

Snapshots

by

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Braving the Storm

She sat still on the wooden bench behind the house, looking out over the tidy garden. The air was hot and close. The heat and humidity oppressive. Swallows chased each other through the sky, zigzagging between the carefully selected and lopped trees, and buzzing bees flew from one neatly planted and arranged flower to another. The flowerbeds were the right size, the tutored lawn mowed at just the right height. Everything was as it should be, or almost. She hadn't pulled the weeds today.

From the west she saw clouds coming in. Slowly gathering, thickening, and billowing high into the sky like giant cotton balls. But for now, the birds were chirping, and the bees were busy. It seemed peaceful, this natural tranquility. The quiet before the storm.

She heard the car coming up the driveway and park beside the house. He came home from a hard and long day of work. His work was important. He was an important man. She heard him get out of the car and shut the door with a hollow bang. He walked towards the front door, rustling with his keys, inspecting the lawn and the dream house for the slightest blemish with a sweeping glance and whistling. Always whistling. She heard him get in, could see it clearly in her mind when and where he put down his leather briefcase.

"Darling, I'm home," he announced cheerfully. "I brought you a wonderful dress. I want you to wear it tomorrow night."

She could see him hang up his stylish coat onto the right hook of the rack and the dress hanger onto the left one. He pulled off his shoes, storing them properly away in the little cabinet.

He went into the clean, stainless steel kitchen, and she could see his quick, scrutinizing look as he inspected everything, from the smooth, clean surfaces over the arrangement of the dishtowels then to the already laid table in the dining room. Everything was just right, she knew it, just as she knew he moved either the silver candlestick or the crystal vase standing on the table a hairbreadth to the right or left; accurate to the millimeter. She knew, could hear him in her head as he muttered about her inability to arrange even the slightest things and as he started to wonder, displeased, about her absence.

The sun was low in the sky and as the storm clouds blocked its shining disk from the world they gleamed in an eerie red changing quickly to a sickly dark violet. Ominous and foreboding. The air thickened with electricity, seemed to crackle with it along her skin. The buzz of busy insects, the chirp of birds ceased. Eerie silence followed, waited.

She could sense it when he went into the bathroom, shaking his head out of wistful pity for her. He used the same inspecting look there before he bent over the marble sink to scrub his hands. When he straightened and looked up into the mirror, she could see him freeze. She hadn't cleaned it today. The smallest beads of water had dried on the smooth, cold surface; had left a trace, had marred what was his.

Outside the blanket of storm clouds, heavy with trapped rain and lightning, settled over the house and with it a dark, threatening gloom. The first thunder rolled. The birds were nowhere to be seen, the insects were in hiding and the neighbor's horses whickered in dismay and pranced in their caging enclosure. She was sitting motionless on the bench, looking out over the garden.

"Where are you?" he bellowed, then checked himself. It wasn't seemly to shout. But, by God, how often did he have to tell her? She knew the consequences. He was an important man, others depended on him. "Is it too much to ask of my own wife to just take care of the house, of the things I gave her?" he muttered.

Where was she? She should have come down to greet him properly by now. Was she off, to a damn friend? But no, she wouldn't dare, not if she knew he came home at seven and wanted dinner to be served thirty minutes later. She knew the consequences. Then again, women were stupid, foolish, not sparing a mere thought about who and what hard work put food into their mouths. Ungrateful bitches.

Anger boiling, thunder growling, he went back into the kitchen, looking for a sign of her. The oven was on. He opened the door and saw his favorite meal, roast rabbit marinated in rosemary – with the wrong vegetables.

She knew mushrooms and shallots went with it, but had chosen string beans for today instead. He roared, slamming the door shut, and the first lightning split the sky. She could see in her mind the anger distorting his features.

"You bitch! How stupid can you be?" Wild now, loud enough for her to hear him outside, he paced the house, "Where are you? Where are you hiding? You know it's useless. You know the consequences. I even think you like it. Why else would you disappoint me so much?" He checked every room for her. "You won't ever get away from me. You're my wife!" he snapped, his voice like a whip. He rolled his sleeves up, automatically fumbling with his leather belt.

