DEAD TO YOU

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DEAD TO YOU

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ABSTRACT

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*Dead to You* is a collection of interwoven short stories, each contributing to an overall theme and storyline.
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“What if I don't want to be the lonely one?

The truth I know is this

I don't want to miss you more

Than I already do”

~Matthew Mayfield, *Element*
April 11, 2010

Dear Charlie,

You don’t know me. You know only what people allow themselves to remember, so you probably only hear about the best of me. You probably know that I graduated cum laude and that I had a good job. You probably know that I worked hard and that I loved your mother very, very much. You might know that I proposed to her on the beach with your grandma’s ring. You might even know that I had a newspaper route and a dog named Chance when I was a kid.

And all of that’s true, but you’ve probably heard a fair amount of untruths, too. Maybe you heard how I died. Maybe your mom is reminded of it every year, though that was never my intention. I need you to know that that was never my intention. I would take it back if I could.

I know that it must be hard, hearing your whole life that your dad is a saint, and then learning how much hurt he caused. And that’s an important thing to learn (what even good people are capable of), but this isn’t how I ever imagined you learning it. I imagined you would learn this when one day you came home from school and your best friend had done something that hurt your feelings. I would sit you down and explain to you that even good people, even the people that really love you, can do mean things sometimes, thoughtless things, impulsive things.
And then we’d go outside and throw a baseball or build a tree house while your mom made dinner. And then we’d eat meatloaf and mashed potatoes, and I’d help you finish your math homework and your mom would come in and read you stories until you fell asleep.

That’s what I imagine, that’s what I dream about every night. Some dreams are about baseball games and family dinners, others are about school dances and summer vacations. I want you to know that I live for those dreams. I am more myself in those dreams than I can ever be here. And if I could, I would go back and make it right –

He dropped the pen that he had been holding so tightly, unsure of where to go from here. So he stood and walked across the small room towards a chipped and weathered wooden desk. He opened the drawer and gently slid this letter on top of the dozens of others, each addressed to a different name. There were letters to a Hannah, to an Olivia, to a Cooper. This was the first that he had written to a Charlie, and he wondered if this time he was right.
“For you, for me,

Make me a better man

For you, oh please

Make me a better man”

~Matthew Mayfield, Better
He fiddled with the sterling silver cufflinks, spinning them on the glossy wooden table as he tried to ease his nerves.

“You know, you’re supposed to wear those.” Rick sat down next to him, placing two shot glasses on the table. Danny smiled, and began pressing the links into his jacket sleeves.

“And what are we toasting to?”

“Well, aside from the fact that it’s your wedding day…”

“Yeah, aside from that.”

“You just look like you’d enjoy a shot right about now.” The two men clinked glasses and threw back the whiskey. Danny gently put his glass on the table, never taking his eyes from it. “Look Danny, forget what Joe said. The guy’s a dumbass. And he doesn’t know Bridget. To be honest, I’d be surprised if he really ever knew any woman.”

Danny smirked and looked up at Rick. “I know Joe’s a dumbass.”

“Good. Then, what’s going on?”

“Nothing. Seriously Rick, this is nothing. Just your run of the mill wedding day nerves. I’m supposed to feel this way. This is natural. This is fine.” Danny patted Rick’s shoulder. “Thanks for the whiskey, though.” The two men stood up and walked to the door, Rick gathering the other groomsmen and forming them into a line.

“I’ll see you up there.”
As he walked towards the altar, Danny’s heart raced. His mind filled with thoughts of practicality: *don’t trip, don’t mumble, don’t vomit. Say your vows loudly enough for the people in the back to hear. Put the ring on the left hand, not the right.* He stood stoically, hands clasped in front of him, feet shoulder width apart.

As his friends escorted her friends down the aisle, two by two, Danny had to concentrate on breathing. And when he saw her, his heart stopped. With her first step towards him, his legs turned to jelly, and he had to shuffle his feet a bit to adjust his stance. With her second step, he remembered to breathe in.

