

Parallel Parked.

By

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Angela shifted her back against the hard wall and watched as the nurse adjusted the fluid flow into his body. Angela had selected this position near the doorway because it offered her the best vantage point. From here, Angela could observe his every movement, closely monitor his breathing and look for the slightest sign of waking. She could also catch the eye of the nurse as she left and, importantly to her, she was out of the way.

Surrounding Angela was the ever-present scent of death. Antiseptics and cleaners of all types, vomit, the iron smell of blood. The smell of death. People came to hospitals to die.

The nurse checked his temperature and pulse, and Angela felt driven to ask, ‘Any change?’

The nurse, Coralie, by her nametag, looked over at Angela with the same puzzled expression as did the other nurses. They knew Angela was not a relative and not his girlfriend. She hadn’t known his name when she came to the hospital looking for him.

‘No change,’ she replied and Angela thanked her with a weak smile.

Coralie adjusted the blankets and glanced briefly at Angela on her way out.

Angela looked at the blankets. She wanted to smile, tried to, but it wouldn’t come.

What a name, she thought, Blanket, Steven Blanket.

In the last three days, she had learnt much about Steven Blanket from his friends and family. For a start, she knew Steven was a contract computer programmer, and he was made on the cricket and footy. He'd been married once, and there was some mention of children.

She watched his face for any sign he was coming out of the coma. Behind the bruises, the cuts and the beard that had started to grow, he was quite handsome. His eyes were blue, startlingly blue. His eyes were the part of him she noticed as her car slammed into him.

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The coffee was bitter and only lukewarm. Angela grimaced with each sip.

'Well, that's another thing about hospitals,' she thought.

She felt death all around her, pressing in on her. She struggled to breathe, but then she pushed those thoughts, those feelings aside, down.

She drank once more, and she was grateful for the drink. It helped. She knew she needed sleep. She felt the aching need for it, the mushiness of her brain, but she could not face her empty house. She could not face the images, the memories, that came to haunt her in the night.

And she kept asking herself, 'What if he woke up while I'm gone?'

And a voice inside answered, 'What if he died?'

The police had taken her statement at the scene. They had been professional though cool towards her but seemed content to leave it until Steven Blanket woke up. She had no idea if they thought she was guilty of trying to run him over. All she could remember now was the sickening thud as her car struck him and his face pressed

against the windscreen surrounded by a spider web of cracks. And those blue eyes of his.

‘Do you mind if I join you?’ a woman asked.

Angela looked up and recognised Steven’s sister, Karen, something. She seemed to float there, like a bird unsure of its perch.

‘Please do. I’m glad of the company.’

As she pulled out a chair, Karen glanced briefly at Angela’s bare left hand, at the even tan there.

Steven’s family had been kind to her. She had naturally expected them to yell at her, demand she leave Steven’s room. But instead, they had been friendly, even concerned for her wellbeing and appeared glad when she asked if she could wait with them in his room.

‘How are you holding up?’ Karen asked, setting her cup on the hard-plastic table. The saucer gave off a faint ‘tink’. Her eyes were soft, sad, lost.

‘I wish I could say “OK”, but I’m not.’ Angela smiled, looked at her, just a quick snatch of a thing and looked away again. ‘How about you and his mum and dad?’

‘It wasn’t an accident,’ Karen said.

Angela’s heart stumbled or at least felt like it had; it took forever before it started beating again.

Was this it? The attack she’d been expecting? She dared not breathe.

‘I wanted to relieve your mind,’ Karen said. ‘And we want the police to know too. We think Steven tried to kill himself.’

‘Suicide?’ Angela said the word slowly. She pictured his face in her mind. He looked so strong. She stared at Karen, unable to look away, searching for answers in the deep lines on the woman’s face.

Karen toyed with her cup, turning it round and round in the saucer. The spoon fell onto the table with a clatter.

‘Steven was married, you see,’ she said and stopped like an engine when the fuel ran out. But then she said, ‘Cathy, such a lovely girl.’

Karen reached for her purse, dug around and pulled out a picture, showing it to Angela. The woman would be about Angela’s age, with similar honey-brown hair. Brown eyes instead of green. She was standing next to Steven; she was slightly shorter, a little wispy in build.

‘Steven met Cathy at uni, and they were inseparable. Dad used to say they were joined at the hip.’ Karen said. ‘After graduation, they travelled. Every week mum and dad would get a postcard from a different part of Europe. They backpacked, you see. That was Steven.’

Angel felt the need to say something. But nothing came. She held the picture, and stared at the woman.

‘They married on the beach up at Mackay,’ she stopped, struggled with the words, and sipped again. ‘Awful stuff. I don’t know how they can call it coffee.’

‘I don’t know how they can sell it, legally, I mean.’

Karen laughed, but the lightness that came with it quickly evaporated. Angela looked outside, for it seemed to have gone dark suddenly.

Angela felt it. The silence that grew between them was like a barrier, one Karen struggled to break through.

