

The **Clarendon House** Short Story Magazine

**Satisfying Fiction from
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**Issue
7**



Four gems from some of the best storytellers on the planet
Riham Adly, Jim Bates, Alexander Marshall, and Peter Toeg

The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

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A man confronts a bear and is mutilated — but perhaps he has confronted more than he thought...

The LG by Peter Toeg

'I dubbed him Mr. Debonair for his clothing after crossing his path so many times in my stumbling

travels. Like a magnet, this street denizen. I was drawn to him like the drunk I was to the bottle, residing in a perpetual hangover. And he swept the street.' But who is the mysterious LG? And what role will he play in Adam's life?

Albatross by Alexander Marshall

It's 1951, and David Kershaw wakes up in the School for the Afflicted, a former farmhouse on the outskirts of Barnsley, to see something miraculous, something no one would ever suspect...

Friday Soup by Riham Adly

'You know I'm allergic to legumes, my husband says every time I offer him a steaming bowl of soup. My seven-year old parrots her daddy's words. She's her daddy's daughter just like I was my daddy's girl.' So begins another poetic gem from Egyptian author Riham Adly.

We hope you enjoy the magazine!

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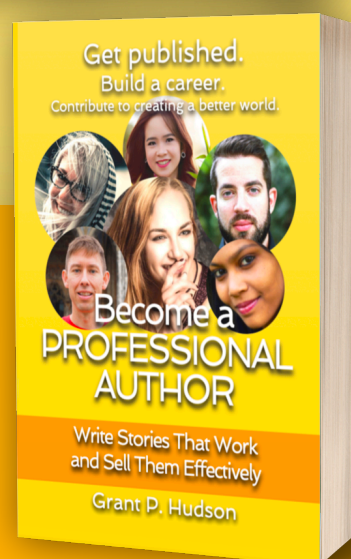
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FACE OFF

Jim Bates

I'd been moved from the emergency area of the hospital to the recovery wing. My condition had been reduced from critical to serious.

"You aren't out of the woods, yet, Ray," Doctor Patel told me. "It's pretty much up to you now. You have to decide, do you want to live or not? Yes or no?"

I could barely make her out through the eyes slits in the bandages wrapped around my face. She had the dark features of someone with East Indian blood, someone in the past I normally would have been skeptical of for all kinds of the wrong reasons. Now, however, she was the only person in my life that seemed to give a damn. I appreciated that.

I couldn't talk and she knew it. She had just given me the facts and the message was received. I gave her the thumbs up sign with my bandaged right hand. My left hand, they'd told me yesterday, had been amputated. *So much for being a hero*, I'd thought at the time.

After the doctor left, I closed my eyes. I'd been sleeping a lot over these last what, four days now since the attack? Dreaming a lot, too. Dreaming about Randy, my best friend, and the times we'd had. The best times of my life.

I hear myself think those words, *the best times of my life*, and add to that thought, *how pathetic can one person be?* Well, if it's me, someone who's nearly fifty years old and doesn't have much to live for, the answer is obvious — pretty pathetic.

*



Randy and I been childhood friends growing up in central Minnesota where flat farmland surrounded Willow Creek, a small town of three-thousand hard-working citizens nestled near the creek of the same name. My dad ran the hardware store and Randy's dad owned the grocery. We met in first grade and bonded over riding our big tire Schwinn coaster bikes together, and a love for being in the outdoors; hunting and fishing and trapping, along with generally messing around without our parents bothering us. We called ourselves The Dynamic Duo.

In the summertime we went skinny dipping in a deep pool on a bend in the Willow River a few miles outside of town, and we skated on that same river in the wintertime. We were average students, but we were likable and had friends, even girlfriends. We double-dated with the Anderson twins to our senior prom and both lost our virginity that night to them, me to Kathy in the back seat of his old Chevy, he to Karen on a blanket in the sand down by the creek where we'd parked.

All in all, I would have to say that those first eighteen years of my life were as near to idyllic as they could be. But nothing good lasts forever as they say, a lesson I was about to learn firsthand because after graduation life got in the way, specifically the war in Vietnam.

The year we graduated from high school the government decided they needed more men, so they set up the 1970 lottery in July and picked our future out of a rotating plastic ball. My number was seventeen. Randy's was thirty-five. Our fate as well as our future was sealed. We were going to war that next year.

Well, not quite. Randy decided to enlist early so he could choose 'his poison' as he called it and have some control where he spent his time in the military. But I didn't follow him to the recruitment office in Cottonwood, the nearest big town. I was terrified of getting killed, so I took the cowards way out and made plans to go to Canada.





You'd think Randy would have hated me for that decision, but, no, he wasn't that kind of a guy. "I wish I had your guts," he said late in August that last summer we were together. We were sitting on the bank of the creek sharing a pall mall. Randy was plucking grass stems and throwing them in the water. We'd both watch them drift away in the current until they were out of sight, then he'd throw another one in and we'd watch it. Swallows flew overhead snatching bugs out of the air. I remember thinking there were the most amazing fliers I'd ever seen, like ballerinas in the sky.

He surprised me when he said, "I have to be honest, Ray. I'd like to go with you to Canada. I have no desire to kill anyone."

I was shocked, but quickly recovered and said, "Come on with me, then." I shucked him on the arm, our form of showing affection for each other. "The Dynamic Duo goes to Canada. That'll be us."

He grinned. Randy was a tall, string bean of a guy with sandy hair, blues eyes and a quick smile. No wonder Karen went for him. He turned to me, seriously, and said, "I would, but my dad... well, you know how my family is. Military all the way."

Which was true. World War I for his grandfather and World War II for his father. It would have broken his parent's hearts to have their son turn-tail and run from what they called, 'His responsibility.' Randy's family had high standards for him and Randy had high standards for himself when it came to doing what his family thought was the right thing to do.

My parents felt the same way as his, but the big difference was that where Randy gave a damn about what his family wanted, I didn't. Plus, like I said, I was afraid. I told myself I didn't want to kill another human being, which was true, but mainly I was afraid of being killed. Pure and simple. I mean, I've met no one in my life who purposely set out to kill someone. Especially the guys I knew who went to Vietnam. Most all of them went because they didn't have a choice; low draft number or no student deferment and bang, off you went. And that's what Randy did. He went. He fulfilled his obligation to his family, his country and, ultimately, to himself.

At the end September he was to board a train, head off to Minneapolis and then on to boot camp in Virginia. I met him at the station, we looked anywhere but at each other, uncomfortable with how to say good bye.

"See ya'," he finally said.

"Yeah. See ya'," was my response (so pathetic, in retrospect.) A brief shoulder hug and that was it. He turned and walked away. "When you get back," I thought to add as he headed for the train, just it fired off its whistle. I don't think he heard me, but if he did, I wouldn't know. He never acknowledged it.

And then he was gone.

The next day I left home for Canada, hitch-hiking on back roads all the way to northern Minnesota. It took two days. I crossed the border just west of International Falls in the back of a pickup truck driven by an anti-war pulp wood logger, hidden under a burlap tarp that stunk of wet dogs. I made my way to Toronto, lived there for nearly seven years and came back in 1977 when Carter pardoned all of us draft dodgers.

But Randy didn't come back. He was killed by a tripwire and a bomb while out on midnight patrol in that first year after he enlisted. They sent his body back in a casket in the summer of 1971. My guess has always been there wasn't much to send.





That July he was buried in the Willow Creek Cemetery on the bank near where we used to swim. At the time, I was working in a headshop on the outskirts of Toronto and mostly likely stoned out of my mind when they lay my friend's casket in the ground.

After I left home, mom and I stayed in touch, writing back and forth and it was she who let me know about Randy's death. It was also she who wrote soon after, *I'm sorry to say this, Ray, but I don't think you'd be welcome back, here, you know, if you ever wanted to come back, given the circumstances.*

I understood what she was saying. But I still might have gone home except she died in 1975 when I was still in Canada. Honestly, with her death, I really didn't have anything to go back to. So, I didn't.

Randy's death hit me hard. I missed him for sure, but I was more feeling sorry for myself that I'd been such a coward and not done what Randy had done. He'd given his life for his country and was considered a hero back home. Me, I'd run away and lived a pointless life in Toronto and was considered a coward in the town I'd grown up in. Even my father didn't want to have anything to do with me. I felt like a failure, but instead of doing anything about it, like try to become a better person, I did the exact opposite. I went downhill.

