

The Walrus Chronicles:
June 2012, Vol. 2

Inda Lauryn

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It had been less than a month since their last meeting, yet they had already been called back. Grace was always somehow the first to arrive and sat patiently in their corner booth. Davy was on shift that night and had already started preparing all their orders when she arrived. Grace had to admit that he made some of the best banana pancakes she had ever tasted. He knew just how to cook the bananas right into the pancakes and then topped it off with more bananas and fresh cream. The one thing she and Charity had in common was that they could not resist those banana pancakes.

Grace knew Davy was also making scrambled eggs and biscuits for Hope. Faith liked English muffins and jam. They would all share a platter that included bacon, sausage and ham. That was part of the reason they simply alternated paying the check. They liked sharing at least one part of their meal and didn't want to bother with dividing it by how much anyone else did or didn't eat. They also liked having a choice in their pork.

Davy had Hope's coffee in front of her almost as soon as she sat down. He knew she would have preferred something besides plain coffee, so he always made sure he had flavored creamer on hand so that she could get a hint of sweetness. This time he offered her vanilla. He let Faith have a moment to decide whether she wanted apple or grape juice. He figured she might like grape this time. He filled Charity's glass only a third of the way with ice before he poured the Coke over it.

They all liked when Davy was on shift. Things seemed to run more smoothly with him. None of them seemed to mind that he was probably listening to them tell stories. They could always say that they made them up and there was no way they were discussing something that really happened. Davy sat the pork platter in the middle of the table before handing them their individual plates. They waited for him to take his post back behind the counter before getting down to business.

"Charity starts this time."

"Okay," Charity said. "But I'm afraid mine may be a little boring this time."

Tina's Test

Oh, Christ!

Why couldn't she have been a drug addict or something sane like that? She would have settled for anything other than this. Why the hell did she have to be a high school student?

Charity never liked high school when she was there. Being forced to go back after she had so successfully completed that rite of passage seemed particularly cruel. She had been an honor student and not exactly someone considered popular or remotely cool. Needless to say, after her own high school experience, she never looked back.

Now here she was forced to relive it again. Four days still seemed like a long time when high school was involved. Furthermore, this girl had just let out the loudest, most bloodcurdling scream Charity had ever heard. Right in the middle of class.

The embarrassment came over the both of them. Charity felt the panic attack rising up in the girl as the other students began to stare. A few of them even began to snicker and whisper. The girl got up and ran as fast as she could out of class to the girl's room. She ran into a stall and locked herself in not knowing exactly what to do next. Her heart thumped loudly, but her voice seemed paralyzed.

"It's okay," Charity began to reassure. "You're not going crazy. There is someone else here and only you know. You didn't do anything to trigger it. This just happens from time to time."

Charity could still feel her fear as the girl's breathing began to get back to its normal pace. She thought the girl would get some control over herself, but at that moment, the bell rang. They both sat still in the stall as they listened to the bustle of other students outside the doors. The din grew a little noisier as two girls entered and made sure they hadn't gotten a hair out of place since they last checked an hour ago between classes.

"It was so funny," one of them was saying. "Tina Crawford just screamed out loud in the middle of English. Just started screaming for no reason. Then she got up and ran out of class. Nobody knows what happened. She just freaked out."

"I told you that girl was special," the other said. "Just because you get straight As doesn't mean you're not crazy. I knew that about her a long time ago, but nobody believed me."

"Yeah, I know right. They say there's no difference between a crazy person and a genius. Well, I'm glad everybody knows now that she's just insane. Walking around here like she's smarter than everybody else."

"Let's go. I can't be late for algebra again."

They listened as the two girls left. The late bell rang and the noise from outside the girls' room subsided. Tina finally emerged from the stall and looked around to make sure she was alone. She steadied herself on the sink as if she would fall were it not supporting her. Charity watched her as she looked in the mirror. She was on the pretty side with dark eyes and hair to match that complimented her brown face. Even with dainty features, Charity still knew she wasn't the kind of pretty that often got admiration from the boys her age. She was a little shorter than average with a conventional build, a little more up top than she probably wanted.

"Are you okay?"

Charity could see that she had startled Tina who seemed to have forgotten where the trouble started. Tina tipped toward the door then decided against it. Charity listened as Tina reasoned she would be seen leaving through the front doors. She then went to the small window that was required to be large enough for a student to escape in case of an emergency. Tina decided this was an emergency. She struggled a moment to squeeze herself through the window then made sure no one was watching as she headed to the school parking lot. She found her three-year-old model Saturn and kept looking around anxiously as she started the engine. Although she carefully drove out of the lot, Tina nearly floored it as she left the school grounds.

"Where are you going?"

Tina screamed as Charity asked the question but kept driving. Charity decided to remain quiet until Tina made it to her destination. She didn't want to cause an unfortunate accident. Tina finally stopped at an empty park that was probably full of kids once the sun went down and they needed a place to hang out away from prying eyes. Tina began to talk to herself.

"I must be tired. I'm nervous about the SATs in a couple of days, so I'm just starting to crack up a little."

"No, you're not," Charity tried to explain again. She felt Tina tense up, so she tried to speak in a gentle tone. "My name is Charity. I have an ability to transfer my consciousness to another. Do you understand me?"

Tina was near tears in her confusion. She had no idea why this was happening to her. She just knew she was going crazy. She felt like something was wrong with her all along. That had to be why she couldn't get along very well with the other kids her age and why she always felt so awkward around them. This episode would render her an outcast forever.

"Tina, there's nothing wrong with you. You probably can't get along with the other kids your age because you don't share the same interests. Hanging out doing nothing doesn't appeal to you, does it? You would much rather be watching a sci-fi film or reading Arthur Clarke, wouldn't you? I know because I was the same way. It's not you. No, this doesn't happen to everyone and I don't know why it's happening to you, but there is nothing wrong. Okay?"

"You can hear my thoughts?" Tina finally asked meekly as her body began to function at its normal pace again.

"Of course, I can. You don't have to speak out loud."

"Good. You heard what they said. They all already think I'm a freak. By the end of the day, it'll be all over the school and no one's going to ever want to speak to me again."

"You don't know this right now, but that's not as awful as you may think."

Tina began to smile weakly, but she still wasn't completely convinced.

"You may be right about one thing though. You do seem tired."

"I've just been up day and night getting myself ready for this exam. I have to score well to get into this college. If I don't get a full scholarship, I won't be able to pay for it..."

"Slow down. I understand what you mean. I went through the same thing myself when I was your age. Damn, that seems like a lifetime ago. Anyway, tell me something. How have you usually done on tests?"

"I always score in the top percentile. Have since I was a little kid."

"What makes you think this would be any different?"

Tina was quiet for a moment as Charity's words began to get through to her. Charity felt something become at ease. Tina finally began to see that she was indeed okay.

"You're right. I start to study and I realize I know this stuff. I just feel like a fraud sometimes because I know there are plenty of others smarter than me and they'll find out that I'm..."

"Tina! It's okay. Let's just get out of here and go home or something. You clearly need the rest. In the meantime, tell me about the SATs. I took the ACT."

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Charity found that Tina was quite practical for an 18 year old. Her parents had managed to buy her a used car and she chose one that had good gas mileage and safety features rather than something she thought would look good to the other kids. She had an adult's bedroom, something that she also found on sale when she had to admit she needed a new bedroom suite. Charity imagined her parents must have been proud to have raised such an aware child.

Tina also did not have many of the new gadgets and toys most teenagers her age had. Her cellphone was used mostly for making calls and nothing else, not even texting. She had a laptop that she would sometimes use to stream films and shows, but she tended to spend much of her time doing her homework and completing other assignments. Tina also had a wall full of books that showed a wide range of interests. She had everything from an idiot's guide to string theory to the latest book by Mary Higgins Clark.

Charity could tell that she felt a little embarrassed that she did not have lots of pictures of friends or a boyfriend to show off to anyone. Charity knew what it was like to feel like such an outcast at that age. She had also been considered intellectually gifted and treated like a miniature adult from a young age. Like Tina, she never felt the right to simply act her age and make mistakes that could be attributed to learning and growing.

Something else was also weighing heavily on Tina's mind, something other than the usual worries of getting into a good college and whether or not that cute guy had actually looked at her. Tina was trying to suppress something she knew would subject her to judgment. Charity tried to get through to her, but Tina was in very deep denial about something wrong. She didn't find out what until the next day when Tina met the three friends she did have.

"I don't think I'll have a problem with reading, but I know that math will probably kick my ass," the one called Jessica said. I like to read sometimes, but I haven't been doing so well in math."

"My problem is just the opposite," Amy added. "At least there's a definite answer with math. I don't know how you come up with answers to something you read and understand in a different way than somebody else."

The one called Lori said nothing, but Charity could see something devious in her eyes. There was a reason the conversation had made its way from *Glee* to the SATs. Only Tina did not see the conversation was for her benefit. Charity watched Lori try to subtly give Amy the signal to get to the real issue.

"I was talking to this guy, a real computer geek. He said there's a way to get into the system and find out what questions will be on the test. You know they make the real test harder than the practice stuff. I know I need to make a good score."

"Yeah, me, too," Jessica chimed in. "I normally wouldn't consider it, but they try to keep some of us out with that test anyway."

Something clicked with Tina. She was well aware that she was the only black girl in the group and Charity could feel her discomfort with one of her friends trying to play to that. Charity knew then what was contributing to Tina's anxiety. Not only were these probably the only people she could call "friend," but they were now encouraging her to help them cheat on a major exam. Tina did not know how to say no without risking losing the only peer group that let her in. Charity understood the bind.

"I'm sure it's not going to be that hard," Tina said, hoping her nonchalant tone would let the subject die. "If you can take the standardized tests from the school, then this one shouldn't be a problem. Didn't you take the practice test online?"

The other three were quiet a moment as they looked for another tact to take. They needed to find a way to bully Tina without looking like bullies. Lori was obviously not going to settle for anything less than a yes to their demands.

"These things may be easy for you, but the rest of us have other stuff going on," Lori said. "We're involved in a lot of clubs and other stuff at school because we need to put these things on a college application. We don't get special treatment like you will."

Charity felt the hot pang shoot through Tina's chest at the accusation.