She sat on the bench behind the house, still, looking over the tidy garden, listening to the rolling thunder. Her hands didn't even tremble. The horses whickered, prancing, caged. Lightning flashed.

He was upstairs now. She looked up to the window.

She had left the light on in their bedroom today.

Wild with rage, his blood bubbling he wanted to go and find her and drag her home, that deceitful bitch. But he couldn't afford a public scene, and so he would have to wait until she returned to the privacy of their home. She would be punished for that, too, for letting him wait. With a howl of fury he slammed his hand onto the light switch.

Outside she saw the flicker of lethal, bluish light in the room, felt the electricity in the air, and heard – dead silence. Peaceful quiet.

Rain started to pour down, and the woman sitting on the wooden bench behind the house got up slowly. Lifting her arms high, she turned her face into the reviving rain, her silent, freeing tears mixing with it. Smiling now, she felt the warm droplets trickle against her marred skin like a loving caress. Sensed the relieving breeze awakening. She bathed in the beautiful rain and let the water cleanse her bruised body.

Her heart beat strong and fast.

Finally, Sarah was alive.

Try the Door, John

A knock sounded at the door. He lay on the couch, not caring over much and continued staring at the ceiling. The banging persisted and got even louder until a woman's voice called out, "Hello? I know you're home. Your cars still parked, and you sure haven't moved your butt outside."

Frowning at the unusual disturbance he got up and dragged himself towards the door; oblivious to his disheveled appearance in his old, crumpled jeans, unshaved and unkempt.

A tall woman with short blonde hair and green eyes smiled at him, "Hi! I'm Cara, your new neighbor."

He leaned against the door frame, tired, "Yeah. I'm John. Nice to meet you. No, I have no salt, milk, sugar or whatever it is you need. Bye, then." He was about to shut the door in her face, pretty sure she would leave in a huff, but he didn't get the reaction he had hoped for.

She didn't go away, but chuckled instead, "Forgot your manners, huh? Lucky you the neighbors warned me and told me of your loss." She stepped forward and with one hand pushed the door open so she could brush past him and go inside.

"Sure, come on in," John remarked, not closing the door.

She looked around, "Jeez, since when's your wife dead?"

He gritted his teeth, "Ten months."

"Yeah, I can see that." She turned to look at him and let her gaze travel the length of his body, "Not big on personal hygiene either, huh?"

John just stared at her. This woman was nuts. What did she want here anyway? Surely with her direct way she would spill it out soon. In the meantime he lightened up a cigarette, took a pull and enjoyed its tarry taste before filling his mouth with the delicate flavor of tequila. He squinted at her through the cloud of smoke.

"You shouldn't do that," she warned him, pointing towards the cigarette and the bottle of tequila in his hands, "it will kill you."

He raised a mocking brow, "So?"

She snorted at that, "Oh, come on. Stop acting the poor, hurting widower. Your wife's dead. I'm sorry, everybody's sorry, but that's life, damn it."

"What the hell? You've no idea what you're talking about, and no right. What the hell do you want anyway?"

"Checking out my neighbor, of course."

He put the cigarette out, "Well, you have done that. Now I'm really, really sorry but I've to ask you to leave." He went to the door, holding it open for her. Smiling sarcastically he showed her with a sweeping move of his arm the way out. "Goodbye, forever!"

She stopped in front of him, grinning, "For now. But I promise I'll soon be over again. I might come back on that offer for milk or so."

"That wasn't an offer. On the contrary, I was just notifying you that it would be useless to ask for such things since I haven't gotten any around."

"So what do you eat?"

He held up his bottle of tequila, "I've got all I need."

She shook her head and her eyes filled with mocking pity, "Oh, poor Johnny boy! There's much work ahead of us."

Without another word she turned and bounced down the stairs. He looked after her, shaking his head in utter disbelief before finally closing the door on the world again.

The next morning John woke to the sounds of a hammer, then a lawn mower and back to the hammer again. He got up from the couch, groaning and muttering and walked to the window. Just as he was about to close it, he saw his new least favorite neighbor jumping up and down, moving her hand wildly and screaming, "Ouch, ouch, ouch."

With a curse he snatched up a shirt, which he wasn't sure was actually clean but pulled on anyway as he ran out the door and over his unkempt lawn towards his neighbor's house. Cara was her name, he remembered.

