

## SECOND CHANCE

**I stand in front of the small white-washed bungalow.**

Suddenly, I'm inside, gliding down the hallway. The pink ribbons stream from the waist of my white cotton dress. I step into the doorway of my bedroom and illogically find myself behind the wheel of my car. I'm driving down a deserted country road and see a figure standing in the middle of the road. I move my foot to step on the brake, but there are no pedals on the floor. The car speeds up by its own ghostly control and the figure ahead looms ever closer. I peer through the windshield and can only make out a small figure beckoning to me with a blood smeared hand. Suddenly, big fat raindrops begin to splatter on the glass. I peer closer over the steering wheel as I push the windshield wiper lever up another notch. I stare in horror as the raindrops turn into blood drenching the windshield in front of me.

I wake up screaming, my blue flowered cotton pajamas soaked with my own sweat. My eyes are open. What did I just dream? My brain searches for answers. I prompt myself up, pull my pillow up under my head and look about the room. Morning light fills the room. No blood, no monsters I can see. I shake my head to rid myself of the lingering fogginess. I've got to get up. Thoughts of coffee and danish pastry spur me to shower and dress. I've got to pull myself together.

**I have an appointment with Dr. Owens today**, she's my psychiatrist. I frown wondering how crazy am I? Maybe Dr. Owens can help me make sense of these nightmares. Maybe they have something to do with my accident. I sip coffee and eat one of the danish that Karen had so

thoughtfully stocked in my kitchen before my coming home. I must remember to thank her. She will be here any minute to take me to the hospital for my mental checkup. I jump up from the table to comb my hair and put on some lipstick. I freeze as I remember I could not find one mirror in my house upon my return home from the hospital. I had been gone for quite a while due to all the subsequent surgeries to fix me. I pull out a compact from my purse and stare at myself like I'm a stranger. I think Karen must have removed the mirrors just in case my facial reconstructive surgery didn't work out so well and I came out looking like Frankenstein's sister. The odd thing is there are no outlines of where one might have been before. The rooms seem to be designed purposely without mirrors. I study myself in the small compact mirror and think if I saw myself across the room, I'd think I was pretty wouldn't I? I snap the compact shut and get ready for Karen's arrival.

I'm outside waiting when Karen pulls up in her red Honda. A flurry of blond curls toss as Karen jumps out of her car and comes towards me. She's smiling but her piercing blue eyes study my face.

"Ellen, is that you?" I nod at her as she comes closer to give me a hug. "I'm still not used to your new look. You look amazing. I wish I could be so lucky to have plastic surgery like you..." As the last words slipped out between her lips, horror sweeps her face as she realizes how that sounded and she quickly says, "Oh I'm sorry, what a stupid thing to say."

"That's okay," I say. Then in my next breath, I say, "Karen, how did I look before? I can't find any pictures of me from before and there are no mirrors in the house. Is it against my religion or something?" At that I paused, speaking more to myself "Gee, I don't know if I am even religious."

Karen's blue eyes show concern and then she looks away nervously. "Ellen, I know you must have a lot of questions. Dr. Owens has prepared us, but we're not to answer them all too fast."

"What difference does it make what religion I am?" I ask teasingly.

Karen laughs and gives me a warm smile. "Okay, you were raised Catholic. We had our first communion together at St. Phillips."

I stare at her and for the briefest moment, I see a vision of long wavy dark hair loose under my starched communion veil and small pale hands holding up a pristine white bible engraved with my initials.

I snap back to the present seeing Karen looking very pale and lightly nudging me "Ellen, are you ok? You looked gone there for a second."

As her face comes back into focus, I see her avert her eyes as she hesitantly asks, "uh... did you remember something?"

I shake my head no and say "only a glimpse of a white dress, nothing more. No idea what that means."

"Well, let's get going. We can talk more in the car. I can't tell you how happy I am to see you looking so beautiful," Karen says as she moves towards her car.

**Karen answered a few of my questions but nothing clicks.** Talking about me with Karen was like hearing about someone you don't know. I was told temporary memory loss is common from the concussion as well as the shock from what I experienced but overall the doctors say they are confident my memory will come back over time.

