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Blood Tears

by

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Howard sat at his desk carefully studying the envelope. The desk had been given to him as an afterthought by his great-aunt, after the death of his father. He had learned to write at this desk, first laboring for hours at his papers in high school, then his old Olympia typewriter in college, and now his Mac Notebook as a published novelist. There was nothing special about this desk; the wood was an old, waxy-feeling cherry, complete with deeply etched marks and an area where the finish had been removed, courtesy of his old college roommate's need for an ironing board. His wife had begged him to have it refinished, but the sheer character of this piece of furniture reminded him of his father's badly pock-marked face, and he wouldn't hear of it. He ran his finger along one of the engraved lines, and glanced again at the envelope in his pudgy, red fingers. She had gone so far as to wax seal the enclosure, and he could smell her perfume on it, but not the Chanel #5 she used to wear. He traced the purple, uneven wax circle, with the imprinted "L," for Lisa, and slid his fingernail beneath it, gently prying it upward. He actually wanted to rip the damned thing up and not read it at all, but he knew as well as she had when she wrote the letter that he possessed the self-control of a toddler, and therefore had no chance of tearing it to shreds and casting it aside.

He always read her work, although he thought her tawdry romance novels abhorrent, and would rather spend the day in the "punishment chair" that seem to exist in all women's dressing rooms for husbands who had not the sense to find a way out of clothes shopping with their wives. He remembered the last time she had handed him her finished piece, a stack of papers dripping with detailed descriptions of characters "making love" on the beach beneath a sunset, or under the moon with silvery light, or in whatever cliché location she chose to place them. He would smile as though he was one of her biggest fans: an overweight forty-year-old housewife, wearing a worn tee-shirt with some screen-printed advertisement for a family reunion that had occurred ten years prior, and sweatpants that made any woman's rear resemble an elephant's. He would then run off to his study, locking the door behind him, as if he needed total privacy to savor her newest installment of "passion." In actuality, what he really needed was to open a bottle or two of scotch and drink like an Irishman on St. Patty's Day, just to make it through the experience. He sighed and carefully laid the now opened envelope down. He had to rub his

eyes again.

The optometrist had gasped audibly when she had seen him three days ago, and her mousy, appalled response of “Oh my” had amused him to no end; his eyes had literally been swollen shut, and were bruised from his constant, abrasive grinding into them with his meaty fists, but the blood tears had really been the driving force for the visit. The swelling had subsided today, but he still felt as though someone was slowly digging into his pupils with a toothpick. He had been perfectly alright with not prying his sore eyes open, as it gave him a viable excuse to blow off his editor, Ray, for a little while longer. Their last conversation had been unpleasant, to say the least. He was six weeks past his deadline for the last two chapters of his book, but he had just acquired some kind of mental constipation, and the sound of furiously clicking keyboard keys hadn’t resounded at this desk in weeks. He had never experienced anything quite like this before. In college, he had arrived home to his tiny, roach infested apartment from his father’s funeral, and found that he had some difficulty writing, but that was nothing a little hash couldn’t fix, and he had stayed high for three days until he had finished his first published short story. Even the death of his father hadn’t shaken him as badly as opening the door to his bedroom, and seeing his wife wrapped in the arms of another man.

She hadn’t even looked his way at first. He had stood in the doorway, frozen in mid-stride, unable to close his eyes or move his head or scream “Stop!” He had at first thought she was the victim of rape, until he had seen her run her fingers through his hair, tracing delicate lines down his muscular back, then suddenly gripping his skin, fingernails unsheathed. She had arched her back sharply, and from her sweet mouth flowed the toxicity of his name. Robert. Well, more like ohmygodRobertIloveyou, but none the less, Robert. Robert the thief. Robert-who-stole-my-house-and-sleeps-in-my-bed-with-my-wife-and-drinks-his-morning-coffee-from-my-favorite-coffee-cup. She had looked over at Howard with not even a hint of surprise on her face, and deftly slid her lithe body out from beneath him, not even bothering to cover her nudity as she stormed toward him. “Howard don’t just stand there blubbering! Get out!” Her still perky breasts had bounced gently as she placed her hand on his chest, giving him a firm push backward though the threshold, closing the door quickly in his face. He had felt the breeze of her final

action, and still, it did not wake him out of his shocked stupor. That was the first time he had rubbed his eyes.

In the weeks following, he had spent hours tearing at his raw lids, trying desperately to remove the vision that seemed tattooed to his corneas. Every time it appeared, there was more and more detail attached: her smooth, porcelain-white legs wrapped around Robert's darkly tanned body, the intense look on his face as he pounded steadily into another man's wife, the clear, muscular cut of his arms as he held his body above hers, her patterned breath increasing to a quick pant, and Howard's heart being ripped out through his eye sockets, dragging his guts along with it.