"What the hell are you doing?" he snarled as he grabbed her hand and inspected it. The cut was bleeding but not deep.

Cara smiled sweetly, "Well, good morning to you, too."

"Being rudely awakened by hammers and stuff isn't good."

"So sorry I disturbed your beauty sleep. I know how much you need it."

John shot her a glance that bordered on murder. This woman was friggin' unbelievable. "Do you have a first-aid kit?"

"No."

Without a word he turned and headed back for his house, tugging her along. He told her to sit down in the kitchen while he searched his own kit. When he finally found it he sat on a chair in front of her and taking her hand in his he began to clean the cut.

"You came out of your shell," she remarked.

He looked at her, irritated, "I don't live in a shell."

Cara chuckled, "Sure you do. Look around you. You've holed up in here ever since your wife died."

"And I came out because my dearest neighbor screamed her head off. Over a little scratch at that," he grumbled in a voice that made it quite clear that he doubted he had taken the right decision.

"A little scratch it might be, but enough to make you come running and offer help. Though in a rude cave man kind of way."

"You of all people want to tell me I'm rude?"

"Yeah, but that's beside the point. What's important is, I think, deep inside of you, you want to participate in the world again, but feel guilty about doing so. Though there's nothing you should feel guilty about, believe me. The world moves on, it always does, and so one day you should, too. You won't ever forget your wife and-

"And our child." He didn't know why he told her, but it was too late to take it back now.

Cara leaned forward, her green eyes soft and gentle. "She was pregnant?"

John nodded and swallowed the lump in his throat, "Four months."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and when he looked at her he knew she was sincere.

He cleared his throat, applied a plaster to her cut and straightened in his chair, "This shouldn't give you any trouble."

She stood, "Thank you." When she past him, she laid a hand on his shoulder, giving it a light, comforting squeeze.

John listened to the sound of her receding footsteps until she was out. Then, in the utter quiet of the house he sat in the kitchen, thinking back on their conversation. Cara was a strange woman, without a doubt one of the strangest he had ever met. And yet she made him wonder about what she'd said. John watched her through the window as she continued to plant red and yellow blooming flowers into pots.

He took a look around him. Empty bottles of tequila and pizza boxes lay scattered on every available surface, all of it coated with dust and cold ashes.

With a long sigh John stood and began rummaging through the cabinets until he came up with a roll of bin liners. Filling one bag after the other he cleaned the kitchen, wiping it down from top to bottom before moving on to the next room, where he did the same. His clothes, and there wasn't one clean thing left, were immediately thrown into the washing machine. On a pad he noted down what he needed to buy and restock, and soon realized that grocery shopping was a top priority.

After he had taken a hot shower he stood in front of the mirror and looked at his reflection, shaved and clean. He felt human and alive, something he hadn't felt in a long time. And after honest introspection, he found that, much to his own surprise, Cara was right, there was guilt mixed in between.

He left the groceries for tomorrow and with one beer in his hand settled on his couch. There was only one room left he hadn't touched. Their bedroom. He hadn't stepped one foot inside it since his wife's death. Well, there was only so much one could do in a day.

When his door opened, he didn't bother to look who it was. There was only one so bold enough to come not knocking on his door.

"Come on in."

Cara crossed to him, her eyes scrutinizing the room with an approving gaze before landing on him, "You've done quite a lot here. You're actually handsome without the dirt."

He laughed, shaking his head at her.

A little hesitantly she added, "I wanted to see whether you're alright, or whether I... My mouth often gets the better of my mind, you know."

"You don't say! Everything's fine, though, don't worry."

"Good. So do you have some salt?"

John got up, leading the way into the kitchen, "Try tomorrow. I just might go grocery shopping."

"No kidding?"

"Until then I can only offer you beer or water."

"Beer." She took the bottle he held out to her and asked, "Do you mind sitting down out on the porch? I spend the entire day inside, painting the kitchen and the living room. A little fresh air would be great."

He had noticed the dabs of paint on her clothes and the splatters in her hair. "I can imagine."

