

GOTTEN

I had been having the same list go through my head for some time now. At first it was faded and translucent at the back of my mind, the faint outline of every letter projected across the back of my skull by a cheap antique slide projector, shaky and blurred. It didn't take long for things to thicken into focus and reveal themselves to me in all their horrific glory.

It had been quite a while since Beth and I had been involved in that world, almost fifteen years now. It seems I never really stopped believing even though she obviously did soon after we married and she started her career. Thinking back to those early days made the pain even sharper now, and I ached for a time when neither of us cared what anyone else in the world thought of anything, let alone our romanticisms with other worldly beings and faerie tales.

The telltale signs of someone being the victim of alien abduction includes: memory loss, insomnia, loss of appetite, headaches, fatigue, hair loss, and the mysterious appearance of marks or bruises on your body. This is important for you to know. More important than how to conjugate a verb in Spanish or French, or what date the third president of your country was born, or what bone is connected to the knee bone. None of that stuff will save your life or your sanity and right now it was the only thing that was keeping my head from exploding.

I stare at the tiny droplet of blood on the back of my hand, as a knot of searing hot rage balls up at the center of my skull. I remember someone telling me once that it was blue in our veins, that it was the oxygen in the air that turned our blood red and I wonder if anyone in the history of cutting themselves open had ever done it quick enough to see it turning from blue to red. Was there an in-between color? What's in-between blue and red? Purple? No, that's when you mix the two.

I try to remember who it might have been who instilled this little nugget of information in me. Did I read it somewhere? It's funny how some people are more likely to believe something when they read it in print, rather than if it's told to them. Ironically, its as though taking the time to sit down and put pen to paper, or finger to key, deems it much more likely to be a fact because the person has taken greater lengths than simply blurting it out of their mouths. I'm kind of counting on it actually.

My eyes lock on a vein just below the black cold steel that rests in the palm of my right hand and I follow its long thin canal up the middle of my arm to a scab I hadn't noticed before. It does look pretty green in there, and maybe red and blue make green? That would suggest that something in there is red though, maybe the vein itself? I curse myself for not paying more attention in biology.

An ant grabs my attention as it sprints across the amber wooden floor towards a tiny spatter of blood, the direction and tailing of which will probably be closely examined later by some poor squint who's seen more than his or her fair share of blood patterns.

I catch sight of a foot twitching out of the corner of my eye and spin wildly to scan the room for someone else, yelling out loud to no one, "Who's there?! Was that me?"

I am sure I hear something like laughter, but why would I be laughing? I stumble gingerly over to a chair by the door and plop down on it, slowly wiping off the droplet of blood with my other hand's thumb and rubbing it deeply into my pants.

It has to be red. It's always red when the nurse hangs a fresh bag of it up for an accident victim on every single show on TV and those TV people do their research, don't they? They would know.

I think about how the needle is pierced into the vein and the blood slowly drains out into the thin plastic bag. It brings me back to when Beth and I were trying to have a child and had to give so much of our bodies, minds and souls to the nurses and doctors only to have them tell us there were no answers and that it was just one of those things that happen to people in life. They always seemed keen to add that adoption was always an option.

Then, I think about how if the whole system isn't air tight the blood would definitely be red and not blue; but, even if oxygen is getting into the bag somehow, it can't possibly be enough to turn the whole bag from red to blue so it must be red to begin with!

I laugh out loud. I've never heard that laugh before. It is definitely me, no doubt about it this time. Sounding desperate, maniacal almost. The twitching has now ceased. I can stop distracting myself. I stare with great disbelief at the body lying in front of me as the last few years flash before my eyes.

You know how they tell you your whole life flashes before you when you're faced with even the possibility of your own death? They're wrong. It's death, period.

Doesn't have to be your own death, and it isn't necessarily your whole life. They're memories flashing, not life. So why do they put it that way? Life is something you live.

Memories. I've always found them to be problematic. I'm not even sure whether I can confidently say that I have a good memory. If I had a dollar for every time I said the words "I can't remember", I'm sure I could work at least two weeks less a year.

