

never there

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Little Spot for Stories
Mason, MI

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CHAPTER ONE

REMEMBER BACK IN THE EIGHTIES, getting home from school and eating Jiffy peanut butter with a spoon or watching Ed McMahon running up to houses with big checks and balloons to announce winners of the Publishers Clearing House? If you remember that, then we have two things in common: our memories are the same, and we are both completely wrong. Neither of these things ever happened. Jif has always been Jif and never Jiffy, and Ed McMahon never touched a Clearing House check or surprised a prize winner.

You might share another memory, a strong one, of visiting a farm when you were a kid. It was called Pendleton Farms. It was a huge property out in the country with rolling hills, a silo, and a big blue barn. You might even remember feeding a baby goat or petting a giant rabbit. You might remember the way the spring sunshine warmed you while you played in the hay. You might recall passing a sign on your way to that scenic farm that declared, “Welcome to Cedar Rapids.”

If you remember all of this, just like me and my entire third-grade class, you are wrong again. Our parents assured us, and the lack of any photographic evidence proved it, it was a place that existed only in our minds.

I didn't have words for the phenomenon when it happened, but I've since learned that many people are plagued by false memories, or perhaps memories that were real and denied by the powers that be, for reasons unbeknownst to us. This phenomenon is known as the Mandela Effect. Discovered after a group of people gathered for a panel and recalled their memories of the funeral of Nelson Mandela, they described the ceremonies and people who attended the service, the speech of his widow. All recounted the same thing, only to learn that what they thought they had seen had never happened. Mandela was still alive. Some theorize these memories are from an alternate reality, and others think the effect is more straightforward: simply a confused

memory, mistaking one thing for another.

Whatever the cause, my third-grade class experienced it. By the time we graduated from high school, Pendleton Farms and Cedar Rapids had become an ongoing joke, a shared memory we all had of a place we had never been. That memory is what made it all the more astonishing when I got a call one week before my high school reunion from Tammy Davis, a friend I hadn't talked to in a long time.

"Michelle, this is Tammy, guess where I'm heading, Cedar Rapids, baby!"

The message was shocking. Shocking because it came so late at night. Shocking because it came to me. And most shocking of all, when the call ended, just like Cedar Rapids, Tammy disappeared.

WHEN I WOKE TO THE MESSAGE, I was surprised. I hadn't talked to Tammy in years. I dialed the last number I had for her and was disappointed to find it had been disconnected.

I called another mutual friend from back in the old days, Missy Stacky.

"Hey girl! Can't wait to see you next week!"

"Me too," I squealed at her and jumped up and down, just like I did when we were in school having a chat about the gossip of the day. Though back in 1999 I was in the kitchen of my grandparents' farmhouse, and today, ten years later, I was tucked into a fifth-floor walk-up in Chicago with flimsy walls and thin floors. My neighbors were quick to remind me that my every move could be heard and banged on walls every time the floor squeaked.

"Shut up, 525!" bellowed from below me.

I gave an extra stomp to shut them up, feeling mighty proud of myself for my petulance. A round of aggressive pounding followed my mini act of defiance. It was frightening enough for me to latch the chain lock on my door and take a cautious step back to my little kitchen table.

"Was that person yelling at you?" Missy said.

"You can hear that?" I said embarrassed.

"Goodness yes, is that person in your apartment?"

“No, just thin walls. Anyway, I’m calling because I got this really weird message last night. It was Tammy, and she said she was heading to Cedar Rapids.”

“Cedar Rapids?” she laughed. “Gosh, I haven’t thought of that place in ages.”

“So, she didn’t call you?”

“Nope, but you were always the one obsessed with finding it, so maybe she thought you would want to know.”

“Hmm, I bet Corey will know more; he still lives in town. They talk more than the rest of us. And... on that note, I thought maybe we’d all get together at The Alpine next week, like old times.”

“Well, I’d love a basket of nachos and a rum and Coke, so I’ll be there, but if Tammy pulls a Tammy, I’m out.”

“She’s not that bad, and I don’t even know if she’ll come. I haven’t talked to her in ages.”

“It’s not me you have to worry about; it’s Jen. She’s not going out much these days. The baby isn’t even here, and it’s already her excuse to get out of everything. Baby this and baby that.”

“I know. I’ll call her.”

After we hung up, I dialed Jen. It went straight to voicemail; I hated it when people had their tape set to pick up on the first ring.

