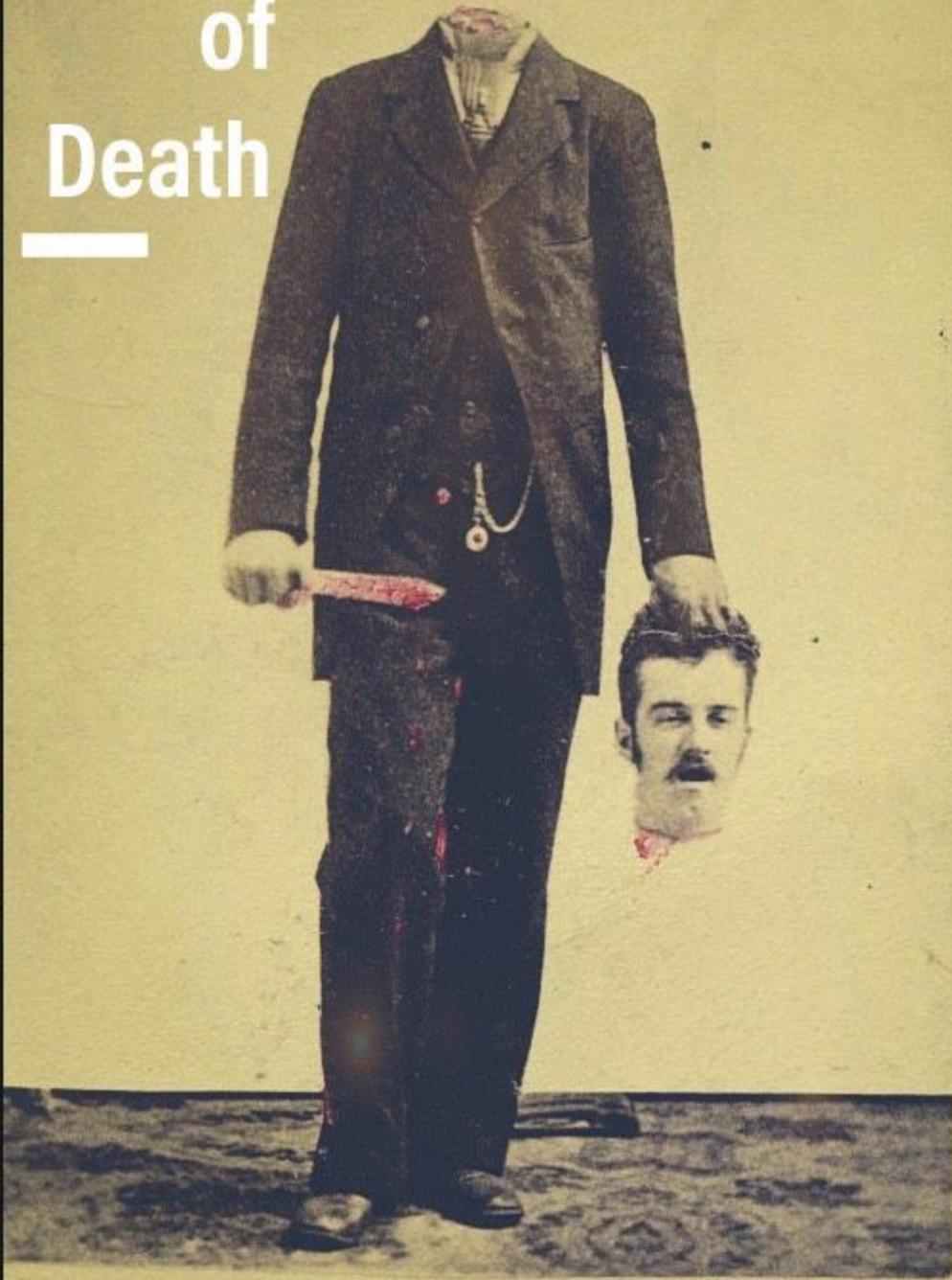


Night
of
Death



Nathan
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The Night of Death

**By
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Trick photo, decapitated man with bloody knife, holding his head

She wants to touch him, to close the few feet of space between them, but her feet feel rooted to the floor. Her head feels heavy, dizzy; her pussy already wet.

“Can I kiss you?” He asks roughly.

She nods her head and parts her lips to answer yes but he is already stepping across the room. Taking her face in his hands, his mouth is on hers before she can speak. He pushes her up against the closed office door, lifts one of her legs which she obligingly wraps around his waist. It's only his lips, only her lips, but it feels like sex – wet and soft, just the lightest touch of his tongue in her mouth. Her knees go weak and her hips loosen; she's so sticky and wet she is sure she's soaked through her panties and her jeans, but she grinds herself up against his erection regardless.

He slides one of his hands down to cup her ass, pulling her closer, the other hand slides up under her shirt to fondle her breast. Using both hands, he reaches around to unhook her bra so he can touch her bare skin. Her breasts are warm and heavy in his hands, the large nipples are not erect and feel silky smooth under his fingertips.

He pulls her shirt and bra over her head and ducks his head to suck on her tits. With his tongue, lips, and teeth he coaxes her nipples, making them rock hard.

“Mmm...” She moans softly, placing her hands on top of his head. That small moan of pleasure makes his cock twitch and pulse, makes him feel impossibly hard. He sucks harder and she cries out. She murmurs something he can't quite hear,

“What?” He asks.