They went out, and set down in the wicker chairs, overlooking the back yard. The lawn was unkempt, the weed growing rampant between rosebushes and lavender. Once it had been his wife's haven, and now it was utterly neglected. He would have to see to that, too, John mused.

"So you decided to redecorate the house? Well, I guess it does need a little renovation. The Campbells, the previous owners must have lived there all their lives. Kate and Tom, you never saw one without the other for long. Their grandson, Sean, works in the food store, but

you probably know him already. So, you chose that green there for the kitchen or the living room?” he asked, pointing towards a dab on her blouse.

Cara looked down at herself and laughed, “The kitchen. I like strong colors.”

They drank their beer as they watched the sun gliding lower through drafting clouds, tinging them with a first orange hue.

“Do you believe in God?” The question surprised John, and angered him somehow. He lifted an eyebrow and after a long telling look, she bit her lip, “Well, I guess with what happened you aren’t fond of Him. And who could blame you, right?”

She looked at him from the side, observing him closely, as she continued. “On the other hand it seems your faith just wasn’t strong enough to help you through your trials.”

John snorted at that, “I take it you believe in God.” When she nodded, he asked, “And for you, losing a loved one is a trial? For me, it was the end of my world, our world. The world we started to build together crumpled in a blink of an eye, when I opened the door to find a police officer standing there.”

Cara put a hand on his shoulder, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to anger or hurt you. I just believe that everything is a great puzzle, greater than we could ever understand, and only God knows the resulting picture of it all.”

John took a deep breath that now spoke more of sorrow and desperation than anger. Leaning back in the chair he looked out over the garden, into the distance, and he remembered how he had talked to God, screamed at Him, to be exact. But answers hadn’t come, and he had felt more deserted and alone than before.

Cara’s voice pushed through his thoughts, and he noticed she continued talking. “My dad, you could say he was a man of the church, he liked to tell us, me and my sisters and brothers, about the wonders of the world. He was kind of preaching the choir, actually, but we had questions of course, and he would take the time to answer us. Once when I was a kid I wanted to know, why God didn’t answer us, at least when it was really, really urgent. And he said, ‘Well, the world is mighty big and complex in so many ways, and sometimes God just doesn’t answer us in a way we expect. There are more than voices to be heard. So for example, the next time when you’re sad, and think there’s a big fat rain cloud over your head, watch if there’s not a rainbow nearby, too.’ And I did. Whenever I was sad or needed an answer I would watch whether there wasn’t something around that made me smile or simply feel better.”

He surely could have come up with a nasty remark, but didn't. She looked peaceful and for once less annoying as she sat in the wicker chair, facing the setting sun with a sweet smile on her lips, full of memories. "Your dad must be an interesting man."

"Indeed, he is."

John took a pull from his beer, "So where is he?"

She waved a hand, "Oh, further to the north. I travel and move a lot, but we always keep in touch. Not a day goes by without us talking," she grinned at him, "or getting on each other's nerves."

When he found himself smiling back at her, he wondered at this exasperating woman in front of him. One second he was angry and about to wrap his hands around her throat, and the next he was smiling. Maybe he shouldn't have opened when she came knocking on his door, John mused. But then again, it felt good, to sit out on the porch, watch the sun light dance through the trees and to talk about, well, everything under it; even with, or maybe because of, the forward, no-nonsense woman beside him.

The next morning John got up, showered and planned his day. He would finally go grocery shopping and afterwards he would attack the lawn. And maybe he would even find the nerve to go up, into the bedroom.

The grocery store hadn't changed much, but he noticed that Sean, his former neighbors' grandson had decided to grow a goatee, probably in an attempt to look manlier and to distract from his lanky frame. At least the distraction was a success.

John tried his best to suppress a smile as Sean put his food through the till. "So, you managed to let the house?"

The young man looked up, a little surprised, "Yep, a writer from London wants it. She didn't even want to look at the house, just paid for it. But how did you know? Word travels fast, I guess."

"I already saw her."

"Oh, I thought she said she would still need a little longer taking care of things in London? Well, since we settled everything I told her I left the key under the doormat, so she could come by whenever she wanted. That's £55.36, by the way."