*"Don't listen to her. She's just trying to make you feel guilty over something she knows isn't true. She could have put the same time and attention into studying as you did, but she didn't. That's her fault, not yours."*

Tina began to get even more anxious and edgy. Charity realized it was partly because of her and not just the request she was definitely considering.

"You know what happens if you get caught. No place will take you then."

"Who says you're gonna get caught?" Lori said with no small amount of derision. "You're supposed to be so smart, then you can get us those test answers."

*"Tina, don't listen to her. She is not your friend. You think she's going to be there for you if something goes wrong? You already know this. Don't doubt yourself."*

"But I... there's just..."

Tina couldn't find the words as the three faces stared at her demanding an answer, daring her to refuse them at the cost of their precious friendship. Lori was the one who drove in the nail.

"What's the matter? Are you gonna freak out again like you did in class yesterday?"

Tina managed to hold the tears in as she got up from the table and escaped to the girls' room again. Even in her solitude, she could not bring herself to let the tears cleanse her. She held them in and tried not to choke on her feelings. She knew there was something wrong with their friendship, but she had nearly no other options when it came to those who even wanted to be associated with her. She had tolerated so much from them because she needed some human contact despite her pleasure in being alone at times. At least having someone made high school more tolerable.

"You can't tell them yes. They will bring you down with them."

"Will you just shut up! You're driving me crazy!"

Tina realized she had yelled out loud quickly looked around to see if anyone else had witnessed this latest episode. She was relieved to see that she was still alone and turned her words inward.

"Don't you think I already know what they're doing? This isn't the first time they brought this up. I just wish I could forget about that stupid test altogether and not even take it myself."

"After all the hard work you've done? You'd be willing to let it go just like that."

"No, I don't... I don't know. Do you know what it's like to want to fit in just once?"

"Why do teenagers always think they're the first ones to go through stuff? Girl, this kind of thing has been happening since there was a such thing as school. You are not special here. If there is one thing that I know is that these girls are not your friends now and they won't be when high school is over. While they are still sitting here trying to manipulate other people into doing what they should be, you will be doing your own thing and making friends with people who appreciate you for the wise, intelligent young woman you are. I know that seems impossible now, but it will happen."

"So are you psychic, too?"

"No, I've just been there. Some things never change. College students have some drama, but you will find the ones who are about taking care of business in the same way you are. That tends to happen."

Tina seemed to calm down a bit. Her breathing was returning to normal and that dry heaving sensation was leaving her.

"I know you're right. Thanks."

The bell rang. Lunch was over. All Tina had to do now was make it through the rest of the day without having to see those three harpies pretending to be her friend.

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Charity thought the school day would never end. Tina enjoyed class, but sitting through class reminded her of why she never felt nostalgic for the days in which she was a kid again. There was no way she would go through this again if she had to. Tina tried to block her out as she began to count down the minutes until the last bell. Charity was just about to do a mental victory lap when the principal's voice came over the intercom and called for Tina's three friends to come to the office after school.

Charity felt Tina's heart leap out of her chest. That strange burning that settled in the chest and stomach when something felt wrong grew strong. The last bell finally rang. Tina could barely move as the fear in her threatened to paralyze her movements. She finally managed to get out of her seat and headed out. Tina glanced briefly in the office to see Lori's angry scowl before heading outside to her car.

"I wonder what that was about," Tina thought as she settled into her car and began to drive on autopilot. "I'll have to call Jessica later and ask."

"What will you do until then?"

"Math."

Charity had to admit she admired Tina's love of all things scholarship. She did not tackle her homework like it was some kind of punishment for being in high school. She liked the challenge. She liked finding an answer and knowing it was definite. It took her no time to finish the math. She tried to call Jessica after that but got no answer. She moved on to an English essay. Charity could also feel how much Tina enjoyed analyzing her reading, *The Healing*.

"You mean to tell me they are actually teaching Gayl Jones in school now? I might have liked that."

"Well, we got to choose our readings and I'm going to do my senior thesis on some writers from the 1970s. None of this stuff was on our reading list, so I guess this is my chance to read something I really want. Our teacher would never assign this. She tried to convince me to do something different like Kate Chopin. I said I was staying with Gayl Jones, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. I think she got mad because that meant she was going to have to find out who they were and read them."

"And she calls herself an English teacher."

"She calls herself a feminist. She teaches the old white guys and gets self-righteous about how they fail women, but she doesn't like it when I want to talk about Ntozake Shange and Maxine Hong Kingston."

"That sounds about right."

Tina got so involved with the English assignment that she completely forgot about her earlier worries. They didn't come back to her until she went to bed. Charity knew Tina was not going to get to sleep easily while she didn't know what happened earlier in the office. Even when she told herself she would see Jessica first thing in the morning, she still could not get to sleep. She finally had an uneasy couple of hours before her alarm rang and she tried to ignore the burning in her chest while she got herself ready for the day.

"I really don't understand how you're going to give yourself an ulcer over this," Charity said. "They're not worrying so much about you. If they were, they wouldn't have asked you to do something you clearly didn't want to do."

"Look. This may be silly to you, but do you know what it's like to be the only black person in your class because you're the only one taking advanced classes?"

"Yeah, I do. Did you think you were the first one, the only one?"

She knew that got the young girl. Charity was sometimes amazed when young people had no perception of their own age, especially the smarter ones. She came to the conclusion that some time ago that the reason things stayed so messed up with the world is because everyone went through a stage of adolescence. Everyone always thought she was the first one to discover something new and that she had all the answers. Tina was no different. She thought she was the only one to ever feel lonely in her skin and that no one else struggled with so-called friends asking to do something unethical. That was why Charity figured the world

never truly changed. Something in human nature just would not allow common sense to prevail.

"Well, it's probably different now. You were in school a long time ago. Things have changed since then."

"Honey, when you're my age and you've been through some real life and not this high school bullshit, then you get back to me and we can talk."

Tina left it at that. Charity could tell that she was one who had always felt she should respect her elders and authority. Charity may not have been any kind of authority to her, but Tina was sure she was an elder. Times like this, Charity was grateful that her age afforded her some kind of merit to someone. She knew Tina would be disappointed to find out that sometimes her age would not be enough for others to show her the respect she was due.

Tina looked around the school before class for a sign of Jessica, Amy or Lori. She could not find either of them but became vaguely aware of a few strange and dirty looks from some of her classmates. She finally got into homeroom and tried to get her mind on English. She finally acknowledged that one of the guys sitting next to her was giving her a look as if he wanted to say something. Tina did not hide her irritation when she questioned him.

"What?"

"I didn't know you had it in you. Selling out your own friends like that. You could have just left it alone, but you got them in trouble. In a way, I got a new respect for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you hear about it?"

"They got called into the office yesterday when they got caught in computer class trying to break into the SAT program. They tried to pin in on that computer nerd Ollie, but he was nowhere around. They all got suspended and they're not allowed to take the test. How did you not know this? Aren't you're your friends?"

Tina couldn't speak at first. She had no idea what to say. She couldn't believe they had decided to go ahead with it and got caught. She could not figure out if she was upset that her friends' futures could be ruined or relieved that she had not been with them when they were caught.

The rest of the day was even longer with no one to sit with at lunch. Tina could barely eat as she thought about what would happen to the other three. She was also not unaware of the sideways glances she was getting from the other students who believed she was the one to blow the whistle on the girls kind enough to bless her with their friendship when no one else was willing. She could not ignore the intentionally loud conversation taking place at the next table among a clique discussing her like she wasn't even in the room.

"That was really low. She told on them after they asked for help."

"I know, huh. She could have just left it alone and not said anything. How two-faced."

"I hope they never speak to her again. They just wanted to pass, too."

"Well then maybe they should have taken some time out of their busy schedules and sat down to study. See that's what I did when you guys were out partying and acting like you had no other responsibilities. I took care of business and they didn't, so don't think for a hot minute I'm about to be sorry for them because they thought they could take the easy way."

Tina almost literally bit her lip when the words came out. She didn't finish her lunch as she walked out of the cafeteria, embarrassed publicly again. She headed for her favorite stall and finally began to cry.

"Why did you do that? They already hate me."

"You know why they hate you? Because you're better than they are. They know it, too. They spend an awful lot of time trying to make you feel like less than you are because they know they will never be anywhere near as good as you. The sad thing is you fall for it every time. For you to be so smart, you sure can let these shady creatures manipulate the hell out of you."

"Oh what do you know? Nobody here likes me and I have to put up with it until I go to college and get the hell out of this place. Even when I get there, everyone's probably going to think I'm some two-faced big mouth and no one's going to want to be my friend there either. I may as well not even take that stupid test. Maybe then everyone will know I'm not the one who told and they won't all hate me like they do now."

Charity had heard enough. She was usually patient with a transcorporean, but at that moment she remembered why she never wanted to have children.

"I swear teenagers have got to be the most irrational creatures on the face of the earth. Why do you even care what those so-called friends think about you? Guess what? None of them are worried about you right now. And you're talking about not taking the SATs tomorrow because you don't want everyone to think you ratted out a bunch of privileged princesses whose parents will probably buy their way into college. You are going to ruin your entire future just so that people who don't even like you won't think you're a snitch. What type of sense are you making? You do what you want, but let me tell you that you are the biggest fool on the earth if you think high school is the end of your life. Girl, it hasn't even started."

Tina had stopped crying but seemed to be a bit mortified that charity had spoken so harshly to her. She could only dry her eyes and wash her face once she left the stall. She didn't say anything, but Charity knew then that Tina would be up bright and early the next morning to take her SATs.

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"You're lucky. I had to wait weeks before I found out my results. Everything is on computer now, so you don't have to worry about that. Congratulations. You have a lot of doors opened to you now."

"Thanks." Tina was on her way to celebrate her high scores. She didn't seem to mind that she would go alone. All the anxiety and nervousness that filled her system these past few days melted away as she settled down and saw that the test was nothing to fear. She even finished a couple of sections before time ended and had time to go through and recheck her answers. Her mind was no longer on her minor scandal or the friends she had probably lost after the whole escapade. She was once again looking forward to the future and her life after high school.

"I think you should learn to treat yourself more often. You'll learn that no else will, so make sure you treat yourself right."

"I will. And I'm going to start with a Zanzibar mint ice cream."

Charity stayed quiet while Tina made her order then headed outside to sit down in the sun and indulge in a rare treat. They both saw her at the same time. Jessica approached them rather timidly. She had obviously been looking for Tina.

