

As I was driving home one cloudy day, the sky started to darken. Everything seemed to turn pale and grey as a light rain began to fall. I had to slam on the brakes as a car pulled out in front of me, my tires skidding slightly on the damp road. I thought people would be more cautious in the rain, although, at that point, it was just a little drizzle. I had not even had to turn on my windshield wipers. Nevertheless, it appeared that I had better keep extra alert. I heard most accidents happen close to home, and I was less than a mile from my house.

Even a dreary day can be entertaining, as long as you know where to look. It was funny to watch people run from their cars with groceries, dodging raindrops as they raced to their porches. Some kids played in a puddle as their mother yelled at them from their front door. They had better listen, I mused to myself, because I thought I saw some lightning off in the distance. Just then, there was a rumble of thunder to signify that I was right and the storm was going to get bigger. Everyone began to run for shelter as the rain started to come down.

Driving by a house with a wooden privacy fence, I noticed a section of the fence was missing. As a flash of lightning illuminated the gap, I saw a woman standing there in the rain. She appeared to be wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans, and she had her arms out to either side as if she was connecting the two fence posts. With only the briefest glimpse, I could tell she was a dream girl. There was no other way to explain it. Everyone has their type or a certain look that is attractive to them, and she was mine. She was beautiful, and I needed a second look to make sure that I could believe what I had seen. I tried to look in the mirror to confirm that she was real, but I had already gone too far down the road.

The odd thing was that she was just standing there staring at me as I drove by. She was in the pouring rain. Why wasn't she running for cover? Most people seek shelter when a storm hits. As I reached the end of the street, I decided it wouldn't hurt to drive around the block and come down the street again. I was sure she would be gone. As I made the turn, it occurred to me that she could be walking down the street toward me as I circled around. How would that look to her? I could come off as a stalker. Does stalking count if you don't know the person at all? So many questions were going through my head, along with one main emotion: excitement.

As I approached the fence again, I saw that she was still there. We stared at each other again as I drove by. After I passed, I glanced at my side-view mirror to see if she was still looking my way. In the tiny mirror, I saw her head turn in my direction. I watched as she got smaller and turned into a blur in the distance. Suddenly, a horn blast jerked my attention back to the road in front of me. A car was headed right at me. I swerved out of the way, as an angry old lady gave me a bad hand gesture. She seemed pretty mad from the words she yelled at me. I guess she had a right to be upset. I almost hit her dead on.

Once I made it to the end of the road, I thanked God that I didn't hit the lady's car and I was a bit embarrassed that my mystery woman may have seen my near miss. Both of those thoughts should have been enough to put me back on the road home. Not to mention, the rain was getting heavier. I had originally chosen to drive through this backstreet neighborhood to avoid the traffic on the main roads and get home before this nasty storm hit.

But, I couldn't help but wonder about her. Why was she still there? Was she stuck? Was she being robbed and told not to move? She was in the rain in a white t-shirt with her arms spread out. Naturally, that was enough to make me want to go back around. That shirt was only getting wetter. Even if she didn't notice me the first time around, she would certainly remember me if I passed again. Three times would fall into stalker territory.

I pulled onto the side of the road. The rain was getting worse. Okay, I thought, what if she really needed help? What could I actually do to help her? I was not a cop. I could have

called the police, but, then again, what would I have said? “This lady may or may not need some help. She may or may not think I am stalking her.” My mind was running wild.

It was the simplest concept that got to me the most: If I kept going, I would never see her again. We have all felt small connections to people we pass on the street. What was it worth to me to see her one more time? She was on foot. I knew where she was. I just didn’t know anything else. I tried to convince myself that turning the car around and going back the way I came would not be considered a third time around. My heart started pounding hard as I made my decision. I pulled into the street and made a U-turn. I hoped, if she was waiting for me, that she would be looking in the opposite direction this time.

I could see the fence and the opening coming up. My heart was going a mile a minute in my chest. As I reached the gap, I could see she was no longer there. I slowed up to see if she was in the yard or maybe behind the fence. Apparently, I slowed up too much, as a guy behind me began honking his horn. I was basically parked in the middle of the street. I gave a polite wave in my rear window. Not wanting to annoy him further, I sped up and drove away, making a left turn at the next intersection. Luckily, he went straight. One less thing to worry about. As I drove down the street, questions continued to run through my head. Who was she? Why was she there? And, most importantly, was she as intrigued by me as I was by her?

Unfortunately, it seemed this close encounter would end in mystery. I pulled over again to give this moment time to sink in. I realized that I was just a passerby in her life and it wasn’t a big deal. But, what if it was? What if we were meant to meet and never did? Our lives change every second we breathe. Walk this way instead of that way and you could be hit by a car, get shot by a stray bullet, or buy a winning lottery ticket. Could I have missed the chance of a lifetime with this woman?

Alas, there was no way to know. And, it was kind of silly to be pondering this while sitting in a car in the rain. I made the decision to just go home. I put the car in drive and checked my mirrors before getting ready to pull out. As I was about to take my foot off the brake, I was startled by a knock on my driver side window. I pushed the brake back in and put the car in park. The rain was coming down hard, blurring the image through the foggy window. However, I could make out that the person outside my window was wearing a white t-shirt. My heart began racing as I realized that this was the woman. She had her arms folded across her chest, most likely because her t-shirt was almost entirely transparent from the rain. Perhaps she was mad at me for driving back and forth on her street. However, her knock seemed to be more of a gentle rap than angry pounding. I was a bit puzzled as to what to do. She seemed to notice my hesitation because she knocked again, a little bit harder this time. I quickly rolled down the window to confront her, not wanting her to get angry.

Before I could get the window halfway down, I heard her say, “I am getting wet. Can I get in?” I didn’t even answer her. I just leaned over to the passenger side and unlocked the door. As I settled back into my seat, I noticed her making her way around the front of the car and heading for the passenger door. I was so nervous that I began gasping for breath as she entered the car. I had forgotten to breathe since the moment she knocked. I was actually shaking at the sight of her. The only positive side to the cold, rainy day was that she might think my trembling was due to the weather.

