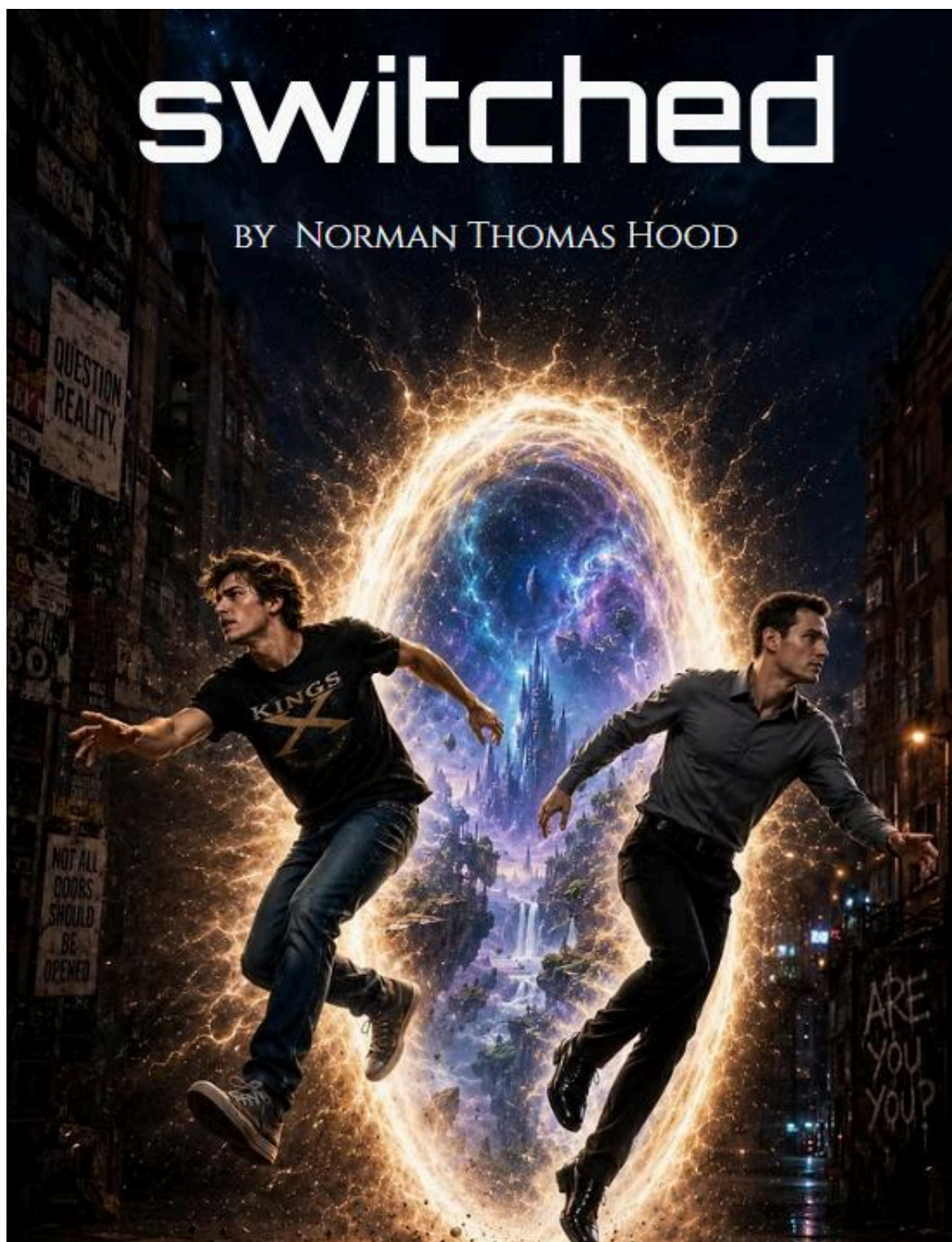




Switched

By Norman Thomas Hood

The clerk pulled the pack of cigarettes I'd asked for down from the rack and tossed them on the counter. I was more than ready to get to my apartment and catch the second half of the ballgame after the day I had. As I waited for him to finish the transaction, he stood like a statue over the register with his finger hovering over the keyboard, motionless.

Come on, old man! Forget how to run your own register? He reminded me of De Niro in the movie *Awakenings*.

"You alright, Pops?" I asked. He didn't move a muscle... or blink.

As I tapped his arm, something to the left caught my attention. I turned toward the store window. It shone solid white with light now. Blinding light.

"What's going on outside? The window looks as bright as the sun," I said, covering my eyes.

Immediately, the man's finger came down on the keyboard and finished the transaction. He leaned forward and straightened his glasses, looking a little wobbly in his stance. I stepped back to give him some space. He turned to the window.

"What do you mean? I don't see nothin' out there 'cept your car, fella."

"Hell, how do you even see my car?" I asked. "It's as bright as a nuclear blast out there. I can't make *anything* out." The man looked outside again, then turned his gaze to me.

"You havin' eye trouble, son? Not sayin' I see that well myself, but you're seein' somethin' that just ain't there," he said.

"No, I just—" Immediately, the source of the blinding light moved inside the store, causing me to cease talking. I closed my eyes and raised my hand to cover them again, trying to protect myself from the burning rays that now filled the

store. Concerned for the old man, I opened one eye just enough to check on him. Everything I saw, including him, suddenly lost its shape and color. Thinking I was passing out, I grabbed the counter's edge. I felt a strange vibration, similar to a pulse of electricity, start at my neck and run down my spine. Soon, I felt numb all over. As my knees began to buckle, the tingling left and the overwhelming light dissipated. Still half blinded, I leaned against the counter and rubbed my eyes until I could see again.

I tried to focus on where the cashier was standing, expecting to see him on the floor. As his image became clearer, I found him standing in the same spot he was before the light had appeared. He was donning the same confused expression on his elderly face.

"Son, do I need to call you an ambulance? Or a family member? That's the second time you've had yourself an episode in here."

"No, sir. No family, and I'm not married."

"Coulda fooled me," he said, looking down. "So you're okay now?"

"Yeah... I'm okay. I don't know what the hell just happened, but maybe you're right. Something's definitely going on with my eyes. Everything got really bright and weird there for a minute."

"Could have been one of them mini-strokes. Got a cousin who's had a few. You seem a little confused. Better get it checked out before you have another one."

"Yeah... will do." As I was saying that, I noticed something different about the old man. I could have sworn he was balding on top of his head, but now he had a full head of gray hair. I shook it off as an effect of my event and reached to grab my cigarettes. Wrong brand.

