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Cinemagic

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Cinemagic

A few days after our anniversary, my husband called to tell me that he'd had a dream where all the hair on his body – beard and mustache, eyebrows, the hair from his chest, his groin, his legs – had mysteriously fallen away. He lived in Pittsburgh now, with his mother, which is where he'd retreated after I'd kicked him out eight months ago. I hadn't seen or spoken to him since our daughter's birthday in March, and for all I knew he might actually have shaved away all of his hair just like a boy I'd dated in high school who was on the swim team.

"It'll grow back," I said. "Don't worry."

I heard the key turn in the front door of our Park Slope apartment and nodded to Amy as she slung her backpack to the floor.

"It was a dream," he said. "What do you think it might mean?"

"That you've regressed to some infantile stage of development."

"I don't think so," he said, oblivious. "It felt so liberating, so free, like a weight had been lifted and I could rise up into the air."

"We'll both be free soon enough."

"That's not what I meant," he said before hanging up. "But thanks, you've been a big help. As always."

I would have asked him if he wanted to talk to Amy, but as it was I just closed my eyes and rested my cheek against the cool smoothness of the kitchen table until I felt my daughter's eyes burning a hole in me.

* * *

I wasn't really surprised when my husband called again very late the next night or any of the other three times during the week. Still, I decided not to tell Amy about them. Especially because his dreams seemed to be becoming stranger and stranger, signaling God knew what. In the last one, he said that I

had appeared before him in a prison cell. I was naked except for cut-off camouflage shorts and a sports bra, that I had finally lost the 10 pounds I'd been trying to lose since my pregnancy with Amy 12 years ago, that my abs were totally ripped – his word – and that I wore gun metal colored bracelets on my wrists like Wonder Woman. I didn't tell Amy any of this – I couldn't – but I did tell Abed, one of my ACLU clients.

His full name was Abdalquader Abu-Dajani. Since May I'd been visiting him at the Metropolitan Detention Center where he was incarcerated for violating a statute of the Patriot Act requiring all young men from Middle Eastern countries to register their existence with the INS during specially designated weeks. Abed had decided that such registration was offensively un-American. Unfortunately, they had neglected to remind Abed that he was not an American. Agents had appeared in his Contemporary Literature class at 10:30 in the morning and taken him away in handcuffs. As his attorney, I met with him every week to provide an update on the progress of his case.

"Would you keep calling a woman who clearly hates your guts to tell her every bizarre dream you have?" I said.

"Only if I were hopelessly in love with her."

We were sitting together in an electronically locked conference room, our conversations being recorded for audio and video, a blue-clad guard stationed just outside the door. On the table between us lay Abed's depressingly thin case file.

Abed had a lazy way of sitting in his chair, not slouching down exactly, but at 20 he already wore thick eyeglasses and sported slightly rounded shoulders. If I thought I could get away with it I would have grabbed each shoulder in a hand and tried to snap them back into place. Bad posture drove me insane. It was a never-ending battle I had with Amy. Still, Abed had big, beautiful eyes and wonderful thick wavy hair. Plus the courage of his convictions. When I told him about my husband he smiled at me with such sadness.

"If I were your husband I would know that you hated me, and I would use anything I could to entice you."

"Bizarre dreams?"

"Why not?"

Since we'd split, I often found myself envisioning my husband's life. I'd be riding the train or selecting apples at the grocery store and some picture of him wandering around his mother's house in Pittsburgh would pop into my head. It wasn't hard to do because I'd driven Amy there for a rare visit, the highway taking us around the confluence of the three rivers and the stadium where the Steelers play football. The whole thing had been a disaster with Amy complaining about how she hated her grandmother's old house – it smelled funny – and how she would miss swimming practice and her friends.

"I am beyond enticement," I said to Abed. "We're getting a divorce and he's going to have to learn to live with it. Besides, as you know only too well, I'm no Wonder Woman."

"You're doing everything you can for me."

"Yes. I am." I closed the file with a sigh. "There's just so little precedent for this."

Abed reached across the table and took my hand and squeezed. He was trying to comfort me. His palms were soft and warm, and the way he held my hand was so careful. I could smell a kind of antiseptic cleanness on him from the no frills soap the prisoners wash with. It was not an unpleasant smell coming from a man. But everything was backwards. Wasn't I supposed to be comforting him?

"I'll see you again at the same time next week," I said, quickly slipping my hand away from his.