“Thank you. It is really coming down hard out there,” she said as she slid into the passenger seat and shut the door. She wrapped her arms around her chest as she shivered, rubbing her hands up and down her biceps briskly. I informed her that I had an old sweatshirt and a blanket in the back seat. She didn’t hesitate to lean back and look for it. I mumbled that it

had been back there awhile and might be a little dirty. Although, I could see the goosebumps on her arms, so I was sure she wouldn't care. She pulled the shirt and blanket to the front seat.

"This will help," she said as she handed me the blanket. I was confused at first as I began to unfold it. I thought she would need it more than me.

"Can you hold that up?" she asked, flashing me an amazing smile. She had the kind of smile that made you smile. In a daze, I held the blanket up facing the front of the car. She giggled and grabbed my hands to reposition the blanket so it would face her and block my view. Now I realized what was going on. Or rather, coming off, as I could hear her wriggling out of her wet t-shirt. I heard a car drive by on the passenger side and I felt a little jealous of their better view. She finished up and told me to give her the blanket. I could see that she had on my sweatshirt, and she had wrapped the blanket around her as well. My mouth dropped open as I noticed her t-shirt and bra on the floor of the car. It dropped even further when I spotted her jeans on the floor, too. Speechless and numb, I just pointed to the jeans. She smiled at me.

"What? They were cold and wet," she responded. "I am warm and safe now."

"Safe from what?" I asked, worried about what I might have gotten myself into.

She brushed off the question. "Doesn't matter." As she thanked me again, I tried to play it low-key.

"Where to?" I asked. I didn't know anything about this woman, but I knew she needed a ride.

"I'm going wherever you are," she said with a smile. As nice as it was to hear, I did question whether she understood me correctly. I decided to try and be more straightforward.

"Where do you want me to take you?"

Again, to my surprise, she answered, "Wherever you're going."

Okay, I thought, maybe she didn't have anywhere to be and just needed to warm up. I informed her that I was just heading home. It was not far, but I could drive her somewhere if she needed me to. Her answer confused me even more.

"I'll just ride home with you."

As weird as this situation was, I couldn't help but enjoy the mystery. She was perfect and beautiful, and I felt like the hero rescuing her. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but feel that this was the high point. As the mystery was revealed, I was sure that she wouldn't be so perfect. No one could be lucky enough to pick up their dream girl in the rain on the side of the road.

I decided I was not going to fight it. If a friendship or relationship came from this chance meeting, then so be it. At the very least, I was making a memory. My day-to-day ritual could best be summed up as sleep, eat, work, and repeat. The only thing that changed was the weather. And, this rainy day was bringing me sunshine.

As I pulled out from the side of the road, she asked if she could turn on the radio. Personally, I would have preferred to chat and dig deeper into who she was. I still didn't know anything about her other than she looked perfect to me. Of course, I was struggling to think of something to say to start a conversation, so I ended up telling her that some music would be fine. As she went through the stations, I came to the conclusion that music seemed important to her. Most people listening to their car radio would just stop at the first halfway-decent song. To tell the truth, that's what I would do. But, she seemed to be searching for something special. Cruising along to any old song is fine, but, if that one special tune was playing, she wanted to hear it.

The rain had died down to a mere drizzle as we pulled up in front of my house. "So, this is your house?" she asked me as I turned off the car. I explained that it was my parents' house,

but I moved back in when they passed away. As she tossed the blanket into the back seat and reached to the floor to gather her wet clothes, my mind jumped back to her soaking wet jeans still in a ball on the passenger-side floor. I had nosy old neighbors, and a half-naked woman in front of my house would surely result in a call to the cops.

As she moved to get out of the car, I was just about to scream “No!” when I noticed that she was wearing a pair of my old sweatpants as well. I exhaled, relieved, and told her that I could have sworn I threw those pants away. She smiled and told me that they fit pretty well. I remembered finding them in the house after my mom died. They were my old gym clothes from when I was a teen. I must have kept the sweatpants with the shirt. Even though part of my mind was trying to picture her bare legs, I decided that wearing pants was a good thing. I wondered if thinking about her legs made me dirty-minded. She was gorgeous. Maybe I just wanted to find a flaw. Could somebody be too good to be true?

“Are you sure you don’t have anywhere to be?” I asked her as we entered the yard.

“Nowhere else I want to be,” she told me as she stopped to admire the house.

I wondered if she was playing with me. She did seem to take great interest in viewing the house and the yard, as if she was on vacation and taking in all the sites. She mentioned that I had a big yard and wondered whether I had to take care of the grounds by myself. I wouldn’t say that I had a big yard. It was the same as all the other ones on my block. I guess if someone wasn’t used to suburban life, they would think it was large. My backyard was a little bit bigger than the front. It had a patio with a picnic table and chairs. And, there was only a strip of about 10 feet on either side of the house. Some might say that my neighbors were too close, which was why I was worried about her getting out of the car with no pants.

As we stood there, it started to rain again, so I didn’t get to show her much more. We hustled up the steps to the front porch. The awning of the porch protected us from the rain while I looked for the key to open the front door. She noticed all my keys and inquired as to why I had so many. I explained that my job required me to open a lot of doors, so I needed a lot of keys. I worked as an on-call maintenance person for a plaza hotel downtown.

“Sounds like you’re a very important person,” she smirked.

“I wouldn’t say that,” I said, correcting her modestly. “But I do work a lot when other people take off because I have the time.”

“So, no girlfriend?” she asked as I unlocked the door. I thought of some quick-witted responses, such as “I haven’t found the right girl” or “I wouldn’t be inviting you in if I had a girlfriend”, but I decided they would come across wrong.

“No girlfriend,” I responded, simply.