"Hey buddy, I'm sorry... but I wanted menthol lights."

"That ain't what you asked for, son. Maybe you were startin' to have that episode of yours, but you told me Marlboro Reds."

"Reds? Sir, I've never even smoked those before. They'd be way too harsh for me, besides not being menthol. No, I asked you for menthol lights. I saw you put them on the counter just a minute ago... I'm sure of it."

"Hell, son, I doubt you could be sure of *anything* you saw. Here ya go, take the menthols. Same price."

I could feel the old man's eyes following me out the door. He was obviously glad I was leaving. Once outside, I didn't see my car where I'd left it. On the other

end of the parking lot sat an old truck, probably the old man's, and a motorcycle. I pulled my keys out of my pocket. They weren't mine. I knew no one else had come into the store, so I couldn't have picked up another customer's keys. But still, my car was nowhere in the lot! I reluctantly pressed the unlock button on the fob in my hand. A BMW parked where I thought my car had been honked briefly, its headlights flashing twice. As I looked down at the keys again, I noticed my shoes and clothes were different! I'd been wearing running shoes, blue jeans and a Kings X shirt when I came in. Now, I had on black leather dress shoes and a grey oxford! I stumbled backward, into the store again, frightened at what I was seeing.

"Hey man, what the hell's going on? My car's gone and I'm wearing different clothes!"

The elderly cashier stared at me in a moment of confusion, then reached for the store's phone.

"That's it, fella! I've had enough strangeness out of you today. You step out that door and don't open it again... or I'm calling the cops! You're on some kind of drugs or somethin', and I ain't having that garbage in here! Go on, now!"

Shocked by his sudden change in demeanor, I stepped into the parking lot again, still confused as to what was happening. I glanced back through the store's window. The old man was still watching me, his phone in hand. I didn't know what to do but open the door of the car in front of me and sit inside until I could figure out what was going on.

I got in the vehicle, my heart racing. As I looked around the cabin, I noticed a bulge in my pant's front pocket. I pulled out a thick wallet, also not mine. I looked through it, finding the driver's license. The man looked about my age... darker hair though. His name read Anthony J. Whisman. He looked to be a white collar, business-type of guy, considering his driver's license picture, which showed him in a dress shirt and tie.

As I continued trying to figure out what was happening, I noticed an object in my left pocket, too. I pulled out a new cell phone. Once again, not my own. I tried to open it, but it was locked with a passkey. My heart was beating even faster now. I sat back in the driver's seat, trying to catch my breath. I couldn't go back into the store again, and I couldn't use the phone I'd just found.

I pulled out the man's driver's license again and read his address.

I'll drive to his house. Maybe this guy's stuck in the same nightmare I am!

I laid the keychain in the passenger seat and pushed the ignition button to start the car. After I put it in reverse, I looked in the rearview to back out. The eyes I saw staring back at me weren't mine! I grabbed the mirror and moved it around. My face was like the man's in the picture! I pushed my left sleeve back to look at the scar on my arm. It wasn't there anymore!

I've got to be dreaming! None of this can be real! I'm home right now... in my bed. I must have drank too much last night, then gone to sleep or passed out. That's it. I'm freakin' dreaming this shit.

I pinched my arm, having heard if you can't feel the pinch, you're dreaming. It hurt. I slapped my own face. It stung as well. As I stared at myself in the rearview mirror, the phone suddenly rang! I looked down at it, unsure if I should answer. The ringing continued. Not feeling I had any other choice, I answered it.

"Hello?" I uttered nervously.

"John, did you get stuck behind a train or something? What's taking you so long? Dinner's on the table."

"I, uh... I'm not sure whose phone this is. Who's speaking, please?"

"What? John... it's *your* voice. Stop playing around! Please... be home soon, okay? We're hungry!" She ended the call. I sat there with the phone in my hand, not sure what to do. Was I still dreaming? Am I in some kind of Twilight Zone episode? I needed answers. Driving to the address listed on the license seemed to me the best way to get them. I entered the information into the car's navigation system and pressed 'start'.

Minutes later, I arrived at the address listed on his license. The house was a large and beautiful Cape Cod. The yard was huge as well, and perfectly manicured. There was a garage attached. As I pulled in the driveway, I pushed the button on the garage door opener clipped above me. It slowly began to rise, revealing another BMW inside. It was the same as the red one I was driving, just in silver. I parked next to the other car and turned the ignition off. I felt my hands beginning to shake. My nerves were starting to get to me. Odd, since I'm not the type of guy

whose hands shake when nervous. I took a deep breath and got out of the car. When I shut the door, I saw myself in the window's reflection.

What kind of freaking nightmare am I in? I'm standing in someone else's garage after driving someone else's car inside someone else's body!

Just then, the door to the house opened.

"Daddy!" a little girl squealed before wrapping herself around my leg. "What took you so long? I missed you!" She squeezed my leg tightly. I didn't know what to do except pat her head. Inside, I was panicking.

"Are you going to eat in the garage, or come inside?" another voice asked. I walked inside, the little girl still attached to my leg.

"Come on Cindy, let go of your father. It's time to eat, she said.

"Daddy let me ride on his leg! He's happy today!" she announced.

As the girl ran to her seat in the dining room, I stood in the kitchen, looking around like a home buyer would, not having seen it before. I turned to see who I assumed to be the child's mother. She was beautiful. Blonde hair and a soft, lovely face. She seemed familiar to me, though I was sure we'd never met before. The kitchen light shined through her long hair, leaving a warm glow settling across her cheek. She leaned forward and whispered to me,

"This is closer than we've stood together in two years, John. What gives? Usually you just walk past me and sit down." Still panicking inside, I somehow managed to answer.

"I'm feeling a little... not myself tonight," I said, aware of the irony.

"Are you sick? A headache?" she asked. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Remember what you used to ask for whenever you got one of your headaches?" she asked. All I could do was shake my head 'no'.

"Really? Nice to know the impact I made." Her expression changed. "It's okay... I figured you'd forgotten about that by now. Don't worry. Soon you won't have to ever stand this close to me again. Just don't let on to Cindy we're divorcing... you promised me, remember?"

All I could do now was nod 'yes'. As I did, a tear began to run down her cheek. She quickly wiped it away, not wanting me to see it. She left for the dining room, leaving me in the kitchen, like I'd hurt her feelings.

What the hell is going on? This isn't like any dream I've ever had before, I thought. This is more real and vivid than any acid trip I took in college.

