

A Collection of Short Stories by:

G. Styles

203

K. Biltz

204

S. deGeyer

301

B. Somers

302

T. Radle

DEAD
MEMORIES



INTRODUCTION

Greetings,

The five authors whose stories you are about to read are part of a small writing group in northeast Ohio. We met first on Twitter and once realizing our geographic connection, we started meeting in person on a monthly basis, back in early 2019. What initially started as a critique group—reading parts of each other’s works and offering creative criticism to help us become better writers—soon became much more. We became, dare I say, friends. Except Tim and Stoney who are mortal enemies.

After a year of poking, jabbing, and challenging each other, some brilliant soul came up with an idea. (He or she shall remain nameless so as not to encourage their delusions of grandeur.) The idea was simple: We each write a short story around a single premise.

The premise we came up with was as equally simple: Two characters have amnesia, one dies.

This book you’re reading is the result of that challenge. Each story is vastly different and comprises a different genre. We normally write in horror, thriller, romance, fantasy and sci-fi but, strangely enough, a few of us chose to write outside of our typical genre for this project. We hope you enjoy the result. At the very least, we hope this expands your reading horizons.

If you’re a writer yourself, we encourage you to find a local group of writers of your own to join. If you’re in our area, contact us. You never know what you’ll find: support, understanding, constructive feedback, and most importantly, friendship.

But most of all, we hope you fall in love with this small group of authors you’re about to read, just as we have fallen in love with each other. (Except Stoney and Tim.)

-- George, Ken, Stoney, Bambi, & Tim.

GEORGE
SWICES

Ken Biltz

Bambi Sommers

Stoney

Tim

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Jesse Burke for his contribution to our project. He created the cover page as well as each story title page. Jesse is a visual artist living in Kent, OH. With the exception of a couple college drawing courses, Jesse is a self-taught artist, drawing since he could hold a crayon and picking up painting somewhere in his early 20's. His artistic style is mainly abstract and surrealist, with his preferred mediums being pen and ink, acrylic and oil paints, and digital art. Jesse currently resides in Kent with his wife, Cindy, and their two young boys, Sebastian and Killian. Find more of his artwork at www.jesse-burke.jimdosite.com and on Instagram as @jesseburke80.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction..... 1

Acknowledgments..... 2

DRIFT -- by George Styles..... 4

CLOWNING AROUND -- by Ken Biltz..... 22

THE HIDDEN PLACE -- by Stoney deGeyter 38

A FAMILIAR STRANGER -- by Bambi Sommers..... 56

A SINGLE TEARDROP -- by Tim Radle..... 70



DRIFT

by George Styles

I open my eyes.
For a moment, there is a haze.
Everything is blurry.
I don't notice anything else.
A few seconds pass, and now my eyes come into focus.
I finally begin to notice my breathing.
It's shallow and smooth.
Like a wave-less body of infinite water.
And now I see across from me that there is someone else.
Despite my initial mental charges, I can see that this mysterious entity across
from me is looking at me.
And now all that runs through my mind is the glare beaming across from this
mysterious being.
The silence doesn't help my apparent delirium.
Through this... stillness.
But I love this. All of this.
This serenity. This immobile moment. Out of the reach of time.
It's not that I don't remember how I got here.
It's that I don't want to think about how I got here.
I don't remember and I don't care.
I just want to revel into this mystical serenity.
This hypnotic glare.
An abyss I wish to be forever confined within.
Falling, down, forever, into this void.
I don't want to leave this.
This moment.
As I go to move in closer, I notice that something has changed.
Then there is a loud bang.
This of course, quickly stirs me from the darkness.
Now I'm awake.

Cleanliness is next to godliness. Well, at least that's what they say. Despite the potential for a philosophical self-debate, after the cleanup, I head for the shower. It's not unusual for me to spend 45 minutes or more in the shower these days. More so, however, on this particular day. On this particular day, there is a lot I need to be clean for. Thus, this entails making sure that I am surgically clean on all possible bodily surfaces. After all, with the way I do life, I need to make being clean a top priority. I begin to scrub away, making sure to get everything.

Everything.

And while I scrub on, my mind now fades off into other things.

Now I'm thinking back to yesterday morning.

Yesterday morning, when I was in the shower.

And now I go back to yesterday, right when I was in the shower.

Yesterday, after the shower, I got dressed. There were a lot of reasons besides the obvious to get dressed, but in the case of yesterday there were some important reasons which required dressing my very best. After all, yesterday was the day I was to give a lecture. Given that it was going to be in front of some people who were looking interested, I decided to go with all my possible best clothes. Even my best socks. Then, after the lecture was lunch, then, following lunch, a rendezvous in the evening with that woman from the convenience store from last week.

It's the date in the evening I'm actually excited for.

Once I got dressed, I then went downstairs to fix breakfast. Of course, I do a regular breakfast. I have no need for anything fancy. Well, at least not in a breakfast. After I finished, I cleaned up.

And then I headed off to the lecture.

"That's a nice tie," says Jeff, looking over at me while we sit in his office.

He then turned to shut the door behind him.

"It goes really well with your suit."

"Thanks for saying so," I replied, nodding his way.

"Hey,"

"No problem."

"I gotta give credit where credit is due," he says, tapping his pen off his file folder.

"So," he continued, opening the file and looking through his papers.

"It looks as if everything is going well."

I smiled, not moving my gaze.

“And if I might say so,”

“I think we’ve definitely got progress.”

I stayed as I was and just looked on smiling.

“Yeah,” he continued.

“This means we can move on,” he said, smiling.

“Move on to the next level.”

Jeff was always an optimist. But yesterday made me realize that he was far more of an optimist than I had initially believed he was. After we chatted on about this and that, we both decided that I was to meet Barry over at the pub, for some lunch as it was long past noon. I always lost track of time when I talked with Jeff. Much of the things he said were compelling. You don’t meet a lot of compelling people in life. Good thing I knew Jeff though. Jeff was compelling. Most of all, Jeff doesn’t offend you when he looks at you. He has a gaze that doesn’t try to interrogate you. I like his eyes.

Once I shook hands with Jeff, then I went over to meet up with Barry at the pub.

“You still don’t like fish n’ chips?” Barry said, taking a sip of his coffee. Barry said this every time we met up. He always had to say it at least once.

“Personally,”

“I can’t get enough of them,” he said, looking over to see if the waitress was bringing out his order.

“It’s not my thing,” I replied, smiling.

“Well,” he began, turning towards me and folding his hands together.

“I don’t know how it’s not.”

“But,”

“To each his own.”

“Here’s to that,” I said, raising my Diet Coke.

“To that,” he said, not moving and just glaring on at me.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, I shuffled back in my seat. Barry has this sort of eeriness about the way he looks at you. He continued for maybe a minute more, not moving and not talking but staring right at me. I had no idea why it was that he needed to do this. It is unsettling in a strange way. His gaze is like a razor blade. I have to look away a bit.

“Alright,”

“So,”

“Do you recall that girl who used to work at Humbers?”

“Girl at Humbers?” I replied, looking at him as it wasn’t ringing a bell.

“Yeah,”

“The one who was usually quiet whenever you’d try to make conversation at the register?”

I looked on at him. Barry always had this thing for wanting you to know every single person in the city. Although it was likely true that he knew everyone, it wasn’t true that the rest of us did.

“Human trafficking,” he said, not giving me anything else.

“I don’t follow,” I replied.

He then reached into his pocket and pulled out a notebook. He opened it and flipped to a page where he began reading.

“Yep,” he said, reading away.

“She went missing two months ago.”

“And it looks as if this is likely a case of human trafficking.”

“Or, that’s what the current take on it is.”

“This happened here?” I replied, thinking that it would be utterly strange to have such a thing happen in this town.

“Well,” he began, still gazing on at the notebook.

“It does seem rather odd, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I replied, watching him read on.

“So just before that happened,” he continued.

“A week before,”

“The pharmacy over on James St. was broken into.”

Barry stopped reading through the notebook, he shoved it aside from his face and looked on at me.

“So the odd thing here is not that they broke in,” he continued.

“It’s that they only took one thing.”

“Weird,” I replied, not knowing at all where he was going with it.

Barry paused and exhaled. He looked on at me for a moment. I did nothing but continue as I had been.

“So,” he began.

“They took something specific.”

He paused, looking on at me.

“It was a drug.”

“A drug that, when injected, leads to temporary paralysis.”

“Apparently,”

“You inject this stuff,”

“And the patient soon finds themselves unable to move.”

“Now, they can hear, breathe and smell fine,”

“But once this stuff hits them,”

“They can’t even so much as twitch a finger.”

I felt a bit of a turn in my stomach. The whole thing was getting a bit eerie.

“That’s scary,” I replied, feeling as if I couldn’t wait till the waitress brought out his lunch.

“Yes,” he said, looking at me straight in the eyes.

“Scary indeed-”

“Fish n’ chips?” the waitress said out of nowhere, standing beside our table, holding the plate and looking between us both. Barry quickly broke his glare.

“Right here, ma’am,” he said, moving aside so the waitress could set the plate down on the table.

“Enjoy,” the waitress said, smiling.

“Do you gentlemen want anything else?”

“We’re fine,” Barry replied, unfolding his napkin not even taking a moment to shoot me a look to clarify whether I wanted anything.

“How about you, hon?” the waitress asked me.

I looked over at Barry. He was completely focused on his meal.

“I’m okay,” I replied.

The waitress then stood there for a second and smiled at me. Strangely, she looked me in the eyes. She had a refreshing gaze.

“Okay then,” she said, still gazing on at me.

“I’ll be by again,”

“So if you do change your mind-”

“Thank you,” I replied, staring back at her.

She glared on for one more moment. I found myself unable to look away.

“So,” Barry said, still chewing his food, breaking my gaze.

“Back to my story,”

“It’s rather strange that someone would break into an entire pharmacy just to get one thing.”

“And it’s even stranger, that of all things,”

“That they only wanted a paralysis-inducing drug.”

I watched on as Barry continued to eat his meal. Likewise, he looked on at me with a piercing gaze.

It was as if his eyes were the only thing that were really trying to say something. After what seemed like an entire minute of staring at me with the most unwavering look I had ever been subject to. He put his utensils down.

“You see,” he began.

“All of this is making me wonder about the whole human trafficking idea.”

“Really? I replied, not at all being able to see where he was going with it.

“How?”

Barry picked up his napkin and patted it gently over his mouth.

“Well,”

“We don’t have any evidence that the Humbers girl was in fact kidnapped by human traffickers per se.”

“After all,”

“Absence of evidence is not exactly evidence of absence.”

“It’s really that we don’t know what happened to her.”

“But,”

“Seeing we’re a relatively small town,”

“I think it’s really a matter of trying to figure out whether she was taken by someone outside the community.”

“Or, get this,”

“In the community...”

Barry completely stopped moving. His eyes looked on at me much too intensely. Again, we sat in a strange, awkward silence. In the background, everyone else was going on about their usual. The two of us however, almost seemed to come to a halt. Barry continued on for what seemed like a minute more, then broke from his motionless glare.

“I wonder,” he began.

“The biggest mistake we could make in figuring it all out is that we make too much effort to look out,”

“When all this time,”

“The whole reason could be right in front of us.”

After more discussion with Barry, I found myself bidding him a good day and rushing, rather than just walking, out of the café. Although he could be over intense and particularly jarring to sit with, today, there had been something completely fierce about him. And it was also today that I was actually glad to get away from him more than I ever had been.

I scurried up the street, trying more so to get as much distance from the café than having any particular destination. As I walked on, a familiar figure then appeared in my sights. It was the town's only homeless guy.

And this homeless guy was a bit odd.

"The spider catches the fly," he said, as I walked up to his position at the front of the building.

"Sorry?" I said as I slowed up to catch what he was saying.

He turned to me with a ghastly look. This man had the most hideous stare. It was awful. I could barely look. He had a look of sheer hideousness. It was almost impossible to look his way.

"You know," he began, wobbling from the lunchtime round of alcohol.

"Unlike the crow or the sparrow,"

"The bird of prey,"

"Usually when it secures its catch,"

"It goes for the eyes."

I looked on at him, wavering between looking him in the eyes and not looking away.

"Yeah," he said, staring at me.

"It pecks out the eyes first."

His existence seemed to be entirely aimed at making passersby feels uncomfortable. Of course, he never really changed what he said to you. Thus, as this was the case, I walked on. Of course, you can never just leave these people without having something crude spewed out as a final retort.

"Things are mighty strange in this town!" he yelled as I scurried off up the street.

"Mighty strange indeed!"

It took a lot to shake off that man. The years of alcohol have clearly drained him of his senses. Delusional and asinine, he could barely sit upright let alone say anything coherent.

Once I got up the street, I then noticed that I was close to the optical outlet store.

As it was a favorite of mine, I couldn't deny myself a few minutes to browse around to see if there were any new selections. Once going into the outlet, I looked around only to notice that they indeed had changed their selection from the last time I had been in. Additionally, they had something new that caught my eye.

These new mannequin models.

They were unlike the old ones however.

These ones actually had a painted face, but they had great detail. Almost looking as if they were a human face. And of course, they had those artificial model eyes. As I had noticed all this, I then walked over to one. I removed the glasses from the model and then looked on. They shone. Just like real. It was absolutely mind-blowing that mere fabrication technology could be manipulated to produce such a miraculous work of art. As I marveled on, I soon realized I couldn't help myself. Slowly, my hands moved up towards them. It was like a tractor beam. Then, suddenly my head went numb. I had to touch them. Even if it was just for a minute. They felt real. The way the head was oriented, I could only slowly rotate my thumbs over the smooth surface of them.

The feeling of it was utterly unimaginable.

A pure state of supernatural bliss.

I felt myself leaving my body.

There is nothing quite like it.

"Can I help you?" a voice said, shattering my trance.

"Huh?" I said, jolting back, surprised.

"Oh,"

"I'm so sorry," the girl said, stepping back and holding her hand over her mouth.

She looked on at me in a rather embarrassing way, holding a look of shock on her face. Being that I had been torn from my trance, I had no time to compose myself. Now all I could do was continue on in my entranced condition. I then took a good look on into her eyes. They flickered away in a gentle dance, clearly indicating that this girl was far more startled than I had been. Overall, she looked like she had just seen a ghost.

"You know,"

"You have the most beautiful eyes," I said, glaring on and marveling at their exquisite beauty.

The girl took a second to break off from her apparent state of shock. She then quickly blushed and smiled.

"Thanks," she said, taking a sip of her drink that she seemed to have been carrying around with her. It seemed almost a bit unprofessional.

"So do you."

"Well," I replied.

"I'd say that yours are something much, much more."

She smiled quickly and then turned around as if to look around the store to see if no one else was there.

“So,”

“What were you-”

“Doing?” I quickly interrupted.

She widened her eyes and started to smile and snicker.

I returned the smile.

“Well,” I began.

“I was just seeing if those eyes... were *real*,”

“Like,”

“You know,”

“Technology is always surprising.”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Tell me about it.”

“Right?” I replied.

“I mean,”

“I wish it was actually a bit better though-”

“What?” she asked.

“Technology.” I replied.

“Oh, tell me about it,” she said, taking another sip of her drink.

“Especially these days,” she continued.

“Especially with all these missing women.”

“Missing women?” I asked, wondering how it was all related to technology.

“Yeah, you know,” she began, looking at me a bit strangely.

“Like, the thing that they’re trying to keep hush hush right now?”

“Have you heard what everyone’s saying?” she said, moving her drink aside.

“No,” I said, smiling and wondering where she was going with it.

“Okay, check this out,” she began.

“So,”

“You do know how there are now like six missing women, right?”

I looked on at her for a moment. I actually had no idea that there were that many missing women from our town.

“Six?” I asked, thinking that it was far too high an estimate.

“Well,” she began, turning her face into a more serious look.

“If you count the other three from the last few years,”

“Then it’s nine.”

“Nine?” I said, surprised.

“Yeah,” she said, nodding.

“Anyway,”

“People are actually starting to believe it might be a vampire.”

“A vampire?” I said, pulling my head back in disbelief.

“Seriously?”

“I know, right?” she said, taking a sip of her drink. She looked around quickly and then leaned in.

“You know,”

“At first,”

“I thought it was a joke too,” she began.

“But the strange thing is,”

“They aren’t able to find the bodies-”

“So why isn’t it just human trafficking?” I asked, thinking back to my discussion with Barry.

“If they can’t find the bodies-”

“Well,” she began moving her face in a bit closer.

“They’ve actually been watching who is coming in and out of town,” she said, saying it all in a hush.

“My dad’s a cop,” she explained.

“Apparently,”

“No strange vehicles or anything else have been coming and going around the dates that the women go missing.”

“So they think it’s actually someone from town.”

“Someone from here?” I replied.

“Yes,” she said, nodding her head so as to confirm.

“That’s what the cops are saying.”

“But people around here are starting to think otherwise.”