“It’s a shame. You’re a good looking guy,” she said as I pushed the front door open. She walked right past me and went into the house. I stood outside the door for a second, shaking my head. I felt like she was playing with me. Was she doing it on purpose? What was her motive? Hopefully, she would let me off this hook she had me on. It was a little odd that she didn’t wait until I invited her in. She just walked into the house like she owned it. Then again, for somebody who was a bit of an introvert like me, it was probably better for her to be a little more forward.

Once inside, she looked around the living room for a moment before asking if she could use the bathroom. I pointed to the stairway that led from the living room to the upstairs hallway. “The bathroom is upstairs on your right,” I said. I held out my hands and motioned for her to give me her wet clothes. I was sure she wouldn’t want to carry them around. She dropped her clothes into my arms with a polite “Thank you” and made her way up the steps. As she

disappeared upstairs, I once again started driving myself crazy wondering what was going to happen. What should I do? Why was she even here? How can I find out about her?

To occupy my mind, I decided to run to the basement and throw her wet clothes in the dryer. I called up to her and announced my plans, in case she would come back down and wonder where I had gone. I quickly ran down the steps to the laundry room in the back of the basement. Luckily, I didn't have anything in the dryer. I chucked her clothes in and watched as they unraveled. My eyes caught her panties and bra which were balled up in her jeans and shirt. I wasn't sure if she had removed her underwear in the car. I knew she was probably gutsy enough to do it, I just didn't know if she needed to. It takes a good amount of rain to get to the undies. I could sort of make out that her bra was a pinkish color through her wet shirt, but I had not seen the pink panties before. I stared for a moment, then quickly tried to snap the dirty thoughts out of my mind. I knew I needed to get back before she got out of the bathroom. I set the dryer for thirty minutes, which should have been plenty of time to dry only a few pieces of clothing. I darted back upstairs to the living room and tried to act nonchalant as I waited for her. After about five minutes, I started pacing back and forth, wondering if it would be rude to go check on her. Just then, she made her way down the stairs, gazing at me the whole way. I could feel my nervous energy triple. I was still wondering about so many things, so I decided it was time to step up to the plate and be more aggressive.

"What's on your mind?" I asked her. But she just smiled and didn't respond. How could a simple question be so hard to answer? I was about to get frustrated, but then she giggled, which made me smile.

"Did you ever play hide and seek when you were a kid?" she asked. That seemed like an odd question but maybe she was going somewhere with it.

"Of course," I answered. "Every kid must have at some point." As I waited for her response, I was hoping she wouldn't tell me that she was the one kid that never played. Maybe I should have just said "Yes" instead of "Of course." But my worry was soon put to rest.

"Let's play!" she blurted out, laughing.

"I think I have the advantage. This is my house." She just smiled and said she didn't care about winning. She just wanted to have some innocent fun.

The word "innocent" left me a little uneasy. I mean, she didn't have to add that. Before I could confirm that she was serious, she asked if she could hide first. Realizing that the game was on whether I was ready or not, I smiled and playfully said, "Sure!"

As she started to run out of the room, I held up my hand. "Wait!" I shouted. She stopped in her tracks. "Is there a prize if I find you?"

Her mouth opened, but she didn't answer right away. It was an honest question, but I knew she could take it in a couple different ways. She looked me up and down. Just as the tension seemed to be getting uncomfortable, she smiled mischievously and raced out of the room. "You'll need to find me to see!" she called out.

I wasn't sure if the game was going to be innocent, but I was excited to find out. I started counting, trying to be loud enough for her to hear me throughout the house. As the count reached twenty, I realized that we had never settled on an amount. I yelled out, asking if twenty was high enough, but I didn't expect her to respond. It might have downgraded my impression of her intelligence if she had responded. After all, it was a classic way to trick kids into giving up their location.

Deciding that twenty was indeed high enough, I began searching every room on the first floor. I checked behind every piece of furniture and opened every closet but failed to find her.

The only other place she could have been was the basement, which could be dark and scary. I didn't want to look like a chicken if she decided to jump out at me. The best case scenario would be that I would look silly. The worst case scenario would be that I would accidentally punch her. It might be time to forfeit, I thought to myself. I called for her to come out and announced that she had won. After waiting ten seconds, I repeated myself. She could be in a tight spot, so I should probably give her more time. After another minute without a reveal, I decided to check the front and back door. Maybe she had slipped out and this was all a cruel joke. A good joke, but a cruel one nonetheless. Or maybe she had let someone else in. That thought made me walk a little faster. To my relief, both doors were still closed and locked.

I leaned against the door and sighed. I was still not sure who I was dealing with, but, for some reason, I found comfort in the thought of her face. It was burned into my mind. However, just because I was attracted to her didn't mean she wasn't bad news.

I decided to check the whole first floor again. I looked underneath every table and behind every chair, searching even in places I didn't think she could fit. When I convinced myself that she was nowhere on the first floor, I decided the only other place she could be was the basement. I had started in the living room, so she couldn't have gotten past me and gone upstairs. The door to the basement was right next to the kitchen, so it was feasible. I made my way to the basement door. I didn't want to go down there, but I knew I had no choice. I made one last attempt to call out to her before reaching for the knob. Suddenly, with a yell, she burst out from behind the door. I jumped back, momentarily startled, but then relieved once I realized what was going on. I tried to play it cool, hoping that she didn't see me jump.

"You found me!" she called out. I didn't feel like the victor, but I wasn't going to deny the win. She grinned and told me that I still needed to catch her to get my prize. I didn't know exactly what she meant, but I did know that she was the prize that I wanted. So, I chased after her as she bounded across the kitchen, making a beeline for the side door. I hoped she would not be able to get it unlocked and run outside before I could stop her. My thoughts returned to my neighbors. Seeing me chase a beautiful woman that was trying to get out of my house would definitely not look good. Of course, as she opened the door and ran out, she was laughing not screaming in terror. So, maybe it would have been alright.

