

WAKE

By
Vince Gatton

WAKE

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For WMH, who said yes

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SETTING: Three rooms in a house in the country, about two hours' drive from the city: a bedroom with double bed, nightstands, and a crib; a kitchen with a table and chairs; a living room with a couch and coffee table. There is also a neutral space with a standing microphone for the podcasts, from which stories will be told directly to the audience in the style of The Moth or other storytelling events.

TIME: Summer of 2013

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

DAN, male, any ethnicity, 45 – 50ish, married to **ERIC**. An introvert.

ERIC, male, Caucasian, 30-ish, married to **DAN**. An extrovert.

TERRELL, male, African-American, 45 – 50ish, friend of **DAN**. Gregarious.

ESME, female, African-American, 20s, niece of **TERRELL**. Insightful.

CHARLIE, male, any ethnicity, 30-ish, friend of **ERIC**. Sexy and knows it.

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PODCAST 1

ESME appears at the microphone in the neutral space.

ESME. Whoo-boy we got a live crowd tonight, y'all! Y'all heard this one was live and y'all came to be, like, LIVE! Well, thank you for being here — and thank you to everybody listening later. We love you! Welcome to our special live show of WHAT'S YOUR STORY?...yes, thank you!...the podcast where you can tell your story frontwards, backwards, upside-down, sneak at it sideways, or shoot it from the hip...just tell us something true. Tell us something true. Thank you to the Fire Pit for hosting us — tip your bartenders, folks, these guys have been amazing — and to our sponsors, Legacy Moving & Storage and Spirit Cleaners, for their ongoing support. And thanks most of all to you — for coming tonight, and for listening, for sharing, for rating, for recommending — that's how more people hear these stories...which helps us find more stories! See how that works? So keep it up, y'all, keep it up. We have an amazing line-up for you tonight...and I'm going to have a thing or two to say as we go along as well -- so don't go running off to the bathroom when I come back, 'cause I can see you, you know. Yes, I can. Oh, yes. I see you. So listen when I'm speaking to you. I'm gonna tell you about a couple of people I know. (*Her voice begins to fade along with the lights...*) But first up: Welcome to the mic, a great friend of our podcast, a lady who has written for Esquire, McSweeney's, and one of the greatest...(*she fades away as lights come up on...*)

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SCENE 1

ERIC and DAN stand in the living room, looking at the house. Dan holds a newborn baby in a carrier.

ERIC. It's perfect. Isn't it perfect? It's exactly what you wanted, right? The space, the quiet, the not-the-city. I mean, hell yes. Duh! What's not to love? Yes. Yes! *(Beat.)* You're not saying anything. What?

DAN. ...I didn't want to jinx it. *(Beat.)* I didn't want you to see how bad I want it. Because I really want it, Eric. Really. It's...It's my Happily Ever Fucking After.

ERIC. *(Eric holds up his fist, showing his wedding ring.)* This? *(Gesturing to the baby, the house.)* All of this? This is what winning looks like. *(Dan holds his ring up too and they clink their wedding rings together in a fist-bump.)*

PODCAST 2

Esme at the microphone.

ESME. Now. Let me tell you about a couple of people I know. First: him. *(Beat.)* She was just the script girl, on her first Hollywood picture, and she showed she was a professional: she did her job, she didn't freak out or anything. Certainly not in front of Mr. Hitchcock. Not in front of anyone. She was just the script girl – I mean, it's not like she was Janet, the poor actress who had to actually act it, to experience it, at least psychologically on some level, hour after hour in that cramped shower set, screaming and screaming over and over and over, practically naked in that tiny space, with all those people, all those men, standing around staring, watching so intently as she was murdered in tiny cuts again and again and again. She was just the script girl. But from then on, and for the rest of her life, she only took baths. Never showers.

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SCENE 2

The bedroom, lit by a nightlight. Dan stands looking down into the crib.

DAN. What's this? (*Beat.*) What is this? (*From the bed, Eric stirs.*)

ERIC. Dan?

DAN. What is this?

ERIC. (*Getting up quickly*) What's wrong? Is she OK?

DAN. ...

ERIC. (*Checks the sleeping baby.*) She's OK. She's OK.

DAN. I don't understand.

ERIC. Are you asleep?

DAN. I don't understand.

ERIC. You're asleep.

DAN. What is this?

ERIC. It's Mia, honey.

DAN. ...

ERIC. It's our baby girl. It's our daughter.

DAN. ...

ERIC. She's OK. You're OK, you're just asleep.

DAN. ...

ERIC. Come on. Everything's fine. Come back to bed. (*Dan looks to the baby and back again. Eric has his hand and starts to lead him back to bed.*)

ERIC. Come on back to bed with me. (*After another beat, Dan lets himself be led.*)

SCENE 3

Dan is in the kitchen, feeding the baby. It is bright, serene, country-morning lovely. Groggy Eric enters, carrying a laptop.

