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Floyd took a deep breath of cool autumn air, tinged with the bitter tang of smog that blew into the suburbs from the city. He didn't care. It was incense compared to the searing dust and blood-tainted winds of the desert battlefields he had endured for the past year. He gazed down at his pressed dress uniform which hung a little loosely on his tall frame due to the weight he lost while on mission. Jenny always smiled at him with smoldering eyes when she saw him in uniform and he didn't want to disappoint her. Grinning to himself, anticipating the reunion with his wife, he picked up his duffle and made his way up the street.

The Floyd residence fit cozily between several other cookie-cutter homes that ringed the small court at the end of the street. Jenny wanted their home to be unique, to be a neighborhood landmark, so she went to the local hardware store and bought them out of "Azure" house paint. She and Floyd had spent a weekend repainting their small house, covering themselves and some of the adjacent shrubbery in bright blue specks, and finally ended the project by making love in what Jenny termed "cerulean splendor". As he approached, Floyd noted that the house was quiet and that no lights were on inside. Jenny's little yellow hatchback hunched in the driveway next to Floyd's old farm truck. *She must have turned in early*, he thought as he made his way to the front door and quietly let himself in.

Floyd set his duffle on the dining room table and trod softly toward the small bedroom in the back of the house. As he passed through the hall, light from the street lamps outside reflected off the glass of the framed photos hanging from the wall. He ran his fingers softly against the wood and glass that held his memories: portraits of himself in various uniforms, candid shots of he and Jenny on vacation in Manzanita, a certificate declaring that Floyd had completed basic jump training, the 'official' wedding portrait, as well as a variety of other pictures capturing the

faces of the friends and family that shared in the joy that comprised Jenny and Michael Floyd's life.

The bedroom door was ajar—as usual. Jenny hated closed doors and opened the windows as much as possible. Nothing could contain her. This trait occasionally grated on Floyd's natural disposition towards order and discipline, but also made him fall in love with her again and again. He gently pushed the door aside and gazed upon the form of his sleeping wife, bathed in moonlight, curled tightly against the body of a dark-haired man whose face was turned away from the window.

Floyd stood frozen in the dull lamp light. His mind churned against a rising wave of cold rage as he gazed at the sleeping form of the dark-haired man. A hot lance of insight shot up from his gut and cut through the anger and pain, an instinct that told him he did not want to know who lay beside his wife and to whom she was clinging like a life-line in her sleep. *Patrick. God, please don't let it be Pat. I don't think I can take that.* He pushed past the rage and foreboding that froze him in place and walked deliberately toward the sleeping forms.

The man was curled onto his side, facing away from the window. Jenny lay curled beside him, spooning his back, her hand draped over his shoulder. Their hands were clasped as they slept—just as he and Jenny often spent their nights. Floyd gulped down a sob and steeled himself to continue. As he approached, Floyd noticed the smell of sweat in the room, as well as the slightly fruity scent of Jenny's favorite shampoo. Grinding his teeth, he reached down and clasped the shoulder of the sleeping man.

The dark-haired man shivered as if a cold draft had tickled his skin and rolled to reach for the coverlet. Floyd cried out as pain, sharp and sudden, arced throughout his body like lightning shooting up through his feet and into his brain. Stumbling back, he saw the dark-haired man

reach across the wide bed, the streetlight revealing his features. Floyd gasped in recognition as his eyes widened in horror. The dark-haired man, Michael Floyd, reached out and settled the coverlet over himself and Jenny's still-sleeping form.

Floyd regained consciousness as morning sunlight streamed through the open curtains of the bedroom. His body hummed with nervous electrical current and throbbed with his heartbeat. Holding his head, he felt as if he was putting himself together again, cell by cell, atom by atom, returning to some state of equilibrium after the absolute pain and shock that was his last memory.

He had heard of people having out-of-body experiences, but those were usually wacko Hollywood types who had nothing better to do with this life than to contemplate their past ones. Was that what he experienced last night? No, it was just a waking a dream, the stress of the war and the relief of his return home warring in his subconscious and distorting his sense of self.

