

“...let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze upon God. This is the magic glass, man; I see my wife and child in thine eye.” Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

“A man has only one escape from his old self: to see a different self in the mirror of some woman's eyes.” Clare Boothe Luce

“If one is lucky, a solitary fantasy can totally transform one million realities.” Maya Angelou

WINDOWS
TO THE SOUL

BY DIANA BLACK



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*For Jennifer and Caitlin
Greg and Michael
Sandy, Mother and Dad*

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ONE: GABE – KNOCKIN’ ON HEAVEN’S DOOR

For the life of him he couldn’t remember what became of her birthday bike. The police had to have seized it as evidence. How else would they have matched the car’s blue paint found on the pink bike frame? But after the investigation closed, was the twisted bicycle pitched into a dingy wire storage cage at the police station and stockpiled with other criminal evidence like crowbars, hunting knives and shotguns? Did the little Huffy still have the yellow bow attached at the handlebars? At some point over the last three years he *must* have known what happened to her bike. But right now, for all he knew, it could be out back in the utility garage.

God, that reminded him.

Gabriel George Hart bolted upright in bed. It crossed his mind he did so like a corpse come to life on a morgue slab. A hint of things to come? He hoped not.

He hurled his long legs over the side of the mattress and rummaged in the dark for jeans and a flannel shirt, pulled on both and barreled downstairs two steps at a time.

He’d had a year to write a note and here he was in the middle of the night, at damn near the last minute—but hold on. His bare feet landed together on the bottom stair tread. Truth was he had until five o’clock that afternoon—fourteen hours, each of which was apt to feel like a week. He glanced over his shoulder at the stairs behind him leading to the bedroom. Which did he dread more, trying to fall asleep or writing the damn note?

Gabe entered the downstairs hall and followed the dim light of the 40-watt bulb above the kitchen sink. He used a nub of a pencil he found on the counter to rip open a phone bill stamped Final Notice. On a blank side of one of the statement pages he

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scribbled a message, sealed his note in the payment envelope, crossed out the return address and printed in caps "TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN." That was rather impersonal, he thought. But the eraser was hard and only managed to leave a huge, ugly smudge.

Envelope in hand, Gabe scooped up his mud-caked boots from the spread of soiled newspapers on the floor and eased closed the kitchen backdoor. Thank God Destiny hadn't awakened. It was three in the morning and cold, and if the Golden got out now, he'd anoint every damn bush and tree in the backyard.

Gabe's back braced against the wooden porch post, he struggled to tug on his boots, thinking socks might have been an idea, and a damn jacket, but he couldn't deny it; the stars over Piney Valley, that Irish and Leesie had loved so much, were breathtaking. He just might miss them. "But," he stood and sighed, tapping the envelope against his thigh, "it won't be long now." Out of the corner of his eye he caught a meteor streaking across the night sky as though punctuating his comment with a long dash. Irish would have said it was some kind of a sign. But he wasn't Irish.

Leesie, on the other hand, would have giggled the grass overgrowing the steppingstones between the house and the utility garage was "frosted flaked." Now that he could buy. If anything made sense this morning, and made him smile, it was that.

The white converted 15-passenger van with four low tires abandoned in the middle of the utility garage resisted Gabe's best effort to open its front passenger door. Determined, Gabe marched around the van and challenged the Econoline's driver door with extra muscle in his pull. Not a budge. Right, he remembered, there was a trick; lift up on the handle and push. The door yielded, and Gabe was hit with the combined aroma of motor oil, sour grass and sweat-soaked upholstery. It was manna to a hot air balloonist. He brushed dust off the springy bench seat before he stretched across it to place the sealed envelope inside

the glove box.

The van's overhead interior light flickered. That, Gabe knew, *was* a sign.

He popped open the van hood, secured the hood prop and found a repurposed plastic milk carton containing water. He quickly topped off the van's battery, but one mechanical thing led to another, until he'd worked under the hood for three hours.

After a quick inventory to confirm what he had thought was likely the case, that Leesie's bike wasn't there, Gabe emerged from the garage just before 6 a.m., rubbed his lower back and glanced at Fallow Ridge. Sunrise was a good half hour off. He shivered and darted toward the house, eased off his boots, dragged himself upstairs to the bedroom, discarded his flannel shirt and jeans on the hardwood floor, and collapsed backwards onto the mattress.

A year to prepare, and it came down to last-minute servicing of the van? Preceded by having forgotten to leave a note? The *note*. He covered his head with the bedding. Shit. Shit shit shit. He'd left out the most important part of the whole goddamn note, the main reason he needed to write the damn thing—No funeral.

Summit Funeral Home didn't smell as stale as the breath he was trapped with beneath the covers, but it was musty and led one to believe a sufficient amount of fresh air hadn't entered the mortuary since it was built midcentury. And maybe the staff didn't have enough oxygen getting to their brains, because they often got the names of the deceased wrong; his likely would be misspelled with those flimsy individual letters slid into a black signboard wobbling on a stand that would threaten to topple over onto people entering the viewing area. Undoubtedly the same staff would select some godforsaken Bible verse for the paper-thin commemorative leaflets and Photoshop a picture of him with Irish cropped out, maybe their wedding portrait, the shadow of her bridal veil on his chin. Mostly he hated to think about people

spending hard-earned money on standing sprays of flowers for the third Hart funeral in as many years.