After Carter's pardon, I came back into the states through customs at Thunder Bay and began living in Grand Marais, a picturesque town on the shore of Lake Superior. I lucked out and got a job working in a hardware store, just like I'd done with my dad. I was paid by the hour and not really considered management material because I was nothing but a pot smoking, beer drinking, long-haired loner. I rented a small room in the Lakeview apartments, a few blocks from the lake, a more run-down excuse for a place to live you couldn't imagine. For a number of years that was my life. Working, getting high, drinking and sleeping it off to do it all over again. A poor excuse for a human being if there ever was one.

In the beginning, when I'd first moved to Grand Marais, occasionally I'd drag my ass up to the hills above town and go for a walk on the Superior Hiking Trail. I still enjoyed nature and liked to be out in the woods, especially by myself, watching birds and whatnot trying to shake my hangover. I even bought a bird identifying handbook, some binoculars and a small day pack to carry them and some water with me.

Being in the woods started out being just another form of escape from the guilt I felt over Randy being killed doing something for his family and his country while I just ran off to Canada because I was afraid. But over the years it became a much-needed shot in the arm of something positive and clean and pure and gave me something more to do than continually abusing my body with pot and beer. It gave me a sense of purpose. You see, I went up there to talk to Randy. Yeah, sounds crazy, doesn't it? But that's what I did.

My conversations went something like this: "Randy, I need you to know how sorry I am. You know what I should have done? I should have gone with you. Me and you, the Dynamic Duo, should have gone over to that damn war and I should have fought with you, and I just know we would have been fine. I'd have protected you, and you would have protected me, and we would have come home and gotten on with our lives. Maybe even started dating those Anderson girls."

Oh, I'd go on, believe me, and you know what? I told him about living in Canada with other draft dodgers. I told him about my girlfriends up there. I told him about the letters Mom and I wrote to each other.

And I told him I was sorry. I spent a lot of time telling my friend I was sorry.

It felt good. Like I was in counseling or something, standing there among the pine trees in Superior National Forest, with Lake Superior glimmering in the distance like sparkling jewel.





Sometimes Randy would answer me back and say, 'Hey, there, buddy, don't beat yourself up too hard. What's done is done. What you need to do is move on with your life and make something of it. That's what the Dynamic Duo is all about, remember? Doing what's right.'

Easier said than done, but I have to say that it felt good to talk to him. I quit drinking and only smoked pot a little and even got a promotion to evening manager of the hardware store, my boss telling me, "After all these years, I have to say, I'm glad to be able to do this, Ray. I used to worry about you, but not so much anymore."

He didn't have to spell it out. I probably should have been fired a hundred times over but for his kind and benevolent nature. I found out from the postman that he lost a kid in the war, and I guess he sort of adopted me. Who knew?

*



So, I was cleaning up my act. I'd been living in Grand Marais for twenty years. I was nearly fifty years old. I had a job. I wasn't a drunken, drugged-out loser anymore. And, I had a purpose in life; going up to the woods above Lake Superior to walk, observe nature, and, most of all, to talk with my best friend Randy.

Which is what I was looking forward to doing the day I ran into the momma bear.

I was hiking along the crest of the Aspen peak on the trail that day, listening to the call of a redtail hawk circling overhead and thinking about chatting up Randy. The sun was shining and the air was mercifully free of black flies. Things were going pretty good. But then all hell broke loose.

I stepped into a clearing. Ahead of me and to the right about fifty feet and not paying me any attention at all was a momma bear, her two cubs and a guy and his kid who I learned later was Jack Sorry and his ten-year-old son, Ethan. And they were up shit creek dealing with that bear, let me tell you.

The father and son were flattened against a big aspen tree with the momma bear snarling

at them and rolling her head back and forth, standing on her hind legs then dropping to all fours and moving closer and closer until she stopped about ten feet from them. Agitated was putting it mildly. She was furious. One of the cubs was behind her and one of them had climbed into the tree the father and son were standing up against.

I found out later they had no idea the cub was there, but the mother sure did, and she wasn't happy. She kept up with her threatening gestures, standing up on her hind legs, then dropping down, then standing up while Jack tried to protect his son by swinging a day pack back and forth at the aggressive animal. I knew right away it was the wrong thing to do because it infuriated her more. Finally, she raised up tall on her hind feet once more, extending herself to a height what seemed like twenty feet and then dropped to the ground, snarling and brawling even louder. She reached out her right paw and extended her claws. I was positive she was getting ready to attack. I needed to do something, but what?



I knew the woods. I knew about wildlife. And I knew about bears. She was moments away from charging so I didn't hesitate. In my mind I saw myself in Vietnam with Randy. We were under attack and out of ammunition. From out of the jungle charged a single Viet Cong soldier with his rifle pointed at Randy and me. I knew exactly what I had to do. I stepped in front of that charging soldier and saved my friend.

And that's what I did now. Except instead of a soldier, it was a bear. I ran at that momma bear waving my arms and yelling and screaming my head off, wanting to put myself between her and the dad and his son. What I said, I don't know, but it must have had

something to do with "Get the hell out of here" because that's what the father and his son did. They got the hell out of there. Me? I was left with the momma bear; a pissed off, frantic wild animal wanting nothing more than to get to her cub up in the tree. I was in the way and I had to be dealt with. And, boy, did she do a number on me. As I fell to the ground under her massive weight was stared at her sharp teeth as they closed in on my face, I remember thinking this macabre thought, *So, this is what it's like to be eaten alive.*

Thank goodness Jack and Ethen were able to find a forest ranger and get help.

*





I kept dozing in and out after Doctor Patel talked, but when I was conscious, I took stock of my situation. I'd been in the hospital for four days. I was wrapped in gauze to stave off infection, and missing my left hand. And, frankly, I was feeling a little sorry for myself. I didn't have Randy to talk to because for some reason he only visited me in the woods.

I was thinking about Doctor Patel's questions. 'Do you want to live or not? Yes or no?' And I was leaning toward the "Not" and "No" end of the spectrum. Why not? I really didn't have all that much to live for.

Then, I had a visitor. Well, two to them, actually. The father and his kid (which was when I found out they were Jack and Ethan.)

The stood at the foot of my bed and the father did the talking. "Hi, Ray. We thought we'd stop by and, you know, thank you for saving our lives." He was an average-looking guy, ten years younger than me. Slightly paunchy, slightly balding. He wore a red flannel shirt and blue jeans and boots. He seemed a little nervous, but that was okay because so was I. I wasn't used to people making it a point to talk to me. I didn't have

much to say, anyway, but did appreciate the effort. I gave them the thumbs up sign which I think they appreciated. At least the boy did. He smiled at me.

They stayed and talked to me about how much they enjoyed hiking in the woods. "Yeah, we live down in the cities," Jack said. "We come here hiking as much as we can. We love it up here on the trail, don't we Ethan?" He turned to his son who smiled and nodded like he meant it. I could sense a warmth there between them that was nice to see. As he talked, though, I got the feeling that there might have been troubles with the marriage because he never mentioned a wife. I don't know, maybe I was looking into it too much.

But it was amazing, really, incredible even, that as the minutes ticked by, I found that didn't mind them being in the room and talking to me. In fact, I enjoyed listening to them. The boy even told me that he liked bird watching, which surprised me since he was wearing a Minnesota Wild hockey team hoody sweatshirt, making me think he was a jock. He seemed like a nice kid.

One thing led to another and pretty soon I felt myself fading and then fell asleep. I was exhausted from all the conversation even though I didn't say a word. I did give the thumbs up sigh a lot though. I guess with Jack and Ethan's love of the woods along with mine, we had a lot in common.

So, all in all, I'd had a good time. The last twenty years of my life, since I came back from Canada, I hadn't been much of a talker. I didn't talk much at work and certainly never away from work. In fact, the most talking I ever did was with Randy out in the woods, and some could argue that it didn't count because he might have just been my imagination. But to that I'd say, "Ha, ha. No way. He's real. I know it for sure."

The next day, Doctor Patel noted in her chart I'd had my two visitors. "So, how'd it go?" she asked. I looked at her through my gauzy view of the world. She was kind of pretty. "It says they might come back again. Only if you'd like them to, though," she said. "I don't want to get you too worn out. You've got a lot of weeks left here for those wounds to heal properly. That momma bear ate you

up pretty good." She stood back, appraising me I'm sure, thinking, *Is this guy really worth it?*

I was, I decided. I was worth it. I enjoyed seeing the doctor and I especially liked Jack and his kid Ethan. She asked me again, "What do you think. You want those two to come back?"