I gingerly walked into the dining room. The walls were a cream color, the dining table a deep mahogany. The artwork on the walls looked expensive. I sat in the chair by the only other place setting. Cindy was sitting to my left, and the woman directly across from me. There were several ceramic bowls in the center of the table, all full of Chinese food.

"Asian tonight, remember? Cindy asked for it yesterday," The woman said. I smiled and picked up the glass in front of me. Taking a sip of what I figured was iced tea, I must have made a face when I tasted it.

"Something wrong with the tea? I made it earlier today," she said.

I shook my head. "Nothing, just wasn't expecting it to be... do you have any sugar?"

"Sugar? Wow, there must be something wrong with you. You haven't had any sugar in your tea since the doctor said that you were diabetic."

"I'm diabetic?" I asked, shocked. She looked at me with disdain.

"No need to be sarcastic, John."

"Daddy, guess what? I beat everyone in the spelling bee today! Know what my hardest word was?"

I felt no other choice but to take on the role I was playing inside this dream.

"That's great, Cindy. What was the word?" I asked.

"Toad! Everyone else misspelled it. They tried to put a 'w' in there, but there's no 'w' in toad!"

"Not unless it's hooked to a tow truck," I said. Cindy looked thoroughly confused. The lady laughed.

"Wow, John, you told a joke. That's not like you," she said. "I'm a little confused, but I like it."

I had an idea. "Hey Cindy, can you spell your mother's name for me?" Cindy looked worried.

"You mean her *whole* name?" she asked, looking at her mom.

"You can do it, dear," her mom said, "we've done it before. Just try."

Cindy cleared her throat and straightened her back. I noticed her hair was the same color as mine. Well, my new hair, anyway.

"J, e, n..." she started.

"That's good, babe. Keep going. Sound it out," her mother said.

"I, f, e, r," Cindy added.

“Oh! So close, her mom said. There’s two ‘n’s, though, remember?” Cindy looked upset that she didn’t get it right.

“Hey, dear... you did great.” I said. “That’s an eight letter name... not easy for anyone.”

“Really? You’re not mad that I didn’t spell it right?” She looked up at me with her dark brown eyes... same color as mine.

“Why would I be mad? You tried and did fine. No one’s perfect, Cindy. But listen... one day you’ll be able to spell better than your teacher.”

“Better than *Mom*?” she asked, grinning. “I’m homeschooled, remember?” I was finding out more than I asked.

“Yes, even better than your mom,” I said, looking across the table. She couldn’t hide her young smile.

“Okay, wow,” Jennifer said, “This is turning out to be a great dinner-time conversation for us, but no one’s touched any food yet. Dig in, please.”

That was the first time I’d ever eaten homemade Asian food. In fact, it was the first time in a *long* time I’d eaten *anything* homemade.

“That was great, Jennifer. Thank you,” I said, putting my napkin down. Cindy jumped down from her seat and left the room.

Jennifer had more questions for me. “Okay, what’s going on tonight? You come in, acting strange, then end up being the most talkative one at the table. No offense, but you *never* talk to us at dinner anymore. Plus, you called me Jennifer. You haven’t used my full name since high school.

“Why wouldn’t I talk to you two at dinner? And, fine, Jenny it is.”

“It’s Jen, John. What’s with the sarcasm? Did you drink something before you came home? Is that why you were late... and acting so weird now?” she asked. By this time, I’d decided to go full-on into this dream, or whatever it was.

Why not? I thought. *What could it hurt? Let’s have some fun with it. Never had such a lucid dream before.*

“No, I didn’t stop to drink anything. Just call this the new me. However I was yesterday and before, that’s all over. I guess you could say I had an epiphany today. I’m not the same person I woke up as this morning.”

“Okay... so you didn’t go to the doctor or anything? Get on something that’s making you act this way? So much more... human?”

“Nope... nothing. Why wouldn’t I be nice having a beautiful home like this, plus a beautiful little girl and lovely wife?”

“Lovely? Well, I don’t know... you referred to me as your roommate last week... and that’s how we’ve been living, to be honest. Pissed off roommates, that is. It’s just confusing, that’s all. The compliments, especially. Anyway, I have to clean up the kitchen. Thanks, I guess... for the conversation, and especially encouraging Cindy the way you did. It was very sweet and meant a lot to her.”

Immediately, I realized I had no idea where to go after the dining room.

“Uh, hey... can I help you with the kitchen?” I asked. Jen stopped in her tracks.

“John... I don’t... I mean, you’ve never *offered* before. Do you even *know* where anything goes in there?”

“Not even the silverware... you have no idea. But you can show me, right? It’s not like I can’t learn new things.”

“Shit, John... you’re really freaking me out now, but sure, if you really want to help me... thanks.”

By the time we finished, I had the basic idea where everything in the kitchen went. I folded my towel and laid it across the divider in the sink. Once again, she was looking at me as if she was watching a ghost.

“Okay,” she said, “I’m going up to go take a bath. Um, see you in the morning?” she asked.

“Sure, sounds good.” I stood there as she disappeared around the corner.

A minute later, I heard the sound of water filling her bathtub. I took that opportunity to walk around the house and get familiar with everything. Every room was decorated beautifully. Whoever I am in this dream must make good money, I figured. As I explored the basement, I saw a sleeper sofa fully extended. There were men’s clothes draped across the end of it. I realized then that this is where I, I mean her dream husband, must have been sleeping since they decided to divorce. There was a big screen tv on the wall and a small refrigerator built into the wall. Plus, a bathroom with a shower had been installed down there.

Nice, I thought, what a sweet basement for someone nearing a divorce. A virtual mancave!

I looked around to the other end and saw a full sized pool table and workout area.

“You’ve got to be freaking kidding me,” I said out loud.

I played pool and watched the golf channel on the big screen for hours. Thirsty, I opened the fridge. It was fully stocked with Cokes, whiskey and beer. A small cabinet sat above it contained nuts, chips and other snacks. The only thing that would have made the evening better would be to find a pack of menthol lights lying around. No matter, though.

If I never wake up from this dream, I’ll be just fine.

The alarm on my phone was repeating near my pillow. I dismissed it and fell back to sleep. Later, I woke up groggy and started my way to the bathroom. Three steps in and I tripped over a hand-weight and ran into a wall.

“What the hell?” I said, rubbing my shoulder.

I opened my eyes fully and found myself in the same basement I had dreamed about! I looked around. It was all there, just like last night, in my... dream?

Is this not just a dream? I should be awake now.

I walked to the basement’s shower and looked at myself in the mirror. There he was again... the new me. The stranger I never asked to become. I slapped myself hard in the face. Still... couldn’t wake up. Frustrated, I wanted to punch the mirror. I walked across the room and sat on the side of the sleeper sofa, trying to figure out just how crazy I’d become.