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DAN. Good morning.

ERIC. Mmmph.

DAN. I was starting to worry about you. You slept a long time.

ERIC. I didn't get much sleep at all, actually.

DAN. Well, whose fault is that?

ERIC. Yours.

DAN. You were up all night yelling at people online.

ERIC. Maybe a little.

DAN. Sleep when she sleeps, seriously. We're luckier than most.

ERIC. ...

DAN. A baby who sleeps this much – this is gold, I'm telling you.

ERIC. ...

DAN. We shouldn't squander it.

ERIC. ...

DAN. Can you take over here? I have some errands I want to run in town.

ERIC. I got woken up and it took me a while to fall back asleep.

DAN. Did she cry? I didn't hear her.

ERIC. No, she was fine. It was you.

DAN. What.

ERIC. You went for a little walk is all. You were sleep-walking.

DAN. No I wasn't.

ERIC. Uh, yeah.

DAN. I would know if I sleepwalked.

ERIC. Would you now.

DAN. I'm a very light sleeper.

ERIC. Maybe so, but you do it on your feet. You should take some Benadryl or something tonight and knock yourself out.

DAN. I don't have trouble sleeping.

ERIC. *I* had trouble sleeping; *you* should take a Benadryl.

DAN. Don't blame me when you stay up all night fighting on the internet.

ERIC. I just did some reading.

DAN. Fighting. No wonder you couldn't get back to sleep.

ERIC. Those Dominion Day fuckers are dangerous.

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DAN. Just don't read it.

ERIC. Please. We moved right into their back yard, practically. They could be right behind me in the grocery store. I don't know why that doesn't bother you.

DAN. I don't know them, they don't know me, so what? I got my husband, I got my baby, I got my house, they can think whatever they want about it.

ERIC. No, they can't. Crazy hick assholes. They're getting worse, too.

DAN. No. They've always been there, just now they have wifi. And you open up your laptop and invite 'em right in. Now will you watch her for a bit? Please? I want to run in town and get some stuff.

ERIC. (*Opening his laptop*) Sure. Just gimme a sec. I started the hashtag DominionGay last night and I want to see if it took off.

DAN. We haven't baby-proofed anything.

ERIC. I know, we suck. I like this one: "God Dates Fags".

DAN. We don't have any drawer locks or outlet covers. The downstairs bathroom has that slippery floor and those marble corners.

ERIC. Dan, she can't even lift her own head yet. We've got some time before she could slip and crack her skull on the bathroom sink.

DAN. Yes. We'll have so much more time on our hands once she's mobile. What was I thinking.

ERIC. "Love the sinner, hate the shoes."

DAN. So will you watch her please?

ERIC. Hmm?

DAN. Will you watch her?

ERIC. Yes, yes, I got her. (*Eric takes the baby from Dan.*) Oh, and Charlie is going to come out soon, too. I forgot exactly when, I'll double check.

DAN. Great.

ERIC. Don't be a pain. He's like the only friend of mine who'll make the trip out here.

DAN. He's just...exuberant.

ERIC. He's fun.

DAN. I assume he'll stay over.

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ERIC. Probably. Hey: “I love Christians, I just don’t agree with their hairstyle.”

DAN. You got her?

ERIC. Yeah, yeah. Do your thing. *(Dan gives Eric a peck, and a gentle, lingering kiss to the baby.)*

DAN. Back soon. *(Dan exits. Discontented sounds from the baby as Eric looks at his laptop, distracted.)*

ERIC. Shhhh. Sh-sh-sh-shhhh... *(He reads. The baby continues to fuss. Eric doesn’t seem to notice. Reacting to something on his screen...)* Ha.

PODCAST 3

ESME. Have you ever been to an industry wine tasting? Not the classy learning-about-wine party with soft lighting and cheese, but a sales event where buyers spend all day sampling distributors’ wares, spitting the wine back out into buckets so they don’t get drunk? Well that’s what they do. Now hold that thought. *(Beat.)* The young man’s wife woke in the middle of the night, vomiting blood. He sat in the emergency room with her all night, petting her hair and holding the shiny stainless steel basin as the blood kept coming up, over and over, red and terrifying. By morning the doctors were able to find the tear in her stomach. But they couldn’t repair it, and shockingly quickly she was gone. Returning to work after the funeral was actually a relief: having somewhere he had to be, a job to do, a task to distract him, was just what he needed. He set up his table at the wine expo, ready to start the first day of the rest of his life...The buyers came, sampling his wares, filling their mouths with gorgeous red cabernets, merlots, and syrahs, then leaning over and spitting them back out into shiny silver buckets. *(Beat.)* He lasted ten minutes.

SCENE 3

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The living room. The baby is in the car seat/carrier, making hungry noises. Eric holds a full baby bottle while talking on his phone.