* * *

I found my daughter lying in bed with her laptop balanced on her stomach. The lid of the machine was covered in stickers with slogans that said things like, "My mind is a frightening place" and "Got Blood?" and "Bite hard, leave marks." She ordered these things from websites with money that her father loads onto Paypal. I asked her if she'd done her after school chores of feeding the fish and running the vacuum in at least one room in the apartment, but I couldn't get anything out of her except a quick nod.

"What are you looking at?" I said.

"I'm reading an article." She turned the screen toward me so that I could see the webpage. It was designed in lurid black and red with advertisements in the

margins for custom-made fangs. Amy already had a pair. They were ostensibly for Halloween last year, but I knew she put them in almost every day. Once she was sent home from school for wearing them.

"Vampires in India?"

"There's a man in Madhya Pradesh who drank his wife's blood for three years," she said with disturbing enthusiasm. "He drew it with a syringe and then poured it into a glass and drank it. When she complained, he beat her."

Even before my husband left, Amy was into vampires. She had read all of the Twilight Series, Bram Stoker's classic, and had nearly worn out my Buffy the Vampire Slayer dvds. It seemed pretty normal to me, I guess, because every adolescent girl in the country had been swept up in the mania. What woman didn't love dark and dangerous men? Let her have fun, I remember thinking, let her fit in. When my computer crashed and I used Amy's to check my email one night, I saw just how many vampire sites she had bookmarked in her favorites, especially one blog where she had posted under the screen name Inbal365.

Still, I wasn't too worried. She had taken this interest further than I would have at her age, but the posts felt so juvenile to me that I had trouble taking any of it seriously. I asked her how she came up with the name Inbal and she said she didn't know, she thought it sounded cool. After that I checked her computer on a regular basis, but she had gotten wise and always logged out. Soon, however, objects and articles of clothing began to appear in the mail addressed to her: a pair of strangely patterned black fishnet stockings, satin corsets, a top hat with a broad red band embossed with the silvery image of a rose. When I asked her what she was up to she said she was putting together a "killer outfit" for next Halloween. The inspiration for it, she said, had come to her in a dream.

"I want to get a cane," she said, "maybe with a sword inside. You know what I mean? To go with the top hat. Almost like a music video with all of my friends dancing around me dressed in black and red and silver and gold. The beat pumping in the background and the strobe lights so crazy everyone's ready to stroke out."

"That sounds cool to you?" I asked her, more wrapped up in the idea that Amy was having crazy dreams just like her father than anything else.

"Uh, yeah." She wanted to know if I could think of anything cooler.

"Well," I said, "it depends on how you define cool. I'd be much more impressed if you could play a Beethoven sonata on your violin." This was a new point of contention between us, the way her instrument had been just sitting in its case collecting dust.

"Lame," she said. "Well, not cool anyway."

"You understand, don't you, that this is a corset?" Suddenly, I'd reached some limit and picked up the satin material and shook it only a few inches away from Amy's face. "This is lingerie. You're 12 years old. I wouldn't let you out of the house wearing this in a million years."

"Yeah, that's what they said you would say. But I said, no, my mom is cooler than that."

"The important word in that sentence, Amy, is 'mom' not 'cool.' That's something you need to remember."

As a lawyer, I often found myself trying to explain the conceptual differences contained in even familiar words, the way they could influence an argument, shift a listener's perspective. Amy, however, had long been onto my tactics. Most days, the best I could hope for was to shoot to a draw.

Amy slapped the lid of the laptop closed and bounded from the bed. She wore a tank top and her back was still walnut brown from a summer spent at the pool, a light dusting of tiny blonde hairs like the legs of a millipede gathered in swirls near her neck. Just under her still soft baby skin rippled muscles from hours and hours in the water. This child was no vampire. She was going to be healthy and beautiful. Clearly, her love for the sun and her fascination with the undead were ideas she hadn't fully reconciled. Still, I knew she was developing theories. I just didn't have it in me to actually listen to what they were.

From a little case on her windowsill, looking much like something an orthodontist would give you for a retainer, she removed her fangs and popped them in her mouth. Then she turned around. Even with her mouth closed, the fangs changed the look of her face. The skin around her upper lip appeared slightly swollen, as if she were a snake that was just beginning the slow process of swallowing a rodent. I know for a fact that it had taken weeks for her to figure out how to talk in anything even approaching her normal voice with the fangs in. But she'd done it. Now I listened to her explain how a group

of her friends were hatching plans to go to Comic-Con where Robert Pattison was scheduled to appear.

