

## Paradimensional

“You can’t face everything alone, Spence. That’s not how people work.” There were tears in Tessa’s eyes as she attempted to reason with me, her weak hand clasping my forearm as if trying to wake me up from some deep sleep.

“I’ll be fine -- I *am* fine.” She let out an exasperated sigh, as if she were hitting her head against a wall in trying to get through to me.

“It’s important to you that it seems that way, isn’t it,” she stated with a wisdom beyond my comprehension. I stared vacantly into the distance, trying to process her words but polarized by the painful finality of our situation. “I’m not gonna ask you to get over me or to just move on. But eventually you need to make peace with what’s out of your control. If you can’t do that, the world *will* slowly tear you apart.”

After my wife died, I used the insurance money to purchase myself a small house just outside of Grand Rapids, Michigan - a city located on the western side of the state. No tour and no realtor. Just a quick offer above the asking price, and just like that, it was mine. All it took to sell me on the humble townhouse was a single photo of the exterior, and I suddenly found myself drawn to it. It’s simplistic beige paint job and worn red window shutters. The dark blue front door and its golden knocker. From what I could tell, the house still needed some work, but nothing that I couldn’t handle with a little extra time and patience. I also liked the proximity to an area that felt full of life while still being able to hide away in what felt like my own quiet corner of the world.

Quiet, up until the day I moved in, was something I had scarcely experienced in recent months. After all that had happened, my mind was left in a state of disarray, my thoughts and feelings all scattered about in an inconceivable mess. I needed to create a distance from that chaos. Find a way to put it all into perspective. And the small beige house on Scranton Street was to be my haven.

“Where are you?” my friend Nathan asked after I had ghosted several of his text messages over the course of a week.

“I just crossed into Michigan, actually.”

“Michigan? What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m leaving New York. Probably for good.” Judging by the pause that followed, I could tell he had been taken by surprise, both by my actions and the sound of bitterness in my tone.

“You’re moving?”

“I bought a place. It’s small and in a quiet neighborhood. I’m sick of all the noise.”

“Well, alright. I’m just a little worried about you. I wanted to make sure you’re doing okay.”

“I’m fi-” I caught myself as the words almost escaped my grasp. “I appreciate your concern, Nate. I just... had to get out of there. Y’know?”

“Yea, I understand. But listen, if you need anything at all, don’t hesitate to ask me. Send me the address too so I can come by and visit sometime soon, alright?”

“Yea,” I responded with hesitation, my nerves grating at the idea of having to entertain company, “sounds good.”

All I had brought with me to my new home was a laptop, my mother's old lamp, my father's favorite recliner and a blanket I bought at Walmart on the drive there. Upon finally pulling up to the house, a strange sense of peace washed over me. There was no single reason for this that I could point to, but after the most painful year of my life, it was like arriving at my own personalized rehab. I unloaded my belongings from my 2010 Ford Ranger and for the first time, I entered the front door of my new home. As a writer who seldom leaves the house, the creepy home felt endearing in that “*something is watching me around every corner*” kind of way. From the scent of musty mildew to the odd wall decor that remained from a previous owner, the house never failed to inspire some emotion or memory of a different time. To be clear, it didn't feel haunted, just well lived in. Like the energy of some loving family had burnt itself into the walls around me. But even then, the sense of eyes on the back of my neck didn't exactly put me at ease.

The first time I noticed her, I had just listened to a frustrating voicemail from my older brother, Eric. Usually, I would just delete his messages on the spot, but I guess that day some part of me was hoping he had only called to wish me well.

“-If you could, it would help me out a lot, brother. Also, I mean, I'm sure you're doing okay but... I wanted to say that I miss her too.” I tucked my phone back into my jacket pocket, and as if waking up from a dream, it suddenly dawned on me that I was in desperate need of a shower. It had already been four straight days of bringing in new furniture and fixing up the poorly kept kitchen. And as it turned out, the fresh sprinkling of anxiety that the message had brought on was just the encouragement I required to finally set down my tools and stop working. Firing it up for the first time since my arrival, I turned the well-worn knobs in an attempt to summon hot water from the shower head. Through some act of divine intervention, a welcomed

force of steam began to swim throughout the bathroom. I happily stepped inside, pulling shut the curtain behind me. The whimpering was quiet at first, almost imperceptible as I attempted to wash off the past week. As the sound became more distinct, I froze in place, unsure if I had imagined the noise or if the plumbing had simply retained some quirks from its past. I stood there silently, analyzing it with care, haunted by the realization that the sound was coming from somewhere near the bathroom door. By the time I pulled open the thin fabric curtain, the noise had stopped and there was nothing or no one around to attribute blame to.