ERIC. But who did he send? Was it Christie? ...Glenn? Ugh, he's the worst, Christie is so much better. *(Pause.)* I mean, yeah, there's that, but Christie's just so much more effective, the mayor actually listens to her. You get an hour meeting with Glenn and it's like not having a meeting at all, it never goes any further up the chain. *(Dan enters, passing through with a hammer or a toolbox.)* Was Dominic there? *(Pause.)* Oh, well then it might get some traction after all, Glenn's kind of hot for Dominic. You'll at least get a follow-up. *(Pause.)* Yes, for once it's not you, deal with it. *(Dan stops, noticing that Mia isn't actually getting fed, and catches Eric's eye. Eric looks at him expectantly, not getting it.)* That's probably true. *(Pause.)* Uh-huh. *(Dan looks pointedly at Mia, the bottle. It takes Eric a moment, but then he remembers the bottle in his hand, and starts feeding. The baby goes quiet.)* Uh-huh, probably. *(Dan continues out.)* Yeah, but you can't let them get away with just that. *(Pause.)* No. *(Pause.)* No. *(Engrossed in his conversation, he has let the bottle drift away from the baby. She objects.)* Because that's what they'll always say, just to get you to go away, you have to have seen that coming. *(Pause.)* Fine. It's your thing now, not mine, you gotta do it your way. *(Dan passes back through. He sees what's happening and stops to give Eric a look. Eric catches himself, mouths "Sorry!" and goes back to feeding. Mia quiets, Dan exits.)* So did you go out after? Where? *(Pause.)* Who was there? *(Pause.)* Who? *(Pause.)* Who? *(Pause.)* NO WAY. *(Eric sits back away from the baby, taking the bottle with him.)* Did you guys talk to her? That's amazing. *(Pause.)* YOU DID NOT. *(Pause.)* No. Yes! *(The baby starts fussing.)* That's amazing. That's amazing. *(Dan re-enters. He watches Eric for a moment. Eric doesn't notice, engrossed in the story.)* Amazing.... *(Dan puts down his tools and goes to the baby, gently taking her out of the carrier and cradling her in one arm. He motions for the bottle from Eric, who mouths a quick "Thanks!" and curls up on the couch to listen to the story. Dan paces a bit while Mia feeds, eventually drifting out the way*

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he came. Eric doesn't really notice.) Wow. Wow. Just wow. (A long pause.) You're gonna come out here soon, right?

SCENE 4

The bedroom, night. The sound of the baby crying, much louder than in the previous scene. Eric sits up in bed, then stumbles over to the crib.

ERIC. Hey, hey. *(He picks Mia up, bouncing her gently. She keeps crying.)* Shhhh...sh-sh-sh-sh-shhhh...What do you need, lady? You got a full diaper? *(Checks diaper.)* Nope, you're good. *(Bounces her for a bit. Still crying.)* You hungry again already? We still got some of this bottle left, don't we. Let's see. Let's see. *(He finds her bottle and gives it to her.)* There we go. There we go. *(As the baby's crying subsides, the quiet reveals another sound: the sound of Dan crying too.)* Dan? *(Eric looks to the bed, but Dan isn't in it. Eric finds him on the floor, weeping.)* Dan? What..? *(Dan doesn't respond to him, just continues weeping.)* Dan. Dan. *(Eric tries to comfort him, but with the baby and the bottle both hands are occupied.)* Hey. Hey? Honey, what is it? What's wrong? *(Dan begins to breathe rapidly, panting through his tears.)* Whoa. OK. OK. *(Eric struggles for a moment with what to do. Dan's distress increases. A lasso of baby, bottle, and crying husband ensues. Eric eventually has to put the bottle down in order to get an arm around Dan to calm him and Mia screams in protest. Dan buries his face in Eric's shoulder and really lets go, weeping hard.)* It's ok. It's ok, seriously. Shhhhhhhh-sh-sh-sh-shhhhh... *(Eric sits on the floor of the darkened bedroom with Dan on one arm, baby on the other, both wailing loudly.)* Jesus.

PODCAST 4

ESME. She worked in the North Tower, and when she came out of the PATH train that bright blue morning, a cop was shouting to her to go

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where he was pointing as quickly as possible and not to look up. Of course she looked up. (*Beat.*) Now when a fall day is too bright, too clear, when the sky is too blue...she stays home.

SCENE 5

The living room, just after dinner but before dessert. TERRELL enters, carrying the baby.

TERRELL. YES, lady! Oh my gosh, look at you. Just look. At. You! You little miracle! Is that a smile? You got a smile for your Uncle Terrell? Uncle T? Yes, YES, honey! (*Calling offstage.*) She loves me, I can tell.

DAN. (*From off*) Duh.