"Where is it?" I said, my voice mostly even and reasonable sounding, working hard to keep down a knee-jerk impulse to smash this idea into the tiny bits it so obviously deserved.

"San Diego."

"California?"

"No, San Diego, Connecticut."

"Don't be smart."

"Well don't ask stupid questions."

It was in Amy's nature, I knew, to try to coordinate large and difficult adventures. Last summer it had been a whole crew who wanted to try out for American Idol, though that had just been in New Jersey and required only that she and her friends sucker one of the mini-van driving mothers into thinking it was a good idea. Suddenly now I can't remember the name of the woman who agreed. Fortunately, everything fell apart when Amy discovered you had to be 15 years old to audition.

"All right. What's the plan this time."

"Right now we're thinking of fundraising. We're going to start with the bikini top-short shorts car wash at Brusters, but the second part is way more ingenious."

"I'm listening."

"We'll charge people in our class to bring back Twilight memorabilia, almost like a sponsorship for Race for the Cure or something." Amy and I had run the 5k last summer after she'd walked the neighborhood gathering people to give money if we completed the race. "Twenty dollar fee for each person plus the price of whatever they want."

"That's going to be difficult to collect in advance."

"Yeah. Someone will have to front the money."

"Ah."

Amy rolled her eyes and ever-so-slightly bared her fangs at me.

"I suppose you think that I'm one of the leading candidates for the 'fronting' of this money."

"Maybe," Amy said. "You or Dad." Without warning she popped the fangs out of her mouth again and replaced them in their case before turning around and flashing me her normal-toothed smile.

"Listen honey, I don't know what your dad's up to with all the money – or even where he's getting it from – but you've got to stop counting on him. Don't you think it's weird that he just keeps sending you money but never visits or talks to you when he calls?"

"How do you know he doesn't call my cell phone?"

"Does he?"

"Maybe." Amy gave a withering look before blowing passed me and striding into the living room. She scooped up her sneakers and began to lace them. "I'm going to the park."

"Don't be gone too long," I said.

"I won't. I never am."

I listened to her rumble down the steps and then moved to the window where I watched her walk away at a brisk pace in the direction of the park. She had swept her hair up into a high ponytail that bobbed angrily with each stride.

Out of habit I checked the answering machine and saw it's blinking red light. I pushed the button and heard my husband's voice. "Hi Kathleen, it's me," he began before I pushed the button again and silenced him.

* * *

For three and a half months my team at the ACLU had been discussing potential strategies to secure Abed's release. On some level we knew that he'd eventually be let go so long as the FBI could not establish any dubious connection to his life, a thing that he assured us was not possible, and about which we absolutely believed him. The urgency we felt was to limit the amount

of time he had to rot in jail, and that's what MDC was, not even a proper prison, which would surely have had much better facilities. The longest such case that we'd personally dealt with had lasted 17 months, and had left the whole office feeling impotent and bitter.

"Where are we with those character references?" I said. "They'll probably be useless but we need to have them in place if we can ever get this in front of a judge."

"His professors are taking their time," said Deidre, though she directed her answer to Holly, our boss. There was something going on there, too, but like so much in my life I couldn't bring myself to look at it.

"Here is one written by his literature professor," I said. "It's lovely. He was teaching the class when the FBI came in to arrest Abed. Somehow I think he holds himself responsible."

I remember the afternoon I stopped by the professor's office to ask him to write the letter for Abed. He was still a young man, short, with a beard, and a brown jacket that had patches sewn at the elbow. His office had a framed Life Magazine photograph of Ernest Hemingway on the wall and piles of books everywhere, the desk cluttered with student papers. I liked his office, it was the first part of the world that I had seen in a long time that looked the way I thought it ought to. As we talked I could see how shaken he was by Abed's arrest. I tried to reassure him that things would eventually be okay, that the likeliest outcome was that the government would revoke his visa and he'd have to return to Jordan without his degree. The professor asked me if I knew what they'd been reading on the morning they came for Abed. I told him I did not.

"David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*." When I didn't react, he smiled a little hopelessly. "It's about the internment of the Japanese during WWII."

"Oh," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Oh."

* * *

On a Thursday nearly three weeks later, Abed raised a finger to his lips to silence me when I began to give the usual no progress, progress report. He wanted to talk about other things during our time together, he said, about life.