He picked himself from where he had fainted and made his disoriented way toward the kitchen. Jenny wore a blue terrycloth bathrobe, drinking coffee as she read the paper. It was a scene that had played itself out at least a thousand times over the years that he and Jenny had been together.

He stood in the doorway, waiting for her to look up from the paper and notice him. After about five full minutes, his patience ran out.

"Jenny! Hey! I'm home!" He waved frantically from the doorway. His wife looked around the room, her brow furrowed. Pushing away from the table, Jenny went to the kitchen window and gazed outside. Shrugging her shoulders, she returned to her paper and her coffee.

Frantic, Floyd bellowed "Jenny! Over here! Please see me!" Jenny looked up again, turned to the window again, shaking her head. Floyd felt tears streaming down his cheeks as he

marched to the table and started banging his fists on the wooden surface. “Here, Jenny! I’m here!” He felt the solid resistance of the wood against his hands, but heard no racket other than his strained voice. He grabbed a chair to rattle and bang it against the tile floor and found that his hand could not grip the frame. Floyd fell to the floor, sobbing, as Jenny made her way around him to start her day.

Throughout the day, Floyd strained to get Jenny’s attention. As she loaded the dryer with clothes, he failed to knock the fabric softener off the utility cart. He tried to open the refrigerator door with no success. Anytime that he tried to grip, move, throw, or hit, the object of his frustration refused to be affected by his actions. He even stood in the narrow hall to block Jenny’s path as she made her way through the house. This resulted only in nausea for Floyd and shivers for Jenny as she passed through into the next room. Late in the afternoon, Jenny left the house. Floyd finally gave up and perched on the kitchen counter like an invisible, frustrated gargoyle.

Thinking back, he could not remember *actually* opening the door to the house, nor could he conjure any real memories of his trip back. All he had were impressions, a hodge-podge of other, older memories strung together to fill in the blanks in his head. He remembered battles and traveling across the sands with his unit. He remembered long chute drops and the cold, dark, nights of the desert. He briefly visited scenes of bloodshed and bullets, the bellowing of his friends and comrades, and the moans of the dying. From these, he quickly turned away.

He didn’t remember dying...but what else was he if he wasn’t a ghost? He certainly seemed to fit the definition. He felt solid enough to his own skewed senses, but could not affect anything he touched. Jenny could almost, but not quite, sense his presence. No, not presence. His existence was too ineffectual to be termed a “presence”. His breath felt warm against his

hand and he could feel his heart beating strong in his chest. But his face failed to appear in the mirrored surface of the toaster, nor did his breath leave a film on its shiny surface. He had even tried to grip the cross that hung over his and Jenny's bed to see what would happen. Like everything else, it appeared to be unaffected by his touch.

Perhaps what he encountered last night, what he was experiencing today, was a dream, a painful illusion. Maybe his head had been Swiss-cheesed by PTSD. That had to be it. He was insane, trapped inside himself. The thought sent a shiver down his spine. He didn't want to put Jenny through the pain that would inevitably come of having a shell-shocked veteran for a husband. Worse, what if he was trapped in his mind because his body was a wreck? For all intents and purposes, his body was gone, useless and ineffectual...like in this dream.

The tight ball of frustration that he had been carrying in his chest since the previous night was replaced by a hollow despair. This impotence, this powerlessness, turned in on itself and created a sucking whirlpool that drained hope from his heart and tainted his senses. He was forced to choose between two unacceptable possibilities: the bizarre reality of his senses or the rational explanation of being physically shattered and locked in insanity.

A lifetime of professional discipline pulled him back from the abyss. Floyd glanced down at the paper that Jenny had left on the kitchen table. She always pulled out the Sports and Opinion sections for him...for Michael...before she threw the rest in the recycle bin. He slowly slid from the countertop and walked to the table. His breath caught in his throat as he noted the date. As far as he could tell, the paper was nearly a year old.

This was the answer. He would work his way out of this self-imposed trap. This is why he was here in this half-life, in this here-not-here state. Today was the day he could change

things. He had an opportunity to fix it, to make sure his mind and body remained whole. Today was the day Michael received his deployment orders.