I made a snap decision, one I hoped I wouldn't regret. I gave her the old thumbs up sign. Gotta' take a chance sometime, right? I'm pretty sure Randy would have wanted it that way and, besides, it seemed like the time was right. Just to be sure, though, I'm thinking that when I'm feeling better and can get back in the woods, I'll touch base with Randy and we can talk about it. I'll see what he says. I'm pretty sure he'll be happy for me. I'm pretty sure he'll say something like, 'You know, buddy, it's time to move on. You've repented enough.'

You know what? I think he may be right. I think maybe it is time to move on. Plus, Jack and Ethan seem like good people. Maybe we'll go hiking together some time. I think I'd like that. I think I'd like it a lot.



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*Sharon Frame Gay has been internationally published in many anthologies and literary magazines, including Chicken Soup For The Soul, Typehouse, Lowestoft Chronicle, Literary Orphans, and others. She has won awards at The Writing District, Wow-Women On Writing, Owl Hollow Press, and Rope and Wire and is a Pushcart Prize nominee. Her first collection of short stories, **Song of the Highway**, was published in 2020 by Clarendon House Publications. Her master storytelling continues in **The Nomad Diner**.*

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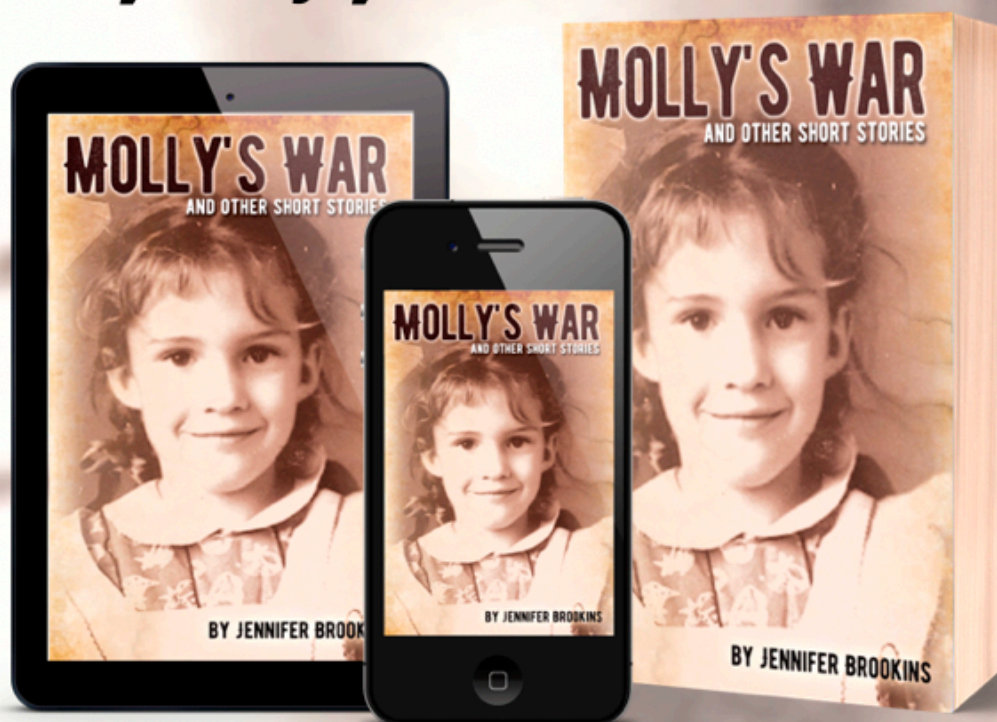
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The LG
Peter Toeg

I dubbed him Mr. Debonair for his clothing after crossing his path so many times in my stumbling travels. Like a magnet, this street denizen. I was drawn to him like the drunk I was to the bottle, residing in a perpetual hangover. And he swept the street.

Wearing a suit jacket and jeans, he was lean and craggy, maybe sixty, an Ascot cap on likely a full head of white hair. He once had a handsome face, I bet. Something military about his bearing carried him on a crisp early Midwest morning at a downtown corner.

An elegant fool.

He moved with a practiced flair, limbs in synchrony, body balanced; an artist focused on his task. Like a ballroom dancer. His shoes. Amid the clutter and fine street dirt, they held their shine. I stared, daily headache pumping, propped on a doorway fifteen feet away.

He stepped back after a few minutes and looked at his work in progress, hands on hips.

The collected debris in a neat pile was a twenty-foot stretch of the sidewalk and gutter clear and clean. My man had come with a galvanized trash can, almost a relic in our small city of plastic everywhere. Another old broom, a dented dustpan, and a bent rake speared up from the can, held by bungee cords.

He was a relic too. Street cleaners were replaced in almost every city in the Midwest with vehicular street scrubbers, the Hoovers of the pavement. Now vagrants were taking over? Well, the downtown did look cleaner.

A street party the night before had left detritus in its wake. If I had been there, I didn't remember. The smell of beer and puke lingered in the air outside a local bar near the corner where he labored. Little pedestrian traffic and a few cars and trucks passed. I was in the habit of walking in the area even when sober, so I'd spotted him. We'd never talked, and neither of us made a move. Until now, after two months.





Spooky. I'd seen this... specter before. Ten years ago, a guy doing the same job, clothing a little more worn but respectable. I guessed him to be about the same age then, only leaner, shorter, so the two had to be different. But so alike. Like graduates of some elite sanitary academy. Damn.

We had our share of walkers and street people in this sleepy Midwestern city, the old and lost, others seeming to turn out on the streets. Lots of recovering addicts subsidized by the state. Sad, usually annoying.

But this one.

This one had an aura about him and energy, certainly not the distinctive smell. The years I spent in Manhattan almost inoculated me from noticing street people and panhandlers. You step around them and never think twice. The squeegee people who catch you at stop lights and smear your windshield for a bill. Yep, they find you.

This man made no moves to solicit or even draw attention. No mumbling. No bucket or sign for money. Working some days in the city center, gone others. Around mostly when few people walk. Early mornings.

I've heard the stories. Successful executives burn a brain neuron and fall out of society, brilliant minds becoming demented. Ending up in some shelter and early death. This one had kept his clothes from his other life.

I passed him—or watched nearby—for weeks before as Fall advanced, distributing a new mix of trash: dead yet colorful fallen leaves amid the conventional street dirt and discards. His one-block work area expanded to three, then four encompassing the heart of the downtown. More of a purpose in life than me. Me, the vagrant with a house but not much better off.

On this day, he caught me with a sidelong glance on the upswing of his sweeping street-clearing arc. Our eyes met. I thought I caught a spoken word, expecting crazy talk or tics so common to street people. He seemed in perfect control, with precise polished movements like he had a goal. I quickly moved on.

"Have you seen the odd fellow downtown sweeping the streets?" One morning, I asked my gadfly neighbor Sam as he hauled some trash from his house. This big Bluto guy, crew cut, gut, earthy, sports-minded. Owned a '65 red and blue Camaro with loud pipes.

"Everybody's odd. How do you tell them apart?"

"This one has a trashcan and broom, and cleans streets and sidewalks. I call him Streetwalker. Like a bum, but overdressed."

"Overdressed?"

"Dressed too well for the job."

Sam looked at me like I had left out the punchline. "No, just the usual townies. Why?"

"Like during the mornings when you do the café circuit with your buddies?" Sam knew the beat of this city. Hard-drinking, workingmen, second and third-shifters, a wide circle of friends.

"Nope, sorry, Adam." He shrugged. "But we do need a fourth for cards this Friday. Maybe he's game?"

*



I asked a few other people over the next few days. Nothing. Had I imagined the guy? Yeah right.

I'd been in freefall since my separation two years ago. Job prospects evaporated. Long nights in the company of a bottle, a downtown bar with a growing tab. My world turned upside down.

I worked out of our—my—small bungalow, daughter in college and son in the Army, playing parent roulette on semester breaks and leaving. I wrote advertising copy from a diminishing list of clients, and the creative spark lost. I wouldn't make the child support and alimony payments if I lost one more job. Grace would take me to court; no love lost. Was that how people end up on the streets? Sweeping.

I needed a plan. Today was the day. Clean up my life. Pull the ripcord and land in a better place.

Yep.

Instead, I called Public Works.

"Street cleaner, some guy downtown? Not one of ours."

"I see him all the time. Sweeping. Ever notice how clean the central city is these days?"

"We do our best. Thanks for your comments."

Huh?

Hmmm. Meet the guy. Talk to him. Okay, no fast moves, nothing to threaten him. I'm street smart. Find some reason to... interact. Sort of... bring my own broom.

Maybe the broom could be the ice-breaker. The Sweeper used two or three from a collection bungeed to his trash can.