So what I know for now about the accident and my past is mostly from what I've been told. What I've been told is that I have lived in this town since I was five. I've known of Karen since we met in first grade. She lived a few houses down the street from me and we became friends later. My parents died just after I turned 18, both by heart attacks. Tragically six months apart. I studied art through an online curriculum and somehow built a successful career as a freelance book illustrator. The job allows me to work from home which I must prefer as I rarely go out. I bought this house from the money my parents left me. I was an only child.

Karen didn't add much more even when I pressed on what could have happened that made me such a recluse? I may suffer from fear of places, it's a real phobia I hear. I make a mental note to google it later so I know what symptoms to watch for.

Eerily like she was reading my mind, Karen says, "You weren't that bad of a recluse, you went out occasionally."

Yes I did, as just then a memory presents itself so vividly in my mind that before I can stop them, the words spill from my lips, "I did go to that party where after leaving I was in the terrible car accident that has led to all of this." I take a breath and continue on. "Didn't you tell me it was some rich man's son driving the car that smashed into me?" With a snap of my fingers, I remember the son's name is Jeff. Hmm...I remember getting flowers from a Jeff while in the hospital, I think to myself. "Anyway, you told me he was drunk at the time of the accident so his dad is paying for all of my hospital costs and more to help keep his precious son, Jeff, from going to jail." I pause and then say more slowly. "I can understand that, but all their money doesn't completely undo what happened to me."

Karen looking upset by my last comment, changes the subject to announce we're at the doctor's office and she will be back in an hour to pick me up.

**After checking in at the desk**, I'm told Dr. Owens will be with me shortly. I sit down and thumb through a magazine when I hear my name. I look up and see Dr. Benjamin (prefers to be called Dr. B), my plastic surgeon, come striding through the doorway with clipboard in hand.

"Well, how's my favorite patient?" Dr. B booms as he comes around to me and cradles my face in his warm firm hands. Smiling, he looks me in the eye and says, "Ellen, you're my proudest work. You really look beautiful."

"Thank you, doctor, it's all your handiwork," I reply back. "Everyone at the hospital says I was cut up pretty bad. Thank Goodness, I don't remember that part. I don't think I ever want to."

"Well, Ellen, going through a windshield isn't a pleasant experience, I'm sure," Dr. B says in his serious voice. "That's why you're seeing Dr. Owens, to help you remember and deal with what might trouble you."

"Did I hear my name mentioned" says Dr. Owens who comes up behind me.

"I saw Ellen come in here and thought I'd admire my work some more," Dr. B says with a smile.

I turn and look in the mirror hanging on the wall in the waiting room. I stare at my reflection. "Why don't I remember what I looked like before," I say as my grey gold-flecked eyes lock with Dr. B's brown eyes in the mirror. "Was I this pretty before or did you create beauty where there was none?" I touch my face with my palm and feel the contours of my cheek and smooth texture of my creamy soft skin.

With a big smile, Dr. B says “Well, I might have removed a pimple or two.” Then the smile fades as Dr. B says more seriously, “Ellen, your face was badly damaged. I had to do a lot of restorative surgery to your facial structure. Forget the differences for now and enjoy those terrific cheekbones I gave you.” With that, Dr. B strolls out of the room.

Dr. Owens gives me a long look as she ushers me into her office. “Ellen, tell me about those dreams of yours.”

“At first I thought I had an isolated nightmare but then the dreams keep repeating,” I say as I settle into a chair facing Dr. Owens. Dr. Owens nods for me to continue.

“I dream I’m in my bed and then I hear this tapping sound like this.” I rap my knuckles on her desk. “The tapping sound gets louder as it seems to get closer. I lie there frozen seemingly unable to move when suddenly the tapping stops. I then find myself standing in front of my house. I go in and seem to float to my bedroom doorway where suddenly I’m behind the steering wheel of my car when I see someone standing in the middle of the road. I try to push on the brakes but there are no pedals on the floor. Then it starts raining blood and I wake up screaming.”