I wonder if I have always been this way. As a child my mother would always remark how she couldn't understand how I could walk out of a movie I had just seen for the first time and recite countless lines from it, word for word. For that matter I never really did that well at school and that requires mostly memory, doesn't it?

I've also been accused by several female companions of being anally retentive; but, it's not that everything has to be in a particular place because I compulsively need them to be there, it's just that if I don't have a certain place for everything, I'm likely to forget what I have or where I've put those particular things.

"Did it twitch again? Maybe one of the fingers? How did I get to this place? When did they get her? Fucking memory sucks.", I whisper to myself while glancing around slowly, not recognizing a damn thing in the apartment.

Everything matches like a glossy photo-shopped picture in a magazine ad for some new wave yuppie furniture store. The bookshelf against the far wall is covered with self-help books, cookbooks and a veritable who's who of biographies. The shelf itself looks like it has come alive, deciding to crawl up the side of the wall like ivy up the side of an English manor. Nobody I've ever known has lived in a place like this.

"It was a month ago."

Slowly the shock subsides and I grasp at the visual memories that had whizzed in front of my eyes just moments before. I need to slow them down like slow motion replay. A camera is just a mechanical configuration of the human eye, so surely the brain can mimic a slow motion video replay, can't it? That's what I needed to do. Catch my breath and assess the moments that led me to this place, to remember how I got here.

“And when had she been gotten?”

My obsession with when just stems back to my problems remembering. It's always seemed to me that recalling the beginning of anything is horrendously difficult for me and many others for that matter.

With songs, we usually recall the chorus when asked, “How does it go?” With movies, we walk out exclaiming “What an amazing, or, what a crappy ending”. Fights, “How did this start?” Probably can't remember. Then there's our obsessions and fears, things that drive us at the very core of our being, that can motivate us to thrive and excel or keep us pinned to the bottom of the barrel with the rest of the slugs, and the first thing a good therapist will do is lay you down and get you to start from where? The beginning.

A bitter acid fume slowly snakes its way up my throat and I swallow dryly to choke down the erupting bile.

I stare at my legs, realizing they mutinously refuse to follow orders and lift the rest of my body out of the chair to get a drink of water.

“It had to be a month ago. Or did they have her when we first met?”

My legs finally fall in line and I half stumble half do a jig to the bathroom, ignoring the circus sideshow mirror I pass in the hallway that makes my reflection look as crooked as a stick in water.

Grabbing a stylish glass next to an Oral B electric toothbrush, I fill it with water from the bathroom sink immediately feeling the acid rise again within me.

I smash the glass down on the marble counter top and quickly position my hands at the ten and two o'clock positions on the pristine ceramic bowl next to the sink. Convulsing violently, I attempt to squeeze every bit of acid and left over whiskey from my day's deprived of food stomach.

Calming myself after the third wave, I kneel inhaling and exhaling deeply, trying my best not to pass out. Then, instinctively searching the side of the toilet to flush, I come up empty. I lift my head from the bowl squinting at the tank. Searching for the tiny silver lever I exclaim, 'The fuck?'

Leaning back and searching still, my hands come to rest on a firm bench. I lift myself up plopping backwards onto it, not believing what I see in front of me. The whole toilet appears to be a fishbowl of sorts, with tiny plastic goldfish and sea horses swimming around and a little plastic castle with a skull and cross bones flag floating on a pole smack dab in the middle of the tank. "How the fuck do you flush this thing?"

My elbow rests on a leather- padded arm rest and I quickly raise my arm in the air in disbelief, realizing I was sitting on a bench. Not just any bench, but one that seems to have been made from a shrunken funeral casket of sorts. "Who the fuck keeps a bench in their bathroom?!"

I have never puked in such style and decide I won't bother figuring out how to flush it. I anticipate that my legs probably won't carry me anywhere I want to go just yet. Staring at the tiny plastic goldfish floating around the bowl in front of me, I think back on the last year or so, trying to pinpoint exactly when they had taken the love of my life away from me.

What first caught my attention about Bethany was her posture. She had one of the most amazing asses I had ever seen in my life, but what really did me in was the way she stood. More importantly, the way she held herself as she conducted even the most boring of daily tasks. She had a ton of confidence to back that ass up, even a tiny dash of arrogance one might say, but always managed to respect herself and those that she was dealing with.