Late October, seven in the morning, frosty and desolate at the city corners. I spotted him working steadily, undeterred, still sporting that stupid jacket. He wore a white one over it. Dinner jacket? Had to be freezing his ass off.

He spoke first as I approached. Ten feet. "Cap'n," in a strong cheery voice. He lifted his head, revealing deep blue eyes for a few seconds, then returned to his sweeping stroke.



"You do nice work." Lame.

The man stopped sweeping, faced me, and stared, a sloppy grin now, two hands gripping the broom in front of him. "You been watching me a long time, fella." He coughed, a hack, really. He cocked his head. "You gonna ask me about my broom?" His voice held a hint of sarcasm, but a smile creased his windburned face.

"Uh." He was nobody's fool. Broom notwithstanding. I'd try straight talk. "Why are you doing this shit job? You're not paid."

"LG's my name. You?" He faced me, almost posed as if the broom propped him up. He appeared almost amused.

"Adam."

"I don't run into many talkers, Adam. Then again," and his grin spread, "I'm not one myself." The wind picked up, and the pile he'd collected didn't move. "Let's say sweeping is what I do on the side." He spoke firmly and mysteriously. Intelligent? Poised. Not your

garden-variety street person. "What do you do, Adam? That's worthwhile."

My mind flashed to what I did and then to Grace and the boys. He asked a tough question. "Well, I—"

LG staggered a bit, dropped the broom, and crumpled to the sidewalk.

My gut said to flee. I didn't know this guy, and did I even care?

"Oh Lord," I said and moved close to bend down. He lay on his back. I looked into his face, eyes closed, put my hands on his shoulders, shook him, and then felt for a pulse on his neck.

LG opened his eyes. "Call 9-1-1."

My cell. I scrambled for it, one pocket, then the other. I found it and dialed. LG now lay smiling on the pavement. *Wha?* "Corner of Main and Gillette. Ambulance. Hurry." It was getting darker. I didn't feel right. Something... LG's face dissolved.

*





Bright light filled my vision, a painful zap. I could feel and hear my eyelids closing against the glare.

What happened?

I heard words, and the light moved as a head came into my vision. A voice said something about pupils amid background chatter. I realized I lay flat on my back with an anvil on my chest. Had to be. Hospital? Seemed right.

"The old guy. He... okay?"

I discovered I could croak.

"Easy. Just stay put. We're checking you out." A woman. Nurse? Then I heard some muffled instructions and commands.

Nothing.

*

"What old man? *He* was having a heart attack?" Grace looked at me like the crazy she portrayed at the divorce hearing. Standing—she never sat in my presence as if ready to flee—next to my hospital bed the next day.

I had told her the story about the streetwalker, LG, whatever. "Did the doctor say anything about him? Would he have been hauled in with me in the ambulance? Grace?"

"You probably hit your head, Adam. On the sidewalk when you should have been working."

She shook her head rapidly in annoyance. I knew her facials so well. "Get some rest. I'm late for work."

"But—"

"I mean it, Adam. Sam said he'd check in on you." She turned to me on the way out. "You're late on child support and alimony. Big surprise." And she was gone.

My death wouldn't cause a ripple in the universe.

In the following hours, I learned that I had suffered a mild heart attack, but my 9-1-1 call and fast action saved my life. Immediate intervention made the difference. No more smoking and I needed to "reassess my lifestyle," the doc said.

And, no, the street cleaner wasn't around when the paramedics arrived downtown.

But he had collapsed before me?

Nothing made sense.

Sam showed up late in the day.

"How are the nurses on this floor, Adam? Any hot ones looking for a real man?"

"Yeah, Sam. But I told them I had to back off the humping for a while."

"Right. The line forms behind me." He flashed that goofy grin. "I'm your ride home. Say, why are you still here?"

*

Two days later, after being released after observation and "counseling," I watched some mindless TV as instructed. No stressful activity. Come back in two weeks. Just like that: near-death, revived, and looking forward to death.

A week later, on a cold early December morning, I walked the eight blocks to downtown. Again, I recognized LG from a distance in his white dinner jacket and broom, advancing his cause.

"What happened to you? Two weeks ago?" I said, approaching him from behind.

He didn't miss a stroke. "You're looking better today, Adam," he said without looking. He stopped his work and turned to face me, squinting as if the sun off his jacket reflected the morning light. "Glad you made that call."

"The call for help was supposed to be for you." Something prickly ran up my spine.

"I guess not, Adam. Funny how life turns out."

"Who are you, LG?" I tensed involuntarily, shoulder muscles tight. "You a doctor? You saw a

symptom in me?" I swallowed, and took a breath. "And then you keeled over first, right here in the street. Explain that."

We were close now, and wrinkles creased a face that I bet had seen a lot in the years. Something about this guy.

"I am what I'm doing now, Adam. Kind of true for all of us. *Who* are you, Adam?" I read a softness in his face. "Or maybe I should ask '*where* are you?' in this world."

I wanted to get far away. Spooked by a street cleaner with a broom. "Too many questions, LG." I turned to leave and then stopped. I thought of something. I faced him.

"You don't have a cell phone." Not for a question.

LG looked down at his piles of dirt, which were neatly arranged, and set to work.

*





I would have been dead in minutes; the minutes shaved away when the ambulance arrived the day of my heart attack. That realization shook me: life is fragile, and time is short. It gave me a new perspective. So, make some moves, improve your life and health, stay away from alcohol, and get a decent job. Maybe talk to Grace again about starting over. Yep.

That second Monday of December, I called my contract agency, had oatmeal for breakfast, skipped that second glass of bourbon with it, and had a short conversation with Grace before she slammed her phone down.

Then I went looking for LG.

Icy roads and sidewalks after a light rain and freeze-up the night before greeted me. I didn't see him, waited a bit, freezing my butt, then bussed to the Salvation Army shelter eight, ten blocks away.

"Yeah, I know the men pretty well," said Oscar, the bearded shelter manager, a no-nonsense, gruff old guy who shooed a scrawny vagrant out the door with some advice. "The cheese factory might still take you if you hustle. They're short on day-workers. So get your ass in gear!"

Oscar turned his attention to me as the homeless guy flipped him off on his way into the cold. "No loafers. They sleep here at night, get supper and breakfast, clean their areas or wash dishes and find work or a warm spot in the day." He shrugged. "Them's the rules. They pay for a bed. Not a lot, but it's an encouragement, gives

'em a little dignity." Oscar was big and threatening but had his marshmallow side, I figured. The caring in his eyes confirmed my suspicion.

"How many men sleep here right now?" I could see three rows of cots all made up through the dorm door as a volunteer dragged a mop over the tile. Germ warfare.

""'bout thirty-five now in winter. The numbers change. Some men find other accommodations. Why?"

"Looking for one in particular," I said. "Maybe hangs out here. A guess. Name's LG."

"Doesn't ring a bell. Describe him."

I did, noting the suit jacket and ascot, which must have set him apart.

Oscar pondered, but not long. "Nah, I'd remember a guy like that. The jacket part. Like a suit jacket?"

"Yep, one black and another one white on some days."

The morning light glistened off the wet floor in the dormitory. "Way back, years, some guy dressed a little like that showed. Wacko, had to be. It was winter. He'd be older now. Or dead."

Wacko.

I gave him my card. "Maybe call me if he drops by. This LG."

*



Walk. Like the answer to my messed up life could be found on the streets. Winter, no less, snow and ice, few pedestrians.

"Heya, Warren," I greet my lawyer in passing one day.

He smiled, nodded, and hustled off. I owed on his bill.

Regardless, I found it liberating to be out of a lonely confining house. Grace is becoming more difficult to reach by phone, and me missing the kids.

Son Danny was stationed in Germany. He had called the day after Thanksgiving, little to say, a thread holding our relationship together. His mother had won him over.

Daughter Elise in Seattle, second-year psych major, my little girl. Medical school in her sights. A bright young lady. And she asked about money again, more directly. Tuition is coming due. Oh yeah, child support.

"Dad, you need to get some help. It's embarrassing."

Elise had echoed Grace's words weeks ago. Allied with Grace. My daughter was slipping away.

I was alive. And I could have been dead. Should have been. I survived a heart attack and returned to a stack of bills due and no work assignments. Dried up.

Walking. Walking. A weeknight late, Christmas approaching, colored light's strung all over, wintry... downtown, deserted, snow piles after a thaw. Laughter from some apartment, a couple of bar revelers, stumbling as the last call approached. Streetlight nearby out. My body, probably my heart, told me I needed to be somewhere warm.