“Some people are actually starting to think it’s a vampire,”

“Or, at least,”

“Some kind of monster.”

I glared on at her for a moment. She equally glared right back.

“A monster?” I gasped.

“Yes,” she said, nodding away.

“A monster.”

As I had spent far too long discussing the strange situation that had apparently spooked the residents of the town, I finally wrapped up my conversation at the Optical outlet and headed off for the days main event, my date with that woman from the convenience store, from last week.

Immediately after meeting up with her at our agreed rendezvous at the park, we agreed to head over to the town's finest in dining.

"Who is having the fettuccini?" the waiter asked, appearing out of nowhere, ready to set the plate down on the table.

"Right here," she said, smiling at the waiter. He placed her plate down in front of her.

"Thank you," she said, widening her eyes at the impressive meal now before her.

"My pleasure," he replied. He then looked over at me.

"And the blue steak?"

"It might be me," I replied, looking on at the waiter.

"Here you go," he said, setting it in front of me, smiling and snickering.

"My gosh," she said, unwrapping her utensils from the napkin.

"I'm so hungry."

After dinner, we decided to have coffee and then go for an evening stroll.

As we walked along and the dark set in, I felt as if a strange sensation began to trickle down the back of my head. It came about in pulses, first they were gentle, but then they intensified to the point where I almost began to shiver. As they intensified, I could feel myself beginning to fade. As we strolled along and she continued to discuss whatever we had been previously discussing, then, out of nowhere, everything went black.

At that point, I am not entirely sure how long I was out.

Either way, I later woke to myself dragging along not far off from where I had last remembered being conscious. As I dragged along, I then quickly noticed that it was not I so much that was dragging along, but rather that I had been dragging the girl from the convenience store along. Strangely, she seemed to be completely unconscious. As it was far too perplexing to try to reason out as to how things had become the way they were, I then continued along in the darkness towards the park.

Just as I entered the back of the park, I looked over towards the center of the park only to see the homeless guy, standing there, looking on at me in some sort of state of amazement. Seeing that I was in what could only be thought of as a tight squeeze, I let go of the girl and walked over to him.

He looked as if he had just seen a ghost.

"Listen," I began, noting that he had a full bottle of whiskey in his hand.

"I'm going to need you to climb up on that play structure with me."

He nodded quickly and I took him by the arm and led him up to the top of the play structure.

Once we got to the top, I turned to him.

"I'm gonna need you to take down that whole bottle," I said, nodding towards the whiskey bottle.

He looked on at me as if I was insane.

"All of it?" he said, his voice trembling and his hands shaking as he reached down for it.

"Yes," I replied.

"All of it."

He glared on at me for a second. Strangely, it was almost as if he was no longer the same, boisterous homeless drunk he was a few hours ago. This time he had a look of terror in his eyes.

Almost as if he had just seen a vampire.

Or a monster.

Once he had finished taking down the entire contents of the bottle I stood by and pointed out to him all the different trees in the park. As the minutes ticked away, he soon began to wobble and once he did this, I told him to look over at something all while I quickly stooped down and grabbed his ankles and flung him as hard as I could right on over the side of the play structure.

Luckily for me, he flew down without even registering it and landed right on his head, immediately breaking his neck.

With that out of the way, I went back to retrieve the unconscious girl.

With my path cleared, I then decided that I could just carry her back to my place. I brought her upstairs into my bedroom and fixed her to a chair. Seeing that it takes a bit of time for them to come around, I decided to read a novel I had just started. It took a good hour before she came around, of course, at this point, noticing the gag I had secured in her mouth.

After some commotion and shaking in the chair, I put my novel down.

I walked over and looked on at her. She began to scream upon the sight of me. Of course, the screaming was muffled as I had made sure to secure the gag sufficiently. She then began to shake and wriggle about, trying to unfasten herself from the chair. I watched on for a good few minutes as she slowly came to the realization that she wasn't able to get out. She then started to sob and it was then that I knew that I could remove the gag.

And much to my surprise, this girl unlike all the others, just continued to sob.

"Who are you?" she asked, hyperventilating and shaking.

"You're not the one who-"

"I'm not the one?" I asked, catching her by surprise and quickly jabbing her with the needle, injecting the contents all while she began to struggle hard. Once the injection had been complete, I walked over and put the syringe on the dresser.

As I didn't know when else would have been a better time, I then decided to break it to her.

"The last ones," I said, trying to get her to look at me. She continued to flail her head all about so as if to shake off the injection.

"The last ones," I continued, then trying to get a hold of her head. I finally got a hold of it and held it so that she looked my way.

"I cut out their eyes."

The girl began screaming and hyperventilating.

"And," I continued.

"I'm not a vampire," I assured her.

I then stooped down to look her straight in the eyes.

"I make sure you won't feel a thing."

"I'm not..."

"Not a torturer,"

"I'm just in this for something... deeper."

The girl continued on, lamenting all while entranced in sheer panic.

"And it's okay," I further explained.

"I will erase your remains."

"That way,"

"Your family won't have to see you left to such a dismal end."

"I can't even begin to tell you how much that is really worth."

The girl suddenly began to wail and scream so hard I had to shove the gag back in her mouth. Once I had roughly secured the gag, I went over to the closet and then brought out the guillotine.

“This fits on the table,” I explained amidst the commotion.

“Don’t worry,”

“It’s razor sharp,”

“You wouldn’t even know if it dropped.”

“This evening though,”

“I think I’m gonna put it on one side of the bed.”

“And don’t worry,”

“It’s perfectly good to remove a head from the side.”

“But I have to admit,”

“The trigger is a bit touchy,”

“So,”

“Forgive me if that happens,”

“It’s something I still have to work out.”

The soul is in the eyes.

It is here where the gateway to the deepest dimension lies.

But people never get it.

Despite what the hopeless will cry, there is always a silver lining.

A silver lining in everything.

God gave us this.

It’s a default.

Something to look forward to through life’s compulsion to subject us to downpours of misery and torment.

After all, it can be a wretched existence.

My brother, Christopher.

Someone had taken his eyes out.

Left him on the front lawn.

They said the blinding was so traumatic, that it killed him in the process.

And they never actually found his eyes.

When the adults asked how I was about it, I told them I was fine.

And whenever they would ask, I would tell them the same thing.

But the truth was, I wasn’t.

I was never fine after that.

And only a few people really had a clue.

Barry.

Damn cop. He seen it all. Thankfully no one took him seriously.

And that homeless drunk.

He knew it all along.

Barry knew it was me all along.

Of course all these disappearances were due to someone in the town.

I couldn't look my brother in the eyes, even one last time.

A moment like that, taken from me.

And because of all their incompetence, they never did find out who the killer was.

Barry, that drunk, none of them.

However, none of them could have known.

I had promised Christopher that I wouldn't tell anyone.

Tell anyone, about his date that night.

A date with a strange but alluring woman that very night it all happened.

A woman, who just seemed to have disappeared into thin air right after leaving Christopher lying on the front lawn.

His eyes plucked straight out from his head.

And needless to say, all of this had put me in an unsolvable predicament.

I never was able to find that woman, let alone find out who she even was.

And maybe,

Just maybe,

This is why I do what I do.

So the way it all ended up turning out was that I make sure to lie about it all.

In fact,

I've always been lying to Jeff,

And Barry,

And all the others.

But most of all,

I don't let my eyes betray me.

I can't let them know what lurks inside.

Even if they suspect it.

“I can’t feel my hands!” she screamed, as she started to tremble, the gag falling out from her mouth due to her persistent struggling.

I look on. It’s all futile.

I can’t convince any of them that there is no need for commotion.

“You...”

Her voice trails off.

The elixir is now kicking in.

Despite being caught by the spell of the potion, she continues to lament. It’s now all incomprehensible but I’m sure it has a ton of meaning. Soon she’ll still be doing it, screaming, but only on the inside.

And then she’ll come to see.

Either way, I hope I don’t nudge the mechanism on the guillotine this time.

The bed isn’t sturdy enough on its own, let alone with a touchy mechanism.

And I hate when the blade drops too soon.

It ruins the... ambience.

After all, I can’t get enough of this.

Yes.

And no one would ever understand.

They’d never get it.

They always got something that holds them back.

Oh well, that’s too bad.

I don’t.

And after all, then there is the truth.

No one knows true beauty like a monster does.

GEORGE STYLES

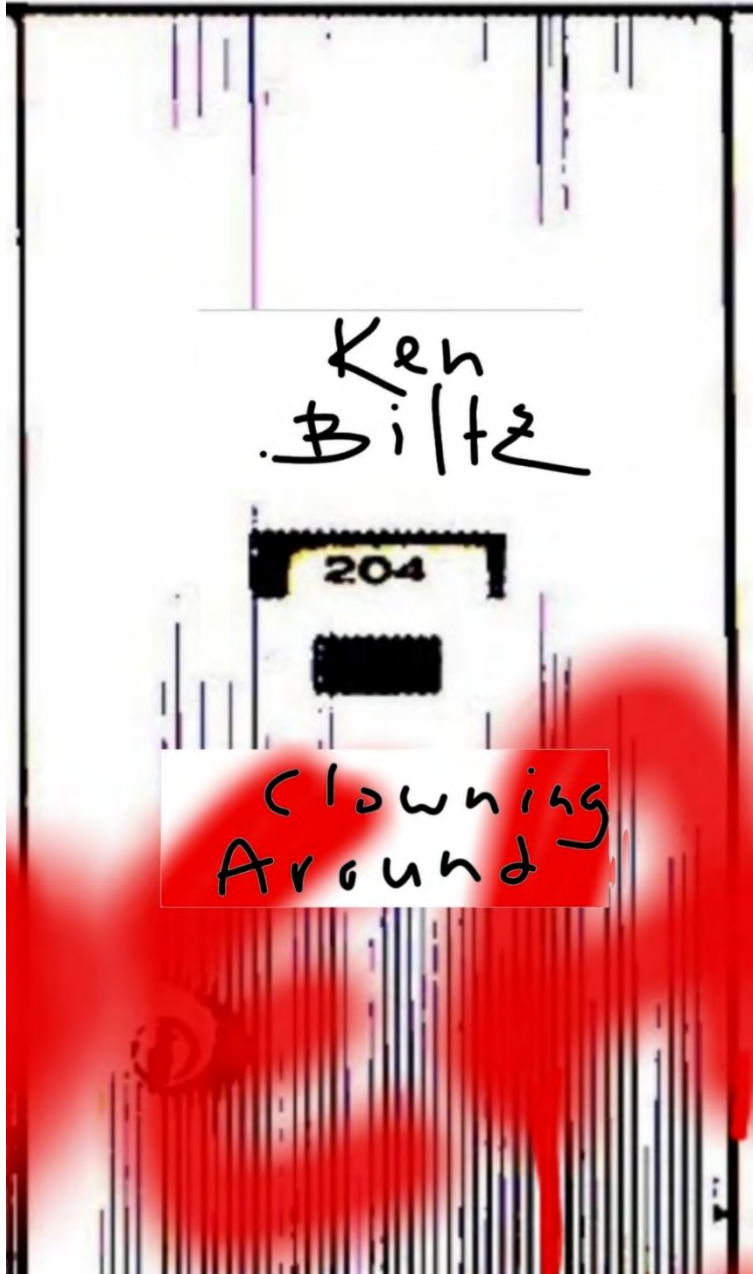
George Styles lives in Cleveland, OH. He obtained in PhD in Biochemistry from the University of Ottawa in Ottawa, ON, Canada, and is also the author of two books, *Chronic Calamity* and *Lost Without Mischief*. He is currently working on his third book which is due out in Spring 2021.

Along with this, he has numerous hobbies including, writing, songwriting, guitar and bass, martial arts, programming and coding, microcontrollers, reef aquariums, philosophy and spends lots of time trying to decipher the universe and all its mysterious secrets.

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CLOWNING AROUND

by Ken Biltz

A dim light shines through a tiny space above her head. Tammy can hear the slight sound of birds singing nearby. She turns to face the darkness to her right and realizes she is not alone. The silhouette of another person can be seen, even though the darkness is overwhelming the room. The slight rays of light fighting for presence from above as they reflect onto the nearby wall are little help. Tammy wonders who this can be, why they are together and, as she turns her head side to side, wonders where the hell they are. She lies still, as to not alarm the other of her presence, at least not until the rays from above win their current battle for relevance in the room. She lies still and listens to the birds outside the above window. Suddenly, the bed tosses from side to side as her bed mate sits straight up in the near darkness as the above rays are beginning to triumph for space. Tammy gasps as she watches the girl next to her turn in surprise and stare at her.

“Who the hell are you?” Her voice rings out.

“My... my name is Tammy. Who are you?” She timidly replies as she, too, sits up in the bed.

“Rebecca,” the voice calmly says. “You can call me Becky. Where are we?”

“I do not know where we are. I just woke up a few minutes ago and it has been too dark to see anything.”

“I’ve been awake a little while, listening to the birds in the darkness. I heard your breathing change and figured you were awake,” Becky says.

“Why are we even here? Do we know each other?”

“I don’t think so,” Becky replies. “I don’t think I know a Tammy.”

“I was thinking the same thing about Rebecca.”

The ray’s battle subsides as it overtakes the responsibility of illuminating the tiny room, victory, as the two girls glance around their surroundings in the new found light. Becky stands from the bed and reaches up to the tiny window above and pulls the curtain aside, allowing more light into the room. She steps up on the bed and peers out through the dirty glass. “Nothing,” she says as she steps down.

“Nothing?” Tammy asks, as she exits the bed and heads for the door.

“Just a field and some weeds with a whole bunch of trees beyond them. We’re in a basement,” she says as Tammy jiggles the door knob. The knob turns but something is keeping the door from opening, something firm.

“We’re locked in,” Tammy says as she turns and looks at Becky. “We need to figure out why and where we are.”

“What did you do last night?” Becky asks.

Thinking for a moment Tammy shakes her head and says, “I can’t remember.”

“Yeah, me neither, damn it.”

Tammy notices a switch near the door and flicks it on. A small bulb glows in the center of the ceiling giving them much more light to see each other. It is a very low wattage bulb, but it is lighter than the single ray of light they previously had. The two girls stare at each other for a moment.

“Yeah, you don’t look familiar to me at all,” Tammy says with much dejection in her voice.

Becky stares back. “I don’t know, maybe a little bit.” She continues to stare and looks Tammy up and down.

As Becky continues to stare, Tammy looks around the room and sees a couch on the opposite wall from the bed. “What’s that?” she says as she points to the couch.

“A couch,” answers Becky.

“No, on the end of the couch,” Tammy says as she darts across the room and grabs what appears to be a handbag that was sitting on the end of the couch, tucked in the side near a pillow.

“What’s in it? Who’s is it?” Becky rambles.

Tammy begins pulling things from the bag. A pack of smokes and a lighter. A small folded stash of cash. A brush with blonde hairs in it, which she compares to her long strands, “This could be mine.” She continues digging and out comes a small wallet, she looks to Becky and back at the wallet.

“Open it, let’s see whose it is,” Becky directs.

Tammy clicks the wallet open and flips through the card holders until she comes upon a driver’s license. She pauses, looks at Becky, and then back to the license. “Lacy Becket.” She flips the license so that Becky can see the picture of the long-haired blonde girl in the photo.

“Who the fuck is Lacy Becket?” Her anger grows as she snatches the wallet from Tammy’s grip. Tammy returns her attention to the remaining contents of the purse.

“A digital camera,” Tammy says in surprise as she turns the camera over and clicks the power button to the on position. Becky sits on the couch next to Tammy and gets in tight so she can see the pictures, too.

A brief moment passes as the camera begins to generate a menu screen. Tammy clicks on the Photos option and a small grid of tiny thumbnail pics pops on the tiny screen.

“Well, let’s start at the beginning,” Tammy says as she hits number one. The picture pops open and it is of a small dog sitting on a tiled floor. Tammy clicks the right arrow and a picture of a bigger dog appears. She quickly clicks through subsequent unnecessary photos that frustrate both of them. Finally there is a selfie of Lacy with pursed duck lips on the screen. The selfie is from a high position and the pic shows the ample cleavage below her chin.

“Very pretty, do you know her?” Becky asks.

“No, I don’t think so,” Tammy calmly and quietly responds as she clicks to the next picture. After four more selfies, a picture shows Becky standing with another brunette girl next to a rather nice-looking Red Ford Mustang convertible. Becky and the other girl could be twins. They are very similar to each other in every way, except Becky towered over her. “Is that your sister?”

“I don’t know,” Becky says with a tremble in her voice. “I can’t remember.” She looks away.

“There I am,” Tammy sternly says as she pushes the camera towards Becky’s eyes.

“I guess we know this Lacy girl, if she is taking our picture, that is,” Becky says. “And each other.”

“I, I, I can’t recall her, or you,” Tammy cries out.

“Well obviously someone has drugged us and kidnapped us,” Becky angrily says.

“Kidnapped?”

