



## **Refill**

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## **Dedication**

Some stories come from dreams, not many, but enough to warrant the mention here.

This story came from someone else's dream.

Thanks to Phenomsel for dreaming and sharing that dream so I could turn it into a story.

## Refill

That night she imagined Scott's face as the dirt on the diner's floor. With each push of the ragged mop, Shelley wiped a little more of that smug bastard from her memory.

If only life were that easy. If only love could be wiped away with one quick push, but that was wishful thinking. She didn't hate Scott, but it was getting damn close over the last few weeks.

From behind the counter Lashawna made a tutting sound as she tied on her apron.

Shelley looked up.

"Girl," Lashawna said, "you look fit to bust through to the basement with that damn mop. What's on your mind?"

Shelley smiled weakly.

"Nothing," she said.

Lashawna waved her hand and her head in time. "Don't give me nothing, girl. You ain't attacking that floor for no good reason."

Shelley shrugged and rolled her eyes.

"It's that man of yours, right? I got me a sixth sense when it comes to those bastards. What did he do?"

Shelley pushed the mop to the counter and leaned against the chrome surface.

"Nothing really," she said.

"And that means everything. Fess up. Did he cheat on you?"

"No, it's...you know how we both went for that college course?"

Lashawna let out another tut.

"The bastard got it, didn't he, and you didn't?"

Shelley's lips tightened. Every time she thought about the Veterinary College and Scott it was like a bad dream. One where you can never tell whether you're dreaming or not.

"I don't mind that so much," Shelley said, "it's just all the talk, you know? It's like he's rubbing it in. Bert said this and Bert said that. Never stops."

Lashawna leaned over the counter, a wicked grin on her lips.

"Who's Bert?"

"The recruiter from the college. Bert Lee. He's some big shot in the department."

So what you gonna do about this?"

"He wants to meet me tonight, up on Abbot's field, you know where the tree house is. It's where we first kissed when we were kids."

Lashawna rolled her eyes.

"You know what's gonna happen, don't you, once he gets you up there?"

Confused, Shelley shrugged.

"What?" She said.

Lashawna extended her index finger, the bright purple fake nail shining under the diner's false light. She hummed a few bars from the "wedding march".

"He's gonna pop the question, no doubt about it," Lashawna said.

"No, that can't be—"

"Sure as I'm standing here and looking like a million dollars."

"But—"

Lashawna waved away the words.

"You take it from me, girl, don't get all Harlequin romance when you're up there. It's a mistake, understand?"

"But—"

The door to the diner swung open.

Theresa, Shelley's replacement on the late shift, entered.

Where Lashawna was lean and tall, Theresa was short and, even though Shelley didn't like to say it, fat.

"Well if I never saw two more devious bitches in my life, may God strike me down," she said, meeting them at the counter. "What's got you two huddled up and whispering?"

Lashawna jerked her head in Shelley's direction.

"This one here is about to be proposed to, only she don't want no proposing."

Theresa lost her smile. She faced Shelley and like some disapproving Mom, waved her finger in the air.

"Now you listen to me. I been through three marriages and three divorces, and men are all the same. They're coffee, the lot of them, nothing but coffee."

"Coffee?" Shelley said.

"You better believe it, here 'Shawna, hand me that pot there," she said, motioning in Lashawna's direction.

Lashawna handed over a half-full coffee pot.

"What you playing at, Theresa?" She said.

"Look at this here," Theresa said, holding up the pot. She poured the coffee into the sink behind the counter. "Now you tell me what'd happen if I walked around now with this here empty jug?"

"What?" Shelley said.

"Every sorry sonofabitch in here would ask for a refill. That's what men are like. Don't matter if there's nothing in the jug, they still want their refills. You get me? And you know what mama Theresa says when they ask?"

Shelley smiled.

"Tell us, mama," Shelley said.

"Mama Theresa says to all those men out there who want something when it ain't on offer. No refills. Nuh-huh. No refills, sir."

Lashawna reached over and grabbed the coffee pot from Theresa's hand.

"Why don't you put on your apron mama and get to work, let Shelley here go and break it off proper before she loses her nerve?"

"Why you little bitch, I should take you over my knee and—" Theresa said, mimicking a backhand slap.