The aisle seemed miles long, and in the time it took her to reach him, Danny’s mind filled with memories of their past together and hopes for their future. He imagined the trips they’d take to Asia and Africa, and he could see clearly her smiling face and windblown hair as he imagined them in a hot air balloon over Napa Valley. He remembered the first time he saw her, in a chemistry lab at college during their sophomore year. She had sun-kissed skin and long brown hair, a thin frame and delicate features. She was beautiful and everyone in that class noticed. She was surrounded by girls eager to be in her presence, and, throughout the semester, she was approached by guys eager to get in her bed.

The first time they spoke, Danny invited her over to watch football. She hated football, but she said yes. And when she asked him to the art museum a few days later, he said he’d love to go, despite the fact that museums typically bored him.

Over the coming weeks, months, and eventually years, Bridget and Danny endured countless events in the name of love and decency. A ballet for a baseball game, an awards show for a draft. Tradeoffs. The temporary discomfort and restlessness was
worth it so long as they could spend time together, Bridget said, learning from and about each other. In fact, it was rare for a day to go by without them spending nearly every free moment together, ever since her dad’s heart attack three months into their engagement.

That’s when their relationship shifted, and what had started as small sacrifices of comfort turned into necessities. She *needed* him. She needed to be near him, to not be alone, to always have a project, because life’s just too short.

Danny knew that it was temporary. He knew she wouldn’t always need him like this, and that she would find her feet again soon. And he knew the right thing to do until then was to comfort her, to be what she needed, because that’s what you do for the people you love. And when she found herself again, whenever that may be, he could be himself again.

Bridget was now standing in front of him. Her brown eyes big and full with happiness and love, her red lips curled upward into a smile. He stared at her and she seemed both familiar and unfamiliar. He watched her as the officiant addressed their guests and spoke about love and marriage. He couldn’t force his eyes away from her.

And as he professed his love for her in front of their friends and family, he felt both heavy and light. As he vowed to have and to hold her, from this day forward, for better or for worse, he felt himself spilling over with love and affection for her. And as she vowed to love and to cherish him, from this day forward, until death do they part, he felt terrified. He was afraid to exhale for fear that he might breathe out the last remaining bit of himself.

And then they kissed, and that was it. She was his everything, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. She engulfed him.
They took each others’ hands and walked up the aisle, smiling and waving at their guests, one foot in front of the other. They ran to their limousine, and as Danny closed the car door behind them with his right hand, Bridget wrapped her arms around his left arm, pulling herself into him. And simultaneously, his stomach dropped and his heart leapt into his throat.
“It’s okay to not want to die alone
‘Cause neither does anyone”
~Matthew Mayfield, *Razorblade*
THE LIES WE TELL

As kids, we’re taught that we’re special. We’re taught to dream and to hope and to reach for the stars. We’re taught that if we try hard enough and want something badly enough, it’s in our reach. We can do anything.

And we buy it.

So we dream, and we dream big. At first the dreams are huge: I want to fly, I want to go to the moon. As we get older, our dreams get a bit more manageable: I want to be a doctor. I want to travel the world. I want to learn how to fly a plane. And as we get older still, and our limitations become more obvious to us, our dreams get even more diluted and dulled down: I want a big house. I want a pretty wife. I want a prime parking spot.

Somewhere along the line, dreams devolve from something that pushes us forward into something that holds us back. Dreamers are naïve; they refuse to accept the fact that sacrifices are what keep things moving along. Practicality is key to being an adult. Accept and conform.

But “you’re special” isn’t the biggest lie we tell kids. Neither is “you can do anything.” The biggest lie we tell our kids begins the first time we try to explain the difference between good and evil.

We set up this dichotomy, good on one side, evil on the other, and we teach our kids that it’s easy to tell the difference, that they’re mutually exclusive. Good consists of
all things peaceful and promising. Love is good. Brotherhood is good. God is good. To be
good is to be in favor with God.

And then there’s evil. Darkness and greed and hate and sin and selfishness. To be
evil is to be in cahoots with the Devil. Murderers are evil. Terrorists are evil. Dictators
are evil.