“Hey Jen, it’s Michelle. I got a weird call last night. It was Tammy. She said she was headed to Cedar Rapids; remember that farm trip in third grade? Anyway, wondered if she called you...maybe we could all get together. Your mom sent me the invite to the shower. I’ll be there. I’m heading your way this weekend. I can’t wait to see you. Talk to you soon. Kisses.”

That left Corey. I still talked to Corey every now and again. His proximity to my cousin John meant he occasionally called to let me know a lamb had gotten out or one of John’s chickens wandered over the property line. Outside of the antics of livestock we didn’t find much to talk about anymore. I assumed it was the distance because whenever we got together it felt like old times.

He picked up on the third ring, “Hey Corey, it’s

Michelle.”

“Mmmm,” he mumbled. Then he yawned. He sounded like he’d been asleep. I checked my watch: 8 a.m., not that early on farm time.

“Hey, um sorry to bother you.”

“It’s not my goat,” he mumbled.

“I’m not calling about a goat. I’m calling about Tammy.”

“Tammy?” he perked up.

“Yeah, she called me last night.”

“You? Why would she call you?”

“Well, we were good friends once you know.”

“Yeah,” he coughed. “But when was the last time she wanted to talk to you?”

“I’m delightful, Corey; people want to talk to me often, but that is beside the point. She called and said she was going to Cedar Rapids.”

“Cedar Rapids? The fake place?”

“That’s why I’m calling. Do you know what she’s talking about?”

“Oh, shit. Well, she’s got some things going on, and uh, well, let me make some calls.”

“What’s she got going on?”

“I don’t know if she’d want me to tell you about it. Because you will tell Missy, and Missy will tell Jenny, and then it will just be all these people in her business that she doesn’t want in her business.”

“Well, can you check on her and tell her I’m glad she called? I want us all to get together. Next week at The Alpine. Are you in?” I asked.

“Uh, yeah, I’ll make something work; my cousin is coming into town too, so I’ll be pulled in a few directions. Are you going to come to town early for the fair? Your grandmother keeps asking me to work a shift to sell milk at her barn stand.”

“Why are you talking to my grandmother?”

“I always talk to your grandmother.”

“I’ll ask you more about that later. The short answer is, yes, I’ll be there. I’m leaving early. My boss doesn’t want me to go, but I’m doing it this time. I’ll be there for sure. By the

way...what are they paying you to work in the milk barn?"

"A gallon of chocolate milk."

"Good, that's what I get."

"Anyway, I'll make some calls. I'll talk to you later in the week. Pick a night and let me know."

"Oh, wait, any chance you can pick me up at the train station in Battle Creek on Saturday and take me to grandma's house?"

"Normally yes, Saturday no. You're going to have to call your grandmother."

"She already said she'd pick me up. I just didn't want to bother her. I'm trying to stay out of her way. She's so busy with everybody at her house and making meals for the whole family all the time. And Grandpa's not getting around so well and all that. So, I'm planning to stay out at the camper."

"The camper is awesome. I'll visit out there, and we can get in some time on the boat."

"You got it."

I hung up the phone and listened to see if my neighbor had calmed down, or if there was any continued threat of a reprisal from my stomping.

Talking to Corey was enough to paint a picture of home in my mind. He was probably in his apartment above the garage at his parents' house, with the big window that looked out over the field. It was early, so the sun would be up casting a golden blanket of light over the corn. It wouldn't be high yet, but if it was doing well, it would be knee high, like the old saying, knee-high by July.

I longed to run along the lane that separated my family farm from his family property. Back home I had wide-open spaces. The world felt boundless when I ran from one field to the next. I could run past the soybean field my father had sown, to the cornfield my grandfather had sown, straight through to my uncle's cow patch, and then on to Corey's family plot with acres of corn on one side and a horse pasture on the other. The horse would run with me sometimes, and I would run until I hit the woods. Their pasture stretched as far as the eye could see.

In Chicago, I had one small square of earth to call my

own, and it was situated above four other people's square of earth. I owned, or rather, rented air space. It was a small apartment with gray walls and beige vinyl flooring. The room was cheered somewhat with a yellow fridge and stove which matched a yellow sofa I'd picked up off the curb when I got to town. The couch was quaint in its way, with a multi-colored mailbox and bird print.