“I want your cock in my mouth,” she whimpers.

He stands and pulls his shirt over his head while she works at his pants, lets them fall to the floor. Tugs down his boxers, his cock popping free. She pushes him back into her desk chair and kneels in front of him.

Without opening her mouth she runs the tip of his cock over her lips. It fascinates her, how he can be so hard, so thick and solid, yet the skin of his shaft is so soft. She lightly teases him with her tongue, running it along the underside of his erection from base to tip, swirling it around the head. He groans in frustration, grips the top of her head lightly. In one swift motion she takes him into her mouth, as much of him as she can, as deep as it will go.

“Oh, baby...” He moans, takes a handful of her hair in his fingers.

She sucks harder, opening her throat, massaging him with her tongue. With her index finger and thumb she strokes up on his cock as her mouth slides down. His hips begin to thrust up into her mouth, almost imperceptibly. She enjoys this sensation – him fucking her mouth – and moans around his cock. The vibrations make him tingle.

Pushing her away he stands and pulls her to her feet. “Get naked,” he commands and she giggles. He frowns. “I'm serious. Get naked.”

The smile fades from her face as she undoes her belt and slides her jeans over her hips. She steps out of them, unable to break eye contact.

“Take off your panties, too.” His voice is rough.

Her heart is pounding, her breathing fast. Her skin feels flushed all over. She can't believe how wet she is. But the sight of him, standing before her, naked, his cock erect and straining, his voice so serious and demanding – it makes her shake with need. Slowly, she slides her panties down her legs and over her ankles and feet.

His eyes trail over her face, around her breasts, the nipples still damp from his mouth, down her belly to the junction of her thighs. “Sit down.” She does. He kneels in front of her. “Open your legs.” She does. “Lay back.” Again, she complies. He begins by kissing her neck, then her breasts, her belly, then the insides of her thighs. He kisses her pussy lips softly. “So wet...” He murmurs and

gently begins to lick her clit.

“Ah...” Her eyes close and her head tips back. “That feels so good,” she groans, tipping her pelvis to give him better access. She lifts one leg up onto his shoulder as he laps at her cunt. Her pussy so hot and wet she feels like she's melting into his mouth. His tongue swirls around her clit and she bucks her hips. “You're gonna make me cum,” she moans, then gasps as he slides a finger inside her. She's so close, so close to her orgasm, can feel it building hot and slow between her legs. Suddenly, he pulls away. “No, no, noo...” She begs. “Please don't stop.”

“Did you like that?” He asks.

“Yes. Very much,” she whimpers. “Please keep going. Make me cum.”

He smiles. “You cum on my cock.” His words make her shiver.

“Then fuck me,” she whispers.

He pulls her out of her chair and kisses her, deep on the mouth. She can taste her pussy on his lips.

He lays her down on the floor and nudges her thighs open with his knee. Kneeling in between her legs, he slides the head of his cock up and down the slit of her pussy lips. “Baby, you're so wet,” he whispers.

“Yeah?” She asks, her voice breaking.

“Yeah,” he answers, letting the tip of his erection slide into her.

“Ohhh...” She moans. He pulls out and continues to slide up and down her wet cunt, coating the head and underside of his cock with her pussy juice. “Please,” she says.

“Please what?”

“Please, I want you inside me.”

“You want me inside you?” He asks, a smile on his face.

Her voice is straining with need. “Yes.”

“I can fuck you however I want?” He asks.

“However you want, baby. Just please.”

He pushes further. “So if I want to fuck you slow, I can fuck you slow?”

She nods.

“And if I want to fuck you hard and deep, I can fuck you hard and deep?”

“Yes,” she cries.

“And if I want to cum up inside this soaking wet pussy, I can?”

“Yes!” She calls out.

“You cum when I want you to cum?”

She nods furiously.

“Say it,” he commands.

“I cum when you want me to cum. I cum when you say so,” she cries, desperate. Without another word he slides the full length of his shaft inside her.

The impossible pleasure of being filled with the entirety of his thick cock all at once causes her to shout out loud. He leans down to kiss her mouth, shushing her.

“Oh, Jacen,” she moans. “This feels so good. So, So fucking good.” She's never been so wet. So wet and hot.

He strokes her slowly, taking his time from tip to base, feeling every inch of her soft cunt around him. Feeling like he could cum after a few short strokes. The sound of her moans and the sound of her sopping wet cunt enveloping his cock drives him crazy.

She wraps her legs around his waist and pushes up at him, her hands over his broad back.

If he keeps fucking her like this he'll cum in just a few minutes. He slips out of her and she moans in protest. Taking her by the hand he leads her to the desk. “Get up there.” He tells her. “Face the wall.”

She does as he asks.

“Now tilt that round ass out at me.” Placing her palms flat against the wall, she arches her back, pushing her bottom out over the edge of the desk. He pulls her legs farther apart and stands behind her. Slowly, he slides half his cock into her exposed pussy. Nadia turns and looks over her shoulder, biting her lip, already moaning. “Now work that pussy back down on my cock,” he advises gently. “Stroke it with your pussy, okay?”

Her eyes glaze. “Okay,” she replies. Her voice soft and shy. She pumps her hips back, sliding up and down his erection. He looks down, watching his cock disappear then reappear, slick with her arousal. Reaching around with both hands he fondles her breast, rolling her nipple between his fingertips, and with the other hand he fingers her aching clit. “Oooo...” She moans, quickening the pace.