He reminded me that except for the occasional college friend, I was his only visitor. "Coming here scares my Arab friends," he said, " and I don't blame them." What he preferred to talk about were movies, particularly anything done by Roman Polanski and Robert Redford. I thought that was an odd couple of favorites and said so, but he just shrugged his shoulders. Talking about *The Ninth Gate* or *Quiz Show*, I forgot myself and my life for a little while. And even though I didn't remember seeing either film, listening to Abed's enthusiasm reminded me of when I was a teenager, only a little older than Amy, on dates with boys at a Drive-In that had long since ceased to exist. It was also a relief to hear Abed talk about the things he loved because in this way I could be fairly sure that he still believed that he would one day be released and resume his life, that he was keeping his spirits up.

"You sound very passionate about film," I said, a little self-consciously pulling at the cuffs of a carefully chosen blouse.

"If I wasn't such a coward," he said, "I would apply to film school and become a director." He laughed and looked a little embarrassed, taking off his glasses and rubbing them clean against his shirt. His eyes without the glasses looked naked and vulnerable. "But my father is dead and my mother expects me to do something practical. I don't blame her."

"It seems you don't blame anyone for anything," I said.

"Would you believe me if I told you it was a quality I was learning in prison?"

"Maybe," I said, and we laughed.

"How is your husband?" Abed said. "Still dreaming?"

"Yes, I'm still getting regular reports."

"He must love you very much," Abed said. "Isn't there any way you can forgive him?"

I didn't say anything, just shook my head no.

"Would you play a little game with me?" he said. "It was something I did when I first arrived in America and felt homesick. I've started to play it again recently." He looked up at the walls and the ceiling and raised his hands slightly in a way that looked like he was offering the prison to me.

I hesitated for a second, but then nodded. "Okay," I said. "If you want me to."

"Did you ever see one of those electric clocks where a disc flips down whenever the minute or the hour changes?"

"Sure."

"I had one as a child. It made a very satisfying click, especially on the hour. It was like something had really changed, like turning over a new leaf. Close your eyes now and think of a scene in a movie that you love. Imagine it very carefully so that each time the shot changes the image flips in your mind's eye with that satisfying click."

"You want me to close my eyes?"

"Yes, close your eyes," Abed said. "It's best that way."

For a moment I couldn't think of a single movie I'd ever seen. It was unbelievable and I felt stupid. But maybe because I was talking to Abed, I began to think of the desert and so remembered going to see the English Patient in those days when I didn't yet hate my husband. Ralph Fiennes and Kristen Scott Thomas were trapped in their car during a sandstorm and afraid they'd be buried alive. To calm her fears, Fiennes' character, a Hungarian count, began to tell her about all of the many famous desert winds. As he talked, his voice compelling and engaged, she forgot the possibility of death for a moment. Probably, this was because as the count spoke he let his fingers play with the ends of her hair, just below the ear, sometimes gently brushing the lobe.

"Are you thinking of a scene?" Abed said.

"I am."

"Tell me what you see."

I described the claustrophobia of the interior of the car, the look on the actress' face as she cycled between fear and desire. The quality of Fiennes' voice. The sound of the sand blowing against the car windows. I had no way of knowing if my words allowed Abed to see what I was seeing or if he'd ever watched the movie himself. Nor did I know what benefit he was getting from my description, which I thought was probably not very good. But I knew I felt calm and clear-headed and remarkably content. The thought that eventually

Abed would be released and I would never see him again passed through my mind.

The electronic locks on the door buzzed, startling me, and the guard stuck his head into the room. "Time's up today."

I looked at Abed and he smiled. I wanted to say something important to him, something that would be meaningful during the time between our visits, but I didn't have anything. "That's a cool game," I said.

"I know," he replied, just as the guard escorted him from the room.

* * *

The next time my husband called, he asked if I ever dreamed about him. It was less than a week since my last visit to the prison, and I had been playing Abed's movie game almost every night before I went to sleep.

"Of course I do," I said, "all the time." Which was sadly true. I'd known the man for fifteen years. Slept beside him every night for the better part of twelve. Taken him inside my body so many times only someone with an actuarial personality would have bothered to keep count. We'd created a child together. I'd listen to him rage against the world and laugh until food spewed from his mouth. I'd held him while he cried when his father died and smiled through wet eyes with him when Amy won her first swim meet. "How could I not?"

"You never mention anything about me," he said, his tone trying to register only simple resignation but not quite managing it. "You seem to have erased me."

"What do you want me to do?" I said and instantly regretted it. I could imagine him lying on the bed in his old childhood room and talking to me on the blue push-button phone he'd called his girlfriends with as a teenager. He was probably wearing the green polo shirt he liked for the weekends when he planned on just bumming around the house, when he said nothing could compel him out into the world.