**I leave Dr. Owens office feeling comforted and somewhat foolish.** Dr. Owens has reassured me that my dreams are a result of my unconscious coping with the nightmare of my accident. “Everything will sort itself out, just give yourself time,” she tells me.

Karen picks me up and we go shopping for some things I need. I’m lucky to have someone like Karen as a best friend though my memory of her before the accident is vague.

The doctor said my amnesia is only temporary and eventually all will come back. I do remember Karen coming to visit me every day while I was in the hospital. She took care of my

house as well as my personal needs. She notified my employer of the accident and recovery time, ensured my bills were paid, stocked the fridge with my favorite foods and also bought makeup and lipstick that fits my skin tone perfectly. So far she knows more about me than I do.

“Ellen, you’re awfully quiet. Is anything wrong?” Karen asks as she makes a left turn.

“No, everything’s fine. I was just thinking what a great friend you are. Have I said thank you yet?”

“No need, Ellen.” Karen says with a smile and pats me on the arm “I’m glad to be of help. To finally see your pretty happy face is what I’ve always prayed for.”

Her last comment doesn’t seem to make sense, but I decide to let it pass.

“Well, here we are, I’ll help you take the packages in and then I’ll need to run off.”

Karen says to me as she pulls up to my house and parks the car.

After Karen drives away, I remember the mailbox looked pretty full when we pulled up so I go back outside and grab the mail, thumbing through it as I go back in and close the front door behind me. I decide to have lunch while I sort through the mail. There are a stack of get well cards. It feels weird, like I’m reading someone else’s mail. As for any bills or whatever, Karen had said just make a pile to give her and she’ll take care of any mail needing attention. After doing so, I feel tired and my head hurts so I go upstairs to the bedroom to lie down. I meant to nap but I fall quickly into a long deep sleep.

**It’s dark, so very dark in the room.** Then the tapping starts, like knuckles rapping on the dresser top just getting louder, tap tap tap....taptaptaptapTAPTAPTAPTAPTAP... and then suddenly the tapping booms, sounding insistent now from my closet door. TAPTAPTAPTAP... It’s at the end of my bed, I silently scream in my head. My voice freezes down deep in my

throat. I manage a rasp of “who are you, who is there?” NO answer, the room goes chillingly quiet. I force my eyes open to search the darkness and then I feel a scream build in the hollow of my chest and rising as I make out a figure standing in the shadows. Blood! Blood all over me! Screams leap out of my mouth and pierce the air.

I wake up, it's morning already as sunlight streams from the bedroom window streaking sunbeams across my bed. My T-shirt is soaked with my own sweat. Another nightmare. I lay there wearily thinking of what I can remember dreaming. Something in the dark. It seemed so real but couldn't be. I look around my bedroom, it all looks normal, no blood, nothing to indicate anything happened here last night. I feel a little relieved and drag myself out of bed. As I tear off the bedsheets to wash them, I make a mental note to take the sleeping pills tonight. Dr. Owens said it will help block the nightmares.

**After a long hot shower** and getting dressed into a clean rose-colored blouse and jean cutoffs, I decide to go for a walk. Being out of doors with the sun shining warmly on my face and arms and legs feels heavenly.

Suddenly, I feel alert, my heart is racing. I hear a dog barking. For some reason the barking makes me afraid. Very afraid. I see it then ahead in someone's car. Its head hanging out of the upper part of an open window. A mongrel of some sort. It's teeth are bared and with each bark, it strains against the window, pushing his head like he's trying to get to me. The car starts and backs out of the driveway as the dog continues to push and bark in my direction. The car moves away from where I stand frozen to the ground, locked in place by paralyzing fear. That's all I remember, when suddenly I'm home again standing in front of my house. I shake my head. Was that a dream? I pinch myself, No, it couldn't have been.



Several days pass but the dreams continue. I think I must be losing it no matter what Dr. Owens believes. Even though I've taken the sleeping pills the last three nights, I'm getting no rest. Blood keeps seeping into my dreams. Each time I dream, drops of blood splatter closer and closer to where I rest my head. Even worse is now that damn dog from the other day is in my dreams too. Barking crazily at me and baring those big sharp teeth that then become blood soaked. Then here's the craziest part, last night Karen was in the dream. At least it looked like her but a younger version of her. She was laughing and saying something like a chant while pointing at me with a blood soaked stick. She looked mean and crazy.