"Hey," she said. "How'd it go?"

"Went alright."

"Passed with flying colors didn't you?"

Tina shrugged and went on enjoying her ice cream. Jessica looked for the words to explain why she had taken some time out of her Saturday to find someone she barely treated as a friend.

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry. I know it wasn't you who told. Even if it was, we didn't have any right to try to force you to help us cheat. I told Lori not to say that shit to you, but she's such a..."

"Bitch?"

Jessica smiled. "Yeah. We've been friends for so long that I try to overlook that part of her, but that wasn't right. She's the one who tried to get it spread all over school that you were the one who told. She wanted them all to hate you."

"So who did tell?"

"I don't know. More than likely it was Ollie. He was obviously pretty mad when Lori talked to him about getting the answers, but he didn't say anything then. Can't be mad at him though. He never really did seem to like us."

"Well, it's over now. What are you going to do?"

"Who knows? If I do go to college, parents will have to get me in and make sure they have all the right friends who can do it. It's nice to have connections, you know. The right ones can get you anywhere. What kind of ice cream is that?"

"Zanzibar mint."

"It looks good. Let me get some and I'll join you."

Tina nodded as Jessica went inside to make her order. Charity felt it then. It was time to leave.

"Remember what I told you."

She hovered a while and watched Tina and Jessica as they had their moment of friendly teenage girl bonding. She tried to keep that moment when she found herself flat on her back on her own couch. She was glad that Tina had at least one person who might act as a true friend to her. Charity even liked to think that perhaps she had helped the girl in some way. She would have to remember to look out for news on Tina Crawford when the girl started to do great things.

### Ronald's Work

I didn't realize people still worked in factories - not in this country. I was certain all those jobs had moved overseas to places where kids made three cents an hour making Kathie Lee handbags. Yet here I was in the heart of an excruciatingly hot place. Maybe it was just the body I was in, but I felt extremely uncomfortable. Not only was I hot, but I ached all over. And the man who owned this body had no idea there was anything else inside him at the moment. He was focused on the task in front of him, doing a great job in blocking out just how tired his body was. His hands were rough, too.

I couldn't stop thinking about how tired I felt. I wanted so badly to just lie down right where I was and rest. Not even sleep just rest. I needed this body to stop making its mind-numbingly repetitive movements just for a second and allow it to get what it needed. This man was not about to do that. I know he needed to concentrate on what he was doing, but I felt so heavy in the body that had been somewhat chiseled by a lifetime of manual labor. I kept trying to shut his eyes. He fought it like he was used to it. I tried again. His power of resistance was awesome.

"Please. Just rest for a second."

Both of us felt a spark when my request got through to him and he just barely missed getting his hand caught in the machine. The motion jolted me awake because even I knew that was every worker's nightmare. Unfortunately, it disrupted the line he worked on and his supervisor was coming by.

"Okay, Ron?"

"Yeah, hand just slipped."

"Well, you look tired. Why don't you go splash a little cold water on your face and have a cup of coffee. I'll go ahead and put Pete on here and you can start your next rotation when you get back."

"Um, thanks, I'll do that."

He thought he was finally slipping into madness. Years of hard work just to stay in the same place must have been catching up with him. I waited until he got into the bathroom and stared at himself in the mirror before I tried to get his attention again. I studied his face a moment. I didn't see too many men who only wore a mustache these days, especially a brother. His hair was in a neatly kempt baby 'fro. He was handsome, but his tired eyes made him look sad all the time. I had to let him know who I was.

"Trust me. You're not losing it. I'm sorry I startled you back there, but I just felt so tired like you must feel. Why don't you call it quits for the day and head home. I know you're in pain and need the rest, so you shouldn't try to work around all this heavy machinery."

He kind of smiled to himself like he appreciated my concern. "I don't know who you are, but I can't quit now. People been getting fired for going home early these days. You don't work your full shift when you supposed to, then you get replaced by someone who will. Can't get laid off with a wife and two kids."

I tried to keep my mind from going to that place that told me it wasn't fair. He didn't need to hear that. He already knew. Hell, he lived unfair every day of his life, but he lived it.

"Sorry again back there, but I don't handle fatigue as well. I know this is your life, but you have to admit you're tired and your body aches. Isn't there anything you can do until it passes?"

"Only got about an hour left. I can hang on until then."

"Well, I'll try not to disturb you while you work. I'll tell you more about this after your shift is over. In the meantime, my name's Faith."

"Ron. Ronald Denton."

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His car was a few years old, but it was well kept, especially considering he had already said he had two kids. They must have been well behaved to not make a mess of a car. Ronald came across as kind and patient, but he didn't seem like the type to take any shit. We sat there in his car while I told him about myself. He didn't press me with questions like what was my purpose, which was good because as far as I knew I didn't have one. It just happened and he accepted that. That was one of the things I liked about him. Not a lot of people just accepted some things the way they were without question. I guess it didn't matter much to him.

I noticed that his body still hurt. In fact, it felt a little worse than it had when he was working. At least then, the movement and mental focus kept his mind off it. Here in his car where he didn't have to worry about losing an arm in an accident, he didn't try so hard to block

out the pain. At least he didn't when he was parked. Once he got started on the road, he was back in business mode.

"Don't worry. I'm only here for four days. You have your body back all to yourself then. You don't have to worry about me making you do anything you don't want to do. I might keep insisting that you get yourself some sleep though. I don't know how much I can handle feeling this tired all the time.

"I'm not always this tired, but it is the end of the week. Tomorrow is Friday and I usually have myself a good nap after work."

We arrived at his house. Modest little place with a neat lawn but no fancy landscaping. It was the kind of place I would like to have someday with someone I liked. It was idyllic in a way: a wife, two kids, house and a car. That was the American Dream, right? That was what I heard Ronald telling himself.

"Don't judge. We do what we can to get by here."

He unlocked and carefully opened the front door. The house was almost completely dark except for the soft glow coming from the television with the sound down as low as possible. It took me a minute to notice the two little bodies planted in front of it. Two children, an older boy and a younger girl.

"Hey, Daddy," the girl said as she got up to greet her father with the hug. I could tell that as much as he enjoyed having the little girl in his arms, it was physically painful for him to return her affections. The boy had gone to turn on the lights and immediately retrieved his homework from his book bag. I saw what was going on then and why Ronald asked me not to judge his family. They were latchkey kids. The boy knew not to turn on any lights until one of his parents was home. I was actually impressed that he had been taught not to try to do his homework in the low light. Kids really shouldn't be that mature at that age.

"Did your mom call, Junior?"

"Yeah, she said she couldn't leave until the other girl got there, but she wouldn't be that late."

Ronald managed to disconnect himself from his daughter Lilly and headed to the kitchen. I thought he might have a beer or something so that he could relax. Instead, he took the chicken that had been thawing out of the refrigerator along with some other fixings: carrots, corn, green beans and potatoes. This man was about to cook up a good meal.

He let Lilly open up the cans with the can opener while he prepared the chicken. Even Ronald Jr. sat in the kitchen doing his homework to enjoy the smells while his father cooked. I was starting to get a little hungry myself just watching him put all the food on the stove. The pain that had been with him early had diminished for the moment. Seemed like a strange way to deal with pain: keep moving until you could no longer feel it. Yet, it seemed to work for Ronald.

He was almost done by the time his wife Misha made it. She was a rather pretty lady but kind of short. She looked just like one of those nurses from practically any hospital television show ever. Her hair was pulled back out of her face, she wore no makeup and her scrubs had a pretty pink floral pattern. Even though she looked as tired as her husband felt, it didn't diminish the pretty. I could also see how relieved she was to see that Ronald had already started dinner.

"You need me to take over here?"

"Well, I'm almost done, but you can take it home if you want."

The rapport between these two was obvious. I knew practically nothing about either of them, but there was something about the way they looked at each other that told me everything

about their relationship. There was a whole lot of love and respect there. I couldn't be mad at it. I was still a single woman, but I couldn't begrudge a sister for having a good man of her own.

I rarely got a good old-fashioned home cooked meal like that anymore. I was never much of a cook, so I tended to stay close to those recipes from books where everything was supposed to be low fat. I always ended up having to experiment in order to create some flavor in those foods. Ronald and Misha knew how to use seasoning without looking at a recipe. Hell, I was so in love with this couple that I wanted to be in their relationship.

It felt good when the itis kicked in. Junior had finished his homework by dinner, so he went to his room to do god knows what children did in their rooms these days. He was probably just going to play video games or something like that. Little Lilly preferred to sit under her parents while they watched TV. I knew she enjoyed being the baby of the family. I was the same way when I was a child. I got to see a lot of things I had no business seeing when I sat under my mom and this was no different. I didn't want to disturb this scene.

Eventually, Lilly went to sleep and Ronald and Misha talked a bit about their day. Ronald told her that he almost had an accident, but he didn't mention me. Couldn't fault him for that. A lot of husbands have trouble explaining to their wives that there is a woman inside them. One of my transcorporeans tried once and got himself kicked out of the house for having an affair. And this was the relationship where the husband and wife called themselves telling each other everything.

"You still here?"

He was just about to undress for his shower when he remembered there was a lady present.

"Of course. I told you I would be here four days."

"So then, you're going to see..."

"I'm sorry, but I see everything you do. I know it makes some people uncomfortable, but it's not like I go blabbing to everyone about everything I see."

Just those three friends I have who go through the same thing I do.

"Misha the only woman who seen me naked since before we got married. This feels like cheating on her."

"It's not."

Ronald finally relaxed a little and undressed. After he submerged himself under the shower head, he stopped thinking about me. The hot water was working its wonders on his skin and easing the pain that continued to permeate all throughout his body. Misha was waiting for him when he got out. Her invitation was so obvious even I saw it. I actually wanted Ronald to go for it. It still took a lot for some women to make the first move even if she was married. Some men didn't like it, but Ronald didn't seem to mind. Still, there was something a bit wrong. He felt a bit pressured but didn't want to say anything. Something in him didn't want to say no so that his wife wouldn't feel rejected, but his body was so tired.

He tried anyway. Misha ended up doing most of the work, but Ronald was there for his part. He could read her body in just the right way. I liked the way his rough hands felt on her soft skin. I could feel how much she enjoyed it. Although he was tired, Ronald got in sync with her and they fell into this wonderful rhythm. It didn't last as long as I would have liked it, but there was nothing there for my benefit. I was surprised that he went through with it knowing I was there, but apparently Misha's desires outweighed any embarrassment he felt. I was glad. I almost forgot what it was like to connect with someone else on that deep of a level. It felt good to be reminded.

