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## Faith

Twenty-two years ago, I almost died in a car crash. There was no foul play involved, just bad luck, the other driver momentarily taking her eyes off the road and slamming into me head on. I was in my Honda hatchback while she was in a boat of a Buick, and I didn't have my seat belt on. My body was launched straight through the windshield like a cannonball, and the only reason why I survived was because of a pond. According to the police report, if I had landed just half a foot to either side, my skull would've been crushed by the rocks below. But all I'd hit was sand, soft, water-logged sand that cradled me like a mother.

A month after the crash, I was in a convenience store to buy a pack of AA batteries. It was a few minutes past midnight, and there were four people in the store including me. One of them, his face pantyhose-squished, pulled out a shotgun hidden in his trench coat and aimed its twin barrels at the clerk, who emptied the contents of the register into a plastic bag without a word. I'd been at the counter, in the middle of purchasing the batteries, so I handed my purse to the clerk. I remember the hold-up man smiling behind his mask, his lips flattening underneath the nylon to reveal the glint of a gold front tooth. Behind him, the other customer tried to flee. The man turned around and shot her in the back, at which point the clerk pulled out his own pistol and shot the man at point-blank range, but his aim had been off and he took off a chunk of

an ear. More than anything, that's what I recall from that night, the man's frayed ear blooming forth from the constriction of the pantyhose, tatters of bullet-blown flesh swinging amid a swirl of bloody mist. And then there were two more shots, one from the man and one from the clerk simultaneously, both to the chest. My ears rang hollow for days.

You'd think that after two encounters like that, I would've been angry at the world, or God, or whatever else was out there. But I wasn't. At the time, I thought I deserved every bit of misery, because that summer, the day before we were to leave for our respective colleges, in my back yard, I grabbed a shovel and swung it as hard as I could at my boyfriend's head. It was morning, the green grass soaked in dew, and he'd been dozing on the folding chair, and now he was slumped on the ground, bleeding out onto the tarp I'd laid out.

There was an investigation. I wasn't there in person, since I'd gone off to college in another state, but since the university library had a subscription to my hometown newspaper, I was able to keep abreast of the situation. I'd been questioned by the police before I left, since everyone knew Andrew and I were in a relationship, but I must've played the part of the grieving girlfriend well enough because they couldn't find a reason to keep me.

So each morning before my first class, I read about the case, but a strange thing happened. As I read about the state-wide search and Andrew's sister's tears and his parents' lament and all the names and streets of the place I knew so well, I began to feel less familiar with what was going on, the very act of reading these printed words creating a distancing effect, as if I were watching a movie playing before my eyes.

Perhaps it was a coping mechanism, a way for my subconscious to keep me from dialing the phone number on the business card of the detective in charge and confess. Even though I'd

dumped his body a hundred miles from the shore – weighed down with six of the heaviest dumbbells gathering dust in the attic, rolling him off the stern of my father’s motorboat and into the blue fathoms of the Atlantic Ocean – I had a hard time convincing myself that I wouldn’t be caught. It was only in books and movies that people got away with murder. In reality, the police weren’t inept, the criminals weren’t brilliant, and bad people got what they deserved.

But then other information began to surface. That Andrew’s father was involved in a pyramid scheme with shady investors, some with ties to the Russian mob, while his mother had purchased prescription painkillers from an unlicensed doctor in New Mexico. The focus of the investigation spread wider, which was good for me, but for a couple of days, this was national news, which didn’t seem so good. And yet in the end, I had nothing to worry about.

Because misfortune has a shelf life. The story of Andrew’s disappearance petered out in less than a month, as the media found more compelling stories to chomp on. The case remained open, but by the time I returned home for Thanksgiving, it was as if Andrew had never lived at all.