He had managed to write several pages of gruesome deaths for Robert. Thus far, "Robert the Thief" had been mutilated by a cotton gin, decapitated by a psychotic twelve-year-old, drowned in a swimming pool after first breaking his neck on the diving board so that he could experience every last moment, down to the vomiting that occurs immediately before a watery death. Robert had bled to death while trapped under a car, been flattened by a tank in Iraq, and had his eyes plucked out by a crow in a desert in Arizona somewhere. The desert scene was especially vivid because Howard's eyes felt very much like that now. He had mentioned an idea to Ray about writing a book solely focused on deaths for Robert, in a mostly joking manner, but his old college buddy was far from impressed. There had been a long sigh on the other end of the old beige rotary telephone, then, "Howard, really man, I'm telling you this for your own good, but you need to get out of that shit-shack you call a house, and I mean really get out, like not to the nearest McDonalds, and breathe the air. Go for a walk or something. You have really put out some good work, but there are a lot of eager up-and-coming authors, younger writers, and you'll be left in the dust. Get some fresh air, lose some weight, and finish the goddamned story, or you're gonna have a real problem on your hands, man. Okay?" There had been a sharp click, and the dial tone had signaled the end of that conversation.

He placed the envelope between the third and fourth rows of keys on his Mac, leaning it against the screen, so that the address glared up at him, emphasizing the difference in locale between husband and wife. He took a deep breath to hold back the salty tears that would inevitably rip through his optic nerves

like lighting through the bark of an old dead tree, landing him on the floor in agony.

The blood tears had been easier, with the exception of the sheer terror that had erupted from him as he saw the first drop of blood on the spacebar, while writing a new death for Robert-the-asshole-who-is-about-to-be-electrocuted-by-a-light-pole-through-the-roof-of-his-sporty-forest-green-Camaro-on-my-computer-screen. He had jumped up, knocking his fleshy knee against the desk leading to an altogether different kind of pain, gently searching his face with fingertips for the open wound. He had considered that Robert had just shot him in the head, and he had managed to live through it, until he found the trail of blood from his left eye to his thin upper lip. Blood tears were smooth against his eyes, blocking out the harsh, artificial lamp light momentarily until he blinked them away, like windshield wipers to mud. He wondered if they could also block out the images he yearned so badly to forget.

The letter taunted him, and he reached over to grab the receiver of the old rotary phone that both his wife and Ray had tried desperately to force him to upgrade. He hadn't want a cell phone, and although he had received one as a Christmas present, it sat in its original packaging, buried somewhere beneath the smaller clothes that used to fit him in the floor of his closet. He quickly dialed her Seattle number and began counting the rings. She was laughing when she answered the phone, but he could hear the smile slide from her face when she heard his voice.

"How are you, Howard?"

He took a short breath, then forced his mouth into a grin.

"Never better, sweetheart. I was just wondering if you had put the house on the market yet."

She paused before answering, "Howard, I'm not selling the house. I love it here. I told you that before. When are you sending the divorce papers? I thought you said that they would be in the mail this week sometime."

He struggled to regain some sense of calm. He hated that word. Divorce. It sounded so final.

"Oh, you haven't received them? Hmmm, (long pause) well, I know they were sent. I'll e-mail the lawyer and ask him what's up. I have to get going, now. Time to send Ray my new book."

Her voice sounded sickly sweet, like syrup in his ear, "You finished it? Howard, that's wonderful for you!"

Ray called me a couple of weeks ago and sounded really worried. I am so glad to hear that you are feeling better.”

*That bitch.*

“Well, Lisa, like I said, gotta run, super busy over here in old Bama. How is Bobby? Is he enjoying our spa bath? How about the deck I built for our anniversary two years ago? Is he tanning on it? Oh, I do so hope he’s enjoying our house.”

A long sigh. That seemed to be the standard reaction lately. “Howard, I’m not selling the house. Send the papers. Goodbye.”

She hadn’t even asked about the letter. He thought maybe that she would, and then he wouldn’t have to open it and read whatever she found so necessary to send through the mail. Now, at least, he could count out the possibility that she was begging him to return home. He removed the letter from the keyboard and stared at the blank white Word document behind it. It felt like time for him to write another gruesome end to “Robert-who-is-probably-comforting-my-wife-right-now-with-his-muscular-arms-that-should-be-ripped-off-with-a-mideival-torture-device-on-this-empty-Word-document.” He began to type.

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Howard held the two pairs of sunglasses up to the lamp on his desk, comparing the tint in the lenses. He would need the darker, for he was planning an outing. He wasn’t sure where he was going, but Ray had been correct in his assessment of Howard’s hermitic behavior. He walked across the pavement, wincing at the high sun. He chuckled to himself, envisioning what he must have looked like to the poor cabby who had arrived to take him to the optometrist several days ago. He had stumbled out of the doorway, one arm out in front of him, the other up to his face, two fingers holding one eye open, which rolled back to show the white in response to the sun. He probably had dried trails of blood on his face from the blood tears and his eyes were encircled with black for a good half inch around the orbits. He remembered hearing the automatic locks click several times, as if the Indian taxi driver couldn’t decide whether he really wanted this fare. Howard had hoped that the last click meant “unlock,” and was correct.

The cabby looked rather shaken throughout the entire ride, and had driven slowly away after dropping

him at his destination, like a man backing slowly away from a gun.