"You could think about us," he said. "Think about our home where the three of us live." We hadn't talked like this in months and maybe not so directly about our lives since he'd moved out. I didn't hate it, but when I started to reply to him my throat felt like it was filled with sand.

"I know it's hard to accept," I said when I finally found my voice again, "but only Amy and I live here now."

* * *

That evening, I didn't complain when Amy opened up the Netflix and presented me with Interview with a Vampire. I just nodded and she squealed with excitement before running into the kitchen to make popcorn. And I didn't complain when she came back carrying two sugary sweet cokes for us to drink. We hadn't sat down to watch a movie together in a very long time, and certainly not as we were tonight with Amy's skinny hips pressed against mine on the couch and the bowl of popcorn between us. The lights were off. We could have easily been mistaken for a mother and daughter who were not slowly learning to dislike each other.

After about an hour, Amy needed a pee break and so we paused the movie while she went to the bathroom. I stared at a frozen image of Tom Cruise in mid-stride, crunched a bite of popcorn, and felt, remarkably, almost nothing at all.

"Mom?" Amy said when she came back and discovered me. When I smiled at her she started talking about how creepy the little girl vampire was, and that children were always the scariest part of monster movies because they're so difficult to hate. This was the reason why she loved her fangs so much; when she looked at herself in the mirror the image that stared back even managed to freak her out a little.

"You think little children are difficult to hate?" I said, the words out of my mouth before I quite realized what I was saying.

"Yeah. It's that whole big eyes, tiny features thing that makes them cute and so everyone wants to protect them. When they've, like, been bitten by a vampire and are beyond help that's really, really scary."

"Huh," I said. "Maybe that's true."

For a moment I lost myself in Amy's idea about children and fear, not really getting anywhere with it, just turning it over in my mind until I realized she had something more to say.

"Do you think that's why Dad never comes around?" Amy said. "Do I scare him? Her voice, normally edged with an incredulous adult cynicism, sounded finally very much like a 12 year old's.

"No, baby. You don't scare him." I placed my hand on the back of her head and rubbed my fingers through her silky brown hair. It was hot in the living room and her roots were damp with sweat. I wondered if maybe she had overheard something the last time my husband called. I tried to go back over the conversation, but couldn't think what it might have been.

"Tell me again about this San Diego plan," I said. "I don't think you can sucker someone's mom to drive you 3000 miles no matter how sweetly you beg."

"No, we'd have to fly. There's four of us, but Jessica Shaeffer's dad has more frequent flier miles than God, so it won't be as expensive as you might think. Plus we probably only need two hotel rooms, maybe even one. And we'd totally stay someplace cheapo like Motel 6."

"It still sounds like some little rich girl stunt," I said. She shrugged off my hand and turned to face me.

"Sometimes, Mom, you just have to go for it. Otherwise, why even live?"

"I think platitudes like 'go for it' are really just excuses for not living like a decent human being. I imagine your dad was just going for it when... Don't you?"

"Who knows, Mom? Maybe he was. Maybe you should stop complaining and go for something, too."

"Maybe I will," I said. I pushed play and Tom Cruise glided once again into motion. "In the meantime be careful or ... I'm going-to suck-your blood!" Then I buried my face into Amy's neck and covered it with wet noisy kisses.

* * *

Two summers ago, just before Amy's school started again, our little family had taken a camping trip in central New York. I had grown up on a farm and every so often felt an overwhelming desire to get out of the city, to be surrounded by greenery and fresh air and silence. I had dreamy memories of walking the pasture trails in the evening as a girl and feeling like, well, like I don't know what. Like I understood the world and was part of it. I wanted my daughter to

experience that same feeling, too. So we went camping. In all honesty, the campground itself didn't really give the illusion of being truly in the woods, what with all of the paved sites for parking your car and a general store where you could buy magazines and bug spray and firewood. Still, you were sleeping outside and there were trails that could be walked that made you feel isolated from the 21st century in a way that made me happy. In fact, that's a big part of my memory of that trip: my daughter wearing dirty cutoff shorts and humming tunelessly as she walked a trail behind her father, with me stopping every so often to run my hands along the bark of old trees, and my husband finding my eyes and smiling warmly before leading us around the next bend.