Jenny returned a short time later, her arms filled with grocery bags. Floyd perched on the counter, listening to her hum to herself as she began preparing dinner for the evening.

Watching her work, Floyd allowed himself a short respite from the hopeless spiral of his thoughts by basking in memories of Jenny. He watched the graceful way she moved and the childish way she scrunched up her face in thought as she debated one ingredient or another. He remembered all the meals that they had shared in their small kitchen. He smiled at all the beautiful, ordinary evenings they spent curled up on the couch; she with her puzzles and he with his novels. Tears welled in his eyes as he watched her from mere feet, yet an entire reality, away. "Let us cling together as the years go by, oh my love, my love," he sang, caught in his memories of one of their favorite songs.

"In the quiet of the night, let our candle always burn, let us never lose the lessons we have learned," Jenny sang, picking up the tune where Floyd had left off. She smiled as she continued stirring, the room filling with the smell of chunky marinara sauce.

Floyd's jaw dropped as he stared at his wife in wonder. Had she somehow heard him? Had he somehow reached her? Floyd's mind reeled from the possibilities.

The kitchen door opened as Michael Floyd entered. He was in his khaki base uniform, carrying a briefcase. His face was drawn, his dark eyes hollow. Floyd looked at his younger self, or this memory of his younger self, noting that Michael looked older than Floyd had ever imagined himself. Floyd remembered the mixture of dread and excitement he had felt when he first received his orders. The dread of the pain it would cause Jenny and the natural fear that

came with a wartime deployment fought against the excitement of being able to fulfill the promises of his long and arduous training. He could see these emotions playing behind his own eyes as Michael set the briefcase on the kitchen table and hugged his/their wife from behind.

“Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. The pasta’s still a little too crunchy.” Jenny turned and kissed Michael full on the lips. She paused, also noting the warring emotions behind Michael’s smile. She blinked and placed her hands on his cheeks. “You’re going, aren’t you?” Michael merely nodded.

She gently brushed the top of his head with her hand, still rubbing his cheek with the other. “We knew that this day would come, baby. We’ll get through it.” They embraced as the sauce began to pop and boil over the pot onto the top of the electric range.

Floyd remembered how proud he was of Jenny when the time had come for both of them to face their fears of his deployment. She never made him choose between their marriage and his duty, nor questioned the purpose of what he had to do. Her unwavering support, her faith in their ability to overcome anything together provided him the strength that ultimately got him through the war.

Or did it? Suddenly panicked, Floyd sprang from counter and rushed over to the embracing couple. He gripped Jenny’s shoulder and gave his fears form in clenched words. “No! You can’t let me go! We’ll lose it all, Jenny!” Floyd felt Jenny’s flesh shiver beneath his touch and her shoulders clench.

“I’m...but I’m so scared, Michael. I don’t understand...what if we lose it all?” Michael gently lifted her chin. “We talked about this, Jenny. I’m scared too, but we’ve got to keep it together to get through this. I have to go. There’s no getting around that.”

“I know, I know. You’re right. I’m here for you...” Floyd gripped her shoulder and pleaded *No*. “...I...just...”

Michael narrowed his eyes in confusion. “We discussed this. I thought...”

“We did! I know! And I meant what I said!” Jenny gripped her head, her shoulders shaking. “It’s just that there this little voice that...”

Michael chuckled. “I know. No matter how much we talked about it before, it’s different now that my number’s come up.” He smoothed her forehead with his finger. “We have five days before I ship out. I need you to be strong for me, baby. I need *you* to be strong so that *I* can be strong and survive it.” He reached out and held Jenny close. Floyd followed, his grip on Jenny firm. She shivered and sobbed into her husband’s shoulder.

As the day of Michael’s deployment approached, he and Jenny grew further apart. She constantly pleaded with him not to leave her. Neither reason nor emotion seemed to affect her. Michael tried to explain that no matter how he or Jenny felt about the matter, he had to follow his orders and his duty. He begged her to stop, that they had already discussed all of this, and that he felt betrayed by her sudden change of heart. She tearfully acknowledged what she had said, her promises of unwavering support and her faith in him and in God to bring him back. She still felt that way. But she simply could not shake this feeling of dread and panic that he would not return, that his body and mind would be wrecked beyond recognition. She was of two minds, and it was tearing her...and her marriage...apart.