TERRELL. I just canNOT! Dan's baby girl! That is crazy. Do you know how *crazy* that is?

DAN. (*From off*) What are you saying?

TERRELL. I'm asking her "Who's your daddy?"

DAN. (*Entering, with a full drink*) Shut up.

TERRELL. She thought it was funny. Didn't you, baby girl? Yes, you did. (*Esme and Eric enter, with half-empty wine glasses.*)

ERIC. She likes you.

ESME. He's got baby mojo. Every kid in our family grows up looooooving Uncle T.

TERRELL. Don't act like you didn't, too.

ESME. Oh, sure. You're just so vain about it I don't like to feed the monster.

TERRELL. I hope you don't mind, I'm not giving her back.

ERIC. Fine with me. Let someone else hold her for a while.

DAN. It's like pulling teeth to get him to hold her at all.

ERIC. Excuse me, what?

TERRELL. Oh, hey -- I saw your twitter thing: "God Dates Fags". Funny!

DAN. Really? Still?

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ERIC. No, not new ones, I haven't done any new ones in days, I promise.

DAN. ...

ERIC. *(to Terrell)* Did you see the rest of them? There were some really good ones in there.

TERRELL. In where?

ERIC. The whole DominionGay hashtag – there was some great stuff.

TERRELL. ...

ESME. What's that?

ERIC. It's about those Dominion Day people.

DAN. Eric is in an online war with some religious nuts who live near here.

ERIC. Was. I'm letting it go. Dan thought it was bad for my blood pressure.

DAN. It was bad for his sleep.

ERIC. I'm trying to be more "present".

DAN. Is that so bad?

ERIC. The point is, I started a hashtag making fun of them. Did you see any of the other ones?

TERRELL. I gotta tell you...I don't really know what a hashtag is.

ERIC. What? Are you kidding?

ESME. Come on!

TERRELL. Isn't that terrible?

DAN. No.

ERIC. Sure you do, it's the thing, with the little pound sign in front of it. *(He draws a hashtag in the air.)*

TERRELL. ...

ERIC. You tap it or click on it, and you see all the other tweets with the same tag.

ESME. It's like an index.

TERRELL. Ooooooh. You can click on those? I didn't know.

ESME. Oh my god...

ERIC. What?? Now if *he* said that, that would make sense. But how can you be on twitter in 2013 and not know what a hashtag is?

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TERRELL. Yeah, see, I don't really know how it works. I only follow you, and my firm, and Beyoncé.

DAN. I don't understand why you'd even want to be on it.

ERIC. Dan's a Luddite.

DAN. No, I just don't see the point of all that constant inane interaction.

ESME. Well, it's a way of connecting.

DAN. To a bunch of people you don't even know.

ERIC. Dan doesn't feel much of a need for "community".

ESME. OK.

TERRELL. "You kids get off my lawn!"

ERIC. Like, for instance, he cares about gay *rights* and all, but doesn't feel like he really needs to be around gay *people*.

TERRELL. Ha!

DAN. That is not true.

ERIC. Oh, come on. You never have, you never will. It's fine.

TERRELL. Whoa. Wait. No. Are you kidding me?

ERIC. Look, I'm not saying that's bad – I love him, I married him. But facts is facts.

TERRELL. You, my young friend, don't know nuthin'.

ERIC. I know Dan.

TERRELL. Do you now.

DAN. I am sitting right here, you know.

TERRELL. Mirror, mirror, on the wall, he was the gayest of us all.

ERIC. Uhh...what?

DAN. Shut up.

ERIC. What does that mean?

TERRELL. Who was first in line for Madonna tickets? Dan. Who was it that dragged you out of your dorm and took you to your first gay bar? Dan.

DAN. Shut up.

TERRELL. Who knew where to go to get someone else to buy you drinks? Dan. Who brought Paul Monette to speak on campus? Dan.

ERIC. Who?

TERRELL. Shut up. So many times Tony and I and even Carl would want to just stay home, but Dan with a plan was a force of nature.

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Resistance was futile, bitches. We'd be like, "OK, just one..." and the next thing we know the sun is coming up and we're trying to remember where we left our car.

DAN. And sometimes Tony.

TERRELL. Right?

ERIC. Really?

DAN. No.

TERRELL. Yes! And hooooooo --- so *pretty*. Dan and Carl together? You don't even know. Those two just made you want to kill yourself, looking at them. Seriously, they lowered self-esteems all across Boystown just by walking down the street.

DAN. Now you *have* to shut up.

ESME. Awww!

ERIC. Really?

TERRELL. YES. And they *knew* it. I'm not saying you're not still super-duper-handsome, Danny. You are. You are *very distinguished*.

DAN. Ouch.

TERRELL. But you were *smokin'* back in your day. You were out and loud and fabulous, baby. You were glorious chaos, my friend. *Glorious* chaos.