And as far as kids know, you’re either one or the other.

What we don’t tell our kids, what we hide from them, is the fact that people are
both. Everybody is capable of good and of evil, and a lot of people swing from one to the
other, back and forth, throughout their lives. Some people are just really good at hiding it.

For example, there’s this one guy I know – Frank. I’ve only known him a few
months, but from the beginning I thought Frank was a pretty decent guy. I probably
would’ve placed him on the “good” side of humanity on any given day. He prays before
he eats, he works hard at his job, and he’s not racist or homophobic like a lot of guys his
age. Even his jokes are clean.

And sometimes Frank would bring his grandson to work with him. The kid would
usually just sit to the side of the plot, far enough away from the beams and hammers so
that he never inconvenienced anyone. He didn’t seem miserable, just sort of bored. But
Frank would sneak over to him whenever he caught a break, and the two seemed to have
a sort of rapport. And then one day, the kid shows up unexpected, grabs a piece of plastic
tubing and just slams Frank in the back of the head. Before anyone could stop him, the
kid threw the tube down and starting whaling on Frank, punching him in the face and in
the gut. Some of the guys pulled the kid off, and held him for a few seconds while he
yelled about Frank sending his mom to the hospital. At that point, we all just looked at
each other and Frank looked down. The kid promised his grandpa that if that man ever
touched his mom again, he’d kill him. And then he spit at the old man before walking
away.
“I'll give you all of me
I'll make you mine
If you'll take me and you'll make me
Your first in line”

~Matthew Mayfield, *First in Line*
They laid there together, bodies covered by a thin, white sheet, eyes locked. She smiled and dropped her gaze. He reached his hand towards her and ran his fingers through her hair, lightly tracing the outline of her face.

“I love you,” he said.

“I know,” she said, still smiling. She lifted her eyes to meet his. “I love you, too.”

He cupped the back of her head in his hand and pulled her forward, into a kiss.

“But do you really know how much I love you?”

“I think I do. But if you’d like to remind me, we could go for round two.”

“Bridget, seriously. I want you to really know.”

She shifted her body. “Danny, I know.”

“Do you know that I’d do anything for you?”

“Yes.”

“I mean anything.”

“I know.”

He bent his arm and rested his head in his hand. “I’d go across the world for you.”

“Lucky for you, I’m right here.”

“But I would.”

“But you don’t need to.”

He shifted. “I love you so much that I’d go to the Tiffany exhibit.”
She propped herself up on her elbows. “You didn’t want to go?”

“Staring at jewelry isn’t my favorite thing to do on a Friday afternoon.”

“Well I figured it wasn’t your favorite thing to do.” She slid back down, and turned her body to face him. “But they were so pretty.”

“Yes, they were very pretty.” He watched her as she turned on her back, eyes to the ceiling. “I love you so much that one day I’ll cover you in Tiffany jewelry.”

She turned again to face him, wide smile, wide eyes. “Yes, please.”

His fingertips grazed her ear, lingering there. “You’ll have Tiffany here,” he said just before kissing her lobe. “And here,” his lips brushed along her neckline. “And here,” he pressed his lips to her wrist. And then he glanced up to meet her eyes before his final “and here” as he kissed her finger. She smiled, softly flushed and pink.

“We could start whenever you want.”

Her eyes widened. “Danny….”

“Bridget, I’m serious. Whenever you want.”

They laid there in a long silence, Danny staring at her as she stared off in the distance. When she met his eyes again, she spoke softly. “Tiffany isn’t cheap.”

“I know,” he smiled. “I’ve been saving.”

“You’ve been saving?”

“Of course.”

“So, you’ve really thought this through.”

“Bridget, I love you. And I know you love me – “

“I do.”
“And I know you. I know you could have your pick of any guy. But I can promise you that they will never love you like I love you. No one could ever love you like I do.”

The room went silent, the only noise coming from the city sounds outside the window - the constant sound of cars softly whooshing by, of birds chirping. Sunlight splashed against the walls and covered her cream colored armchair and mahogany desk. The tips of her toes were beginning to feel the warmth of the sunlight as it climbed up the length of her bed.