When he stopped at his '85 Subaru, yet another item Lisa had tried to convince him to upgrade, he wiggled the key into the lock, pulling back slightly and angling the key to the left. Success. Good ole Suzy let him in on the first try, which was more than he could say for most women, not that he had really put any effort into dating recently. He started driving, still unsure of the destination. Suzy would take him anywhere he wanted to go.

He drove, staring at white lines, yellow lines, double lines, not registering any place in particular. He happened to look at the gas gauge. It was time to stop. At last, a destination. He pulled into a GasStop and marveled at the age of the building. In any other city, he would have expected it to be closed down, perhaps with the last price still attached to the sign: \$1.02 and some fraction, but this one was indeed open. Mobile, Alabama was full of surprises: indiscernible accents, Aquanet, southern fried parts of animals that he could not identify, and gas stations that could be considered prehistoric. Attached to the GasStop was a pawn shop. What a strange marriage, not unlike that of a gas station attached to a fireworks store: a ready-made bomb.

He gassed Suzy and stood beside her, studying the pawn shop. "Pawn Yur Wares" was advertised on the window, and the displaced shop accepted gold, silver, and TVs, apparently. He moved Suzy to a parking place that was close enough for him to study the accompanying shop, without being obviously interested. He wondered what, exactly, one might find in there. Was it like an antique shop? He birthed his weighted body out of Suzy and stood at the corner of the building. He felt like a mongoose, slinking around the corner this way. He hoisted his pants up, like a child would his bathing suit before a jump off of a huge cliff side into water; he decided that he would go inside.

The bell on the door startled him, and he turned fast to leave. The voice stopped him. "Let me guess. You're here for a gun."

"I'm sorry, what?" Howard responded, realizing that for the first time in his life, he had pronounced the word "what" correctly, emphasizing the w-h sound in response to the thick, southern dialect.

"You know, a gun...the thing you shoot people with." Howard realized that he had meant "gun," not

“goo-un,” as he had pronounced it, simultaneously registering that the man clad in nothing but overalls had said “shoot people with,” and not “hunt game with.” He stood there for a moment before responding, “Why, *yes*, that was exactly what I was here for. However did you guess?” To the left of the store sat rows of televisions, some with rabbit-ears and some flat screens. There were glass cases of jewelry and watches and a superabundance of musical instruments. Still perusing the strange collection of wares, he wondered whether this was a graveyard for failed or starving musicians. His swollen eyes browsed the long line of shotguns against the left wall of the store. The overall man chuckled a little hesitantly, then proceeded to show Howard a plethora of firearms, from pistol to shotgun, and the assortment of ammunition required. A shotgun that would take the side off of a barn, the handgun that would leave a man unrecognizable to his mother, and the shotgun for hunting animal with scatter-pellets that could target all of the important parts of some unsuspecting furry creature. He settled on a handgun, used for close-range damage and the 22 caliber bullets it would use. As he left the store, no longer startled by the bell attached to the door, he heard the man state, “I would shoot the bastard that did that to my az too.”

Howard had nearly reached the car before he realized that “az” translated not to “ass,” but to “eyes.” He climbed into Suzy, smiling at the new ending to Robert’s life that had come about by the miscommunication that had just occurred between him and the store owner. Robert would now be gang-raped by a pack of werewolves, and slowly devoured in a bloody, screaming mess. He looked across the street and decided to stop at his favorite fast-food joint, MacDonald’s, which was conveniently located across the street. He waited patiently at the second window, marveling at the fact that the four-armed “Grimace” character he remembered as a child had been replaced with a nicer, gentler two-armed taste bud creature.

As the wincing, pimple-faced teenager handed him the bag containing a double cheeseburger and fries, he smiled. The kid seemed to be attempting some kind of Go-go-gadget move, reaching as far out the window as possible, while pulling his body as far away from Howard as possible. His eyes must have looked really bad again; the kid’s disgust was a little too obvious. He drove forward a couple of feet so as not to block the window and dug into the brown bag of sin. Grasping the double cheeseburger in its



familiar yellow paper wrapping, he lifted it in the air. “Here’s to you Ray, you bastard.” He opened the wrapper gently, like a newborn baby from his blanket, but bit into the burger ravenously. He was ready to go home. He had a job to do, and it would take some planning.

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She gently touched a soft, pink tongue to his lips, cleaning the drop of honey that rested there. He thought her lips tasted sweeter than any honey, or sugar, or any substance known to man. She stood, backing up in front of him, turning in little circles, dancing to the inaudible music of the forest. She was twenty, and free, and careless. She had no deadlines or worries. She danced before him, occasionally bending low to pick a weed or two, throwing them in his direction, then twirling again, making her patched, flowing dress catch the wind, then stopping, so he could see the perfect lines of her long legs.

He rubbed his swollen stomach, filled by the apple slices she had delicately fed him from her own teeth, like a mother bird. He was of a thin frame, the kind that dictated that he would be a writer bent over at a desk, or a scientist with large safety glasses, or a mathematician at a board, working out impossible problems. He had never been muscular, nor would he ever be, but he cared not, as long as she always traced her fingernails over his ribs while they lay naked in the grass near the stream by his parent’s house.