My little place wasn't quite a studio as it did have a small bedroom, just large enough to fit a full-size mattress. It sat on the floor, and I could lie to myself and pretend that with my mattress on the floor I had higher ceilings, which would help ward off the claustrophobia from lack of windows. The reality was I couldn't afford a headboard or a bed frame.

I should have money, but I don't. I graduated from college with a degree in journalism that promised an anticipated income that never came. When I graduated, I set off to make my mark in the world. I was going to be like Woodward and Bernstein, the journalists who took down Nixon with their tenacious sleuthing or go undercover to expose wrongs using long form exposés like Gloria Steinem did when she went undercover at Playboy. It wasn't long after I graduated that I learned journalism was in the final throes of a death spiral. When I entered my first newsroom, I was taking over the beat of great journalists who came before me. They enjoyed the golden age; they were unionized, well-paid journalists who, just as I graduated, had been given early retirement and shown the door. I didn't feel too bad for them when I learned they were paid a living wage, had health care, and earned a pension. I was forced to work for half the pay, had to do twice the amount of work, and benefits were on offer only if I could afford them, which I could not.

On top of the lousy pay and terrible hours I also couldn't do investigative journalism. The artform was all but dead. With budget cuts, I would never get a month to work on a story, or a week, or even more than a day.

I was tasked to write five stories a week, and I had to do it in a cube surrounded by three other empty cubes. Those cubicles used to be occupied by other writers, copy editors, and

developmental editors. I could walk down the hall and find other groupings of cubes that were mostly empty. My office had a lone sports reporter in his empty cluster, or I could go even one more row over and talk to the middle-aged goth woman who did government updates, obituaries, and classified ads, but she wasn't very friendly since she'd been forced to take on those other departments. Her heart was really only in obits.

I had one editor, Bill, who barely had time to read my work though somehow found time to pace around the office at deadline time. He wanted my stories to be perfect the first time, every time, but I was more like a half-the-time sort of lady. Whenever he had to make an edit, I swear he circled the mistakes so loudly I could hear it through three empty cube walls.

He was a decent editor but a terrible boss. In an unguarded moment in the coffee room, he told me about the before times, when he just edited stories. His eyes lit up when he told me about all that I had missed, a lively newsroom filled with crosstalk from writers, photographers, and editors, many putting their heads together to cover a big story as a team. He said you could feel the excitement in the air in those days.

"You missed the glory days," he said and hung his head. "Now, I have to write, and manage people, and layout pages. I used to just edit. I used to be a thinker."

I swear a tear slid into his coffee. I wasn't sure if it was a tear or sweat rolling off his balding head, but something definitely emanated from him and rolled into his coffee. I gave him a sad pat on the back, and he walked away shaking his head as if he had forgotten he was even talking to me.

On my way to work that morning, I felt a sense of dread. I had to finish two stories in advance for next week and one more to finish the week I was in. I usually finish one article per day, but I was going to need to knock out three so that my boss would keep his cool while I snuck away for a whole week.

He was waiting for me by the door. "Are you going to get all three of those in today?" he snapped.

"Good morning, Bill." I said, pushing past him and past the reception desk which didn't even have a chair behind it, as the company had long abandoned having a receptionist.

“Good morning to you, Michelle.” He corrected his manners, then just as easily went back to his rushed state. “What’s the status? You can’t leave without giving me a story for the school section and the city council wrap up.”

“I know, Bill. I was thinking of my angle for the school story on the way over. I’m on it.”

“If you can write three stories in one day, you can write more than one a day and take a few more off my plate, you know.”

I rolled my eyes. My predecessor averaged one and a half stories per week. I walked away from Bill to my cube without conversation and noticed he was still standing by the door, probably waiting for the sportswriter to come through to make sure he would meet his deadlines too.

It was a bad time for the paper, and with more cuts looming over us from corporate and talk of the internet getting more and more popular with our advertisers, every moment seemed like a scramble to keep my job. I knew it was a bad time to leave Bill, but I had to. I needed a getaway. I needed to push away the boundaries of my 396-square foot apartment and be in wide-open spaces. While I typed away in my cube, I pictured running through the pasture at Corey’s grandparents’ house and spinning like I was Maria in the *Sound of Music*.

I had finished two out of three stories, and it was almost five o’clock.

“Two down, one to go,” I whispered to myself. I was a deadline writer; I could do this. I got my head out of the hills and back to the keyboard just as Bill popped up over my cube like a shark. “You’re not going to finish the council story. I knew it!”