ERIC. Wow. What the hell happened?

TERRELL. Life.

DAN. We grew up.

TERRELL. Oh my gosh, if you could go back in time and find the four of us at Sidetrack –

DAN. I wouldn't.

TERRELL. -- and you walked up and told us one thing about our lives now, who we'd be in 2013 – can you even imagine what we'd make of it?

DAN. ...

TERRELL. We wouldn't even *believe* it, honey.

DAN. (*after a moment*) Just the "2013".

TERRELL. Right? 2013 is like Buck Rogers shit.

DAN. We'd believe Buck Rogers before you being a lawyer.

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TERRELL. Mmm-hmmm. Or you being married with a kid? That's NUTS.

ERIC. You and Carl wouldn't have ---

DAN. No.

TERRELL. Hell no. That wouldn't have even crossed our minds. If all you told us was Dan would be *married*...with a baby...that would mean he'd gone completely Jesus-freak insane. No no no, not in a million years would we take *that* to mean *this*.

ESME. So what about the other two --

TERRELL. Well, Carl's no longer with us, and who the hell knows where Tony is.

DAN. He might still be sitting there at Sidetrack for all I know.

ESME. You could look him up on Facebook.

DAN. God, no.

ERIC. Dan doesn't do Facebook. Obviously.

ESME. Terrell does Facebook...

TERRELL. Lord. Why in the world would I want to find Tony? Wouldn't even recognize him, most likely. All wrinkled and fake tan, hitting on boys half his age. I don't need to see those status updates.

DAN. Botox, probably.

TERRELL. Eye lift.

ESME. Come on now. You don't know.

ERIC. Yeah, he might be perfectly respectable. Look at you two. If you were so close once, why not find out?

TERRELL. ...Nah. Too much water under that bridge.

DAN. That's the problem now: nobody ever goes away. (*A pause.*)

TERRELL. Sometimes that's good, though --- my girl here is back! That's a good thing.

ESME. For a while, anyway.

DAN. How is Yolanda doing?

ESME. She's doing...ok. I mean, at this point it is what it is. It's mostly about keeping her comfortable.

TERRELL. It's a lot of work.

ESME. It's fine.

TERRELL. It is, though.

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DAN. Yeah.

ERIC. It was good of you to come all this way for her.

ESME. Well, of all of us, it was easiest for me to get away and come back. What I do is pretty portable, so.

ERIC. I guess you can record anywhere, huh?

ESME. It's not quite that simple, but yeah. And I can still do a lot of the producing stuff from here; plus who knows? A change of scene can kind of shake things up creatively. Untilled soil.

ERIC. We listen all the time.

TERRELL. They really do.

ERIC. I subscribed!

DAN. Yolanda's lucky to have you.

ESME. It's a little selfish, too. I want as many of her stories as she can give me while she's still here.

TERRELL. And lord, does she have stories.

DAN. I bet.

TERRELL. You don't even know the big one.

ERIC. The big one?

ESME. They don't know that one?

TERRELL. I don't think so. It's not the kind of thing that just comes up.

ESME. It's like, *the* story! It's why I got interested in storytelling in the first place. I did my damn thesis on Oral Histories of the African American Experience, partly because of that story. That story is...it's pure Yolanda. I can't believe you never told them!

TERRELL. It's a lot.

ERIC. So you tell it.

TERRELL. Oh, lord...

ERIC. What?

ESME. You don't really want to hear it right now, you're just being hosts.

ERIC. No, really, we're not that polite.

TERRELL. It's true, they're not.

ESME. You're sure?

DAN. Sure. I'm always up for a Yolanda story. (*Esme looks to Terrell.*)

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TERRELL. Why not.

ESME. OK. (*A beat.*) So, you guys know Yolanda. Did you ever see her wear a dress, or a skirt? No. Did you know why? It's because Yolanda didn't want people to see her scars. She didn't want people to see that, and then have to always be telling the story I'm going to tell you now. When Yolanda was a little girl, she had a best friend named Beanie. Thick as thieves ever since before she could remember. When they were about 8 years old, Beanie's mom moved her out of the neighborhood, just a little ways away over to a white neighborhood. Now this wasn't a Movin' On Up kind of move: this white neighborhood was probably a little rougher than where they'd been living. They had a little shotgun apartment, on the ground floor of one side of a duplex. One of those where you enter in the back, in the kitchen, with the few little rooms all in a straight line back up to the front. Now this was 1950, remember, and while Beanie's family may not have been the first black family in this neighborhood, their presence was not exactly welcome. There was some trouble. Little things: stuff getting said at them, eggs thrown at their door, a broken window. The window that got broke was in the front room, facing the street, which was Beanie's room. Her momma had someone put bars on the windows after that. But in between these incidents, life just got on with itself. And one summer night, these two little girls were hanging out at Beanie's house while her mom was at work. It was a hot night, and the girls weren't really doing much of anything but sitting around Beanie's bedroom drinking endless glasses of sweet tea and getting wound up and silly like little girls do. They were squealing and giggling – hopped up on all that sugar and caffeine – and didn't hear anything, Yolanda says. What got their attention was when they smelled the smoke. The fire started in the back, in the kitchen. No one ever conclusively proved whether it was an accident or was deliberately set...but people made up their own minds. All these little girls knew was that there was a fire in the kitchen, between them and the only door out. They shut the bedroom door against the smoke, and tried going out the window. But there were bars on those windows now – the bars Beanie's mom had put there to protect her. They called through those bars for help, but somehow on this hot summer night there was no