*She* wasn't a she, until I heard her speak for the first time. It'd been a full week, and I hadn't felt alone even once during my time in the mostly empty house. My down time was often plagued by thoughts of loss and loneliness, made worse by the fact that my surviving family was only really thinking about themselves. Even states away from my heartless and selfish sibling, Eric's attempts to pull me back in never ceased.

"Not sure if you're getting my messages, but I could really use your help," a text from him read. The only escape I found anymore was in the peculiar hiccups of paranormal activity that my home periodically exhibited. I caught myself looking over my shoulder more than once whilst trying to work on my next book, "Well Wishes from the Afterlife." I sat in my father's chair from the moment I woke up and late into the night, staring into my laptop screen and searching my mind for what was next.

*"He's really gone,"* a voice whispered from my side one afternoon.

"Hello?" I called immediately, frantically searching my surroundings for some sign of life. When it became apparent that I was in fact alone, I checked the nearby windows to make sure they were shut and that noise wasn't somehow bleeding in from somewhere outside. "Is... someone with me?" I held my breath as I waited, secretly hoping for a particular response.

I missed Tessa with a yearning pain. Though our time together was nothing short of perfect, the renal cancer that had metastasized from her kidneys made sure to bring a swift end to that reality. One of the first things I did after she passed was search the term “widower.” It’s derived from the old English word “Widewe” that means “*to be empty*.” So, I was a 34-year-old widower with no intention to ever seek out love again. To be empty. Hollow, as if all the love I had once been filled with had been abruptly poured back out. That is, until those eerie sounds began to interrupt my thoughts.

Another few days had passed and I was now emotionally bonded to the paranormal occurrences within the house, even if I pretended not to be. With each shiver that a moving door or knocked over object would send down my spine, an extra beat was also reverberating within my chest. No matter how hard I tried, it would seem that the force of resuscitated love wasn’t one I could overcome with willpower alone.

“Time to clear my head,” I told myself, turning the shower knobs again and entering that revitalizing stream of warmth and clarity. The arguments I spewed to myself had been quite convincing. I rationalized my pain and qualified the desire to see her again. “In our world, when someone is dead, they don’t return,” I thought to myself. “I miss her so much. But I have to let her go.” I let the water stream down onto my face, pelting my eyelids and reminding me of the separation between my imagination and the world outside of it. It was this gesture that solidified the truth in my experiences; for what I saw next weighs so heavily in my mind that it set in place a chain of understanding that redefined how I see our world forever.

“*David?*” A poorly lit figure was partially visible through the curtain of my shower, standing somewhere between myself and the entrance to the bathroom. My heart had skipped at

the return of the incorporeal woman, but quickly settled upon a realization of an inconvenient truth. I pointlessly shook my head, as if interacting casually with some stranger on the street.

“No.” I told her, “My name’s Spencer.” She didn’t move from where she stood, and I followed suit.

“*Will... you hurt me?*” she asked, her voice trembling. I hesitated to respond, confused by the spectral being’s apparent fear.

“Never. I’m harmless.” The woman's arms raised toward her face, dabbing at her eyes as she attempted to hide her continued weeping. By the time I reached for the curtain’s edge to peer around, she had again vanished entirely from the room, leaving me in an utter state of bewilderment.

In all of the horrific tales of ghosts and demons that I’ve heard in my lifetime, never have they included a spirit fearful of the living. I wrestled with the meaning of this knowledge, slowly convincing myself that the bizarre connection the home possessed may not have been to the afterlife at all. Studying the events and documenting my story became an obsession over the coming weeks. Whenever a noise would come from one of the rooms of the house, I attempted to recreate it, always noting the time and location that it occurred if I could pin it down. It began to feel as though another person was living an entire life within my home, always somewhere just out of sight. On the days I showered, I spent most of my time on the lookout for ghostly figures, but it seemed unreliable, as if there was some further pattern involved that I had yet to discern. A pattern that didn’t reveal itself until I’d started to spend more and more of my time in the bathroom.

“The curtain?” I asked myself. I had formulated a theory about what was going on, and there was only one person I would dare share it with.

The next day, with my fingers crossed, I made myself comfortable in the bathtub. I sat patiently behind the curtain, waiting for the evening to shift itself into darkness. Thumbing through my notes, I had been clarifying various details when I suddenly heard the door shut itself.

“Hello?” There was a pause before I received any acknowledgement.

*“You again.”* She stated somberly.

“Can we talk?” I asked, my heart beating rapidly in my chest. She paused for a moment, seeming surprised by the offer and unsure how to react.

*“Are you dead?”*

“I’m not... and I don’t think you are either. I’ve been tracking strange things that happen in the house -- noises without a source. Doors opening or closing on their own. I’m willing to bet it’s been happening to you too.”

*“Just little things, here and there. But yes.”*

“It would seem that I’m your ghost, and that you’re mine. I... hope I didn’t scare you.”

The woman let out a sigh that was filled either with relief or pain, but I struggled to decipher exactly which.

*“Not quite,”* she replied, *“just... gave me hope, is all.”*

“Hope for what?”

*“I’d thought... maybe... that you were my late husband.”* I paused, chuckling sympathetically.

“David, right?”

*“Right.”* Her reply contained a hint of mild embarrassment.

“I don’t mean to laugh. It’s just that... Well, I thought the same thing. About my wife, I mean.”

*“I’m sorry,”* she let out, slightly hanging her head.

“Me too.”

*“You called yourself Spencer, right? My name is Sara.”*

“Nice to meet you, Sara.” I greeted with a smile.

*“It’s nice to meet you too.”*

I began experimenting with the loose reality we shared. I left notes unattended in different corners of the house; kind reminders that I was there and hoping she was okay. It was a welcomed shock when she started reciprocating the gesture.

*“I’m here as well,”* she’d written, *“Sorry if I’ve been hesitant with whatever this all is. I struggle with feeling crazy sometimes.”*

“Sometimes a little crazy is exactly what we need,” I’d responded. “If you don’t mind, I could use the company from time to time.”

Over the span of a couple months, our notes had evolved into full letters. We’d started by discussing our day-to-day struggles, sometimes contemplating the bizarre circumstances we’d found ourselves in. I also told her about my writing and my inability to focus at times. She told me that she had two kids, and jokingly apologized if the noise had ever managed to somehow slip through the fabric of reality. The truth was that it actually had from time to time, but I somehow found comfort in that chaos. In fact, on days with frequent activity, I found myself putting more on the page than on days without any.



Our shared pain bonded us more than anything. We spoke of our memories of love, and how only small flickers of joy now sparked from those once beautiful places within our minds.

*“Are you free to meet tonight?”* a short note read one afternoon.

“I’ll be there,” I responded. The sun was setting as I closed the shower curtain behind myself. I’d taken to filling the tub with pillows during our meetups, lying comfortably for the duration of our talks. My queue that she had arrived always took form in the bathroom door shutting itself.

“How are you?”

*“It’s been a hard day,”* she admitted with a shortness in her tone, taking a seat on the floor next to the wall.

“Why’s that?” I sat patiently waiting for her reply, but for longer than I expected to.

*“My children haven’t seen their grandparents in almost three months now. They used to visit us every week but that doesn’t happen anymore.”*

“Have they been sick?”

*“No, it’s not like that. They’re always available, I just...”* she paused, waiting for the tide of emotion to wane within her. *“I haven’t answered their calls. I told them that we aren’t ready.”* I withheld my desire to prod, aware that she was going to share whatever she felt comfortable with telling me. *“I’m scared, Spencer. Leah’s only three, but Michael is old enough to remember. I haven’t told them he’s dead. They still think their father is coming home from overseas. Michael will be devastated. It’ll break him. I’m still not ready to explain... I don’t know how.”*

“I’m so sorry,” I said, seated upright and watching the defeated woman who was slumped over and burying her eyes into her palms. As I watched her sit there, the pain of loss tearing her in one direction, the fear of harming her children's psyche pulling her in another. I saw myself in

Tessa's hospital room, my shoulders stiff and forced upward, my posture robotic and yet telling of an inner turmoil. It was a time when I should have been weeping. When I should have been cradling her and thanking her for all of the love that she so generously shared with me. I wasn't fine back then, not even a little. But it wasn't until that moment in the bathroom with Sara that I finally realized it.

“Y’know, when I was a kid, my brother and I were extremely competitive. We’d find *anything* to argue about, and whoever was right always rubbed it into the other’s face for days on end. Well, my brother has always been a shit head. And one day, during an argument, he said he could guess which of our parents was going to die first. It sounds grim, but neither of us really knew anything about death, so it wasn’t remotely threatening to us yet. He swore up and down that mom would go first, but I held strong that our dad would eventually work himself to death. Not even two weeks had passed and one day our mother sat us down with tears in her eyes, trembling as she held both of our hands in the living room. I lost my competitive streak after that. But, something she said that day has always stayed with me – even through her eventual death, some several years later. “Love, no matter how big or small, is never lost. It molds you, it guides you, and it will bring you warmth when your day comes to finally leave this earth.” Those non-physical pieces of my parents stayed with me. I believe that more than anything. I also believe that’s true of my wife, and of your husband. Their love cannot be stripped away from us, no matter if they’re alive or dead. Honestly, I think I’d lost sight of that for a while. I know you don’t feel okay, and neither do I. But I’m confident that someday we will be.”

I had been lost in memory as I told my story to Sara. I was staring into the fabric of the curtain as an inordinate amount of time passed by in silence, and was disheartened to realize that

she was no longer in the room with me. It seemed that between our worlds was an ever-shifting window, and at some point during our talk, that window had abruptly shut.

A small part of me wanted to write to her the following day, asking her how she was. Instead, I figured it best to let her contact me if, and when, she decided to. Three days passed in complete silence, unprecedented by the house's previous track record for what I call "Paradimensional events." By evening of the fourth day, I could hold out no longer.

"Everything okay?" I wrote on scrap notebook paper, setting it in the middle of the living room floor and itching for some kind of reply. I checked on the note periodically as that night went on, desperately waiting for it to move from its place. So you can imagine my disappointment the following morning when I found it lying in the same spot, completely and utterly untouched.

I found myself spending hours upon hours in the bathroom after that, desperate to reconnect with my long distance friend, and refusing to admit to myself that the rift allowing us to connect may have finally shut itself for good. And then Thirteen years passed by. During the space of time between then and now, I've healed many of the parts of myself that had once been fractured. I still often think of my wife, but now with a sense of thankfulness for our time together. I also made good on my word to never seek out love again, but as fate would have it, a woman who recognized me at a cafe unwittingly found her way into my life. She was a fan of *most* of my novels, as she would put it, and tempers my ego while still finding new ways to lift me up. My brother, Eric, will always struggle with his addiction. But for the last two years, he's been clean. Part of his process toward sobriety included righting previous wrongs, during which time he apologized for fiending after my dead wife's insurance payout. I appreciated the gesture, but it didn't feel real until he finally asked me to replay those old voicemails, holding my hand

the entire time with tears in his eyes. And I still own the small house on Scranton Street as well. I fixed it up before I moved out and rented it to a kind family, never mentioning to them the possible connection it had to an alternate dimension. Eventually, I'd made peace with the memory of Sara and her kids, hoping for the best that they too had somehow found their way to happiness. Then, one day, I received a strange call from my tenant.

“Hi Spencer! Sorry to bother you, but we found a message that we think was left for you this afternoon. The odd thing about it is that it was found in our bathroom, neatly folded on the counter top. Do you have any idea how that could be?” I spent about an hour reassuring her that nobody had access to the home, and that her kids must have somehow found one of my older but more preserved letters that I'd likely forgotten to pack up. I made plans to stop by and collect it, mentioning that I could also grab a set of tools that I had once abandoned in the attic as my excuse to come inside. When I arrived, she immediately handed me the note, apologizing on behalf of her children.

“It's fine, I'm glad they found it,” I explained, acting casual but secretly desperate to know what was inside. She ushered me through the front door and I apologized for the inconvenience, pulling down a folding ladder from the ceiling and climbing up inside. “I'll try to be as quick as I can,” I said to her with a smile.

Once out of sight, I pulled the letter from my pocket, feeling my heart beat through my chest as I steadied my gaze on the unfamiliar handwriting:

*Hi, Spencer. We've never spoken before, but my name is Michael. A little over a decade ago, my family lived in this house, and we shared many memories within it. I remember back then my mother had started leaving strange notes around the house that were never actually sent anywhere; only moved around from room to room before finally being tucked away. I was only nine then, so I thought nothing of it. That same year my father died, and we eventually decided to leave the house for good. She did something strange on the day we left though. Something that she never explained and I never thought to bring back up, until after she had already passed away. She spent what must have been three full hours locked in this bathroom, leaving me alone to watch over my sleeping sister before we finally left for good.*

*As I said, she's no longer with us, but it's through her that I learned something beautiful.*

*"Love, no matter how big or small, is never lost. It molds you, it guides you, and it will bring you warmth when your day comes to finally leave this earth."*

*I thought those words belonged to my mother for as long as I can remember. But, in her final moments, she looked up into my eyes with a beautiful smile and said something I didn't yet understand: "Spencer was right. I've never been so warm." Not long after that, I found the notes the two of you shared, locked away in a safe within her closet, alongside a journal she had used almost daily. It was within those pages that I finally learned the full truth. So, I'm writing to you in hopes that I can somehow convey the power your words had on us. How we've lived our lives with gratitude for existence, rather than a contempt for mortality. I miss my parents but I hold them within me, and that truth might have been lost forever, if not for you. I can't know if this message will ever reach your hands, but I wanted to thank you for helping light the way. You brought my mother peace during her darkest times, and through her, my sister and I as well.*

*With love, Michael.*

I dried my eyes before climbing back down into the hallway. During the brief moment after tucking the ladder back into the ceiling, I found myself staring into that mysterious bathroom one final time. I could have made an excuse, walked inside and had a few moments to myself. But I didn't need to now. Not anymore. For as long as I had thought that I'd found peace in my world, it wasn't until the poetry of that very moment that everything truly felt okay.