He had never made love as he had with her, feeling every curve of her soft body; worshipping her every movement as though she were a goddess, obeying every soft gasp that escaped her luscious lips. But these moments, watching her dance with no barriers, no boundaries like he had, these moments told him that this was the woman he would marry. These moments in time were perfection in motion.

There was a strange sound, and he struggled to identify it. As realization hit him, he desperately tried to ignore this intruding noise, this interloper in his moment of perfection. The fucking phone. She disappeared and was replaced by a white wall. Who would have the audacity to call and steal his one memory of euphoria?

“What?” he whispered as he placed the earpiece to his head.

“How’s the story? Did I wake you? Good. I’m glad I did. They’re gonna drop you, man. I’m not kidding, Howie. That shit better be on its way, man. It better be sealed in a manila envelope with my name on it

and appropriate postage to get it here. I have my name on the line, too, man. Howard?”

“It’s on its way, Ray, I swear it. I have a few finishing touches. That’s all. Blood and guts details, k? Ray, what time is it?”

“Time for you to get your ass moving, man. Time to avoid bankruptcy, man.”

“It’s on its way. No worries, Ray. Trust me. I’ll have it in the mail by midnight. Chill, ok?”

“Chill nothing, man. Get it done.” Click.

That was it. A moment of beauty and apples and dancing and love ruined by a bastard with a deadline. He sighed and rolled over. The white envelope stared at him, begging to be torn open and devoured with hungry, desperate eyes. Swollen, black, blood shedding eyes.

Next to the envelope lay the pistol. The pistol for which he had no official title. It was slightly amusing to him that he now owned a hand gun, and could not have even said the name of the damned thing, because he had a habit of naming most inanimate objects. All Howard knew was that if he shot Robert-who-should-have-had-some-sticky-bomb-type-apparatus-detonated-in-his-ass, in the face, he would die. Would Lisa come to visit him in his lonely prison cell? Would she cry tears of guilt and remorse for what she had caused? Would she stand next to Robert-who-stole-the-gentle-woman-of-the-best-dreams-he-could-ever-hope-to-have’s grave, wearing some impossibly amazing black dress, shedding tears of loss for the subject of every stupid love scene she had ever written? Would she even care for either of them, or upgrade to a new man altogether? He thought not, judging from the way she had held onto “Robert the Thief” while he made sweet love to her. Robert, she would miss. Robert, she would mourn for. Howard, she would give that ridiculous, pity-filled look for, like one does a five-year-old who accidentally took the life of his own mother.

He climbed out of the bed, grabbing the nearly empty bottle of Dewar’s from the floor nearby. He stumbled to his scarred desk and sat heavily in his cushioned computer chair. He thought it was a nice game to guess whether he was actually hung over or still drunk from the night previous, before he actually peeled himself from his covers. Today, he could not tell the difference. He opened the screen of his Mac and pressed the power button.

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Howard should have felt at home in his cubicle of action: he had his computer, a freshly poured tumbler of scotch, a handgun for which he had no name, and an envelope which he refused to open. He typed several pages of climax, and then pressed the delete key, watching as each newly written paragraph disappeared, letter by letter. He rewrote, scrambling through his brain, looking for the perfect ending, but it would not come. He tried again and again to finish the story. Just two chapters left, and they could be short, if he could just find the words. He glanced at the pistol at his left. He looked to his right side at the unread letter. Maybe reading it would help him write. Terror gripped him as he fingered the opened envelope. He unsheathed the neatly folded letter, noting the heavy paper. He imagined Lisa searching through rows and rows of white paper until she found the perfect one on which to write this abomination. The paper was so thick that he couldn't read the dark, black ink through the back of it. He pulled open the bottom fold, making the executive decision to skip most of the bullshit, and really get to the meat of the matter. He struggled to focus his eyes, as he had been seeing double since his first glass of scotch. He began to read:

Yet! I beg thee feign bitter silence for but a moment more, as this brutal contention has unchained a Muse. A dynamism personified that pushes my pen with such awful fortitude, that omission cannot flow alongside these confessions. Her absence would cleave this vivacious desire to unleash an unbound barrage of both healing and damaging manuscript that may just be my salvation.

As my heart, that treacherous beating organ, longs for relief from our estrangement, I fear that my liberated hand and thought would suffer, even knowing the consequences of such an entreaty. If thine own hand lagged with the burden of unwritten acervation, wouldst thou still my tongue, if the mere cessation of its tempered tenderness granted harmony to your very quintessence?

I beg thee, gift muteness, and I shall return candor in ink, much in favor to the exaltation of the companion love I so ardently yearn for."

His blood boiled, burning a trail of madness through his veins. She could write better because he didn't speak to her? She begged silence? Was she drunk when she wrote it? She must have been. Who uses

words like these anyway: “I beg thee, gift muteness?” The pretentious bitch. She wanted silence? Well, fuck her! Silence, she would not have. He would crush her muse as a cockroach under his heels.

He tore the letter clean down the center, not bothering to read the beginning, or middle, or any other piece of this stupid shit. Was this a writing exercise for her? He jerked the earpiece of the phone up to his head, jamming it against his ear, simultaneously and mindlessly dialing his former home number. One ring...two...three...” Hello?”

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Howard’s world stopped. He couldn’t breathe, let alone answer this foreign salutation. This deep, heavily accented voice on the other line was not Lisa. He considered that she had a horrible cold, maybe even H1N1, but the accent? He slammed the phone down, missing the receiver. He attempted several more times until he gave up, first throwing the earpiece across the room, then, unsatisfied with its rebound, jerked the entire phone from the wall. He threw it with a rage he had never experienced. Acid surged through his nerves, giving him a turrets-like twitch in his burning eyes.

That bastard had the balls to answer his phone? The phone number that he and his wife had listed as “Howard and Lisa Wise” in the phonebook? There was no death good enough for Robert. He could die in a fire or an explosion or in a plane crash or by vampires sucking his brains from his ears. There was no terror he could write or pain he could cause that would be fitting. Howard cleared the old writing desk with his arm, wishing that the sound of the glass, the computer, and the pistol made a more satisfying sound as it hit the floor. The pistol. His unnamed handgun. He could drive the thousands of miles to Seattle to hunt him down, but he was suddenly struck by a strange feeling of calm.

Howard picked up the handgun. Sam, he thought. Sam is his name. He felt the weight of this strange silver contraption in his hand. He pointed it in his direction, peering curiously down the barrel into the cylindrical darkness. He smelled the oil from the strange store owner’s care of the piece. He was struck by the odd notion to taste the metal. He stuck out his tongue, stretching toward his weapon, feeling the cold hardness in his hand. He pulled it away sharply, placing it definitively on the desk. This old desk. He sat, wondering if this was the also the last movement his father had made.

He was suddenly very tired; his eyes first burned with salty tears, then were soothed with smooth, warm, creamy liquid. The blood tears. He wondered how many times he had rubbed his eyes today. Had it been such a long time since Ray's rude awakening? He laid his heavy, worn body onto the cheap dollar-store comforter covering the thrift store single bed he had purchased after his move from Seattle. He had chosen Alabama not because of the distance, but really because he knew no one here. "Sam" still in his hand, he arranged his body, back flat, head exactly in the middle of the deflated pillow. He closed his eyes and thought of Lisa, twirling in circles before him, back when she had loved him with some kind of amazing, smothering, nurturing love. He thought of the look in her tearful eyes as he proposed with a simple, cheap, gold band. He thought of the feel of her lips pressed to his as he told her the news of his first published short story; the kiss that had healed the pain of his father's unexpected death.

He tried to imagine the weight of her body next to his in the bed, as he struggled to stop his alien hand from bringing this metal tool to his face. A drop of sweat trailed down from his forehead, gliding down to the fat rolls of his neck. His body shook uncontrollably. He opened his mouth and placed the cold metal inside. The feel of the pistol clicking against his teeth was too much to handle, and he folded his lips over his teeth to stop the awful noise. He was terrified that if he did indeed pull the trigger, he would just blow a hole in the side of his cheek because of his uncontrollable tremors. He breathed deeply to calm his nerves. The barrel pressed hard against the ridges of the roof of his mouth. Howard tried to imagine something other than Robert enjoying his wife's body, his slow movement against her delicate frame. The impenetrable mirage would not leave his mind. He thought of his father in his last moments of life. His father had writhed and kicked until the ceiling fan had dropped six inches and the struggling had finally ended. He wondered how long that had actually taken, the end of the pain, but it must have seemed like an eternity.

Howard closed his eyes, and a single red tear down his cheek wrote the last line he would ever produce.

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Lisa traced circles in Robert's chest hair. She had climaxed, but no satisfaction came from the

experience. She was disturbed by his mention of Howard's call. She no longer cared for Howard, exactly, but she did want him to be happy; well, she wanted him to be happy without her. She traced the words "do you know?" into his chest, as he breathed heavily in sleep. It was safe to mark such an unkind sentence in his slumber, but not speak so into his deep brown eyes. It was more upsetting to know that he may not care about her inner thoughts, than to try to impress upon him her displeasure. She tried to slow her breathing, rolling over, with a loud sigh in the dark. She hoped he would wake and ask her anything...ask her absolutely anything relevant, but she knew there would be nothing. She wanted more wine. She had needed more and more to satiate her sadness since the separation. She wanted anything that would take away the fact that Howard had called earlier, and she hadn't been the one that answered. She had hoped that Howard would never hear Robert's voice. She knew that at some point they would've met each other, but she didn't plan it this way. She had hoped to hold onto this secret just a while longer, but it now seemed a public affair. She closed her eyes and wished for sleep.

The phone rang at 4:08am. She answered it out of reflex, secretly hoping that it was Howard, but that was an afterthought to the female voice on the line. She got up and ordered the first ticket to Alabama. She dialed a number and shared the news.

Robert had yelled at her during her hurried scavenging for what she would need for this trip. He thought she should stay and leave Howard alone in his misery, but she could not bring herself to abandon him. She concentrated on gathering her things, ignoring Robert's sharp words. She was sure that she hadn't managed to pack everything that she might want, but it wasn't like twenty years ago, when she would have to go without blush on her all too pale cheeks; she wouldn't have to suffer without; she could buy what she needed when she arrived, and this was no time to be worried about her image, even if the press did get the news.

She hated the ordeal through security, but not as much as Howard had. He was a smoker, and she had no need to leave for a cigarette and return, rushing to catch a flight. She just felt violated as they moved through the detectors, stopping for every little thing that was on the unacceptable items list. He had quit smoking, but they had taken a lot of flights before they had both become published. She would

have followed him anywhere, whether he would have had time for her or not.

She sat on the plane, comforted by the cold, artificial air. She liked to look out of the window until they reached the clouds, when there was nothing to look at but a white baseline. She could think during that time, then enjoy when a different lighted city appeared before her, wishing that she could stay afloat above the scene forever.

When the lights were extinguished, silent tears fell from her eyes. She thought of all the times she had called and been unanswered. Even with the gift of a cell phone, he had cared not to pick up: he was “busy.” She remembered all of the times he had not held her: “he just didn’t feel like it.” Every love scene from every one of her books had been an unanswered wish. She handed him her manuscripts, hoping that he would see what lay inside: her unanswered desires, but none of them were ever made real. She wasn’t searching for another. She hadn’t cared when he had gotten bald and fat like the lonely men she saw so often, shopping solitary in the grocery store. She had never wanted anything as much as she wanted his love and affection, but it had never arrived.

She met him at a local artist’s meeting and could not look him in the eyes for fear that she would fall in love. His crystal-blue eyes reminded her of ice, and they had never changed, even with age. She had avoided his eyes when he caught her cheating; they would have burned her soul in a fiery pit of shame.

Robert had arrived, and she was glad for it; she felt on the brink of emotional death until the dark, foreign man had told her how absolutely beautiful she was. Robert could never read her work with full understanding, but he could hold her until the emptiness subsided. He could make love to her, tearing the pain from her soul, giving her a fantasy escape by making her forget the neglect Howard had offered her, and now, Howard would seek to steal it away. His careless, impulsive actions would cause her to hop on a plane and heal whatever damage she had done, even if she had only intended to salve her own wounds, inflicted by him.

When the city appeared below her, she opened her mouth with child-like awe. What beauty lay beneath her in the matchbox cars and Christmas lights surrounding the tall buildings? She wondered what

this place held for her, but already had an answer to this question. Again, the reticent tears fell.

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What the fuck just happened? was the first thought in Howard's mind. Anguish surged through his mouth, but the silence did not come. He sat straight up in the bed, still disoriented from the sound of a gun going off in his mouth. His teeth vibrated with agony. He had to look in the mirror, if only to satisfy his curiosity. He jerkily moved toward his motel-like reflection in the bathroom, eyes wider than they had been in weeks. A large, bacony-smelling hole was apparent in his cheek, and he opened his mouth to allow copper-tasting blood and teeth to fall into the sink. These were pieces of teeth, he thought, as he studied the nastiness from his mouth. He gazed into the mirror, dizzy from the pain, and laughed, gurgling in the back of his throat from his inability to swallow. This was no ordinary laugh; this was the laugh of a man that had just shot himself in the face, with the full intention of death and had not succeeded. He looked at the gaping hole in the left side of his face, and thought, This is definitely gonna leave one hell of a bruise.

Howard stumbled into the bedroom, tripping over all that he had swept from the desk, landing on his knees. At least he was at least eye level to the old desk, but where was the phone? Howard sighed with gentle aggravation at his own silly impulses. Here's the plan, Howard. Find the fucking phone. Find the fucking cord and reattach it to the jack in the wall. Dial the fucking number. Ready set go... He gently turned his still resounding cranium to the left, noting the red trail of goo dripping from the side of his face onto his leg and onto the dirty carpet beneath it. There was the beige phone in several pieces. He was not, under any circumstances, going to hook up that cell phone and dial out. That was most definitely not happening, he thought to himself. He crawled to the shattered rotary, which currently held some semblance to his jaw, by first moving one hand, then the opposite leg, and the other hand slowly, to avoid increasing the terrific misery in his face. He was really beginning to regret his pawn shop purchase.

He reached the phone and traced the cord to its end. Feeling the jack between his thick fingers, he again crawled to the wall. At least the jack had come out in one piece, although he was not sure if the phone would actually work once he had plugged it in. He lifted the earpiece to his right side and listened.



Panic gripped him as the absence of dial tone struck him. He pushed the handset onto the receiver, and picked up again, desperate for salvation. Dial tone. He shakily dialed the number, jamming his fat fingers into the holes and turning the dial. The operator answered and he was again struck with sick irony: he could not possibly communicate with half of his face missing. She asked for the address, and Howard tried earnestly to give it, but she couldn't understand him. There had to be a better way. He pressed a shaky hand to his wound, and spoke as slowly as he could, enunciating every single syllable. Someone was on the way. He leaned against the wall, gasping, and rotating his head forward to drain the red liquid from his shattered mouth. He finally stood and walked toward the sound of the blaring horn outside.

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Kishore pulled into the shabby apartment complex in search of his next fare. This place seemed familiar, but he wasn't sure until he pulled in front of the building from which his customer would emerge. When the large man stumbled toward his car, Kishore felt as if he had been propelled into an alternate universe, then jerked back out by the nape of his neck. "What is up with this guy? Geez..." he muttered.

The Americanized Indian rarely remembered his calls; he just drove, sinking back into his mind where his beautiful wife still lived, preparing fabulous meals, singing the most enchanting of songs, and blessing his children's souls with each of her kisses. This job paid the bills, and that was all that mattered at the end of the day. This, however, was a man he had difficulty forgetting.

The first he had seen of this disastrous nightmare had involved what he had first taken as a stumbling drunk, desperately trying to make his way home, until he had seen his eyes, or rather, where they were supposed to be. This guy seemed to ooze nastiness from his pores, maybe even his soul, but most definitely and literally from his eyes. Kishore was not a religious man, but he had prayed after delivering his passenger to the eye doctor, and he had taken the next couple of days off. Now, the fat, balding man was lurching toward the cab, a white and red towel bound to his face, leaving only an area for his bulging, black optics.

Kishore's foot trembled uneasily on the pedal, again trying to quickly determine whether to

retrieve his fare or drive to the warmth and comfort of his home. He slid his hand down the side panel of the door, slowly enough to feel the bumpy, brail-like texture of the hard plastic, and sighed heavily. He unlocked the door and waited.

\*

Lisa's cab pulled up to the hospital. She hadn't arranged for a hotel room yet and would have to carry her bag with her to Howard's room. Her head throbbed with the feeling of a college frat party hangover, but she propelled herself through the automatic sliding doors of the front entrance until she reached the elevator. She pressed the up arrow several times, focusing on the changing numbers on the screen above her. When she emerged onto the floor, she walked slowly and deliberately to his room number, and inhaled deeply. She felt as if she were stepping into the house of the last surviving member of the human race after some kind of nuclear apocalypse; she just wasn't sure what to expect, but she had a feeling that this would be one of the most unpleasant experiences of her life.

She stepped forward and looked toward the bed where her husband lay. She was at first confused, then sickened as her neural ganglia tried desperately to send impulse after impulse to her legs, instructing them to turn and run at a lightening rate of speed. Instead, her airplane dinner seemed to receive the message. She felt her mouth flood with saliva and her stomach squeezed hard. Her body jerked forward slightly, and she attempted to swallow, but again her stomach lurched. The voice in her head screamed, "WHAT HAPPENED TO HIS EYES? OHGOD!OHGOD!OHGOD...HIS BEAUTIFUL BLUE EYES? WHERE ARE THEY???" She could no longer hold back the chicken and broccoli she had eaten on the flight and dashed for the trashcan. She felt as if everything she had ingested for the last six months had just re-passed through her lips. As she stood up, it occurred to her that there was really no lady-like way to vomit, especially with the volume that had just been released from her tiny body. She looked at Howard again, and words failed her.

The nurse with the smiley face scrubs entered the room briskly, carrying a cool breeze behind her. "Would you like to speak to the doctor? Oh! Are you alright? You look ill...Can I get you something?" "No, I think I would like to speak to the um, doctor, um, if that's possible," she stammered, struggling to

regain some semblance of sanity.

“I’ll be right back with him, k?,” and she turned quickly to leave.

“Wait!” she said, a little too forcibly. “May I walk with you, please?”

The nurse motioned for Lisa to follow, and she commanded her posture to remain calm, as nothing internally seemed to have that capacity, at this moment.

The doctor, a generic-looking young man in his forties, explained very gently that Howard had obviously intended to die, yet had missed, and the 22 caliber short had ricocheted throughout his mouth like a pinball on a hot run, shattering his maxilla and mandible in several places, and finally exiting through his left cheek. His well-wired jaw was missing quite a few teeth, and had massive burns throughout his throat, but was “a very lucky man.” Lisa had heard that phrase before in reference to his pretty wife, mostly at cocktail parties, as he dragged her around the room to meet people on whom she would never again lay eyes. She imagined that this was not what the doctor had intended to indicate, then physically shook her head in hopes of regaining cohesive thought. The young physician admitted that he wasn’t quite sure what to make of Howard’s eyes and had actually been under the impression that the bullet had caused the damage until he had the opportunity to take a closer look. “Looks self inflicted, but I’m not sure how one would go about causing that kind of wound...it’s a mystery, I guess. I mean, the lids are nearly torn clean off, and that infection is bad, and I mean bad.” Lisa searched to quiet her empty stomach’s mutiny once again, and quietly cleared her throat.

The doctor began to suggest a list of locations, for which Lisa had options of sending her husband, although at first, she had thought that he was listing hotels in the neighborhood, as she was still attempting to maneuver her brain out of the harsh emotional quicksand in which it seemed to be lodged. The whole process reminded her of the illustration she had seen in a children’s book of Rabbit and Piglet tugging Pooh’s arms to remove him from the doorway of his house after he had eaten too much honey. She decided that she might need a snack (or a morphine drip) before she returned to his room, and the nurse pointed her toward the cafeteria, grasping her arm as if she were a senile old lady asking for directions to a location just across the street. She began to walk, trying to beat the haze that felt

determined to swallow her, and began searching her purse for silver change.

\*

Howard felt a cold, smooth hand wind around his fingers. He lay still, imagining the guilt-ridden look on his beautiful wife's face, allowing his hand to bask in the glory of her soft touch. He felt the gentle angel's lips brush his forehead, and felt the warmth of her breath, like petals against his aching skin. She parted her lips and whispered, "Howard...why?"

Howard's brain waves flat lined momentarily. The morphine was obviously causing auditory hallucinations, for that was most definitely not Lisa's voice. He tried to steady his galloping heart and waited for her to speak again. "Howard?" He again questioned the dosage he must be receiving, for it could not be that he had just heard his mother's voice directly over his ear. Who would have called her and for what sick form of torture could she be sitting, right here in this very room, where he was trapped in a hospital bed with no way to clearly communicate through his wired mouth? "Howard, after what your father did...and you...how could you do this to me?"

Howard suddenly wished for death much more than he had earlier when he had pulled the trigger, releasing a bullet into the back of his mouth, and thought it could be considered a mercy killing by anyone who had encountered the misfortunate experience of one of his mother's guilt trips. He willed his heart to stop beating, his kidneys to shut down, his brain to cease operating, or Dr. Kevorkian to enter his room, but none of these came to fruition. He tried to hold his breath but was fully aware that he would pass out before he died, probably adding to his mother's list of reasons why he should come live with her. "You could've called, Howard. You could have come to stay with me." He curled his fingers and his toes, trying to remove his hand from the demon's talons, but she held his hand more firmly, and every movement was excruciating. He slowly reached toward his chest with the other hand, searching for the morphine button, but she deftly moved it from his reach, informing him that he "had probably had all he needed of that stuff."

"I had a friend whose cousin's son was in a car accident, and he got addicted to that stuff in just under five days. Consider that I am saving your life, Howard, because the life of an addict is much too

hard.” The life of her son also seemed to be pretty miserable at the moment, he thought, as he tried again to remove his hand from her grip. She squeezed tighter and continued: “Had I known that things were this bad for you, I would have come to stay with you, even, had you just called, but no sir! You had to be just like your father. Just take the easy way out, he did, leaving us behind as if we never mattered to him.” Her voice began to quiver, and he wished for every death he had ever granted Robert. “You could’ve called Howard, or written, but you didn’t. Just left your poor old mom to get a call from Lisa in the middle of the night telling me that you tried to blow your head off.”

Lisa! Lisa? Lisa. He was going to strangle her. He was going to disembowel her and hang her by her entrails. He was going to mastermind the blueprints for some sort of torture device that would sicken even Vlad the Impaler, and build it with his own two hands. How could she have called his mother? She didn’t even like “Doris Who Bores Us,” as she used to refer to her, before his mother’s all too long visits to their home. Oh, but yes, he would most certainly be the cause of some serious pain to Lisa. She once again began to speak, and he started to pray.

\*

Lisa stood in the middle of the cafeteria, oblivious to the family members, nurses, doctors and other hospital staff walking around her. She had just made an executive decision. She reached in her purse and found her phone. She pressed the “send” button twice and spoke to the man on the other line. She finished her ice cream bar, and disposed of the trash, then promptly walked past the elevator and through the sliding glass doors at the entrance. She searched momentarily for the yellow light and walked in its direction. She opened the door to the cab and spoke one word: “Airport.”

\*

She had not asked for a window seat, as had been her habit, but chose to sit in the middle, glad to have an empty chair on either side. For the first time in her life, she leaned over and closed the shutter of the window. She then promptly laid back and assumed the “airplane sleepers position”: Eyes closed, head turned at an awkward angle, and mouth wide open, with her chin resting on her right shoulder.

The sheer trauma of seeing him in his current state of blood and filth and misery had pushed her

beyond caring for him any longer. No guilt remained in her soul; it was quite obvious to her that he had done this to himself through years of cruelty to her and everyone else around him. The evil inside of Howard that had been expelled on paper and sold in hard-bound copies, had finally seeped out and possessed his dumpy exterior, right down to his once stunning, crystal-blue eyes.

\*

Howard begged for death. He prayed to Satan to take him straight to hell. The pain he was experiencing without the use of his morphine was soul-splitting. His dedicated vampire of a mother would not leave him, even for the smallest fraction of a second. She leaned over, her huge bust resting on his arm. He tried desperately to turn his head, but she had stacked all of his pillows on one side, “to make him a little more comfortable” she said, but Howard knew it was to keep his head immobilized so that he could not look away from her. He felt her warm breath moving the tiny hairs on his ear as she hissed, “I’ll take care of you Howard. I won’t leave your side. I promise.”

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