‘They had two children,’ Karen said. ‘Little Allen and dear sweet Vicky...’ She stopped. Breathed raggedly in and out a few times. ‘It happened about eighteen months ago. I remember the day clearly. It rained in the morning. But then the sun came out all bright and cheery. We had lorikeets in our backyard. We never get lorikeets, not usually. Funny, isn’t it? The things you remember.’

Karen grew older as she spoke.

‘Cathy was driving back from Canberra. Steven was working that weekend. A rush job, something like that. The kids were just babies. A truck crossed the road’

Angela’s fertile imagination made her see the impact that killed the mother instantly. She could hear the terrified screams of the children, strapped in their seats, as the car tumbled down the embankment, coming to rest on its roof in Lake George.

‘The rains, you know ... The lake was full. The kids ...’

‘Steven took it badly?’ Angela hastily interrupted with the first thing she could think to say.

‘Yes.’ Karen looked out of the canteen window at the world outside, staring at the trees in the distance, the cars passing, and the people. ‘He saw a councillor, and we thought he had gotten over it, I mean, as much as you can. We thought he was managing. He took dad to the footy Grand Final every year. He loved the footy. Mad about it. But things started to happen that worried us.’

‘What sort of things?’ Angela asked.

‘He’d cut himself,’ she replied. ‘The first time, he said it was an accident, and we believed him. But it kept happening. There were other things. He’d go to the pub, get drunk and then there’d be a fight. Six months ago, he got fired from a job. That’s never happened before. Usually, his clients are desperate to keep him. He got headhunted all the time.’

‘How did he take that?’

‘It seemed to shake him up,’ Karen said. She sipped, grimaced and pushed the cup away. ‘He saw another councillor. But it only lasted two months, then it was the same thing all over again.’

Angela reached out and placed her hand on Karen’s as tears rolled down the woman’s cheeks. Angela had to fight back tears of her own.

The noises of the cafeteria faded. The sounds of people’s voices, the clack of crockery and the electronic ‘ping’ of the cash register were dulled, and the two of them were alone in the world.

‘So, you see,’ Karen said, visibly struggling, ‘when we heard about the accident, we weren’t surprised. If it hadn’t happened then, it would have happened sometime.’

‘There was nothing you could do,’ Angela said. Sound returned, and the moment passed.

‘We talked to him. The whole family did. We tried to get him back into counselling. We even talked to the family solicitor about getting him committed. We told him we were afraid something like this would happen.’

‘But you couldn’t get him committed,’ Angela guessed.

‘No. But that put him offside. He hasn’t talked to us, any of the family, in weeks.’

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This was an alien land, and she an intruder. Angela was under no illusions, the police would call it “Breaking and entering”, but she had to know more about Steven Blanket, where he lived, what his life had been like before ...

Getting the key was simple. His possessions were in the drawer next to his bed. She had simply rummaged through his wallet for the address and then borrowed his house keys. She was left alone with him for hours on end. No one would ever know.

Angela had assumed his home would be something ultra-modern, yet she found herself standing in front of a single-story dwelling in an old part of Artarmon. The bricks were that shade of muddy chocolate that was in vogue when the soldiers came home in WW1. The house had once been lovingly renovated though now the paint was fading and looked tired. The garden had been painstakingly laid out so that, even though it was neglected and beginning to run wild, it was still beautiful.

She opened the front door and walked inside. The house was bright inside, but with an empty silence that made it feel colder than it was. The air was stale, the house lifeless, just like hers.

Angela walked into the living room and was immediately impressed by the room's style. Either Steven or the late Cathy had decorating talents she could not hope to match.

The dining room came next, then the kitchen, with its strong smell of old alcohol. With each room she visited, Angela was more impressed by the style of the renovations, but at the time, she was saddened by the obvious neglect.

Angela couldn't bring herself to enter the children's bedrooms. Instead, she stood in the doorway of each room and looked in. Both had been decorated with careful attention to the wallpaper and colour scheme. Just by looking at where they had slept, Angela felt she knew Vicky and Allen.

The last bedroom belonged to Steven and his wife. Angela sat down on the four-poster bed. This room was the brightest of all. The walls were painted in shades

of peach and light grey. The original narrow windows were gone, replaced with French windows that opened out into the garden, where she saw a run of roses gone wild, bushes and trees she couldn't name in a ragged, neglected order.

She imagined lying on the bed, the mosquito netting hanging from the ceiling, blurring out the world, enjoying the freshness of a summer's morning.

On the bedside table was a photograph in a silver frame. Angela reached over and picked it up, and looked into the smiling face of the dead woman. She was breathtakingly beautiful, and she had been married to Steven.

In the woman's eyes, Angela saw love; a deep, abiding love. The type of love, Angela guessed, that transcended adversity and lasted a lifetime.

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It rained most of the week; the sky was overcast and dull and added to the depression that surrounded Angela. She put the key in the lock of her front door and struggled with it. The lock needed oiling, and she knew she should get it fixed but she could not seem to find the energy.

'Ms Linden?'

Angela turned and was confronted by the face of a man a dead woman had loved and that had stared at her through the windscreen of her car.

'Oh ... Mr Blanket,' she said, stumbling over his name.