John paid and accepted the change, wondering what else his new neighbor had kept from him while ruthlessly poking her nose into his life. He wished Sean a nice day, and drove back home. As he put away his groceries, he contemplated inviting Cara over for a couple of barbecued steaks. She might have been a little too nosy and cheeky, but she was also new in the neighborhood and he could at least welcome her properly.

His mind set John went over to Cara's. He knocked and waited. When no one answered he squinted through the windows trying to look inside. What he saw didn't make any sense at all.

Remembering what Sean had told him, he flipped back the doormat and found a key. Opening the door he stepped inside.

The wooden floor creaked under his careful step. Sunbeams streamed in through the back windows, and stunned he saw the light dust covering the shelves and the old furnishings that stood where the Campbells had left them. No fresh paint, no blooming flowers.

He swore he heard the rustle of spreading wings. And then he saw the single white feather wafting through the air, swaying gently, before landing in a pool of light on the floor.

Despairing Hope

The air was filled with incessant chatter and laughter, and hinted at mouthwatering promises as the barbecue was getting started. The family had met at her in-laws' place and was enjoying the late afternoon sun out back in the blooming garden. The women set the table and carried out different bowls of salad and bread that everyone had brought along. The men enjoyed a fresh beer and stood debating around the grill.

Kate liked being here. She loved the abundance of sweet-scented flowers, the occasional neigh of the horse grazing in the neighbor's garden and baaing of the sheep across the street. Irene, her mother-in-law denied having a magical green thumb but somehow that woman could bring any plant or flower to thrive and to bloom, and even those she would sometimes forget out in the frost didn't wither.

Since the grill needed a little more time, the women decided to walk through the garden, marveling at its beauty and occasionally plucking a twig of rosemary or lavender, while nursing a glass of cool white wine.

Her sister-in-law, Marie came up beside her with her little daughter in her arms, "Can you hold her a moment? I have to pee."

"Sure," Kate took the gurgling package with a smile. "Hey there, are you having a nice time?" Of their own accord, her eyes searched her husband. Their gazes met.

They had always thought it would be easy to have a child, but after five years of trying they knew better now. At first the doctor had said not to worry, a bright smile on his lips, and that it was normal after taking the birth control pills for a few years. He said that the body needed time to find its own rhythm again. Then the smile had become forced and less reassuring as he'd told her that her ovulation was irregular and sometimes even absent, but that they might be able to fix that with the help of a hormone therapy.

After endless syringes and doctor's appointments without improvement, her husband and she had decided to stop the treatment, since their love life, which was supposed to be a way to live and show their love and pleasure and a shelter where words were needless, had become a duty, a timed task. Now she wanted to scream every time she saw her monthly blood flush away another chance of life. She started to hate her failing body, her flat stomach.

Her sister-in-law and her fiancé, Thomas came back, holding hands. When they reached Kate, Marie started making funny faces at her daughter, which the child stared at with big loving eyes. Thomas took his beautiful girl and held her above his head and she giggled in delight while Marie put one arm around his waist. A happy family. Jealousy sparked,

unwanted and uncontrollable. She knew the baby hadn't been planned. And guilt speared her as soon as the thought arose, because Kate knew they loved her and treated her as such.

Watching the mother and father playing with the gurgling child, a fist squeezed her heart tight until it broke, and inside she was screaming and crying.

Kate had heard that some people, scientists even, say that sometimes a child simply wasn't meant to be between two people. Others said that love was just chemistry, the result of the body searching for and reacting to the most suitable of partners. So then how could it be that, when she loved her husband with all her heart and wanted to carry his baby, it wouldn't work? They both wanted a child so much, to love and care for it, to see it grow. Could fate, or whatever power responsible, really be so cruel? And bring together two loving souls and deny them their greatest joy to be as one?

"Dinner will be ready soon," her husband, the master of the grill called out, and pulled her from her dark thoughts without knowing it. The family gathered and sat down at the table. Platters and bowls and bread were passed along without conversation pausing for even a moment.

"Your potato salad is delicious, Kate. So fresh."

"It's the capers," she explained, forcing herself to smile brightly.

Later that night she lay in bed with her husband, naked and out of breath. His arms held her close, and she could hear the strong beating of his heart. A silent tear slipped away and ran down her cheek. For she knew the time of waiting began again. And, even though she tried to stop it, she knew that with each day that passed frustrating hope would eat away at her more and more.

