had turned on a
blood pouring
hose.

Mike felt the
tears welling in his
eyes. He stopped
struggling against
his binds.

“Georgie,
would you mind if
I started the

festivities? I particularly dislike this fat, over-indulgent asshole.”

Again, George only nodded.

“Thank you. Oh and let us not forget...” Darla reached behind her and then pulled a black ski mask over her face.

George raised a cell phone and held it out toward Mike.

“What are you going to do? You don’t have to do this. I can give you money. Please, let’s think about this for a moment.” Mike pleaded with her.

Darla looked from Mike to

Georgie and asked,
“Are you
recording?”

George moved
his head up and
down once.

“Great!” Darla
picked up the
scissors from
Mike’s chest and
drug them through
the blood that
poured over his
chin and down his

neck. “Now,
where to begin?”

Three

*June 21, 2020,
4:07 am*

*San Francisco.
California*

Darla and
Georgie shared a

shower. The red flowed down their bodies, over their feet, and into the drain. They scrubbed the blood and bits of flesh from each other's bodies. Their touching of one another was not sexual. It was only their desire to leave all traces of Mike behind.

They stepped
from the shower
and George
sprayed it with a
commercial grade
bleach product.
Darla watched him,
pointing out any
parts of the shower
walls that he might
have missed. When
he finished coating
the shower, he
used a towel to
grab the shower

wand. He rinsed the cleaner and the remnants of Mike from the large stall.

They redressed themselves, used the towels to wipe the bathroom floor, and retreated to the basement theatre room. The air had filled with the metallic smell Darla associated with

death. There was no way to avoid the meaty, earthy smell. It was like the scent in a butcher shop, only rawer.

As she pulled on her socks and shoes, she looked over her work one last time. She felt regenerated. Satisfied. Mike was unrecognizable as a

human being,
other than one toe,
and a couple of
fingers that lay
amid the gore.

“Well,
Georgie, as usual, it
was a great time.”
Darla kissed him
on the cheek.
“Thank you for
joining my party,
as always. Let’s
make it official,
shall we?”

She pointed at the phone in his hand.

He nodded and raised it to show her the video upload. Once it was complete, he deleted the video from the device and handed it to her.

“Thank you.
I’ll destroy this. See
you next time.”

They left
Mikey’s residence
in the middle of
the night in two
different cars,
heading in two
different
directions.

Four

*June 28, 2020,
5:15 pm*

Austin, Texas

“That was a
great tee shot on
the 17th hole.”

Don grinned,
“Yup. It’s what got
you beat.”

Stan shook his head as he placed his clubs in the back of his Mercedes GLS580. “You’re right. We were even until that point. Damn fine shot. You were sitting right at the edge of the green. I needed another two strokes to get there. With only one hole

remaining, I had no chance.” He extended his hand to his new friend. “Good game, man. Thanks for the invite. I had fun. I haven’t been out for a while. Susan and the kids, you know how it goes.”

Don laughed, “Yes, I sure do.”

The Texas sun blasted its rays of heat down on them. Stan wiped the sweat from his forehead and replaced his cap on his head as the rear hatch of the SUV closed. “Speaking of families, you’ve met Susan and the kids. When do I get to meet Mrs. Don?”

Don tapped his head and answered, “You know, I have an idea. If you have a little time, why not come over now? The wife went shopping earlier, but we can have a couple of drinks while we’re waiting for her to come back. I can show you a project

I've been working
on in my garage.”

“Project?”

“Yeah, long
story. I'll show
you. Come on
over.”

Stan agreed.
“Okay, sounds
good. I'll follow
you.”

Don held up
his cell phone. “I'll

text her now.” He pretended to click it on and tapped a fake message on the black screen.

“However, you know women and shopping. She’ll say she’ll be right home, but it will take a bit.”

Stan laughed.
“Don’t I know it.
Get Susan in a
clothing store and

that is the rest of the day, gone.” He waved a hand and opened the driver’s door to his SUV. “I’ll follow you. If she takes a bit, it’s just more time for some beers.” He paused with one leg in the vehicle and one out. “By the way, what’s your wife’s name?”

When Don did not answer, Stan looked over his shoulder at him. Don was already in his BMW sedan.

Stan laughed and muttered to himself.

“Someone’s in a hurry for that beer.”

Five

*June 28, 2020,
5:40 pm
Austin, Texas*

Stan pulled up to the curb in front of a sprawling ranch-style home as Don drove into the home's driveway and parked.

Don was out of
his sedan and
motioning Stan up
the front sidewalk.

“The heat is
going to melt your
car, man.”

Don waved a
hand as he
unlocked the front
door. “Nah, it’ll be
okay. I’ve been
parking it outside
since I started my

project in the
garage.”

They entered
the foyer to the
large home. Stan
commented, “The
air conditioning
feels great in
here.”

“Oh, yeah, I
like to keep it
cool.”

“Does your
wife mind? Susan

and I have the marital battles of the thermostat. She freezes and I roast, so it's never cool enough for me, and it's always too cold for her."

Stan followed Don into a kitchen filled with stainless appliances. Don opened the refrigerator and

handed him a
beer.

“You didn’t
mention having a
kid before. How
old is he?”

Don stared at
him. “Huh?”

Stan took a pull
from the bottle of
beer and pointed at
the fridge. “The
artwork. How old
is...” He focused

his eyes on the
name at the
bottom of the stick
figure drawing that
was held in place
with magnets.
“Grady?”

Don looked to
the fridge. “Oh,
yeah, sorry, I
thought I
mentioned this
before. Yeah, little
Grady is five.”

“Are those from Grand Cayman?” Stan indicated the magnets that pinned Grady’s drawing to the refrigerator.

“Yes, family vacation a couple of years ago. Great time we had. It was Sarah’s idea to go there.”

“Sarah.” Stan
drank again and
said, “I was going
to ask her name. I
have a terrible
memory when it
comes to names. If
you told me
before, I
apologize.”

“Oh, no
worries. I probably
forgot. I am
forgetful too
sometimes.” Don

pointed at a door
between the
kitchen and dining
room. “Want to
check out my
hobby?”

“Sure. What is
it? Woodworking
or something like
that?”

Don laughed,
“Something like
that, yup.”

Six

*June 28, 2020,
5:53 pm*

Austin, Texas

“Wow, you’ve
got tons of tools
out here, man.”
Stan admired the
various saws and

drills that adorned
the garage
shelving.

“Yes, they’re
good for all sorts of
things.”

Stan wandered
to the shelf and
pulled down a skill
saw. “I have one
like this, but it’s a
cheaper brand.”

“One of my
favorites.” Don

moved behind
him.

Stan pointed to
the table in the
middle of the
garage that sat on
top of a large sheet
of plastic. “Does
the plastic help
with the sawdust?”