“That's it, baby,” he whispers. “Work that cock.”

“Do you like it?” She asks.

“Yeah, I like it,” he responds, leaning forward to kiss her back and shoulders. He begins to stroke up to meet her thrusts, begins to fuck her hard. In this position, she can feel him so deep inside. It hurts, but only a little, and the pain is overwhelmed by the sheer pleasure she gets from his cock, like it was built for her pussy. His strokes quicken, come faster and harder, and she cries out. She can hear and feel his scrotum swinging forward and slapping against her pussy lips, his hand tightening its grip on her breast.

He pauses, entirely inside her. “I want you to cum on my cock,” he says in her ear. She twists her head and kisses him deeply. He lays her, again, on the floor, straightening her legs, lays on top of her, his cock sliding into her. After a time her body begins to shake, her hips pushing up to meet his thrusts. “Oh, Jacen,” she whimpers. “Oh, Jacen please don't stop.”

He doesn't stop.

“Ahh...” Her moans are louder now. “Oh, that's the spot. Just stay right there, right there. Unh...”

Their bodies are slick with sweat, his muscles tense, her limbs shaking.

“You're gonna cum for me?” He asks.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes,” she replies, her breath ragged.

“Say it's my pussy when you cum,” he says.

She nods absently. She can feel her orgasm getting close, can feel the liquid heat building in her cunt. “Shit, baby,” she moans. “Oh, I'm gonna cum. Oh, fuck, Jacen I'm gonna cum on your cock. I'm gonna cum on your cock.” She repeats. Her voice rising in pitch, the words coming faster.

He fucks her faster, can feel her pussy getting wetter around him.

“Oh, fuck. Yes, yes, Jacen. Oh, god! Oh, god! Please keep fucking me, please don't stop.” She's stretched her arms above her head, her fingers reaching. “Shit, here it comes, oh, Jacen, it's your pussy, it's your fucking pussy!” Her words dissolve into whines and moans.

He watches her come apart beneath him. “That's it baby,” he whispers. “Give it to me.” She moans like a wounded animal. “Give it to me,” he says again.

And she begins to shake and convulse, unable to control her body or the sounds it makes.

As he watches her cum he feels the ache return to his cock. Still shaking from her climax she can feel him pumping faster and harder. “Oh, Nadia,” he moans, his cock slick with the sopping mess of her pussy. A rash of goosebumps breaks out all over his body. “Oh, Nadia,” he moans again, “I love this pussy, I love this pussy!” His voice cracks as he cums. She can feel the heat of his cum inside her. A few more deep strokes and he's done, collapsed on top of her. His body is heavy, but she loves the weight of it. She slides her legs out from under him and around his waist, feeling his cock begin to soften inside of her, his breath slowing.

“This is what I had in mind one last time,” she whispers, looking away to hide her tears.

Jacen gets up for work in the morning to the annoying blare of his phone's alarm. He fumbles in the early morning dark to shut it off and notices several missed texts and calls from Nadia. Drunk texts. Drunk calls. He's too tired to respond, scratching his ass under his boxers as he half stumbles to the bathroom and into the shower, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

The shower is steaming; heavenly, hot water running down his body and waking him from the night's slumber. Eyes closed and face beneath the spray of water he recalls the dreaming that is fading from memory. Dreams drift away so swiftly after waking. He replays it over and over in his mind in hopes of remembrance of every detail. He dreamt of Betsy Eire. A woman he hasn't seen in twenty years. His first love. His first heartbreak. When they broke up they were still kids. Eighteen, nineteen years old. He regrets the way it ended. They had a screaming argument. Jacen can't remember what it was about. He sees himself lying on the hood of her car yelling at her not to leave him as she drives away. She had an abortion. Maybe men aren't supposed to have the right to be involved in the decision but the abortion hurt and haunted him. It still haunts him all these years later. If she would have asked him, he would have said no to the abortion. She didn't ask him. She told their circle of friends that he was psycho. They knew him. Knew he's an emotional drama queen. He's matured in the many lives he's lived since then.

In the dream they'd run into each other on the street. Became acquainted again. Became lovers again. Jacen wonders where this is coming from. He hasn't thought of Betsy in years. Her family were millionaires. They did not approve of him. The classic tale of the nice girl dating the bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks. Well, she wasn't quite a nice girl. She loved to drink and party.

He brushes his teeth, uses mouth wash, dresses. Looks at his phone on his bed and decides to read the text messages and listen to the voicemails from Nadia before leaving for work. Wishing she would leave him alone. Feeling guilty for having sex with her again.

The first text message: "ihgifvi;vivlv". The rest are similar. A few fuck yous. You are a selfish ass hole prick. Son of a bitch. Cocksucker.

He puts the phone on speaker and listens to the message. All of them are dead air except one: *"Jacen. You fucking bastard. How many years have we known each other? And how many times have I emailed or called you when you were hurting? When you just felt sad of when you'd broken up with someone or been broken up with? And how many times did I remind you what a good, valuable person you are and how much I cared about you?"*

"How often did I ask about you and your work? Or read and comment on your work? Edit hundreds of pages for free? How often did I give enough intellectual consideration to your ideas that we could sit and have a conversation about them?"

"How many times did I call you or answer the phone when you wanted to get off? And how many times did I do and say all the things you wanted me to?"