But, as I exited the door, I heard her start to scream. The shouting was not due to my pursuit, however, but a steady stream of water that was pouring down the side of the house onto her. My rain spout had previously broken and was being held up by a 2x4. She must have run into the board as she came out of the house. The torrent of water had knocked her down. Her sweatshirt was sagging, drenched from all the water, and her soaking-wet hair was covering her face. She held her hands over her head as the water continued to pour down on her from the roof. I did my best not to laugh because I didn't want to hurt my chances with her. Although, I had to admit, it was funny.

As the water continued to fall and she continued to scream, I knew I had to do something to help her. I quickly grabbed an old pizza box from the recycling bin next to the house. I crouched down and held the box over her head to shelter her. As the flow of water was diverted, she used her wet hands to part her hair to either side of her face and smiled at me.

"My hero," she whispered as she stared into my eyes. If ever there was a time to make my move, it was now. I leaned closer to her to set up a passionate kiss. Her lips were full and her face was glistening from the water. For a moment, everything else just seemed to fade away. Her smile was like my landing light as I made my approach. I used my free arm to reach around her back. With one romantic swoop, I pulled her to her feet. She was standing on her tip toes,

melting into my embrace. I imagined her wrapping her arms around my neck. I needed to imagine that part, because, as I was leaning in, I moved the pizza box and a waterfall of rain suddenly separated us. We were both soaked as the torrent of water from the broken spout resumed its downpour. I hung my head in shame, as I felt like my best opportunity was lost. She noticed my disappointment and suggested that we get out of the rain. I followed her back into the house, holding the box over her head to protect her from the water.

Before coming inside, I tossed the pizza box back into the recycling bin. As I closed and locked the door, I heard her say, "We need to get out of these wet clothes." Even though I was feeling down, hearing that was enough to jump start my heart. That statement could play out in so many ways. As the different options played out in my head, I failed to answer her right away. She brought me back to reality by asking if I had any dry clothes. I didn't hesitate at her request.

"Do you want to go to my room and pick something out?" I offered.

"It's either that or walk around naked," she said. I did not respond immediately. I was sure she knew why. I shook off the thoughts running through my head. I had to be realistic. We had just met and walking around naked wasn't something that was going to happen any time soon.

I motioned for her to follow me as I headed through the living room. As I reached the stairs, I glanced back to see if she was behind me. She was walking slowly, holding her baggy wet sweatpants to keep them from falling down. The water had made them heavy enough that they were slowly creeping down her thighs. She stopped, frustrated with her stretched-out clothes, and suggested that she could just wear whatever I brought her.

"Besides," she said, "I don't want to get the carpeting wet upstairs." I smiled at her thoughtfulness. She cared about my property. That was another positive point for her. My living room had a wooden floor, so it would be easier to wipe up. I reminded her that the bathroom was at the top of the stairs.

"You can go in there," I said. "I will show you clothes from the bedroom, and you can decide what you want to wear." I convinced her that she wouldn't drip too much if she hurried. Without hesitating, she raced up the stairs past me and headed into the bathroom. I followed her to the top and turned the opposite way into the bedroom.

I began asking her a bunch of questions about her taste in clothes. That could provide some more details about her, even if it was just simple things. What color did she like? What style did she prefer? I brought up that I had some button-up shirts. I hoped that she would want one of those, because I found button-up shirts to be sexy on a woman. Unfortunately, she ended up not revealing too much, as, after I showed her another pair of baggy sweats, she motioned for me to toss them to her. Maybe loose clothes were more her style. Of course, the jeans and t-shirt she was wearing when I first saw her were not exactly loose. She may have just been in a hurry to get out of the wet clothes. I can't say I was enjoying the feeling of wet fabric on my own skin. She shut the door for privacy, and I did the same as I went about searching for clothes for myself.

I wasn't planning on running into my dream woman today. I was wearing my work clothes as I was driving home, so this was my chance to step up my game. I picked out some clothes that I had just purchased. After sliding into a nice pair of pants and neatly tucking in my button-up shirt, I checked myself in the mirror about six times. It was not like I was wearing a suit, but these brand new clothes did fit me very well. I had been saving them for a special occasion. They made me feel like I might not look out of place standing next to someone like her. Nevertheless, underneath, I still felt like she was out of my league. I was still so nervous

around her. Maybe, if I could put up a good enough front when dressed properly, I could be more confident, take more chances, and try to make her the nervous one. As I got ready to leave the room, I imagined her reaction. She would already be waiting in the hall and immediately step back, as my change in appearance would take her by surprise. "You clean up well," she would say with a smile.

However, when I opened the door, I didn't receive the reaction I had imagined. The bathroom across the hall was empty. I shouldn't have been surprised, since she was only slipping on a pair of sweats. I figured she must have gone downstairs without me. I held out hope that I would still make an impressive entrance as I headed down to the living room. I stopped a few steps from the bottom, thinking that I would look even better from a higher angle. But, as I glanced around, she was not in sight. I also noticed that the puddles of water that we had left on the living room floor appeared to be gone. If she had started to dry my wet floor, I liked her even more.

Just then, I heard her coming from the kitchen area. I tried to situate myself in a good pose on the railing of the steps. When she saw me, she stopped and smiled. The room seemed to get brighter. The lady had a presence that made me want to stand and stare. Unfortunately, she didn't offer any comments about my clothes. I tried to think positively. Maybe she liked me no matter what I was wearing. I could honestly say that was how I felt about her.

I watched as she walked across the living room, inspecting everything. I nervously noted that she appeared to be casing the place for a robbery. I hoped my infatuation with her wasn't clouding my judgment. She stopped at a shelf of my mom's antique ornaments. As she ran her fingertips over a ceramic doll, I couldn't help but wish I could switch places with the figurine. I started imagining how soft her touch must have been. As she returned the doll to the shelf and leaned against the display case of my mom's precious items, she made a remark about how big the house was.

"Do you live alone?" she asked me. She might have been wondering if I had a roommate since the house was so big.