I can't say that I'm not idealizing the trip in my mind. Probably Amy complained about mosquito bites or that her father burned her marshmallows too black for her to eat them or that my husband complained I wouldn't fuck him with our daughter so close by even though she had her own tent. All of these things might have happened and maybe worse, but in my mind this was the last time we were all happy together. I had no idea that he was sleeping with a young waitress at the restaurant, or that I would react the way I did, that Amy would develop her obsession with vampires, or that Abed would be arrested and his future placed in my hands. It's possible that if I had looked more closely at our lives, at the little nuances of give and take that went on among us, I might have seen some or all of these things coming, but I did not. And so I still hold it there, living like one of Abed's movie scenes, a still shot of waning happiness captured in my memory.

On our last day camping, my husband caught three trout with a wonky, old fishing pole that had belonged to his father. He'd been very excited by these little fish and so had Amy, who had been with him when he'd reeled them in. Naturally, he wanted to eat them. And over my objections – God knew what chemicals might have been released into that stream and become a regular part of the fish's diet – he showed Amy how to clean the fish, wrapping them in foil with salt and lemon to slow cook over the campfire. Though they looked all right when he had them cooked, I still refused to eat them. He and Amy were stuffing their faces with the white fish and laughing at me when my daughter stopped short and clutched at her throat. At first I thought she was only pretending, but she was choking.

"It's caught in her throat!" I said to my husband.

"Swallow hard, Amy."

"She can't breathe!" I said. "Do something!"

Of course he just stood there staring while I pried Amy's mouth open and stuck my fingers down her throat until I felt the bone and pulled it out. Right away she gasped as air flooded back into her lungs. She was scared and she clung onto me while I rubbed her back and her breathing returned to normal. "I'm surprised," my husband had said. "They were such little bones."

* * *

My next meeting with Abed turned out to be my last when he announced, with a fair amount of chagrin, that he was firing me. His mother had appealed to her family for money and they were hiring another lawyer. The phrase he didn't use was a "real" lawyer or, at least, not a pro bono lawyer, but his meaning was clear. We sat in our usual positions across from each other in the conference room. He was so upset about firing me that he'd started to sweat, and I found myself transfixed by the little beads of moisture pearling along his upper lip.

"I know people believe that there's a direct correlation between the fee an attorney charges and their competence," I said, "but are you sure this is what you want to do?"

"I have great faith in you, Kathleen." He pushed his glasses a bit higher on his nose. "My mother, though, feels that something more should have been done by now. I am innocent."

"Well, technically," I said, "you're not. You did, in fact, fail to register with the INS in the time proscribed by the laws of this nation."

"Still, my mother believes a man will get faster action."

For a moment, my mind went absolutely white, and all shapes and images burned away.

"Abed," I said, finally, "I've been thinking about your movie game. Do you ever start to think of your life that way?"

"You mean like scenes from a movie?"

"Yes," I said. "Like stills."

"No," he said, considering my question. "No, I don't think so."

"That's probably because you're too immature to know how to do it."

It took a second for what I'd said to sink in, but eventually Abed said, "You're angry with me."

"No Abed, I'm not. I'm disappointed that I won't be able to help you anymore. I don't know if you realized it or not, but helping you had become very important to me."

"I think I did realize it."

"Good. Then maybe you are actually thinking for yourself."

I gathered up my briefcase and stood to leave.

"Are you going already?" he said.

"I can't see any reason why I should stay," I said. "Have your new attorney contact our office and I'll have your file forwarded to him."

"Couldn't you just stay until the end of our normal time?" he asked.

"No. I don't think I can."

I knocked on the door and waited for the guard to disengage the electronic lock.

"Enshallah, you will work things out with your husband," Abed said.

"Thanks."

When I got out of the conference room and into the hallway my hands were shaking so badly that I dropped Abed's case file and the papers spread out across the floor like spilled water. The guard tried to help me pick them up but I'm afraid I wouldn't let him, taking a scolding tone that I normally reserved for Amy's worse offenses. Or maybe my husband's. He muttered under his breath, something that I wasn't supposed to hear, but I heard bitch clearly enough. I could feel the blush stretching across my cheeks and the heat there. But I told myself that it didn't matter, that none of it mattered. I was okay, just a little upset. It would pass and I would be fine. Just stand up and smooth out your skirt and leave. When I reached the automatic doors that led to the parking lot, I saw a trash can and threw Abed's file into it. Many of the papers were wrinkled and sticking out at odd angles. The parent in me instantly

wanted to retrieve it, or to at least straighten the papers before leaving them to their fate. It also struck me as unlikely that Holly would believe that I had just misplaced Abed's file directly after being fired. And so I stood there for half a minute, my hand poised above the file. In the end, however, I found that my hand dropped to my side and I simply walked away.