For an instant, she wondered if he knew she'd been in his house and had come to denounce her. But when her heart stopped pounding, she realised he could not. He had been unconscious at the time. She looked into his face and caught her breath. His eyes were so alive, so bright. She fought the urge to call him Steven.

'I'm sorry. Did I startle you?' he asked.

'No, Mr Blanket,' she lied. 'Not at all,'

‘I wanted to talk to you. If that’s ok?’

Angela hesitated. The picture of his wife was fresh in her mind.

‘Come in, Mr Blanket,’ she said.

‘Please,’ he said, walking past her into the apartment, ‘call me Steven. You make me sound like my dad.’

He turned and smiled at her. Immediately the room brightened.

‘Why do you keep the place so dark?’ he asked.

‘Keeps the heat out.’ Angela pointed at the window. ‘The sun comes in pretty fiercely in summer. Serves us, I mean me, serves me right for buying a house facing east.’

‘I hate darkness. I love a room that’s bright and cheery.’

‘So do I, but it gets too hot,’ she lied again but went over to the window and threw the curtains aside.

‘That’s better,’ he said.

‘Would you like a drink, coffee?’ she asked, trying to think of something to say. ‘I’m sorry, I’ve only got coffee.’

‘Coffee’s fine,’ he said.

‘I’ll make it. Please sit down,’ Angela went into the compact kitchen and stayed there till the water boiled and the coffee was made. She came back into the living room carrying two mugs. She looked at the long wall, her eyes lingering for a moment on the bright square patches amongst the faded paint.

‘Thanks,’ he said, accepting his cup. Angela was careful not to spill hers as she sat.

The last month and a half had been kind to him. The bruises had faded, and the beard was gone. His skin looked healthy and even a little tanned.

He sipped the coffee and became hesitant. She saw the change in him. They were seated facing each other, knees not quite touching.

‘I ...’ he started and then stopped. ‘You’ve a beautiful view.’

She followed his gaze. Immediately visible were the other homes and, in the distance, a smudge of green that was the start of the national park.

‘Yes,’ she replied.

He was silent for a time. She waited while he found the words. She wanted to help, but then she thought of the woman in the picture, and her words remained unspoken.

‘It wasn’t an accident,’ he said eventually. she remembered they were the same words his sister had used. ‘You didn’t hit me. I ran into you.’

Angela didn’t reply but looked into those blue eyes.

‘Oh,’ she said eventually, then, ‘Your sister told me about your wife.’

‘About Cath?’ he said. He looked startled but then said, ‘Yes, I know. We had a chat... I’m going to see a counsellor again. I guess Kaz told you about the past. I wanted you to know that it wasn’t your fault, the accident. You couldn’t help it. It was me.’

‘It’s ok,’ she said. She felt like reaching out and touching him, but didn’t.

‘Thank you for telling me.’

The shock was gone from Angela. Two days after the accident, late in the night, she had woken at a sound. For some reason, that was the trigger, and she burst into tears. The following day she felt better than she had in a long time.

‘No, it’s not ok!’ he snapped and startled her. His eyes had turned desperate. He reached over and cupped her hands in his. The touch of his hands on hers sent a shock racing through her. ‘There’s something else I need to say. When I ... When I

stepped in front of your car, I just wanted to die. You know about my wife and the kids. They were my everything. When they... for me, there was nothing to live for.'

'I know,' Angela said so softly he appeared not to hear. 'I understand.'

'I just chose a car at random. One minute I was standing on the footpath. The next, I was walking amongst the traffic.'

His hands were warm. She didn't want him to let go.

'But then I saw your face through the glass, and I thought, "My God! I can't do this to her." It took only a fraction of a second, but... but I saw in your eyes you were someone special. You didn't deserve to have this happen to you.'

He stared at her hands for a very long time. He didn't move, didn't appear to breathe.

'I didn't allow myself time to get out of the way,' he looked at Angela again, tears in his eyes. 'I just wanted to die.'

He released her hands and lay back as if exhausted.

'It's ok,' she said again.

'I just wanted to say sorry,' he said softly. 'I wanted to say ... I wanted to say sorry.'

He breathed in and out slowly but then abruptly stood.

'I've intruded long enough,' he said, the words tumbling like acrobats from his lips. 'I've kept you long enough.'

'I don't mind, really. It's good to see you well,' she said and stood as well.

'I'd better go.' He hurried out the door but stopped on the landing. 'They tell me that while I was out, you know in a coma, you hung around and kept an eye on me.'

Angela didn't know how to respond.

‘Thanks. Thank you. It was good of you. You didn’t need to. It’s good to know that someone cared.’ He touched her hand where it rested on the door. Again she felt a thrill run through her. ‘It mattered a lot to me. Goodbye, Angela.’

‘Goodbye,’ she said, and as he walked away, she closed the door and heard the mechanism click home. She rested her back against the timber and looked into her house. It was silent, just like his had been. Not even the sound of a ticking clock for company.

Angela wandered back into the living room and over to the window he’d been staring out. Unbidden, an image of Steven’s face floated in front of her but try as she might, she could not remember what his wife looked like.

She turned away and immediately saw the car keys beside the coffee he’d barely touched.

‘He’ll be back in a minute,’ she thought and smiled.