“I’m on it, Bill. I won’t leave till it’s done.”

“Do you really need to take your whole week of vacation all at one time? Break it up; you can take three days next week and then two days another time. You’re tying up all your days with one trip.”

“I need to go, Bill. I haven’t had a vacation in six months, and I haven’t seen my family in over a year. And I’m entitled to one more week of vacation in addition to this one.”

“Don’t remind me. Well don’t you go planning to take

that one all at once. This is killing me.”

“Bill, I’ll take it when I take it. Calm down so I can write.”

I typed away, hacking out a mundane story with poor transitions. I would normally have smoothed those out, but it was hard to think with Bill pacing in front of my cube. Just before six I shouted over the wall. “It’s done. I’m going home.”

He pounced; without saying a word he ran down to his office and pulled up the story and printed it. I heard a furious scribble from his desk and quickened my pace to leave.

Just as I opened the door, I heard a shout from his office but pushed on through without looking back. Bill was going to have to make his own edits on this one.

I was out of the building and checked behind me several times as I hustled home. My heart was pounding so hard I felt like I was running from a slasher. But it was just the threat of my work stalking me. If Bill was following me, he was doing it at the pace of Jason Voorhees. It’s not like he could make me go back, but I didn’t want to argue. I scurried home, and when I was finally in the safety of my apartment, I threw the lock on the door, grabbed my phone off the receiver, and made my way to my bedroom. I opened my suitcase and set it on the ground in front of my dresser, sorting through my clothes while I dialed Grandma.

“Emm, hello,” Grandma said. She always cleared her throat before she said hello. It was an old trick she learned when she worked as a telephone operator to make sure the line had time to connect before she talked.”

“Hi Grandma, it’s Michelle.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed with excitement. “Tomorrow is the big day. I can’t believe it’s tomorrow. We haven’t seen you for ages.”

“It’s going to be great. I’m really looking forward to seeing you. Are you sure Skeeter or somebody can’t come and get me? I don’t want you to have to drive so far or ruin your plans.” My real worry is Grandma was driving slower every time I saw her, and her reaction times weren’t quite what they used to be.

“Nonsense, you are my plans.”

We chatted about the milk barn and the best way to pack for a Michigan summer, which was exactly the same as a Chicago summer, before Grandma came around to the question that I knew she wanted to ask. The words that she used were, “How are things,” but what she meant was, “Do you have a boyfriend yet? Do you have any money? Is that job going anywhere? How long do you plan to live in squalor?”

“Things are...fine,” I said.

Hmm she replied. Which meant that was not the end of that discussion. She would ask me how “things” were again when she had me trapped in her Buick for an hour and a half long car ride.

“Okay Grandma, gotta finish packing. I love you, bye!”

And I clicked off the phone before she could say anything more. No need to have the discussion about “things” twice.

I had just set the phone down on the bed so I could free my hands for folding when it rang again.

“Emm, Hello,” I uttered, involuntarily emulating the way Grandma answered the phone.

“Uh, Michelle?” It was Corey.

“Yes, it’s me; sorry I just got off a call with Grandma.”

“Yeah, you did that throat clearing thing she does; it threw me off. Oh, well I don’t want to freak you out or anything, but nobody has heard from Tammy since yesterday. She never came home last night, and she didn’t show up for her shift at work today. What exactly did she say when she called?”

“She just said she was going to Cedar Rapids.”

“Did she sound scared or upset?”

“No, she sounded really happy.”

“And Missy and Jenny didn’t hear from her?”

“Missy said no, and I just left a message for Jenny.”

“It’s weird that she called you and not me. No offense, but I talk to her pretty regularly, and I know you guys don’t talk anymore. Why do you think she called you?”

“Sorry, Corey, I don’t know why she would call me. Truth be told, I didn’t know she had my home phone number.”

“Okay, well if you hear from her again can you call me? Her mom is getting a little worried.”

“I’ll let you know. I’m leaving in the morning, but I can call back home and check my messages.”

“Let’s plan to meet up tomorrow night. I’ll pick you up at your grandparent’s house around seven if that works for you.”

“I’ll see you then.”

I walked back to my kitchen and looked at the machine as I replayed the message; it said it was left at 3:16 a.m. “Michelle, this is Tammy, guess where I’m heading? Cedar Rapids baby!”