Ten minutes later Shelley was out in her car, Theresa's words ringing in her ears as was the cell phone.

Where the hell was Scott? Why wasn't he picking up?

And was he like all the rest? Was he after that refill when the coffee pot was empty?

She wasn't sure she ever wanted to find out the answer to that question.

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A waist-high fog covered Abbot's field.

Sticking up like some gnarled and blackened hand was the old oak. Between its fingers the tree house rested. One window caught the light from the moon making it look almost like an eye.

A wave of fear crept over Shelley. She shivered and hugged herself.

You're acting like a little kid. There's nothing out here you haven't seen a million times before. No need to be spooked.

Her back to the field and the tree house, Shelley hit speed-dial and held the cell phone up to ear for the tenth time since she'd left the diner.

After six rings there was a click and a computer voice answered.

"Dr. Scott Carrigan isn't available at the moment, please leave a message after the tone."

Shelley flipped the cell shut before any message could be recorded.

Dr. Scott Carrigan? Jesus, who did he think he was? You couldn't be a doctor until you'd finished school. Sonofabitch.

Well, Dr. Scott Carrigan, you can go hang for making me wait out here

tonight. And if you dare propose to me then—

A new thought struck Shelley.

She wouldn't leave any more messages on his voicemail, no, she would leave him a real message. One he wouldn't be able to ignore.

She turned and faced the tree house.

It looked just as imposing as it had moments earlier. Alone and isolated in the middle of the field it was almost alive. Some strange creature from a horror movie that might jump out and grab her at any moment.

Shelley rubbed the chill from her arms, sucked in a deep breath and set out into the field.

The fog seeped in around her, thick and wet. The polyester work uniform clung moistly to her skin like the greasy touch of one of the drunk Truck driver's who rolled into the diner.

Shelley grimaced, but she pushed on toward the tree house. One thought in her mind.

When Scott came here, when he finally arrived he would get the shock of his life. This would be the greatest break-up note ever written. And she would write it four feet high on the wooden walls of the tree house interior.

Inside the tree house the walls were already scratched with messages. Love hearts and insults chipped out of the wood with penknives. Even the one Scott had done.

It read: Scott and Shelley Forever.

Shelley snorted out a laugh.

What a joke that was. Forever? Yeah, because she wanted to live forever with a man who constantly reminded her that she'd failed. How about never? That sounded much better.

Shelley fished her car keys from her purse and bunched them in her hand. The longest poked out between her fingers.

Now, what to write?

Fuck you Scott?

No, it had to be longer than that, but not too long. She didn't want Scott turning up halfway through and catch her in the act. If he ever did turn up.

And what did it take to just make a call and tell her he would be late? Couple of minutes? Less than that?

Shelley dug the key into the soft, rain soaked wood and pulled her hand around in an arc to form the 'S' in Scott's name.

Scott, we're through. Fuck you.

Yeah! That would do, and it rhymed. See how you like me now,

Scott. See how–

A heavy clunk boomed out from below the tree house.

Shelley froze.

A second clunk. The tree house vibrated slightly.

Shelley turned, slowly. A lump formed in her throat. She shivered.

“Scott? Is that you?” She said.

Thunk.

“Stop being a douche, will you. Scott? Scott?”

Thunk-thunk.

Shelley grabbed the keys tighter. She inched forward to where the old gnarled oak tree met the floor of the tree house.

What if it’s some zoned-out meth head looking for a bit of fun? Christ, she’d heard plenty of horror stories about those cranks when they were high. They always seemed to end up with the pieces of some lonely woman found in a Dumpster.

Thunk-thunk-thunk.

The sound was almost as if someone were knocking on the side of the tree. Like if they were knocking on a door, maybe? What kind of meth head did that?

All of them. They were high, for God’s sake, they did crazy things.

Like rape women and then cut them up into tiny pieces.

The thought sent a new shiver of Shelley’s body. She drew back from the edge of the wooden floor. She fixed on the view from the single window of the tree house.

Abbot’s Field was thick with the deep fog. It seemed to run out forever in all directions.

Good place to hide, Shelley thought. If only she could get down from the tree house and into the field. But it was a fifteen feet drop to the ground. A drop that might end up with a broken ankle or –

A low moan came from below the tree house.