"Yes," I replied. I kept my answer short because I didn't know where the conversation was heading. I had told her before that I moved back in after my parents passed. This might be her way of finding out more. I was still unclear about her intentions.

She seemed to sense my nervousness as she moved across the room and slid onto the couch. She crossed her legs and looked up at me. "I wonder what's going through your head right now," she said with a sly smile. I didn't answer, afraid I would say the wrong thing. However, my silence could have come off as even more creepy. I had a ton of questions and she did just give me an opening to ask them. I wanted to go sit next to her, but I still wasn't sure of our boundaries. She seemed more comfortable in my house than I was. There was an awkward silence, and then she suddenly jumped up from the couch. For a moment, I was afraid I did something wrong. I immediately started to apologize when she interrupted me.

"I thought I heard the dryer stop," she said. I hadn't heard anything, but I was relieved to be saved from an awkward situation. She quickly headed toward the basement door. Her eagerness to get there surprised me, although I assumed she was anxious to get back into her own clothes. I cautiously followed her into the basement.

The dryer was still on, so apparently that was not the noise she had heard. She opened the door, killing the power to the machine. I was hoping her clothes would be dry enough for her. She grabbed the warm clothes and piled them on top of the machine. As she reached for the bottom of the shirt she was wearing and began to lift it, I realized that she was planning to



change right there. I averted my eyes, catching a glimpse of her bare back as I turned my head. I quickly stepped out of the doorway into the other room. Part of me wanted to take a peek, but I knew that I might lose my chance with her if she saw me.

As I stood outside the door, I began turning the situation over in my head. I should leave her to get dressed. But, what if she had scars or bruises on her body? That would let me know if I was getting into something dangerous. Maybe a quick look would be alright. I eased around the edge of the door frame and was confronted with a flawless body, her gorgeous bare backside exposed to me. I did not expect her to be nude. I assumed she would have slipped on her panties first or, at least, used the long shirt to keep covered until she had put on her underwear. Then again, she was preparing to remove her shirt before I turned my head. I knew I should look away, but I stood mesmerized as she slipped on her panties. She began to dress a bit faster, putting her bra on so quick that it was like she was racing someone. As she was about to put her head through her shirt, she stopped in mid-motion as if she was spooked by something. I suddenly snapped out of my trance. Oh my God, can she see me watching? Her back was turned, but maybe she could see me in a reflection or something. I quickly turned away, and stepped back out of the room.

I cringed as I waited to hear some movement from the laundry room. After a few seconds, I decided to take a quick peek to see if everything was okay. Hopefully, she had not noticed me and was continuing to get dressed. As I again eased my head around the corner, I saw that she was still frozen in place, as if in deep thought. I was not sure what was going on. At least I was able to admire her body, which was just as beautiful as her face. But, did she want me to enjoy the view or not? If something was bothering her, I wished that she would just tell me. I was terrible at talking to women. As my eyes moved across her lovely curves again, I was startled when she finally began to move. Instead of pulling the shirt down over her head, she removed it completely and dropped it on top of the dryer. I felt like that was finally my cue to look away, and I took a few steps into the other room. Maybe her shirt was still wet. Part of me was excited about the prospect of her walking around in only underwear as she finished drying her other clothes. I shook my head, trying to put that thought out of my mind. I was a bit disappointed in my actions thus far, but I would most likely have regretted not taking a peek. I felt like the right thing to do now would be to stay put. I sat down on an old bar stool and waited to see what would happen next. After a few seconds, she appeared in the doorway, still only wearing her underwear. My eyes went wide. I looked away rapidly, not just averting my eyes but shutting them tight.

“Sorry, I thought it was safe to wait here,” I said, trying to be a gentleman. I assumed she would head back into the other room, but my ears told a different story as I heard her step closer. I didn’t want to look so I kept my eyes closed. I could feel her presence right in front of me. Her breath hit my face. Any boundaries I was worried about crossing were clearly being crossed. Was she just fooling with me or did this really mean something? At that point, I didn’t really care that I was unsure of her intentions. I shivered as she touched my hand with her fingertips. The touch I had envisioned before was really happening. I started to tremble nervously, and I hoped that she wouldn’t notice. My eyes were still closed. I felt her place one of her legs across my thigh. My nervousness began to mix with excitement. As she straddled me, I felt her body press into me. She took my hands and placed them on the small of her back, then slid them down a bit. Something very good was happening. I almost didn’t want to ruin it by opening my eyes, but I also knew that I did not want to miss any more of this glorious moment, so I slowly opened them and looked into hers. Her stare was intoxicating as she settled comfortably into my

lap. Her focus was so determined, so strong, and so passionate. She bit her bottom lip. I knew that what she had planned was my fantasy come to life. I was sure my first kiss from her was only seconds away.

Suddenly, she seemed to hesitate. As the time passed for her to make her move, the situation began to feel more awkward. Having her close to me was a special moment, but I began to fear that she was starting to have second thoughts. I could see the mixed emotions in her face as she moved to rest her head on my shoulder. That seemed to indicate that she trusted me, although something was obviously troubling her. I hoped my excitement was not making her uncomfortable. I made the decision to move my hands up from her backside. As I slid them up to her lower back, I felt something move them back down. It took me a moment to realize it was her. At first I thought she had lost her balance and grabbed my hands to steady herself, but then she brought her head back up face to face. I smiled, happy that she was feeling more comfortable and also at the possibility that our special time might be resuming. I felt like we both wanted the same thing, but, when she failed to return my smile, I could tell that she still seemed to be on the fence. I let my hands slowly drop down to the side. She didn't make a move to return them this time. I knew that most women like a confident guy, but I wasn't sure what she wanted from me. Part of me wanted to ask her what was wrong, to find out what was troubling her and make it better. Another part of me wanted to stand up and sweep her into my arms. Although, she may have had an abusive relationship in the past and a dominating guy would turn her off. If that wasn't what she wanted, I would blow my whole chance.

