

## Waiting Period

by Sunil Sadanand

“I didn’t tell him I was leaving.” This is what the dead girl in the yellow dress tells me when I ask her if she’s seen my daughter.

“Five-foot four, blue eyes, dark hair, very fair, pretty, Lauren Vienna.”

“What’s your name?” she asks.

“Louis. But my daughter—”

She loses interest. Looks away. Looks like she wants to cry. She says, “I didn’t say goodbye.”

The abandoned building on St Martin Street is full of dead people. The girl in the yellow dress is young and pretty. Most of the people here are fixated on the barrel in the center of the burnt out, gutted room. Fire looks alive when you’re dead.

“I didn’t give my brother a birthday present last fall,” someone else says.

“Anyone here know a girl named Lauren?” I ask, almost yelling. “Lauren Vienna?”

“I forgot to shut off the tap water.”

I shiver, and move closer to the fire, but it does no good. You can still feel the cold when you’re dead.

“I skipped school all last week,” A blonde kid says. “I think I’m flunking bio.”

Silence.

Someone chuckles. The blonde kid smiles. I sigh and move towards an old woman muttering to herself in the corner. I tap her on the shoulder. “Lauren Vienna? Five-foot-four, dark hair, you know her?”

“There are going to be some angry creditors tomorrow morning,” a fat man in a white t-shirt says with a grin. “I can tell you that much.”

“Do you know where you’re going?” The girl in the yellow dress asks me. The dead, they flutter around these old buildings like insects beneath a sodium arc light.

I turn around. “Excuse me?”

“Do you know? Do you know where you’re going?”

I tell her I don’t want to talk about it. And then I say, “I don’t know. I don’t care.” And then, “You sure you haven’t seen—?”

“I know,” she says.

“You know what?”

“Where I’m going.”

Wind shakes the rafters, the floorboards, and whips through a hole in one of the wooden planks covering the window. It cuts into my hands and face. It whispers daggers into my ears. You can still feel the wind when you’re dead.

“I didn’t wish my son good luck.”

“My son was a drag queen.”

“I didn’t feed the cats.”

“I didn’t lock the door.”

“I didn’t hug my little brother.”

“I didn’t tell my mother I was leaving.”

The girl in the yellow dress looks at me for a while, then, “How did you die, Louis?”

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Some things take a while to get used to.

Like how locked doors and brick walls are no longer barriers. How you can no longer pick up objects. How you don't feel tired anymore. How sometimes two living people might be screaming at each other and you can't hear a word they're saying even though they're standing right next to you. How sometimes you can hear a baby crying from several blocks away.

You get lost easier.

You'll enter a passageway that looks like it's only a few feet long and end up walking for hours. And then you'll turn around, take a few steps, and end up right back where you started.

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What if your inactions meant more than all your actions? This is what I'm thinking the day my doctor tells me I'm going to die.

"It's called a primary brain tumor," he says, holding up the CT scan. "A grade 4 astrocytoma or glioblastoma multiforme. Unfortunately, it's located too close to"

*What if it isn't about what you do?*

"See, the brain stem controls involuntary body functions. Breathing, swallowing, heartbeat, blood pressure...."

*What if it's what you didn't do? "Oh."*

He clears his throat and looks at his hands.

Above the stretcher, and the doctor's bald head, there's a poster on the wall depicting two young Asian children with their arms around one another, and they're smiling, and the caption above their head reads, FIGHT AIDS, TUBERCULOSIS and MALARIA.

"The boundaries of the astrocytoma are diffused. This means it may have already spread to..."

Next to the poster are the doctor's medical certificates, and qualifications, and next to those is a plaster mold of a human skeleton, and there is another poster, which shows a detailed illustration of a

healthy female uterus, and the walls and floors and ceilings are white and blinding, and the week before, in the office, my nose started bleeding, and I vomited, and almost fainted in the men's room.

“How much longer?”

He takes off his glasses. Looks at his hands.

“You should get your affairs in order. I'm sorry, Louis. Why didn't you come in when...?”

I shrug.

At my apartment, there are piles of unwashed clothing stuffed in the corner of my bedroom, dishes covered with dried food in the sink, a half empty bottle of vodka beneath the bed, and Lauren's bed is unmade, and her things are exactly the way they were the day she left, and, “You should have done something, Louis.”

Then, “This the worst part of my job, Louis.”

Then, “We'd like you to come in for observation, Louis.”

Then, “There are some special treatments. Experimental ones.”

“How much longer?”

“You should get your affairs in order.”

“Oh. Okay. Shit.”

“I'm really sorry.”

And then I leave, and two weeks later, I put the barrel of a shotgun in my mouth.

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Outside, it's cold and people are bundled up in their winter jackets and some of them are window shopping, and others are just walking, coming back from work or school, and last night I saw an imp with black feet and hairy hands sitting on top of a traffic-light.

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“You learn to recognize your own.” This is what the black woman in the back pew tells me after I describe my daughter.

“Have you seen her?”