Shelley gritted her teeth and tightened her fist around the keys.

Nowhere to run, but if she kept quiet then–

“Shelley.”

The voice was drawn out, like a drunken man or someone high.

Don’t respond, she told herself. If he can’t hear you then–

Idiot!

He already knows you’re here, he just called out your name.

My name?

It couldn’t be some meth head down there, not if they knew her name. Then that left only–



Shelley scrambled forwards, thoughts of an injured Scott prominent in her mind.

I'm sorry, Scott, she thought. I should have known something was wrong when you didn't answer your cell phone. I should have—

Shelley peered over the edge of the floor.

It wasn't Scott.

Looking up into her eyes was Bert Lee. At least he was trying hard to look.

She'd only met him once, on an interview for the place that Scott eventually took. At that time she'd noticed how much he looked like the famous General E. Lee, but now all that was gone.

One of Bert's eyes was missing, nothing left but a blackened and charred hole. His face was cut up, dark flaps of skin peeling away like the edges of a poster.

He opened his mouth to speak, revealing a set of bloodstained and chipped teeth.

"Jesus! Ben, what happened?"

"Scott...the others...all..."

"Scott? What's happened to Scott?"

"All of them...all..."

Heart thundering in her ears, Shelley descended the planks fixed to the side of the old oak. She dropped down onto the ground and whirled around.

"Scott? Tell me Ben, what's happened to Scott?"

Ben shook his head and the flaps of skin danced crazily in the moonlight.

"The car..." he said, a bubble of blood-stained spittle forming on his torn lips.

"What car?"

"We were heading to...and...they're all..."

Shelley didn't want to hear the end of his sentence, but she already knew the last word. There was no other word that would fit.

Dead.

No. She couldn't believe it. She wouldn't believe it.

She put her hands out to steady herself against Ben's shoulders.

But Ben wasn't there.

His body shimmered and shook like water hit by a rock.

Shelley's hands fell right through the man and she dropped forward into the moist, clinging hands of the fog.

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Shivering, shaking, tears stinging her cheeks, Shelley ran to the car.

The cell at her ear she heard again that familiar computer voice.

This time she left a message.

"Scott! Jesus, Scott where are you? Are you okay? What's happened, what's--"

Shelley hit the edge of a large rock obscured by the creeping fog and tumbled forward.

The cell phone shot out of her hand.

She picked herself up just in time to see it crash and splinter against the paved road that led to the field.

More tears.

She could feel them as they dripped from the end of her nose.

It wasn't fair. How could he be dead? Just like that? How could--

The fog turned ice cold around her.

Ben.

Oh Christ! Had she seen a ghost, was that what Ben was out there under the tree house? But ghosts weren't real, they couldn't be--

But he'd disappeared right in front of her eyes. What else could he be if he wasn't a ghost? And if he was a ghost then--

Scott.

Would Scott be the same, would he be like Ben out there all cut up and bleeding? Was that going to be the only way she'd ever see him again? Some kind of corpse?

Guilt washed over her.

How could she have been so mad at Scott? He wasn't being mean on purpose. He was just excited that was all and now he was--

Dead.

No, she couldn't think of him that way. Not yet. Whatever Ben had been, then it wasn't a guarantee that Scott had ended up the same way.

She had to find out. Make sure before--

Before what? Before you go crazy insane? You just saw a ghost. Don't try and think your way out of this one. If Ben is dead and he says that Scott died too then you can't just ignore it. It won't just go away because you want it to.

Shelley picked her body up from the ground and broke into a run.

She had to find Scott.

Dead or alive.

She wanted it to be the latter.

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Scott's black SUV was parked up outside the house. In front and behind were the Honda Civic and the beat up old truck that belonged to his best friends from college.

Shelley pulled to a screeching halt, her blue Mazda parked at an odd angle blocking the road, and leaped out.

If the car was okay then that meant Scott was okay and if Scott was okay then what had she seen out there on Abbot's field? Was she going mad? Had she banged her head climbing up the tree house and—

Scott's front door swung open before she'd reached it.

A pizza delivery man exited, shaking his head. Behind him the loud thumping bass of Rage Against the Machines's Know Your Enemy boomed out.