As I debated what to do, she made my decision for me as she climbed off and slipped quickly back into the laundry room. I began to panic, worried that she was regretting her decision to get involved with me. I leapt up and followed her into the laundry room. I feared that I might only have a chance to ask one question before she asked me to leave so she could finish getting dressed. Of course, I had already seen her in her underwear, so getting dressed in front of me should not be much of an issue. As I entered the room, I blurted out, "Was it me?"

"No," she said without even turning around to face me. I was relieved until she added "And yes." My heart sank. She grabbed her clothes from the top of the dryer and ran past me out of the room. When she reached the stairs, she turned to me, holding the clothes in front of her as if she was embarrassed or ashamed of something.

She started to ask a question. "Can you...?"

"Wait! Please wait!" I cut her off. "Whatever it is, I want you to know we can deal with it together." I explained to her that she needed to trust that I could handle her secrets. I was laying my heart out there, even though I wasn't sure I could handle it. Does she have an abusive boyfriend? Is she married? What if she has kids? Could I honestly say that I was ready for any of that?

As she stared at me, I noticed that her eyes appeared to glaze over. I found myself looking up and down her arms, searching for signs of drug use. I was scared of what might happen. I slowly held up my hands, palms out, as if to signal a timeout.

"You're right," I said, trying to buy some more time. I confessed to her that, even though I didn't know her, my heart ached when I looked at her beautiful face. I loved her look, I was just being honest. But, that was just the outside. "I really want to know the person inside," I told her. "And if you didn't want to know me, why are you here?"

She looked frustrated at my question. "What if I were to tell you that you already know everything about me?" she asked quietly.

I paused a second to take in that weird question, before admitting, "I would be even more confused than I am right now." I couldn't help but smile as I said it. She seemed to be playing with me. I quickly realized I was wrong.

"And that's the problem," she said as she turned away from me, almost in tears. She hurried up the basement steps and disappeared upstairs.

I stood silently and watched her leave. My first thought was to chase her, but, if she was serious about getting away from me, that scenario could end up with me chasing a crying half-naked woman down the street. I decided it would be best not to follow her. Hopefully, she would take the time to put her clothes on before she left. I waited a moment, listening for the front door to slam, but heard nothing. Maybe she decided to wait until she calmed down before making the decision to leave or stay. I listened to the silence, wondering what she was doing up there and why it was so quiet. I began playing scenarios out in my head. She could be crying herself to sleep on the couch. Or maybe she was quietly sneaking out to get the police. I sat back down on the bar stool, content to wait and think.

After a good hour, I made the decision to take my chances and go upstairs looking for her. I couldn't stay in the basement all night. As my foot hit the first stair, the loudest creaking sound in the world echoed through the basement. I cringed, wondering if she heard me. I was nervous about seeing her, but I also felt a bit silly sneaking upstairs in my own house. I shook my head and continued up the stairs a little slower than normal. At the top, I took a deep breath and walked into the kitchen.

I looked around, but there was no sign of her. I began to head for the living room before stopping abruptly at the refrigerator. I reached in and quickly grabbed a soda. If she was still in the house and unhappy to see me, my excuse could be that I came up for a drink. I opened the can and took a sip. I felt a bit more comfortable now. I headed out of the kitchen, pausing in the doorway to the living room. I could see the recliner and the section of the couch near the front door were empty. If she was in the living room, she must be on the section of the couch adjacent to me. I cautiously leaned around the door frame, but, when the couch came into view, the only thing on it was a pillow.

Convinced she wasn't in the room, I entered without hesitation. I knew that I had not heard the front door. If she wasn't in the kitchen or the living room, she must have gone upstairs. Any other time, the thought of her waiting in my bedroom would be a dream come true. However, in this situation, I had to admit I was a little scared. What mixed message was she sending me? I could not figure this woman out.

I ascended the stairs and moved cautiously into the hall. I reached for the knob to the bedroom door, but I didn't have the courage to turn it. I decided to check the bathroom first. There was no light coming from under the door, although, it was still partial daylight outside. Maybe the bathroom window was providing her with enough light. As I gently rotated the knob, I could tell that the door was not locked. I stopped the turn halfway as it occurred to me that she might be using the bathroom. I should knock first, I thought. Even if she was in the bedroom she would hear me. Any response from her would give away her location.

I took a deep breath and knocked. I paused a moment, waiting, but there was no answer. It appeared I wouldn't be getting any help from her. I turned the knob and slowly opened the door. I stopped halfway. The odds were against her being in here, but it would be awkward if I caught her in a compromising position. I knocked again on the half-open door and received no response. Convinced that the room was vacant, I threw the door open and my suspicion was confirmed.

Faced with an empty bathroom, I took a quick drink to calm my nerves. As I stepped back into the hallway in front of the bedroom, my thoughts turned to the attic door located at the end of the hall. I didn't think that she would have gone up there. At least, I hoped that she wouldn't. I always had a fear of the attic stemming from childhood when a cousin locked me inside. At this point, I actually felt just as nervous checking the bedroom. I put the attic out of my mind and turned my attention to the bedroom door. If she was still in the house, chances are, that was where she was hiding. I would just have to be respectful and follow her lead. I didn't want her to feel like she had done something she regretted, especially when I was that regret. With so many unanswered questions, I was ready to find out what was going on with her. It would be awkward to have our first meaningful discussion in my bedroom, but that was her choice.

I knocked on the door and waited a moment. No answer. I knocked again, a bit louder, and was met with silence once again. Frustrated, I opened the door, my eyes focusing in on the empty bed. The covers were a little messed up, but that was just how I had left them. She was not there. I supposed that she could be hiding in the closet, which would be extremely weird. I decided to check anyway, shoving clothes out of the way until I was sure it was empty. This situation was getting more and more ridiculous, and my patience was wearing thin. I was past trying to spare her feelings. Determined to end this game of hide and seek, I headed out of the bedroom and stormed down the hall to the attic stairs. The attic was dusty, creepy, and full of junk. Who in their right mind would go up there just to think? Annoyed, I climbed the stairs and squeezed into the narrow doorway. I often wondered as a child how my parents even got stuff through it.