“It sure does, it
catches all kinds of
stuff.”

Stan placed the saw back on the shelf and sipped at his beer again. He noticed the tripod camera mount across from the table. “Hey, that’s a great idea. Do you film the steps of your building process? I hadn’t thought of that. If you film it, you can review what

you did, if you
want to do it
again.”

Don watched
Stan inspect the
camera mount as
he moved closer to
him.

“I sure do.
Filming is a crucial
part of the
process.”

Stan glanced
from the plastic to

the table and said,
“You know, if I
didn’t know better,
I would think you
were murdering
people in here.”

Don raised the
mallet over Stan’s
head. “Do you?”

Stan rubbed the
whiskers on his
chin as he turned
toward Don.
“What’s that?”

“Know
better.”

Don brought
the tool down on
Stan’s head.

Seven

*June 28, 2020,
11:33 pm*

Austin, Texas

Don peeled the plastic shop coveralls from his body, being careful not to get blood on his shorts or shirt. He threw the covering onto the plastic tarp and then switched off the camera, as well as the music he had played in the garage. Blood

smearred the small stereo, but he didn't mind. It came from the gloves on his hand, so it was not a big deal. He withdrew a rubber mask from his face and tossed it on top of the coveralls. After stuffing the mask and coveralls into a plastic bag, he also placed his gloves in

the bag and then
tied it shut.

He withdrew
the digital camera
from the stand and
slid it into his
shorts pocket.

Don stared at
his creation. It was
his finest work to
date. The club
members would
revel in the video.
He smiled, proud

of his
accomplishment.

Stan's head
rested on a tangled,
bloody mass of
flesh. Don had
placed it in the
center of the mess
he had created.
The mass of
destroyed and
bruised flesh
represented the
chaos in the world.
It was disorder. It

was disarray,
precisely like the
everyday goings-on
all around him.
Planet earth had
become a scarred
disaster, harvested
for its minerals and
gems. Its natural
beauty was being
hemorrhaged on a
global scale, as
forests were
destroyed. Large
corporations

harvested wood
and other natural
resources,
shredding earth's
natural
environment. The
greed of man, the
ruining of the earth
at the hands of
bipeds, had
become prolific
and out of
control.

Stan was his
representation of

the larger
destruction that
humanity leveled
against mother
earth every day.

Stan's eyes
stared in two
different directions.
One looked at
him, and the other
gazed at the ceiling
as though it could
see beyond the
structure of the
home and into the

heavens. That eye
pleaded with God
for intervention, as
had Stan before he
had lost
consciousness for
good.

The pinnacle of
his creation,
though, was what
he had done with
Stan's mouth. Don
had removed Stan's
teeth and piled
them on the raw

flesh before his
head. They were
the sacrifice for the
fingers that
protruded from
Stan's open mouth.
The fingers
reached forth from
the cavern of his
stretched and
gaping maw. Stan
was human greed.
The fingers pushed
forth, seeking to
escape the mayhem

and the destruction
of the body,
representing
mother earth. The
fingers were the
minority of
mankind, those
precious few who
revolted against the
system and sought
escape.

He picked up
the trash bag and
stepped over a
large pool of blood.

He would dispose of the bag and then upload the video before flying home to rest. Making the type of profound statements he made through his creations was hard work.

UNPLANNED

“Okay, how
about this one...”

Shanda set her
wineglass on the
linen-covered table
and stared her date
in the eyes. “How
old were you when

you had your first
kiss,” she giggled,
the wine doing its
job, “and who was
it?”

Myles smiled,
“Well, we’re
getting right to it
aren’t we?”

He glanced
around the
restaurant. His
father would have

said it was a dining establishment, not a restaurant. The servers were all professional and courteous, well-dressed penguins in their black pants, white shirts, and black bow ties.

The men seated at the various tables all donned ties; the

ladies wore dresses.
Most of the items
on the menu he
couldn't
pronounce, and he
was fine with it all.
He was as out of
his league in the
dining
establishment as he
was on his date
and, amazingly; it

was going well,
very well.

“That’s what
first dates are for,
getting to know
one another,
right?”

He nodded.
“Yeah, okay, her
name was Madison.
I was fifteen, she
was seventeen. It
was after a high

school basketball game. I didn't really know her, but a friend was throwing a party, and she was there."

Shanda traced a finger around the rim of her glass.
"So, your first kiss was an unplanned thing?"

“Yes, the way
it should be.”

“So, what if I
was planning to
kiss you tonight?”
She picked up her
glass and drained its
remaining contents
down her throat.

“Is that a problem
if I was planning to
do that?”

“That would be fine.” He smiled. She was far more flirtatious than he had expected. The way she occasionally twirled her hair around her pinky and released it without being aware she was doing it was

familiar to him. It was something his subconscious had picked up on during one of their many video chats.

She swallowed.
“But you said those things should be unplanned.”

“There is a noteworthy difference here.”

Myles held up a finger. “You are planning to kiss me, but we together are not making that plan. It is you.”

She smiled.
“So, it’s okay, as long as one of us is planning the action, but not both of us?”

“Yes, because without both of us talking through a formal plan, it is unscripted.”

She refilled her wineglass. “Ahh, I see now. Okay, I have a question.”

He grinned at her, unable to hide his interest. Her profile pictures

were beautiful, but nothing compared to her, alive and in the flesh. She was amazing. Their phone calls had not revealed the extent of her full beauty. Her long black hair was a stunning contrast to her pale skin. The greenest eyes he had ever

seen gazed at him
over the rim of her
glass. He had been
instantly attracted
to her. He was in
over his head, but
Myles Witten did
not say no to a
beautiful woman,
especially one who
wore such tight
dresses so perfectly.
The green dress she

had on accented
her eyes in a way
that made him feel
like he was dating a
supermodel.

Amazingly, she
seemed as taken
with him as he was
with her. Her
flirtatious nature
had him
enraptured.

“So, let’s say
that I told myself
before meeting
tonight that if I
found you
interesting, I would
do certain things
with you, to
you...”

Myles leaned
his forearms against
the edge of the
table. He didn’t

care what she wanted to do with him. He was single and ready to go. The stirring in his gut as she played with her wineglass was confirmation that the evening would go as far as she wanted.

“Oh, I like the sound of this.” He

grinned, trying not to seem desperate.

“But what I did there was make a plan. You’re okay with that?”

“Yes, of course. You made a plan that I knew nothing about. Also, you had a contingency.”

She tilted her head, her long black hair sliding over one breast. “A contingency?”

“If you hadn’t found me attractive tonight, in person, on our date, you would not have gone through with this plan you made. You gave yourself

an out by not
planning it with
me.”

She smiled and
said, “Well, it’s a
good thing for you
I find you
attractive then, isn’t
it?”