The black woman, she’s dead too, but you can’t distinguish her from the twenty or thirty living churchgoers here for Sunday mass this morning. We’re sitting next to a boy who’s eight or nine and keeps covering his eyes with his hands. Next to him, there’s a pastor, middle-aged, and still garbed in his priestly attire. They’re dead too, but with his white frock and white hair and pale white skin, the pastor is the only one of us who doesn’t look alive. He keeps glancing around the room like he thinks someone is going to sneak up on him. He looks frightened. He says, “I’m not supposed to be here.”

The black woman asks me, “When did you pass, child?”

On the pulpit, the preacher is reading a passage from Psalm 88. He says, “Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed. All day long, they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me. You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.”

I tell her three days ago.

She asks me my name.

“Louis.”

“I’m Clarice.”

“Nice to meet you. My daughter—”

“I haven’t seen her, love.” she says. “You don’t stay here for very long, you know. This is just a waiting period.”

“I’m not supposed to be here.” The pastor says, and looks behind him, then around the room. This pastor, you can see right through him. Like he’s fading. The little boy covers his eyes.

Behind the preacher there's a triptych. The central panel depicts Christ's resurrection. He stands over his body, dressed in flowing white robes. The left and right panels portray a group of kneeling apostles and angels.

"You'd be surprised how many people start coming to church after they die," Clarice tells me.

"I have to talk to my daughter."

On the pulpit, the preacher says, "I am sated with misfortune; I am at the brink of Sheol. I am numbered with those who go down to the Pit; I am a helpless man, abandoned among the dead, like bodies lying in the grave of whom You are mindful no more, and who are cut off from Your care. You have put me at the bottom of the Pit, in the darkest places, in the depths."

"Yesterday," Clarice says, half-smiling, eyes distant and glistening. "I saw the most beautiful little boy in Central Park. He had dark russet hair, and large brown eyes, and he was sitting in the grass in front of that bronze statue of Christopher Columbus and he was playing the most charming little song on his lute and robins and bluebirds and cardinals had gathered around him and a butterfly with golden wings alighted on his shoulder."

"There's a mistake," the pastor says. "I shouldn't be here."

Clarice sighs. The little boy peeks at me and then quickly covers his eyes again.

"I have to go, Clarice," I say.

Clarice nods and then, "Good luck, Louis."

The little boy waves goodbye, and then hides his face again. The pastor's eyes are large and frightened and he looks at me and says, "What's wrong with the sky?"

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Outside the little church on Sutphin, there are men in suits with cell phones clamped to their ears, women walking little lapdogs, kids tearing through the streets on skateboards, women sipping

lattes, women looking in through store windows, so many beautiful women, and none of them are Lauren, and a light breeze is sifting through my hair, and the sun is glaring through the clouds like the face of an angry god, and for some reason, the entire sky has taken on a blood red texture, and there are a murder of crows perched atop the church's spires, and two of the crows are tussling over a long bloody piece of sinew that's attached to an eye.

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I should have gone after her.

I didn't.

I remember the police station, the police lady, and it reeks like stale coffee, stale cigarettes, puke from all those drunks in the holding cell and, "Officer, I'd like to fill out a missing persons report."

"How long has this person been missing?"

"Two months."

"And what is your relationship with this person?"

"She's my daughter."

"How old is she?"

"Fifteen."

She stops. She looks puzzled. Then confused. Then suspicious. Then, "Two months? You're fifteen-year-old daughter has been missing for two months and you're coming in to report it now?"

"You don't understand the circumstances, lady."

"Well, you better start explaining them."

"She's on drugs. She's run away from home. She's been disappearing for weeks at a time and this is the longest she's been gone and—"

“What’s your name?”

“Louis Vienna. Can you help me find her?”

Her expression is stern, cold.

“If there’s anything left to find.”

And of course this never occurs to me. That Lauren might be dead.

I remember the last time I see her alive. By then, she’s rarely home, usually coming by just to get something from her room, and then promptly leaving. What I remember most about my daughter is she has her mother’s sad eyes—always looks sad—even when she’s smiling. It’s three in the morning when the door opens, and I’m sitting on the couch, bottle of Stolichnaya in my left hand, cigarette in the other, and on the television there’s this infomercial on, made by the People for the Ethical treatment of Animals.

She enters, black hair loose, skin pale, looks about ninety pounds, even with the three layers of clothing on. The kid doesn’t even glance in my direction, heads straight to her room, and I hear her searching through her drawers, slamming them shut and, “Where the fuck is it?” cursing, muttering to herself, throwing stuff around, and a few minutes later she comes out and glares at me, and I say, “Looking for something?”

“Where is it?”

“When was the last time you slept, Lauren? A week, a month, a year?”

She doesn’t respond right away and on the television a man is walking through a factory farm where chickens are kept in cramped little cages, with their beaks cut short so they don’t peck each other to death, and some of the chickens have strange abnormalities, feathers falling out, sores on their bodies, and their eyes are dull and lifeless and they look like inmates in a mental institution and then, “Give it back to me.”

“When was the last time you ate?”

“I said, give it back.”

“How long have you been shooting crystal meth, Lauren?”

