

My Other Real Life 1

Around my 42nd birthday. I had the sensation that the life I inhabited was not the one I owned. By this, I don't mean that I no longer felt at home in the life I had constructed (though I certainly did feel this). Nor do I mean I was losing my mind (though, of course, that is for others to judge). Rather, I had glimpses of something beyond the surface of the everyday. A little like when you gaze through a darkened window and see the scene outside, but the room inside, superimposed, too.

At the time, I'd been ill, and gone into hospital. As a natural hypochondriac, I was accustomed to the sensation of feeling unwell so that when real sickness came along, I'd mistrusted and neglected it, and something quite minor - a urinary infection – had blossomed into something more dangerous. I barely remember being transported to the ward.

Afterwards, I woke in bed, the sheets stretched over my knees, a plastic tube burrowed into my hand, and my mind was totally blank. My husband, my children, my home, all seemed details from a movie I once watched. When I thought of anywhere, I recalled the house I grew up in a dull suburb of London. I pictured the rose bushes in the garden, and the way the brambles tightly wound themselves around the stalks.

My room had green walls and I remember thinking I could hear a blackbird singing outside the windows, which looked down upon a truck stop. In truth, this was unlikely: the glass was sealed shut, and there were no trees, only scrubby bushes, the kind they plant in municipal spaces. Below, I could see the drivers sitting in their cabs, eating sandwiches, scrolling through their phones, indefinite shapes that from a distance might not have been

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human at all.

One day I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, I saw a man I didn't recognise. Then a fleeting memory emerged. He is called Sean, said a voice in my head, and he's your other husband. This man kissed me softly on the cheek. Darling, he said, I was worried about you.

I knew then this was not my own husband, who'd never have said such a thing. We had reached the point in our relationship where we'd forgotten to be kind to each other, so reverting back to that kind of behaviour would have seemed forced and unnatural, even in a situation where I was gravely ill. The man called Sean held out what I recognised to be flowers: purples and red shapes with green lines protruding from the bottom.

Sean sat in a vinyl-covered armchair by my bed, and stroked my hand. He droned on, discussing domestic issues: rail delays, laundering dusty duvets. Though all I'd done for days was listen to the radio by my ear, which piped old tunes from the 60s, I was bored. In my head, I counted the seconds until he'd leave. 'The children will visit soon, would you like that?' he said at last, pulling on his jacket. Two shadowy figures crossed my mind's eye, like Japanese shadow puppets. 'Yes,' I said; it seemed the right thing to say.

The next day, I was transferred to a ward. Flimsy curtains concealed the other patients, but day and night I heard constant wails and screams. Once more, however, my window overlooked the road. This time I saw directly into the cab of a truck. A man sat there, studying his phone. Whenever I looked down, he seemed to stare directly back. I wondered if he could really see me from that angle, or if I was paranoid.

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Days passed. Sometimes, the truck disappeared, and I'd feel anxious at the loss of an object that had grown strangely familiar, but its vast metal hulk always returned. Then, one afternoon, I looked up to see two children. 'Mummy!' they cried, clambering up and kissing me. 'Careful folks!' said Sean jovially, as I tried not to flinch. 'She's still delicate!'

I resisted the urge to push them aside. 'These are not my children,' I thought. My own were the same age, but mine were dark with brown-button eyes; these were fair and smelled unfamiliar, milky and sour. The girl who was older, and called Ruby, chattered away about schoolwork. The boy, Alex, stayed silent, sucking on his thumb.

Afterwards, I felt exhausted and slightly repulsed, tumbling into a feverish sleep. I woke late, a tray of brown mush by my bedside. The blind's slats were lowered, the setting sun shooting shards of glassy light in my eyes. I looked outside. The shadowy figure still sat in the cab. Though almost dark, I saw him looking at me.

That night, as the other patients drifted into fitful sleep, I climbed out of bed, pulling on my ugly rubber sandals. It was quiet on the ward, an eerie, greenish light flickering. I slipped past the nurses, as they sat eating cheap chocolate.

In the corridor, I stepped into the lift, a vast metal contraption, big enough for pile-ups of patients ambulated in from horrific accidents. It rattled downstairs and I paused by the front, where the usual decrepit smokers gathered, stooped and sallow. Then I walked around the stubby perimeter wall. The truck was parked, the driver reading his paper. He had a ginger beard and wore a blue cap.

I walked round and rapped on the window. He motioned for me to climb up. Inside it smelt of beer and smoke, and something sickly, like rotting melon.

'Well, 'said the driver, 'Where to?'

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'My home,' I said. 'The real one.'

He started the truck. It rumbled into life, then sped up. The empty roads were black as deep space, sky the colour of burned toast. The radio played a dreamy ballad. 'You left me so I killed you.'