* * *

The next time my husband called, he sounded like he'd been crying. It was about ten days since being fired by Abed, or his mother, and I hadn't been back to the office, taking some vacation days that I had saved up for when Amy would inevitably have to stay home sick from school. For the first couple of days, Holly had called to see how I was doing, but now all had fallen quiet. No one had said anything about the missing file. It wasn't like them to make a scene, but when they felt I'd had time to pull myself together and returned to work, I knew there would be a reckoning of some kind. In any case, it was almost a relief to hear my husband's voice on the line. Here, after all, was someone I felt was even more messed up than me.

"Kathleen," he said, "I feel so completely fucked up."

"I was just thinking about you," I said. "Has something happened?"

"You mean something besides losing my wife, my daughter, my house, and my job? No," he said, "nothing else has happened."

"Life is really hard," I said and meant it. I took the phone into Amy's bedroom and sat on the edge of her bed.

"I keep telling myself the wheel is going to turn, that somehow, slowly, things are going to get better," he said. "But they haven't, Kathleen, they haven't."

"I know." I leaned back onto the bed to stare at the ceiling and my head bumped into Amy's top hat, the one with the wide, red band that she believed a cane would look so good with. I wondered, briefly, where on earth she'd got her notions of what was "good," but then I wondered where on earth I'd gotten mine. "Calvin," I said, using his real name instead of his middle, Jeremy, which is what he went by. "I think you should come visit your family."

"I can come?" he said. "If I did, I could get us all tickets to the Giants' game."

"You want to take us to the football game?"

"Is that a stupid idea?"

"No," I said. I sat up and put on the top hat. It was too small and I probably looked like an idiot. "Not necessarily."

"When should I come?" he said. I asked him about his schedule, which was alarmingly open and then we discussed the possibility of a couple of different long weekends that were not so far in the future. His voice was a little frightening, choked as it was with such abject gratitude. When we hung up, I stayed sitting there for a long time with the phone in my hand. Eventually, I let myself fall back onto Amy's bed and slept for most of the afternoon.

When I woke again, the sun pounded into my eyes and a line of sweat circled my neck. My throat was hot and sore, and I could feel a headache beginning to pulse along the top of my head. When I staggered out to the kitchen for a drink, a six-pack of Jeremy's beer, rings of rust around the edge of the caps, suddenly seemed just the thing. I drank the first beer standing in front of the open fridge door with the cool air billowing onto my skin. I took the second beer with me to the computer where I looked up the New York Giants football schedule. I tried to imagine the three of us in the stadium together and wondered if Amy would think it was a good time, if there was any chance of us being happy there. Could I sit beside my husband and not hate his guts? Then I looked up the Comic-con website. It didn't take long to discover images of Robert Pattison, his pale and vaguely frail beauty. I tried to understand what Amy saw in him, tried to imagine her vampire daydreams. Did she see herself stepping out of a black limousine, wearing her satin corset, her fishnet stockings, her red banded top hat and being escorted to some secret vampire enclave where she would do...what? Dance on a strobe lit floor with thin, pale-skinned wraiths? What would she learn about the world there? That it's always better to be a predator than to be the prey? That it's better to already be dead?

That night I dreamed of being invited to a party on the Upper West Side. I wore a gown and a black carnival mask. My hair was piled high on my head with wispy tendrils falling against my bare neck. My husband was there, and so was Abed. They both wore tuxedos and everyone drank champagne. The room was packed and a string quartet played. I had something important I wanted to say to Abed, but each time I tried to reach him, the crowd seemed to mass and block my way. Frustrated I stepped with my drink onto a balcony that looked out onto the city. I felt more than saw my husband join me. He was a vampire and when he smiled I saw his fangs. When he bit my neck, it didn't hurt much. It was very like a dull toothache, and as long as I didn't move,

there was almost no pain at all, just a sinking feeling that, slowly, something horrible was happening.

* * *

One afternoon I came home from the grocery store to heavy metal music blasting from the speakers of my stereo in the living room. Holly had been calling every day, at first with a tone of great patience but increasingly something edgier, to inquire when, or if, I intended to return to work. I had insisted on a policy with Amy that all calls should be left to voicemail and had a catalogue of Holly's efforts. And, of course, my husband had been calling as well. After our last conversation inviting him to visit, I didn't know how to talk to him. He naturally wanted to finalize the details. I was careening toward something bad, and fast. Anybody could see that.