“Bridget, I love you more than I ever thought possible. And for me there’s no one else. I need you.”

She placed her hand on his chest and stared up into his eyes. He searched them for any sign of agreement or recognition. And when he couldn’t find it, he searched for happiness or sadness or fear or hesitation, anything that might tell him what she was thinking. But she showed none of her telltale signs. No faint hints of a smile, no slightly furrowed brow, no deep inhales or exhales. She didn’t nibble at her lip or close her eyes heavily. She just stared straight into him.

“We don’t have to run off today or anything.” He reached for her hand, interlocking his fingers with hers, kissing it gently and leaving it next to his cheek. “I know that we both have a lot of life left to live, a lot of big choices. But I want to do it all with you.”

She smiled a small smile.

“I want to be wherever you are. I want to share everything I am with you. I want to wake up to you every morning and go to bed next to you every night, not just because we can but because you’re mine and I’m yours and that’s the way we need it to be. I want
to make dinner with you, and I want to make babies with you, someday. I want to pick out Christmas trees with you, and I never want to spend a New Years without you. I want to bring home wine and flowers and chocolates and Tiffany and whatever you want. Just be with me. Choose me.”
“Please don’t leave me, I am begging you
My hands are shaking and my heart’s in two
I’m okay, I’m okay, I’m okay
As long as you’re not leaving”

~Matthew Mayfield, As Long As You’re Not Leaving
THE PLAN

She sat alone, a heavy blanket tightly pulled around her, a glass of water in her hand, a box of tissues on the table. The room was dark, the only light coming from the kitchen, seeping into the living room through the open doorway. Her eyes felt dried up, her head pounded. She concentrated on every breath, in and out, in and out.

“God,” her voice was soft, cracking slightly. She cleared her throat. “God, I’d like to talk to Danny if he’s there, please.” She took a sip of her water. “Actually… no. I’d like to have a word with you first.” Her lips pursed and her brow furrowed. “What the fuck?”

She spoke her words slowly, laboriously, with a staccato-like rhythm. “I don’t mean any disrespect, and I always thought you knew what you were doing. That everyone had a path, and that you had a plan. For everyone.

“And when dad died, I knew that you knew what you were doing, and that there was a reason. I didn’t question that. And I got through it, just like you knew I would, just like Danny….” She let out a small sob. “Just like Danny knew I would.

“And you gave me a good life. I know I was blessed.” She sighed deeply. “But I don’t understand. I don’t know what the plan is. And I need to know what the plan is. I need to know why. Why Danny?” She bowed her head and inhaled deeply. She gripped the wine glass tightly, lifted her head, and threw the glass against the blank wall in front
of her as she let out a scream. “What the fuck?” She cringed slightly at a sharp discomfort, and placed her hand on her growing belly.

“I can’t do this without him.” She closed her eyes, and images of Danny fluttered behind her eyelids. “I’d like to speak with him, please.”

She took two deep breaths and then straightened herself, adjusting the blanket around her. “Hey Sweetie,” she started as her eyes begin to fill again. “I hope everything is okay up there. I hope you found dad and that you two are catching up. Did you tell him about the baby? She’s been kind of fussy lately.”

Her eyes widened. “You didn’t know she’s a girl, did you? Surprise.” She smiled, but it quickly faded. “Mom said I should think about naming her Danielle, and then we could call her Danny. It’s a nice idea, isn’t it? But I don’t think I could do that. I hope you’re not offended.” She clenched her jaw and inhaled deeply. “I miss you.”

“I’m okay, though,” she looked up towards the ceiling. “I’m okay. I’d be better if you were here, but I’m okay.” She sat in silence, alone with her God and her ghost. “Did you happen to talk with God yet, and figure out what… what this is all for? What I’m supposed to do? Why you can’t be here with me? No? Okay, no rush. Just if you do have that talk, could you let me know?”