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*She enjoyed it. I could tell. You don't seem happy about it. Most men actually feel proud when they make a woman come. It's not the easiest thing in the world to do you know.*

*"I know, but I could have done better. I wanted to give her a little more but..."*

*The pain was too much. You haven't told her have you?*

*"Nah, she would just worry."*

*Of course, she would. She's your wife. Did you also think that maybe she would help you if you told her?*

*"I don't need help. I just need to make it until the end of the week then I can make it for another one after that. That's just the way it is."*

*It doesn't have to be this way. You're not supposed to live your life like this. I've been proud my whole life, too, but you're going to wreck your body trying to overexert yourself like this. What happens to those kids when you finally give out? Is that job of yours going to give you a pension or some sort of compensation when you can't work anymore or are they going to find a way to screw you out of what they earned like they did everyone else?*

*"I don't really know what's going to happen tomorrow, next week or a year from now. All I know is right now we have to keep food on the table and a roof over our heads. If I have to work around the clock on crutches, then I'll do it because my family deserves that much."*

*I hope you're right, Ronald. I'd hate to think about what those kids would go through if they lost you.*

*"Don't talk like that. You'll only give yourself a headache and I don't need no more pain than I'm already in."*

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The next day at work was more of the same: the pain just wouldn't go away. I could even feel Ronald start to worry a bit. He didn't want to, but I think he found a new site of pain that he hadn't felt before. It was spreading. I didn't think it was possible, but this might have been a different kind of pain than what he was used to. That was when I noticed how stiff his fingers felt. That same tightness was in his toes. The joint pain was pretty bad all over. By lunch, we both wanted to give out.

"Something's really wrong this time isn't it?"

"I'm used to my muscles hurting, but I feel something different in my joints. I sure hope old Arthur's not kicking in."

Arthritis - every working person's worst nightmare.

"I don't know if that's it, but I do think you need a vacation. Some rejuvenation could go a long way toward making you feel like yourself again. Being this tired all the time can't be good. Can't you and your wife leave the kids with family and take the day for yourselves just once?"

"I already had my vacation days. Spent those in bed just resting."

"You need to do that more often."

"I know, but somebody got to make sure the kids get fed, do their homework and go to bed."

"That's all they do?"

"There's no after school program or center they can go to until we can get out of work. They have to stay in the house until one of us gets there so social services don't come looking for us. Marlene down the street almost got her kids taken away from her when one of them starting hanging around at the school after hours and they found out she was working the second shift and wasn't there. That's something else. How they gonna try to take your kids 'cause you working?"

I couldn't argue because I knew how fucked up that was. It made me mad sometimes when other people felt they had a right to be in your business and tell you how to live your life and raise your kids. I know people say it takes a village to raise kids, but some people really have no business trying to invite themselves into the village. Ronald and Misha were doing everything right by those kids. They shouldn't have to worry about the state trying to come in and take their kids away because they both had to work in order to take care of them.

"You know exactly what I'm thinking. How about that?"

"Sorry. I go off on a tangent in my head sometimes. I try not to interfere in the lives of others, but I kind of want to help you since you and your family are such nice people. I just don't want to give you some unwanted advice that doesn't really take into account your full situation. I'm sure you've probably thought of everything I would tell you anyway."

"That's alright. You seem like a nice girl."

"Can I tell you something anyway?"

"Can I stop you?"

I laughed. "No. You really need to tell Misha about this. If anyone's going to help you, it's her. I see the way she looks at you. That woman adores everything about you. I think the least you can do is let her know what's going on with you."

"Yeah, but I don't want to worry her. She feels bad enough we have to leave the kids alone when we don't want to. I really don't want her to start thinking about what would happen if I lose my job."

"She's already worried. Ronald, last night, did you feel a little something off when you were... I mean did she respond to you in the same way as usual?"

He thought about it for a moment. He knew there was something different with her, but he had been too tired last night to think about it. Plus, he was a little disappointed with his own part in it.

"I may not know her very well, but she seemed to hesitate a lot and I think she expected something she didn't get. She didn't say anything though."

He started rubbing at his eyes as they began to water. I knew it was mostly fatigue, but frustration had begun to creep its way into his usually calm demeanor. I was actually beginning to get a little frustrated myself thinking about how no one wanted to consider how this man was suffering. Not just hurting, suffering. This was America and the privilege of having a good job was supposed to be its own reward. He needed a vacation and some physical care, but he couldn't afford it on his salary. So he suffered in silence not even telling the person closest to him how he was really feeling. I didn't understand how he could live that way.

"Believe me. You just get used to it."

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The end of the work week couldn't get here fast enough. I knew Ronald was looking forward to having a relaxing evening at home with no worries about work for two days. I wish it was

longer, but I wasn't even a physical entity in my own body. Who would listen to me anyway? I didn't know much about real work. The summer before college, I worked in a factory for about two months on the third shift. By the end of the first week, I was too mentally and physically tired to do much of anything. I didn't even want to read books. That was how bad it was.

"Yeah, I had that job since after I got out of high school," Ronald was saying. It was pay day, so he and Misha always treated the kids to something special on Fridays. This time around they were getting tacos and ice cream. "It was a good job, too. Paid better than a lot of the work most people could get around here. I met Misha a few years later and we been together ever since. I didn't really worry as much as I did until after Junior and Lilly were born. You married?"

"Not even close. Don't get me wrong. I believe in commitment, but that's not always going to come with a marriage. A ring won't guarantee a man is going to stay faithful to you, but I'd gladly stay with someone who showed the love and respect I want. Otherwise, I'm not even trying to find myself tied to someone legally."

It was Ronald's turn to laugh although he had to stifle it while he waited for his order. "I don't get you girls these days. You say you want a good man but then don't give the one that's trying to marry you the time of day. He's too nice."

"Nice has nothing to do with it. Anyway, we probably have different definitions of what you consider 'nice.' Besides, you won't admit how some of you get a wife and think she's supposed to be your mom after you put a ring on her finger. I know men who could cook, do their own laundry and clean up after themselves, but as soon as they got married, they expected their wives to do everything. Let me tell you. You are not a nice guy if you present yourself as one way when you're trying to land someone then turn around and decide your woman is your property just because you married her. People always say that a woman wants to change a man. Hell, men change themselves because they think they don't have to keep doing all those things they were doing when they were courting."

I didn't get a response from Ronald on that one. He paid for the food then left. He was mostly quiet on the drive home. I could feel the pain creeping up on him again. It got to the point where his arms were hurting so much that he didn't feel like trying to lift them to eat.

"You have to tell her, Ronald. She can help you. I don't know how, but she can."

Ronald presented the kids with their Friday treat before heading off to the bedroom. He only removed his clothes before lying down. His back was soothed a bit as he relaxed, but the pain in his joints persisted. I was amazed at his resolve to block out the pain and not acknowledge it even though it was terrible on so many levels. He eventually went to sleep. I hoped for some miracle that would take the pain away before he woke.

That miracle didn't come, but Misha was home by the time he awoke. That was when he got a scare. He couldn't move. His body just wasn't willing. Ronald tried to turn around on his stomach and practically broke out into a sweat. Being in his body was torture at that moment.

"Oh my God, what's wrong?"

Misha's voice was so beautiful at that moment. She helped him turn over again and got him comfortable on his back. Ronald was breathing heavily and unable to block out the pain any longer. He started to tell her about how he was worried the arthritis was about to get him. He described the pain as best he could. Misha couldn't hide the worry. Everything Ronald said would worry her was written right there on her face. I could also see that her husband's well-being was on her mind, but the thought of losing a much needed paycheck could not make itself any less important.

"We'll find a way. The first thing we can do is start giving you aspirin. The generic stuff works just as well as the brand name, so that's a start. If that doesn't work, I can talk to some of the other nurses and see if we can get you some other medication that can help. They always liked you, so I know they'll do what they can to help. I can also learn to do the massage therapy. A lot of people are trying to do that instead of medication, but I never paid it much attention. You might like that."

I didn't know why I was so impressed by Ronald's ability to smile through his pain, but there he was. All that time, he was worried about disappointing his wife and here she was offering to learn a whole new skill just to help him. I had to admit I didn't see that much love and respect between two people a whole lot, but it did make me think that sometimes that whole marriage thing could work.

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I told you she would help.

"Yeah, I know, but that's more work on her. She doesn't need that."

No one does, but she thinks you're worth it. Listen, Ronald. You guys may not be able to hire a sitter or find daycare that works for both your kids, but I know a few people. I mean there are a few older ladies who would love to have kids around and probably wouldn't even ask you to pay them for looking after them. Sometimes they get a little lonely and they like to have something to do. It's kind of sad because they need to do something so that they feel useful, but they really can be lifesavers when you need them.

He thought about it a moment. "Good idea, but I don't know how the hell I'd explain that to Misha, where I got the idea."

Tell her you heard someone at work mention it. I'm sure you know one or two people who have some elderly parents or something that might want to spend some time with your kids. That way you don't have to explain me when you bring it up to Misha.

I felt him hesitate. He was suppressing a thought, hoping I wouldn't bring it out of him. I coaxed him into telling me what was wrong.

"Nothing's wrong. It's just that I feel bad."

Bad why?

"I feel like I'm doing wrong by her because... because I really want to see your face."

It was innocent, but I knew why he would feel odd about it. I was rather flattered actually. No one had ever wanted to "cheat" on his wife with me because of feelings or affection before.

You can see me if you really want.

I told him about the water. Even after he ran it, he hesitated to look. I watched him smile back at me as my face materialized before him. Neither of us said anything, but neither of us wanted the moment to end. There was something perfect about it.

Yet it had to end. I felt the sensation come over me. I saw Ronald stare at his own reflection as I floated above him and found myself in my own kitchen. For a moment, I could still feel a bit of the pain from Ronald's body as if it was my own. It slowly went away as I laid comfortably on my bed staring at the ceiling. I wanted to reach over and turn on the radio to get the noise out of my head. I couldn't get the look on Ronald's face out of my head and didn't want to admit how it made me feel. I would never forgive myself if I actually acted on the feeling that was beginning to take over me. Still, I felt good that Ronald knew what I looked like and could take the steps if he wanted to pursue what I felt in his mind right before I left

him. While part of me knew it was wrong, another part hoped he would decide to try to find me. For now, I had to decide whether or not I would tell the others about it.