"Look, you need to come out!" I announced as I barged through the attic door. She didn't respond. I would call her by name, but it had just occurred to me that I didn't even know it. "Come out! I'm going to lock the door!" I yelled threateningly, squinting as I searched the dark corners. The place still gave me chills.

Again, there was no answer. Just more chills. I didn't really want to lock the door. What if she was just not answering me? I decided to head downstairs to the kitchen. I had bought a powerful flashlight a few months ago due to a blackout in my neighborhood. A drunk driver ran into a power box, and I was without electricity for two days. All my food went bad, and, even worse, the darkness in the house seemed to bring out all my nightmares. I grabbed the flashlight from the drawer and turned it on to check the batteries. The light shone as bright as the sun. Confident I could thoroughly check the attic, I climbed back up the stairs and through the narrow doorway.

"I thought we had something special," I said, disappointedly. "Now you have me searching for you like a rat in my house." I aimed the light into the dark corners of the dusty attic, thinking to myself how I originally thought this would be a love story not a horror movie. My nerves were even more unsettled as the light made harsh shadows on the walls. Trying to ignore the eerie reflections, I moved the light from one side of the attic to the other. As I completed my sweep, I was disappointed not to find her but relieved that I could get out of the spooky crawlspace. I hurried down the stairs and stopped at the bottom. Not sure what to do next, I made one last attempt to locate her.

"Come out!" I called out for a final time. But, I was met with only silence.

Faced with the reality that I might never see her again, my heart started to hurt. I tried to talk myself out of my misery, thinking of all the usual excuses to justify this kind of outcome. Maybe she had a dark side. I was better off without her. Someone else would surely come

along. Despite all of that, I still wondered what I did wrong. I wasn't overly aggressive. Maybe that worked against me. She used the word "hero" earlier. Maybe she needed one. I guess I didn't do enough. I resolved that I would be stronger if there was a next time.

But, would there be a next time? Should I try to find her again? If someone leaves, nine times out of ten, they don't want you around. Nevertheless, that ten percent chance was worth it in my mind. I remembered where I had first seen her, but I didn't know if she would ever go back there. If I hoped to meet her again, that was where I would have to start. As I returned the flashlight to the kitchen drawer, I could not get the idea out of my mind. I looked out the kitchen window at the darkening sky. Even if I were to go out and search for her, I most likely would not be able to find her in the dark. My heart said to go, but my mind said to wait until morning. So, I decided to go to bed. I dozed off here and there, only sleeping about an hour and a half combined.

The next morning, I started out early. Most people aren't out at daybreak, but I was worried that the woman might have spent the night outside. That would have been somewhat silly of her, since my place was better than no place at all. I still had no idea where she had come from. I circled the block about twenty times, finding no sign of her. I was hopeful no one had called the cops on me for as many times as I circled the block. My inability to locate her gave me mixed feelings. I was hopeful that she had found a place to stay, although I naturally wished that it would have been with me. I gave up the search for the day, but resolved to continue. I repeated my search the next day, circling the block at a different time. By the third day, I not only doubted that I would ever see her again, but I also began to realize how stupid it was for me to be chasing after a woman I didn't know and who most likely didn't want to be found. I resolved to make one last drive through the neighborhood and then give up my thus far fruitless search.

As I passed the gap in the fence one last time, I thought back to the day I had first seen her there. Unlike that cold and rainy day, this day was nice and sunny. It seemed like there were more bushes and trees in the abandoned yard behind the fence. As I pondered the different scenery, the woman suddenly appeared before my eyes. She was standing in the gap wearing the same t-shirt and raggedy jeans that she was wearing when I first saw her. I slammed on my brakes, causing the car behind to do the same. They blasted their horn at me, but I ignored it. I quickly looked out the window behind me to find that she was no longer there. Could my mind have been playing a trick on me? I put the car into park and jumped out. The angry man in the car behind me also jumped out, thinking that I was going to confront him for honking his horn. I ignored him again. I didn't want to take my focus off the place where I had spotted her. I started frantically looking in every direction in case she was on the move. I must have come off as a crazy person to the man in the car. His anger seemed to dissipate when he realized that I was in a daze. Luckily, the guy was nice enough to ask me if I was okay. That snapped me out of my hysterical focus on the area around the fence. I made up an excuse about an animal running into the road in front of me. I profusely apologized to the man and got back in my car.

Desperately trying to calm myself down, I put the car in drive and started to head back home. Every part of me wanted to circle the block again, but I knew it was time to face the facts. It was time to move on. It doesn't matter how you feel about someone, if they don't feel the same, you have to let them go. You will always wonder what you did wrong and you may never get the answers. Living in regret in any situation only hinders your life and your happiness. Mentally drained, I approached my house. The weather man on the radio was calling for rain tonight, which reminded me that I still needed to fix my rain spout. When I looked back along

the side of my house, I was surprised to see that the rain spout was no longer broken and hanging down. As I wondered how that was even possible, I noticed that there was someone sitting on my front steps. I couldn't identify the person, because a bush was blocking their face. All I could see was a pair of legs in tight, raggedy jeans. My breath caught in my throat for a moment. As the person leaned over to reveal her face, there were no words to describe the feeling that hit me. I blinked to make sure that what my eyes were seeing was true. It appeared that my mystery woman had returned.

Wasting no time, I pulled to the curb, slammed the car into park, and threw open the door. As I stepped out of the car, the door blocked my view of the front steps. My heart jumped into my throat as she disappeared from my sight for a moment. To my relief, she was still there when I planted my feet and stood up. I shut the door behind me and took a deep breath. I was imagining every Christmas present I ever wanted all rolled into one. I tried to stroll calmly down the sidewalk to my house, but, inside, I wanted to sprint.