Her eyes fell to the floor across the room, where her wine glass lay in pieces in a puddle. The wall behind it, once filled with pictures of their wedding and vacations and holidays, was now blank. A stark, white wall punctured with tiny holes that used to hold up memories on display to the world. She needed to fill those holes soon. Maybe she should paint the wall. Yellow would be nice.
Though the photos were pulled down and packed away into boxes, she couldn’t bring herself to move the boxes from the room. So they sat there, despite her mother’s pleas, a reminder of him. All other reminders of him had been taken away, stored in friends’ houses until she was ready. She wasn’t sure when that would be, how do you ever feel ready again? These two boxes, along with a shirt she snuck into her bedside table drawer, are the only reminders she was allowed to keep. Well, those and the growing child inside of her. No one could take that away. Though she did think about it, if only for a moment, a very weak moment. She wondered if he knew that.

“I really am okay,” she said. “So I hope you’re not worrying about me.” She fiddled with the drawstring on her sweatpants. “Danny, I hope you know how much I love you. I know I probably wasn’t always the best at showing you, all the time. And I should have been showing you all the time, every day. I hope you can forgive me,” her voice cracked.
“I have seen what you are
And I have seen who I am
And we are desperate, we’re desperate, we’re desperate
For home”

~Matthew Mayfield, Open Road
I feel sore and sunburned. Resting my head in my hands, I close my eyes and begin to massage my temples, my rough fingers digging in to my skin. I need coffee.

Where’s Jim?

I open my eyes and tilt my head to the right, and then the left, trying to spot him. As he steps out from kitchen, I signal to him, raising my right hand slightly.

“Danny!” he says with his trademark Jim excitement. I used to think he reserved this enthusiasm for me, but no. Anytime a regular comes in, Jim greets them with a smile and a booming Maria! Jack! Benny! “A burger and fries?”

I manage a smile. “And a coffee, please.”

And then Jim gives me the look he always gives me when I ask for a coffee. “It’s 100 degrees outside. I don’t know how you could drink coffee in this heat. You sure you don’t want a Coke instead?”

“I’m sure. And can you make it strong, Jim?” Jim nods and walks over to the coffee maker, pours some ground beans into the filter, just enough for me since no one else ever asks for coffee, fills the machine with water, and flips the switch.

“I don’t know how you sleep at night, drinking coffee so late.”

I look out the window and squint as the sun hits my eyes. “Jim, it’s only, like, six o’clock.”

“Yeah, but you’ll be in here drinking coffee until ten.”
I shrug. “I’ll sleep when I’m dead.” The irony of this statement is lost on Jim, and I don’t know whether I’d rather laugh or cry, but since I can’t do either I just bow my head and begin rubbing my temples again.

The truth is, I don’t want to sleep. Because when I sleep, I dream. And when I dream, I see Bridget. It’s been nearly seven months since I left, since I ran, so she should be having our baby anytime now. At any single moment, I might be becoming a father. I never thought I wanted that – I definitely didn’t want it seven months ago. But now it’s all I think about. Is it a boy or a girl? Does he have my blue eyes? Is she blonde like her mother was as a baby?

I wonder how Bridget is dealing with it all. With the pregnancy, with being alone. She was never very good at being alone, though she always had a way of getting through things gracefully. I bet this was no different. I bet she put on a brave face. I bet she was strong.

I wonder what name she decided on – we talked about so many. I wonder who’s going to be in the delivery room with her. I wonder who helped her build the crib. I wonder if our baby will ever know me. She’ll probably hear that her dad was a good man who loved her mother and worked hard.

Jim places a mug in front of me. “Extra strong.”

“Thanks, Jim.”

“No problem. Your burger’ll be out soon.”

I nod my appreciation and wrap my hands around the hot mug, picking at a chip in the handle. I close my eyes and I see her, sun-kissed skin and long brown hair. I open my eyes and look up at the TV hanging from the wall in front of me. It’s on the news,
which is weird because Jim never watches the news. A customer must have requested it. After twenty seconds I don’t want to watch anymore. I already know that people are awful and that the world’s going to hell.