When I put down the groceries and hit the power button on the stereo, the singer's falsetto cut off in mid-screach, and Amy came out of the bedroom with a half eaten red popsicle in her hand. Her lips and tongue stained red. I gave her a wan smile and waved.

"What's new in the world?" she said. "Did you actually speak to any human beings today?"

I just looked at her for a moment. I wondered if she'd been listening to Holly's messages or if maybe her father had finally decided to call her since he wasn't having any success with me. I had started to gather up the grocery bags from the floor, but now I let them drop again.

"Look," I said. "I'll be blunt. I probably shouldn't, but you're smart enough to see that I'm fucking things up. I'm sorry."

"Royally," she said.

"That's right." I looked at my daughter. She wore a pair of white terry cloth shorts that were starting to be too small for her, and with that red popsicle mouth, she looked impossibly young. Too young to be having this conversation. I asked her what that noise was that I'd just turned off.

"You don't even want to know," she said. "Besides, they call themselves some name I can't pronounce. I think they're Romanian."

"Show me the cd case," I said.

Amy retreated to her room for a moment but quickly returned and handed me the plastic case. Most of the image was shadowy and indistinct, but in the background the head of one figure emerged from all the black. Its skin was pale and yellowed like the moon on certain nights and its eyes were sunken in like raisins pushed into dough. Nosferatu, I supposed. The liner notes were indeed written in a foreign language that might just have well have been Romanian as anything else. I couldn't imagine why Amy was interested in this music, but I didn't say anything to her. Couldn't bring myself to criticize her. For once. I felt that, at least for the moment, some of my parental prerogative had been lost. Better to save whatever I had left for the truly big battles.

"What's going on with Dad?" she asked when I handed back the cd case.

"He's supposed to come visit," I said, and walked to the window to gaze at the apartment across the street. The neighbors never pulled their curtains closed and, often, it was possible to see something good. "But now I don't know."

"Why's it so hard to know?" Amy said.

"I don't know that either." There were so many decisions to make, and I couldn't even manage to identify what all of them were let alone actually make choices. Should I eat crow and go back to work and take whatever punishment was coming my way? Should I let Jeremy take us to the Giants game? Should I fund Amy's absurd Comic-con trip and be voted Mother of the Year? Or should I organize an intervention and throw away every bit of vampire paraphernalia my daughter had collected, before dragging her down to the swimming pool and throwing her in?

I looked into the apartment across the street. The old man who lived there wore red plaid boxer shorts and a white t-shirt. He stood in front of a fan and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. There were heavy framed pictures on his living room wall and a huge relic of a television from at least the eighties, maybe even older. A serious piece of furniture. As far as I'd ever been able to tell he lived alone and had a recliner positioned at an angle only a few feet away from the screen. From long experience, Amy and I knew his two favorites were the History Channel and Turner Classic Movies.

"Don't you think you should put the groceries away?" Amy said.

"In a minute," I said. "Look, he's going to watch a movie." I pointed to the tv where the opening credits were rolling across his screen in black and white. With the windows open, I could just hear, ever so faintly, the theatrical music.

"I sometimes wish," I said, "that I could just walk into a movie." I imagined the light getting brighter and brighter as I approached the screen, until eventually I was swallowed by whiteness and disappeared.

"Maybe that's what heaven is like," Amy said. She wedged herself in front of me and I put my arms around her. I put my nose into her hair and took a deep breath, and we both looked at our neighbor's television. "That's what some people believe, you know. That heaven is whatever you want it to be. So for you it could be like the movies."

On the screen an actress stood looking out the window, distress plain in her every gesture and expression. Then, suddenly, a noise claimed her attention and she turned to the door. It opened to reveal a man. He was dressed in a dark suit and his hair was slicked perfectly in place. When he saw her, his face broke into joy and the two strode across the room to embrace each other. They kissed one of those hard, closed-mouthed kisses that used to signify passion, and then the couple began to talk. Who knew what they said? Did they talk about love? Politics? Family? For a moment they paused, holding hands, and looked into the camera at the old man in his recliner, at Amy, at me with my arms wrapped around my daughter, waiting.

About Jeffrey Condran

Jeffrey Condran is the author of the forthcoming story collection, *A Fingerprint Repeated*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as *The Kenyon Review*, *The Missouri Review*, and *The Jabberwock Review*, and has been honored with several awards, including 2010 William Peden Prize and Pushcart Prize nominations. He is a professor of English at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh.