

Elsie

“Ah, there’s another one Elsie,” my mentor says as he points at a round, black-haired woman. I discreetly watch her as she walks into a store that sells massage chairs. Her plump, little figure waddles sideways between some brown leather armchairs. She wiggles her way into a similar chair covered in black leather and takes a seat. She’s far from where my mentor and I sit, but I imagine I can hear the little sigh she lets out as she clicks a button on the chair’s remote, causing the magic fingers to begin massaging her back.

My mentor stands up and arches his back. An audible crack echoes in the air between us. He brushes the top of his gray hair with his hands and tightens the ponytail that holds the ends back. “I’ll be damned if those benches don’t get harder every time they remodel one of these malls,” he says. He gestures for me to stand. “Look, kid, it’s not as hard as you would think. And a lot of them in this place want to leave.”

We walk into the same store that the black-haired woman just entered. My mentor takes a seat in one of the chairs next to her. He motions for me to sit down in the chair that faces his. I take my seat, and he leans across the small aisle to get closer to me. “Now, it’s not nearly as difficult to capture a soul as it was when I first began,” he said. “I received my calling during the roaring 20’s. Back then we had to lure the souls into a speakeasy, we’d liquor them up, then we’d have them pose for a picture. Soon as that flash bulb popped,” he stopped to put his finger in his mouth and quickly slipped it back out against his the corner of his mouth to making a popping noise, “we had ‘em.”

“Don’t you feel bad though?” I asked. I wasn’t comfortable with being a Soul Collector. I had received my calling only four days ago. Since then, I’d been following my mentor around like a lost duckling, learning “the tricks of the trade.” I missed my family and friends, I missed my life, but there was no going back to it now. Once you received your calling as a Soul

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Collector you were erased from the world. People you had known all your life could pass you on the street, and they wouldn't recognize you. You were a ghost.

“Nah,” my mentor said as he took a cell phone out of his pocket. “It’s actually a little interesting. When I collect my souls, I *really* collect them. Got a couple walls of their photos in my apartment.”

The image of walls full of empty, soulless faces made me uncomfortable. I shifted in my seat as my mentor came to stand next to me. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to do it,” I said.

“Sure ya can, honey,” he said. He tapped the touch screen on the phone. “Like I said, it’s a lot easier than it used to be.”

My mentor handed me the phone, and as I held it, he started tapping on the tiny screen with his leathery finger. “See, with all this technology now-a-days, they were able to create this here, little...app – as the kids call it. We pull it up, find our soul’s name in the list, tap the little camera button, and...” he took the phone, and held it up towards the black-haired woman in the massage chair, “Point. Click. Snap.”

The camera made the quiet, artificial sound of a shutter, the woman blinked, and then looked confused.

“Done,” he said with a satisfied look. He handed the camera back to me so I could take a look at his handy work. On the tiny screen was the image of the round, black-haired woman. She was sitting in the chair, but her expression was noticeably different than the slight look of bliss she had been wearing moments earlier. She looked empty. There was no life behind her tiny, brown eyes. I lowered the camera to take a look at the woman in the chair. Gone. There was no soul there anymore, her family would notice a slight difference in her, but on the outside everything appeared the same. She looked just as empty as the tiny photo of her on my phone.

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“Do we need to save it or something?” I asked. I couldn’t take my eyes off the woman. We had just taken her soul. With a photograph taken on a cell phone.

“See? You’re a smart one. You ain’t need to save it unless you want to print it for your own collection like me,” said my mentor. “You just need to send it to the big guy down below. He wants to make sure his debts have been collected ya know.”