Carlos' Protest

"Just a nigger and a spic. That's all you are."

The blow to the head left them both dizzy. For once, Hope was the one confused by her presence. The room around her spun out of control and the transcorporean hit the floor. He had a good size body, but the guy who hit him had Holyfield power behind his punch. Hope entered right at that blow, but she knew it was not the first. The body was too tired and was about to give up the fight from its owner. The man started to come again.

"Block him. If you can't swing, just block it."

The fist came at him again, but the transcorporean managed to bring up his hand defensively and keep it from connecting with his head again. The man seemed to get mad and settled for a kick in the ribs before walking away. Hope lied down in the floor with her host body a moment as they listened to the man slam the door on his way out.

The aching was all over, but the head was the worst. The throbbing felt like it would never end. Hope never wanted to get up. She would have welcomed death if it meant the pain would go away. He began to cry. Silent tears but they came. They felt good. She felt some of the pain ebbing. His tears felt cleansing. They both started to feel just a little better on the inside.

"Thank you."

"Why?"

"For helping me. I wouldn't have tried to fight him anymore. I was just so tired."

"Can't really say I feel all that helpful. I think it hurts less to get hit by an actual Mack truck."

"Yeah, maybe."

"You don't seem freaked out at all. About me, that is."

"This is a bit out of the ordinary, huh?"

"You have a whole new person in your being. I have to say there is nothing ordinary at all about this situation."

He laughed just as silently as he cried. Some of his strength came back, so he began the arduous task of picking himself off the floor. The pain screamed through his joints again. At least he took his time. Hope knew if he moved any faster he just might have dropped for good. She felt his dizziness for a moment. She wondered if he would make it to the bathroom before the bile reached his throat.

He did. He had purged himself and a little more of the pain went away. A little more left as he splashed some water on his face at the sink. She looked through his eyes at the mirror. One of the most handsome curly-haired men she had ever seen stared back at her. She could see his already brown skin was a little darker with the changing season. Something told her that he liked to be out in the sun but didn't make it as often as he liked. He wasn't very skinny nor was he heavily built. He was rather average with just a little muscle tone to show that he occasionally did some heavy lifting rather than working out.

His eyes looked as tired as they felt. Hope could see which one was starting to swell. The dark mark was already forming like a target around his deep brown eyes. She watched him give the eye a look as he asked himself how he would explain it if he couldn't hide it this

time. He abruptly dropped his gaze from the mirror when it occurred to him that she was also studying that eye.

He headed to his kitchen and grabbed an ice pack from the freezer. The cold actually made the pain a little worse – at least it felt that way to her. He seemed relieved. She looked around through the eye he hadn't covered. That was when she saw the portrait on the wall: he and the man who had just beaten him in a couple's embrace under an inscription. Carlos and Paul, Together Forever.

"This guy is your boyfriend. Your boyfriend did this to you."

"He's my partner," Carlos said defensively. "I'm too damn old for a boyfriend."

"So am I, but you know what I mean. This man probably tells you he loves you on a regular basis and he treats you like this. How many times have I seen this before?"

"Look. It's not so... I mean this doesn't happen all the time. Paul's not such a bad guy. He just gets a little angry sometimes and loses control. I happen to be the one here right now. He didn't mean to take it out on me. He'll explain when he comes back home."

Hope tried to keep the "you're kidding" from reaching the front of her mind, but it slipped.

"No, I'm not kidding. You don't understand. No one does."

"Paul..."

"I'm Carlos."

"Sorry. Carlos, I'm usually not one to judge people, but I have to ask. He almost killed you just now. Why the hell do you stay here? You say I don't understand. Try to help me understand."

Carlos gave the ice pack a rest sat down on the old sofa in the living room. Hope looked around and noticed how much of a bachelor pad this really was. Most of the furniture was old and worn even though she could see there had been some attempts to keep everything repaired and in good condition. There were no family portraits on the wall, just various posters or other mass produced pieces with the words and likes of Caesar Chavez, Mohandas Ghandi and Rosa Parks. There were a few posters advertising marches, demonstrations and other events all over the place. One or both of these guys worked a lot out of the living room. There were all kinds of books and guides on the history of political movements all throughout the world. She finally figured out what Carlos did for a living.

"I know you may think I'm naïve or something, but Paul was the one person I had when my parents kicked me out for being gay. He was there for me when I literally had no one else to turn to. We found ourselves a place and it's been the two of us ever since. I've never been able to depend on anyone else except him. Hell, where would I go if we broke up. I'd never make the rent by myself and it's a lot easier dealing with so much bullshit when I got someone to come home to. Besides, what I get from him can't be half as bad as what I would get from the cops. I guess I'm just preparing myself."

She knew his brief chuckle was supposed to indicate a bad joke, but Hope just couldn't bring herself to join in. She managed to hide her horror, but she had heard that kind of logic before. Nowhere else to go, no one else to depend on. She counted her lucky stars that she had never found herself in that situation. She just knew that for now she would have to endure a very long four days.

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"They're having a meeting about it in a couple of days, so we need to be there."

Carlos explained to Hope what was supposed to happen at his latest protest. She tended not to like activist too much, but Carlos was sincere and dedicated to his causes. She also knew that he had to tell himself that he needed to help others who had it much worse off than he. She told herself the same thing at times. Hope had her days when she worried about stretching the food budget to make sure she still had a roof over her head then justified her hardship by telling herself that there were others who had no shelter or food. Then she would tell herself that was bullshit.

"These assholes have been trying to raise property values in this neighborhood and drive out the people who already live there. These people have worked hard all their lives to have their own homes and now some corporate suits want to get them out to build a golf course or something unnecessary there. They got a lot of the land around the area cheap because, you know, the property values are always lower around our neighborhoods. Now they've decided they can make something better of the land and get the kind of people they feel 'deserve' it into the neighborhood. Makes me mad just thinking about it."

"I hear that." Hope admired the fire and passion that arose in Carlos as he explained to her what he hoped would happen with the protest. She had given up on that kind of activism long ago. She understood the need, but she just felt that on a deeper level, these actions only offered a temporary solution. All these people put so much time and energy into getting themselves into a system that was built to keep them out instead of overturning it. She hated the illusion of democracy and justice that came with protests and activism of that particular ilk. Eventually, everything would go back to the way it was.

"Most of the homeowners will be there with us of course. I mean this is about them, but they still need to show these bastards that they have a whole community behind them. Our organization still hasn't settled on just how involved we need to be, but I've been trying to tell everyone that we need to take more of a supportive role and let the homeowners have their say. We lost a couple of people who got mad that we don't want them to add their individual agendas. They keep saying stuff like "we need to make sure we talk about sustainable living. I'm trying to tell them that these people are trying to make sure they can still sustain themselves. If that golf course even gets close to getting built, no one will give a damn about what's happening to the environment since they can't live on it."

That was Hope knew she liked Carlos. He had ideals, but he was realistic. The pain in his body was still there, but the more he talked about his work, the less he focused on it. He hadn't taken any painkillers or done anything to get rid of the pain except take his mind off it. He was very mentally strong. Once he began to block out the pain, he focused on the task at hand and didn't look back.

"How long you been doing this?"

"Most of my life as far as I remember."

She could feel him trying to shut down after a memory of his parents came to mind. Hope decided to try to get him to talk.

"Tell me about them."

"Who?"

"Your folks. I know you had a falling out, but you still miss them, right?"

He fought it, but something in him really wanted to talk about his parents. He relented.

"My father was from Guadalajara. He came here when he was still a teenager. He said he hated it at first, but he eventually made a home for himself. He met mom when he was in college."

Carlos stopped and went into the bedroom. He opened his underwear drawer and felt underneath the top to detach an envelope. He pulled out an old picture of his family. Hope looked at the mother, father, brother and sister as she felt the longing and sadness Carlos could not hide. His father was rather handsome and imposing. His mother was indeed a beauty with a smile that could have blinded anyone. Carlos appeared to be the middle child with his siblings. They all appeared to be happy.

"Her parents weren't really too worried about the two of them getting together. He said his parents didn't want him with her though. They told him they came here so he could do better for himself and she was beneath him. They came around eventually though. They had to. Mom could charm anybody."

He couldn't hold back his heavy sigh. "Sometimes it didn't work on Dad though. He went across her head every once in a while, but she stayed with him. She sided with him when I came out. Lupe, my sister, she talks to me every once in a while and lets me know how they are. Mom's still hanging in there. Lupe says she misses me even though she won't say it."

"What about your dad?"

Hope regretted asking, but she didn't stop the question from entering her mind in time. It was the first time she felt anger out of Carlos.

"He doesn't care about me and I don't care about him anymore."

It was a lie, but she didn't tell him she knew that. She just let him hold his family portrait and think about the good times he chose to remember.

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Hope remembered another reason she could never stay involved in activism and politics: too much disagreement and animosity among people who claimed to have the same interests in mind. Every point became a shouting match, especially from those who wanted to have more leadership than they had. Carlos was not immune to falling into this trap and Hope did what she could to help him keep his head, sometimes to no avail. By the time the meeting was over, Hope really had no idea what had been accomplished. Lots of talk and no way to know if it actually did any good. This drove her crazy.

Carlos joined a few friends for coffee afterwards. It amazed her that they all made an effort not to notice the bruising and swelling on his face. One "friend" joked that Carlos must have started the protests already. He laughed it off like they all did. Hope knew that none of them could actually be so oblivious to not know that he was a victim of his own partner. The only thing that saddened her more was Carlos' relief that no one asked him about the truth of the matter.

"I think that went well."

"Really?"

"We know what we're going to do. Not everyone is happy about it, but at least we have a plan. A lot of these guys have been so nervous. They've been burned before with activists coming in and not really doing anything while they're left holding the bag. We've got to show them that we're in this as long as they need us. It may not be my neighborhood, but it could be."

"I have to admit that I really admire your dedication to it. The one thing I hated about most activists is that they are career activists. They don't really have a greater good in mind. They make a lot of profit when they show up in the right place at the right time and really don't believe in the cause. Then there are the ones who try a bit too hard. 'Let me live in the poorest

neighborhood I can find and show these poor souls how they should be living.' I hate that type, too. I'm glad I met someone like you."