"How many months, how many years sometimes, did you ignore me when you were using or when you were involved with someone? No explanation. No apologies. You just cut me out of your life for significant spans of time and then, when it was convenient for you, you popped back up again. And how many times did I just accept you back?"

Now how many times did you ask me about my work? About what I do? Do you even know what I'm studying? What my interests are? What my taste in music or movies or books are? I bet you don't. And I could very easily answer those questions about you. I know what bands you like and what authors you admire. I know you. And you don't know me. You don't know me at all. Because you've never cared to get to know me. And this is why I have to laugh. Because you don't know the first thing about me. Because you don't ask.

"And how many times did you do or say anything that demonstrated that you gave my work or opinion any sort of value? I will be the first to admit that I can be an angry bitch. I'm frequently smug

and arrogant and yes, I like to be in control. But I'm also loyal and a good listener and a good friend, and I value you as a whole person. I like to talk to you and be around you, and whether or not I'm getting fucked doesn't factor into that equation.

“The only way I have value for you is as something to fuck. You've rarely, if ever, had interest in me as a person. And I know what you'll say. You'll tell me I'm a prude. It isn't a big deal. No matter how you spin it, the bottom line is that I'm just like anyone else to you. You will do whatever it takes to get what you want. You're not interested in a relationship; you're interested in self-gratification.

“You matter a lot to me. You're one of the most significant people in my life and I had hoped on knowing you for a long, long time. But it's clear to me that the only value I have for you is a warm place to put your dick, and that's fucking bullshit.

“I can't remember the last time, if ever, that you've told me you cared about me. Or that you thought I was smart, or interesting, or funny. Or even the last time you asked me how I was doing, how my life was going, how my family was. And I always ask you about your relationships, your job, everything. Because I give a damn about you.”

Jacen sits silent on the bed holding his phone feeling like a piece of garbage. He knows she is right. Everything she said. He doesn't have the words to respond. She does know him and he is a selfish, self-centered bastard. He wonders what is wrong with him. Why does he push away people you care for him. Nadia deserves better than what he has to offer. She deserves better than the way he treats her. She is an intelligent, strong woman. She deserves a man that will love and respect her. Jacen is an emotional mess. He doesn't know what he wants. He treats sex like a drug. Getting off. Getting high on orgasm.

With a long sigh he pushes himself off the bed and pockets the phone to leave for work. At the same time telling himself, committing himself to staying away from Nadia. He doesn't want to hurt her again. The only way he can protect her is to stay away. Too stay away forever.

He walked down the stairs with slumped shoulders. Any longer and he'll be late for work. Out the door and...

There is a man sleeping on the porch? First thought. Some drunk bum passed out. A flash of anger. But the candle...

Jacen's eyes are wide and fear makes him gasp. A rush of terror through his body. Up from his stomach and into his heart. The man is wearing a green Army jacket, worn blue jeans and dirty sneakers. Tan skin, pocked scarred cheeks, long back hair laid out like a fan or halo around his head. Not sleep. The stillness of death. There is no life in the hard, slack expression and closed eyes. A white candlestick sticks out of his mouth burning, wax dripped down over the dead man's face. He must have been there for hours. The candle burning since night.

The corpse is laid out with purpose. Legs straight. Arms at his side. Hands flat.

Jacen staggers back in through the front door of his home, panting, he calls the police. “911. What's your emergency?” A female voice asks.

“A dead body.” He answers with no hint of emotion. “There is a dead man on my porch.” His next thought is that he will be late for work today.

Jacen ended up calling into work and telling his supervisor he wouldn't be in. The police showed up six minutes after he called them. After several hours of their questions and examination of the crime scene he couldn't handle it any longer. He felt the need to get away. It seemed like the the police weren't ready to rule him out as a suspect. He is innocent but still frightened. The dead man's name is Logan Lynch. Jacen doesn't know him. Never heard of him. He told the police he needed to

leave for awhile, worried they wouldn't let him go. He lives close enough to downtown that he decided to walk to a coffee shop. The walk would clear his head. The fresh air needed. The neighbor's curious, excited stares annoyed him.

Inside the coffee shop he feels a bit more relaxed. He sits in a familiar booth next to a window view of the street; a newspaper and a white chocolate mocha in hand. Jacen lets out a long tense sigh and gazing out the window not truly focusing on anything. The coffee is good.

Who is Logan Lynch? Why is he dead? On Jacen's porch? A burning candle in his mouth? It seems like something out of a horror movie. Insane. Macabre.

“They won hockey game.”

A familiar voice ordering coffee at the register? Jacen glances at the blonde woman. Her back is turned to him. She's speaking on a cell phone. It can't be.

She turns away from the registers and their eyes meet. Jacen is a deer caught in headlights. Her mouth drops open and her eyes widen.

Betsy Eire.

A memory. Twenty some years ago. Betsy and Jacen live together in a tiny one bedroom apartment. They are young, naive, and beautiful. They feel invincible and lost in love. Jacen has a bag of balloons they are blowing up together. A variety of bright colors. They laugh and talk until every balloon is blown up.

“Let's set them free.” Jacen suggests.

Betsy gives her cute, full crooked smile. Jacen think she looks like a cross between a young Meg Ryan and Alicia Silverstone. But she is her own woman. A unique beauty and he can't believe she wants to be with him. “Okay.”

The climb out the window of their second story apartment and stand together on the old metal fire escape. It's night. The street is quiet. As the watch dozens of balloons blow and bounce down the street and sidewalk Betsy looks him in the eyes, holding his hand, her smile beaming. “This is the most romantic thing I've ever done.”