From Summit Funeral Home he traveled mentally down Main Street three blocks to Fallow Ridge Fellowship Hall. It would be there townsfolk would aimlessly mill around, gnawing on fried chicken parts and whispering, it was *suicide*, right?

The cavernous room's concrete walls had echoed every word mourners uttered during Irish's memorial. Gabe had sought refuge in a small alcove, feigning interest in the musty paperbacks scattered on a half-empty bookshelf beneath a sign, Leave a Book, Take A Book. But he still heard the hushed comments—Irish was so young, would there never be a cure for cancer, what would *poor* Gabe do without his sweet wife, and only two years after their little Leesie's tragic death. A year later and he still remembered the mildewed-book smell and the way people tentatively palmed his shoulder; something in their touch sent a message that though they extended their sympathy, they were glad it was him who lost their spouse and not them. He had to give it to Irish; she'd chosen great music. Songs like Dylan's "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" playing in the background was genius. Gabe guessed as long as they didn't play a polka at his memorial, he was good. Really, what did he care? He'd be long gone by then.

Still, later this morning he'd unseal the envelope and add a PS to his note.

Gabe was exhausted, but the way his eyelashes batted on the covers was driving him mad. He clamped his eyelids shut with his right thumb and index finger, much like he had the morning he and Irish made arrangements for Leesie's funeral. That morning he'd contemplated pressing his eyes clear through the back of his head. The undertaker wouldn't stop talking.

None of the planning, though, was Mr. Bergen's fault. In fact, his voice cracked when he suggested Gabe and Irish forego a

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traditional gathering in the fellowship hall, given the circumstances of their daughter's death. And would they agree just the immediate family at the brief graveside service for the little girl?

Gabe had done well to manage a nod. Irish, however, had the wherewithal to ask, "Miss Louisa Fern, maybe she could play a song from *The Wizard of Oz*?"

"Why, yes, of course. 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow,'" Mr. Bergen said. "Wonderful choice. She's very familiar with it. Perhaps at the close of the service, as everyone passes..."

"No." Irish interrupted. "'Follow the Yellow Brick Road.' It was Leesie's 'favorite favorite' song." All that summer she'd sing it skipping from one steppingstone to the next toward the utility garage like the outbuilding was Emerald City and Destiny at her heels was Toto.

Rarely was a funeral in Piney Valley deprived of Miss Louisa Fern's poised organ accompaniment. The retired librarian and church organist had also been Leesie's Sunday school teacher and had sat with her on Saturday nights when Irish's parents weren't available. Gabe imagined it had been difficult for the sweet lady to make it through the song given her history with Leesie. But even today all Gabe could remember about his nine-year-old daughter's funeral was entering the parlor and witnessing a hundred people turn their heads in unison toward him, pity written on every face, and seeing over their heads the walls lined with bouquets of multicolored flowers arranged to the ceiling, until the blooms' sweet, pungent fragrance overwhelmed him, and the sea of grievers parted and he saw Leesie's small white casket draped with tiny yellow rose buds and bright red tulips, and he turned on his heel and ran to the men's room to vomit.

The thickly padded double-wedding-ring quilt began to hinder Gabe's breathing. Was asphyxiation the same as

suffocation? Who cares, he thought, as long as it gets the job done later today.

He slid the covers and the top sheet to just under his chin, and winced when the early-morning chill hit his warm face. He thought how quiet the room was without the tired furnace in the basement, two floors below where he lay, clanking and straining to meet its daily obligation to heat the house. He'd seen no need to call the fuel oil guy a couple days ago, to get the tank filled; after today nobody would be living in the house until it had new owners. But now he had second thoughts. Winters had gotten progressively warmer the last few years, but what if Piney Valley had an unexpected cold snap? After all, they'd had an early frost this fall, and if the house didn't sell right away, say by mid-December, there could be problems without heat in the house. The water pipes would likely freeze and burst. He'd better turn off the main valve later today, before he locked the back porch door one last time.

Gabe wasn't afraid to die. In his mind he should have been buried six feet under *last* October. He would have been, too, if not for that damn promise. "Gabe," Irish had requested more times than he could count over the last few months of her life, "just promise." He ran his fingertips along his unshaven cheek and thought about her last breath. It had been a fleeting puff of warmth against his skin while his lips committed to the promise she'd been waiting to hear.

He'd mentally relived the moment of his whisper and her final breath a thousand times over the last year. Half the time he convinced himself Irish had died before he made his promise. In that scenario she'd never heard the promise. The other half he thought he whispered his promise and *then* felt her dying breath on his cheek.

He'd resolved after 365 days that there was no way to know the true sequence of events.