“What? What the hell are you talking about? I don’t shoot anything, idiot.”

“So what do you do? Smoke it, sniff it, sprinkle it over your oat-bran cereal?”

“Like you have any right to—look at you. When was the last time you were sober?”

“It’s been years. So? You want to end up like me? The route you’re on is much worse, kiddo.

With that shit, you’ll waste away, your body first, then your mind, your soul; you’ll be a zombie. You want that?”

“My soul? How about I take all your vodka? How would *your* soul feel?”

“Lauren—

“Listen, don’t sit here and pretend to—you don’t know anything about me. Go ahead and keep it. I’ll get more. I give the best head this side of Park Avenue....”

I remember getting up, rushing towards her. I remember her face, how scared she looked. I wonder what I must have looked like, hair disheveled, lips curled, teeth bared, piss drunk and—*dirty, fucking street whore*—I remember how she runs towards the door and—*get away from me*—throws it open, slams it behind her.

I should have gone after her.

I didn’t.

I never see her again.

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Outside, things have changed. There are still people, but not as many people as there were the night before, and even though they’re standing right in front of me, I can’t hear a word they’re saying, and across the street there’s a large, black rat walking on its hind legs, and the sky is burning, and crows are everywhere, and something huge, shapeless and translucent is moving beneath the sewer

grating.

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At church the next morning, the pastor and the little boy are gone. It's Monday and so there are only a couple of living people and Clarice is sitting in the same seat in the back pew so I go there and sit down next to her.

"Hi."

"Good morning, Louis," she says and she smiles, and her smile is sincere and warm and today there is a large bald dead man with hoop earrings through his ears and tattoos covering his muscular arms, and he's kneeling before the triptych and praying loudly.

"Did you find her?"

"No," I say. "I think she's gone."

She sighs. Pats my hand. Then, "I saw a rainbow over the Hudson River this morning. And last night, I saw a herd of white deer run right down Fifth Avenue." She laughs. "They were beautiful," and she turns to me and then her smile disappears, and then, "What's wrong, honey? Why are you crying?"

I tell her I miss my daughter. I ask her why this is happening. I tell her, I never killed anyone. I never stole or cheated or coveted my neighbor. It's not my fault Lauren left.

She looks at me and nods slowly, sadly, and then looks away, and then, "Sometimes, it isn't what you do, baby," and she looks at the bald man with the tattoos, as he keeps reciting the Lord's Prayer, yelling it, tears running down his face, voice cracking, and he keeps saying those words, over and over again, until they don't mean anything and, "Sometimes it's what you didn't do."

"I don't want to go to hell".

"You don't go to hell," she says shaking her head. "Hell comes to you."

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The abandoned tenement building on Christopher Street is filled with dead people. Some are sitting down in small circles. A young man in a leather jacket with spiky black hair is standing in the corner by himself. Some are huddled in small groups.

Rich people, black people, white people, poor people. No one wants to be outside.

No one wants to be alone when it's night.

"I was hit by a U-haul truck." Someone snickers. The man in the blue suit, his eyes widen, and then he chuckles.

"I OD'd on heroin."

There's a moth eaten couch in the corner of the room. This room may have once been a lobby. There's nothing living here anymore. The barred doors reinforced with steel grating keep the bums and addicts away. Rats are scared of dead people.

"I had a heart attack."

Pause.

"While I was having sex."

A few people laugh. A few clap and cheer.

Outside, a fierce wind is whipping trash through the streets, and shaking the window panes. You can still feel the wind when you're dead.

"I had AIDS. For three years."

The boy with the spiky hair steps forward. His hands are shaking. He looks around the room. He asks, "What's wrong with the sky?"

A few people look away, look at each other, shake their heads, look at the ground, and, "Take it easy, son. Sit down, just relax now—"

"What is this? What the fuck is this, man?"

"Hey, hey, language, language. There are kids here."

"Who are you people?"

"Hey, shut up over there."

"Settle down, kid. You can settle down, relax and be quiet, or you can get out of here."

The kid looks like he's not hearing what people are saying to him, like he doesn't know where he is, like he's confused and scared and like how all of us feel, and that wind is shaking the windows now, rattling the glass, howling through the empty streets, "What's wrong with the sky?" and he turns around and just starts running, right through the walls, and we can hear him screaming, yelling, "What's wrong with the sky?" and the people, they look at each other, shake their heads sadly and then huddle closer together.

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The next day, at the church on Sutphin, Clarice is gone, and so are all of the church patrons, and so is the preacher, and someone has smeared shit all over the walls, and there is an old dead woman muttering to herself in the corner, and there are insects crawling through her empty sockets, and the central panel of the triptych portrays the bleeding corpse of Christ torn down from the cross, and the left and right panels depict a group of imps and men who walk on all fours and rats who walk on their hind legs and they're dancing around His body in celebration, and outside, the sky is bright red, burning, and this sky, it looks alive, like a living flame, and there are no people on the streets, dead or living, and maybe it isn't what you did—*do you know where you're going?*—maybe it's what you didn't do

Maybe you don't go to hell.

Maybe hell comes to you.