She walked with grace and elegance, something that most women these days can't even spell, let alone carry off with ease. I loved the way she held her head high no matter what she was doing especially at the local UFO conspiracy theorist meetings held by Paranormal Realms, where I first met her.

Most girls at Paranormal Realms meetings are either geeks or freaks and a lot of the times they are both. Bethany was different. Standing straight at five foot eleven also was a major factor that impressed me. I couldn't remember ever looking a woman in the eyes before; I was always straining my neck to look down.

She was giving a guest lecture called "Magnetic Stimulations While Seeing Aliens with God" and wore her rust-red hair pulled into a ponytail. Her shimmering green

eyes glowed, wearing a Willie Nelson T-shirt and blue jeans riding over brown leather cowboy boots that brought her up well over six foot one.

I have to admit I don't remember very much of that first lecture. I was mesmerized by her and spent most of my time trying to come up with ways to impress this incredible woman, who was serendipitously placed in my path. I wasn't anywhere near being a player but I wasn't exactly a virgin either.

Luckily, there wasn't much competition when her lecture was over. All my fellow nerds were either too chicken shit to chat her up or too anxious to get in line for a chance to use another guest lecturers alt-azimuth mounted Newtonian telescope to search the skies for UFO's.

The only competition I had to worry about was Monty, an 80 year old hardware store owner who was way more obsessed with the possibility of Bigfoot than he was with alien life forms or UFO's. When Monty went off to empty his bladder, I moved in ready to wow her with my thoughts on Roswell, Rendlesham and the Levelland Texas incidents; but the cocky little minx that she was, she came right out and asked me to take her somewhere quieter where we could talk about it over a beer.

“No, they didn't have her then. She was a free spirit when we first met. She loved me with everything that she was.”

At the bar, she wowed me with details of the research she was doing in school. She and her research partners were working with 2000 research subjects showing how magnetic stimulation of different parts of the brain could activate different feelings and emotions- such as oneness with God, feelings of love and lust, anger, anxiety and even the feeling of being in the presence of a UFO.

She went on for over an hour in great detail explaining how many UFO sightings come during a period of earthquakes, when shifts in the earth's plates alter the atmosphere's magnetic charges. So it wasn't surprising that people's brains could vividly experience what seem to be UFO sightings or even an alien abduction.

I was amazed at everything she had to disclose on their fascinating project, but was even more impressed with the fact that she was a true believer and still accepted the possibility that aliens and UFO's could simply be a trick of the mind. It was her open mindedness and her desire to seek out the truth that sealed the deal and had me falling head over heels for her that very evening.

One of the goldfish in the tank part of the toilet tries to float into the little plastic castle at the middle, but is immediately evicted by an automatic drawbridge lowering and creating a sudden strong current towards the plunger as my throat is injected with thirst.

I jiggle my legs carefully, testing their mobility. They feel as though they can carry me at least as far as the kitchen to get a drink and I push myself off the bathroom bench towards the hallway.

I stand in the kitchen doorway staring awkwardly at a bright red table right in the middle of the room that appears to be floating and melting at the same time. I pin myself into the arch of the door as a wave of nauseous dizziness surges up from my feet through to the very tips of every hair on my head.

I focus on what looks like blood red paint paused in mid drip and my knees start to give out beneath me. I slide along the wall further into the kitchen, away from the red

monstrosity at the center of the room. Sitting there on the floor, with my elbows on my knees, I concentrate on breathing and try not to pass out.

“It was a little over a year ago. At least. When she cut her hair.”

Pushing myself up off the floor with my legs, I slide up the wall with my back. Holding my hands out like a blind man crossing a quiet country road I stumble over to the kitchen sink, stop dead in my tracks and try to decipher what it is my eyes are looking at.

“Lobster claws. They’ve poisoned me with hallucinogenic!”

Ignoring the false images my senses deliver I reach out carefully to turn the cold water claw. Water rushes out and I bring my left hand down under the cold running stream in front of me. I splash copious amounts up onto my face, slurping a gallons worth into my mouth before quickly turning the claw to the off position and backing away from the sink.

Unable to trust anything my brain perceives, I walk slowly to the hallway and stop, close my eyes and breathe deeply.

“She had cut her hair short. Practically shaved it all off.”

She had been complaining that her hair was falling out. That it had been thinning for months and was starting to fill her hairbrush more and more every day and she almost couldn’t stand it anymore. The doctors had told her it could be a side effect of the fertility drugs; but she had stopped taking them months before so they really didn’t have any answers for her, as usual.

A friend of hers had recommended a shampoo that was meant for people with fungal problems because apparently that condition is the reason for most hair loss that isn't due to genetics or drug use. The scalp obtains a fungal infection which attracts microscopic bugs that eat at the hair follicles surrounding the fungal infection.

Beth had decided to give it a try, but the shampoo was very expensive. She decided to get drastic cutting almost all her hair off so she wouldn't need to use as much shampoo and would save more money. It had all sounded like a load of crap to me at the time. Now I was certain that it was. Suddenly, I hear a low guttural moan seeping out of another room.

Walking into the living room where the sound is emanating from, I stop dead in my tracks. In the corner of the room behind a small black leather chair, something is hiding. Hiding isn't the best choice of words as the tentacles are in plain sight if one were to look carefully enough into the shadows.

I move to circle around to the left of it to get a better look when another moan crawls out from the center of the room. I glance down to see a body.

Rich red liquid pools surround the tilting head. An arm lifts up as another moan slips from a near lifeless mouth. I remember how Beth had joined a gym not long after she cut her hair. She had said she wasn't feeling good about herself and all the weight she had put on in the past few years and put herself on a military regime workout and diet. Every single day, without fail, she had worked herself down to skin and bones in no time.

I stare at the fidgeting shell in front of me, reaching its hand out, staring with blank dead eyes as a loud yelp comes from behind me. I turn and hold my gun up to my shocked wife's skeletal freckled face. "Richard, what the hell is going on here?!"

I back away, keeping the gun focused on her and keeping her a good distance away from the body on the floor. She looks down at it worried, attempting a swift jump in its direction but I push at the air in front of her face with the gun and she focuses her attention on me once again as I scream hysterically at her. 'They got you Beth! You may not know it yet, but they did!'

Beth backs a step away from me putting her hands out in a calming manner. "Who, Richard? Who GOT me? Are you stoned?!"

A blood curdling laugh vomits from my throat as I stamp my right foot on the floor in applause to this suggestion. "Poisoned is more like it! They've pumped me full of hallucinogens! They don't want me to see what's really going on, but I do! I even see it back there behind the chair trying to hide! Don't tell me you don't see the tentacles, Beth!"

Beth peeks quickly at the body just behind me before peering into the shadows in the corner of the room and then back into my eyes with extreme pity. She attempts to take a step closer to me as I remind her of the gun in my hand. "Richard, it's a piece of furniture. It's nothing but wood and leather and plastic pieces designed to look like the body and arms of an octopus. That's all it is."

I point to the wall to the right of me where half a white antique couch appears to bend and crawl up the wall it is next to. "How do you explain that? Or the fish tank toilet and coffin bench in the bathroom! What about the invisible table with blood dripping

over it set in front of the lobster clawed faucets in the kitchen?! They've drugged me Beth! They want me to believe I'm losing my mind so I don't double guess what they've done to you! They thought I wouldn't figure it out, but I did."

She calmly puts her purse down on the floor. "I don't understand what you are talking about or how you got here. There's a very simple explanation for all of these things. I don't know anything about hallucinogens, but I can tell you that all of these things are just pieces of furniture. The kitchen table, fish tank toilet, octopus chair, these are all pieces of furniture that Leonard sells in his store. That's what he does for a living, he sells furniture. It's different and out there, but that's all it is, Richard. Furniture."

Not wanting to hear the lies they have programmed her to feed to me, I back her up against the wall and force her to her knees. All I can think of doing is to get her away from there and find someone who will know how to break their hold on her.

Suddenly, I am sure that they must have a device implanted somewhere on her body. Or maybe they are drugging her with toxic alien mind- controlling potion. Or maybe the alien has taken over her body, mind and soul and all that is left of the woman I knew is this shell of a person cowering in front of me.

Shaking and sobbing, her head bows down and away from the gun that is pointing at it. I reach out with my free hand to the healthy fiery red hair on top of her head as she looks up at me with jade green eyes and I remember the day I was sure they had gotten her.

I had arrived home late to our apartment after a hectic day at work. We had been having problems for some time now and I was very concerned for Beth's health. The

severe weight loss and sudden change of hairstyle, not to mention the fact that she had had a few scrapes and bruises that she couldn't account for, already had me on slight alert. What I came across that day had convinced me she had been abducted.

I was looking for a spare charger to my cell phone since I had left mine at work when I came across a receipt in a drawer for a restaurant I was positive I had never eaten at before and couldn't possibly have eaten at on the day the receipt was dated, because I was at a conference on the other side of town all day.

When I asked Beth whom she had eaten there with, she claimed the receipt wasn't hers and that she didn't remember ever eating at that restaurant and she needed to go to bed because she was exhausted.

"I went to that restaurant the next day, Beth. I showed the manager a picture of you and she said you were in the place at least once a week for lunch! How could you not remember something like that?!" I yell, pushing the gun into her skull.

My wife of 15 years glares up at me, tears staining her face with running mascara and bleeding blush. A rage seethes from her that can only be from the frustrated foiled attempts of whatever alien force is failing to pull the wool over my knowing eyes.

"You're out of your mind, Richard! Why can't you just let me go? We weren't happy together. For years! I admitted cheating on you but you insist on clinging to the past instead of just getting over it and moving on with your life, like I have. I'm happy now with Leonard. Please, you need to stop doing things like this. It's only going to make it worse!"

I think back to when we first fell in love. I hold on tight to those feelings and all the things we told each other. How she said I was the only one for her, that we would be together forever.

It awes me, the power they must have to flip a switch inside her and change all of that. Erase every promise she ever made to me, to make her go against everything she believed in becoming a total and complete stranger to everything she had once been.

“Richard, you need to hear me now. Leonard is hurt. It looks very bad, but we can still get him help.” She motions with her eyes and hand to the pile of wasted skin still behind me.

Glancing over at the body slithering around on the floor behind us a thought finally occurs to me. The woman I had fallen in love with all those years ago wouldn't want me to let her be gotten. She wouldn't want to be this soulless withering betrayal of a being she has slowly been forced to become. She would expect me to do something for her, to protect her from what they were turning her into. I look back down into her pleading eyes.

‘Beth, do you remember when we had a talk, years ago, about what we would do if one of us got into a horrible accident and became brain dead?’ I whisper to whatever tiny shard of the woman I once adored with all my heart is left inside the host body trembling furiously in front of me.

Whatever it is kneeling in front of me has misjudged my loyalty to her. It has no clue the lengths I am willing to go to save the woman I have loved for so many years.

“I'm sorry I let it get this far, baby.”

My hand begins to tremble as I slowly squeeze with my trigger finger. Again, lucid memories flutter through my head while the shell kneeling on the floor before me shrieks defiantly. My ears pop and the world around me becomes blurry and silent.

Stumbling towards the door to the apartment the inside of my head begins to hum as streaks of electricity flash in front of my eyes. The streaked and scratched mirror directly in front of me now reflects the image of a man I barely recognize. His face is covered in white- flecked hair, more than he has on the top of his head. Large dark bags sag under each lifeless eye, sunken into a skeletal white frame of a head that I know is my own, but couldn't pick out of a lineup if my life depended on it.

I can only hope that somehow I will find a way to tell the world my truth. That people will share my story with anyone willing to listen, because everyone needs to hear that what I did, I did for her. That they are out there and they are taking us one by one.

It is hard for me to pinpoint exactly where it had all gone wrong for Beth and me. There are too many things I can't seem to recall, key moments that may shed a dim light on everything. I scratch at the crusty scab on my forearm and it breaks off and oozes a new batch of crimson blood.

I look up into the antique dirty mirror again. I search the opposing tattered and lifeless face for anything I may find of the old me when the overhead track lighting flickers off and a creeping realization sweeps through my brain, as I realize then and there, that I too have been gotten.