I thought back to yesterday... driving to the convenience store after work... my dealings with the elderly cashier.

That light! I wasn’t having a mini-stroke, or anything else! That bright light... the cashier couldn’t see it. It meant something. The moment it dissipated was when I became someone else. Someone new. Different car, clothes... body... but how? It’s crazy!

I slapped myself again, then pulled hard at my hair, which hurt as some of it came out in my hand. The pain I felt was real. The floor under me, the bed I was sitting on... all real. I wondered what I’d find walking upstairs. A new wife and daughter... or something else? I laid back down, not sure of anything now... what to feel or what to do.

I looked at the time shown on the cell phone. 8:55am. A minute later, I heard footsteps running down the stairs. She peaked her little head around the wall.

"He's still here, mommy!" Cindy yelled up the steps. I heard her walking back upstairs.

"Hey, come here for a minute," I said.

"To the basement?" she asked.

"Yeah, come on," I said. She crept around the corner slowly, like she was walking on hot coals... careful, measured steps. She looked at the room like she'd never laid eyes on it.

"Come here," I said, waving her closer. "Good morning. I guess since you're homeschooled... mom is fixing you breakfast upstairs?"

"We already ate. I have to clean my room next, then do my homework." She paused, looking the basement over again. "I like your room, Daddy."

"It's just a basement," I said.

"Well, I didn't think I was allowed down here."

"Who told you that?" I asked.

"You did. I got in big trouble last time when I tried to get a Coke."

"Well, I'm sorry I told you that. From now on, come down any time you want."

"Really?"

"As long as you ask your mom... you know, get permission from her." She ran upstairs. I could hear her relaying our conversation to Jen... my new wife... since yesterday.

Oh, my God, I am going crazy! What the hell am I doing? She's not my daughter... Jen's not my wife. I'm losing my damn mind! I have to get back to my own life. But what about right now? I can't tell Jen anything about it. She thinks I'm 'John', her husband that I look and sound exactly like. She'd think I was nuts if I said anything different!

My hands were jittery. I really needed a cigarette. Seconds later, I heard more steps coming down the stairs.

"Did you really tell her she's allowed down here now?" I nodded yes. "Well, please don't change your mind on that later... it would break her heart."

"Why would I change my mind? What does it hurt if she comes down here? I mean, hell... we have a pool table. And a big screen. So, why not? It's not like she'd drink the beer or whiskey. She's only..."

“Six, John... she’s six. Okay... well, I noticed your car was still in the driveway a few minutes ago and got worried. You *never* sleep past your alarm... so.”

“Yeah, I know. Still feeling a little off today. I think I’ll stay home and relax.”

“You? John Whisman? You’re going to stay home... and *relax*?”

“Yeah, it’s not like I’ve *never* taken a sick day before, Jen.”

“Yeah... and no, you haven’t, John. Like *ever*! You’ve had the flu three times in the last eight years, even a broken arm from playing basketball, and you’ve *always* gone to work... like *always*.”

“Well, not today. If my attendance has been that damn perfect, seems like I could use a few days off, right?”

“A few days? I’m sorry, but you’re really scaring me. You’re just acting so differently since yesterday.”

“Well, I can definitely tell you... I *feel* different. Different from what you’re used to, I’m sure.” That was the most honest I’d been with her, and I could tell by her reaction she agreed.

“So, you’re going to hang around *here* today? With *us*?”

“Yeah... if that’s okay.”

“I mean, yeah... that’s fine, of course. It’s just that you’ve said that other than playing nice for Cindy’s sake, you didn’t want anything to do with us anymore. You felt incarcerated by your life with us and told me you wished you’d never married me. Said you wished you could just start over alone without any dead weight! So, yes... it’s kind of hard to believe you’d want to spend your day with us, John.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. *Obviously*, I’d said it. Not me, but yes, as far as she was concerned, it was me.

“Damn, Jen... I said all that? How long would you say we’ve had marital problems?”

“You’re really *asking* me that? Seven and a half years, John. Six months into the marriage and you suddenly decided you’d made a mistake.”

“And you don’t think counseling—”

“Counseling? You went to *two* sessions. I went for eight more months... alone. So, no... counseling wasn’t much help. Then, when Cindy came along, you accused me of getting pregnant on purpose... to trap you! You even asked me if she was yours!”

“So, you feel the whole time we’ve had trouble is because I wanted to be on my own again, with no responsibilities?”

“Out of your own mouth. Work is the only thing you’ve ever really loved... making money. Cindy and I were just anchors, according to you. You said it yourself, to my face. So... what’s going on with you lately? You’re not acting like yourself... which is nice, actually. You’re actually talking to us... you’ve laughed. I even saw you smile last night. Are you sure you didn’t start a new medication?”

“No, I promise. I’ve just... let’s say, felt differently in the last two days and I’m still trying to sort it all out.

“Yeah, no shit, John... very different. It’s like I don’t know who I’m talking to anymore.”

“I’m sure it feels that way,” I said. She stood there, shaking her head.

“And how you’ve interacted with Cindy... it’s not your usual.”

“I know. Listen, I’m not sure of very much right now. Can we put the questions on hold for a little while? Maybe the three of us just need some air. We could go to a park for a while... how about that? Maybe let Cindy burn off some energy? Sounds like we both could use a mental break for a few hours.”

She stood there with the same look I’d been getting since I met her yesterday.

“I mean, yes? Maybe? I’m getting conflicting signals from you, John. Promise me no arguments while we’re out with Cindy?”

“You have my word,” I said.

“Okay... can I make you some quick eggs and toast? Cindy and I just ate.”

“Thank you. I smell coffee. Is there enough left for another cup?”

“John, you hate coffee. You know what? Nevermind. Yes, pour yourself a cup.” She went upstairs, leaving me with a surprising amount of guilt.

Damn, I really was a jerk to her. John was, I mean. Dammit! I’m starting to confuse myself. What am I doing? Making amends for someone else’s failed marriage? Whatever happened to me might reverse itself at any moment. Or worse, I wake up in an insane asylum! Either way, she gets the asshole she married back.

I found some weekend clothes, got dressed and went upstairs. The smell of coffee permeated my walk upstairs. An empty cup sat upside down next to the coffeemaker. I flipped it over and filled it. I could see Jen watching me out of the corner of her eye.

“Got any cream and sug—, I mean cream?”

“Yes, and I have several artificial sweeteners if you want.”

“Awesome. God, I can’t wait to get this coffee down.”