What is going on? Why does my mind keep doing this to me? I shout out to no one, "PLEASE STOP! IT'S NOT FUNNY."

I'm too afraid to go outside again. I keep looking to see if that dog could have gotten loose and come around to my door. I've heard dogs can smell fear and will attack those who are afraid of them. I hide inside my own home like a prisoner.

Karen has called repeatedly and after I finally answered her fourth phone call, I talked incoherently to her about the blood and the dog, which she then announced she is coming over.

I hear a knock on the door and yell for her to come in. I'm too tired to get up. So tired of trying to find a rational answer to everything.

"Ellen, there you are!" says Karen, after finding me curled up on the sofa. I peer up at her from the comfort of the throw I have wrapped over me like a child hiding. Karen actually looks worse than me, I think. Her blue eyes are bloodshot, blond hair stringy and she's so pale. Her freckles stand out like small topographical maps. I wonder hopefully if some flu bug that

includes hallucinations is going around. I suddenly realize that Karen is talking and I haven't heard a word——“.....and I know Dr Owens said to take it slow in telling you some things——“

“What THINGS?” I interrupt.

“Please just listen. I've got to tell you some things. Some things you might not like. You probably will hate me after I tell you this.” As the words spill out, Karen rushes to me and takes my hands into hers and presses. “I was actually relieved when the doctor told me you had amnesia. I thought maybe this was my second chance to make things up to you...”

I interrupt her again. “Karen, you're babbling. I don't understand what you're saying.”

“Ellen, your deformity was my fault. I was such a stupid kid. I... I... Karen's words muffle as she buries her face in her hands.

I stare at her and say, “I thought I was deformed in the car accident. You had nothing to do with that. Stupid Jeff was drunk. How can you blame yourself?” I stammer at her.

Karen looks up at me with her eyes so full of tears that they are spilling out causing her mascara to streak down her face like tire skids on a road. I look at her and think - Gee, I thought I was freaking out but Karen is a basket case. Maybe my hallucinatory flu idea isn't so crazy.

“Ellen, you're not listening to me.” Karen rasps. “Oh god, this is so hard. I almost wish you could remember so I wouldn't have to tell you.”

“Remember what.” I'm so confused now. My mind is swirling, trying to make sense of what Karen is saying.

“Ellen, when we were kids....do you remember?”

I stare blankly back at her.

Karen sighs deeply and wipes at the tear-sodden mascara which only smudges it more around her eyes. She looks terrible.

Karen takes a deep breath and continues. “You may not remember but we lived in the same neighborhood and went to the same church together. We weren’t close friends yet. I wasn’t so nice to you then. I was so jealous of you. You always had such pretty dresses. My folks couldn’t afford much. I had to wear my sister’s hand me downs. While you had the prettiest dress I’d ever seen. White-laced with pink ribbons around your waist and streaming behind from the cute bow tied at the back. You looked like a princess. We were about nine years old. It’s so silly now when I think of it but I guess a new pretty dress was important to me back then.” Karen blushes as she pauses and looks me in the eye. “Ellen, does any of this sound familiar?”

**A rush of images play in my mind like a movie.** Easter Sunday. I’m nine years old. I’m so happy. I got a new dress and a bunny. A real bunny. My very own honest to goodness, living breathing Easter bunny. I naturally named him Peter after Peter the Cottontail.

My parents set up a cage in the backyard for him where I feed him carrots and lettuce. My parents let me invite some kids from the neighborhood and church over to see him. I’m so excited. Mom had set up a piñata for us to bust so Easter candy can spill out for us. While the other kids mill around outside waiting for the festivities to start, I go inside to help my mom bring out the refreshments when I hear laughter. It’s not nice laughter, but mean sounding laughing. I then hear taptaptap coming from outside. I run to see Karen and a couple of other kids hitting the cage with the sticks for the Piñata. Then one of them lets Peter out of his cage.