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one around: no one sitting on their front steps, no one coming home from work, no one anywhere. Precious minutes passed as they called out for help that simply wasn't going to come. By the time they gave up on the window, the kitchen was consumed. The middle room was burning now too, and the smoke was a solid, killing thing. They were kids, but they knew what their choices were: run into the fire and out the other side, or stay in the bedroom and die. (*A beat.*) Burn or die. Imagine facing that choice at eight years old. (*A beat.*) They knew they stood a better chance if they could wrap something wet around them, but they were cut off from the kitchen and bathroom. Beanie had an idea, though: she took two of her dresses, gave one to Yolanda and told her to pee on it.

ERIC. ...?

ESME. Remember, these were two scared little girls who'd been drinking iced tea for hours, so they were fully loaded. It was better than nothing.

DAN. Mmph.

ERIC. Smart, though.

TERRELL. I wouldn't have thought of it.

ESME. So they peed on those dresses and wrapped them around themselves as best they could. Now they just had to do it: run in a straight line through two rooms of terrible smoke and heat, then one kitchen's worth of flame...and out the door on the other side. With a running start and if they did it right it should take about five seconds. Easy, right? Yolanda was shaking, and Beanie told her she'd go behind, to help push her forward if she had to. Eight years old.

ERIC. Jesus.

ESME. They got themselves lined up, wrapped their little damp dresses around their heads and shoulders, crouched down for a last deep breath of air...and they ran. What exactly happened in the next several seconds, she can't say. It was days before she was even conscious again, and months before she left the hospital. She says she remembers two things: the noise of being inside the fire, so loud it was like silence -- and the smell of burnt pee. Eyewitnesses -- because once it was too late, suddenly I guess there were people around -- described watching the

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blaze and being shocked when a little burning person suddenly came shooting out the back of it. A little burning person. When Yolanda came running out of that fire, she came out alone. (*A beat.*) What they found of Beanie in the burned out kitchen didn't tell them much of anything. We know Yolanda ran into a metal chair in there -- she still has the imprint of it on her thigh, amid all the swirls and rivers of scars, like she was branded -- and maybe Beanie then tripped on it. Maybe she just pulled back, even for a second, and that was enough. Either way, it ended the way it ended: Yolanda got out, Beanie didn't. (*A pause.*)

ERIC. That's...awful.

DAN. I didn't know any of that.

TERRELL. She doesn't talk about it much. She won't talk to me about it at all anymore.

ESME. Well that's only 'cause you called her a liar.

ERIC. What?

TERRELL. I did not, that is not true at all. I never said she was lying, I'm just skeptical about...certain things.

DAN. Like what?

ERIC. You think she made up getting burned?

TERRELL. No! Of course not. Settle down, y'all. It's the after part I just... (*shakes head.*)

ERIC. After part?

ESME. The after part didn't happen 'til 18 years later.

DAN. There's more?

TERRELL. Oh, yeah.

DAN. (*Rising, exiting to the kitchen*) I need another drink.

ERIC. I want to hear it.

DAN. Don't wait for me. (*exits*)

TERRELL. I was around for this part, so I know.

ESME. You weren't even walking yet, so what exactly do you know?

ERIC. Tell.

TERRELL. Go ahead.

ESME. Yolanda healed and grew up; she met Gerard, my granddaddy, and he didn't mind at all about her scars I guess 'cause she got pregnant and they got married and by 1968 she'd had three babies: my mom,

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Shana, was eight then; my uncle Deveron was around four; and this one was just a baby -- what? 10 months, when it all happened?

TERRELL. Allegedly happened.

ERIC. Says the 10-month-old lawyer.

TERRELL. I was very precocious. (*Dan re-enters with a fresh drink.*)

ESME. These were years when Yolanda's world was pretty small, and that was just how she liked it. Gerard traveled a lot for work, so she spent long stretches at a time just being at home alone with her babies. She describes it as one of the most contented times in her life, actually -- until stuff started to happen.

TERRELL. Here we go.