She got out everything I asked for, still surprised I wanted coffee with breakfast.

Jen drove us to the park shortly before lunch. Cindy ripped and ran every inch of it. We had to hurry just to keep up with her. After a while, she settled on the swingset. Jen and I sat on a bench a few yards from her to rest. The warm, breezy air almost put me to sleep. My eyes had been closed for only a few seconds when I felt a warm hand covering mine. I looked to my left. Without making eye contact, she whispered,

“Don’t worry, I’m not giving myself false hopes. But I want to soak in this moment. We’re not fighting or being hateful to each other for once, and our daughter is having the time of her life out here. The weather’s beautiful... the day is just perfect. I want to remember it.”

I held her hand, the whole time trying to convince myself I wasn’t being a douche by leading her on without being honest. But her husband was an asshole to her. At least she’s getting a break from him, I reasoned. Besides, she was beautiful, smart, caring... why the hell was he so unhappy? Only a narcissistic jerk wouldn’t *love* sharing a life with her. And Cindy? She’s the perfect little girl. Anyone would love to parent her.

I felt Jen shifting her body weight. A second later, she was leaning against me with her head on my shoulder. Her soft hair graced my face, the wind blowing softly to move it around every once in a while. False hopes? During that moment, I could have disagreed.

“Can I go down the curly slide?” Cindy asked us.

“The *what* slide? I asked.

“She means the corkscrew slide. I don’t think so, dear. There’s too much mud where it ends.”

“Awww!” Cindy moaned.

“I’ll go with her... catch her at the bottom. No problem,” I offered.

“John... you’ve never come here with us before. Now you’re playing with Cindy on a muddy slide? Am I dreaming this?”

“I thought I was dreaming, too, Jen. Still trying to figure myself out.”

Her face seemed upset.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, suspecting the answer.

“I’m worried I’ll wake up tomorrow and you’ll feel the way you did a couple days ago, and for the seven years before that.”

I was starting to worry about the same thing. In just two short days I found myself falling for her. Not just for her... but for Cindy, the home, everything. It didn’t even take two days, really. The first day I spent wondering what had happened to me and trying to figure out a way to get my old life back. Now, I’m sitting here worried I might lose the new life I fell into somehow. Regardless of how it may turn out, I needed to know exactly what happened... and why.

Two hours at the park turned into four. We missed our lunch, and the moment we got in Samie’s car to leave, we realized just how hungry we were.

“Can we get chicken and french fries tonight?” Cindy asked.

“Not your father’s favorite, dear. How ‘bout something else?”

“Chicken sounds great, actually,” I said.

“And why am I not surprised you’d say that?” Jen laughed. All I could do was shrug my shoulders.

“One of these days you’re going to have to explain things a little better than just a shrug, dear,” she said. She was right. All I could do was nod.

We ate our chicken and fries, then left the restaurant for home. For the entire drive home, I wrestled with when to tell her what had happened. The problem was, I didn’t know exactly what *did* happened, how or why! Telling the truth without any solid answers would sound like I was crazy or worse, lying. Still, at some point it would have to happen.

We pulled in the driveway and sent Cindy up to take a bath. While she scrubbed the park’s dirt off herself, Jen and I sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee and talking together.

After a while, Cindy came bouncing down the steps. She got a snack and asked if she could watch a movie in her room. Before Jen's nod was complete, she'd already taken off upstairs again. We talked some more, then sat on the couch together. Once again, Jen shifted in her seat until she wound up leaning against me. I didn't object. It was amazing to feel her body pressed against mine. I hadn't dated anyone since a bad breakup over a year ago, and being with Jen made me forget all of the pain I went through.

"You planning on working tomorrow?" she asked. I knew the answer to that immediately. I didn't even know what kind of job I had or where it was.

"You know? Today was so nice... I'm thinking it would be a shame to return to work so soon. Maybe I'll take a week or two off."

"Wow! Are you serious? Yes, yes! Do that! Call them tomorrow, please?"

"I thought maybe they'd call me at home by now. Somehow I've forgotten my passcode for my cell phone. Maybe you could call the carrier tomorrow morning and they can reset it for me?"

"You sure it's not in your desk? You practically lived in your den before the other night. I know you always write down passwords and pin codes in some notebook you keep in the middle drawer. Check in there."

"Yeah, I'll look there tomorrow, if they don't call here first."

"Well, I hate for this day to end, but I'd better get upstairs," she said. I worked up quite a sweat chasing her butt around today. I need a shower.

"Oh, right! Yeah, I'm heading to the basement now. I need to rest from all that running, too. Breakfast together tomorrow?"

"Two in a row... a new record these days!" she said.

I got up and walked toward the basement door. I sensed she was following me. When I got to the door, I turned around to see her behind me.

"Good night, Jen," I told her.

"Goodnight," she said. I walked down the steps, wishing I had taken the moment to kiss her, then reminded myself why I shouldn't have. I turned on the tv and dimmed the lights. While straightening my blanket, I noticed she'd followed me down.

"Oh, John... you can't sleep on that. It's all wet!"

"Wet?" I asked, looking at the blanket.

With that, she picked up a can of Coke I had from last night and poured some of it onto the blanket. Before I could respond, she grabbed my hand and led me upstairs to 'our' bedroom. She shut the door behind us and lit a candle on her dresser. My heart raced, knowing what she intended to happen next. I knew I'd be the biggest jerk in the world if I didn't say something... and quick. I opened my mouth to speak. She put her finger over my lips.

"Don't say a word, and don't move," she ordered. "Not one inch, John."

I stood in the center of the bedroom while she retreated to the master bath. A minute later, she walked out of the bathroom wearing the outfit God gave her, and nothing else.

Her body glowed in the candlelight as she slowly walked towards me. My heart was racing even faster now. I knew my last chance to speak up was now. I said nothing. She crossed the room like a gazelle, her feet barely seemed to touch the floor. When she reached me, she stopped my hand from unbuttoning my shorts.