Poor little bunny looks so scared. Hunched and cowering as they surround him with their sticks, poking and hitting him. Stunned, I see it’s Karen who is leading the insanity. She laughs

shrilly and yells they should chase him into old Potter's yard next door where he keeps that mean old doberman of his. "Maybe old Potter's dog likes rabbit, she yells." She taunts as Peter scurries into her trap - running just where she wanted him to go. I scream "Nooooooooo! I run after Peter into old Potter's yard. I see his dog barking and snarling, running towards my beloved bunny. Peter sits still, obviously frightened. I run towards him! I dive to snatch him away from certain death as the dog gets closer and his huge jaws widen. As I scoop Peter into my protective arms, I scream as I feel teeth tear at my cheek. Blood flies and smatters onto my arms and runs down onto my dress as the dog gnashes at my face. Everything goes hazy as I hear screams now coming from my mother and see a fuzzy image of Mr. Potter restraining his dog as mom rushes over to me where I lie soaked in my own blood. My FACE! I let go of Peter as my hands go to my face. The right side, I can feel bone "where flesh was ripped away. My FACE!!! The right side of my face had been horribly disfigured. KAREN!!!! IT WAS KAREN!

"Ellen, Ellen! You're remembering, aren't you? Please don't hate me. I've punished myself for that day every day since. Seeing your face so mangled, knowing I was to blame, I've hated myself since."

I suddenly realize Karen has her arms wrapped around me as she breaks down and cries uncontrollably. I break from her and sink into the sofa.

**It's all back now.** The old memories mixed in with the new. Karen got a hold of herself and bravely sat down with me to help me sort it out as the memories flooded my consciousness. Karen said that when Jeff's car crashed into me and I went through the windshield, the doctors said I would have to have plastic surgery to just function normally. There had been a lot of advances in reconstructive surgery in the past twenty years, and they wanted to try and restore my

face. Jeff's father agreed to pay for it all. Whatever it took to make up what his son's recklessness did to me.

“Since that Easter day, I've felt so responsible for what had happened to you. I hated myself and swore I'd make it up to you. What made it worse was you didn't hate me. Instead you hated yourself. The few times I was able to talk to you, you said all the bad things that ever happened to you must have been your own fault. Your face, then both your parents dying suddenly so close together. You told me at their funeral you must have been a very naughty child for God to punish you so. You know, to protect you, your mom homeschooled you,” Karen tearfully told me. “I tried over the years to be friends with you but your mom understandably told me repeatedly that it was best to stay away. Then the car accident happened. I saw your car on the news about the crash and rushed over to the hospital saying I was your best friend. Since you have no family left, the hospital and doctors were happy to have someone around to visit and help you. Now, to see you looking so beautiful, as beautiful as you would have been without my childish cruelty, makes me believe wrongs can be righted.”

Hours later, I'm still sitting on the couch absorbing all the memories that have flooded back. Karen left awhile ago, giving me time alone to think. I have to admit she's right, I had only hated myself for the past twenty years. I'd denied myself any happiness. I hadn't even researched the possibility of plastic surgery because I felt I didn't deserve a second chance. On that Easter Sunday, nearly twenty years ago, I shut out the little girl in me. I became a separate person, never allowing her to be loved. I hadn't even seen her because I never looked into a mirror since the accident until that day in Dr. B's office when he removed the bandages. I had buried my childhood self in self-loathing and fear.

**I'm in bed waiting for whatever it is that has been haunting me at night.** I'm ready to face the monster.

As the darkness surrounds me, I hear it! The tapping. I now realize it's the sound of sticks hitting against Peter's cage. The tapping gets louder and louder and then suddenly stops! I'm sweating profusely in my pink T. My legs and arms feel damp and sticky. My heart thumps. I cry out "Where are you? Who are you?" I hear a rustle by the side of the bed. I turn towards the sound fighting an instinctive urge to dive under the covers. Then I see a figure in the shadows. A small figure in a red stained white dress. Face is hidden in the shadows. The blood stained figure moves into the light and reaches one blood smeared hand to my cheek. A warmth comes over me as now I understand. I reach out to my childhood face and with my palm caress the broken side as I whisper, "I love you," meaning it with all my heart.

THE END