I bring the mug to my lips and take a small sip of black coffee. I don’t want to think anymore, so I bow my head, stare into my cup, and eavesdrop on the customers behind me. There’s a group of what I assume to be college kids by the sound of it. I turn slightly and glance over my shoulder, just long enough to see the girls in cut-offs and sundresses and the boys in soccer shorts and t-shirts. I turn and stare back into my cup as they talk about the president and terrorists and motives. I can’t take this, and thank God Jim comes by and puts a plate down in front of me, fries spilling off the side.

“Thanks Jim.” As he smiles and as he turns to walk away, I ask “How’s business going?”

He turns back to me, a slightly puzzled look on his face. “Business is good. People are hungry. As long as the air conditioner doesn’t break again, I think business will stay good.”

“Good. That’s good. How’s the family?”

Jim walks over to me and places his hand on the counter, leaning slightly. “The family’s good. Jen just got a promotion. Bradley’s about to finish second grade here soon. I think he was just a squid or something in the school play.”

“A squid?”

“You know, some sort of sea creature. Maybe an octopus. Or a crab.” I watch him as his mind wanders, trying to remember what his daughter had told him. Eventually he just shrugs and asks “So when are you going to settle down and start a family?”
“Oh, I don’t think I’m the family man type.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I am either. But you know, I think I’d do it all over again anyway. The divorce, the money problems, the fights… they were all hard, but I just can’t imagine my life without Jenny.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. A kid changes you that way.”

I stare into my coffee and try to send my mind far away. Why didn’t I ask about baseball or the weather or for Christ’s sake anything but family?

“So no kids for you?” he asks in a way that sounds more like a statement than a question.

“No, no kids for me.” No kids for me.
“I’m tired of faux desires
Of makeshift men and their wires”

~Matthew Mayfield, *Wrapped in Rain*
OUR PROMOTION

The clinking of a silver spoon against a crystal wineglass shushed the dining room. The twelve men and women, all dressed in their finest “casual cocktail” attire, looked up from their conversations towards the beautiful brunette, a perfect proud smile painted on her face.

“First of all, Danny and I wanted to thank you for coming here tonight. You are our dearest, closest friends, and we couldn’t imagine celebrating this with anybody else. So thank you.” Her guests smiled in recognition.

“And to my husband,” she turned and stared at him, “I just want you to know how utterly proud I am of you and your hard work and your dedication. You deserve this, honey.”

“To Danny,” cheered a rather large and somewhat drunken man in a pink dress shirt and black tie.

“To Danny” echoed the guests as they raised their glasses. Danny smiled politely and raised his glass, too. He dropped his eyes as he tilted his glass back and drank in his wine.

“And now, if you’ll all find your seats, Danny and I are going to go check on the dinner, which should be ready any minute now.” She turned and led Danny through the swinging door and into their newly renovated kitchen. As she walked over to the stove,
he set his wineglass on the glossy marble countertop. He watched as she opened the oven door and leaned in.

“Damn,” she said. “It’s not quite ready yet. Maybe a few more minutes.” She closed the door, turned to face her husband and smiled. “I really am so proud of you, Danny.”

He shifted his weight slightly, from his left foot to his right. “I know.”

She walked towards him, reaching her arms out. He walked in to them, wrapping his arms around her waist as she wrapped her arms around his neck. They kissed.

When they separated, there was a silence between them. She walked over to the refrigerator and opened the door. He hesitated.

“Bridget, I’m not really sure I made the right choice.”

She furrowed her brow as she searched for something. “What do you mean? Of course you made the right choice. We talked about this.”

“I know, but – “

“Danny,” she looked out from behind the door, “this promotion comes with a bigger paycheck, which means we’ll be able to replace that clunker of a car sooner than we thought.” She turned back to the open fridge.

“It’s only five years old.”

“And it means we can start saving for our baby’s college.”

He rubbed his forehead. “Bridget, you’re not even pregnant.”

“I know, but who knows how much college is going to cost by the time the baby graduates high school. Or what if I have twins? Twins run in my family.”