As I approached her, I would have thought the only thing on my mind would be her. For some reason, however, I couldn't stop thinking about my rain spout. Did she not only come back to my house but also perform a repair? Maybe asking about the rain spout could be my opener when I was finally able to talk to her, even though I knew that was not the most important question I had for her. I forced it to the back of my mind as I made my way through the front gate into the yard. Her eyes met mine as I approached.

"Why did you come back?" I asked.

She lowered her head for a moment and then looked up at me. I hoped that she was ready to let me in on whatever game she was playing. "I gave you some mystery and danger without any real danger," she said as if it was supposed to make sense to me. I began to feel frustration mixing with my excitement. This woman needed to come clean or get out of my life.

"And love without love," I replied, trying to be condescending. She just smiled at me, which frustrated me even more. I needed to know her motivation for being here. Her statement about mystery and danger made me pretty sure she was just playing with me. I hoped my condescending statement about love showed how serious I was.

"I didn't fix the rain spout," she abruptly announced. My inner monologue stopped in its tracks. I asked her to repeat what she just said. She just looked up at me and matter-of-factly repeated, "I didn't fix the spout." This news affected me more than I could imagine. I never asked her about the rain spout. How could she know I was thinking about it?

"I'm Beth," she said, extending a hand out to greet me. I was taken aback by her sudden openness, but I also felt excitement at the chance to once again experience her touch.

"I'm Jacob," I replied as I gently shook her hand. I was enjoying the warmth of her soft smooth skin, but I knew I had to maintain my focus. She was finally opening up, and I knew it was time to get some answers.

"Can you tell me more about yourself?" I asked her. My question was delivered as more of a demand. I felt like it was time for her to lay all of her cards on the table or leave. I was trying to be polite, but I needed her to know how I felt. I took a seat next to her on the steps. The sun was going down, and we had a beautiful view of the sunset over my neighborhood.

"You know my name," she said.

"I would like to know more," I told her.

"What else?" she asked. "You ask, I answer."

Finally, the opening I was looking for. I decided to start with easy questions, since opening up seemed to be very hard for her.

“What's your birthday?” I asked.

“May 4<sup>th</sup>,” she responded.

I was surprised. “Mine, too,” I announced with a laugh. “What are the odds?”

She didn't answer. She didn't even smile. Why would she not find it funny?

“What year?” I asked.

She took a deep breath. “The same as yours.”

This surprised me even more. That would be a huge coincidence. And, how did she even know my birth year? I felt like something strange was going on. She had a very serious look on her face.

“Is that really your birthday?” I asked.

“I believe so,” she said.

Suddenly, a strange feeling came over me. The whole situation felt so surreal. “You're not a dream, are you?” I asked.

“I never said I was,” she responded and looked into my eyes, as if waiting for my next question.

“I'm not dead, am I?” I asked, laughing nervously and hoping she didn't answer affirmatively.

She smiled. “No. You are definitely not.”

I could only stare into space as she answered. The strange nature of this question and answer session made me think about the last few days. If there really was such a thing as the twilight zone, I may have been in it. A wave of emotions unexpectedly washed over me, as my eyes began to tear up. She slid closer to me and put her arm around my shoulders.

“You wanted the truth, but I think you already knew the truth. I believe it can really set you free, if you let it.” Her calm demeanor soothed me, but I still felt so confused. She smiled at me, a smile that would normally have the power to take me to a better place. Only, this time, it didn't work. My parents used to tell me if you don't know what to say, just walk away. At that moment, it sounded like the best advice I had ever received. I stood up, feeling her arm slide off my shoulder. I was numb. I didn't want to leave, but, for some reason, I knew I had to. I fidgeted through my keys to get the one for the front door. I wanted to look back at her, but I wasn't sure what I would see. As I threw open the front door, the only question left in my mind was the biggest one of all: What was going on here?

I entered the living room and tossed my keys onto the table. I began nervously pacing back and forth. I need to sit down, I thought. I sat on the couch for a moment and immediately felt the need to get back up. In the midst of all of the confusion, something suddenly dawned on me. I hadn't been to work in days. I was one of those people who worked every day because no one else wanted to. Everyone else had a life. I hadn't been to work, and no one had even called me about it. Why?

As I got to my feet, I glanced toward the door and saw Beth standing inside, calmly watching me. I had not let her in. How could I have missed her entering?

“Are you a ghost?” I asked her.

“Nope,” she answered.

“I know this isn't a dream,” I said, chuckling in spite of myself. “If it was, you wouldn't be driving me crazy.”

She laughed and shook her head, indicating that it was not a dream. However, I couldn't help but notice that she seemed not totally convinced of her answer.

“Remember when we first met?” she asked with a smile.

I closed my eyes. It made me smile, too. It was one of my best memories. How could I ever forget it? But, why was she bringing it up now? Is she trying to tell me something? I thought hard about the moment I first saw her. I was driving, it was raining, she was by the fence, and...

There was lightning! The lightning hit my car! I remembered now. I only had a split second before I was rendered unconscious. The last few days must have been a vision in my unconscious mind. None of it was real. I was comatose. It was the only thing that made sense.

As the reality of my situation was finally revealed to me, I opened my eyes and looked at my mystery woman. She gave me a reassuring smile, and I smiled back. All of my uncertainty seemed to melt away. She told me before that I already knew everything about her. I guess she was right. I no longer had to stress about her mysterious past. Everything I needed was right in front of me; I just needed to be able to see it. Whatever she turned out to be, I was sure she would be perfect.

Did it matter that she wasn't real? That she was just a vision in my comatose mind? Whether you liked traveling the world or simply enjoying a beer in your backyard, everyone had a different definition of happiness. Finding your own definition was the most important thing. I felt like I had found mine. I may have been in a coma, but, believe it or not, I was happy. People have said that life is what you make it. What's the difference if you made a good life in reality or a good life in your mind? I certainly couldn't complain. I had found the woman of my dreams.

So, you'll have to excuse me, I have a date. I haven't asked her yet, but I am pretty confident she will say yes.

THE END

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