“I believe so.”
Myles raised his
glass.

She raised hers
with him and
sipped at her wine.
“What?”

“I was thinking
about how
beautiful your eyes
are. They’re
amazing.”

She winked at
him. “Why thank
you. Would you
like to know

something
interesting?”

“Of course.”

“I think your
eyes are beautiful as
well. I love blue
eyes.”

He smiled. She
was perfect.
Something terrible
would need to
happen to keep

him from falling
for her.

★★★

“Dinner was
amazing. Of
course, it pales
compared to you.”

Shanda set her
fork on her plate,
part of her steak
still on her plate,
along with most of

a twice-baked
potato. “So, tell me
about your
daughter. She’s
from your
marriage, right?”

Myles perked
up at the mention
of Lizzy. “Yes, and
I have a question. I
know you’ve
answered this

before, but I need to make sure.”

She sat across the table from him, unblinking. “I know what you’re going to ask, but ask again. I want you to feel reassured.”

He sighed.
“I’ve run into this before. Women

I've dated in the past have told me they were fine with Lizzy, and then later... Let's just say they weren't okay with it."

"Listen, I think it's great. I love kids." She pushed her plate away. "I haven't had any of my own yet, but I

want to... I need
to meet the right
man first.”

Myles blushed
and glanced away,
aware of the heat
in his face.

Shanda giggled.
“I’d like to tell you
I want to meet her,
but I can’t.”

“Wait, I’m
sorry. I must have
misheard you. You
said you were okay
with me having a
child, but you
don’t want to meet
her?” Myles
recognized the
sinking feeling in
his gut. He had
been here before.
Shanda was more

beautiful than the others, but he had experienced women politely bailing before. Even after they had sworn they were alright with him having a daughter.

“No, silly.” She giggled again. It was light and musical. He had

already partially
fallen in love with
the sound of her
laugh. “I can’t say I
want to meet her,
because I already
have.”

“Oh.” He
laughed, relief
over-taking his
feelings of despair.
“Uh, wait, how
have you met my

daughter, though?
We're on a first
date." He tried
remembering if
Lizzy had been at
his place or her
mothers when he
had spoken to
Shanda during their
few phone calls.

She continued
to move her finger
over the wine glass

rim in a slow,
clockwise
rotation.

“On the
phone.” He
declared as he
snapped his fingers.
“Yes, that’s right,”
Myles remembered
Lizzy speaking to a
woman on the
phone. His
daughter had been

her typical shy self,
and she... the
memory came
forth from a place
far back in his
mind. That had
been months ago,
and it had been a
woman named
Karla on the
phone, not Shanda.
Myles still couldn't
place a time that he

had put Lizzy on
the phone with
Shanda.

He asked her,
“When was that
again?”

“Earlier,
tonight.” She
waved at a passing
server. “I’d like to
order some
dessert.”

The server
paused; a white
towel draped over
his arm. “Yes,
ma’am. What is
your pleasure?”

She glanced at
Myles, “Well, now
that is a loaded
question, isn’t it?”

Myles felt
himself blushing
again and noted the

server's face
reddening as well.
His mind ticked
back to her
previous comment.
She said she had
spoken to Lizzy
earlier that
evening, but that
was impossible. His
daughter was at her
mother's place for
the weekend.

“I would like a slice of cheesecake, and for you, Myles, honey?”

He tried to shake away the confusion. “I, uh, the same, please.”

The server nodded and slid away from the table as though he

had never been
there.

“You
mentioned you
spoke to Lizzy
earlier tonight, but
that is not possible.
You see, she wasn’t
at my house for
you to speak to
earlier. She’s at her
mother’s.”

Shanda
swallowed water
from her glass and
agreed, “Oh, yeah.
No, you’re right.”

“Right.” He
couldn’t
understand why he
felt relief.

“I mean, you’re
right, it wasn’t on
the phone.”

Myles cleared his throat. “I don’t mean to, uh, I guess I’m a little confused here.”

She smiled at the server as he approached the table. The middle-aged man set two thick slices of cheesecake with dabs of strawberry

topping before
them. “Bon
appetite.”

“I have never
spoken to Lizzy on
the phone, Myles. I
have only met her
once...” Shanda
eased a small bite
of cheesecake into
her mouth. Her
eyes rolled with
pleasure.

“When?”

“This is to die for, try it. I think you’ll agree.” She licked a smudge of the creamy dessert from her fork.

“Let’s hope that isn’t necessary, though. It would absolutely ruin my evening.” She winked at him.

“What would
ruin your
evening?”

She set her fork
down. It clinked
against the ceramic
plate. “If you were
to die.” She pushed
the cheesecake to
the center of the
table. “It was
delicious, but
eating that won’t

allow me to keep
my girly figure.”

She glanced at his
untouched dessert.

‘Aren’t you going
to eat? Men have
all the advantages, I
swear. You guys
don’t have to
worry about
putting on a few
pounds like we
ladies.”

“When did you
meet my
daughter?”

She laced her
hands together on
the table. “As I
said, earlier
tonight.” She
leaned forward,
inches from the
candle in the
center of the table.
“Let’s quit fucking

around here. I can see you've had your limit. I met her at your ex-wife's place."

"You, what?"
Myles raised his voice.

"Shh!" Shanda glanced at the tables near them.
"We can't be drawing attention

to ourselves. Your daughter's life depends on it." She leaned to the side of her chair, reaching into her bag. Withdrawing her phone, she held it up to him.

"Oh, my God. What have you done?" Myles stared at a photo of

a smiling Shanda
next to his
daughter and a man
he had never seen
before. His little
girl sat between
them, looking
happy and content.
It was as though
she had made two
new, great friends.

“Insurance.”

He glanced
from the phone to
her face while
reaching for his
own phone.

“I wouldn’t do
that if I were you.”
She rattled her
phone at him, the
small picture of his
daughter bouncing
side to side.

“Insurance for what?”

She said, “Eat your dessert. Let’s make this look real, like we’re having a normal first date.”

“That’s a little hard to do now.”
He seethed. “Is Lizzy okay?”

“Oh yes, I assure you, she’s fine. My friend is entertaining her as we speak. When I left, they were enjoying some Sponge Bob.”

Her beauty had faded over the past couple of minutes. He wanted to slug her in her face and

bust her perfectly
sculpted nose.

“And my ex-
wife?”

“Do you
care?”

His divorce had
not been a pleasant
experience. He
hesitated for a
moment and
answered. “No,
but Lizzy will.”

“She’s resting peacefully. If you do as you’re told, Lizzy will go home. Mama will wake up and be none the wiser.” She spoke with a confidence that told him she had been in this situation before. She was a criminal,

and he had fallen
for her game.

“What do you
want?”

She laughed
and raised her
voice. “Oh honey,
aren’t you the
cutest thing?”

He looked
around the
restaurant. No one

seemed to pay any attention to them. She was acting as though they were a happy couple. She had either lost her mind, or someone was watching.

He contemplated what would happen if he could get her phone. Maybe he

could get it on his way to the restroom and call the police. If he had her phone, she couldn't tell her friend to harm his daughter. "And if I don't do as I'm told, you'll tell your friend to kill Lizzy?"

She tapped the
table with one nail.
The tablecloth
dulled the sound.
“No. Geez, Myles,
you think so little
of me.”

“Then what’s
keeping me from
calling the cops
right now?” He
asked.

“You’ll never see her again. She will be taken to a home for children and sold to a wealthy couple who want to adopt discreetly, most likely in another country.”

Myles’s heart sank. He told himself to think,

that time was short.
He needed to
come up with a
plan, but he
thought of nothing
that didn't put his
daughter in further
jeopardy.

“Out with it.
What do you
want?”

“Over my
shoulder, there's a

couple, a man with black hair and a woman with red hair. He's wearing a suit, and she's in a green dress. They appear to be in their mid-thirties. Look at them."

Myles gazed over her left shoulder and spotted the couple.

They seemed to be in the midst of friendly banter. He imagined the man was telling his wife about his day at work, and she was lending a sympathetic ear. As they spoke, the man reached across the table and held the woman's hand.

Shanda smiled
at him and giggled
as though he had
said something else
to her that had
captured her heart.

“Okay, so
what?” He asked.

“They’re not
who they appear to
be.” She said flatly.

“A happy couple out for dinner?”

“No,” she corrected.

“They’re not human.”

Myles looked from Shanda to the loving couple, and back to her porcelain-skinned

face. “Come again?”

“You heard me. They aren’t human.”

Myles considered twisting her phone from her grasp and making a run for the men’s room. He thought about Lizzy sitting in the

company of a
strange man,
wondering where
she was and when
she could go
home.

“If you hurt
my daughter...”

She smiled and
placed her hand
over the top of his.
“You’re in no
position to threaten

anyone. We need your help, and remember, Lizzy's future depends on it."

Uncomfortable with her touch, he extracted his hand from her grip.

"Awe, are we going to have a pout? A few minutes ago, you

were ready to jump my bones.” She snickered into her palm. “Okay, look...” Her hand fell away. “Look at them again, closely. What do you see?”

He glanced back at the couple. The wife was leaning over the

table, wiping
something from
the corner of her
husband's mouth.

“I see a happy
couple enjoying
their evening
together. I wish I
were so lucky.”

“There's that
pout again. No,
look closer. First,

look at her hairline.
Do you see it?”

The couple
were oblivious to
his visual
inspection of them.
The woman’s red
hair was pulled
behind her head in
a bun. Where her
hair met her
forehead and down
the side of her head

to her ear was a faint shadow. It was as if it were not her real hair. If he hadn't looked closely at her, he would have missed it. The line was so faint.

“A wig, it's not her real hair.”

She nodded.
“Yes, and look at

him. You'll see the same thing."

"Okay, now that I look closer, it's not his real hair, either." He looked at Shanda across the table. "But so, what? Lots of people wear wigs because they have to, because of

things like
cancer.”

“Uh-huh, and
they both have
cancer, right? At
the same time.”

Her one raised
eyebrow indicated
her sarcasm.

Myles shook
his head, “Sure,
they could have
met at their cancer

treatments and
fallen in love.”

“Nonsense and
you know it.” She
sighed. “Their hair
isn’t usually the
giveaway. It so
happens that those
two did a terrible
job with their wigs.
Most of the time
you can’t tell
anything by

looking at their
hairline, but you
can by their eyes.”

Myles glanced
back at the couple.
“I cannot believe
I’m having this
discussion, but you
have my daughter,
so I’ll play along.
What’s wrong with
their eyes?”

“I know you
don’t believe me,
but you will. Their
eyes look normal
ninety-nine
percent of the
time, but if you
keep watching, and
you catch them at
the right angle,
you’ll see what we
call the spark.”

“What do you mean by the spark?”

“Watch them for a few minutes. When they turn their heads and catch the light just right, you’ll see a spark. It’ll be like a brief flicker of light, but it’s bright. Most

people don't notice
it because it's gone
before they can
contemplate what
they've seen."

He stared over
her shoulder for
what felt like five
minutes. "I don't
see anything.
They're two
people in love,
enjoying..." He

squinted and
leaned forward on
the table. “Holy
crap, you’re right. I
saw it.”

“Are you
jerking my chain?”
She asked.

He looked back
at her. “No, I saw
it. It was like a
pink ray that shot
up to the ceiling.

That's the weirdest thing I've ever seen. If you hadn't told me to look for it, I wouldn't have even picked up on it."

She eyed him suspiciously. "You don't seem like you're being genuine."

“Look, I saw
what you told me
to look for with
their eyes, and yes,
they each have a
weird smudge at
their hairlines.
What you’re saying
is that because of
these unusual
things, they’re
aliens, right?”

“That’s right.”

She challenged him
to argue with her.

“I want to get
my daughter back,
so, I’ll go along
with you. What do
you want from
me?”

Shanda reached
into her purse and
pulled out a small
baggie. Inside was a

clear and white
mixed powder. She
wiggled it at him.
“Take that and put
it in your pocket.
You’re going to
use it to kill
them.”

“What the hell?
I’m not killing
anyone. No, thank
you. What is that
stuff, poison

crystals of some
kind?”

She shoved it at
him. “Take it, or
I’ll make a phone
call.”

Myles picked
up his napkin and
covered his palm
with it. He allowed
her to place the
baggie in his hand

with the napkin
under the baggie.

“Why are you
using that napkin?”
She asked.

“I don’t want
that poison on my
skin.”

“It’s quartz. It
won’t hurt you.”

Myles wadded
the napkin into a

ball with the baggie in the middle and closed his fist. He slid down in his chair and reached under the table. A moment later, the baggie inside of the napkin was in his pants pocket.

“Why do you want to give them quartz?”

“It kills them.”

Myles shook his head. What a disappointment the night had turned out to be. Not only was his date a complete nut job, but she also wanted him to murder a couple with broken pieces of quartz.

“So, the little rock

chunks will kill the
aliens, if I do what?
Throw it in their
faces?”

“As long as it
touches their skin,
it won’t matter.”

Myles sighed
and sat back in his
chair. The couple
beyond Shanda
whispered
something and

glanced at Myles.
He looked away
from them casually,
as if he had simply
been admiring the
room. “So, if I get
this baggie of stuff
on their skin,
whether they live
or die, you’ll give
me my daughter
back?”

Shanda smiled
and blew him a
kiss. “That was for
visual effect, but
yes, I will, and
believe me, they’ll
die.”

“Why don’t
you do it yourself?
I mean, how hard
is it to throw some
rocks on

someone?” He asked her.

She smiled at him. “There’s a reason I’m sitting with my back to them. It’s because they know me and my partner both. They’ll never let me get close enough to them.”

“So, do I get
up and walk across
the room and
dump the contents
of the baggie on
their heads, or
what?”

“You can be as
big a smartass as
you want, but this
is serious. They’re
dangerous. They

have special
abilities.”

“Like what?”

She whispered.
“They can
disappear right
before your eyes.
They’ll straight
flick out of
existence and then
reappear
somewhere else,
which could be

right behind you.
That's what
happened to my
old partner. Those
two behind me
stabbed him in the
back. They killed
him. They can also
look like other
people.”

Myles glanced
at the young
couple. He looked

back at Shanda.

“Alright, how do I do it?”

“Outside,
you’ll wait for
them to come out
of the restaurant.
Once they do,
you’ll call them
over to you. You’ll
be standing by the
alley. You need to
convince them to

step into the alley,
and you'll do it
there.”

“Why in the
alley?” He asked
her suspiciously.

“Because they
smoke when they
die. We don't want
to draw the
attention of
anyone. They're
evil, Myles. They

murder and kill to get whatever they want. We have to rid the planet of them. That's what my partner and I do. We hunt them down and kill them, and when we've been compromised, we use people like you to help us."

He nodded his head. “Oh yeah, they’re the only evil in this room. What about you?”

“Hey, I’m doing us a favor. If they’re allowed to reproduce, it won’t take long until humanity is a thing of the past.”

“You use people like me by drawing us in with your sexuality and then kidnap our loved ones to force us to murder people.” He glanced at the couple again. They were asking their server for their

check. “One last question.”

“Yes?”

“When I throw this bag of crystal on them, it’s going to piss the husband off. When he punches me in the face, will you still be satisfied and return Lizzy to me?”

“That won’t happen, you’ll see, but yes, if that bag of quartz hits them, they’ll die, and then I’ll take you to your daughter.”

“Uh-huh, and where will you be while I’m doing this?”

“Across the street in my car. As

soon as you are
done, walk across
the street and get
in the silver
Mercedes sedan.
I'll be waiting.”
She stood and held
out her hand.
“Let's go home,
honey.”

Myles took her
hand and walked to

the exit. He
wanted to kill her.

★★★

He could see
her across the
street, sitting in her
car. Shanda made
no secret of
watching him. Her
stare was cold on
his back. Myles
paced back and
forth near the

restaurant entrance,
which was up a
small set of stairs
off the sidewalk.

“I can’t believe
this.” Myles
thought of his little
Lizzy. She would
be waiting for him
to come to get
her.

He watched
the door to the

restaurant. He only wanted to confront them and get his business done. The night had been a waste. There was no reason to prolong the inevitable. Soon, the woman with her fake red hair and the man with his fake dark hair

stepped into the
night air.

As they stepped
down the stairs to
the sidewalk, Myles
drifted close to
them. The woman
eyed him as she
stepped onto the
sidewalk.

Myles
approached with a
friendly smile on

his face. He could feel the weight of the quartz in his pocket. “Excuse me. Might you have a moment to chat?”

The man looked him up and down. “Weren’t you in the restaurant with a young woman?”

“Yes. We need to talk, in private, all three of us. I’m afraid it’s a matter of life and death.” Myles did not plan his words. They tumbled out of him before he could contemplate their impact on the couple.

The man and woman exchanged a glance. The woman said, “I thought something was up with you. I noticed your stares inside.”

She stepped toward Myles.
“Where?”

He nodded. “I apologize for

bothering you
both.” He turned
and walked into
the alley. The man
took his lady by
the hand, and they
followed Myles.

★★★

Shanda
watched Myles
approach the
couple as they
exited the

restaurant. Her phone vibrated in her pocket.

Without taking her eyes off Myles, she retrieved it and glanced at the text message.

Is it done yet?

Myles had approached the two human imposters and

spoke to them. She wished she could hear what they were saying. Myles looked sick to his stomach. She held her phone and tapped on its screen with a fingernail. Her nervous energy had to escape somehow.

The female in
the fake red hair
spoke, and then
they followed
Myles into the
alley. The three of
them moved at a
steady pace and
were soon
swallowed by deep
shadows.

She composed
a reply message and
sent it.

*He got them in
the alley. Should be
done soon.*

Shanda set the
phone down and
concentrated on
the alley entrance.
She watched
closely for the
smoke. It should

come soon. The
aliens made one
hell of a stink
when they died.

One time, in
Los Angeles, she
killed a room full
of them. She had
the smell of their
combustion on her
skin for a week.
The clothes she
had been wearing

had to be burned.
Part of the stench
was from whatever
they made their
human skin from.
It was so lifelike;
you could never
tell it was synthetic.
They needed the
shell to walk
among humanity.
Without it, people
would run

screaming from
them.

 Their spread
and infiltration of
the earth would
never happen
without a very
human-looking
disguise. It was
why most of them
chose attractive
skins. They
enjoyed the

attention they got
for their human
appearances.

She checked
her watch. It had
already been four
minutes since
Myles had entered
the alley.

“What’s taking
you so long,
Myles?”

Myles, who she had gone to great lengths to target on the dating app, was young, strong, and attractive. He was also a parent, which is exactly what they looked for when they couldn't perform a kill on their own.

Most often, it wasn't necessary to kill those they manipulated into doing their bidding. Holding the life of a loved one hostage was typically all the motivation a recruit needed to do as they were told.

She checked
her watch again.

“Six minutes.
Dammit.”

Something was
wrong. Shanda
grabbed a flashlight
from her glove box
and climbed out of
her Benz. Her
heels clicked as she
crossed the street.



Shanda entered
the alley and
clicked on the
small flashlight.
Myles stood in the
middle of the alley,
facing her. She
looked around.

“What the hell,
Myles?”

He shrugged
and spoke while he
stared at the top of
his shoes. He was
too quiet to hear.

“What
happened? Where
are they?” She
demanded.

Again, he
spoke to her. She
scrunched her face

and tilted her head
at him. “What?”

Myles raised his
head. “I want to
show you
something.”

She walked to
him until they
were a foot apart.
“This went
sideways, didn’t it?
You let them get
away. I warned

you about your
daughter,
dammit.”

“Look.” With
his left hand, Myles
reached up and
pulled an eyelid
toward the sky. He
pinched the
pointer finger and
thumb together on
his right hand and
grabbed hold of the

colored contact
that floated on his
eyeball.

Shanda stepped
back from him.

“No, it can’t be.”

Myles smiled at
her, his eye flashing
a blue beam across
the alley in the
moonlight.

Shanda
stag­gered
back­ward. “You’re
one of them.” The
flashlight fell from
her hand to the
alley. She turned to
run.

The couple
from the restaurant
blocked the end of
the alley.

She dug in her pocket. Before she could remove a baggie of quartz, strong arms wrapped around her from behind.

Myles approached her. He flicked the contact lens across the alley. “My eyes are naturally green,

as you can see,
much like yours.
The blue that you
loved was the
lens.”

She wriggled
against the man
who held her. The
woman stepped in
front of her, next
to Myles. “I hear
you were trying to
kill us again.”

Shanda flipped her hair out of her face. “You don’t belong here.”

The woman grinned. “Awe, why? Didn’t we all come here from somewhere else?”

Myles held out his hand. “Your phone?”

“It’s in my
car.”

He kept his
hand opened
before her. “Keys,
please.”

Shanda
dropped the key
fob into his palm.
“It doesn’t matter
what you do to
me, they’ll track
you down. My

partner knows who
you are.”

“In the next
thirty minutes,
your partner will
be as dead as you.”
Myles nodded at
the man and
woman and walked
away. Before he
reached the end of
the alley, he pulled
the cloth napkin

from his pocket
and tossed it and
the quartz within
into a dumpster.

★★★

*They're dead.
Myles did his job.
Change of plans,
bring the kid to the
restaurant.*

Myles sat in
Shanda's sedan and

sent the text
message to her
partner. The cell
phone facial
recognition
security system on
her Samsung had
been no problem.
He recalled the
lovely Shanda's
beautiful features
and morphed his
face until he

thought his
recreation of her
face was good
enough to get into
the phone.

He had been
right. The phone
had opened for
him easy enough.
While he waited
for a return
message, he
scanned through

the text thread. At one point, Shanda had texted her partner that she hated using him because he was a looker.

The phone vibrated in his hand. A new message appeared.

On my way.

Myles smiled and pulled his cell phone out. He flipped to the dating app he had met Shanda on and scrolled through the latest recommended women. The third profile he hit was a very attractive blonde woman.

She had privately
messed him.

Hey handsome.

He replied:

Hi beautiful!

She was still
active on the app.

*Hi there. I was
hoping to hear from
you. I like your
profile pics.*

Myles smiled
with his Shanda
face. He typed and
clicked his phone
shut.

*I have some
business to take
care of yet this
evening, but I'll
message you
tomorrow. Maybe
we can meet for
some coffee or*

*something. I'd like
to meet you,
although I'm not a
very good planner.
I mostly tend to
operate unplanned.
The more
spontaneous, the
better. I'm the
original unscripted
guy.*

*Hope to meet
you in person*

Coming Up Short

*tomorrow, or we
can text some
more.*

Myles

Coming Up Short

COMING UP SHORT 2

Please Enjoy the
first two stories and
check out the full
book on amazon.

gramps

His right hand
was in his pocket.
He twirled the
coin through his
fingers. It was a
nervous habit he'd
had for the past
twenty-two years.
The coin was a

1946 silver walking
half-dollar coin,
given to him by his
late wife.

Cancer, or, as
he referred to it,
the Big C, got her
a decade and a half
earlier after several
years of radiation
treatments. They
had done anything
they could think of

to extend her time with him and their family. The chemo had been the worst, but it had bought valuable time. He missed her warm touch and her calm spirit every day. The world was just not the same kind place

it had been when
she had been alive.

Harry Dutton
was many things,
not the least of
which was a coin
collector. His
collection
dominated every
shelf in his room
and most of the
space in his closet.
He had many coins

that were much more valuable than the half-dollar in his pocket. Many of those had also been gifts from his dear Esther. The 1946 coin was the last she had given him before she had passed. It was not the most valuable coin he owned, but

it was the one that
made him feel the
strongest
connection to his
wife. He
remembered they
had been at a
family gathering
when she had
given it to him.
They had all been
together for his
birthday. It was

one of the last,
true, happy
moments of his
life.

His right hand
twirled the coin.
His left hand held
the right hand of
his granddaughter,
Mia. Her long
black hair tickled
the hairs on his
arm, her hand was

wet and slick with sweat. She wriggled her hand, and he squeezed tighter. The day was a scorcher. He looked down at her and gave her a disapproving look.

Even at twelve years old, her looks caught the attention of people.

They often
commented on
how beautiful she
was. The contrast
between her
porcelain skin,
green eyes, and
dark hair was
stunning.

“We’re holding
hands until we get
across the street.
Safety first.”

He stared at the
bustling cars
moving back and
forth, barring their
path to the Baker
City Mall. The
mall was the
indoor type with a
couple of anchor
department stores,
smaller shops, and a
food court. The
mall had been built

in the 1980s and had changed little since, other than a steady decline in both the physical appearance of the building and the clientele.

Baker City's finer residents had all moved their shopping to the west side of town

to a development
that had newer
shops such as Nike,
Rue 21, and Old
Navy. Harry
preferred the mall
though, much to
the chagrin of
Mia.

“You don’t
need to hold my
hand, gramps. I’ll
be fine.”

She watched
the cars whip
down the
boulevard in front
of them. Harry
thought she looked
a little scared, but
she would never
admit it.

Mia glanced at
him and shouted
above the traffic,
“Why didn’t you

park in the Mall's lot? If you had, we wouldn't need to cross this traffic."

Without looking at her, Harry said, "Too much crime in the mall parking lot. I like my Buick without the windows busted out, thanks."

Finally, the traffic light changed, and they made their way across the busy boulevard to the mall parking area. As soon as Mia stepped foot onto mall property, she dropped Harry's hand and made a show of wiping her

palm on her jeans.
He rolled his eyes
and thought of
Mia's mother, his
beautiful daughter,
Kristina. She had
been gone for two
years and two
months. Unlike his
wife Esther,
Kristina's death had
been sudden and
unexpected, the

result of an
accident. When he
thought of her
death, anger rose
inside of him, and
his heart fluttered.

“Best not to
think about that
now, Harry.” He
said to himself.

“What gramps?
Are you talking to
yourself again?”

Harry shrugged
his shoulders and
entered the cooled
air of the mall.

“Tell you what
little miss, let’s go
grab us an ice
cream before you
do your
shopping.”

Mia bounced
on her toes, “Yay!

Ice cream, let's
go!"

At the ice
cream shop, Harry
released the half
dollar back into the
depths of his front
pocket and
withdrew his
wallet. He looked
at the chocolate ice
cream in its tub
through the glass

partition. Some chocolate with peanut butter cups mixed in appealed to him.

Mia pointed the pimply faced teenage boy behind the counter to the vanilla. “I’ll take a scoop of the vanilla in a cone please, and gramps will

have two scoops of
chocolate with
peanut butter cups
mixed in, right
gramps?”

Harry nodded
his head, “How did
you know that?”

Mia replied,
“It’s what you had
last time, don’t you
remember?”

Harry was sure
that he had ordered
coffee ice cream
with brownie
chunks in it on
their previous visit
to the mall, but he
supposed Mia
could be right.

After paying
and finding a small
table for two,
Harry watched Mia

suck on her cone.
Between bites, she
jabbered about
Tommy, a boy at
school. She
thought he was
'adorbs' but so did
Sheila, and that had
caused a whole
bunch of drama
with a cap D'. He
listened to her, as
his mind drifted to

his daughter's
death.

He had found
her at night. His
worthless son-in-
law had been away
on a business trip,
as usual. That was
always fine with
him, since he lived
with his daughter,
Ethan, and Mia.

When Kristina
had gotten it in her
head that he was
lonely without
Esther, she had
hinted at him to
move into their
large home in the
country. He had
resisted until he
had damn near
burned his house
down one day. He

had completely
forgotten the
bacon he had been
frying on the stove
when a buddy
called him. The
phone call had
distracted him from
his lunch-making.
By the time the
smoke alarm had
bellowed, half the
damn kitchen wall

had burned. He
had been lucky to
get the fire put out,
but the fire hadn't
been the actual
damage that had
been done.

Kristina had
determined that he
was losing his
marbles in his old
age. She had
insisted on him

living with them.
Of course, getting
distracted by a
phone call, and
burning the bacon
up could have
happened to
anyone, but his
daughter hadn't
seen it that way.
Two weeks later,
his house was on
the market and he

was moved into
her and Ethan's
guest room.

The night she
died, he found her
in the barn, pinned
under the bucket
of a bobcat front-
end loader. Ethan
was away, and he
had needed a
hammer. He had a
new Norman

Rockwell print he wanted to hang in his room, so he had gone to the barn for the hammer.

There he had found his precious daughter, her body was twisted and disfigured.

He closed his eyes. Mia's ramblings were

only background noise as he relived that night. He had stormed into the house and called 911. Then he had called out to Mia. She hadn't answered him.

He sat in the mall staring at his melting ice cream, remembering that

moment of panic
that had layered
itself over his
devastation. He
yelled out to Mia
several times. She
had not come to
him. He had left
the dispatch
operator hanging
on the phone and
started searching

for his
granddaughter.

“You need to
quit thinking about
mama dying.”

Mia’s mention
of her mother’s
death pulled him
out of his fog. In
his pocket, his right
hand found the
coin.

“Mia, I have a suggestion.”

“What’s that?”

Harry stopped flipping the coin through his fingers and looked at her. Her eyes were definitely off. The right color, yes, but in the light, the shade of green was

wrong. They were too dark.

He looked into her eyes, “Why don’t we cut the crap?”

Mia’s mouth hung half-open with melting ice cream pooling on her tongue.
“Huh?”

Harry pushed his wire-framed glasses lower on his nose to peer at her and said, “I know who you are. I’ve seen one of you before.”

“You’re silly.”
Mia took another bite of ice cream while observing a couple of teenage

boys push and
shove each other
playfully. They
laughed as they
entered Kicks, a
shoe store.

“Aswang.”

He watched for
her response. She
looked at him for a
moment and then
began munching

on the waffle cone
part of her dessert.

“Before I met
Esther, I was in the
army.”

Mia nodded,
“Yeah, I remember
you talking about
your war stories.
Daddy says you
live in the past. He
says that happens to
old people.”

Harry
continued, “I was
stationed at Clark
Air Force Base in
the Philippines. It
was there that I
saw the Aswang.”
He paused. She still
had not made eye
contact with him.
“That’s what you
are. You’re
Aswang. I even did

some research on
the Google. I
studied carefully,
and it all fits.”

Mia turned her
cone sideways. She
nibbled around the
edges and asked,
“What’s an ass
wang?”

He shook his
head, “Not ass or
wang, Aswang, and

you know damn
well what it is
because you are
one.”

“You say silly
things sometimes,
gramps.”

He still had not
touched his ice
cream. “You’re not
Mia. What
happened to her?”

Mia finally
looked past her ice
cream cone at him.
She had drips of
vanilla on her
chin.

She smiled and
said, “Daddy said
to tell him if you
said things that
don’t make sense.
He said it might be
dimension.”

Harry looked at
her green eyes that
were right and
wrong. He
remembered
walking past her
open bedroom
door two nights
previous. He had
seen two glowing
green embers
hovering in the
dark. They had

been positioned at the head of her bed. He had reached into her room and switched on the light. Mia had been sitting up on her bed, staring at him as though she had expected him. She had asked him what he wanted. Before

answering her, he
had flipped the
lights back off. The
two glowing orbs
had returned in the
darkness, in the
same spot as her
eyes were when
the lights were on.

He had flipped
the light back on.
The glowing green
specters were gone.

In their place, Mia
sat staring at him.

She had said,
“Gramps? What are
you doing with my
light? Gramps?”

“Gramps?”

Harry looked at
his melting ice
cream, and then at
Mia. She was
speaking to him.

“Gramps?
Hello?”

He focused on
the depth of her
eyes.

He said, “It’s
called dementia,
and I don’t have it.
Your dad will have
to show me his
medical degree
before I’m going to
worry about his

diagnosis. Since
he's an accountant,
I'm guessing he
doesn't have one."

Mia shrugged
and returned to
munching on the
waffle cone.

"Mia, why do
your eyes glow in
the dark?"

She giggled,
“Gramps, my eyes
don’t glow.”

“They did
when I stopped by
your room the
other night. They
were green, and
they were glowing,
like the Aswang I
saw in the
Philippines.”

She sat up in
her chair and
frowned, “Quit
calling me that. It’s
a dirty name.
What’s an Ass
Wang, anyway?”

He tried a bite
of his ice cream. It
was too sweet. His
tastes had soured as
he thought of the
loss of Kristina.

“It’s not dirty. In the Philippines, it’s what they call a shape-shifting creature. The Aswang can only appear as a female during the day, but at night... at night they become flying monsters. Tell me something, Mia, why is your bed

empty so often in
the middle of the
night?”

She had
finished her cone.
Her arms folded
across her chest,
she leaned back in
her chair and
sighed as though
she was growing
weary.

She answered him, “It’s not. Sometimes I go to the bathroom, that’s all.”

He lowered his voice as a middle-aged couple sat down a few feet away. “So, at two or three in the morning, you go to the bathroom for

forty-five minutes?
Because I have
been keeping track.
You're gone from
your bed every
night for at least
that long. The
Aswang hunts
during the night.
That's what the
Mangkukulam told
me in the
Philippines.”

She tilted her head at him. It reminded him of Toby, their dog. She scratched the end of her nose, leaving a trail of ice cream. “What’s a mang coo coo lam?”

“It’s a witch in the Philippines. I consulted one after

seeing the Aswang.
I learned a lot. The
glowing green eyes
in the dark and the
ability to project
their voice are
some of their
talents. They turn
into monsters at
night, to hunt.
They also can't eat
garlic. I have
noticed how you

refuse to eat any meal that has garlic in it as well.”

Mia shrugged her shoulders, “I think you are having memory problems, gramps. I’ve had garlic, I just don’t like it. It’s too strong, and it gives me a stinky face.”

He asked her,
“What about that
time that I couldn’t
find you in the
house, remember?
I kept calling out
to you. You
answered, but your
voice kept fading as
though you were
getting further and
further away. You
had me believing

you were outside
wandering away
from the house. I
turned around and
damn near fell right
over you. You had
been right behind
me the whole
time.”

She giggled
again, “Yes, that
was funny. You fell
for it, almost really

fell for it.” She
laughed.

“How’d you
do that if you’re
not an Aswang?”

“Gramps,
you’re scaring me.
I was just making
my voice quieter.
Are you going to
be okay to drive us
home?”

He waved a finger in front of her, “No, it was like you were outside, not like you were talking quietly.”

Mia folded her arms across her chest and stared at him.

“You killed Kristina, and more

than likely Mia as well.”

Tears welled in her eyes, “Don’t you tell me that!”

The couple across from them were staring. He glared back until they looked away, whispering to each other.

He turned his attention back to Mia, “Where were you the night I found Kristina?”

“I was trying to find you.” Her tears had already dried up.

“Like hell you were. I searched everywhere. You were gone. I had a

dead daughter lying
in the barn,
crushed to death,
and a missing
granddaughter. My
ticker just about
gave out right then
and there. Then
there you were,
coming back from
the barn.” He
paused, watching
her green eyes

glaze over, “Here’s something I know for sure. That Bobcat didn’t turn itself on and crush Kristina into pulp. Someone did it. The police may have ruled it an accident, but you’re not fooling me.”

Mia's stare was far away. Her eyes held steady while her mind churned through memories. She said, "I saw her there. I went out there to find you guys because the house was empty. I walked into the barn and I saw her laying under that

thing. I knew it was her because of her hair. She was so...

“Stop it.”

Mia returned from her memories and said, “I’m going to tell daddy. He said if you say weird stuff to tell him.”

Harry leaned forward, “I’m watching you. I’m watching you all the time. You’re going to screw up at some point and I’m going to have the proof I need.”

Mia stood up from the table, “I want to go home.”



Harry opened the mall door, and they stepped back outside into the heat. They began the trek across the parking lot toward the busy boulevard.

“I AM telling dad about this just

as soon as we get home.”

He heard her, but he was not concerned. She wouldn't get the chance to say anything.

They reached the boulevard. Cars rushed back and forth.

He took her
hand in his, and
she tried to pull
away.

“Remember,
young lady, safety
first.”

She stopped
pulling against him,
her arm hanging
limp.

He watched
the cars speeding
by, waiting for the
right opportunity.

“We can go
now, gramps.” She
started to step into
the street.

He pulled her
back. “No, not yet.
Those cars down
there are coming
too fast.”

She rolled her eyes and stamped a foot on the sidewalk, “Oh my God, this is going to take forever and it’s hot out here. The sign says we can walk.”

In the distance, he could see a white delivery truck. It was in the

lane nearest them
and moving fast. It
was perfect.

He tightened
his grip on her
hand. “We’ll go
right after this
truck.”

He had
dreamed of this
moment since he
had figured out
who she was.

The truck was
only a few seconds
away.

She had killed
Kristina that night.

His Mia was
gone. He didn't
know what
happened to her,
and never would,
but the Aswang
next to him

wouldn't live to
kill again.

The truck was
barreling toward
them.

He pulled her
arm forward. He
expected her to
resist. Instead, her
damp hand twisted
free of his. He
turned his head to
her. She was

already behind
him.

He wondered
how she had been
able to move so
fast, and then he
felt both of her
hands on his back.

She shoved
him.

The truck was
a blur of white. It

struck him in his
left side. The pain
was brief and
intense. Then he
was weightless.
The street below
him streamed by as
though it was a
fast-moving river.
He heard tires
squeal and a
scream. Someone
shouted out a plea

to God. The world
zoomed by below
him and everything
stopped. He could
no longer see the
street. The
screaming woman
faded away. There
were no more
sounds of horror.
There was only
darkness.

It was peaceful.
In the darkness,
someone called out
to him.

“Kristina?”

Pain came to
him. It radiated
from his side,
through his arms
and leg, through
his back, into his
head.

The voice, so familiar, called to him.

“Kristina?
Esther?”

He opened his eyes. The sky above him was so blue, like the ocean, only with a wash of red over it.

He blinked.
The red cleared
and then oozed
back across the
sky.

A face drifted
into his vision. The
redness colored the
face as it had the
sky.

“Gramps.”

Not Kristina,
but Mia.

“Aswang.” His
mouth felt mushy.
He needed to spit.

Mia looked
past him and then
stared into his eyes.
“You should have
studied a little
harder when you
were doing your
research, old man.

I am Aswang, and
you were right
about everything
that you said, but
you missed one
thing.”

It was getting
harder to make his
mouth move.
“Wha...what?”

“I can also read
minds.”

Another face
appeared, a young
man. “Oh my
God, mister. What
happened? Why
did you step off the
dang sidewalk?
Hold on, I called
the paramedics.
They’re on the
way.”

The young
man looked at Mia,

“Are you, okay,
little girl?”

As quickly as
they had passed
earlier, tears sprang
to her eyes.

“Yes, but he’s
going to be okay,
right? He’s my
gramps.” She
looked at Harry
and ran a hand
across his forehead,

“Oh gramps, why did you step into the street? I told you not to.”

The young man stood up and answered his phone, “Yes, he’s breathing and talking, but there’s blood everywhere...”

His voice faded
as he stepped
away.

Harry could
feel small hands
rooting around in
his pocket. Mia
held up his 1946
Silver half-dollar
and kissed it. She
stuffed it into her
jeans pocket.

Sirens were
drawing near, but
he couldn't focus
on them. A
blinding light
opened above him
in the sky. The
light reached for
him. It was warm
and welcoming.
He wanted to go
to it. A voice in

the light called his
name.

“Harry, honey,
it’s time to come
home.”

He felt as
though he was
being lifted by the
voice. He floated
away from the
street and all the
noise.

“Esther? Is that
you?”

Below him, the
lies of the Aswang
were drifting,
folding in on
themselves.

“Oh, gramps,
don’t die, please
don’t die...”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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He lives with his wife Mia and has 3 children, 5 god children and 3

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