He smiled a killer smile that any other time would have melted Hope, but she felt something else coming over him right then. Carlos remembered that he was faced with two prospects: either was about to head home to an empty home or he was about to find Paul there. For a moment, he didn't know which one would be worse.

"Would you like to go to a movie or something, Carlos? You seem like you would be the indie film type I get along with. I can yell at the screen all I want since only you can hear me."

The smile came back full of happiness this time. Unfortunately, they arrived too late for a last showing. They had to settle for an iced latte and a walk to the lake. Even with the impending summer solstice, the breeze kept them both cool. They mostly sat quietly with the reality of Carlos' life hanging over the both of them. Hope never really liked to talk about herself, so she didn't offer much in the way of conversation. Even though her life was dull by comparison, she didn't want to appear to judgmental in how he led his life. Besides, that would have led her to getting involved. They both decided to sit and enjoy the serenity of the moon reflecting off the dark water while the winds blew ripples through the water.

Carlos finally worked up the nerve to head home. It was a slow walk, almost like a funeral procession. The ominous feeling that came over Hope grew stronger with every step. She hoped this was only her usual fear of the unknown taking over her as it was apt to do.

They arrived back at the apartment. Even with Carlos' slow and steadied movements, everything felt still. Something lingered in the air that Hope couldn't identify. Then she saw it: Paul was back.

"Where have you been?"

It wasn't exactly a question but more of a demand. It was as if he expected Carlos to still be in the same spot where he left him bleeding, just waiting for him to return. She could feel the pounding of Carlos' heart although he tried to keep his emotions from showing in his body language. He was scared. He was also somehow relieved.

"Had a meeting tonight..."

"That was over hours ago. Where the hell did you go?"

"I went for a walk, alright. I got an iced latte and walked down to the lake for a while."

"Bullshit. Who were you with?"

"Something different began to swell in Carlos. That relief he felt was no longer there. That love that came over him whenever he spoke Paul's name was no longer foremost in his heart. He was angry.

"Yeah, I was with someone tonight. Her name is Hope. She gets into people's heads and talks to them through their minds."

Oh, Carlos, no.

"She's really nice even though she tries to act like she isn't," Carlos continued. "She asked me something I try not to ask myself all the time. 'Why the hell am I still with you?' I wonder, Paul. You keep treating me this way. Why am I still with you?"

Paul was still a moment, caught off guard by Carlos' rare show of spine with him. It was only a moment. Paul scoffed like Carlos was a petulant child throwing a tantrum.

"You crazy, nigger. Hope inside your head. I told you all that activist shit was gone make you crack. Look at you. You still with me because nobody else would ever want you nigger-spic ass. And now look at you. Crazy to boot. What else did this 'hope' tell you? She

tell you this latest save the world bullshit you into was gone work? If she did, that bitch is crazy as you are."

Hope could feel pieces of Carlos dying. She could feel how useless and worthless those words made him feel. He couldn't see it as coming from a weak man desperately trying to hold on to the power he wielded over another. Carlos took every word to heart from the man he thought loved him more than anyone ever would in the world. If this man who he believed truly loved him despite his abusive shortcomings, what chance would he have with anyone else? Hope had no words to tell Carlos that he was anything but worthless. She knew he wasn't listening to her anyway. Paul knew Carlos was listening to him.

"She still there, Carlos? Huh? Maybe you need some help getting rid of her."

Paul shoved him with one hand, not enough to move Carlos off his feet.

"She still there? This 'hope' still inside you?"

He pushed Carlos harder this time. Then he slapped with an open hand across the head like he was disciplining a child.

"Why I help you get this hope out of you? You don't need this hope anyway, do you?"

Carlos, walk away. Just walk away and get out of here.

Hope felt Carlos try to respond to her, but his feet seemed planted to the floor. Something paralyzed him. He was beginning to get into a familiar defense mode and curl up into a ball to protect his head. Paul started to swing viciously.

"I'll make sure you never see this hope again!"

The last thing both Hope and Carlos saw before the darkness was the lamp Paul suddenly picked up and swung at Carlos' head.

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*"Can I ask you something, Carlos?"*

*"You're the only other one here.*

*"Do you want to die?"*

*"What kind of question is that?"*

*"What if he killed you? What if you're already dead?"*

*"How can I be dead when you're talking to me?"*

*"I don't know how this works. No one's ever died while I was in them. You might be the first."*

*"Don't say that. I know I'm not dead."*

*"You didn't answer my question. Do you want to die?"*

Carlos was quiet. Hope felt the answer in him, but he just could not bring himself to say it out loud. He did not want to admit to himself how he really felt.

*"You already know you don't, so why is it so hard to say it? You have a right to value your own life."*

"You know why I can't say it. I may not be ready to leave him. You've only seen his ugly side. He's been stressed lately at work and worried about keeping that job. His parents don't talk to him either. He's gay and on top of that he's with a black man. Let's just say Mama and Papa Epstein were none too happy about that. You don't know how much he sacrificed to be with me. He's had guys cheat on him and treat him wrong before, so he can't help but be suspicious sometimes. Gets on my nerves when he throws those accusations at me, but he comes to his senses after a while."

Hope said nothing. She knew what it was like to let being in love make her lose every bit of common sense she ever gained through years of living. She couldn't judge Carlos on that

front since she knew what it felt like to want someone else to love her just so she could feel validated. She knew those feelings all too well. What made her angry was her determination to not get involved. She never liked to care about a transcorporean, especially one she knew was in a bad situation that might not see an end. Carlos had admitted that he wasn't ready to leave Paul. Hope wanted to believe that she could help anyone in an abusive relationship, but she had to admit to herself that she would get way too frustrated dealing with someone who could not walk away from an obviously bad situation. She just had too little tolerance for that much of a gap between the brain and the heart.

"I know you think I'm stupid. Hell, I know I am, too, but I can't give up on him. Yeah, you're not the first person who didn't want anything to do with me after finding out how it is between Paul and me. He's the only constant I've had in a while."

"I don't think you're stupid, Carlos. Naïve as all hell, but you're one of the least stupid people I know. You just have to learn how to self-preserve while you're out there trying to save the world. Contrary to what we've been taught, it's not the martyrs who die for a cause that change things. It's the ones who keep living for it."

"Hope, don't leave me before you have to."

"I won't."

~~~

Carlos regained consciousness the next day. He found out that Paul was in jail after a neighbor finally called the police to report a disturbance when she noticed Paul leaving in a hurry and no other sounds coming out of the apartment. That was how the police found Carlos. Paul was smart enough not to talk to the authorities before he had a lawyer with him. They tried to scare him with attempted murder talk, but he still knew better than to admit anything before he found out if Carlos was going to say anything. He was probably going to be out soon with no charges against him.

A few of Carlos' friends helping him plan the protest came by to see him. They could see he was in pretty bad shape. One of them suggested they cancel the protest, but Carlos insisted they go on without him. However, he needed some time to get himself together.

One of his nurses knew something was off about all the bruises and other marks on Carlos' body, but she said nothing to him. Hope could tell she wanted to, but the nurse had that same frame of mind that it was none of her business that she often had. Something told Hope that Carlos might not press charges against Paul or even admit Paul was the one who did this to him.

"How do you feel now?"

"Like I've hit by a Mack truck."

"Can you stand?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Go to the sink."

Carlos did as he was told even though he could feel his entire body ache. He made his way over to the sink. "Now what?"

"Run some water."

He turned on the tap and let the sink fill about half way. He splashed his hand in it playfully a moment before letting it settle.

"Just look into it and focus. Really concentrate."

They watched the water in silence a moment. Carlos finally began to see.

"Wait. Is that you?"

"Yes."

"You're beautiful."

"Thank you. The only guys who've ever told me that and meant it were gay."

For the first time since he regained consciousness, Carlos smiled. Hope continued.

"Carlos, I want you to look at my face and really remember it. You know my name; you know my face. Don't ever forget it. If you ever need me for any reason, you come to me. Even if you just need to get an ice coffee and walk by the lake. Don't ever hesitate. I'll only be mad if you do."

Carlos was quiet a second, but Hope could still feel the swirl of emotions fighting for control of him at that moment. He relented to the one she hoped she would get: gratitude.

"Thanks, Hope. I won't forget."

"Now, if we're going to be here for the rest of my time with you, you have got to figure out a way to get us some ice cream."

~~~

Carlos was asleep when Hope finally left him and returned to her own bed. She stared at the ceiling with the pain from his bruises and swelling infiltrating her own skin. It would go away soon, much sooner than it would for Carlos. They would probably come back again and again before he finally decided he had had enough. Until then, she would wait until he took her up on her offer.

### Denise's Memory

I hated to admit it, but sometimes I truly did not like some of the transcorporeans I found myself in. That wasn't always the case, but being someone else could suck quite hard sometimes. There was this one time I found myself inside this old man who still paid younger girls to give him blow jobs. Ewwww. At least this one was a woman even though she appeared to be 80.

That might have meant nothing. One thing I learned in this life is that old people still know how to fuck. Plus, they're better at it because they've been doing it for so long. But there was something odd about this woman. It was like her head was constantly in a cloud. She didn't even seem to know who she was for a minute. There was so much confusion in her head that I thought it would suffocate me. I soon felt her fear except I knew I had the upper hand because my presence wasn't doing a thing to help her confusion.

"I know you're not going to believe this, but you're okay. There is someone else here. It's not just in your head. Well, actually it is in your head, but it's not your fault. You know what I mean. You didn't do anything to trigger it. I just come to people sometimes."

She had started to look around while trying to keep her tears at bay. It didn't work. This was not going to be easy.

"No, don't do that. I hope you're not scared. My name is Grace. I have a strange power. Look. Don't make me explain it, but this just happens to me sometimes. I never hurt anyone. After four days, you won't even remember I was here."

Something must have clicked with her because her tears didn't seem to come from frustration or worry anymore. She seemed happy. Now I was the one confused. Why was she

happy there was some stranger in her head reading her every thought and mood? Furthermore, how did she know she could just think a thought and I could hear without her speaking out loud?

"Your name is Grace. How could anyone with that beautiful name harm me?"

Oh.

"It's been so lonely here sometimes. My family doesn't like to come around much anymore. So many of my friends have passed on or can't get around well enough to visit. Now here you are. You're my grace."