They kiss.

Jacen is speechless in the coffee shop. The last time he'd seen Betsy it was a few months after their dramatic breakup. They were both driving down a busy street near the mall. She flipped him off. The look of anger in her face ripped deep into his heart. He only looked at her as they drove passed each other. She went from loving him to hating him. She was pregnant and he didn't know it. Later he realized she must have truly hated him to have the abortion. He knew he wasn't someone that anyone would expect to be a good father. He would have. He would have stepped up. His friend Stan had told him about her sobbing when she told people about the abortion. Jacen hasn't seen Stan in years either.

Betsy stands frozen, staring at him with a cell phone in one hand and a coffee in the other. “I'll call you later.” She tucks the phone into a purse hanging off her shoulder. Then she stands there longer, scowling.

Jacen feels guilty. His stomach churns. He can't look away because he doesn't want her to go away. She hates him still. It's in her eyes. To his surprise she sits at the booth across from him and says, “Jacen Jung.”

“Hi.” Jacen says so softly it's almost a whisper. “Betsy Eire.”

They only look at each other. They both aged. They have the same blue eyes. Both still attractive, stylish dressers. Well kept. Both just beginning to have wrinkles. A few at the outer edges of their eyes and the foreheads. The first few grey hairs appearing. Jacen feels like he is going to explode. The anger vanishes from her face.

Betsy's eyes fill with tears and looks away to hide. Jacen feels his own eyes warm. He blinks to hold the tears back but it causes a single teardrop to quickly run down his cheek.

“I fucking hate you, Jacen.”

“I know.”

She looks back at him. Her mascara slightly running. “That's all you have to say?”

“I love you.”

Betsy looks up at the ceiling using her fingers to stop the tears and fix her mascara. “Oh, shit.” She chuckles. Looking back at him with softer accusing eyes. “Be serious.”

“I do. I love you. I always have. You as beautiful today as the first day we met.”

A memory twenty some years ago. Memories. Jacen storming out of the apartment in a rage. He's jealous. Betsy's sister has brought some friends over to the house. He kicks the cat out of his way as he goes. He'd always regretted that. He was an emotional ball of fire in his youth.

A couple of days later they talk on the phone. His voice. “Please come over.”

“Alright.”

His heart pumped with excitement. She was so beautiful standing in the doorway.

Maybe I'm Amazed by Paul McCartney and *Wings* played softly from the radio.

“I need you.” Jacen cried. “I love you. Please don't go.”

“I have to.” Betsy cried.

“I know you love me too.” Jacen cried.

“I'm leaving now, Jacen.”

“No!” He held up his arms to block her from leaving.

She pushed passed him and walked out the door.

He watched as she started her car. He had to do something. Before he knew what he was doing he was on lying on the hood of her car begging her not to leave.

“Get off my fucking car, you psycho!” She screamed, her face red with anger as she backed out of the driveway.

Jacen rolled off and sat in the street sobbing as he watched her tail lights fade into darkness.

Back in the coffee shop. Back to the afternoon Jacen found a corpse on his porch.

“I hated you for a long time.” Betsy sniffles. “Then I forgot about you.”

“For a long time I hoped you would come back.” Jacen confessed and sips his coffee, happy she is seated across from him. “Until I had to forget because it hurt so much. I forced myself not to think of you.”

Betsy takes a deep breath, collecting herself. She looks at Jacen and smirks. That crooked little smile, so perfect. Blue eyes alive with electricity. “What am I doing?” She shakes her head. “Have a good life, Jacen.” She begins to stand.

“Betsy, wait.” He begs.

She does. She sits and looks at him seeming wiser than he is. Waiting for him to speak.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything."

She nods. "It was a long time ago."

"I'm still sorry. I made mistakes. I just want you to know that. And to know I still love you."

Her nostrils flare with anger. "Do you want me to forgive you?"

Jacen's eyes drop. His head shakes. He whispers. "You don't have to forgive me. I understand."

She doesn't leave. Her arms cross. He watches as a dozen emotions mix across her face.

Jacen speaks with tender passion. "I was an immature, selfish son of a bitch. I was nineteen and didn't know anything about life. You put up with a lot and I didn't deserve you. It took years before I finally got my shit together. Losing you was the greatest mistake of my life."

It looks as if she might cry again. Memories dance through her mind. Good and bad. The abortion. The arguments. His mistakes. The romance. The smiles. She can remember the first night they made love. He was so frightened. An inexperienced boy, but they made love until the sun rose. She remembers wrapping Christmas presents together. When the wrapping paper was gone and all that was left were the cardboard cylinders the boy Jacen picked they up and they pretended they were swords and fenced all across the universe and living room, laughing with pure joy. She remembers him giving her massages. The stupid, inconsiderate things he would say without thinking. He was a lost child so in need of love and attention.

Betsy sips her coffee. "Are you married?" She glances at his finger. No ring.

"Divorced. You?"

"Divorced. Do you have kids?"

"Yes. Two boys and two girls. Half live with their mom the other have are off to college."

"That's a lot of kids. My son is in college too. I'm very grateful for him."

"That's wonderful." Jacen smiles.

"I've found Jesus." She tells him.

"Oh." He's taken back. When they dated all those years ago her mother was a fanatic Christian. She would get drunk and leave messages on their phone accusing them of being devil worshippers. He never saw this coming. He nods, resolving it quickly in his mind. "I believe in God."