“Who has twins?”
She closed the fridge door and walked towards their newly constructed island, placing a butter dish on top of it. “My aunt Maggie.”

“Okay, well I don’t think we’re going to have twins.”

“I don’t think anyone *thinks* they’re going to have twins.”

“Okay, Bridget, but... my point is, why do we need to save so much for something so far in the future.”

She turned to him. “It’s not that far in the future.”

He sighed. “Okay, but what about the trips we planned? This new position is going to make it a lot harder to get away as much as we talked about.”

“We’ll still get to take trips. Maybe we won’t be able to fly to Paris on a whim, but we’ll still be able to make it to St. Barts with the Donelans and Zabrinskis. I really can’t see Dave telling you to stay at the office and work that week.”

“But we were supposed to go to South Africa.”

“We’ll go to South Africa some other time.”

“When Bridget?” Danny could hear his voice raise slightly. “Between the work, and the baby you apparently want a little sooner than I thought, and the new car you plan on buying, when do you suppose we could make it to South Africa?”

“Danny, don’t yell at me.”

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to yell.” He looked at her. “But what happened to everything we were supposed to do?”

“What do you mean?”
“I mean backpacking through South America. Renting that hut in Hawaii. Kayaking in New Zealand. Seeing parts of the world other than this tiny little corner. We said we’d do things.”

“We are doing things. Priorities change, Danny. People grow up. People take jobs. People buy houses and start families.”

There was a long, stubborn silence between them.

“This isn’t what I signed up for,” he muttered.

“Excuse me?”

“I just… I feel like I’m giving up too much of me.”

“I’m sorry if you feel like you’ve given up too much of yourself to this marriage. You know, I’ve made sacrifices too. I’ve given up my dreams, too. I passed up that Boston offer right out of college so I could come here and be with you. Don’t think that I haven’t held my tongue sometimes, that I haven’t had to make hard choices. When I was a little girl, I didn’t dream of growing up to be a housewife, where my biggest decision, my biggest contribution, is to find curtains that match the new countertops.”

She reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear.

“I’m sorry,” he said. It almost sounded like a whimper. “I didn’t mean it. I’m just nervous, and work was overwhelming today. I shouldn’t have said anything. Bridget, I didn’t mean it.”

She turned from him, opened the oven door, and pulled out the chicken. “Damn,” she said. “I left it in too long.”

“I’m sure it’ll still be delicious,” he offered.
She turned to him and smiled. “Can you take this out to the dining room? I’ll be right behind you with the rolls and butter.”

“Sure.” He walked over and grabbed the pot with a pair of hand towels. Before he turned to walk towards their guests, he kissed her forehead. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”
“And God takes the blame

As the fingers point at all the pain

But close your eyes and dream, my friend

And you will see the devil within”

~Matthew Mayfield, *The Devil Within*
DEAD TO YOU

I heard the loud roar of the plane, felt the world shake with its impact. The sky filled with debris and bodies, falling and flying down to the ground. I looked up at the tower and I ran.

I ran with the crowd of strangers on the street. I ran from the cloud of smoke and ash chasing me, swallowing the people behind me, nipping at my heels. I felt the heat all around me, felt the sweat rolling down my face, felt the dirt sticking to my skin. My eyes burned and my lungs labored to breathe.

The people around me didn’t run as fast. I bumped them as I sprinted by. Not hard. More like nudges than shoves. They didn’t seem to notice. They were covered head to toe in blankets of grey, but I could still see their expressions as I glanced at their faces. The ash couldn’t cover the fear, and it couldn’t mask their concern as they stopped to check on one another.

But I didn’t stop. I didn’t stop to help any of the fallen or lost strangers, and I didn’t stop to call my wife, two months pregnant with our first child. I ran past the people trying in vain to make phone calls to loved ones, past opportunistic looters. I didn’t ever want to stop.

And it began to sink in. This was my chance to start over, to do something more, to live the life I wanted to live. This was my opportunity to be free. I just had to keep
running.