ESME. Terrell here was not a good sleeper -- and when you would wake up in the middle of the night, Yolanda would pick you up and walk you around the dark house until you fell back asleep. She said there was practically a groove in the rugs from her walking that same path every night, singing quietly to him in the dark. And one night that summer, as she was walking him through the kitchen, along the same drowsy path she walked every night, she tripped and fell. She hit the floor badly, hard and twisted. Knocked the air out of her, banged up her hip, elbow and wrist so hard she couldn't even see through the pain for a minute. The noise woke my mom up, who came in and turned on the light. And sitting in the middle of the kitchen was what she had tripped on: one of the metal kitchen chairs, pulled out from the table and standing alone in the middle of the floor. In the middle of the path she walked every night in the dark. Momma said she didn't do it. The next day Deveron said he didn't do it. But somebody moved that chair.

DAN. ...

ERIC. ...

TERRELL. I'm not saying anything. Not yet.

ESME. She was kinda banged up from that, had her arm in a sling for a while. And just a day or two later she was taking out some trash when the second thing happened. They had a garbage shed out back, on the alley. It was a simple little wood shack with a metal gate that they never closed because it was all rusted and stuck open and it was just garbage in there anyway. So she's taking out trash one afternoon, and it's a little

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more of a task than usual because one arm's in a sling. And while she's in there, she comes face to face with a big old rat. Yolanda isn't particularly bothered by rats, but this was a little too close and took her by surprise. She stood up real quick, and kind of froze for a second. And as she was staring into that rat's eyes and starting to back out of there...behind her, the gate swung shut. This old, rusted gate that never moved...swung shut. So she goes to push it open, and it's stuck. It had latched as stuck shut as it was normally stuck open, like it had always been that way. And when that gate didn't open, it was about two seconds before Yolanda completely lost her shit. Full on screaming panic. She can tell you exactly why. I mean, yes, she didn't want to be in a garbage shed with a rat. But that wasn't why Yolanda went from zero to crazy train in two seconds flat. It was experience, hard-wired into her brain at 8 years old: when you're trapped with something bad behind metal bars, terrible things will happen to you and help will never come.

ERIC. Oof.

ESME. But this time help did come. One of her neighbors, an old German woman who lived across the alley, heard her screaming and came and yanked that gate almost off the hinges. Helga. Big gal. She got Yolanda out of there and took her inside and calmed her down. Helga could see the bruises and the sling and clearly she thought Yolanda was getting smacked around. But Yolanda explained that no, Gerard wasn't beating her-- and told her what had happened. Helga nodded and said very firmly, "ein Geist." A ghost. (*A beat.*) Helga talked about it like you would about a plumbing problem, or ants – you can pay an expert or do it yourself, but you got to get rid of ghosts when you get them. Can't let it go, 'cause it'll only get worse. Yolanda assured her it was just a couple of accidents, and as she thanked her again and showed her out, Helga was very stern with her: you do something about that ghost, before it causes some real trouble. Well, the next night: real trouble. Yolanda woke up smelling smoke. She jumped out of bed and ran to her kitchen. Smoke and flame were pouring out the stove. And as she stood in the kitchen doorway with her heart pounding, all of a sudden she noticed that she didn't just smell smoke. She smelled something else, too. (*A beat.*) Burnt pee. (*A beat.*) She says she got real calm then. Got

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the children out of the house, then handed the baby to my mom, told them all to stay put, and went back into the kitchen. She unloaded two full fire extinguishers into that oven (because you know she had several), and found the charred remains of the baby's diaper bag inside. Then even though it was the middle of the night, she went over to Helga's, who was awake like she'd been expecting her. Yolanda told her: I know who my ghost is. (*A beat.*) So the next morning, Helga came over and sat them all down on the floor of Yolanda's sunny kitchen. She set Momma and Uncle Deveron to work pouring salt in a circle around them while she tore up sage leaves in a small pot, and told Yolanda to tell Beanie's story while they worked. So Yolanda sat there and rocked the baby and told them all about her best childhood friend and the terrible thing that had happened to her. Momma says she'll never forget it: being eight years old, pouring salt out onto the kitchen floor because a giant German woman told her to, and watching her mother sit on the floor and cry like she's never seen before or since. (*A beat.*) When the story ended and the salt circle was complete, Helga burned her small pot of sage and said a little prayer. Then she got up, swept up the salt with a broom and dustpan, gave Yolanda a big kiss on the cheek, and headed off to start her day. (*A beat.*) Oh, and she scoured out the burnt-up oven, too. Helga cleaned like a boss.

ERIC. And that was the end of it?

ESME. Yes. That was the end of it. "And she lived happily ever after. The End."

DAN. (*After a moment*) Well, that was a real upper.

ERIC. I have a million questions.

DAN. God. Really?

TERRELL. So did I.

ERIC. I...why would Beanie want to hurt her? I mean, shouldn't she have been haunting whoever set the fire?