On their final night together, Michael left. “I’ve done and said everything I have to say. I love you, and I need you, but you have got to get over this panic.” He removed her clawed grip from his arm and moved to the hall closet to get his jacket. “There are several shrinks on-base.”

He shook his head in bewilderment, tears glistening, unshed, behind his eyes. "I'm leaving for war tomorrow. And I can't be here for this." Fear and frustration propelled him from their home.

Floyd seldom left Jenny's side. Somehow he could affect his wife's emotions and thoughts in a way that he could not affect his surroundings. By clinging to her and feeding her his fear and pain, he knew that he could reach his goal of stopping Michael, stopping himself, from going to what was likely to be his death...or worse.

On the second tension-filled night, Floyd had tried to influence Michael in order to save Jenny from the pain of his fear. Floyd gripped the soldier's shoulder and was rocked once again by searing pain, awakening several hours later in the living room where Jenny was crying herself to sleep, curled up like a child in their large easy chair. Michael slept fitfully in their bedroom.

As Jenny sat on the couch, sobbing alone in the darkness, Floyd released her from his grip. He sat in Michael's chair, looking at his stricken wife, feeling slightly ashamed but nonetheless resolute in attaining his goal.

Jenny took a deep breath and dried her tears as she reached for the cordless phone on the coffee table. Hitting the speed dial, she began to bite her nails as the phone on the other end began to ring.

"Lori? It's Jenny...Yes, he leaves tomorrow..." Jenny swallowed a sob. "I need you. Could you...Oh God, thank you...Uh, yeah, it's that bad...worse...OK...Thanks, Lori..." She turned the phone off and curled up on the couch once again, quietly sobbing.

Floyd sat and watched his wife tear herself apart. He reached out to touch her...and slowly pulled his hand away with downcast eyes. He hated the pain that he was causing his wife, but consoled himself with the thought that if he succeeded she would be saved the far worse pain

of becoming a widow. He consciously squelched the small voice within himself that told him that he using her to save himself. He was saving them both.

Lori arrived about an hour later. She was a slight woman, barely over five feet in height and thin. But the strength of her presence had always made her seem larger, a trait that Floyd had always respected about her. She held Jenny in the dark living room for a few minutes before suggesting that they have a drink in the kitchen. Lori led the way and served them both a teacup of vodka from the pantry.

As her oldest friend held her hand, Jenny poured out her heart. She told Lori of the understanding she and Michael had come to before his orders came. She tried to explain the strange panic and fear that had been building in her since that first night and the way she and her husband had become strangers to each other over the past few days. Tearfully, she spoke of her fears for Michael, for their marriage, and for her sanity. His heart breaking for his wife, Floyd reached out and rubbed her shoulder, wiping a tear from his eye.

“Sometimes, I don’t feel it. I know I need to be strong for him and that I can be. But then I’ll try to talk to Michael, and even now when I’m talking to you, the panic starts to rise and I can’t find the strength anymore...”

Lori brought Jenny closer and held her tight. “Oh honey,” she whispered in Jenny’s hair, “we’ll lend you strength. You’re not alone.”

“I know. It’s almost like...it’s crazy. I hear *Michael* telling me that he can’t go. I can feel how scared he is...”

Lori sighed as Jenny sobbed. “He is scared, Jenny. You both are. But you can’t let his fear protect you from yours. You have to face it and let go.”

Lori held Jenny's hands and looked into her eyes. "You've got to let go. By clinging to him, you're not going to protect him. It's going to kill you both by pieces."

Floyd rubbed Jenny's back, tears streaming down his face. He tried to summon the memories of their life, the happy times they had spent together that he had been desperately trying to protect. He saw only his traumatized wife trying desperately to hold herself together against the needs of both sides of himself. Floyd took a deep breath of Jenny's hair, wiped his tears away, and quietly let go.