When the pizza delivery man reached her, he stopped.

"Listen, I'm not being a killjoy or nothing, but you wanna tell your friends in there to keep it down? They'll have the cops on their ass if they don't."

He walked away, still shaking his head.

And now Shelley was mimicking the action as she approached the front door.

A mixture of relief and anger flooded her body.

If Scott was in there and still alive, then that was something to celebrate. But if he was in there then he'd forgotten all about meeting her up on Abbot's Field. He'd—

A very drunken Scott appeared in the doorway. He had no top on, a ten dollar bill clutched in his hand.

"Hey, Mr Pizza Dude, we need more—" Scott's eyes fixed on Shelley. "Babe! You made it! Come on here and give me a big smoocher why don't—"

Hesitantly, Shelley reached out and touched Scott's shoulder.

"Well that's no way to show me you love—"

He was real.

And ten times the bastard she'd thought he was.

Shelley folded her arms, a mean look on her face.

"You were supposed to meet me. Did you forget or were you too hammered to even bother?"

"Hey, Babe, what's wrong. I called you. I left you a message with that woman you work with and..."

"Scott?"

"Yeah, babe?" He said, stumbling out from the door to meet her.

She pushed him back, glad that he was real, but more angry than she had been in months.

"Fuck you," she said.

Scott looked like he'd been slapped in the face.

"Whoah," he said, holding up his hands, "what's with the attitude? I left you a message. I said we were going to party and that you were--"

"Fuck you double, Scott." She turned, ready to storm away, when Scott grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Come on," he said, "don't be like that. Listen, we're getting together for a big cookout tomorrow. I want you to come along. Whatever this is, we can work it out, I promise."

"Cookout? Are you serious?" She said.

"Come on, it'll be good. Jared and Bill are coming along, plus Ben and the guys from the Vet clinic. It's going to be--"

A shiver ran across Shelley's skin.

"Ben?"

"Ben'll be there. I just said--"

"Are you sure about that?"

"Why wouldn't I be, he called me like five minutes ago to confirm it." Scott's drunken face wrinkled with confusion. "Why all the questions about Ben?"

She couldn't tell him the truth. She didn't even know what the truth was now.

That thing, whatever it had been out there on Abbot's field, was as real as anything else she'd seen in her life. But if Ben was still alive then what could it have been? And why had it come to her?

Unless...?

"Okay," she said.

"Okay you're coming tomorrow?" Scott said.

"I'll be there."

She walked away.

"Hey babe, you not coming in for a few brewskies?"

Shelley didn't answer.

Her mind was somewhere else, focused on someone else.

Ben.

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Ben rode up front, Scott behind the wheel.

Shelley rode in back, sandwiched between Jared and Bill.

She'd had no chance to reach out and touch Ben all morning. There was always something in the way. No way to confirm if he was real or not, but he looked real enough.

The thing she'd seen out there on Abbot's field was not the same as the man sitting up front, joking and laughing with Scott.

Yet Shelley couldn't shake the odd feeling that somehow Ben wasn't real.

And if Ben wasn't real, then what about Scott and the rest?

No, she thought, as they came to a stop where the road forked. I must have been hallucinating. Maybe I ate something bad, or some bastard at the Diner spiked me. That's the only explanation for all this.

Ben's voice brought her away from her thoughts.

"There's a back road about ten miles up," Ben said, pointing out of the front windshield, "it'll cut about a half hour off the journey. It's a bit of a mountain road, quite steep, but we'll make good time."

"I bow to the master," Scott said, faking a courtesy behind the wheel.

The car pulled away.

Half way up the mountain road, Ben turned to her.

"I'm surprised," he said.

His eyes bore right into her as though she were the only person on the back seat.

"Surprised?" He said.

"What was that, babe?" Scott said.

Ben smiled, his grin just as focused as his stare.

"He can't hear me, not right now."

Shelley blinked. That familiar moist touch of the fog seemed to have returned to her skin.

"What are you saying?" She said.

"I said 'What was that, babe?' Didn't you hear me?"

"Not you Scott."

"Then who the hell else are you talking to?" He said.

Ben leaned forward.

"From now on we only hear each other," he said.