A crack. Like a whip. I stopped, my own buzz still working, trying to place the sound. Shuffling. Louder. In front of me.



Two forms moved into my vision, one from the right, an alley, and another from the left, between parked cars. Oh Shit! Both toking on joints. The sweet fragrance. Lefty, Army fatigue jacket, long hair, had a stick or pipe in his gloved hand. Righty, dark complexion, gangly, moved close.

"Uh." I froze. Lefty had a bottle in hand, glinting in a frag of light from somewhere.

"Whatta ya got, Buddy? Something for us?" Lefty was talking with a weapon raised in his hand. "A joint? Money?" He looked big enough to take anything he wanted.

Whap! Searing pain in my upper leg as something right, a pipe struck me so fast I couldn't brace. I reeled, teetered, and felt the sidewalk with one hand as I went down. Cold. "I need—"

"You need something you ain't got, Pal. Like a friend." Righty.

At that moment, when time creeps and fear takes you captive, I went rigid. And I didn't care, I couldn't, but for the pain in my leg.

"He's got a friend." A new voice. Not Lefty or Righty talking. Coming from behind me. That voice?

One of the two thugs laughed, and I heard footsteps coming closer in the dark as the voice materialized. Prone on the pavement, I looked up, and from my crazy angle, a figure in a long coat swept past.

A knife, along with the pipe, fell to the ground near me. Then black closed around me.

Dreamlike, in pain. And a siren, clearly audible approached.

A grip on my shoulder. "I don't have time. And you're running out of it by the way things look. Pull yourself together, Adam." A dark form crouched over me, and the nearby streetlight that had been out, flickered.

LG.

I couldn't speak. His face close to mine betrayed anger. Eyes narrowed, voice controlled. "Life is valuable." He looked long and hard at me. "Even you're valuable in your wretchedness."

"Valuable?" My words came, raspy. Was I 'valuable'?

"Anything can lose value. Ordinarily. Use what you have. Make better choices. Time."

"What are you... talking about? What do you want?"

"For Sam."

"Huh?" I turned my head to the sound of a squad car, lights flashing, pulling up to the

sidewalk. When I turned back, LG was gone. Black again.

I woke up someplace warm to someone poking me.

"...head hit the ground? Can you hear me? Follow my finger."

Hospital? No, we were moving. Ambulance. Again. I struggled to understand, my body heavy and my head swimming. "Wha?"

"Easy. Stay down." A face materialized and then dissolved.

*





The headache, my first sensation after waking, was familiar. Almost daily, after passing out. A routine not to be proud of.

Voices were nearby as my world took shape. The white ceiling and a familiar antiseptic smell identified it as a hospital. I knew the detox drill, although no puke aroma was within range. Then, the whirring sound as the bed inclined. A ding from a nearby call button. Hospital sounds today. A hospital.

"You with me, Adam? Can you hear—"

"Not so loud!" Oh, man. I heard a deep smoker's voice and a laugh.

"Amazing you could hold your own in your state, Adam." He'd lowered his voice but inched closer. Smoker's breath. Ugh.

I was nearly facing him now with the bed up. *Think*. LG stood over me on the street. I remembered that. "Hold my what?"

"You leveled the two thugs." A balding guy spoke, now in focus, badge on the pocket. Cheap suit. Had to be a cop.

I did my body check. Everything seemed to move. Not a lot of pain other than the head. I spotted a bandage on my leg. Had a drip in me. Hope it was Tequila. "Okay," I managed. "Start over. Who are you? What happened?"

He grinned at me. No, a smirk. "I'm Officer Callahan. Listen, Pal. I know who you are. According to the desk sergeant, you've stayed in our drunk tank enough. Maybe you just picked the right guys to take down on your way to oblivion."

"Huh?"

"The paramedics and responding officers found you semi on Fourth and Main after midnight, a little banged up. The two unconscious losers nearby were wanted on a warrant. Bad dudes." His smirk radiated.

"Oh, right," I said, remembering nothing. "And the other guy?"

"What guy? Just you three bums."

No LG. No surprise. I lay my head back. What was in that Tequila?

"Somebody outside wants to see you." The cop stood and turned to leave and turned back. "Oh, thanks for the collar, Adam."

Sam, the other gum on my shoe, came in next. How did he even know I'd been admitted? What the...?

*

Home, laid up for a week. Bruised thigh bone. Being the hero to take down two bad hombres buys you a half column in the local newspaper for a day. No reward, no honors, no philanthropists knocking at my door. I almost expected some brother of one of the bad guys to come after me for revenge for sending his kin to the slammer.

I leaned toward the TV on Christmas Day afternoon, half in the bag—hooch *and* meds—trying to read the name of the product being sold in some infomercial. I'll buy six. Halftime of a game, and I channel surfed.

Sam walked in with carryout in a bag, which he dropped on my dining room table, then flopped into a chair facing me, propping his feet and wet boots on the coffee table. I looked twice at him and started. Something green had seized him.

"What's with the vine around your... shoulders?" I struggled to get the words out.

"It's a garland. Blew off some neighbor's door, I guess. Merry Christmas." He removed it and dropped it on the floor next to him. The water from his work boots dripped off the table onto the carpet in slo-mo. Fascinating, waiting for the next drop to form...

"Get a grip, Adam. You're killing yourself." Sam, louder than I prefer.

"Uh, yeah. Got a better idea?" Like he didn't know my life in the toilet. "The... bag?"

"Lo Mein. Pork."

"Have a Bourbon, Sam." Did I want to share my booze? "Bottle's o-o-on the kitchen table."

Sam shuffled over, poured a glass, rustled through the fridge, and returned to his chair. I turned the TV volume down and took a slug of the Jim Beam I couldn't afford. Either two Sam's sat before me or one double image.

"You're killing yourself, Adam. Really. Grace did love you. You lost her." Sam turned shrink.





"You my, uh, conscience now?" I couldn't find the volume button on the remote to tune him out. "She probably left me for another loser. I... know her well. Mind your own... beeswax." I still could talk. Amazing. "What's this crap?" A plate of worms and a full ashtray lay on the table next to my butts.

"Chinese. I put it there, Adam. Eat something."

I switched the channel after three tries. Halftime was over. Okay, Sam 'be over.'

Sam had a noodle hanging on his scruffy chin. "You—oh, forget it." He took the remote.

That smell. Not Chinese food. Familiar... from somewhere... Grace?

"You seen Streetwalker these days?" I asked him. He changed the channel to MTV.

"No, you?"

"Adam, pal." Sam sidled up uncomfortably. "Has anyone you know seen this guy?" his voice getting higher, all serious-like.

*

January. I withdrew more and drank more, residing in the jaded serenity that bourbon buys you until you fall over in a drunken haze and wake up hours later in the house lying in puke with a splitting headache. Repeat, wash, rinse... oh damn.

"Get up, Adam."

I knew that voice. "Go away, Sam." I felt the hard floor on my back and opened my eyes.

"Your mail. And now the door." Desperation in his voice as he read an orange paper. "What the...?"

"You're being evicted. Ten days. You need to read your mail shithead. Posted on your front door, marked 'Eviction Notice'. This orange paper." He waved it at me violently. "The bank's taking your house."

I sobered up a notch at his tone. "You angry at me, Sam?" I struggled to stand, and he offered no help. "It's like you care?"

We stood facing each other in my cluttered living room. My stale breath bounced off his face and bounced back. He put a hand on my shoulder, not gently, then the other. The room had been moving for me and he stopped it from turning.

"Sit." He pushed me into the old stained sofa chair. He towered over me. "You lose the house, and you lose Grace and your kids. And you lose me."

"But—"

"I'm not done." He took the Old Cherokee Bourbon bottle, three-quarters gone, a day's ration for me, and held it before me. "You die when you're alone and old and paid your dues. Not now, Adam. You got obligations. Kids."

Sam shook as I'd never seen him. I was breathing hard and raised my hands in surrender. He'd been drinking too from the smell, only he held it better than me.

"You didn't lose Grace and end up a drunk, and it happened ass-backward. You dumb shit." His face reddened, and I thought I saw a tear. Who knew in my state? "She deserves better. And Danny... Elise... Do you think they get off scot-free? One drunk and four people take a dive."

The room went quiet except for our breathing.

"Okay," I managed, my throat raw and raspy. And the tears blurred my vision. Two Sam's stood before my eyes.

The new fiery Sam: "Where are they? The bottles. Your stash? I bet your pissed mind manages to keep that straight."