Live

Once again I woke in a body claimed by death. My mother was hovering over the bed, my medicaments and a glass of water in her hands. The sheer terror and fear of the possibility I might not awake was still plainly visible behind the relief in her eyes. I groaned. It was no bad dream, no tear-jerking Hollywood movie, just goddamn plain reality. It was unfortunate and a real shame.

“Honey, how are you feeling today?” my mother was fussing over me again, and though I could never have imagined such a thing it got worse with every day that past. With each day that meant there was one less for her daughter to live. But then again I guess it wasn’t easy for parents to helplessly watch their child fade away. It wasn’t the natural order of things. And so I endured the sometimes suffocating mothering, fixing a somewhat faint but hopefully reassuring smile onto my lips. Then I got up, popped the various pills she gave me, and swallowed them down with a gulp of water.

“I’m fine, mom. I’ll just grab a shower.”

Worried eyes fixed me as if trying to keep me from vanishing into thin air right then and there. “Sure. But breakfast is ready, hon.”

“I’ll make it quick,” I promised and gave her a little peck on her cheek and tried that reassuring smile again. It must have worked this time since she nodded and the corners of her lips curled slightly.

In the bathroom I stripped out of my pajama. And for the first time in quite a while and for whatever the reason I turned around to really look at my reflection in the mirror. I didn’t like what I saw. Some women wanted to look like anorexic sticks, I wasn’t one of them but I certainly could join the club now. I was skinny, in an unhealthy bones-and-angles-showing kind of way. But that wasn’t even the worst of it all. My skin wasn’t just pale, it was gray. I looked like a walking corpse, and to my horror pretty much felt like one as well.

I was going to die. I knew it, and with each day that passed there was one question in my mind that pressed ever harder to be heard.

Pushing away the thought, I stepped under the spray of warm water, let it caress my sensitive skin, let it wash over me. When I was finished I toweled off, and rubbed a hand over my bald, scarred head.

Dressed, I went downstairs. My father was sitting at the table, reading the newspaper, of which one corner nearly drowned in his coffee.

“Morning, dad.” I sat down. I wasn’t hungry, but with the inspection of my corpse still fresh in my mind I grabbed a roll.

“Morning. How are you feeling?”

“Good.” I sighed and let the roll drop onto my plate. I couldn’t put it off. Time wasn’t on my side. And so I took a deep breath. “I want to stop the treatment.”

The resulting silence was absolute. And then came the storm.

“What the hell are you talking about?” my father’s face was red with sudden fury and his eyes huge with helplessness at the prospect of losing his daughter. “Are you out of your mind?”

“The treatment isn’t working. I don’t respond to it.”

“Then we can still try that new one.”

“No,” I shook my head and looked at him, utterly calm. “No, dad. We won’t, because I can’t take it anymore. The treatment is killing me, the doctor told me so. My liver is shit. We have to stop. And what’s the use anyhow? What would we win? A day? I don’t even know what I’m fighting for anymore. I don’t feel good. Look at me. I’m numb, I don’t feel anything. Even with the treatment, all we would do is stall. The treatment won’t heal me, we all know it. So, please, let me have the time I have left.” I got up and headed for the door, and out. I needed to get away. I got in the car and just drove, blindly, to wherever it would take me.

After some time I stopped and really looked out the windshield, and saw my old school. It hadn’t changed much. Some signs of old age here and there, but the schoolyard in front was still filled with squealing, talking or quarreling children. And those who were hiding out to have a smoke and thought that made them pretty clever and cool. There were places where time preferred crawling to flying. With memories filling my head and an idea forming in between them I pulled away. I knew where to go now.

I drove nearly two hours to see a friend I hadn’t met in a long time. I parked the car, got out and walked to the door of the five-storey building. After searching the name, I rang and waited.

“Yes?”

“Delivery,” I said into the interphone. With a click the door was opened and I got in, heading up the stairs.

She stood waiting in the door. The last time I’d seen her she had short blue and red hair, now it was brown and flowing past her shoulders, but the rest, complete with the black clothes and spiked bracelets, seemed the same. Her face wasn’t what one would call beautiful or

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