I’m a psychic. That’s how I make my living, by giving people readings of various kinds – their futures, their past, often involving the deceased. I used to be ashamed of my profession, and there’s probably still a tiny part of me that continues to be embarrassed, but by and large, I’ve made peace with it. At parties – not that I can even recall when I last went to one – when small talk turns to people’s jobs, somebody inevitably makes some snide comment. My response: I don’t work in a cubicle, I don’t have a boss, and I make enough money to keep a roof over my head and food on the table.

“So,” says the unbeliever, “what am I thinking?”

“I have no idea,” I say. “I’m looking into your head right now, but you know, I’m not finding much.”

Usually this gets a few people chuckling, but it’s not a joke.

Most people don’t understand that what I do is not a parlor trick. It is real, but at the same time, unquantifiable, like any other form of art. As long as I have faith from my client, I can deliver.

Doubters will scoff, of course. Why wouldn’t I target the poor folks who already believe in this mumbo-jumbo? That’s why they’re here in the first place, because they’re gullible enough, stupid enough, to swallow my lies.

Except it’s not like that. The relationship between medium and client is closer to coach and athlete, teacher and student, and although shrinks never want to hear this, therapist and patient. One cannot exist without the other; it’s an even exchange, a feedback loop of the most beautiful kind. What I am is a conduit, a vessel that brings out the information that is already contained within the body of the seeker. Everyone has a key, and when they’re ready, I can help them turn the knob and swing open the door.

I give readings in the furnished basement of my home. The walls are lined with red velvet and the round table where I sit across from the client is made of mahogany, its edge smoothed by two centuries of human touch. I don’t have a crystal ball or Tarot cards; what I do is hold onto the client’s hands, close my eyes, and blank out my mind to concentrate on the faint voices surrounding me.

I’ve heard voices for as long as I can remember. In childhood, they were my imaginary friends. In grammar school, I was often scolded by teachers for my lack of attention, and in

junior high I spent a summer in a sleepaway camp that was actually closer to a sanitarium, but by the time I got to high school, I'd learned enough about myself to keep quiet. The only reason I went to college was to get away from home, and after the first semester, I dropped out and started working for Madame Bouvier, who wasn't the least bit French and who was even less of a medium. What I learned from her was how far you could go in this business without any actual ability. She always looked the part, never leaving the house without wrapping herself in an elaborate shawl, her frizzy red hair perpetually styled to a slight dishevelment, giving her an air of quirky preoccupation.

After a year of apprenticeship, I set up my own practice, and it was here, yesterday, that Andrew's mother rode the train for four hours to pay me a visit.

It's amazing what you can forget, even something as momentous as killing another human being. Many people think it's the greatest sin, and I agree. More than two decades ago, I held the wooden handle of the shovel and knowing exactly what the end result would be, I swung. It's called a crime of passion if you commit it in a blind fit of love, a temporary lapse of reason, crossing over the fine line between sanity and insanity. My actions did not fit this definition, but there's no question in my mind that I did it for love. I loved Andrew, and Andrew loved me. Maybe his wasn't as much or as strong as mine, but that was just because of time. Like a fruit on a tree, love ripens, and mine just happened to be sweeter, juicier, than his.

Before I wrapped him in the tarp, I cupped the indentation in his skull, Andrew's blood pooling in my hand, and felt the sticky warmth leak through my fingers and I squeezed my eyes shut and told myself to remember this moment for the rest of my life, because even though what

I'd done was right, it was also selfish. I'd taken away a person's life, and this was never going to change.

For a good long while, I thought of that day every morning. It felt good to remember Andrew's death right after I woke up, because sleeping was like a death, and each rising sun was a rebirthing. But then came a time when I wouldn't think of him until I was brushing my teeth, and it wasn't long until I'd skip a day or two until an image from the day returned to me: the dampness of the shovel's worn handle from the misty morning, the comma-shaped cowlick in his auburn hair, the ebbing warmth and the whorls of smoke from the embers of the fire pit.

It's just what happens when you keep living while the other person remains dead. Evolution dictates that we shed what we don't use, and I wasn't using Andrew anymore. There was no need to, so he, like my menagerie of stuffed animals on the bed of my childhood, receded into the distant shores of my past.

My forgetting of Andrew does not make me a bad person. It just makes like everybody else.

There are two types of people who come for a reading: those who believe and those in desperation. Andrew's mother, Jocelyn, was the latter. Her eyes darted at the darkened corners of the room, and for the duration of her visit, she never uncrossed her arms.

It was shocking how old she'd gotten, her blonde hair gone platinum, a noticeable stoop in her narrow shoulders, but then again, I'm sure she'd thought the same of me. No longer was I the lithe, nubile thing that had been the source of her son's infatuation. I wouldn't call myself fat, but I'm most likely headed there. Which is fine with me. It happens to the best of us.

“Mel,” she said, and that was another shock, a name nobody calls me anymore. If I run into a client at the grocery store, they always address me in full, Madame Melody. Every piece of mail I receive reconfirms my grown-up identity. “Mel” embodies my adolescence, and I almost swooned from the strength of its nostalgia.

“Jocelyn,” I said. From the get-go, she’d wanted to be addressed by her first name. She looked relieved.

“For a second, I had the horrible thought that you might not remember me.”

“Now why would you think that.”

“It’s been a long time.”

“That is true.”

She opened a Ziploc sandwich bag and placed a bone in my hand.

“Be careful,” she said. “It’s brittle.”

Andrew, in my hand. I knew it was him. The bone was white and hollow, a curved piece of human resiliency about the size of my pinky, tapered at the ends and shaped like a smile, or a frown, I suppose, depending on how you held it.

“What part is it?” I asked.

It was a rib. After more than two decades, a deep-sea fisherman had found the remains of her son’s body, his hook catching on the rib cage. As years passed under the ocean, Andrew’s jaw had fallen into the cavity where his heart had once been. Enough of his teeth were still attached to make the identification against dental records.

“Did you bring the rest of the bones?”

“No,” Jocelyn said. “The rest are in a casket.”

“And you came to see me because...”

“Well,” she said, squeezing her arms even closer to herself, “you knew him.”

“I did.”

“I thought it might help, that you knew him.”

“For what?”

For the first time, she looked like the woman I used to know. She had a temper; Andrew used to tell me how everyone was afraid of her.

“Why are you making this difficult?”

And here I told her my usual speech, that I needed her to believe. If she wanted for me to communicate with her son, then she was the one who had to do it.

She said nothing for a long time. We just sat there, in the dying afternoon, a shard of sunlight from the curtained window splitting the tabletop.

“Will it work?” she finally asked.

“If we both want it to, then yes.”

“I want to know what happened,” she said, “what happened to my baby.”

I laid my hands on the table, palm side up, and she slipped her hands into mine, her skin as delicate as tissue paper. When she leaned closer, I could smell the same peachy perfume she always wore.

I listened, but I had trouble concentrating because for some reason, I had to pee, even though I’d hardly drunk anything all day.

“This is embarrassing,” I said, “but could you excuse me for one second?”

### **END OF SULU READING**

Jocelyn nodded, and I hurried up the stairs.

I had to shade my eyes from the living room walls, glaring like blank billboards on a sunny day. I ducked into the bathroom and sat down on the toilet without turning on the light, and it was as if the Hoover dam broke, my pee just going and going.

So far, I thought I was managing this situation. The mother of the boy I'd murdered was in my house, and she was asking me to get in touch with him. The circumstances were unusual, but not impossible. In fact, on a logical level, it made absolute sense. I'd known him before I killed him, and because of my line of work, why wouldn't his mother enlist me for this purpose? There was no one else better for the job to recall her dead son to the plane of the living.

But it wasn't like I hadn't tried before.

I'm not the same person who'd snuck into the tool shed and removed the blue tarp from the shelf, grabbing the shovel on the way out. I hate it when people ask the question, "If you had to do it all over again, would you?" Of course I would. That's why I am who I am.

I killed Andrew because I never wanted him to leave. I know that sounds crazy, but back then, it seemed sensible, even practical. I couldn't imagine being so far away from him, and this way, he'd always be by my side. Every day I was speaking with the deceased, from a pair of twin uncles on my mother's side to a six-year-old boy who'd lived two houses down before the Great Depression, so I was confident, I was young, I was stupid. My belief in my abilities was so strong that it didn't even occur to me that I could fail, that when the rusted head of the shovel struck Andrew, when the vibration from the impact of metal striking bone ran all the way up to my collarbone, it would be the last time I'd feel him.

Back at the table of my reading room, when I'd held Jocelyn's hand once more, there was nothing I wanted more than to feel Andrew's presence.

“Is he...here?” she asked. Those three words of hers carried such vulnerability, the barest skein of hope, a sliver of frailty that pierced the very center of me.

“Yes,” I said.

Sometimes I lie to my clients. I don't enjoy this part of my job, but there are times when it has to be done.

“Why?” she asked. “Can you please ask him why?”

I opened my eyes.

“Love,” I said.

The funeral is like a high school reunion, all the familiar faces of my youth congregated on this grassy hill. Time has been cruel to just about everyone equally, the men with swollen bellies and receding hairlines, the women wearing too much makeup in an effort to conceal the obvious.

I don't even like driving by cemeteries because for me, they're as loud as a convention hall. I hum a tune to fight the overwhelming gaggle of conversations inside my head, Simon and Garfunkel's “Scarborough Fair,” the last song I heard before arriving here.

Nobody pays me any attention, not even a glance, which is just fine by me. I was Invisible Mel back in the day, the weirdo with the Ouija board in her backpack, so it's no surprise that I continue to be shunned.

“I'm glad you made it,” Jocelyn says. She's wearing black like all the other women. I feel a little self-conscious with my burgundy dress, but it's the darkest thing I own.

“It's good to see you again,” I say, and it's true. I'd forgotten how much she'd meant to me until I saw her again. With the amount of time I'd spent in their household, she was like a second mother.

She leads me to a row of seats on the other side of the grave, opposite from where her husband and daughter are sitting.

“You don’t want to be with you family?” I ask.

“They need their space,” she says..

Once we sit, I see not only see Andrew’s headstone but another one adjacent to it:

JOCELYN SUMMERS

1943-2010

“I didn’t know you were dead,” I say.

“Death is life, and life is death,” Jocelyn says. “Just the flip side of the same coin.”

“You don’t look dead.”

She smiled. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“I should’ve known you were dead. It’s my job to know.”

Jocelyn lays a hand on my shoulder. “We’re not perfect.”

It’s been a long time since I cried. So long that I can’t remember the last time. And now that I’ve started, I’m not sure if I can stop. Jocelyn offers me a handkerchief, and I deluge it with my tears.

“Do you want to know what happened to your son? How he died?”

“Didn’t we go through that yesterday, at our reading?”

“You asked me why, not what.”

“Are they not the same thing?”

“I never thought of it that way,” I say.

“I was sure I’d be reunited with him once I died, but that’s not how it works. He’s still lost to me.”

I want to tell her that it was me, I did it, I was the one who brained her baby, but even now, I can't do it. It's one thing to know the truth in yourself, but to say it to another – it's like you're giving it away, and I don't want to do that. The actions I'd taken those many years ago belong to no one else but me.

“The funny thing about being dead,” Jocelyn says, “it's not that different from being alive. Isn't that just awful?”

Across from us, her husband and daughter are clutching each other as the minister reads a passage from the Bible.

Jocelyn rises, and I rise with her. She reaches for me, and I grab her cold, cold hand, and we walk down the aisle of the grieving living, and leave this verdant sadness together.