"My family hated you."

"Your grandmother liked me."

"That's true." She tries not to smile.

"It's great to see you."

"You too, Jacen." She stands. "I'm glad you're doing well. I forgive you."

"Thank you." He stands. "Let me walk you out?"

"Sure." Betsy shrugs.

Outside they stand on the sidewalk next to a parking meter. Pedestrians buzz by. People sit at outdoor tables eating, drinking coffee, smoking. A bald man in a peach orange robe dances by singing, "Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare." The monkish man is lost in bliss.

"This is me." She takes keys out of her purse nodding at a sleek new black car.

"Nice." He smiles.

"Goodbye, Jacen." She opens the car door.

"Have dinner with me?"

"What?" Her expression concern.

"I'd like to spend some time with you. Just talk."

"You had your chance a long time ago."

"Do you believe people can change?"

She studies him closely. "Did you ever ask about me?"

"In the beginning. As years went by life changed. The people I knew no longer knew you. High school friends went off and found careers, started families."

"I was always curious when I would hear some gossip about you. "It's been years since I've thought of you."

"That's life. We all grow up."

"Some of us."

"Hey."

She chuckles. "I believe you've changed. Still Jacen though."

"Dinner?"

"Okay. Fine. Dinner. One dinner to catch up. Nothing else."

"Tonight. Sushi."

"Really?" She grins.

"Yes." He smile like a ray of sunlight.

She smiles back. "Am I going to regret this?"

"Never."

"What time?"

"Six?"

"Seven."

"You're on."

"My number is 867-5309."

He programs it into his phone. "Thank you."

"I'll see you tonight."

He feels butterflies flutter in his stomach and the sidewalk like clouds beneath his feet as she drives away. He feels so good he forgot there is a dead body on his porch and police at his house.

As Jacen strolls home he can't stop smiling. It's a beautiful spring afternoon. The sun is shining. The birds are chirping. He sees a pair of squirrels zip back and forth up a tall tree. A grey-brown rabbit hops under a bush. An alley cat meows. And his house is in sight. The walk didn't seem to take long at all. Time was lost in memories of the ghosts of youth. Of Jacen and Betsy's fiery love affair. She still loves him. He knows it. He doesn't even care about the police cars at his house. Four police cars. Strange they're still there. At least so many.

Up the front stairs and into through the porch door. He's astonished and angered that the dead body of Logan Lynch is still on his porch. Why haven't they taken him to the morgue or coroner or something? It doesn't seem right.

Inside his living room all is quiet. There is no sign of the police. Other than a mess of coffee cups and his own things out of order. "Hello?" He walks through the dining room and into the kitchen. Empty. Silence. His body is suddenly covered with goosebumps. "Hello?"

"What the hell." He whispers. Shrugs. Heads up stairs to shower and pick out clothes for his date with Betsy.

He notices the attic door is open a crack. He never goes up there. That must be where the police are. "Hey!" He opens the door and ascends the steps. "Detective Harrelson?" Something doesn't feel right.

He steps into the attic and into a room filled of hanging bodies. His body panics and his shriek is mute as he walks through the attic trembling accidentally bumping into the causing there bodies to swing in chaotic synchronism. "Oh, Jesus God." Jacen whispers. All of the police are dead. Dead and hung by the neck. Hemp rope nooses. Eight dead men hanging. In his rush to get away he

stumbles and falls down the attic stairs completing a somersault to the bottom. He doesn't feel the bruises and scratches he's just earned.

When man is faced with horror his two most likely reactions are fight or flight. Jacen flees as fast as he can without even thinking. Animal instinct screams in his mind to survive. He dashes out to his car. Heart pounding. Sweating. Shaking. Gasping for air.

In the car as he drives away from his house trying not to speed the radio plays Johnny Cash *If I Could Read Your Mind*. A song from his last album. Just before death. His voice so aged and still uniquely melodic. But tired, like Jacen feels.

What to do? What to do?

"Oh my God." Tears wet his cheeks. "What the Jesus just happened. Oh God." He hiccups with fear.

A few minutes later he pulls over on a side street. Catching his breath. Calm. Calm. His phone rings in his pocket. He takes it out and looks at it. A text message from Nadine.

Are you just going to ignore me?

Jacen takes another deep breath and calls the police. 911. He gets a busy signal. He tries again. Again. And again. How can 911 not be answering?

Think. Think. Think.

Jacen makes another call on his phone. It rings thrice before an answer.

"Hello." The sound of Jacen's sister, Jaina.

"Hi, sis."

She immediately detects the distress in his tone. Her voice fills with concern. "What's wrong, Jacen?"

He begins to cry as he tells her the whole story of his unusual day.

"You've had a fucked up day, bro." She says. "None of it's your fault. Stay calm. I think I know why the police aren't answering the phone."

"Why?"

"There was a school shooting maybe a half hour ago." She sounds sad. "It's horrible. People don't know how many dead yet. Dozens."

"Jesus." Jacen hisses. "What is wrong with people?"

"Another school shooting." Jacen shakes his head.

"Yeah." Jaina says softly.

"I'll drive to the police station and report what's happened."

"Do you want me to come along? It's not a probably."

"No. Thank you. I can handle it."

"Alright. Let me know if you need anything."

"I will."

"Call me later."

"I will."