The car and the passengers were engulfed in silvery fog, and in that fog only Ben's face could be seen. Only his voice heard.

Shelley pushed back, trying to retreat, but there was nowhere to go.

"Last night, when you saw me, you didn't react how I wanted you to, Shelley."

Shelley jammed her hands over her eyes.

"Stop it! Stop it! This isn't real."

"You were supposed to run and tell Scott here what you saw. You were supposed to make today easier for me. But you didn't, did you?"

"Not real, not real, not real..." she repeated over and over again like some kind of child's song.

"Oh real enough it is," Ben said, "getting realer by the moment. You nearly ruined it all for me. Luckily I have you here now."

"This isn't--"

"It is."

Shelley's hands pulled away from her face as if strings were attached.

"You see, Shelley, he was supposed to hear it from you. You were there to prepare him for what he is about to see. For what is about to happen."

Voice cracked and broken with tears, Shelley said; "Please, whatever it is you want from me, just don't--"

"Hurt Scott? Now there's a change of attitude. Weren't you all set to leave him, break his heart?"

"No, I was mad, that's all, mad, I didn't--"

"Mad is good," Ben said, "mad is what I've been for the longest time until I found this one here." He waved his hand.

For a brief moment the fog parted to reveal Scott on the other side.

Scott wide-eyed with fear, hands up to shield his face as glass rained down from a shattered windshield.

The fog reformed and she was alone again with Ben.

"What's happening?" Shelley said.

"What always happens when I run out of energy. I need to recharge, refill the batteries. I need a new body, Shelley. And I've found one."

Shelley's heart beat a sickening rhythm. She felt her stomach lurch.

"Scott?" She forced the words out.

Ben smiled.

"And you're going to be there to help me move. You're going to be there to tell him that everything's okay. That everything is going to be fine."

"No," she said.

"Yes, Shelley."

"No."

Ben's smile grew wide.

"It's time," he said.

Shelley screamed.

Then the world turned into a sickening swirl of trees and broken glass.

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At first the world was nothing more than a bright blur.

Her head felt like it was weighted down with rocks. Every inch of her body ached.

Shelley sat upright.

The world came back into focus.

Scott's SUV was turned over on its roof. Jared and Bill were nowhere to be seen, neither was Ben. But there was Scott.

His body lay upon the rocky ground, twisted into an odd shape, the knees and neck pointing in the wrong direction.

Shelley scrambled to her feet, the strange words of Ben playing through her mind.

...you're going to be there to help me move. You're going to be there to tell him that everything's okay. That everything is going to be fine.

Was it all some kind of bad dream? An hallucination? Would she wake up in her bed and this nightmare would be over with?

"Shelley," Scott said, reaching out with his twisted arm.

Real or nightmare, Shelley wasn't sure.

"Scott? Is that you Scott?"

She knelt beside his mangled body.

"Help me," he said.

You're going to be there to tell him that everything's okay. That everything is going to be fine.

"I don't know if I--"

"Jesus, just help me will you."

The voice was Scott's but there wasn't something else in there beneath it all, something familiar that didn't belong to Scott.

Shelley narrowed her eyes, but there was no telling if this was really Scott or not. It was Scott's body alright. Scott's bone punching through the ruptured skin on the arm. Scott's fingers cracked and mangled like Pretzels.

But was it Scott?

"Get that rock," Scott said, straining to point to a large boulder nearby.

"What for?" Shelley said.

"Get the damn rock and finish me off," Scott said.

"What are you saying, Scott?"

Scott took in a long sigh, closed his eyes for a moment as the pain rocked his body.

"You know I'm not Scott. You know I'm not him. Just get the damn

rock and put me out of his misery will you. I can't live like this. I won't live like--"

Shelley stood.

Theresa's words came back to her mind.

She leaned down and kissed Scott, or whatever it was that lived inside the body, on the head.

"What are you doing? You can't leave me like this? You can't leave me--"

"Ben is it?" She said.

"You know my name, bitch. Now get the damn--"

"There's a saying where I work, Ben, when we get an uppity customer who thinks they can walk all over us."

"The rock! Bitch! Get the damn rock!"

Shelley turned, looking at the bright sun and the slope back up to the road.

"No refills," she said, and started walking.





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