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But the day—*the* day—had arrived to make good on that goddamn promise. Whether or not Irish had heard him agree to her request didn't matter anymore, if it ever did. By five o'clock that afternoon, October 1, 2013, he'd have kept his promise; he'd have gone to the goddamn prison and faced the goddamn son-of-a-bitch who killed their little girl. Then, goddam it, he'd be under no more obligation to Irish. Then he could kill his own goddamn self.

The familiar twinge in his lower spine signaled a sharp pain would follow if he didn't move onto his side. Shit. He made an adjustment, but remained on his back.

"Gabe, honey." The words seemed nearer to his ear than the cotton pillowcase. "Roll onto your side."

TWO: GABE – THE BIG DIPPER

Gabe eased himself upright in bed and surveyed the dark room. Turn on a light? No. No. He didn't think so. It seemed to him the dead would prefer the dark. And no quick, jerky movements. *Really?* He'd actually just had those thoughts? Okay, he'd debate his thoughts and actions later. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept for two consecutive hours, and he might be hallucinating from sleep deprivation, but if she *was* there, was he willing to miss a moment with Irish?

Irish was the only person who could have spoken the words he'd heard. Yes, yes, from the dead. But damn it, every night he and Irish shared a bed those half-dozen words, *Gabe, honey, roll onto your side*, had been her way of helping him avoid back spasms.

He hugged his thighs to his chest and rocked, unsure what to do or what to expect next. He stretched out his neck and chin like he'd be better able to hear that way. He remembered as a kid in foster care reacting similarly those times at night he believed he'd heard the voice of his dead mother. Of course, it was never her. The older he got, fewer were the nights he thought he heard his mother's voice. Then he grew and developed into a "pubescent prick," as one foster parent had described him, and too many nights were spent rocking in bed listening to arguing through the closed door to a room where he was supposed to be asleep. At one house, late one night, he heard, "I don't give a shit if it's goddamn midnight! Get his pimple face the hell outta here!" The bedroom door had flown opened and crashed against the wall. In Gabe's preteen exuberance, he leapt from bed into a softball-sized fist square in his gut. "Think before you goddamn leap, stupid asshole," the man had shouted, his breath heavy with alcohol. The woman glared at Gabe as she lifted the man's arm over her shoulder and cozied up against him, luring him out of the room with a promise she'd make it worth his while. The awful man finally left the room,

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and Gabe decided to heed his words of infinite wisdom. He'd been rewarded with fewer sore ribs and less frequent middle-of-the-night-grab-his-plastic-bag-of-clothes relocations.

During the brief span of time Gabe had been off with his thoughts the east-facing window shade had lightened. Okay, that was good. Come on, come on, he willed under his breath. He knew from experience it would come fast—the sun cresting Fallow Ridge and the thin shade allowing daylight full access to the second-story bedroom.

The Big Dipper—the name Irish had given the ladle-like pattern of pinholes in the shade material—appeared as the bright rays of the October sun backlit the shade. The light through the small pinholes looked to Gabe like little lasers. But wait. He sat straight and still as the four posters surrounding him. Miniscule particles of dust danced on the beams of light like bubbles from an uncorked champagne bottle. His heart ached for Irish—her body had always seemed to move effortlessly as though gravity could barely keep her on the ground.

The shafts of daylight lengthened and moved deeper into the room. He strained to see some physical hint of Irish. And maybe Leesie?

But he was pulled to distraction by his peripheral vision. He looked to his right where he saw every drawer of the walnut dresser open, his underwear and socks spilling out; the maple rocker in the corner jammed against the faded flower-papered wall; the paint-chipped vanity on the adjacent wall strewn with his jeans; a rumpled, red flannel shirt hanging by a cuff off the attached mirror like it had grabbed the nearest thing in midflight; and decayed sunflowers scattered on top of the nightstand.

Every item in the room—every piece of furniture, ragged flannel shirt and sunflower petal—was exactly where he'd left it the night before. In other words, Irish had *not* visited or spoken to him. If she had, she, Queen of Clean, even in death, could never

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have resisted tidying up things, at the very least trashing the shriveled sunflower petals on the nightstand.

Gabe released his legs, and they slid out and onto the mattress with the weightiness of glacier ice calving into a frozen sea.

Gabe looked again at the dried up sunflowers on the nightstand.

For the last year, he'd justified leaving everything in the room a mess by holding onto the possibility that if ghosts did exist, and Irish visited, she'd have straightened the chair, removed his shirt from the dresser mirror and tossed the sunflowers. So now he knew. Ghosts didn't exist. Well, if they did, Irish hadn't seen fit to visit. And he hadn't heard her voice. He only imagined he had because he *wanted* to hear her one more time say, Gabe, honey, roll onto your side.

Exhaustion, that was all. He hadn't slept in days. His ears had simply played tricks on him and made him think he'd heard a ghost. And his eyes as well. Dust, after all, contained a fair amount of dead human skin. Anyone could mistake those fleeting particles for the trace of a lost loved one, right?

Gabe reached for Irish's side of the mattress and held his hand there until the bedding no longer felt cold.