"Yeah, um, don't get too excited. I'm only here for four days.

~~~

Her name was Denise. In her day, she had been a nurse. She had been widowed for the past three years. She had three children, eight grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Damn if she could remember all their names. Her hair was not gray but a very distinct white that looked even whiter against her olive skin and deep brown eyes. I could tell she had been taller than she now stood, but that kind of shrinkage was to be expected with age.

She couldn't remember exactly when she retired. She couldn't remember her husband's birthday, death date or their anniversary. She thought his name was Alan. I found out it was when I got to the wedding photos. Alan Gentry. He had been a handsome fellow, too. Through the old black and white picture, it was still obvious he was a good looking man with dark hair and a solid frame. I found other pictures and saw that he actually aged rather well. Denise remembered that he suddenly had a heart attack and died in his sleep. She didn't remember too many details besides that.

Denise actually spent much of the time going through those old photos. It was strange how she would recall in vivid detail playing with her neighbors when she was ten but couldn't remember if she had breakfast that morning. That cloud in her brain would settle somewhere for a moment then move to another area. Sometimes the cloud only felt like it moved; other times it felt like it expanded. I didn't like it either way.

"Well, Faith, those were my old wedding photos. How about we look at the kids when they were young?"

"My name is Grace. I have a friend named Faith, but I'm Grace."

"Oh, I knew it was something like that."

Denise looked for the next photo album. I looked at how carefully it was marked: *Caroline, 1953-1956, The House on Williamson Lane*. All the albums had these labels: names, dates and locations. She had just called me Faith, an almost Christian sounding name that was part of a group. Usually it all has to click for a transcorporean. It started to become clear to me then: dementia. She was suffering from dementia of some kind. That was why she could tell me about an ice cream sundae she had in 1947 in graphic detail, but she couldn't remember if she had brushed her teeth that morning.

I was scared. I didn't like being in this mind. It was scary as hell. Even Denise had to keep herself from a panic when the wheels started to turn in my head. She was trapped in her own mind, but at least she was familiar with that. I was trying to do her thinking for her and she didn't like that. Couldn't say I blamed her.

"Well, let's see here. These are from when Caroline was just born. I thought she wasn't born until after we went to the house on Drury Street, but the album says we were on Williamson then. Maybe we were at Drury before. Oh, what does it matter! Wasn't she a

lovely little girl? I was so proud the day she was born. It wasn't easy. She was trying to come out with her feet first. We finally got her out though. Stayed in the hospital with her nearly two weeks before they let me take her home."

"Times sure have changed from that."

"Don't I know it! Here's the little crib Alan made for her. He worked on it before and after work when we found out she would be born and had it ready in time. Even painted it himself. Had to repaint the name a couple of times when the others came because they had to use it after Caroline."

It was something else. Once Denise got into those memories, things became clear. I didn't even remember my early 20s and I was just in my late 30s. Plus I didn't have Alzheimer's. Strange affliction that was.

"Denise, how about we have a little lunch? We've been at this a couple of hours and I think you're getting a little hungry."

"I suppose so, but you know a lady should never eat too much in front of company."

I hoped I didn't let that "you're kidding" invade her thoughts because it was starting to be the only thing in mine. She was one of those women thinking that she had accomplished something because she was still a size four at her age. Maybe that was just how she was built, but I was glad I never learned that was how I had to be. The sad thing is that this was probably something she had been taught at a younger age and managed to break, but now she couldn't remember. Pray that I never have to deal with Alzheimer's.

~~~

The photo albums pretty much consumed Denise most of the day. She had nowhere to go and no one to see. She remembered to take her medication when I asked her about the notes on her refrigerator. Her dreams were pleasant. She and Alan were together, courting. It was like watching an old movie. I wondered if that was the reason she remembered it that way, a time in the past that we all believed existed because celluloid taught us that it did. Denise's own memories were such a mess that it might have just been that way.

An alarm sounded and took us out of this Barbara Stanwyck fantasy. The fog in her head was strong with the morning. Denise looked at the calendar on the wall and noticed the star. I felt her trying to remember why the star was there. She couldn't quite grasp it, but she knew it was something significant. Then all of a sudden she remembered me.

"Oh, Charity, you're still here?"

"Yes, but I'm Grace, remember?"

"Something pretty like that. I'd better get myself ready."

"What's happening today?"

"I may have to go somewhere or something has to come to me. I probably just wanted to remind myself that I wanted to feel pretty today."

She had no clue. She was embarrassed now. I couldn't tell if she just couldn't remember that I had spent the entire day with her yesterday or she was just feeling the regular humiliation that happens when we look less than perfect through another's eyes. I thought the novelty of my visit was already wearing off on her. I didn't want her to feel embarrassed.

"So what do you usually do on those days you like to feel pretty?"

I could feel her smile. There was some relief and some genuine happiness as she began to go through her grooming ritual that ended with a rather fancy red pants suit that rather complimented her. It was nice being with old girl at that moment.

Still, she had her breakfast then mostly sat around as if expecting something to tell her what her next move was supposed to be. Seriously, it just made me sad.

It was around noon when something finally happened. We both heard the car pull up, but it triggered something in her. It was like a Pavlovian response. She stood up and fussed with her pants suit as if it weren't already immaculately pressed. She had no hairs out of place but she still gave herself that familiar Hollywood primping as she looked toward the door. It finally opened.

"Hi, Grandma Nisy!"

The boy couldn't have been more than five or six. He was a cute little moppet. He kind of reminded me of Denise's husband with his dark hair and dark green eyes. He ran straight into his grandmother's arms and pounced on her like a housecat. Fortunately, he wasn't very heavy or else I doubt Denise wouldn't have been able to hold him very long. We both remembered at that moment why she had taken the time to make herself so presentable. She wasn't just trying to look her best for her kids. She wanted them to believe everything was okay with her.

Denise finally noticed the young woman who came with the baby girl on her hip. She had an expression of perpetual misery on her face.

"Hey, Grandma Nisy," she said as she plopped the baby girl in Denise's lap with the boy. Denise was happy to hold them both. It almost kept the panic from seizing her, but she couldn't keep it from completely leaving her alone. She couldn't remember their names. Here she was holding her great-grandchildren and she didn't know their names.

"Have you had lunch, Grandma?" the young woman said from the kitchen. She was already making a little something as if she expected the answer to be no. Even if it was, she was still going to make breakfast because she obviously didn't trust her grandmother's judgment. Something in Denise already knew she wouldn't win an argument with this one. She was thinking about all the fat she would have to eat in front of people. Strangers.

Lunch wasn't unpleasant. Her granddaughter knew how to cook. She must have brought the chicken and potatoes with her because none of that was anywhere to be found in Denise's house. Denise may not have wanted to eat in front of people, but I made sure she did. I noticed her granddaughter didn't seem to be saying much. The boy was a bit of a chatterbox. Apparently he had just started school and wanted to tell everything he learned. Then I felt the panic seize Denise again when the boy made a simple request: write my name with me.

Denise was smart. "Why, you should write it for me. Show me what a smart boy you are."

"But, Grandma, he wants you to do it with him," the granddaughter said. "He likes to see someone else write it down and then he'll see if he can do it right."

"Oh, that's no way to learn. Back when I was a schoolgirl, they made us learn to do things on our own. I remember it like it was yesterday..."

"Grandma, please? It would mean so much to him."

The cute little moppet looked up at her with those eyes. Hell, I would have done it for him if I could. There was no resisting that face, but Denise tried. She desperately searched her memory for the boy's name. She could see her late husband in his face, but there was no retrieving the letters that would help her identify him.

"Can you tell me his name?"

The boy's expectant look slowly turned to disappointment. Then it turned to shame as if he was afraid he had done something wrong. I could feel Denise's heart breaking as she looked

at the boy and knew there was nothing she could do to let him know that she really wanted to write his name. She just couldn't explain that something in her couldn't remember it.

At that moment, the baby started to cry. The boy looked like he wanted to join her. The granddaughter excused herself to go change the baby. The boy soon got up to follow. Denise sat in her place. She wasn't just embarrassed. She knew she hadn't done as good a job as she wanted trying to pretend everything was normal. She had been found out.

"Mommy, why wouldn't she help me write my name."

"Keep your voice down, honey. She couldn't do it. Grandma Nisy is sick and she can't remember things like she used to. She couldn't remember your name and she didn't want us to know that. We're just going to pretend we didn't notice today so we don't hurt her feelings okay."

Denise heard the whispers. She decided to go along and also pretend. She was happy pretending as long as she wasn't alone in the lonely depths of her mind where only ghosts lived. Those ghosts of her past were realer to her than the three standing before her. She might have seen the traces of her family in their faces, but they were just that - traces.

The rest of the visit was an awkward affair. I hated being a part of it. This was something that should have only been among those family members. Fortunately, my consciousness had been covered with one of those clouds that frequently infiltrated Denise's mind, so she was no longer worried about embarrassing herself in front of someone she didn't know. The granddaughter and kids stayed for the rest of day, making sure Denise had a nice dinner and got through her day. I could see what the granddaughter was doing. She was watching Denise, observing her intently. I then knew why Denise tried so hard to pretend everything was fine and that she was still the same as she always had been. I said nothing and let them play it out.

We both listened to the car leave after Denise had been put to bed. She remembered me then. She told me one thing before she finally went to sleep.

"Connor. The boy's name is Conner, Hope."

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The photo albums from the 60s and 70s were downright fascinating. I always did like old pictures. I wasn't much into the digital stuff now. You couldn't pick those up and hold them in your hands and conjure up a memory like you could with the photographs. Maybe that was why so many people had dementia now. Nothing around them was real, just coded language that could disappear at any minute. How the hell was anyone supposed to know what was real anymore?

It was all real to Denise as she went through and talked about old friends as if they were still with her. I hate to admit it, but the whole thing made me sad. Even in my late 30s, I didn't allow myself to see a future in which everyone I had known for years would eventually die or that I would find myself with one of those afflictions that only seem to happen in old age. I could still live with the illusion that death and other unpleasant facts of life were upon me. I might not have done everything I wanted by this age, but I could still tell myself that I had time. Denise couldn't tell herself that anymore.