"Stop it. That's my job," she whispered. I let my arms relax as she gently worked the shirt off my chest. The next thing I felt were her hands around my waist. She knelt down, unbuttoned my shorts and pulled them down to my ankles, then lifted my feet free of them. She gently kissed my body as she slowly returned to her feet, then pressed her warm lips onto mine. I felt a rush of heat connecting us together. She put her arms under mine and against the back of my head. She played with my hair as we kissed each other. I caressed her sides and waist, allowing my hands to work their way to her soft hips. Though it was a mostly darkened room now, her sensuous curves glowed beautiful in the candlelight. As I looked downward, she pressed her breasts against my chest. The warmth they conveyed sent tinges of electricity throughout my body, which thoroughly responded. She reached down and took me into her hands. I must have sounded like a schoolboy to her, the way I gasped at her touch. She knelt down and took me into her mouth. Once again, I was barely able to contain my desire to respond. When she stood again, she led me to our bed. She lay me onto my back and gently mounted me, her silhouette ebbing and flowing to the flickering of the candle's wick. With no help from her hands, she gently positioned herself onto me, causing another gasp to escape from my lips. Her rhythmic movements seemed to sway the bed in perfect timing. The sensations I

felt began to overcome any resistance I might have had to her will. I was helpless to do anything but join in with her motions. We became one in our movements. Soon, she began to sigh and moan. The longer we made love, the tighter our hold on each other became, until we both felt as one person, one flesh. When neither of us could contain ourselves any longer, we suddenly released together in a surging climax no orchestra in the world could reciprocate. We quickly melted into each other, remaining completely still in the center of the bed before finally collapsing together into the pile of blankets and pillows.

There she remained, lying across my body until morning. I've never been one for cuddling after sex. On the contrary, my history has been to quickly separate afterwards and find my own spot on one side of the bed. This time was different, though. I felt no desire to move a muscle. I was content exactly where I was, and remained there until sunlight from the window parted my eyes again. I turned over. Jen was gone.

"Daddy?" Cindy asked from our doorway.

"That's me... I think," I answered, making sure I was covered up.

"Is your back better now?" she asked.

"My back?"

"Yes, your *back*," Jen said, walking in from the hallway. That's the reason you've been sleeping downstairs... *remember?* Your back."

"Oh, yeah... how could I have forgotten that? Yes, my back seems a bit better now."

"Just a bit?" Jen winked. "It seemed pretty loose to me last night." I had no answer. All I could do again was smile and nod.

Cindy seemed confused. "Did Mommy fix it?"

"C'mon, Cindy... let's give your dad a chance to wake up. He looks like he may have had a long night."

"Oh... you've got jokes, huh, babe?" I asked. She stood in the doorway, watching Cindy run down the hall. Her face became noticeably somber now.

"That's the first time you've called me 'babe' in almost seven years, John."

"Is that okay?" I asked.

“It’s more than okay, silly,” she said. “Don’t be too long in here... I’m making pancakes.” I smiled as she closed the door.

So there I was, in another man’s bed after a night of passion with *his* wife... *my* wife, if Fate didn’t upset things. I got dressed in yesterday’s clothes and walked downstairs for another breakfast with my new wife and child. Any thoughts of wanting my old life back were long gone now. The only worry I had *now* was of losing what I’d been lucky enough to find in *this* life.

After stuffing myself with pancakes, I left for the den, hoping to unlock my new phone and let ‘work’ know I was alive, but would be unavailable for a while. I sat down at the desk and opened its side drawers. Everything I saw looked routine for a businessman. Skimming through his collection of business cards and pamphlets, I saw clues that made me think he dealt with finances. I was amazed there were no business cards of his own in those drawers.

Shit John... you’re really trying to make this hard on me, huh?

I tried the center drawer. It was locked. I felt along the bottom of the drawer for a key. There was none. After looking at the top of the desk again, I decided to flip over everything *on* the desk, including the lamp. There it was, magnetized to the bottom of his stapler. He obviously didn’t want anyone else in that drawer, regardless of what Jen knew about some of its contents.

The door released and quickly sprung open. Inside were two or three notebooks, full of handwritten meeting notes and reminders. Pens, pencils, voice recorders, a 9mm pistol and a few thumbdrives. All usual things to find in a home office of a businessman, except for the handgun. Not very handy if someone broke in. Why would someone need it in a home office desk drawer? I wondered.

I was relieved to finally find a box of business cards with his name on them, though. Englethorp-Lewis Financial Business Partnership was printed in gold lettering across the top of the card. Vice President of Acquisitions was his official title there. I looked up the company’s website and found two names working under him in that department. I picked up the landline phone and dialed the first name listed under his, Jason Turlic. Now all I had to do was convince someone I didn’t know of why I’d been absent from a job I knew nothing about and then

explain why they wouldn't see me at work for two more weeks. Jason picked up after one ring.

"John! Geez man, where have you been? Robertson about flipped out when you weren't at the Harper meeting. Are you alright?"

"Covid," I said in a weak voice. Thought I'd asked Jen to call you. Must not have. I've really been going through it. Definitely not feeling like my old self. How'd the meeting go?"

"Well, it went okay except for old man Harper's attorney doubling down on the final price to buy him out. He took advantage that you weren't there. Kevin and I did our best to stick with where we were at last time, but we ended up buckling when he threatened to walk. They'd asked for another three million. We settled at two. Jensen was pissing cannonballs by the time the meeting was over!"

"He'll get over it," I said. Bottom line is the deal went through."

"Get over it? They never would have tried that with you. You not being there cost him two extra mil! He's talking about re-staffing our entire department, starting with you!"

"Let him try. But in the mean-time, I'm quarantined... another eight days."

"Are you serious? He's expecting to see you in his office today!"

"Not gonna happen. Tell him I'm sorry, but my health comes first. I'll see him in two weeks, job or no job."

"Holy shit, John! I can't tell him that! My ass will be in line right after yours for unemployment. With all due respect, this just doesn't sound like—"

"You *can* tell him and you will," I interrupted. "I need to rest now, Jason. Just take care of it."

With that, I ended the call and closed the drawer.

Damn, that wasn't so hard. Feels pretty good to be the boss of something, even though I probably just got my ass fired.

I leaned back in the leather chair, staring at the still locked cell phone sitting in front of me.

I think it's time for a new phone. I tossed the phone into the drawer and re-locked it.

Sinking back into the chair again, I closed my eyes and began to relax. The sound of the air conditioner was all I heard as I started drifting off. My rest was

cut short, though, as I felt a strange vibration in the back of my neck. I twisted my head a few times, thinking it was just adjusting to the chair.

What I noticed to my left almost made me jump out of the chair. In front of the closet stood a black silhouette of a man! No detail, just solid blackness. And though he appeared to be standing, I saw no legs underneath him! I spun my chair around just in time to see the dark figure dissipate. I felt my stomach fold, and knew instinctively who it was; the original John Whisman!

Holy shit! He's back somehow, watching me! Is he wanting his life back now? Did he cause this to happen in the first place? But how?

Questions flooded my mind as to what could happen now. I had to find out how he switched places with my life, and was it something he might try to undo! I knew it was time to be honest with Jen, regardless of the outcome.