“Well duh! Were locked in this room and we can’t seem to recall anything that these pictures are telling us.”

Just as these words are said there is a sound at the door. A shuffle is heard, followed by the door swinging open and into the wall with a thud. In walks two men wearing clown masks. They quickly look around the room and stop their glance on the girls sitting on the couch.

“Good, you’re awake,” the smaller of the two with the lime green tufted hair and wide grimace says as the girls continue to cower into each other. “We brought you something to eat,” he says as the large man with a full head of red hair and sharp toothed smile places a tray on the small table next to the bed. He slides it in

such a way that what appears to be soup sloshes out of the side of each bowl and onto the tray.

“Wh, why are we here?” Becky asks as she stands from the couch. Tammy hadn’t really noticed before but Becky is a big girl. Becky approached the two men and stood before the small man and she towered over him.

“You are here because we want you here,” the small man says. “That’s all you need to know for now.”

“I demand that you tell me why we are here and how we got here,” Becky nearly yells. “And who the fuck are you?”

“Chuckles,” says the small man as he nods his head towards Becky. Without hesitation the large man takes one step and grabs Becky by the throat, turns and shoves her back against the wall. Tammy can see that Becky’s feet are no longer touching the ground, as Chuckles towers over her. “We’ll do the demanding around her. Do you understand?” Becky’s face is full of fear as she stares into the sharp-toothed face of the red haired clown. She does not acknowledge the small man’s words.

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND?” he yells as spit flies from his mouth.

Becky apprehensively nods her head the best she can with a large hand wrapped around her throat. Her eyes begin to bulge as her face turns beet red. A choking sound emits from her throat.

“You’ve met my brother, Chuckles, you can call me Clarence. We will be the clowns for your entertainment while you stay with us. Or should I say, for *our* entertainment. Either way,” he laughs as he looks towards Chuckles and nods his head once again. Chuckles opens his grip and Becky falls to the ground, gasping for air. Tammy comes quickly to her side and tries to comfort her. “Now, eat, you’ll need your strength later,” the small man says as they turn to exit the door. The door slams and the same shuffle can be heard sliding across the door.

“Must be a bar of some kind,” Tammy whispers to Becky. The two girls head back to the couch holding on to each other.

“Listen,” Becky struggles to say through coughing fits. “They are not raping us. I will fight like a wild beast until they kill me, I will not let them rape either of us.” She coughs again.

“I will fight, too. I may not be much help but maybe I can at least get in the way of one of them,” Tammy confides. Becky smiles at her as she pulls up the bottom of her shirt and wipes the spit from her mouth.

They continue to sort through the pictures on the camera. After thirty minutes or so they both have come to an agreement, although neither of them remember, they do know each other and apparently they were good friends with Lacy and the other girl as well. It was decided, again based on pictorial evidence, that the four girls were celebrating the upcoming nuptials of Lacy and her unknown husband to be. There were many pictures of the four girls partaking in some kind of alcoholic beverages. Each girl taking turns taking the photos of the others as they celebrated. “Looks like we were having fun,” Tammy says.

“It does. Wish I could remember,” Becky smiles.

“Me too.”

A shrill scream enters the room. Both girls jump with the startle. The sound coming from the wall near the bed. Another scream, followed by a thud.

“What the hell was that?” Tammy says as she holds Becky tight.

“I don’t know, but I don’t think we are the only captives here.”

“Oh,” Tammy responds in wonder. “Do you think it’s the others on the camera?” Becky slowly nods her head as she looks in Tammy’s eyes. Tears stream down her cheeks as Tammy begins to cry too.

After the scream and thud, the girls sit quietly near the wall listening for more sounds, which never come. They only hear a door slam a few minutes after the thud. Becky runs to the door and puts her ear against it, hoping to hear something that might be helpful. The sound of footsteps are heard heading away from their door.

“Nothing,” she shakes her head as she returns to Tammy on the bed. She runs a spoon through the bowl on the tray. Strips of chicken can be seen spiraling throughout the broth. “Chicken soup for breakfast, what the fuck?”

Tammy reaches for her bowl, “I’ve had worse, I guess.” She, too, swirls her spoon through the broth. “No vegetables either. Just strands of chicken.”

“I wonder what time it is,” Becky says as she puts a spoon full of barely warm broth in her mouth. “Damn, it is salty.” Her face scrunches in disgust.

Tammy finds out this revelation nearly at the same time and her face reacts in much the same manner. “Yuck!”

After a few minutes of managing to stomach the salty broth and gnawing on the stringy chicken, the girls finish their breakfast. “I hope lunch has more substance than this shit,” Becky says.

Shortly after they finish eating, the commotion begins from above. The sound of saws ripping through some kind of material is heard. “Building new cages,

probably,” Becky says with attitude in her voice. The rest of the day goes the same as the morning with the girls sitting, trying to comfort each other.

The two clowns, Chuckles and Clarence, delivered their lunch on a single tray once again. Lunch was a salty shredded chicken sandwich with mayo and a side of pork cracklens, with more salt.

“I know I can take out Clarence,” Becky whispered as the door closes behind the two making their exit. “Chuckles is big, too big for me to handle alone.”

“If we only had a weapon,” Tammy says as she looks around the room again and then places a cracklen in her mouth and crunches down hard. Her faces winces.

“Salty?” asks Becky.

Tammy nods her head in assurance.

“Figures,” Becky picks up her sandwich, glances at it and sinks her teeth into it. “Mmmm.”

The next three days go the same. Sleeping in the same bed, only one blanket. The two new friends speculate as to who their abductors are and why they are here. Nearly every second is spent discussing this topic and neither has viable answers that satisfies the other.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner of nothing but chicken soup and sandwiches. The clowns come in and leave the tray as they take the previous one when they leave. Not much is said and in fact, Chuckles still has yet to say a word. They have only heard Clarence speak. Chuckles just stands by and does what he is told. He does make a sound though, one that at first they thought was him slightly clearing his throat. But the more they listened the more they realized he made it almost in response to Clarence’s words or actions and Clarence seemed to understand his grunts.

As the door closes after the dinner tray was left on the table Becky turns to Tammy and says, “I think we need to do something soon. We have been here three days already and they have done nothing. They are going to try to take advantage of one of us, or both of us.”

“What can we do? You think you can take out Clarence, but that leaves Chuckles. He is huge. I certainly can’t do anything with him.”

“I don’t know, but we need to do something. I don’t want to die, but I will die fighting for my dignity. Yours, too.”

“I guess I could bash Chuckles in the head with the tray,” Tammy says as she checks the tray for durability with the flick of her wrist. It is a surprisingly sturdy tray.

“That may be the distraction I need to take out Clarence and then we can both work on Chuckles.”

“How are you going to take him out?”

“I will put him in a choke hold until he passes out. My brother taught me that, something he learned in the military.”

“That’s going to take some time. How am I going to distract the big guy that long?”

“Keep hitting him, don’t stop.”

Tammy pauses a second before nodding and stuffing a bit of the sandwich into her mouth. “When do we make this move?” Tammy asks as she stuffs a piece of chicken that tried to escape, back in her mouth.

Thinking a moment Becky says, “Let’s plan on lunch time tomorrow. That way we won’t still be groggy from just waking up.”

Tammy nods as she takes another bite. “Hey, you remembered your brother.”

Becky smiles a light smile. “I wish I could remember more.”

The night seems to take forever, longer than usual, maybe because they were not talking all that much. Both girls lay in the bed thinking of the upcoming battle that lay before them. Tammy is more nervous than Becky as she is a petite girl, not very aware of how much strength she has. She is scared, but she knows she has to step-up and get this done so they can at least have an attempt at escaping.

“If I’m going to die, it might as well be while I’m trying to escape,” she says as she exhales deeply and looks at Becky.

“Good attitude,” Becky smiles at her. “But we ain’t going to die. With any luck it will be one, or both of those stupid ass clowns.”

Tammy just quietly smiles back and drops her head to the pillow. “It’s been, what, three days since we’ve been here?” she asks.

“Something like that. Why?”

“Just wondering why we still can’t remember anything.”

“Strong drugs?” Becky says in the form of a question.

“Maybe. Goodnight friend,” Tammy says as she closes her eyes and tries to sleep.

As long as the previous night was, the approaching morning was just the reverse. Tammy could have sworn she just closed her eyes and tried to get to sleep. Now, that lone ray was peeking through the curtain again, shining its beam upon the opposite wall. The birds continued their early morning songs. As she lay there quietly, she feels Becky’s arm around her waist and she feels her knees nestled in

the back of her knees. Becky had spooned with her, probably due to the fact they only had one blanket, trying to stay warm.

A few minutes pass and Tammy wiggles from side to side. Becky exhales and says, "Good morning."

"Morning, Becky. How'd you sleep?"

"Good, I guess. I had a good feeling last night about what we are about to do."

"What, you think we are going to be successful?"

"Absolutely, we will get out of this room today. I guarantee it," she says with a smile. "Once lunch arrives we will make our move. We will be out of here, I promise."

Tammy smiles in return and says, "I hope so."

The shuffle appears at the door and the door once again slams into the wall. In walks the clowns, tray in hand. Chuckles approaches the small table with the tray as Clarence reaches for the light switch. "Get up, sleepy heads," Clarence says in a loud voice as he switches the light on.

The girls both sit up in bed and stare as the tray of chicken soup is slid across the table.

"Chicken soup for breakfast? Again?" Becky says in a disgusted voice.

"Chicken, how cute," Clarence says with a snicker in his voice. "Eat what we have given you," his voice raises a few octaves. The clowns turn for the door and make their exit. The door slams, the shuffle dissipates. Both girls stare at the soup and shake their heads at one another.

Tammy watches as Becky slowly stirs her soup. She sees a thin line in the mixture, "What's that," she says as she points to the line.

Becky stops stirring and brings her spoon under the line and raises it above the surface. She pinches her long fingers on the item and removes it from the spoon. A long hair, nearly a foot long strings out of the broth on the spoon. "This is not mine," she says. "It's blonde."

"It's not mine, I wasn't even that close to your bowl," Tammy defensively responds.

"Probably one of those imbeciles. I mean, we don't know what kind of hair they have with those stupid masks on," Becky explains as she tosses the hair aside.

Tammy is a little disturbed that Becky just continues to eat her soup with no concern of the foreign matter that was in it. It makes her lose her appetite and she slides her bowl aside and focuses on the coffee. "What happened to your finger?" she asks.

“What?”

“Your middle finger, I saw it when you grabbed the hair, that long scar down the side of it. What happened?”

“Oh, this?” she asks as she holds out her hand and shows the long scar which is evident down her long stringy middle finger. “I noticed it too, but I can’t recall what happened.”

“Oh that’s right, we can’t remember shit,” Tammy says as she exhales deeply in frustration and rolls her eyes.

“Let’s make a game plan for lunch,” Becky says as she continues to slurp her soup.

“Ok.”

Becky takes the dishes off the metal tray and lifts it high. “Good, this one feels pretty solid.” She hands it to Tammy. “Swing it a few times.”

Tammy apprehensively takes the tray, stands from the edge of the bed and with both hands swings the tray into the air. The swing causes a blast of air to blow a couple of napkins off the table.

“Good swing, but harder this time, as hard as you can.”

She swings again and the remaining napkins follow the first batch to the floor. The paper cup holding the half a cup of coffee even wiggles in the breeze.

“Good, just like that. You are going to need to hit him hard right here,” she says as she runs her hand over the back of Tammy’s lower skull.

“I’m ready,” Tammy smiles.

“Nothing to do now but wait,” Becky says as she lays back on the bed.

And wait they do, both girls fighting off sleep from time to time, other times giving in to the boredom and succumbing to the inevitable nap. But when the time comes, both girls are awake and feeling anxious. The shuffle begins, the door opens with a thud. Two clowns enter, one carries a tray the other moves to the end of the bed in front of Becky.

“Time is getting close for you,” he says as he reaches out and runs his fingers through Becky’s hair.

Becky flinches and leans away from his approach.

Chuckles leans in and places the tray on the table. As he does this, he notices the dishes and trash laying on the table. He emits a sound, just as a loud ping and a bright flash overtake his mind. He falls to his knees just as a second ping rings loud in his ear.

Clarence is just about to step closer to Becky when he hears the loud ping. He turns just in time to see Tammy swinging the tray a second time and contacting Chuckles' left ear. He falls to the side and bounces on the side of the bed and thumps on the floor. "What the Fu..," Clarence begins to say until Becky jumps on his back, wraps her arms around his throat and begins to squeeze, her legs also squeezing his torso. Clarence turns, shakes and tries to get her off his back, to no avail. He bounces off the wall and nearly trips over Chuckles and Tammy on the floor. He eventually falls to his knees as he hears several more pings from Tammy thumping Chuckles while he lay sprawled out on the floor. The darkness came as Clarence, too, surrenders to it. Becky grabs the back of his head and slams his face into the floor several times, blood trickling from beneath his head.

"TAKE THAT MOTHER FUCKER," she screams.

What started in a flurry, ended in a flurry as the two girls grabbed each other's hands and ran from the room, out into a small hallway. Not sure which way to go, they turn right. Near the end of the hall is a second room, the door was open. Looking inside they see another bed, table and couch, much like the room they just vacated.

"This way," Becky says as she pulls Tammy back the way they came. Tammy stares into the room they were in as they pass and both men are still lying motionless on the ground.

"Do you think we killed them?" She asks.

"I don't care if we did," Becky replies. "In fact I hope we killed them both."

At the end of the small hallway is a staircase leading up to a lit room above. The girls quickly run up the stairs not caring if they are making noise or not. Both girls stop with a jolt as they enter the room. The room is a large kitchen and dining room combined. It is covered in what appears to be blood with splatters on the floor, the walls, and even a few spots on the ceiling. They slowly make their way through the dining part of the room, past the table that is littered with chunks of meat on bones, all of which were hacked into with a bloody circular saw lying nearby. Knives and cleavers lay everywhere.

The counter in the kitchen does not fare any better, blood and smaller chunks of meat are strewn about. Some blood still drips off the ledge of the counter and pools on the tile below. Tammy sees it first and immediately convulses into vomiting motions. Becky looks and she, too, vomits. The sink is full of entrails and organs. A large pot simmers on the stove, blood congealed on the side, they dare not look inside.

“Let’s get the fuck out of...” Ping.

Tammy heard it, Becky did not. The tray came from nowhere and hit the back of her head. Becky fell face first to the ground. Tammy turned to look and there stood a mountain of a man with crisscrossed eyes and a mangled face, his hair, stringy and scarce. It was Chuckles without his mask. His grin was missing several teeth, the teeth that were there appeared sharp, as if filed to a point.

She screamed. He screamed, only his scream was more of a grunt than a scream. She screamed again and he followed suit with the same scary loud roar of a sound. Tammy turned to run as Chuckles grabbed her and hit her in the head with the same tray she pummeled him with.

Tammy woke in the darkness, just a lone ray of light from the window above. She immediately realized she must have been unconscious the entire day and it was now the following morning. The next thing she realized was she was naked. She quickly reached across the bed and whispered, “Becky.” Her hand fell flat to the mattress, there was no Becky. “I’ll bet they put her in the other room so we can’t plan another attack.” Her loneliness took hold, her fear was strong. She heard the shuffle at the door and quickly laid her head back down and pretended to be sleeping.

The clowns entered and placed the tray on the table. Chuckles turned and grunted to Clarence, who replied, “No, not yet.” Chuckles grunted his disapproval with his reply and turned for the door. Clarence stepped to the bed and slowly lowered the blanket from her shoulders, revealing Tammy’s side boob to him, the light from the hall offering much more illumination than she was used to in this room. As Chuckles wiggled the door, Clarence returned the blanket and he too made his way through the door.

“I’m coming.”

The shuffle locked the door and Tammy sat up in bed. She could smell the chicken soup on the table. She made her way to the light switch, flicked it on and returned to her breakfast on the table. She grabbed her bowl and placed it on her blanket covered lap as she began stirring. It only took two or three complete laps around the bowl before she realized she was pushing something around the broth. She used the spoon to prop up the item in the broth and sliding it up the side of the bowl she could see that very same scarred finger that was once on Becky’s hand.

Tammy screamed and then did her best to suppress any sound. She vomited across the table and dropped the bowl of soup on the bed as she shot off the bed and headed for the couch dragging the blanket with her.

“OMG, that is Becky soup. All those pieces on the table and counter are other people. OMG, they are the bridal party, they are the friends I can’t remember. Holy fuck, have we been eating them this whole time?” She begins crying into the blanket. The shuffle returns to the door.

Clarence enters the room and looks to the vacant bed and then the couch to the right. “There you are, are you not hungry?” he asks as he points to the mess on the bed. He slowly approaches her on the couch. She looks beyond him but there is no Chuckles this time. Clarence stands in front of her at the couch, she clutches the blanket. As she pulls it close to her body she feels something hit her naked breast. She glances down and sees Becky’s finger hanging by a fingernail from the cloth on the blanket.