TERRELL. Bingo. And listen, Yolanda is super churchy, OK. She will tell you that Beanie went from that fire straight into the arms of baby Jesus. So I'm like, if she went straight into the arms of baby Jesus, what's she doing 18 years later knocking your furniture around and torching my diapers?

WAKE

ESME. I don't think Yolanda would actually claim that the ghost was Beanie herself. I think she believes Beanie did go straight to Heaven.

ERIC. So what was it?

ESME. I don't know, something. Something that wasn't Beanie, but was made out of what had happened to her. And this thing floated around confused and lost, until it came upon a soul it recognized: the soul that was present at the moment of its birth. Yolanda.

ERIC. But why then? Why after 18 years?

ESME. Maybe because my momma was the age they were when she died? Maybe that triggered it.

TERRELL. That, I believe. That makes sense to me. Seeing Shana at the age Beanie was may have provoked something psychologically in Yolanda, is what I think.

ESME. It was all in her head, is what you're saying.

TERRELL. No, that is not what I'm saying. I believe things *happened*, yes. I just don't think it was what she thinks it was.

ERIC. What do you think it was?

TERRELL. ...

ESME. Deveron.

ERIC. You think it was your brother?

TERRELL. Deveron's trouble. Always has been. Yolanda just won't admit it, even now.

ESME. You're telling me you think little bitty Deveron a) already knew what had happened to Beanie, and b) was tryna gaslight Yolanda?

TERRELL. I don't think he knew, no. I think he was messing for the sake of messing, and she interpreted it how she interpreted it.

ESME. At 4 years old?

TERRELL. All I'm saying is: Deveron has never not been Deveron.

DAN. All I'm saying is: *can we please talk about something else?*
(*There is a very uncomfortable pause.*)

ERIC. ...OK.

DAN. Can we please just talk about something that is not depressing and awful?

ERIC. Dan...

DAN. No offense, but Jesus.

WAKE

ESME. (*After a moment*) None taken. (*A beat.*) How 'bout dessert? Why don't you and me go get that dessert together? How's that?

DAN. Yes. Sorry. Thank you. (*Esme and Dan exit.*)

ERIC. I'm so sorry. I don't know what the hell that was.

TERRELL. It's fine. Dan being Dan.

ERIC. I mean, she's our guest...

TERRELL. She's fine.

ERIC. Well...she's incredibly gracious.

TERRELL. She's perceptive. She knows that wasn't about her.

ERIC. ...What was it about?

TERRELL. ...

ERIC. ...

TERRELL. (*He looks offstage, checking; maybe lowers his voice a little.*) We talked about Carl. That's what you get when you talk about Carl. (*Dan re-enters.*)

DAN. Who wants cheesecake?

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ESME. It was always when Juana's mother was cooking dinner that her dad would come home and the beatings would begin. And even after that final time, and the police, and the agency, and the funeral, and the three foster homes, one adoption, and middle school, and high school and prom and college, and three boyfriends, five jobs, one fiancé-then-husband, and graduate school and a mortgage and two kids and a career, no one – not her husband, not her kids, not her many friends, nor least of all Juana herself – ever figured out why the smell of browning ground beef made her so sick and so angry she would cry.

SCENE 6

The bedroom. Night. Dan is sitting up sideways on the bed, staring closely at sleeping Eric. Eric wakes with a start.

WAKE

ERIC. Whatthefuck --

DAN. Where's Dan?

ERIC. What?

DAN. I want Dan.

ERIC. Jesus, Dan.

DAN. Yes. Dan.

ERIC. Dan?

DAN. Dan.

ERIC. Dan.

DAN. Dan.

ERIC. Dan!

DAN. ...

ERIC. Christ on a cracker. You're Dan. *(Pause.)*

DAN. Yes. My Dan.

ERIC. What? No, not "your Dan": "you're Dan".

DAN. My Dan.

ERIC. Not possessive your, contraction you're.

DAN. ...

ERIC. You are Dan.

DAN. *(Brief pause)* Where's Dan?

ERIC. For fuck's sake. You're asleep, Dan. Go back to sleep.

DAN. Not until I see Dan.

ERIC. You're wearing me out right now. Seriously.

DAN. ...

ERIC. Lie down, OK? Just lie down please.

DAN. ...

ERIC. Fuck it. *(Eric hits him with a pillow. Dan doesn't move.)*

DAN. Dan.

ERIC. Fine. You can see Dan tomorrow. He'll be here in the morning, OK? Just go to sleep for right now. Please. I'm begging you. *(Pause. Suddenly Dan grabs Eric, hard. A beat.)*

DAN. You're lying to me. *(Pause.)*

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ERIC. I...I promise. Tomorrow. You can see him tomorrow. Please just lie down. Please. *(There is a long moment of uncertainty. Dan lets go. He lies down. Eric does not.)*

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