There wasn't much talking from me during dinner. Cindy used much of the time explaining how her favorite plushie character got its name. I could tell Jen was worried that something might be wrong with me. I could see it on her face. After we finished eating, Cindy went to her room to play. I helped clean up the dishes, but remained quiet.

Jen was putting the last pieces into the dishwasher, then abruptly stopped. Without turning around, she broke the silence.

"John, is something wrong? You barely spoke at dinner. Have your feelings changed after last night?"

I walked over and put my hand on her shoulder. She turned around.

"Jen, there's something I need to talk to you about. No, my feelings haven't changed, but there's something you need to know about me. While I was in the office earlier, I saw something. It was a black figure of a man, like what they call a shadow person. He was just standing there by the closet, watching me. I know it sounds crazy, but I know I saw it."

"Oh, my God... is he *back*? So, it really *did* work? I thought maybe I was going crazy... that you just changed your mind about us and the divorce. That's why I interrogated you like I did. But you seemed so different, something inside told me you weren't him. But how did he come back?"

My head suddenly went numb from the words she'd just spoken.

"Jen, you *knew* I wasn't John this whole time?" I asked.

"No, not the *whole* time. But your personality is just what I asked the universe for. The total opposite of him. Loving, supportive... kind. I just didn't know if it had really worked or maybe John somehow changed his mind about Cindy and me. You had me quite confused at first. Honestly, though, I didn't think the ritual would really work. I figured I'd just been swindled. I'm so sorry for what you must have gone through. It wasn't fair to rip you from your world like that!"

I had to sit down at the table again. My knees were unable to support me any longer.

"So, *you* did this? It wasn't him... or just a cosmic accident?" She sat down next to me and put her hand over mine.

"I was hurting. Seven years of being abused... verbally, emotionally and sometimes even physically. Cindy suffered too, though not like me. He's evil, pure evil! He was divorcing us and planned to start his life over, leaving us in the street like trash."

"Okay, I understand that much... but what happened to me wasn't a normal thing, or even *possible* as far as I've ever known. I literally thought I was going crazy! I was buying cigarettes at a store near my apartment when a blinding light appeared in the shop with us. One second I'm *me*, then a second later I was someone else! I looked different, sounded different... I *was* different! The cashier at the store didn't seem to notice, though... he just thought I was on drugs!"

"He wouldn't know you were any different. To him, you were the same guy all along. What I mean is, in his world, you were *always* John Whisman. The man you spoke to after the bright light wasn't the same man you spoke to before."

"I don't get it. How can that be?"

"Different timelines is how it was explained to me. A timeline split causes a parallel universe to instantly be created, at least that's what she told me. We brought you from your universe to mine."

Now I was really confused. It was all becoming too sci-fi for me.

"You said 'we,'" I asked.

"A mystic guru... she lives in India. I used the money I'd saved over the last seven years to fly her here. I put her up in an apartment in town. She's famous in

India for claiming to be able to cross back and forth between universes... to switch people. Her book was a best seller.”

“You used a mystical guru to do this? So all this happened due to some Indian *magic*?” I asked.

“She’s a mystic *and* a guru. And no, it’s not really magic. It’s based on the way our universe works. It happens naturally sometimes. You know, those people you hear about that suddenly disappear for no reason? The police interview the family and they always say the same things: “They would never just leave. They were happy and loved their family. Something else must have happened!” Well, in some cases, they were right! Those people got pulled into a parallel universe, sometimes even switched with someone else. She said it was the way the Omniverse balanced itself. It has to do with positive and negative vibrations... our soul’s intention and affect on the world around us, basically.”

“Okay... now I *know* I’m losing it, Jen! I mean, I *know* it happened to me somehow... I just never imagined. And for the first day or so I thought I was stuck in some kind of weird, lucid dream.”

“I’m so sorry! I wasn’t trying to hurt anyone, I was just desperate for help. I paid her a lot of money to do this. I asked, practically *begged* the universe for someone that was the opposite of John’s personality. Someone that would love me and I would love. Oh, my God... I don’t even know your real name! Please tell me.”

“Steven. And if it makes you feel any better, my first name is John. I go by my middle name. But... yeah, you’re right. This has turned my life upside down, Jen... literally. I’m glad I didn’t leave a wife or family behind. The whole thing is really starting to mess with me.”

“I specifically asked, and we meditated for, someone who was single and unattached. Still, it wasn’t my right to do this. I honestly didn’t think it would work! It was over a month ago, anyway, so I thought I’d just thrown away my money... being stupid. But I was just so depressed being with him... so sad. I’d even considered suicide at times. I told John that once. He laughed at me.”

I stood up, bringing her to her feet. As we embraced, I whispered to her, “I’m glad it *was* me the universe sent. It picked correctly, Jen. You’re the girl I’d always dreamed of, but never found.”

“Well, you found me now,” she said. “Or, actually, I found you.”

“Meditation? Really? That’s all it takes to switch universes?”

“It’s about frequency and vibration *during* deep meditation, and you need a knowledgeable guide to be successful... but yes. It’s as natural a thing as breathing.”

“Well, it didn’t feel very natural to me, I can tell you. But you said “back and forth” earlier. Does that mean he can come back?”

“You told me you saw something in the den. It had to be him... so possibly. Sometimes the universe switches people back. She warned me of that. No one knows exactly why it happens. He *could* be responsible for trying to come back on his own, but for him to discover there’s a way to do it, and learn how on his own... I just don’t see it being able to happen. I will say this though... his hate drives him! If anyone could find a way to do it, he’d be the one.”

“Jen, this *thing* happened for a reason. And not just for you... for *me*, too. I wasn’t even aware of the gaping hole in my life before you. Now I am terrified of losing it... of losing you. If you can figure out a way to call me ‘Steven’ from now on, I think we can make this work.”

“I’ll call you whatever you want, dear. And if we have to, we’ll move somewhere else and you can change your name. Just don’t go anywhere without us, please.”

“I won’t. I’m here as long as the universe allows it.”

For the next few moments, we shared a heartfelt hug. I say a *few* because during those moments, my world... my *new* world... began to disappear! My neck began to tingle, just like it did when the switch happened and when I saw the shadow person! Jen sensed something was wrong, too. We separated briefly while I told her what I was feeling. The tingling continued, then I noticed the corner of the room getting extremely bright. I covered my eyes.

“No! Steven!” she said, almost crying her words to me.

The light became more intense. Soon, it encompassed me. I could no longer see her at all! The tingling spread across my entire body. When I felt I couldn’t take it any longer, everything suddenly ceased to exist.