After 15 minutes, we screeched up outside a house, a pale oblong emerging from dimness. The driver looked at me. 'You can't go in,' he said slowly. 'But you can look.'

I tiptoed through the bushes, locating a curtain crack. There I saw him. My husband, sitting with my children, with a woman who looked like me, and who I guessed was me. The room was full of my things, I even saw my old blue cardigan draped on a stool.

Then behind me, I heard quiet footsteps. The woman who was me had slipped out the back. I noticed she was wearing my favourite dress, from my other real life, and felt a stab of anger.

'Now look,' she said. 'I know this must be unsettling. But you have to understand this isn't your life any more.'

I stood there, shivering, unsure whether to howl or laugh.

After a moment, I said: 'You're looking after them, my children? And they're OK?'

'Of course,' she said. 'I love them.'

'And my husband?' He was the light of my life, despite our differences and indifferences, I could see that now.

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'He's fine, he's good.'

She reached for my hand, her fingers cool and light.

'What about you - will I see you again?' I asked.

The woman smiled sadly. 'Probably not,' she said.

Behind me, the truck driver sounded his horn. It was time to go. On the return journey, the surrounding landscape appeared hazy, like we were navigating another planet.

At the hospital, I pondered over the fact that the life I'd abandoned was so similar to the one I had. Was it a failure of imagination on my part? I cried silently into my pillow. A few days later, I was discharged. A nurse took me to a featureless room, and said physically I was OK, but I should remember to sleep better, handing me several packets of pills. I formed my lips in what I hoped resembled an acquiescent smile.

Back home, I fell into the usual routines. I worked in the library part-time, drove the children to school. In the evenings, Sean and I watched TV shows. Sometimes I met friends for a coffee.

But I missed my real husband and children. At night, I went to the loft and pored over old photos. There was our trip to Rome. Family meals. Afternoons in the park. All the settings were correct, but the wrong faces left me feeling queasy.

When the children were at school, I drove around, searching for the white house. I even returned to the hospital, but the truck-stop sat vacant, crows pecking at food decaying on the kerb.

One evening, we sat watching a cookery show. Someone was making fish soup. Sean turned to me. 'You ought to see someone. I feel I'm living with a stranger.' 'OK,' I said,

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practising my acquiescent smile again. I Googled my problem. 'I can remember another life.' Nothing in the fathomless online world matched my symptoms. The only option seemed to be hypnotists exploring reincarnation. This isn't a past life, I thought. It's a present one.

Nonetheless, eventually I settled into life's rhythms. I grew to like, even love, my new family. Ruby and Alex grew tall and strong, with their own secret worlds in their heads. I helped people at the library find books, reconnected with friends. Life was OK, possibly even good. Sometimes I'd catch Sean looking at me, oddly, but most of the time we rubbed along. My friends who'd been married a long time reported similar problems anyway, a sense neither party was really present.

The years started to tumble by, the sharp light of high summer fading into the shadows of autumn, then the deep, darkness of winter. Strands of grey wove themselves into my hair. I didn't bother too much about memories; who knew what happened anyway? You remember one thing, I remember another. I no longer looked at old photos.

Then, one afternoon, when the house was empty, a shadow fell over the living room. I heard an engine revving. I looked outside, and there it was. The truck looked duller than it had all those years ago. Inside the cab, the driver wore mirrored sunglasses so I couldn't tell if the lines around his eyes matched the ones round mine. But his beard was bushier, his cap frayed and tattered.

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'Shall we go?' he asked. I nodded and climbed in. I noticed he was playing the same mournful ballad. I wondered if he had just one mixtape, playing seamlessly for decades.

This time, the sky was a perfect blue, unbroken by clouds, light beaming down. When we reached the house, it looked unkempt. The gardens were overgrown, brambles twisting along the windows, frames peeling.

I picked my way across prickly grass. Through cloudy glass, I saw an empty room; strewn with broken furniture and rubbish. I thought I saw a rat scurrying in the filth. And was that my blue cardigan mouldering on the floor? I shuddered and half-ran to the truck. Where was the other me? Had something awful happened?

Back in the truck, the driver was placid. 'Well,' he said. 'Just goes to show, you wasn't missing much.' He started the engine. Back outside my house, I thanked him, even tried to give him money, but he pushed my hand away: 'My pleasure, m'aam.' He began releasing the brake, but I yelled for him to stop. He wound his window down, cigarette dangling. 'Is she OK?' He shrugged sadly. 'Folks don't tell me nothing.' As he drove off, I heard that same old song playing.

Time passed, the kids left home. One day, in my living room, as I sorted some papers, while Sean mowed the lawn, I had the sensation someone was watching. I thought I saw a twitch at the curtains.

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I moved to the door, in time to see something disappearing beyond the gate. Maybe a person, maybe a shadow. On the gatepost, someone had hung up a blue cardigan.

Who knows what's real anyway?