“It’s time for me to have some fun,” Clarence says with a chuckle in his voice.

Tammy grabs the finger and braces herself as he kneels before her and leans into her.

In an instant, and without much of a plan, Tammy springs forward, clutching Becky’s long finger tightly in her tiny hand. She stabs Clarence in his right eye with the severed finger. The long nail on the end allowed it to slide unimpeded through his eye ball.

Clarence screams in intense pain and rolls across the floor. Tammy, still clutching the bloody finger, pounces on him and stabs him in his left eye. She retracts the finger and runs for the door, but just as she reaches the door, Chuckles enters. Before he can react, Tammy reaches back and swings her arm as hard as she possibly can and jams the boney finger into Chuckle’s temple. It goes through the material of the mask and sticks in the soft side of his head nearly three inches deep. It stuck so hard, Tammy could not retract it. Chuckles stopped immediately, froze for a second and fell to his knees and then flat on his face. Tammy exited the room, slammed the door and slid the bar across the opposite side, locking them in her prison. Clarence screamed in pain on the inside. Chuckles lay still in his pool of blood.

Tammy opened her eyes and flinched at the bright lights before her. She was in a comfy bed, bundled in warm blankets. Her right arm had an IV near her wrist, she was in a hospital. She sat up straight in the bed, she was rescued. Just then a tall woman walked in wearing a light blue smock.

“Where am I?” Tammy asked.

“Good morning, honey,” the woman said. “You’re in County.”

“County?” she asks.

“County Hospital. You came in yesterday and you were a fright to see. Didn’t look like you had much to eat the last couple of days, hence the IV. We feeding ya,” she says with a smile.

Hearing the bit about eating brings the queasy stomach and Tammy vomits down the front of her pajamas.

“Oh dear, let’s get that cleaned up,” the woman says as she grabs towels from the nearby cart. “My name is Tilda,” she says as she wipes Tammy’s chin. “Do you remember anything?”

Tammy looks past Tilda and on the wall is a TV. It has the news on with the sound on mute.

“A little. I think.”

“No wonder with the drug they were giving you. Midazolam is pretty strong and will make you forget your own name if given enough,” Tilda explains.

“Midazolam?”

“Yeah, it was in your system, in all the food they were giving you. They did not want you remembering a damn thing.”

“What happened to Becky?” Tammy calmly asks.

Tilda pauses as she was wiping the vomit mess from the bed. She looks at Tammy, “Child, Becky didn’t make it, and neither did her sister or the bride to be.”

As Tilda speaks, Tammy sees the anchor on the news explaining the scene. She sees a white farm house in a field. Police cars and ambulances in the front yard, backed up to the door. A gurney with a sheet-covered body is being wheeled out the front door and placed in the back of one of the ambulances. A photo of two men pops on the screen. “*Carl and Kevin Cassidy*,” the screen reads, recently terminated carnival employees, fired due to lewd activities and claims of stalking.

“Is that them?” Tammy asks and Tilda looks to the screen.

“Yes dear, it is them.” Her hand slides through the air, as if to pet the screen.

“Are you alright with this on?”

“What is she saying?” Tammy asks.

“She’s saying how they don’t think this is an isolated case of cannibalistic activity. There were far too many parts found in freezers than just the three girls. The officials think it is cult related. They will be testing remains with missing person’s reports to try to ID as many victims as possible.”

“What happened to the men?”

“Well dear, you blinded Carl, he’s in custody. You killed Kevin,” Tilda says as she lays Tammy back on the pillow and pulls the blanket up tight to her chin. Tilda turns and walks to the other side of the room. She closes the door and returns to the bedside.

Tilda grips a second pillow and as it nears her face, Tammy sees the ID tag on her chest Tilda Cassidy. The pressure is intense as the pillow covers her face.

KEN BILTZ

Ken Biltz has aspired to be an author for many years. After finally achieving this goal he continues to create more novels. His words mostly conform to the horror/thriller genre, but Ken feels like he has cross genre material within him, stay tuned.

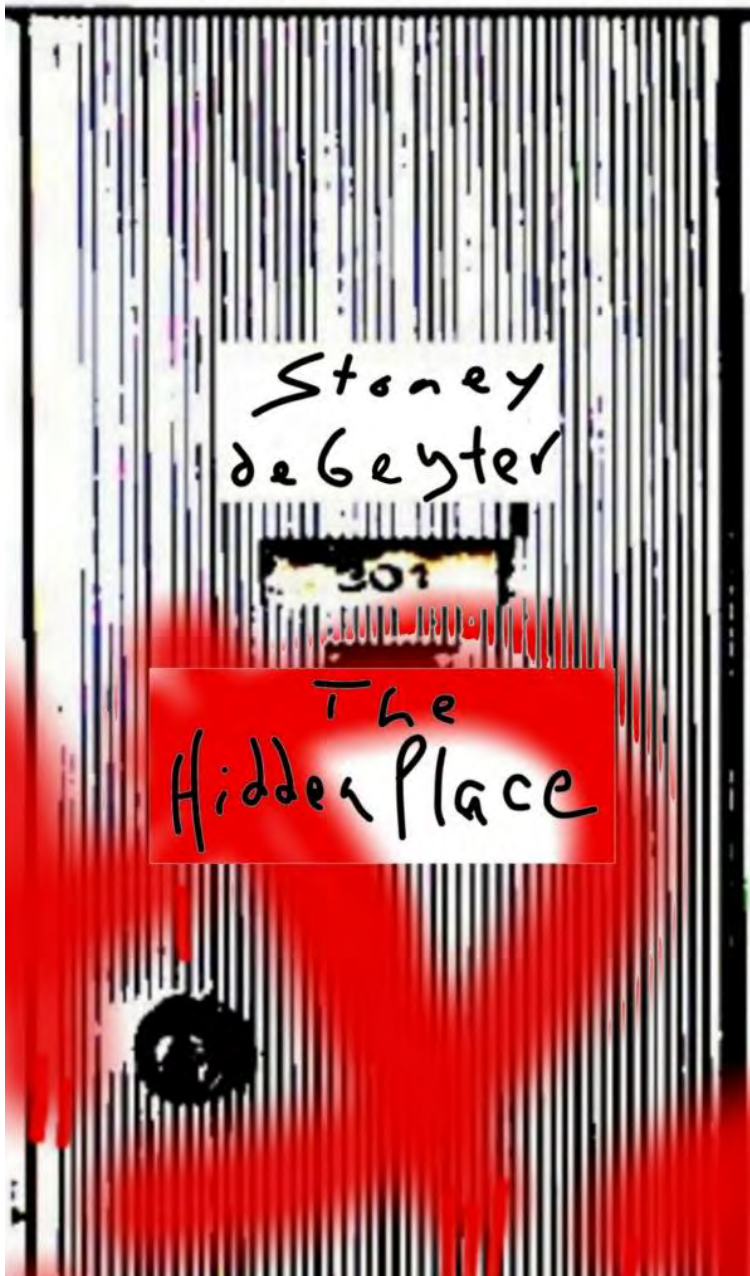
Ken lives in Ravenna, Oh, with his wife, two dogs and a cat that runs the domicile. He and his wife's children are all grown and contributing 7 grandchildren to keep him distracted. He has been employed at the same forge in Streetsboro, Oh, for 27 years and hopes to one day quit that, and write full-time. Wish him luck.

Thank you for picking up this collaboration with my fellow authors. We enjoyed doing this project and we are absolutely elated to provide it FREE for your enjoyment.

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THE HIDDEN PLACE

by Stoney deGeyter

DENIAL

A cloud of acidic steam fills my mouth with the taste of antifreeze. A beam of light fails to penetrate the night that surrounds me. The single headlight, absent its counterpart, reflects off the raindrops and filters back through the shattered windshield. Inches above my head, the downpour beats against the top of the car like an out of control drum solo but doing little to drown out the blaring horn. I blink away the glare burning into my retinas, but the dizzying stream of audiovisual chaos paralyzes me.

This is not happening.

I squeeze my eyes shut, but when I re-open them, my surroundings remain unchanged.

Every muscle in my body aches. My head throbs, drawing attention to warm liquid dribbling down the side of my face. I touch the top of my head and pain shoots through my skull. I jerk my hand away.

The liquid is sticky between my fingers and red in the faint glow of the lone headlight. Blood.

My chest tightens. I'm not able to make sense of the world around me.

To my right, a tree occupies the place of the passenger seat. A passenger, squeezed between it and me, is practically perched on my lap. I can't tell if he's breathing.

No, not a tree. A utility pole.

Dangling from somewhere above, a wire flops around like an unchecked fire hose. Sparks shoot in all directions just a few feet away.

Is this for real?

The seatbelt pulls tight between my breasts. My fingers fumble with the release until I'm free from its iron grip. I tug on the door handle and push, but it remains in place. With the little leverage I have, sandwiched between the man and the driver-side panel, I ram my shoulder into the door. It doesn't budge.

I pound the steering wheel with my fists, screaming like a madwoman. Raising my elbow, I swing it into the window beside me. The glass crumbles like a dry pastry.

There's something I'm supposed to do—or not do—around cars and electricity, but I can't remember what. I push the thought aside and scramble through the opening. Launching myself off the car, I'm careful not to touch it and the ground at the same time. I think that's right.

Landing face-first in the mud, I'm soaked and half-buried in muck. I pull myself to my feet and look for a path of escape. What about my companion?

Can I leave him behind?

My gaze jumps between the deserted highway and the man in the car. I'm not sure I can pull him free without electrocuting us both, but I can't abandon him.

I can't believe this is happening to me.

Diving back through the window, I keep my feet off the ground and wrestle my hands under his armpits.

I pull, but he's about 170 pounds of dead weight.

Shoving fear and common sense aside, I plant a foot in the mud and press the other knee into the side of the door. With both hands under his arms, I pull with my upper body while pushing my knee into the side of the car.

Maneuvering him into the driver's seat, I jam my foot against the door and pull with every bit of strength I have left.

We're halfway out. One more tug should do it.

The sizzling wire on the other side of the car grips my attention. The world around me slows to a crawl. I hold my breath. The wire slaps against the car.

What did I do to deserve this?

A loud pop echoes through my ears. Blinded by a white flash, electricity surges through my arms—still wrapped around my companion—and into my chest. The shock hits me like a getaway driver fleeing a crime scene and blasts me back into the mud.

This is not happening.

Darkness fills my vision.

GUILT

My eyes flutter open. I'm surrounded by blackness. Raindrops pelt my face like some sort of sick water torture. Laying in mud, I'm unwilling to move despite its attempt to engulf me from behind.

The horn, the headlight, the sizzling and snapping of electricity makes its way into my consciousness, as does the pain racing along every nerve.

Oh my God, what did I do?

A crushing weight on my chest makes breathing difficult. The ambient glow of the headlight registers through my dilated pupils. There's a body on top of me.

With what little strength I have, I roll him off. Air rushes into my lungs. I'm breathing, but is he?

I grab his wrist. "Don't be dead," I whisper.

Unable to recall the events that brought me here, the only thing I know is that I can't let the man next to me die. I don't know—or can't remember—who he is, but somehow, my life is intrinsically tied to his.

The electrical wire slaps, hisses, and sizzles. Another ear-splitting pop and flash as it connects with the car's metal roof. *Okay, I remember that.*

I don't detect a pulse in his wrist while my own heart races. Rolling over, I place my head on his chest. No heartbeat.

"No! No, no, no, no, no!"

Instinct takes over. I hoist myself up and straddle him. Lacing my fingers together, one hand on top of the other, I place them on his chest and deliver a series of systematic compressions.

I count them out. Thirty compressions, two breaths into his lungs. Thirty compressions, two breaths.

"Breathe, dammit."

Thirty compressions, two breaths.

Everything else around me fades. I'm on autopilot. Where or when I learned CPR, I have no idea.

Thirty compressions, two breaths.

Please God, don't do this to me.

I resist the urge to punch him in the chest. That will just break his ribs.

Thirty compressions, two breaths.

My arms burn.

Thirty compressions, two breaths.

What feels like hours have passed, but I'm sure it's been only minutes. I can't stop. I'm compelled to keep going. I can't have death on my conscience.

A wave of helplessness threatens to consume me. I can't save this man.

I lean over—our faces inches apart—and scream. Ten seconds of ear-splitting desperation escapes through my vocal cords.

Spent, I collapse onto my back. Mud surrounds me once again. The warmth of my tears contrasts against the cold rain slapping my face.

What have I done?

I'm lost, alone, and just murdered a man. Sadness claws at my heart, squeezing the life from each chamber. From deep within me, the connection that links our lives together begins to sever. I don't know how or why but I'm certain that his death will be followed by another.

But whose? I don't even know who I am.

ANGER

The man beside me bolts upright, holding his head in his hands. "What happened?" he moans.

I sit up. "You're alive! Oh, thank God."

He pulls his hands away and cocks his head. "Yeah... still here."

"You okay?"

He hesitates. "Bit of a headache. My chest feels like I just left a boxing ring."

"That was me saving your life," I deadpan.

I run my hands up and down my legs and over my chest. Nothing's broken. I find only physical bruises. "I'll be fine, too, by the way." I glare at him, but it's lost in the dark.

Grunting, he stands to his feet and grabs my hand. "Let's get out of the rain." He pulls me to my feet, crushing my fingers with his grip, and leads me toward the highway.

"Where are we going?"

He glances left and right then points. "There."

He pulls me across the road. In the darkness beyond is the remains of a house, survived only by a crumbling brick hearth and a half-rotten, wooden bus shelter out front.

We duck under its mostly-intact roof, careful not to touch the walls. By the way it leans, it'll collapse with the slightest provocation, but it gets us out of the rain. Mostly.

Through the glow of the headlight on the other side of the road, I inspect my companion. He's five inches taller than me, making him just under six feet. His hair is thick and dark—or is that mud?—and his beard trimmed short.

"Listen." I'm not sure how to break this to him. "I, uh... I can't remember anything. I don't know what happened, how we got into this situation, or where we were going. I don't even know who *you* are."

He quirks his eyebrow. The headlight reflects off his pupils forging a provocative sparkle in his eyes. A buzz of chemistry sizzles between us. At least I think it does. Is this the type of guy I'd go for?

"To be honest, I don't either," he says. "I was hoping you'd be able to tell me. You don't remember anything at all?"

I narrow my eyes. "That's what I just said."

He raises his hand in surrender. "Sorry."

"All I remember is waking up in the car."

He faces the wrecked vehicle "Looks like we slid off the highway and slammed into a power pole. Who was driving?"

"I was in the driver's seat."

He cranks his head. "Are you drunk?"

Screw you, jerkwad.

"No, I'm not," I say, through gritted teeth.

"Hey, it's a legitimate question."

He stares at me for a second then reaches toward my face.

I slap his hand away.

"You got mud on you."

"It's called skin. I'm black."

He rolls his eyes. "Which is a better color on you than mud, but hey, keep it if you want."

I wipe my cheek and a clod of mud transfers to my hand. *Why did he have to be right?*

Stepping out of the shelter, I turn my face up to the rain and scrub the remaining grime off. Glancing up and down the highway, I see only darkness.

He pulls me back. "You should stay out of the rain."

I shove him. "Don't touch me. Look, for all I know you kidnapped me and we were on our way to your murder den. Neither of us knows who the other is, but we're in this situation together. Let's just find a way out."

"Fine." He glances back and forth between the car and me as if contemplating his next move. "I'm gonna see what I can find in the car." Pointing at me, he says, "You stay put."

He jogs through the rain, glancing back several times.

"Watch out for the electrical wire," I shout.

He flings his hand over his head, waving me away.

Left alone, my heartbeat shifts into a panic-fueled overdrive. Fear crowds out rational thought. I pat my body and search the ground for something—anything—I can use as a weapon. I'm not sure what I expected to find but there's nothing on or around me besides a few partly-rotten boards.

Trust is still in short supply, so I'm determined to keep my eyes on him. In the ambient glow of the headlight, I can't make out much more than a dark outline of his body. I watch his silhouette secure the electrical wire to the utility pole, then move around the vehicle. He sticks his head through the driver's window, then pops out again. Next, he steps around to the back. The trunk opens and he's out of sight for a few seconds before coming back around where I can see him. There's something in his hand.

He hurries back across the road. "I found this. Must be yours." He holds out a sweater.

I snatch it from him and yank it over my head. It fits and brings welcome warmth. "Find anything else?"

"Just this." He holds up a wallet.

DEPRESSION

"You look like a James." I don't mean for it to sound rude, but it comes out that way.

"That doesn't sound like a compliment."

“Take it how you like.” The rain has stopped and we trudge down the middle of the road, looking for help. The dotted yellow line is barely visible in the murky darkness. “You didn’t find a purse in the car? Or anything else?”

“Nothing”

My shoulders slump. The weight of my own body is too much, but I trudge on. What I would give to know my name. “I should have checked the car myself. I don’t know what I was thinking. I can’t believe I’d leave home without ID or a phone.”

“I looked everywhere—”

“The car keys!” I turn back but James grabs my arm. “It had to have been my car, right?” I plead with my eyes. “The key ring might have had something on it to help identify me, or where I live.”

“The key busted off in the ignition and I couldn’t find a key ring anywhere. Except for the wallet and license on the floor, the car was empty. If you had a purse with a phone or ID, it must have flown out when we slammed into the pole.”

I yank my arm out of his hand. “Did you look?”

“I looked. I went all around the car, but without a light I didn’t find anything.”

“What about you? I’m sure you had a phone?”

A furrow forms on his brow. “If I did, same thing. We could go back and look, but wouldn’t find it in the dark if we tried. Wouldn’t work anyway—not in this rain. It’s probably buried in the mud. We can go back tomorrow, in the daylight.”

He’s right. It’s no use. We’ve already walked at least two miles. Turning back now doesn’t make sense. And there’s got to be a house on this road somewhere.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” I shiver in my wet clothes, despite the sweater. My head still throbs, and the more we walk the more my boots dig into my calves.

“No, but based on the skid marks and position of the vehicle, this is the direction we were headed.”

“Right. But were we driving toward or away from civilization?”

He shrugs.

We’re two strangers, lost on an old back-woods highway. For all I know, we could die out here and no one would find us for days. I wrap my arms around my chest and squeeze. James puts his arm around my shoulder but I swipe away his unwelcome attempt to comfort me.

“Have you been able to remember anything else?” He asks. “Name, where you live, favorite food?”

“I don’t remember anything.”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“It’s not that.” I drop my head. I have trouble finding the words. My heart aches and I don’t know why. “I don’t know. I’m just sad. Like my dog died or my boyfriend broke up with me.”

James stops. “So, what... that makes me your rebound?” He furrows his brow. “I mean, you and I were going somewhere together. Your skirt and knee-high boots suggest we were on our way to dinner or a club, or something like that.” He points to himself “And aside from the mud, I’m not exactly slobbering it either. If your boyfriend broke up with you that makes me your rebound.”

Is he for real? “Maybe you can stop thinking of yourself for a minute, James. Look around. We were just in an accident out in the middle God knows where. We’re wet, cold, and neither of us has any idea who or where we are. Short of dying, could it get any worse? And to top it off, I’ve got mud and rocks in my boots digging into my leg.”

“Would you like me to help you get them off?”

“I can’t. They’re wet. If I take them off, I’ll never get them back on, and I’m not walking barefoot in this weather.”

“I guess we can just be grateful to be alive. Things can’t exactly get much worse, now can they?”

I turn and glare at him but he’s staring off into the distance.

“Check that out.” He points. “A light. C’mom.” He grabs my hand and yanks me along. We trudge forward keeping an eye on the light. It’s periodically blocked by a thin forest of trees between us, but we never fully lose sight of it. “There’s got to be a driveway somewhere,” James says.

The clouds part and moonlight illuminates us. It’s almost as if God himself is showing us the way. Just as quickly, a cold wind blows, passing through my wet clothes and sending shivers throughout my limbs. *Cruel trick, God.*

“I see a mailbox,” James says.

If he weren’t pulling me along, I would have frozen in my tracks. A new fear shakes me to my core. What happens if I get my memory back and I’m not the person I think I am? Maybe I’m not even who I think I think I am.

“There it is.” James leads me over to the mailbox. He squints trying to read the words painted on the side. “McCallum. Hey, that’s me. That’s my last name.” He releases my hand and digs into his back pocket, pulling out the wallet he found in the car. He moves it around in his hand until the moonlight illuminates the

reflective letters just right. “Same numbers on the mailbox. What are the odds we’re on the same street, too?”

“This is *your* house?” My voice cracks, and I back away from the mailbox. I expected we might find a house, but I didn’t expect it to be *his* house. Trusting a memory-less stranger while looking for help is one thing. I wasn’t prepared to trust him in his home, especially when I don’t know where I am. I scan the road and woods for alternatives. There are no signs of human life. We truly are in the middle of nowhere.

Another shiver surges through me, but this time it’s not from the cold.

AWAKENING

With no other options, I follow James down the long, winding driveway toward the light he’d spotted through the woods. It’s a single-bulb porch lamp, attached to a small cabin. The path to the porch is overgrown with weeds, looking like it hadn’t been used in years. There are no vehicles out front, no garage or shed in view, and with no light seeping through the windows, I assume no one’s home.

James steps onto the porch and approaches the door. He glances back at me. My feet remain rooted to the dirt path. I offer him nothing, but all five of my senses are in overdrive, tuned to every detail around me. A split on the left porch corner, the smell of a pond or a nearby swamp, the faint hum of a utility meter coming from the left side of the dirty shack.

James tries the doorknob. “Locked.”

He leans down and pulls up a welcome mat at his feet revealing nothing more than an unfaded patch of wood stain. The mat drops. He feels along the top of the doorframe. “Hmmm.” His empty hands fall to his side.

Spinning around, he steps off the porch and roots around in the overgrown flowerbed, moving plants left and right with his foot. “Got it.” He reaches down and comes up with a rock. Flipping it over, a hidden compartment opens, and a key drops into his palm. Holding it up for me to see, James smiles.

I follow him back to the door, uncertain of the wisdom of it.

James unlocks the door and pushes it open. Stepping into the dark cabin, he feels along the wall. “There’s got to be a switch here somewhere.”

An overhead bulb comes to life revealing a small living room. Do I follow this stranger into his home? I glance toward the deserted highway. I could run, but where to? I'm no safer out here than in there. Plus, this cabin might hold some things I need; dry clothes, food, perhaps a working cell phone. Maybe even my memories.

"We need to get out of these wet clothes." He points down a dark hallway. "I assume my bedroom is this way. 'C'mon, let's see if I have anything that fits you."

"I'll, uh... I'll wait here."

"Suit yourself." He shuts the front door behind me then disappears down the hall. Everything about this place screams "lonely bachelor," only tidier than I would expect. Backed against the wall is a brown cloth couch that sits on a darker brown carpet floor. It faces an oversize television flanked by two large stereo speakers. My guess is there are no neighbors to complain about the noise. A glass coffee table separates the couch and entertainment center. Magazines and remote controls are placed in perfect symmetry on two end tables that flank the couch. The magazines are addressed to him, but the newest is over a year old. Curtains cover the window to the front porch. Pulled tight, they look as if they haven't been touched since the 1970s.

I scan the room for a phone. Maybe there's still a working landline. Though, I'm not even sure who I would call. A fresh burst of energy wells up within me. A rescue is imminent, though I don't know what that will look like. A return of my memories? Someone coming to my aid? The comfort of being in a familiar small cabin with my boyfriend? All of that sounds good right about now.

The kitchen opens up on the far side of the living room. I flip on what turns out to be a dim overhead light. Scattered on a small breakfast table are unopened utility bills and a current catalog for home medical supplies—all addressed to James. There are no dirty dishes in the sink and the fridge is empty except for a half-empty jar of pickles and a package of tortillas. As if awakened with possibility, my stomach rumbles.

I spot what appears to be a pantry door, or maybe a broom closet. I cross my fingers hoping for food. I tug the handle, but the door won't open. Above my head is a latch keeping the door in place. I slide the bolt to the right and the door pops open.

The kitchen light barely penetrates the darkness beyond. A musty odor penetrates my nostrils. Instead of stocked shelves, an old set of wooden stairs leads down to a cellar.

I'm not that hungry.

Tacked to the cellar door are a dozen pictures, a necklace, a colored hair scrunchie—complete with strands of hair—and a notecard with a distinct smell of perfume. *So, he has a girlfriend.* A paper with large hand-drawn letters surrounded by hearts hints at her name. Karyn.

The pictures are familiar. All distance shots of the same woman at random locations. Shopping for groceries, riding a bicycle, getting out of her car, entering a bank, strolling through a park. The shots are real and innocent, yet magnificent in how they capture the mundane aspects of her life turned into beautiful works of art, like idols to be worshiped.

Who's the lucky girl?

"I found some clothes you can change into," James booms from the hallway. My heart jumps. My face flushes almost having been caught peeking into his hidden alter. Pushing the cellar door closed, I glance at the pictures again and freeze. The photos *are* familiar. The girl looks like me.

RECONSTRUCTION

James holds out a sweatshirt and sweatpants. "Best I could find. There's a bathroom down the hall you can use."

My heart thumps in my chest, and I'm all smiles. James must be my man. My love. My rescuer. I grab the dry clothes but want to spring into his arms. Though I still have no memory, knowledge of our pre-accident connection fills me with hope that everything will be okay. The pictures on the door are all the evidence I need. He and I have a history together.

"James and Karyn. I like the sound of that," I say.

His smile drops but returns just as fast. He glances at the cellar door beside me.

"It's sweet," I tell him.

His brow furrows. "I'm not sure what you mean."

I pull the cellar door open and gaze into his eyes. How long have we been dating? "I have to admit, though, I'm having a hard time seeing myself as a 'Karyn'."

His eyes narrow as understanding flashes across his face. "I think I know what you mean."

I scan the pictures again. “Weird place to keep these, but these shots are amazing.”

“You weren’t supposed to find them,” he says. “But I guess it was inevitable.”

I cock my head. “You remember?”

An almost imperceptible change in his facial features reveals the evil behind the facade. “I have all along. It was the easiest way to get you here, considering I lost my gun in the accident. You and her will be my first twofer. Two for the price of one.”

I process his words. “Her?” “Two-for-one?”

This isn’t right.

His eyes narrow and grow dark. He has me blocked in with nowhere to go but down the stairs behind me. I need to move; to get past him, but I can’t will my legs to comply.

A sinister smile spreads across his face. He places a hand around my neck and squeezes. I claw at his fingers, desperate to keep him from robbing me of life. His grip loosens but before I can push his hand away, he shoves me.

The stairs descend behind me, and I lose my footing. Memories of my former life dislodge from their hiding place and ambush my consciousness.

My life!

Images of meeting James in a nightclub. I’m no floozy, but he invites me to come home with him. I say yes. But why? James doesn’t have his car, so we take mine.

The images flash to an earlier time. I’ve seen him before and flirted. I got his attention, which is all I wanted right then.

Another memory shifts into place. This time, even earlier. I’m watching him in a hardware store. Then he’s rounding a corner in his truck. Then at another club and he’s talking to a tall, dark-skinned woman with purple hair. She looks uncomfortable and finds an excuse to exit the conversation.

Flashing back further to images of a crowded bar. I spot the man that I now know as James, but I didn’t know him then. This was the first time I’d laid eyes on him. He’s talking to a black woman. She looks familiar. She’s connected to the pictures on the cellar door. The photos I thought were of me.

She’s Karyn.

The two of them leave the club together. My heart aches, but my memories haven’t yet shown me why.

I leave the drinks at the bar and squeeze between the throngs of people to make my way to the door. Outside I search up and down the highway. James and Karyn are gone. Who is she?

Another flash. I remember everything.

She's my sister.

Reality floods back. I'm falling down the stairs. Reaching out in desperation, I grab hold of the rail and hang on for dear life. My back slams against the wall and my feet thump-thump-thump down the stairs.

The door above me slams. The unmistakable sound of the latch sliding into the locked position sends a chill through my bones.

Regaining my footing, I charge the door and pound on it with my fists. "Let me out! Now!"

My efforts are useless. I take a calming breath and process my restored memories. Everything is okay. I remember the plan. Tonight didn't go exactly as I wanted, but I know what to do. I trained for this.

ACCEPTANCE

A muffled voice comes from deep within the shadows.

I feel my way down the steps. "Karyn? Is that you?"

"Mmmmm mnm mmmmmmm!"

At the bottom of the stairs, something brushes my face. I jerk back. It's a pull string for an overhead light. I tug and a dim glow brings the dank cellar to life.

"Oh my God!"

Karyn sits in the dirt, her arms wrapped around a pole behind her. An agglomeration of emotions passes through me like an unstoppable freight train. I am Denial. I am Guilt, Anger, Depression, and Awakening. I am Reconstruction—I'm all of these at once.

The metaphorical train passes.

Now, I am Acceptance.

I rush over and fling my arms around Karyn. "I didn't know if I'd see you again." Tears stream down my face. "I'm so glad you're alive."

She buries her face into my neck.

I tug the gag from her mouth. "Has he hurt you?"

“Not yet. How did you find me, Nia?” She scans the stairs. “Are the police coming?”

“No. No police. It’s just me.”

She freezes. Her eyes widen with horror. “What do you mean?”

“It’s just me, sis. I turned in my badge and gun.”

“You quit the force? Wh—why would you do that?”

“You and I both know how the law works. It would be too lenient on this guy.”

Her eyes narrow. She knows I’m up to something. “What’s the plan, Detective?”

“I told you, I’m not a detective anymore.” I pull out a small pouch wedged between my boot and leg. What I previously thought was mud and rocks was my lock-pick set.

“I’m still a prosecutor,” she says.

I work the lock that’s keeping her chained to the pole. “Are you? You’ve been griping for years how the bad guys keep getting off. Every cop in the state is looking for you, and where are they? My captain pulled me off the case, but I found you before they did. The system is broken, and you know it.”

“That may be so, but I’ve taken an oath to uphold it.” Her hands free, she rubs her wrists. “But if we have to kill him to get away, I’m okay with that. Got any more toys in those boots of yours?”

I smile and wink.

I scout the cellar but find nothing we can use as a weapon. It’s just four bare walls and a post. The clothes James brought me are on the steps where I dropped them. I exchange them for my wet skirt and blouse while catching Karyn up on how I got here. “Things would have gone a bit differently had I not lost my memory, but we can improvise.”

Karyn grabs my hand. “The important thing is we’re together, Nia. And together we’re strong.”

I squeeze her hand.

We wait in silence for James to return. After an hour, I begin to wonder if he will. Finally, the door at the top of the stairs opens. I feel Nia tense up. We’re ready.

James takes two steps down the stairs. He watches us from a distance. He holds a chain in one hand and a snub-nose .38 revolver in the other. My purse pistol. *The bastard stole my gun.*

Karyn sits in the dirt, just as I found her, with her hands tucked behind the pole. I'm curled up next to her. "What are you going to do to us?" I say. "Please. Just let us go."

"You can drop the act," he says. "I didn't notice before, but now I see the resemblance. You hunted me, Nia. That makes you dangerous. Stand up. Both of you."

And just like that, our plan is shot.

I pull myself to my feet and help Karyn up, her arms still wrapped around the pole.

"I came for my sister," I say. "Just let us go."

"That's not gonna happen."

James drops another step, keeping the revolver trained on us. "I'm going to request you play nice. I don't intend on killing either of you—yet. I have other plans. But if you give me any trouble, Nia, I'll shoot your sister in the head and over the next six months I'll feed her to you." He speaks in hushed, measured tones. My jaw tightens and fists clench. I believe every word he says.

"Someone will find us," Karyn says.

"No, they won't. James McCallum doesn't live here anymore and nobody's looking for him. No one's been to this cabin in years. Well, no one but me and the others I've lured here. Since I have your car keys, once I dispose of it, there's no chance of anyone finding you." James raises the .38 and pulls back on the hammer. "Now, if you'll be so kind, Nia, please stand over there. Face the wall."

I step back, but I don't turn around.

James takes another step. His foot snags on the Teflon bootlace I fastened across the stairs. Momentum pushes him forward, and he topples down the stairs. He loses control of the revolver. It hits the ground and fires. The bullet whizzes past my ear, missing both me and my sister.

Karyn pounces before James can pick himself up. She wraps the other shoelace around his neck and yanks. He struggles to his feet and I lunge forward. Karyn and I jerk him back to the ground, the lace digging into his neck. Together we drag him back to the post. She ties the lace and secures his neck against the pillar.

James pulls out a knife from his waistband and swings at us behind his back. We're safely out of reach. He slashes at the Teflon cord choking him but gouges his neck. He missed the artery but dark red blood gushes down his neck and chest.

I find the gun on the ground and aim it at his head. The hammer clicks back under the pressure of my thumb.

Karyn raises her hand, palm toward me. “No, don’t.”

I freeze. “Why not? You heard what he was willing to do to us.”

“Exactly. How many other women has he preyed on?” She doesn’t wait for me to answer. “No, a quick death is too good for him. And, like he said, nobody knows about this place.”

James drops the knife and claws at the string with his fingers, fighting for air.

I watch him gasp with unsettling satisfaction. A month ago, I would have protected him, ensured he got a fair day in court, but he crossed a line I didn’t know I had. The thin line of family blood.

I lower the pistol, turning to look Karyn in the eye. My eyes narrow, and I flash a devilish grin. “What do you have in mind, Prosecutor?”

“Oh, I’m no prosecutor,” Karyn sneers. Her lips curl into a menacing grin.

“Today, I’m judge and jury. His death will be long, slow, and painful.” She loosens the lace around his neck, just enough to prolong his suffocation.

“Devious. Then what? What’s the plan once we’re done with him?”

Karyn picks up the knife. “Then, you and I bring the next serial-killing bastard here, and we do unto others.”

“Our own little hidden place.” I face our prisoner. “What do you think? Sound fair to you?”

His eyes bulge and panic spreads across his face. All he can do is gasp for air as the blood drains from his neck.

STONEY DEGEYTER

TL;DR: Writer, Speaker, Digital Marketer, Dad, Sci-Fi Geek, 63% Robot.

Stoney deGeyter has been an avid reader since his very first grounding, and writing stories as early as the second grade. He can recall writing about Dr. Eng and Mr. Lish on the cover of his English booklet. Even then, he knew it wasn't that clever, but hey, they were building a spaceship. He was a word geek even then and didn't know it.

In high school a buddy, Tony, and Stoney started a rap group. They called themselves St-Toney. Clever, right? Stoney wrote the songs, they both rapped, and a few friends played in the band. They may have even performed once.

Growing up working in his parent's business Stoney got the entrepreneurial bug. In 1998 he founded one of the first digital marketing agencies in the U.S. For 20 years, in addition to executing digital marketing strategies for small, medium, and enterprise-level businesses, Stoney wrote, taught and spoke about digital marketing.

In 2019 he sold his company and is now Director of Digital Marketing for a silicon valley company. In his free time, he writes both fiction and non-fiction. He is currently working on his second digital marketing book as well as his second novel.

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A FAMILIAR STRANGER

by Bambi Sommers

Nick walked along the sidewalk the way he always did; not looking at anything. Head down, eyes on the sidewalk in front of him, never looking anyone in the eye. His goal was his destination. It was the same every day. But this was no ordinary day in Nick's life. He just didn't know it yet.

As he hurried along seeing only what lay directly ahead, he stepped to the side to go around the person in his path whose shoes he could see. He hesitated when the person stepped to the same side. He'd experienced this before, though, when strangers would do an awkward little dance before finally going around each other. They both stepped in the other direction, then back again, the stranger moving his feet just a fraction of a second after him. Not wanting to continue this, Nick stopped and raised his eyes to look at the man.

He originally just planned to glance up to see what this person's problem was, but what he saw held his attention. It took a minute to register that the man standing in front of him was... him. A perfect copy. A twin. His doppelganger. As Nick took in the sight, his world shifted. Literally. The ground seemed to move under his feet and his vision blurred. The last thing he remembered was the man speaking to him, but he couldn't hear him. Then his world went black.

Nick opened his eyes to find himself in his apartment's bedroom. He tried to remember what day it was and if there was somewhere he needed to be. Glancing at the clock on the nightstand, he realized it was early evening. He had slept all day? Was that normal? He ran his hand down his face, trying to wake himself up. Throwing the covers back, he sat up on the edge of the bed. Glancing down at himself, he realized he was fully dressed. The only thing he didn't have on was shoes. He tried to remember if he had gotten drunk but couldn't recall. He made his way to the bathroom where he relieved himself, brushed his teeth and splashed water on his face. His stomach growled so he walked down the stairs towards the kitchen.

As he reached the bottom of the stairs, he heard water running in the kitchen sink. One thing he did remember was that he lived alone, so he tiptoed around the corner and peeked through the kitchen doorway. The water had stopped by this time and what he saw was himself leaning against the sink, arms crossed, looking back at him.

“Bout time you got your ass outta bed. They didn’t tell me you would be out this long.”

Nick eyed the man warily, trying desperately to remember a twin brother. “Sorry. I seem to be having a hard time remembering things today.”

The man grunted as he pushed off the sink and opened the refrigerator door. “They said you’d be hungry, are you?”

“Yeah.” Nick watched this man walk around the kitchen, pulling out things Nick didn’t remember buying. He laid out bread, slices of roast beef, cheese and mustard on the kitchen island. Then, grabbing a bag of chips from the top of the fridge, a couple of Cokes and two plates, he motioned for Nick to sit. “Who are ‘they?’”

The man didn’t say anything. He laid bread on his plate and started piling meat on it.

“‘They.’ You keep saying ‘they said.’ Who are you talking about?” Nick asked.

After taking a bite from his sandwich, the man spoke. “So, tell me. What do you remember?”

Nick frowned, trying to sort his answer. “Do you mean about why I slept all day? Or my life in general? Or... you?”

“Take your pick.”

Nick took a bite of his sandwich and chewed, never taking his eyes off the man. “For starters, I can’t remember you. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I have a feeling I have a twin, so I guess that’s you?”

“Guess again.”

Nick frowned. “Ok, let’s start with why I woke up fully clothed after sleeping all day. Don’t I work?”

“Probably not anymore.”

“I seem to remember that this is my apartment and I live alone. So, why are you here?”

“It’s my apartment now.” The man rose while taking his last gulp of Coke. “Why don’t you clean this up when you’re done. I’ve got to run out for a little while.” He grabbed a jacket off the back of a chair, then stopped and turned at the door. “Oh, and don’t go out.”

Nick finished eating. He felt so strange. But he hadn’t even thought of going out. Hell, he was surprised he could maneuver around his own place. It was his place, wasn’t it? He felt odd, not quite himself.

The man found himself at a convenience store, standing at the counter. He bought a pack of cigarettes and as he walked out the door, he heard someone call his name, well, Nick's name. He turned and saw Nick's sister's wife, Camille. He grinned and waved as she made her way over to where he stood.

She hugged him. "Hey, you. I'm glad I ran into you. I was going to call."

He lit a cigarette.

"Since when do you smoke?" She coughed and waved her hand in front of her face for emphasis.

"It's a recent acquisition. There may be a lot of those."

"A recent acquisition? What the hell does that mean?"

"It means if I'm gonna live on this plane, I'm gonna enjoy myself. So, why were you going to call ... me?"

Camille made a face and looked down at her shoes. "It's your sister. She's in the hospital." When he didn't comment, she looked up at him. "Don't you even want to know why?"

"Ok, why?"

"What the hell is up with you today? Are you feeling alright?" Camille stared him down, but he waved her off with the hand he held the smoke in. "Anyway, she woke up not being able to remember anything."

That got his attention. He turned to look at her. "Really? Hmmm, they didn't tell me about that," he said, more to himself than her.

"Who didn't tell you about what?"

He shook his head. "Not important."

She sighed, indignantly. "So, I'm going back to the hospital. Are you gonna stop by?"

"I've got a lot to do today, but call me if anything happens."

"Suit yourself." She shrugged. "See you later."

As the man walked back to the apartment, he wondered about the connection between twins, real twins like Nick and his sister. So, if he could affect Nick, he could affect her as well? This was going to be more interesting than he thought.

Nick was freshly showered and dressed when the man got back. He had opened the door when he heard footsteps on the stoop.

The man spoke first. "I thought you might be waiting for me. And, from the look on your face, I bet you have more questions. Let's get a beer."

Nick followed the man into the kitchen where they, once again, sat at the island. The man opened two beers and set one of them in front of Nick and the other he

brought to his lips and took a long pull. "I missed some of the things you get to enjoy here."

"I don't know what you mean by that. Have you been some place where they don't have beer?"

"Yeah, but most don't mind. They don't miss things like I do."

"What are you talking about?"

"Let's table that for later. What's on your mind?"

Nick frowned. He seemed to be doing a lot of that lately. "That's the problem. My mind. I hate to ask you this, but I have to be blunt and it makes no sense since you look exactly like me but who are you?"

"I'm you."

Nick couldn't have been more confused. "What do you mean, you're me? How can you be me when I'm me?" He started to panic. "There's still only one of me, right?"

"There's no reason to raise your voice. It won't change anything." He smiled.

"In fact, you won't change anything." The man took another pull on his beer.

"Listen, you seem like a nice guy. In fact, I know you are. But, see, that's the problem."

Nick glared at the familiar stranger. "You listen. I have no idea who you are. In fact, I'm not quite sure who I am. The only thing I know is this IS my apartment, not yours. I live alone, not with you. So, you need to stop talking in riddles and start answering some of my damn questions!"

"Alright. What is it that you want to know first?"

This threw Nick a bit. He expected the man to give him another riddle or at least say something that didn't make any sense. "Well, uh, I asked if I had a job and your answer was probably not anymore. Don't I have to be somewhere? I can't remember."

"No."

Silence filled the air as Nick waited for him to say something else. Anything else. "No? Just no? That's all you have to say?"

"What more do you want me to say?"

"Something. Anything! You seem to know me and know who I am and what I do, so tell me!" Nick stood and when he did, he bumped the table. His beer bottle tilted but the strange man caught it before it fell.

"You gonna drink this?" Nick just glared at him, too angry to reply. "Ok, you want to know something. Hmmm, let's see. How about this? You used to have a

job but you don't anymore. In fact, you don't ever have to worry about working again. That should take a load off, right?"

"What do I do for money?"

"You won't need any."

"What do you mean I won't need any? Everyone needs money to live."

"You couldn't be more correct. Everyone needs money to live." The stranger cocked an eyebrow and took a drink without taking his eyes off Nick. He watched to see if Nick would figure that one out. This was a fun game he was playing. He hadn't been entertained this much in centuries. He saw the moment Nick got it. He watched as Nick's face paled.

"So, are you going to kill me?"

"Yes and no."

"That doesn't make any fuckin' sense! That's a yes or no question that takes a yes or no answer, now which is it?"

"You are going to die but I'm not going to kill you. Not directly, anyway. You see, when you were born onto this plane, a mistake was made. A big mistake. Your soul, instead of being the 'whole' part which is normally dispatched, wasn't. Only the positive side was. Now, try to follow me here. If only the positive side was dispatched here, then that left only a negative side to be sent elsewhere. This mistake went unnoticed for thirty-two years. No telling what the fuck happened. Someone in bookkeeping sleepin' on the job maybe. Anyway, when they found the mistake, word leaked to me and, instead of letting them handle it, I thought it would be fun to take matters into my own hands. Get it?"

Nick stared at him, open-mouthed. He closed his mouth and swallowed. "Not in the least."

"Ok, I suppose it's a lot to take in. Let me give you some background. A human never possesses his or her entire soul. They only possess a part. Other parts are dispatched to other planes, dimensions if you will. Each part is the 'whole' of the soul, positive and negative. Each soul goes to the person or thing they're supposed to. But always, always, there's a small part that stays home."

"Home."

"Yes. Home. That part's a bit trickier to explain. Humans think of it as Heaven or the Universe. Those who don't believe think it dies with them and is buried." He chuckled. "That one always makes me laugh. You humans can be so full of yourselves!" He stopped to take a drink.

“So, if I’m understanding you right, I only have the good part of my soul and that was a mistake?” Nick was more confused than ever.

“Exactly.”

“You’d think having a good soul would be a good thing. So, where is the negative part of my soul?”

The man grinned and stretched out his arms. “You’re lookin’ at it, kid.”

“So, why can’t the parts of my soul just be put together?”

“Because it doesn’t work that way. It’s not like I can just take over your body.”

“So, where have you been living and how did you find me?”

“I live in a higher dimension. Things are very different there. We are aware of your dimension and the human race. We can keep track of the other parts of our souls. That’s why I know all about you. My race is more evolved and we’ve learned to move from one dimension to the next if we so desire. But the trick is we are never to be seen on another plane as our true selves.”

“Why?”

“Because we all have parts of our souls here. Do you know what would happen if our higher souls met your lower ones?”

Nick ran his long fingers through his dark hair then brought his eyes up to meet the stranger’s. “Our world would end as we know it.”

“Bingo! Very good, Nicky! You catch on quick! So, when you met my eyes on the sidewalk early this morning, your world ended as you know it. You have no memory. And…”

“I’m going to die.”

“Bingo again! Damn, boy! For a human, you’re quite bright! You see, we can’t both exist on the same plane and frankly, I’m tired of the other one. There’s no fun there! No booze, no smokes, and even though there are beautiful women, we’ve risen above sex! Well, fuck that noise! This boy wants it all and staying here, as you, allows me to have it.”

“Why is it that I have to die? Why not you?”

“You’re not listening, Nick, I’m of the more evolved.” He grinned.

Nick was starting to hate his own face, watching this son of a bitch. “But I believed good would always defeat evil. That’s only fair.”

“That’s what the good are taught, but, hey, life’s not always fair, right? Weren’t you taught that, too?”

Nick looked down at the kitchen island. He realized he had been getting weaker all day. Now he knew why. He was dying.

“The answer to that is yes, too, Nicky boy. Yes, you are close to being gone.”

Nick stared into this man’s face, into the too familiar eyes.

“You see, I am you. I know what you’re thinking and the weaker you get, the stronger I’m becoming. They didn’t tell me that would happen, either.” He turned away from Nick but continued talking, almost to himself. “But, of course, they wouldn’t tell me that because they had no idea I was going to come here, that I was going to stay. Ah, but how wrong they would have been. I’m going to live it up here with underdeveloped humans.”

“I asked before but you never told me. Who are ‘they’ you keeping talking about?”

“‘They,’ my dear friend, are the supreme, the rulers, gods, if you will. We don’t abide by such nastiness as presidents, like you do. The supreme are there to answer questions, to teach.”

“Aren’t you afraid they will know, or at least find out, that you have come here to take my place?”

He laughed. A full deep belly-laugh. “Here’s where it gets really interesting, Nicky boy,” he grinned. “You see, since I’m the negative side of, well, you, I don’t really have what you would call a conscience, so it didn’t bother me one little bit to do away with the person who was going to make all this go away. And since I got to them early, no one else knew. I then destroyed the records and poof! This little mistake never happened. No one will miss me there because I didn’t have friends, and by the time they figure out that a heinous crime actually happened in their little utopia, I’ll be just another old man here on your plane, dying of natural causes and not giving a damn.”

Nick was fading fast. He could barely raise his head to look at this man. He tried to stand but his legs gave out. The man caught him and helped him to the couch where he could lie down.

“Before you die on me, you should know one more thing. You have a twin sister.” This got Nick’s eyes to open wide as he took in the stranger. “Yeah, I ran into her wife when I went out earlier. Seems she woke up this morning with amnesia. Doesn’t know who she is or anything else. Camille took her to the hospital.”

“Will she die, too?”

The man’s eyebrows drew down and he frowned. “I can’t say because I just don’t know. After you’re gone, I intend to make my way over to the hospital and have a look. I knew about her, of course, but I had no idea this would affect her as

well. Should be interesting to see how this unfolds, right?" He grinned and looked down at Nick.

Nick tried to raise his hand to give this guy the finger since he couldn't seem to speak, but he also couldn't muster enough energy to do that simple gesture.

"Well, I'm going to take a piss. If you're gone by the time I get back, it's been nice knowin' ya', Nicky boy."

He went into the bathroom to relieve himself. While he was there, he washed his hands and splashed water on his face. Nosing through the vanity drawers, he found a new toothbrush. After putting that to use, he ran his fingers through his hair and smiled at himself in the mirror.

Walking over to the couch, he looked down where Nick lay. He could tell he was gone but checked for a pulse just to make sure. He sat in the big comfortable chair across from the couch to watch. As he sat there, Nick started to fade. The man knew what to expect but he had never actually witnessed it before so it fascinated him. He watched until Nick was no more. Rising from the chair, he went to the couch and ran his hand over where Nick had lain. Nothing. Just air. He was gone. The man knew humans did such things as funerals and burials, but he also knew that two souls could not exist on the same plane; one would die and vanish. He shook his head, thinking what a time saver this was.

Grabbing his jacket, out the door he went to the hospital. This should be interesting.

The man stopped by the registration desk and asked what room Nick's, that is, his sister was in. After being told, he went up the elevator and down the hall. When he entered the room, Camille was in a chair pulled up to the side of the bed talking animatedly to the woman who looked just like him, Renee. Both of their heads turned as he appeared in the doorway. Camille stood.

"Nick! I'm so glad you could make it. The most wonderful thing just happened!"

"Oh?" He turned and looked Renee in the eyes, but before anything could register, Camille was tugging on his arm and pulling him into the room, breaking his concentration with Renee.

"Just ten minutes ago, Renee suddenly woke up and remembered! Everything! It's a miracle I'm telling you! A bonafide miracle!" She pushed him down in the chair she had occupied and went to the other side of the bed, pulling up another.

The man turned his gaze back to Renee, who had remained quiet. She looked at him and narrowed her eyes slightly. It was then that he knew.

Camille broke the concentration once again. “Renee, honey, do you know Nick? Do you remember your twin brother?”

Renee slowly turned her head to Camille. “Camille, would you mind running down to the cafeteria and getting me a latte? I’d like a minute alone with my brother.”

“Oh, of course!”

They both watched as the door slowly closed behind Camille before turning back to each other.

“What the hell did you do?” Renee asked.

“What did I do? Don’t be so accusatory. I’d say you did something long before me!”

They stared at each other for a full minute, each trying to process how to proceed. The only thing left to do was ... laugh. It started out as a giggle from Renee but then she started laughing out loud which became contagious and soon the two of them were laughing as though enjoying an old joke.

“Well, I must admit, I wasn’t quite expecting something like you,” the man said to Renee.

“You might want to get used to it. There are more of us than you might think. We all became so evolved that we lost the fun. Humans have no idea what they have on this plane, no gratitude for what they have and we’ve lost.”

They calmed enough to really look at each other before Renee spoke again. “So, Nick’s gone? Too bad. He was a good man, a little too good most of the time.”

“When you came here, did it affect Nick?”

“Yes. Luckily, it was just like now with me. He woke with no memory but then slept the day away while I... processed. When he woke, he didn’t remember any of it and, being human, he didn’t see any difference in me.”

“Since you’re not exactly human, I’m surprised this affected you like it did.”

“Seems the amnesia is something we experience but, unlike humans, we remember when we wake. I knew before I even laid eyes on you. I knew Nick was gone.”

He reached out and touched her hand. “It looks like I had it wrong. I thought I was being original, but you say there’s a lot of us here?”

“You’ll be surprised. We walk among the humans unnoticed, but we recognize each other immediately. I have met a few humans who know something is different, but they chalk it up to us being angels or something they try to get a grasp on.”

“Angels? I admit I’ve never been called that before.” He chuckled.

“There is something else you should know, something I wish I would have been told when I arrived.” He cocked his head and looked at her, curious. “We change as we’re here. In fact, I’m already seeing it in you.”

“Change how? And how can you see it in me, I’ve only known you for a matter of minutes.”

“When you walked through that door, I saw, well, more felt, the darkness in you. But when the other part of our soul dies, the positive part, some of that flows into us. Gradually, we become a ‘whole’ soul here. I already see part of the darkness has faded from you, just in the short time you’ve been in this room.”

The man looked at the floor. He didn’t know how to process this, but now that she’d told him, he could feel it. He could name it. “But tell me, please, we don’t actually become human, do we?”

“To be honest, I haven’t known anyone to be here long enough to tell. Either that, or I can’t see us in them anymore.”

“How long have you been on this plane?”

“Five years and trust me, I’ve changed. A lot.”

“Do you feel like you’ve become more... human?”

The door opened and Camille came in with a tray and three cups. “I got lattes for all of us.” She looked between Renee and Nick. “Did you guys have a nice chat?”

Renee smiled. “We did. Oh, these lattes smell delicious. Thanks for getting them for us.”

Camille leaned over the bed and lightly kissed Renee. “Anytime.” She handed one to Nick and took her seat.

Nick removed the lid and inhaled the heavenly sent. This was one of those luxuries he wanted in his life. A simple latte. He sipped, contemplating what Renee had said about changing. He wished Camille would have stayed away for a little while longer so they could have finished their conversation. The three of them made small talk while they finished their lattes which surprised Nick. He felt he wouldn’t want this part of the human bonding experience. He had planned to come here and grab what he’d been missing, what he wanted to be here for, sex, smokes, alcohol... sins. Isn’t that how they were labeled, sins? But he had sat here, laughing and talking, and actually enjoyed it. Could it be that the soul, the ‘whole’ soul was what really made humans the creatures they were?

Renee’s voice broke him out of his contemplation. “Nicky, are you ok? You seemed lost there for a minute.”

He smiled at her. "Yeah. Today's been a bit of a trial is all. I'll be fine. But I'm gonna get going so you can get some rest." He leaned down and gave her a tight hug, then walked around the bed and did the same to Camille.

"Hey, they're discharging Renee today, so why don't you come to dinner tomorrow? I'll make something special." Camille told him. "Come at six." He nodded and walked out the door.

He paused on the sidewalk outside the hospital. It was an older building on the main street of the smallish town. Standing there, he watched people walk by going into different stores. He could tell some were coming or going to work, dressed in nurse's uniforms or shirts with store logos on them. He watched as cars drove down the street. He lost track of how long he stood there contemplating the fact that each of these people had lives of their own. They had jobs, families, houses, friends, the equivalent of human success. Could that really be what he had wanted after all? He shook it off and headed for home.

The next day before going to his sister's house, he made a list of things he needed to do if he wanted to pass for human on this plane. The list consisted of finding a job and becoming part of human structure. He knew that, no matter how good the other Nick was, there was always something in him that was missing. He didn't realize until this exact moment that it had been the same for him. Therefore, neither one had ever really made any friends. Hell, the human Nick never really looked anyone in the eye. Hence their 'dance' on the street that day. Was that just yesterday morning?

He showed up on his sister's doorstep with a bottle of wine and a cheesecake from the local bakery at precisely six that evening. Camille answered the door and gave him a tight hug. She had an apron thrown over her slacks and sweater. As she ushered him in, she removed the apron, hanging it on the hall tree. "I have to run out. I didn't realize I was out of basil and I need it." She laughed while rolling her eyes. "I'll be back in about a half hour. Renee is in the living room. I'm sure she'd appreciate a glass of that." She smiled and pointed to the wine in his hand. "Ooooh, and I'll appreciate a slice of that cheesecake after we eat. You're the best, Nick!" He grinned as she ran out the door.

"Hey, sis!" he called from the door. She appeared from around the corner and gave him a hug.

"Looks like you have this down already. Wine and cheesecake?" She laughed out loud. "Come on into the kitchen and let's open that baby up."

He followed her. "Listen, Renee, before Camille gets back, I want to tell you that I'm starting to feel differently than when I first came here. I'm starting to see what you mean by the changes."

She nodded. "I was hoping I'd get the chance to tell you what I, and the rest of our kind, think that is happening or has happened. First, tell me about those changes in you."

They filled their glasses and settled onto the couch in the living room.

"I came here to have everything I wanted, everything we gave up on our plane... like this, for instance." He held up his glass of wine. "I had every intention of over-indulging in all of it. My life was going to be one big party, something the other Nick was too stupid to take advantage of. At least I thought he was."

"And now?"

He put his wine glass on the coffee table and ran a hand through his hair, a definitely human act. "I'm finding myself wanting more, wanting what the humans, the ones I felt disdain for, have. I'm almost... envious." He whispered the last word like a prayer.

There was a minute where neither of them spoke, then Renee broke that silence. "Nick, we believe we all died." He whipped his head up and looked into her eyes as she put her hand up, palm out. "Hear me out. We had become so evolved that we actually began to believe that this, what the humans have on this plane, on this planet, was our idea of Heaven. We saw the inability of some humans to see what they have before them, the inability to feel the gratitude they should, and we started to crave it. Being in our highly evolved state over the centuries, we were able to create our own form of Heaven and it happened to be what the humans already had, a simpler form of life. A life with all the trimmings. So, when we died, we came here."

"And we're becoming human."

"Yes. And the humans whose place we took didn't really die. We just became part of them."

"This is what you believe really happened?"

She laughed. "Do any humans really know what happens when they die? Isn't not knowing part of living the human experience?"

BAMBI SOMMERS

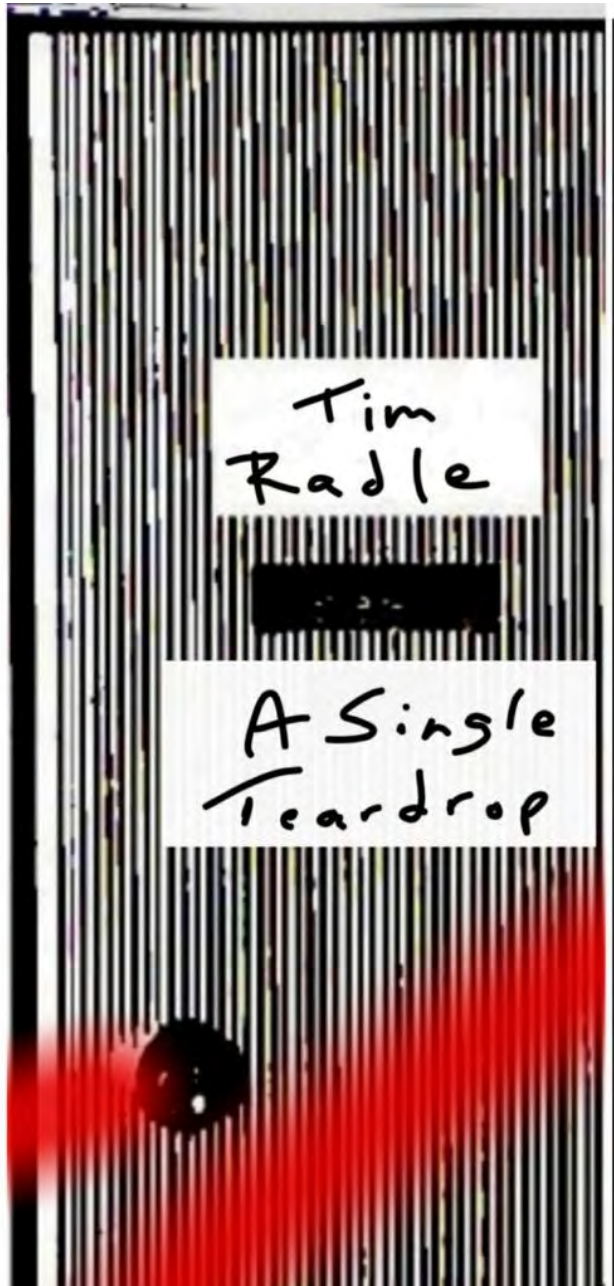
Bambi Sommers has been writing most of her life, small things like lyrics, poems and jingles. In December of 2017, a publicist's writing contest helped her take the plunge and write her first romance novel, leading to eight more by the end of 2020.

During this time, she started an editing business, wanting to help other writers make their words as good as they could be. She also met a few other local writers and helped form a writing group. This led to the writing of *Dead Memories*, the first book put out as a compilation of ideas from the entire group. Although writing romance is her normal genre, she took a step outside to write her short story in this book, which she hopes is the first of many.

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A SINGLE TEARDROP

by Tim Radle

DAY 1

I'm not sure what caused me to wake up, but I was in Amelia's arms. The touch of our naked bodies was the only source of warmth we had. There were no blankets on or under us, but we were on a relatively soft, flat surface. I had no recollection of my immediate past—not where we were nor how or why we got to this place. I solely knew the person whose body held close to mine was my fiancé. We seemed to be in a room of some sort, but we were not in our home. I thought so, anyway.

"My God, babe... What happened?" I asked, tightening my arms around her.

Her already-wrapped arms tightened around me as she stretched.

"Honestly, I don't remember either. I'll *absolutely* take this... this... *you*," she breathed, seemingly not bothered by our mutual loss of time nor our surroundings. "I believe it is our responsibility to take full advantage of this situation we've found ourselves in."

She deftly rolled on top of me and we made love. We used several positions, feeling the corners of our physical connection amid soft nonverbal utterings and the din of the human sex cadence. We renewed the depth of our emotional love purposefully and resolutely.

She laid on my chest, seemingly listening to my heart and breath slow as the minutes bled into eternity.

"I literally have no idea where we are, Frank. I mean, seriously—no idea," she uttered after several minutes.

"Do you see our clothes anywhere?" I asked, rubbing her back.

There was a soft light that slowly grew brighter on the far end of the room.

"I think I see something, yeah. I can't make out if they are our clothes or not, though," she replied and slowly removed herself from me.

I watched as she approached the item. She seemed to stop, look back at me and then continue a few times. I could feel my own sense of trepidation rise.

"I think these are your clothes, babe. I'm going to see if I can find a light switch," she said in the distance.

Well, as soon as she said “light”, a soft light illuminated the room.

Our clothes were scattered all over the room. A bathroom, also mildly illuminated, was on the left side of the room not far from the bed.

So, she gathered her clothes, went into the bathroom, and changed. I followed and did the same. I found toothbrushes and toothpaste and a full complement of other basic human things on the counter. I assumed them to be fair game, as I still had no idea where we were or how we got there—nor whose items these were.

To be clear, I finger-brushed and poured mouthwash into a paper cup from a dispenser out of pure self-preservation from other people’s germs.

“I did too,” she later revealed, smiling.

“Do you have any idea where we are?” I asked.

“No—I think we should go exploring and see what we can find. Up for a little adventure?” she asked, wrapping her arms around me.

“I’ll go with you anywhere you choose to go, my love,” I replied and hugged her tightly.

“Well—though you’ve now made my decision to clothe something I am questioning, we should try and get our memories back,” she suggested and kissed me.

I positioned my arms so I could lift her and stood up, still kissing her. She was all of one-hundred pounds soaking wet, so the challenge was not a big one.

I walked us to the mysterious door and gently set her down.

“Count of three?” she asked happily.

“Go!” I replied and threw open the door.

We were in a large, exceptionally appointed residence. Directly ahead was a sprawling kitchen with an island accented with stools on the one side. To our immediate left was a monstrous stone fireplace with a large sectional couch in front of it. Off in the distance past the kitchen, I saw sets of stairs going up on one side and down on the other. To the right, there was a wall of windows with a set of French doors leading outside. Semi-perpendicular to the doors, there was a dining room table. Past the fireplace on the left, there appeared to be a hallway. It was obvious to me that no one but the two of us was in this house—there were no signs of life *anywhere*.

“Is any of this looking familiar to you, Amelia? I mean—this is an incredible house, but I have no idea why we are here.” I said as I walked toward the kitchen.

“Nope—I got nothin’,” she replied, looking outside.

“Maybe if we can find our car, something will click. I seriously don’t think anyone is here. I mean—we have a car, right?”

“Good idea! We got here somehow, right? I don’t see anything out this direction. Maybe there is a garage or something downstairs. Up for a bit more exploring?” she asked, taking my hand.

“I’m in. Let’s go!”

We walked downstairs to find a cavernous room divided into sections. To the left was a door, presumably opening to something outside, or maybe a garage. A fully stocked bar the width of the house began a foot off of the staircase and ran all along the right side of the room. A sitting area with a TV on the wall was at the farthest end of the room. A pool table sat just behind those chairs. Two glasses and a bottle sat almost perpendicular to that pool table.

“Do you see what I do? Maybe there’s a clue by those glasses,” I suggested.

“I do and fully concur, inspector.”

We walked toward the glasses and found the bottle was unmarked and empty. It sort of smelled like vodka to me. The thing was, neither of us drank vodka. I was a bourbon guy and she a wine girl. Vodka was a thing in the summertime whenever beer was not on hand. (It was not summer.)

“Does this ring a single bell, love? Did we get blitz drunk in this house and have a night of crazy sex in the bed with no blankets? I mean, is that even plausible?” I offered, rubbing my head.

“Truthfully, no. I’m not hungover and you certainly aren’t either. Whatever was in that bottle seemingly wiped our memories. I mean, the entirety of the experience thus far is something I will relish forever, so I don’t care. Waking up stark naked with you holding me, making love on some random bed with no blankets—I mean come *on*. There is a story here somehow—and I like the plot a whole lot as it stands,” she reasoned.

“Why don’t we see what that door by the stairs leads to?” I suggested.

“Yeah—let’s see if there is a garage with a car out there.”

So, across the room and to the door we went.

The door led to a garage—yes. It was empty aside from a well-appointed workbench immediately to the left of the door.

“Um...”

“Yeah, this is weird,” she said. “Maybe there are more clues upstairs?”

I shrugged. Confused, we left the garage and headed that way.

The upstairs hallway led to a balcony that looked over the living room on one side and the kitchen on the other. Four more rooms were there; three were empty and one was an ornately decorated nursery.

“Any ideas?” I carefully asked. I had no idea if somehow the nursery would be significant to her for some reason.

“Not one clue. I mean, the nursery is *super* cute, but I don’t recognize anything at *all*,” she replied, inspecting a stuffed dolphin she found in the crib. “I am hungry. Why don’t we look out the other side of the house and see if maybe our car is in front of the garage or something.”

“I like this plan a bunch. Let’s go—something has to be familiar at some point.”

So, down the stairs, we went and made our way through the hallway off the kitchen to a two-story foyer containing a gorgeous wood door. It, too, would not open.

“Am I missing a lock or something?” I asked, moving the deadbolt and the lock on the handle back and forth.

“It’s possible there is a magnet system at the top of the door holding it shut. Everything you just did should have allowed us to go outside. Let’s go try the other doors to see if we can get out. Maybe the garage door opens?” she asked, a mild panic notable in her voice.

I wrapped my arms around her and attempted to squeeze the nervousness away.

“Wherever we are, we’re here for a reason—our memories are gone for a reason. None of this is worth getting too worked up about,” I soothed.

“I guess,” she relented and put her head on my chest.

Well, the French doors also would not open and the garage doors looked to be disabled. Hitting the button by the door didn’t do a thing and they wouldn’t budge manually either.

“Well, we can’t get out, so let’s see if we can find something to make in the kitchen. Maybe there is coffee too,” I offered as we walked back into the house.

“One minute, okay? I just need to listen to your heart a little,” she replied, snuggling in. “Look—there is a reason for all of this, yes. I am trying *really* hard not to completely lose my mind. Somehow, we can make the most of this—right?”

“I hope so, yeah.”

We stood there for a few minutes. I tried to get my emotions under control. I was partially successful. Something was afoot—I could feel it.

Our hug ended and we started walking toward the kitchen.

Once there, we found a full refrigerator, an exotic coffee machine, and cooking supplies. I whipped up a pair of omelets with spinach, bacon, onions, Kalamata olives, and smoked cheddar cheese. She made two unbelievable cups of coffee.

We sat at the bar and started eating.

“Okay you—follow me on this,” she began, holding her coffee. “We can’t get outside. Neither of us remembers anything beyond waking up this morning. We are in a *fantastic* residence with a fully stocked kitchen that looks like enough food for a week. My thinking is that until we are given a reason otherwise, we make the most of our time here.

“There is wood for fires. We have a pool table downstairs. For that matter, we have a bar with what seems to be an unbelievable assortment of drinking liquids. There is a TV, yes—but what if we literally treat this as a no holds barred, selfish as the day is long, vacation from life? I must insist that sex is a *strong* part of this equation.

“If we are murder victims awaiting our fate, or players in a strange game, or some other random thing—we have this unspecified gift of time. I believe we need to make the most of it. Are you with me?”

I took a final sip of coffee.

“Tell me where you’d like to begin.”

“Well, let’s get the kitchen mess cleaned up so it’s not a massive chore later. Then, you are to build a fire and seduce me. Are you prepared for such a thing?” she asked and kissed my cheek.

“I *believe* you shall find out,” I replied and kissed her.

So, the kitchen was cleaned up and we surveyed the options for dinner. We mutually decided on a pair of filet mignon steaks with baked potatoes and salad as the feast of the evening.

She disappeared into the bedroom and I went about getting a fire started. I also arranged the items on the couch so that surfaces were protected and strategically placed for what was to come.

After a couple minutes, she re-emerged wearing a robe.

“You start when you feel it’s right,” she breathed.

The fire popped.

I softly kissed her neck, winding my fingers around the belt of her robe.

Her breathing grew heavier.

I moved her toward the couch, kissed her, and then laid her down.

“I like where you are headed, sir. Continue.”

We celebrated the edges of our sexuality by that fire. I'll spare details in favor of your imagination, but I will say this: we both slept for a couple hours afterward.

"Okay... What in the world was *that*, babe?" she asked sleepily. "We just did things that I'm not sure are in the normal sex dictionary. I'm not sure I realized I was that flexible."

"Well, I just went with the spirit of the conversation we had earlier. We must be getting old, though—we slept so long the fire died."

"I will so, so take it. You have to understand that the bar has been raised, though."

"I will accept nothing less."

I reluctantly got up—amid solid protests—and got the fire going again. I returned to the couch and collected her into my arms, facing the fire.

"You know, I don't care why we're locked in this house. I wouldn't trade this experience for anything," she said, pulling my arms tighter.

"Yep, I completely agree. I stopped wondering why all of this was happening in favor of just going with it."

We stayed in that fireside snuggle until the sun almost disappeared on the horizon. I should note that we were still naked as the day we were born. Despite this, our frequent kisses were more PG than R. Though the entirety of my memory remained on hiatus, I felt as though we had never been closer.

When the rumble in both of our bellies synchronized, we knew we had to get up to make dinner.

"You have to promise me you will hold me like this again today. I don't mean by a fire—but... But feeling so close to you is pure Heaven," she said, hugging me gently.

"I absolutely promise," I whispered.

We took turns getting dressed and I made our dinner. She went to the bar, found me some bourbon, and got herself a glass of red wine. We ate at the table by the French doors.

"It's really going to be something if we somehow got trapped here and are eating some family's food," she said, sipping her wine.

"I thought the exact same thing. I mean, unless it's a weekend and the people who normally live here are away at their chateau, you'd think we'd see *someone*," I agreed.

"Well sir, until we are visited by these people, I have a challenge for you. Are you game?"

“Deets please.”

“This is a three-part deal. First thing, games of pool will be used to determine outcomes. Second thing, these outcomes will be used in the bedroom tonight. Lastly, when the games of pool are done, your challenge is to have me undressed and in close, close contact before we cross the threshold of that room. Are you with me?” she asked, leaning in.

“Outcomes?”

“Outcomes,” she pressed.

“Well, I’m intrigued and very, very game.”

“I break first.”

Amelia was *good* at pool. As soon as she hit the cue ball, she grinned and ran the table. Her pool acumen was not part of my memory, so in a way, I was played but good.

“Okay... what outcome was that, exactly? I didn’t hit a single ball,” I lamented.

“I am on top to start things upstairs until I choose otherwise. That is outcome one. You break.”

“What is outcome two?” I asked, racking the balls.

“Play and find out,” she said seductively and kissed me.

Well, I am *just okay* at pool. I hit that cue ball and got three more balls in. Amelia then cleared the rest.

“Outcome two has to do with your mouth. I will tell you when...,” she began, fainted, and fell to the floor.

“Amelia! Amelia! Please!” I begged.

I remembered seeing no phones in the house.

There was not a vehicle available to us.

We were locked in.

These things processed in my mind one at a time, the full recognition of our plight filling every inch of my brain with panic.

I picked her up off the floor as carefully and quickly as I could and got her upstairs. I laid her on the bed and checked to see if she was breathing.

She was, but it was shallow.

I ran out of the bedroom and began frantically searching for some way out or some way of calling an ambulance.

Nothing.

I ran back down to the basement, intending to continue my search for a way to communicate or get out. Instead, I found that the TV at the end of the room was on. A man I did not recognize was on the screen.

This stopped me in my tracks. I had no idea what to make of what I was seeing.

“Frank, I need you to open the front door when you hear the doorbell. I know this is a stressful time. I will help you both,” the man said.

I didn’t know what to think.

Regardless, I felt this man may have some means of getting Amelia medical help, so I raced upstairs and waited for the doorbell.

It rang, I grabbed the handle and threw the door open.

The insanity of this failed to register in my brain. My first instinct was to beg him for help.

“Please... I don’t know who you are, but my wife... my wife needs help,” I stammered. Mind you, I had only recognized Amelia as my fiancé to this point. I’m not sure why I called her my wife.

“Your memory will come back in small pieces as you sleep tonight. You need to give Amelia an injection of the medication from the first drawer you come to in the master bathroom. Needles are in there. You don’t have much time,” he said, rushing in and pulling me toward the bedroom.

“How do I know this is safe? How did you know to come here now?” I asked as I was being pulled.

“Read the note in the drawer. Amelia has a sensor in her head that detects when she falls. It was all part of the plan, Frank. Believe this. Now go!”

It occurred to me that we really hadn’t gone through any of the cabinets in the bathroom. As soon as I opened the drawer, it was clear to me Amelia was sick—and had been for some time if what I was seeing represented her medical care. The number of vials in that drawer had to be close to one-hundred. A note sat on top of the sea of bottles.

“Give me 50 ccs, injected into my hip. Needles are marked. It’s safe, I promise. I love you, Frank,” the note read. It was Amelia’s handwriting.

So, I filled a needle as directed and injected the medication into her hip as the note instructed.

In a few seconds, her breathing normalized. She did not regain consciousness, but her breathing was seemingly stable.

I walked back out of the room to find the phantom man, but he was gone. I found a note on the kitchen island. It read, “Pour yourself a drink and then get some rest. Amelia will sleep all night. I’ll be back in the morning. –W”

My emotions were a mess. I had trouble making sense of any part of the night. So, I put a college football game on the TV, sank into a recliner, and drank a sizable glass of bourbon. I wanted nothing more than to decimate the confusion and worry that rushed through every thought.

DAY 2

I woke up the next morning in that recliner, a mild hangover installed handily in my head.

As soon as I shook the hangover-laden sleepiness off, I ran upstairs to find Amelia sitting at the table, her head in her hands.

“How are you feeling, babe?” I asked, rubbing her back.

“I’d rather not answer if that’s okay,” she sheepishly replied.

As if on cue, the doorbell rang when she finished her sentence.

I walked to the door and stopped before opening it. “*What in the world is going on,*” I thought. I had very little confidence or clarity about our safety or our health.

I opened the door and the same man from the night before greeted me.

“Hi, Frank. May I come in?” he asked politely. A leather briefcase dangled from a strap over his shoulder.

“You may, so long as you explain what in the world is going on,” I flatly replied.

“Of course.”

We walked through the foyer to the table where Amelia remained with her head in her hands. She had not moved at all.

The man sat on one side of the table and I sat across from him.

“Frank, I am your business partner, Will. I’m positive—based on all we know—you still don’t know who I am. Please know I am not in any way here to hurt you. I’m going to produce a laptop from my bag. You both need to see a video,” he began and produced a laptop from his bag. “Amelia, I know the last thing you want to do right now is to look at a screen, but it’s important. Okay?”

“Mhmm,” she muttered weakly, unmoving.

A video began on the laptop. In it, Amelia was wearing a bandana, looking sick as the day is long. In her arms was a *tiny* baby. I sat next to them, a conflicted look on my face.

“Hi, well... us!” Amelia cheerfully began in the video. “Here’s hoping the experiment worked! See...,” she began, but tears fell from her eyes and silence took hold.

“The goal of this exercise was to give us one good day. One day away from... From...,” I stammered and also broke down.

“Your memories are not back yet. This is why our daughter remains with Grandma J at the moment,” Amelia continued, regaining her composure enough to speak. “You see, I have exhausted all of the available treatment possibilities for the cancer that *ravages* my body. I... I probably only have a couple weeks left to live. I... I just wanted to feel the love we had without the tragedy, without the harsh judgment of cancer one more time.”

“We—Will and I—developed a means of tricking the brain into forgetting years of life without inducing harm,” I said in the video, wiping my nose. “Our intent in developing the product was simply to help victims of loss to be able to better cope with their situation. We had no idea Amelia and I would be the first test subjects, but it just worked out that way given the situation at hand.

“Every personal photo was removed from the house. Anything that could have triggered a memory was removed. The only place untouched was the nursery because there have been no memories there quite yet,” I continued. I then paused for a moment and started crying hysterically.

Amelia grabbed my hand in the video, tears falling from her eyes. She seemed to say, “It’s okay, it’s okay,” but it wasn’t audible.

After a couple minutes, I wiped my face and said, “Every part of the thought here was around a ‘better goodbye’ as time is *not* our friend.” Immediately after saying this in the video, my head fell forward, and the video ended.

I could not contain my emotion. I laid my head on the table and sobbed. I could not believe this was happening.

“We worried the shock of your situation might defeat the purpose of the product,” Will said gently. “I know this is insanely hard. What the two of you have been through is the very definition of hell itself. The baby... I don’t... It was totally your call, though, Amelia.”

I sat up and wiped my eyes and the river flowing from my nose. When I finally settled down, I looked back at Amelia. She hadn’t moved.

“Amelia? Honey? You okay?” I asked.

“Amelia?” Will seconded, looking intently for a reaction.

There would be no reaction. A single teardrop had fallen from her eyes sometime during that video. I knew she was horribly, horribly sick—but I had just lost my wife to a broken heart.

“Oh my... no... please,” I implored.

“Frank... I... I...,” Will stammered, tears falling from his eyes. “I hope I didn’t... I... Oh God Frank, I am so, so sorry.”

I sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. In less than twenty-four hours, I had gone from a blissfully strange situation with my fiancé to losing my wife and becoming a single parent to a baby girl.

Will called the ambulance and she was taken from her place at the table. I will never be able to describe the profound feeling of emptiness I possessed as I watched those ambulance doors close.

Will remained at the table. “I will stay until you tell me to go, okay?” he began, horribly containing his emotions. “There is one more thing you are owed, as we felt this might be a possibility.”

After saying this, he produced an envelope from his briefcase. “You should read this when you are ready,” he said, his voice laced in despair.

“You” was written on the envelope in Amelia’s handwriting. In it, I found a handwritten letter.

Hello, My Love –

Well, if you are reading this, it would mean that I am no longer living. If this is the case, I need you to know more things than I was able to tell you, faster than when your memory is likely to come back to help you become okay.

For starters, we got married two years ago. We anticipated the memory loss would span approximately three years, so it would have taken us to the year before we got married. I got sick one month before our nuptials with brain

cancer. It quickly spread to every major system in my body like wildfire, within six months.

Well, every system was decimated except for my lady bits. Yeah, through some cruel and twisted joke, I got pregnant ten months ago. No one expected the baby to survive—or for me to live through a delivery—but I made the choice to try.

Yes, this meant a change to treatment—but my pre-baby treatment was barbaric and doing nothing to eradicate the cancer growing in my body. Please know this: we made this decision together. Know that our baby is nothing but the purest reflection of the love we've had from the beginning.

You've given me a reason to fight, Frank. You gave me love. You built me a home that addressed every possible angle of my life, my health. Our bed should be something you patent, my love, as it is sheer brilliance. Sleeping in a purely cleansed place almost assuredly kept me alive longer. I mean it, Frank—patent. Today.

We knew based on the state of my health that I might not survive our experiment. This, too, is something we agreed was an acceptable risk. Well, Will was not as supportive, but I pressed hard for this chance.

You see, I wanted nothing more than to have the ability to show you the purest love possible, without cancer breathing down our necks. It was important to me to be as close to you as I could, as frequently as I could. It so happened that our most 'active' time was the year leading up to the wedding, so our minds were hopefully perfect for some extraordinary closeness.

You are a father, Frank. It will be important for you to process your emotions as you need and prepare for that responsibility. You owe it to me—to us—to give Allison everything she needs.

You also owe it to me to be happy. You owe it to me to let me go, to love again when you're ready.

Know somewhere, I am smiling, my love. Know this in your heart.
I love you Frank.

I cried reading the letter. Will cried as he watched me read the letter.

A short time later, the doorbell rang, and Will got up to answer the door. Seconds later, my in-laws walked in with my baby girl.

I stood and hugged my mother-in-law, who cried so hard she completely soaked my sweatshirt in tears. My father-in-law focused his attention on the baby, though he frequently wiped his cheek.

“She loved you so much, Frank,” she uttered through heavy emotions.

The baby started to fuss, so I squeezed my mother-in-law one more time, wiped my eyes, and went to the baby carrier.

Looking back at me were Amelia’s eyes. I picked up my daughter and held her close—and cried a whole, whole lot.

DAY 6 & BEYOND

My memory fully came back by the end of that horrible day. I remembered the torture I had endured when considering this whole thing. In the end, it was her persistence that pushed me to agree. Well, in truth, there was a sprinkle of my selfishness too. I just wanted to love my wife, without cancer, even if only for an hour again. We knew the risks, but that time together without cancer as our first thought was so precious it was *worth* the risk.

Four days after she passed, Amelia was laid to rest. The ceremony and all the arrangements had been made well in advance. The minute we notified the funeral home of her death, they set everything in motion. When it was time, I was transported from the house to the church, the church to the cemetery, and then back home again. A large catered meal had been prepared in our house for our families and close friends. Will was a godsend through it all—he worked tirelessly to ensure I didn’t have to do a thing but be ready.

As a collective, we processed our grief. Amelia hadn’t yet celebrated her twenty-ninth year. Despite this, she had given us lifetimes of joy and laughter.

Amelia’s influence was profound on the world—profound on me. For a week after the funeral, I was brought food from friends, family, and neighbors. I was sure the family used this as an excuse to ensure I was caring for the baby and myself. I was, of course, but relished the support I was given even if the context was one of concern.

I resolutely settled into my life as a father, caring for Allison in the only way I could: fully. Will and I jointly owned a pharmaceutical company, so I enjoyed the flexibility needed for Allison’s first months. The product Amelia and I had used for

our two-day adventure hadn't been given a name, so I suggested "Amelia" as an appropriate option. Through particularly heavy eyes, my partner and our staff agreed. It literally just got the approvals we've needed to release it to hospitals. Our trial was a big part of that success.

After all the tears, all the sorrow—our day together has given me such incredible memories of her. Amelia's persistence to test the product now bearing her name had given me the greatest possible gift in my mind: replacing the memory of months of anguish and helplessness with a single incredible day filled with love. The bad stuff is there—I will never forget it. However, when I think of my wife, I remember our love first. I would have it no other way.

TIM RADLE

Tim Radle has been writing for most of his life, but published his first book, [The Life of Olaf Waniglia](#) in 2017. His next novel is scheduled to be published in early 2021.

A graduate of The Ohio State University, Tim's first love is music. He has been playing guitar since before receiving his first W-2. A close second is woodworking—Tim always has a project in flight.

Tim is married with two daughters, a stepdaughter and a stepson. The children are all teenagers, so Tim also enjoys rye bourbon and a good cigar as often as life will allow.

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