A short while later Jacen walks the empty halls of the police station. The lights are on. Doors open. "Hello?" He calls out again leaning over a counter. Something is wrong with this day. Could all the police be at the school shooting? Is this related to what happened at his house?

He leaves his car parked at the police station and wanders to clear his head. He thinks more about Betsy. What an unlucky day to have her step back into his life. How can he explained all that's happened today without scaring her off.

His phone vibrates in his pocket.

A text message from Nadine. *Can we talk?*

He doesn't respond and puts the phone back into his pocket. He's been such a jerk to her. He likes her as a person and enjoys the sex but he doesn't want to date her. He needs to stop it. It's so difficult to resist when it happens. No. It will never happen again.

He walks around looking at the little city. His little city. He grew up here. Everywhere he walks there is a memory.

Time drifts as he reminisces. It's already time to meet Betsy at the sushi restaurant. Another text message from Nadine.

Please?

Jacen puts the phone back into his pocket and picks up the pace to meet Betsy.

The sushi restaurant is a small local business. The chef is said to be one of the best. People come from hundreds of miles are to eat here. Housed in an old building downtown. Plaster swirls on the outside walls of the building. The sushi chef and his family live above the restaurant. It's expensive food. Quality food. A very hip spot locally to eat. He wanders through the front door still in a daze over the days deadly events.

The host is a dark haired flamboyant, conceited young man with a false smile of greeting. "Hi. Just one?"

"No. I'm meeting someone." Jacen's eyes scan the tables and booths over the murmur of voices. The sushi chef stands behind a glass counter working in front of the kitchen doors for all the patrons to see. There she is. Perfect. Sophisticated. Proper. Elegant. A woman that takes no shit. Slightly entitled. The once made love like lions. Her blond hair like the gold wisps of a goddess. A face sculpted to outdo Aphrodite. Her eyes melt Jacen's heart and her smile makes him forget everything that's happened. "I love her." He whispers.

The host rolls his eyes. "This way." He sweeps a menu off the counter and Jacen follows him to Betsy. He sees his ex-girlfriend sitting alone; she is looking up at him with a smile brighter than a thousand sun.

Jacen sits across from her. "Hi."

"Hi."

"How's it going?"

"Fine. I hope you don't mind. I order saki, misu soup, and salad with carrot dressing."

"Oh my God." Jacen grins. "You remember."

"Of course I do." Betsy chuckles.

The snotty, skinny waiter comes over to the table. His hair hangs over one eye. He's also wearing black eyeliner. "My name's Chad. Have you had enough time to look over the menu."

They order glasses of water and several types of sushi.

"I've had a crazy day." Jacen sighs. "I don't even know where to begin."

With a flirtatious smile she says, "It has been an unusual day. Unexpected."

Before Jacen can say more her phone buzzes in her purse. She takes it out and reads the text message. Her forehead crinkles with lines of concern. She types a response. "Weird, Jacen. Listen to this text my sister just sent: *Betsy. Mom, the kids and I are on the interstate back to Colorado but the traffic is back up. Not moving. The Army has a roadblock up ahead. It's kinda freakin' me out.*"

Jacen shakes his head. "A DUI checkpoint? Looking for drunk drivers?"

"The Army?"

Jacen shrugs. "Maybe it's the National Guard?"

Betsy only looks at her phone waiting for a response.

“Yeah.” Jacen sips bitter saku from a tiny ceramic cup. “That doesn't make sense.”

Her phone buzzes again. She looks at Jacen. Her face is pale with fear. “It's a quarantine. No one can leave the city. They're not letting my family go anywhere.”

“What? Why?”

“I don't know.”

Jacen's phone buzzes. He takes it out and reads another text message from Nadine. *If you don't talk to me I'm going to kill myself. I promise. I deserve closure at the very least. Talk to me or will I die.*

“Who is it?” Betsy asks, not fully invested in the question.

“No one.”

“I'm worried about my family.”

“I'm sure they'll be okay.”

“Quarantine? Do you think there is a disease here? In the city?”

“I don't know. That is freaky.”

A hoarse shriek interrupts their conversation. They both flinch as a Japanese cook dressed in all white stumbles out through grey metal kitchen doors. The cook's hands hold an unseen wound and bright red blood spreads out soaking through the white apron. A female sushi chef follows him out with rage filled screams; hacking away at the man with a meat cleaver. Blood drops splatter the walls and customers as she swings again and again.

Flamboyant Chad and all the customer scream and cry in horror as they rush to the front door to retreat from the restaurant. Jacen takes Betsy's hand and pushes their way through the small sushi crowd. They glance back as they make it out the door to see the meat cleaver wielding woman hacking the heavy blade into an old woman's back. The old woman's blood sprays her plate of sushi.

“Oh, my fucking Jesus.” Betsy cries on the sidewalk. “What the hell was that!”

Jacen shakes his head watching people from the restaurant run to their parked cars and escape. The sun is getting low in the sky. He looks at Betsy with a blank expression as she dials 911 on her phone. Half a block down the street behind her a man flies threw a large picture window of a bar. The glass crashes and sparkles across the sidewalk. Three men leap out after the one on the rolling bloody across the pavement. They begin viciously punching and kicking the downed man. One of the bar men has a pool stick he is beating the man with.

“Jesus!” Betsy turns to see the man being beaten on the street. “Jacen! The police aren't answering.”

Jacen nods and jogs toward the three men beating the man on the ground. “Hey! Back off! The guys had enough!”

They ignore him and continue to beat the man toward death.

“I said stop!” Jacen shoves one of the men away.

A police car let's its siren blurt out once like a dog's bark.

The shoved man swings at at Jacen. Jacen back steps evading the punch.

A police officer steps out of the police car.

“Thank God.” Betsy moans.

The police officer draws his gun and opens fire at Jacen and the bar men. A bullet hits one of the man beaters in the forehead and another in the chest. Both drop flat to the sidewalk like they've been hit with baseball bats. Jacen dives behind a parked car and jogs, crouching back toward Betsy.

The police officer turns and begins to randomly shoot into the street at the customer's driving away from the sushi restaurant. The sushi chef woman charges like a mad red eyed bull out into the street swinging her bloody meat cleaver and screaming incoherently. One of the police officer's bullets shatters a windshield and kills the driver of an SUV.

Betsy is screaming and crying. People in the street all around are screaming, shouting, sobbing,

fighting, wandering lethargic. The sound of gunshots ring through the air. Jacen's face twists in horror as the sushi woman turns the meat cleaver on herself, chopping and hitting her own legs, chest, and face.

“We have to get in your car!” Jacen grabs Betsy by the shoulders firmly. “Betsy we have to get out of here now!”

She gives a vigorous nod, tears streaming over her flushed cheeks, sniffing, fumbling with her keys.

Inside her car Betsy drives and Jacen watches in confusion as a man on the street stands smacking his head repeatedly against a brick wall. Each time his head impacts the brick more blood splatters out like a red wet halo of paint dripping down.

“Where are we going?” Jacen asks Betsy. She is wiping tears from her eyes as she drives. Either finding an inner strength or going into deep shock.

“The police station.”

“It's empty.” Jacen says. “I went there earlier today.”

“What do you mean it's empty?” Betsy asks.

“I mean I went there earlier today and there is no one there. Maybe the people in the jail are still locked up there but no police.”

“Why did you go to the police station?” She sounds aghast.

“To report a mass suicide in my attic.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This morning there was a dead man on my porch. Some guy named Logan Lynch. In the afternoon I found the investigating officers all hung themselves in my attic.” Jacen's cell phone vibrates in his pocket indicating a new text message.

“Logan Lynch!” She pulls the car over on a side street in a residential neighborhood. The sun is gone. Night has come. “He's my ex-husband. Jacen did you kill him?”

“What? No! Of course not!” Jacen takes out his phone and reads the text message from Nadine. *I will find you.*

Betsy shakes her head in disbelief and takes out her phone.

“Who are you calling?” Jacen asks.

“My sister.”

“I'm going to call Jaina.” Jacen nods.

They both look at each other with knowing expressions for an entire minute as neither sibling responds their calls.

“It went straight to voicemail.” Betsy finally says.

“Jaina didn't answer.”

“What's going on?”

“Everyone is going crazy.” Jacen whispers. “You saw that cop shooting everyone. The woman with the meat cleaver. Those men from the bar beaten that man to death.”

“The quarantine?”

“What else could it be.”

She takes his hand and squeezes it for comfort. Their fingers interlock.

Their eyes lock with a hundred memories flickering through their thoughts.

“I love you, Betsy. I've always loved you.”

“I love you too.” Betsy responds and the kiss. A long kiss.

Outside one of the houses suddenly explodes in flames.

They watch it burn. The firelight reflecting against their faces.

“I wish we'd found each other sooner.” Betsy whispers.

Jacen nods; still holding her hand.

“I have to kill you.” Betsy whispers again.

Jacen's eyes well up with heavy tears. “It's alright. I want to die.”

Betsy takes a black and gold pen out of her purse. Still holding hands. She jabs the sharp end of the pen into Jacen's neck.

He gasps and gurgles. Blood drips from his mouth. She jabs again and again. He puts a hand up covering his throat. The blood runs out like a faucet.

Still holding hands.

Jacen sees headlights approach.

Betsy stabs him in the shoulder and chest with the pen. Grunting with each impalement.

Still holding hands.

His shirt is soaked in blood.

The headlights get closer.

The house is burning.

From another house a man runs out the front door screaming with a knife wielding child chasing him.

The headlights collide with Betsy's parked car. The oncoming car T-bones Betsy's car.

Jacen closes his eyes during the car collision. His entire body jolts like the earth has just quake with quick volcanic rage. His body hurts everywhere.

Jacen's eyes open. Next to him Betsy's body is crush and broken. The car is on the lawn. The door and steering wheel are imbedded in Betsy's dead body.

He feels weak. Tries to take off the seatbelt with one hand; still holding Betsy's hand.

A woman stumbles from the other car. She stands in the beam of the headlights staring into the car at Jacen. Her body is trembling. Her arm broken at a sick angle. A snapped rib sticking out of her chest. Half her face hidden by blood. It is Nadine.

Jacen watches as she drops to her knees dying. Their eyes locked in approaching death. Jacen's vision blurs. A second house is on fire. The child is stabbing the man on the sidewalk. Straddled on his back. Nadine collapses illuminated by the car's headlights. He turns his head and dies looking at Betsy's broken body.

Still holding her hand.

In the news an entire town is reported as destroyed by wildfire. A national tragedy. There are no none survivors. Firefighters fought for six days to extinguish the inferno.

A document is filed away; hidden and in an unknown place. Few eyes ever see it. A documented psychological operations success. *MKUltra Phoenix Project*.

“They put it the water, man.”