He was right. I couldn't fight it. As he moved between rooms on his hunt, I gave up all my hiding spots. I could hear his stomping, cursing, the bottles clanking. Then the water ran, no, the booze being poured down the kitchen drain just out of my sight. It took him probably half an hour.

"Clean yourself up, Adam! I'm wanting to throw you in the shower and scrub you down with Brillo. Show me you're worth my time." He was in my face as his rage slowly receded, his face losing color. "I'll be checking on ya." Sounded like a threat.

He stormed out.

*





Grace. Two days later. I needed to see her. This whole cold turkey hell I lived in stirred something... amorous in me. Sam could only get me so far with sobriety. She was the emotional bridge.

A clear and cold night. Sam's Camaro was missing from the driveway or carport. He was probably sipping a cold one with his buddies now. No choice. I drive to survive.

Grace lived three miles out of the city limits on Washington Street. Still burbs. I hadn't driven much, walking some, bussing, but finding the prone or couch position frequently. Damn seat belt!

Whoa, fella! Blind intersection, and some kid performed a rolling stop. Country blasting on the radio, perpetual headache, my window open. Planning what to say, having forgotten the rehearsed speech.

With effort, I navigated a slight curve up a hill. My lights played on a figure in a white jacket standing on the left side of the road.

No.

Crazy. Out here? Looking straight at me. A cane?

Coming out of the curve, I fixed my eyes on LG; with his on me, I turned my head and the wheel an instant too late. I'd veered right. Barreling onto the sidewalk, my Ford struck a figure in dark clothing and an upturned collar. The sickening thud you never forget.

Two hours later, in police custody, I learned the pedestrian I hit was in surgery to repair his broken leg, putting my agony to rest. I called my "lawyer." Not really, since I had none and

Sam answered. An hour later, the goof sat talking to me in an interrogation room at the police station. Sam, Esquire.

"You're stupid, and a liar, and now your goose is cooked," he said calmly from across the metal table, with bloodshot eyes that probably matched mine.

Scared sober, I was shaking, having just found out the guy I hit would survive. The sergeant let Sam talk to me alone before continuing with the charges' formalities.

"I know, Sam, not now. Who do you know? Maybe a lawyer drinking buddy?" He had scribbled some notes, and I squinted, blinded by the overhead light producing a screeching headache.

"A lawyer won't get you out of this mess," Sam shook his head. "Stupid! Tonight was number three OWI. On top of that, you hit a guy. On the sidewalk! 'Great bodily harm'. Shit. Even I know the law."

"Oh." The Wisconsin drinking law entered my mind as a terrifying thought. "I couldn't—"

"Point 16, Brainiac. Alcohol concentration if you do the math. You were drunk. Major drunk and not what was left in your body after you stopped drinking last week. Remember? Me in your house, destroying your stash? Your promise? Duh?"

"Yeah." I managed to whisper, burying my head in my hands. His next words dropped the boom.

"Prison. Mandatory."

*

"Lookin' better, Cap'n."

I jumped, not only being caught off guard but the familiar voice. I turned to face the old man backlit in the bright sun of the prison yard where I worked alone this day.

He wore his white dinner jacket for this unexpected visit. Ascot, shined brogues, and creased jeans. Grinning broadly, three-day beard. White. He carried no broom.

"Uh." I looked up, and the sole guard in the tower above was out of sight.

"He don't care, Adam. Jes you and me." He bent over the lush prison garden producing midway in the growing season and me four months into my one-year sentence. "Planting is good, honorable work. Pro-ductive, yep. You agree?"

Oh boy. I'd spent my anger directed inward and finally understood this strange man. "You didn't save me that night. That was the plan."

"Not my plan, Adam. It's your life. You control it." He'd been admiring a squash from the bounty before us and never looked up. "Could have been worse for you and that pedestrian."

I registered no emotion, flat, no feelings. He was right.

The breeze picked up, and the plants in this little patch of green amid the concrete and wire waved with it. "Sit with me, LG." He looked up, and I pointed to two five-gallon plastic buckets. I flipped them over and he joined me, walking stiffly but dignified like he'd stepped out of an old film. Somehow the fragrance of the air increased.

Seated, I could follow the furrows of wrinkles on his face and neck, each probably with a story. The man looked like he'd been through what I had.





"I figure you dried out in about a month. Takes that long for the body to cleanse itself."

Why was I not surprised? "That's about right, LG. The only way to survive was to be where I am. You knew that."

LG reached over and picked a few raspberries, and handled them. "Picking the berries takes a gentle grip with your thumb and forefinger. As soon as the berry releases from the plant, you have to let go so as not to bruise the berry. I worked the fields years ago." He smiled wistfully, bearing nice white teeth. "When you pick in rhythm, you hardly touched the berries as they yielded to a light tug." He opened his palm, work-hardened. "You not so much hold them... but let them tumble to the base of your palm."

Tumble. "Raspberries, huh?" The guy was a piece of work, but... Like an observer from the outside, I saw my life coming together for the first time. "You saved my life, LG."

He held the raspberries up like a priest offering communion. "It's not always about you, Adam." The old man ate the raspberries, savoring the fruit of the vine and looked hard at me. "You're not outta the woods yet."

Yep, right. Finish my six months, get my family back, stay sober, and do some good. "Will Grace take me back?" Like he had the answer.

LG stood, an old man really, and managed a smile. "You won't know until you work in that field. And get your children back too."

I'd never told LG about my family. Even drunk, I knew what I'd said in the course of the months I'd chatted with this streetwalker. Recall was a gift of mine, a curse in the middle of the night when every crooked step I took in the last two years came back.

"Say, what does LG stand for?" I asked, almost offhandedly.

He took on that playful look. Cat's got the mouse. Not about to give it up. "Nothing really to most people. Picked it up along the way, mebbe. It's a tag. Short for something. Different for different people. What you want it to be, I reckon."

We were walking now. LG had appeared in the yard unexpectedly, and as we entered the prison compound, we encountered no guards. We wended our way to the empty visitor's room.

LG turned at the sound of a car horn in the distance. "I have to go. My ride."

"That's it?"

"That's it. You're on your own, Adam." We shook hands, his firm grip that belied his age and stature. Then again, the man surprised me from the beginning.

Returning to the yard to finish my last twenty minutes of work duty, I heard the familiar sound and trotted over to the fence to be sure.

LG stood in the drive thirty yards off, waving to the driver, who slowed and came to a stop. The passenger door flipped open from the inside of the blue and red 1968 Camaro.

*





We slept dormitory-style, and the fifteen of us each granted a small semi-private cubbie for clothing storage and a few personal items. Most of the inmates kept to themselves, but I'd made a few friends whose friendship would probably end when one of us was released.

In the beginning of my sentence, I was not in general population when I endured alcohol withdrawal. Say what you want about the prison system, but they don't let you suffer any more than what your body does in returning the compliment of becoming an alcoholic. Enforced rehab. No frills, no charge.

The night after LG had visited, I lay on my cot into the early morning, thinking through the chorus of snoring around me.

It's a tag. Short for something. *Different for different people.* LG

Ladies Gent

Looking good.

Could be anything. And everything. Could be something.

Adam's guardian. Hmmm.

Grace visited me the next day unannounced and unexpectedly. Sitting demurely at a long table, she checked out the other inmates sharing their stories to families across the divide. She wore red and looked stunning through eyes that hadn't been clear for a year.

"You look like hell, Adam," she said in her natural smoker's voice (she never smoked). That scruffy beard! Also, blue is not your color." I think she still loved me.

"You were at the sentencing. I could smell your perfume without turning around."

"Why didn't you?"

"Lawyer told me where to look and how to behave to buy me some leniency." Something softened in her face. The anger dissipated; I wanted to believe.

"Someone saved the house from foreclosure, you heard. You know who?"

"Nope." I had a good idea.

"Like you deserved a break." Yeah, her shoulders were relaxed. I remember when we were together and in love, she sat like that.

"I'm still in love with you, Hon," I said. "I'm lining up a job when I'm released." I guessed LG had his fingers in that prospect too. So this was my pitch to her.

Long wait. "I dunno, Adam." She looked around for the words.

"Life will be different. My sober promise. I never want to go through this again."

"Withdrawal?" She shrugged.

"No, losing you." I held her hand against regulations. "Much worse."

Losing Gamble

"Adam? Adam?" Grace brought me back to reality.

"Sorry, I...uh—"

"We'll see... about any future together," she said, her voice fading off. "Danny's on leave. He'd like to see you next week."

"Elise?"

"Give her time."

I nodded. Grace had given me hers.