When I opened my eyes next, I found myself on the couch. Not the couch in *John's* home... *my* couch. I was left in the apartment I'd lived in for the last five years. I immediately jumped to my feet.

"No! Dammit!" I paced the room, completely alone now. My heart raced as it did when the event happened the very first time. But this time it raced for a different reason.

"Jen!" I screamed out, as if she'd hear me in another universe. I sat on my sofa and punched the seat cushion.

Now what? What kind of sick joke is this? You find my soul's counterpart, then rip us apart?

My thoughts suddenly shifted. If I'm *here*... he's with her.

Oh, shit! He's going to kill her if he knows what happened to him!

I started pacing the room again. My mind was making me sick, swimming in the horrid scenarios I imagined. I vomited trying to reach the bathroom. I sat on the tile floor near the sink, helpless and alone. I was unable to do anything!

An hour later, I sat down on the couch and tried to get my mind off of everything by watching tv. My fear and mounting anger kept me from being able to focus on any of the programs, though. I walked to the kitchen and opened the fridge. My beer was gone, along with all the lunchmeat that had been there previously. I found most of the frozen dinners in the freezer gone, too.

He was definitely here. I'm sure he wondered what kind of basic-bitch life he fell into.

I saw my keys on the kitchen table and walked out to my car. The whole front end was smashed! As I looked closer, I could see where someone used a crowbar to pry the left fender off of the tire.

"Dammit!" I opened the driver's door. There were Marlboro Red butts on the floorboard, along with an open bottle of whiskey. My car reeked of it.

Great! That freaking bastard. I hope the universe dropped him in the middle of the ocean!

But I knew differently. Once again, my heart raced at the thought of what may be happening to Jen, and even to Cindy.

As terrible as it looked, my car started and ran fine. I drove to the convenience store, somehow hoping to reverse what had just happened. The old man wasn't there. A young woman stood behind the cash register. I'd seen her before.

“Pack of Marlboro menthol lights, please.” I looked around the store, hoping to see the room become engulfed in the bright light. Maybe God, or the universe would read my mind and send me back to where I *really* belonged. Nothing happened. I turned around to see the cigarettes still sitting on the counter... Marlboro menthol lights. The young woman stood with an annoyed look on her face, waiting for my payment.

“Oh, yeah... sorry.” I reached into my pocket, quickly realizing I had not found my wallet!

“Dammit! Sorry... never mind.” I pushed the cigarettes back across the counter, looking behind me again.

“Anything you need back there?” she asked, waiting for me to leave.

“No, I guess not... sorry.” I left the store, got into my smashed-up ride and drove home.

That night offered no sleep to me. I tossed and turned constantly, even getting up to watch tv a couple times. By morning, I was exhausted, as were my hopes of ever seeing Jen again. I cooked the two eggs that were left in the fridge and lay down again, depressed.

The next morning, I woke up having dreamed I was at the park with Jen again. We sat on the same bench as before, soaking up the sun as Cindy played on the swing. Everything was right in my world again. I could feel the warmth of Jen’s hand resting on my own.

All of a sudden, I felt Jen’s hand gripping mine. She squeezed so hard I felt the bones in my hand giving way to the pressure. I looked over at her, trying hard to pull my hand away.

“No! Don’t leave me again, Steven! Don’t leave me!”

“What? Babe, I’m not going anywh—”

I looked forward and saw a man walking towards us, smiling devilishly. He had Cindy tucked under his arm like a football. She was screaming, reaching out for her mother. I tried to get up. I couldn’t move. I seemed to be glued to the bench! Jen’s hand suddenly closed completely, passing through my own! As I

reached out to touch her face, my hand began to lose its shape and color! I was disappearing!

“No... no! Not again!” I felt myself drifting across the park, spreading out into a million pieces. That was the point I woke up. For a moment, I wondered if I’d dreamed everything for the last week. The events, Jen... *everything*. I ran to my front door and looked outside. There sat my car, as wrecked as it was the day before. It was then I knew I was in the same situation that kept me up the night before. My heart sank. I decided to take a hot bath and try to forget everything that’d happened, including Jen. I hoped the hot water would help.

When the water reached the top of the tub I shut it off. The water continued to drip slowly from the leaky faucet. The rhythm of the dripping was nice, settling my mind as I let the hot water do its job. I had almost drifted to sleep when I felt the back of my head tingling. I immediately sat up, causing water to spill out onto the floor. Not sure if I was dreaming again, I jumped out of the tub and threw my clothes back on. About the time I pulled the shirt over my head, I saw the bright light forming in my hallway.

Yes! Please God... let it be real!

I held my breath and closed my eyes from the intense rays. Soon, my skin was alive with the feeling of electricity!

Before I could move another muscle, I found myself upstairs, at the top of the steps. Jen’s steps! I was back! Just then, I saw Jen two steps below me. She was falling! I yelled out her name and reached out my arm to grab her, but it was too late! She continued down the steps, tumbling hard until she landed on the foyer’s floor! I screamed “No!” as I ran down the stairs after her. When I reached her side, she was barely conscious. Her phone was on the floor, next to her. I grabbed it and dialed 911 for an ambulance.

“Jen, babe! Jen! Are you okay?” I was afraid to move her.

“My foot, I think it’s broken. I felt it... pop,” she said, looking up at me.

“Oh, my God!” I said, “Babe, I never thought I’d see you again! Thank God you’re okay! I was so scared he’d hurt you and Cindy!”

“Steven?” Her eyes widened as if she’d seen a ghost. “Steven, is it you?” she asked.

“Yes babe, it’s me. I don’t know how you did it, but it’s me! I’m back!”

“John... he was chasing me across the house, said he was going to “make me pay”. When I reached the steps, I felt him punch my back. He pushed me down the stairs, trying to kill me! All I remember in that moment was calling out your name. And now, you’re here!”

“It was the universe, then,” I said. “It must have changed its mind about us and intervened! It had to!” I saw her eyes failing a little, and stroked her face to keep her alert.

“An ambulance is on the way, babe! Just relax. I’ve got you, and I’m not letting go.” She smiled softly and covered my hand with hers.

“Yes, dear. Please make me a promise... don’t ever make me find you again. I don’t think we’d be this lucky another time.”

“We won’t have to, Jen. I think you and I, *and* the universe are finally on the same page.”

I continued to hold her, waiting for the ambulance. I felt her trying to move her left arm. She raised her hand and rubbed the back of her head.

“My neck,” she said, “it feels tingly. Steven... why is the room getting so bright?”

The End