So I listened to her go on about the good times in her life because those memories were all she had left. The more recent ones with the great-grands could not make their way past that fog that continued to cloud her mind. I didn't want to think about how scary it was being in Denise's head. Not just the lost memories of her children but also the ones where she couldn't

remember where her red shirt was only to later find out she didn't have one. When I couldn't convince her that she had already had a little something to eat but she was peckish because she didn't get enough: those were the things that scared the hell out of me.

Then my heart jumped with hers when that unexpected knock came at the door. She got up to see that it was her son. She remembered him right away. I could see that he looked a lot like her husband, so I was glad to see she didn't call him Alan. That might have been awkward.

"Hey, Mom."

She could tell just like I could that something was wrong from his tone. It was forced and calculated like he expected her to think he was someone else.

"Well, son, this is unexpected. Caroline came by with the kids just yesterday and we had a lovely visit."

He froze. That was the first strike.

"Mom, that was Tiffany. She's Alan's daughter. Remember?"

"Oh, of course, I remember, but you that girl has always looked like Caroline. I could never get her name straight."

"No, you never could."

He sat down and looked at the photo albums. I didn't know the problem, but I could see from his expression that that was strike two. He was worried to see those photo albums out.

"I remember when you used to only bring these old albums out for company. You were always afraid something would happen to these pictures and something would damage them. Now you never seem to put them away."

She searched for something to say but was at a loss. That fear that threatened to constantly bubble to the surface came back in her. I knew why she was afraid. I knew why Joseph was counting the strikes against his mother. Neither of them wanted to admit why he was there. Denise suddenly realized the silence was a bit long and she scrambled to find an answer to her son's unasked question.

"It's really nice sometimes to reminisce. No one seems to come around anymore, so I have to entertain myself."

Good one, Denise. Still, Joseph wasn't exactly buying it, so he finally decided to get to it.

"Mom, Tiffany said you couldn't remember Connor's name yesterday..."

"I was just having an off day," she interjected before he could make any accusations. "You know I never was good at names and now that your kids are having kids, that's only going to make it worse. I know who the boy is. I know who his sister is. I know all of you."

He listened, but Denise could tell her pleas were not having the impact she hoped. She tried not to let him get in a word as she told him about what it was like for her to raise them when they were younger and how hard she and Alan had worked for their children. I must say, this woman was good at laying down that motherly guilt trip.

"You eventually remembered Connor's name, Mom, but what happens when you can't? What happens when you can't do it any longer? What happens when you don't know who any of us are? Mom, who am I?"

It was an easy question for anyone, just as easy as saying the name of her great grandson. But it wouldn't come to Denise. She took a shot in the dark.

"You're my boy, Alan Jr."

His heart broke visibly on his face. "Mom, I'm Joseph. Alan died last year."

Denise began to crumble as if she had heard the news for the first time. She didn't remember that her eldest son had already died before she had. Joseph spoke again.

“Mom, you can’t be here alone anymore. We need to get you some help before it’s too late.”

I didn’t know what to say as I felt the desperation fill Denise’s head. It overcame that cloud and she spoke before I could stop her or ask her to reconsider.

“But I’m not alone. My friend Grace has been here with me for a while.”

She chose that moment to remember my name.

“She’ll stay if I ask her to. She lives in my head, so I don’t have to feed her or give her a place or anything. She keeps me company and she can remind me to do things like she’s been doing.”

Now it was Joseph’s turn to crumble. That was the third strike and there was no going back for him this time. His mind was made up.

“I have to go right now, Mom. I’ll come back to check on you later, okay.”

His kiss on the cheek felt cold and sad. The whole scene was starting to depress me and I felt Denise’s despair at her last mistake, so I wouldn’t have to tell her about it to make her relive it. Instead, I watched with her as Joseph, not Alan, walked out the door with his promise to come back. She couldn’t speak as she twiddled her thumbs as if waiting for someone to tell her the next move she should make. The doubts that were beginning to consume her thoughts were starting to overwhelm even me, so I did the only thing I knew I could do at the time.

“Denise, tell something about Alan.”

I felt the smile take over her wrinkled face as she began to think about the man she had spent so much of her life with. Her mind went back to an orchard in the early 50s where she had gone to pick apples to make her first attempt at an apple pie from scratch. She had gone with a couple of friends but wandered out on her own where she found what looked like the perfect tree. She looked up to see the reddest apple of the whole bunch, but it was just out of her reach. She didn’t want to climb the tree in her dress but was about to give it a go when a good looking stranger approached her and asked if he could help. She pointed out the apple to him and he made good use his tall frame as he got the apple for her. Instead of saving it for her pie, Denise offered to share it with him for being such a gentleman. He bit into it – then found the worm in the not so perfect apple. To make it up to him, she offered to let him have the first crack at the pie she was still planning to make. That was the first time she met Alan Gentry.

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Despite her mood and her worries, Denise slept rather well. She woke up refreshed and had no trouble with her routine. It was just another ordinary day for her. That was why I knew something was very wrong in Denise’s world.

She didn’t break out the photo albums. She didn’t turn on the television to let the background noise fill the empty space to drown out the thoughts I had invaded. She cleaned the house and thought about her home on Drury Street, wondering if this was the one where her daughter Caroline had been born and raised. When she was done, she fixed herself a small meal of linguine and chicken, which she had told me was her favorite.

It was nearly one when she got her expected visitor. Joseph stood before her looking slightly more than casual in his slacks and dress shirt. He smiled benevolently.

“Let’s go for a ride, Mom.”

Denise smiled back at him. She knew where they were going. She wasn’t angry with him. She had accepted this as her fate already. She sat back and enjoyed the ride as if it were a

leisurely Sunday stroll through the park. It was rather enjoyable. I didn't often get the pleasure of being driven by someone else, so I decided to look at the scenery as it went by as well.

Although I knew it was coming as well, my heart still sank as we drove into New Horizons. I never liked assisted living facilities. I felt they were simply nursing homes under another name and that name let them charge more for storing elderly loved ones. I never wanted to end up in a place like this. Neither did Denise, but there was not much she could do about it at the moment. She resigned herself to the fact that her family thought they were doing what was best for her. Part of her appreciated her concern; the other part wanted to be back in her own home with her photo albums.

Denise didn't listen as the manager spoke with Joseph about his mother's accommodations and the services she would get. She blindly went with them to her new room and sat down on her new bed. She didn't really listen to her son as he told her she would be happy in her new home and the family would be by regularly to see her. She didn't listen as he promised to bring her photo albums, clothes, photos and anything else she needed to make herself feel at home. He kissed her before telling her to try to get to know the place before he came back to see her again.

She laid down on the bed as if she could sleep for years. I understood her fatigue. Having everything you have ever known and tried to hold on to taken away from you in an afternoon was exhausting.

"Denise, tell me something else."

The day Joseph was born was one of the happiest of her life. She had some trouble getting him here, so for the first time, she was taken to a hospital to give birth to one of her babies. The nurses were helpful and did what they could to alleviate her worries and told her Joseph would be okay.

Denise knew the moment I left her body. From where I hovered over her, I could see the tears falling from her eyes. I think she stopped telling the story at that moment. There was no one there to listen. I thought about her when I opened my eyes and found myself sitting outside my door again.

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I felt cold going into New Horizons. No I'm not family. I'm only a friend. Yes, I'm sure I mean Denise Gentry. She wasn't in her room when we first looked. We eventually found her in the arts and crafts room. She was working on another photo album. I didn't recognize this one at all. It must have been new.

I walked up to her not knowing what to say to her. How was I supposed to explain to her that a week ago, I had invaded her body and been exposed to all her deepest fears and now saw they had all come true? I wasn't sure I could offer any comfort to her, but I still felt compelled to see how she was coping with her situation.

"Denise, someone is here to see you. She says she knows you?"

Denise looked up from her album and gazed at me a moment. I could feel the manager next to me getting ready to call for security when Denise smiled.

"Why, Grace, did you come to hear the rest of the story? I didn't finish telling you about the day Joseph was born."

It was my turn to smile, not just because this stupid manager looked every bit the asshole she was but because Denise never once looked in water to see me. Yet, she knew who I was.

"You bet I did."

I don't know why I hide these moments from my fellow Walruses. I guess I would hate for them to know that these people get to me more than I want to admit. I don't want to care for them. I want to get in and get out and never give any of them a second thought, but I find myself with someone like Denise who just needs someone to listen to her for a minute and let her know that her life matters. At that moment, she only had me.

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It was rare that Grace showed such compassion to a transcorporean, but despite ending her story with her exit from Denise's body, they knew she had done more after the experience. Part of her pancakes had gone untouched and the experience had shaken her a bit more than she wanted to admit. She tended to hold back from them sometimes and none of them ever pressed her to tell them more. They understood that sometimes an experience could leave its scars.

Then there was Hope and Carlos. "Girl, why do you always end up with these people with body problems," Grace said as she tried to deflect attention from herself. She hated ending with her own story. "You always end up with someone in pain or scarred. I hope he left that man beating on him and calling him all kinds of racist shit."

"As far as I know they aren't together right now. I don't know if Paul's still in jail, but I think Carlos got out of the hospital a couple of days ago. One of his activist friends took him in so he wouldn't have to go back to that place. I just don't know what's going to happen when Paul gets back to him though. You can't make him leave if he doesn't want to."

"Nah," Faith said. "That's just how it is. You can only do so much for some folks then leave them to make up their own minds. I don't understand it either, but I'm actually glad for that."

"Well, you did try to talk that man into getting some help, too," Charity said. "How can you go through your life like that?"

"It's easier than you think when you honestly believe you don't have a choice," Hope said. "I know where he's coming from. Damn shame, but it happens."

"Yeah," Grace agreed. "At least you got to help that girl though, Charity. I hated high school, too, but I wish I had somebody who was like me who would talk to me. Hell, I just ended up watching *The Neverending Story* all the damn time wondering why I never got my fucking luck dragon."

Grace's words had the desired effect as the weight began to lift from the four of them. They had had an overload of heavy stuff this time around and they all knew they would need to collect themselves a moment. Davy refilled their drinks before again making himself busy so that he did not appear to be eavesdropping. They sometimes took a moment to enjoy their own lives rather than the lives of others foisted upon them. It was late but neither of them wanted to go home to be alone until the next time they felt the calling. Davy also hoped they would stay for a while. His shift would not end until dawn and he wanted to hear more of those stories about the people they invaded with their minds.