*

A week later, at dinner, a quiet affair except for the metal on metal clanking, I thought about my life so far. Not orderly. Roundabout. Painful. All of my doing. All the good was not. And what I was eating at that moment tasted great. Raspberries. Mmmm. Taste buds come to life.

Life.

LG

Yes. *Life Giver*.



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ALEXANDER MARSHALL

ALBATROSS

In 1951, I was interred at the School for the Afflicted, a former farmhouse on the outskirts of Barnsley, where children who were abnormal or deformed in some way lived and attended classes, well away from prying eyes of their peers or the rest of society. My abnormality was that I only had two fingers and a thumb on my right hand — no one knew why, I had simply been born that way. As it happened, it made me particularly good at calligraphy: something to do with the additional attention I had to pay to how I held a pen and the muscular movements involved in forming letters with it.

The School for the Afflicted was a cold and uncomfortable place, but it was all I had known. I couldn't remember who my parents were, or any other home, and so I quickly became used to the place's routines and methods. These were not so much harsh as simply thoughtless: there was no one to give us much love or attention, and those who worked there did so largely because

they had been unable to find a better job caring for 'normal' people rather than 'freaks'. We were a mixed bunch: some had obvious diseases, some were mentally troubled, while some merely had a missing appendage and were otherwise healthy. Marsh (we always referred to each other by our surnames there, it was a rule) had been born without legs below the knees; Hardcastle didn't have any eyes. Several were deaf; others had disfiguring birthmarks. The main thing was that our afflictions tended to bind us together. There was usually someone worse off than you, and bullying, apparently prevalent among the Normals, as we called them, was minimal at the school. But close friendships were likewise rare. We slept in big dormitories and had little time to play as many of us struggled to keep up with the workloads we were given, not only academic assignments but menial tasks like cleaning and gardening.

In that year, as the National Health Service got underway, and sick people all over Britain came down from bedrooms where they had been hiding, or were ferreted out by doctors doing rounds of remote homesteads, more and more Afflicted came to light, and so, towards the end of that year, we had a large influx of new pupils. There was barely enough room for us as it was, but beds were pushed closer together to squeeze in more and more boys. Eventually, there was only about a six-inch gap between bed frames.

That's how I got to know Ross. He was one of the new arrivals and was put in the bed to my right. He was a hunchback — he had an enormous lump all down his back, not so much on his shoulders but all over. He stooped forward a little to walk, and I wondered how heavy the lump was.

One night, the full moon poured in through a high window — the nuns who looked after us on the weekends had forgotten to close its curtains, and it was so bright that I had trouble sleeping. Ross was restless too. I think I was just about to drop off to sleep finally when I heard him whispering and realised that he was talking to me.

'Kershaw...' he whispered. 'Kershaw. Are you awake?'

I rolled over and faced him.

'I want to show you something,' he said.

Immediately, I had a sense of dread. I didn't want to do anything sinful — the nuns had installed in me a terror of going to Hell, and there was an odd sound in Ross's voice which made me quiver.

'I don't want to see anything,' I replied and rolled onto my back, looking up at the tall ceiling.

'Please,' he whispered. 'I can't sleep. I'm getting up.'

He stood in the narrow gap between our beds and started taking off his thick pyjama shirt, which, I saw, had been especially enlarged to cover his back.

'Don't,' I said in a tiny voice.

He had the jacket off and I could see in the bright moonlight that, underneath, he wore a thick and heavy harness, like a set of interlinked leather belts with large clasps, wrapped around his shoulders and back. 'No wonder he stoops,' I thought.





He fiddled with the clasps for a while and I was sure he would wake up the other thirty or so boys who shared the dormitory, but no one else stirred. After a minute or so, the whole tangled apparatus fell away onto his bed and he grunted with relief.

‘Oh god,’ he said, ‘that’s good to be having that off.’

He sounded Irish, like the man who brought the coal. Ross then stretched his arms and the lump on his back started to grow bigger. In the moonlight it was all shadow at first. But it kept on growing and widening out impossibly, like a cloak in the wind. One side of it touched the wall on his left; the other arched away into the aisle down the centre of the room. As the moonbeams caught it, I gasped.

Wings.

Ross had wings.

The moonbeams hinted at the wings’ size rather than revealed them fully. Ross crab-stepped out from between the beds and opened the wings up as wide as they would go, sighing with pleasure as he did so: I reckoned they spanned sixteen feet altogether, trembling and moving like pale ghosts in the dark dormitory.

‘Can you fly?’ I whispered.

‘I’ve never tried. I’ve never been able to, you know...be on my own and jump off somewhere or anything like that...’

Everyone in the dormitory knew that the fourth window from the main door had a loose latch and could be opened easily, though no one had ever been brave enough to climb out of it in the night. Suddenly determined, I jumped out of my own bed and crept across to that window, lifting aside the heavy curtains. It was a moment’s work to push it open and slide the casement upwards. It creaked mightily and I felt certain that at any moment someone else would wake, and the alarm would be raised. But Ross came over and folded his wings right down. Looking like a pyjama trousered angel, he stood there, grey in the moonlight, as I clambered out. He followed, with a struggle — for a second, he was caught and I had to grab both his hands and pull. Then we were both standing outside in the cold dew, looking up at the slow-moving clouds drifting across the moon, both with no idea of what we were doing.

The school was set in about ten acres of open countryside. Its bordering wall was about ten feet high — we could just make it out in the shadows about a hundred yards away — and just beyond it were the outlying trees of a wood. Ross ran across the wet grass, his white wings extending fully again. He ran up a slight rise in the ground and, right in front of my eyes, glided twenty feet or more towards the wall. I heard him laugh with joy. He ran again, and this time he swept into the air, above the wall, narrowly missing a tree and vanishing momentarily behind foliage. Then he was above the trees, silhouetted against the moon, and I wondered if I were dreaming.

Then he was gone.

I thought he was gone forever. I sat, forlorn, on the grey paving under the window, the cold stone chilling me through my pyjamas. I didn't want to move; I didn't know what to do. Then Ross was standing by me, breathless, beaming, liberated.

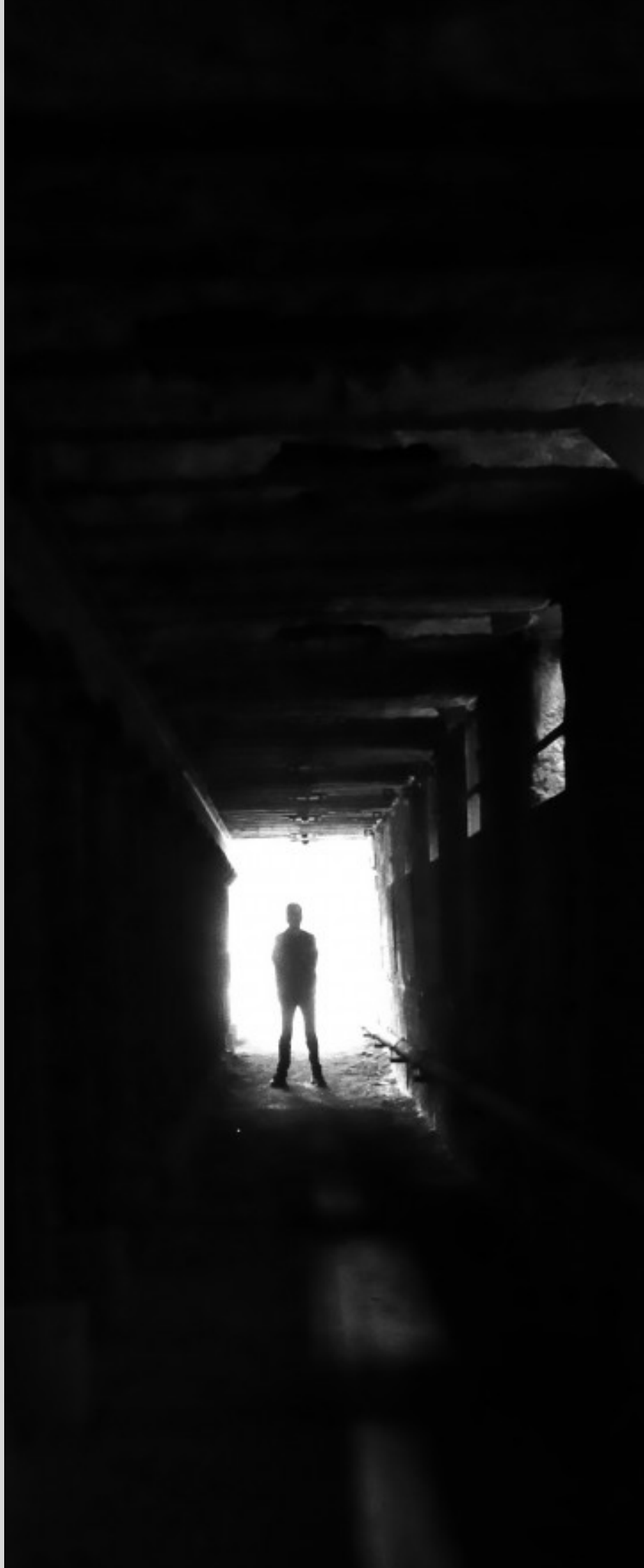
'They called me Albert,' he said. 'My parents. Called me Albert. Albert Ross. Do you see? Albatross. I don't know if they knew about the wings. Not really. They were just lumps when I was a kid. But the last few years...'