I was done paying for a life I didn’t want. The nice car, the big house, the fancy job, the beautiful wife. This is not the life I choose for myself, it’s the life she chose for us. Every night, lying in bed after my twelve hour day, I’d think to myself, maybe tomorrow. And then she got pregnant, and I knew it would never happen. But now… now I could make it happen. I just had to keep running.

Now, there would be no need for lost chances and daily doses of resentment. No more getting older, watching the life and the dreams I had slip further away; no more screaming silences in our house at night, no more cold kisses, no more pretending, no more fighting without fighting.

There was a moment, a split second, when I thought about going back. But what was the point? I was already dead to her.

I only stopped running down the streets when I was far enough away. Here, the street was lined with people, hands over their mouths, heads shaking, standing and staring in the direction I had come from.

“Are you okay, sir?” a middle-aged woman asked me. I kept my head low but gave a quick nod and a wave of my hand. I walked a few more blocks, avoiding eye contact, and walked into the first public bathroom I found. I switched on the light and looked in the mirror. I couldn’t even recognize myself. My face was coated and smudged with dirt, sweat, and ash. My hair was grey, stiff. I looked like I was made of stone, hammered and carved into this man with tired eyes and the first hints of wrinkles.

I started to take off my jacket, but the bathroom was tiny, and the walls hugged me so tightly that I had to sort of shimmy it off my shoulders and down my arms. I laid it
on top of the toilet tank, rolled up my shirt sleeves, turned on the water, and scrubbed my hands and face as best I could before running the water through my hair. I dried myself off with a few paper towels, and then I stared at my reflection. *Who is this person? Who is this man, leaving his wife and unborn child?*

A wave of guilt washed over me, followed by anger and resentment, then sadness and resolve, and finally a hint of excited relief. Who is this man? This man is an exhausted man. A miserable man. And yes, maybe even a bad man. This man is a man who gave everything and still lost. This is a man who played the game and followed the rules and did everything he was supposed to do, and he still lost. But here’s the kicker: no one knew he lost. He was the only one who understood.

I could never say it out loud. I tried once, and the way she looked at me made me feel like such a selfish bastard. Yes, I understood that she had dreams too, and that she made sacrifices too. And no, I didn’t really mean it – I just had a bad day at work. I actually loved the new curtains and countertops, really. And on and on.

I’m not saying it was a loveless marriage. I had loved her, very much. I had loved her and fought for her and convinced her to choose me. Marriage was actually my idea. I bought in to the whole idea of it without really thinking about what it meant. I had thought it would be a way to show each other and our families how much we really loved each other, that this was real, that we were adults now. It had been the next step, the next box to check. It’s what people do.

And then, as marriage so kindly showed me, people grow apart. People ask too much of each other, and people sacrifice too much of themselves. People end up eating at restaurants they hate and seeing movies they hate, and then people grow quietly resentful.
They leave without saying goodbye in the mornings, they pull away from each others’ touches. And then people start fights just to start fights, and soon those fights become one of the only ways people communicate, along with loaded silences and lying smiles. And when the fighting got too tiring, and the silence got too uncomfortable, I just lied. We just lied.

I lied when I told her I loved the pot roast. I feigned excitement when she placed my hand on her growing belly. I lied when I told her I was working late, and I laughed off her curious concern about Eva, my new co-worker. I even tried to pretend that I could do this – that I could fake my way to happiness. But the longer I lied, the bigger I lied. What started as “Honey, this pot roast is delicious” escalated into shamelessly flirting with, and eventually fucking, my hot co-worker.

What kind of life was that? It wasn’t even a life, it was a fake life. And a pretty miserable fake life. So what was the point? We would both end up hurt and unhappy in the end. This way, she would never have to know. She could go on living, remembering me fondly, and I could go off and live the life I want. No more resentment, no more lies, no more anger or fighting or sacrifices. No more.

This man staring back at me from the smudged and dimly lit mirror had a chance. He was handsome and charming, he could even be sly when he needed to be. He could make it. I could make it. I would make it, and on my terms.

I turned from my reflection and walked out the door.