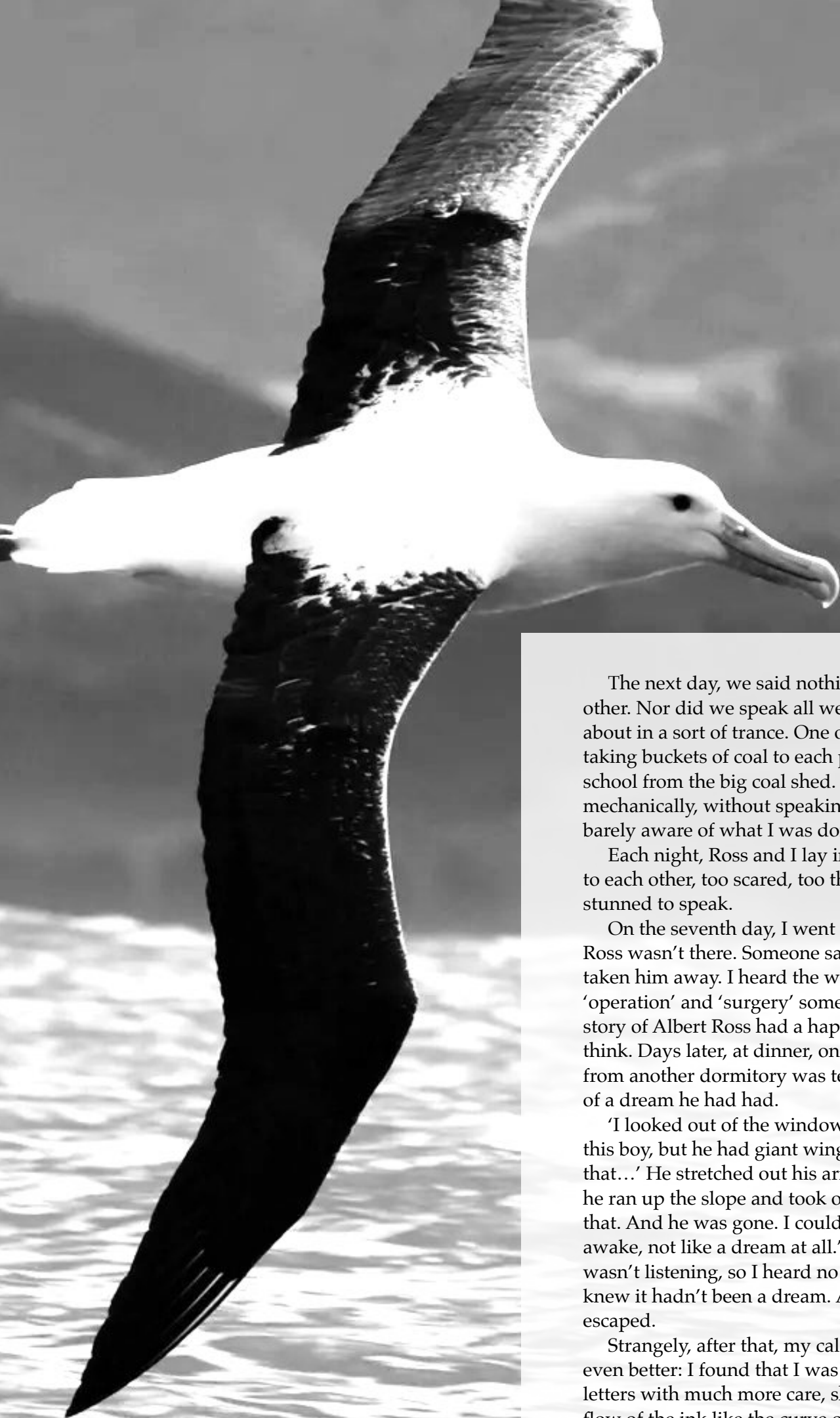
Sister Margaret had said, 'Silence is sometimes the best answer,' and so I said nothing.

'We'd best get in,' he said after a while.

'I'm David,' I said.

We shoved ourselves back in through the window. He folded his wings down as far as they would go, and strapped himself in as tightly as he could with his harness; I had to help him at one point, as the wings wouldn't shrink back into their former lumpish shape. Eventually we did it and lay there in our own beds, wide awake, for hours, not speaking, hardly thinking.





The next day, we said nothing to each other. Nor did we speak all week. I wandered about in a sort of trance. One of my tasks was taking buckets of coal to each part of the school from the big coal shed. I did it all mechanically, without speaking to anyone, barely aware of what I was doing.

Each night, Ross and I lay in our beds next to each other, too scared, too thrilled, too stunned to speak.

On the seventh day, I went to bed and Ross wasn't there. Someone said that they'd taken him away. I heard the words 'operation' and 'surgery' somewhere. But the story of Albert Ross had a happy ending, I think. Days later, at dinner, one of the boys from another dormitory was telling someone of a dream he had had.

'I looked out of the window and there was this boy, but he had giant wings, see? Like that...' He stretched out his arms wide. 'And he ran up the slope and took off, just like that. And he was gone. I could swear I was awake, not like a dream at all.' His friend wasn't listening, so I heard no more. But I knew it hadn't been a dream. Albert had escaped.

Strangely, after that, my calligraphy got even better: I found that I was forming the letters with much more care, shaping the flow of the ink like the curve of wings.

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FRIDAY SOUP

RIHAM ADLY



You know I'm allergic to legumes, my husband says every time I offer him a steaming bowl of soup. My seven-year old parrots her daddy's words. She's her daddy's daughter just like I was my daddy's girl.

Time stops every Friday at exactly 5:38 p.m. By now, I've realized that shaking the clocks or even changing their batteries won't push forward the minutes or the seconds of the hour. In the kitchen I steal a look at the wall clock and feign indifference. Right now — I tell myself, I'm preoccupied with the aroma of my nicely simmering lentil soup—a childhood staple refused by everyone in this house.

Daddy liked his lentils hot hot hot. Tongue-biting hot. Chili powder, curry and cumin did the trick, but too much or too little killed the magic of those rare Friday sit downs at the dinner table. Mother never liked daddy or his lentils. They're like forest fires burning what's left of me, she used to say.

The cat meows right outside the kitchen door, he's like a fickle ghost, sometimes really there, sometimes not. I pour some soup and go to the cat, but I'm not sure the ghost cat should have it. Maybe no one should have it. I make a detour and head to the living room. I tiptoe barefoot like a nervous dancer. The tiles are cold, cold, cold.

I blink a couple of times in the darkness lit by the glow of the 55 inch flat smart TV. I squint real hard to make out the face in the plaid orange and red pajamas. My girl's sleepy frame sits in the nook of those arms belonging to the face in the plaid orange and red pajamas. The sofa they're occupying is an inflamed shade of red I never approved of.

In my memories our sofa had a chronic dusty brown kind of color, facing a much smaller and not so smart television with the face in the pajamas slurping my mother's hot soup.





I take a deep breath. Today is a good day, I tell myself. TODAY IS A GOOD DAY. I insist.

"Dinner's ready yet, Hon?" the face asks. I wonder if my little girl will forgive me if one day we all sit down in the kitchen with the dead clock and have lentil soup... If one day my fantasies come true and the face I see now that is her father and my husband is in love with my soup so much, he drinks it all in one go.

Mother said it was the damn lentils that killed him. She didn't really say "damn", and she'd never really dare mention the lentils, I did that. I forgive you, I wanted to say so many times when it was her time to go, but did I?

"Hon? Dinner? It's about time." Husband turns to me, eyes on the bowl of soup in my hands.

"Not yet," I say.

The ghost cat should have the soup instead.

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