

OUTLOOK

By
Daniel A. Bell

Daniel A. Bell
breathingunderwater@hotmail.com
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She had lots of red, curly hair. She was tall, but not very. Her face was towards the ground as she reached up to pull her light-red jacket tighter because of the chill breeze coming off the nearby lake, but remembered the folder in her hand. She'd use the other hand, but it was a fist in her pocket. Going through the motions of unclenching her clammy fingers and probably having them slip and slide from her zipper would be a pain, anyway. Forget it. She'd stay cold. She liked the cold. Or maybe she didn't. The cold made it hard to forget.

After fussing with her damn slippery zipper, Amber zipped her jacket to the top and adjusted her scarf. She continued her stride, glancing down at the folder with the letters inside. God, to just throw them away. Just forget about them. But no, Mom wouldn't like that.

* * *

"Hi, Mom."

"Amber! I thought you had class today. No, it's Sunday, isn't it? The kids at Sunday school were so worked up this morning. Want some tea? I just got back from the store..."

The obnoxiously large American flag Laura had on the porch fluttered in Amber's face. Amber shoved it aside and slipped in past her mother.

It's going to be one of those visits.

Amber went straight for the immaculate living room. Straight for the black shoebox.

"I had a feeling what's in that folder."

“I found the rest of them. Okay?” said Amber, not looking up. She didn’t even look at the box when she opened it. She just shoved the rest of them in.

“Sure you want to do that, Amber? It’s only been a couple months...”

Amber made a fist again, crumpling a letter.

“It’s not like I’m burning them. I just can’t look at them anymore... Right now.” Amber shut the box. But before she could return it to the shelf, Laura slipped into a chair at the table and claimed the shoebox.

“Hold on. I wanted to show you something. I was going through them the other night and—“

“Christ, Mom...”

“And I remembered that Chris had sent a picture of his friend. You know, the one you were writing to...” Laura shuffled through the box. She began to pull out a worn, torn piece of notepaper.

“Mom. Please. *Don’t.*”

“Okay. Okay.”

Amber stared down at her mom as she continued to rifle through the shitty, old box. *It’s over. Just tell her. It’s over. She obviously doesn’t want to forget. Her choice.*

* * *

“God Bless the USA.” “Support the Troops.” As Amber neared her small apartment building, she couldn’t help but notice all the ribbon magnets and bumper stickers. Both hands were in her pockets now. Fists.

In the foyer, Amber checked her little mail box. Crap. Crap. Bullshit. An envelope fluttered to the floor. Picking it up, Amber noticed the dried muddy footprints on the floor. *Way to keep the place nice*, she thought of her landlord. Slumlord.

Upstairs. Second floor. One bedroom. Just right for a college senior. Amber slumped down on her purple futon couch. Decided not to take off her jacket just yet. The warmth made it easier to forget.

She flipped through her Art Therapy textbook. Four years ago it seemed so exciting. Not so much now.

Was she hungry? Not really. Tired. Yeah, but not enough for a nap. She really should study.

She switched on the TV.

Not having cable sucked. So did being a “poor” college student. But that wasn’t really true. That was just a cliché. She could afford cable if she really wanted it. Mom would surely put up the cash. But cable was more of the same shit.

Amber wasn’t even watching the tube. She barely heard the woman with the British accent ramble on importantly about interior decorating a Beverly Hills mansion.

Fucking snobs.

Amber glanced over. Oh yeah. The laundry.

* * *

Downstairs. The basement. Stuffy. Filthy. Dark, especially in the back. Amber shoved her clothes into the battered old washing machine. She put the quarters in the slot. It was jammed. Again.

What's the use of paying for something that doesn't work?

Amber slammed the lid down. And the washer started. She pressed her hands to her head, not noticing the eyes watching her.

His arm brushed against the dryer venting tube, just audible enough to make Amber jump out of her skin.

They stared at one another for a moment. Then another moment. He contorted his mouth as if he was going to say something.

Well, is he going to say anything?

Amber backed away a bit. To her, he looked homeless. Raggedy clothes. A dirty beanie. Dirty face. Muddy shoes. But he was young.

“Do you live here?”

He didn't speak.

“What're you doing here?”

Nothing. Just that awkward look like he used to know English, but not in this lifetime. That's when Amber's eyes focused on the floor in the back of the basement. There was a dirty old afghan. Some newspapers. A backpack. For some reason, Amber suddenly got scared. This guy could be a raving lunatic murderer psychopath for all she knew. She put a foot on the stairs.

“You can't stay here.” And she ran for it.

* * *

Back upstairs. She locked the door handle and the deadbolt. Dammit, she had asked for another deadbolt from her jackass landlord months ago. Of course he never put it in. That brought her to another thought: her landlord. He should be able to take care of this so she wouldn't have to deal with the cops. She dialed his "emergency" number.

"Yeah, Haly Realty. It's Sunday, ya know."

"Mr. Haly, this is Amber Clarise. I live at 674 18th street, apartment 2—"

"Yeah, yeah."

"I think there's someone in the basement."

"Okay."

"Uh, I think he's homeless. I dunno, he could be dangerous."

"Call the cops."

"But it's your building."

"I'm not a damn security guard, okay?"

"Fine. But I think he's been punching holes in the walls."

Mr. Haly sighed. "Fine. I'll send over maintenance."

* * *

Knock, knock. Amber checked the peephole. Then groaned. She put on a half smile as she opened the door.

"Hi. Matt."

"Hiya, Amber!"

Not that Matt was a bad guy. He was just a little too much. Not creepy, but awkward. And he couldn't hide his crush if he tried. Amber wondered why he looked so scrubby, even on his day off.

"Sorry you had to come by; I know it's your day—"

"Hey, no problem. I needed to do some work on the water heaters, anyway..."

"Right. So..."

"Right! I, uh, checked downstairs and there wasn't anybody there; you musta scared 'em off. Left some things down there. A blanket..."

"He left his blanket?"

"Yeah. Smelled like shit. I chucked it."

Downstairs again. Matt insisted on accompanying her "just to make sure nothin' happened." As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Amber realized that the last thing she wanted Matt to see was her laundry, which, of course, was a bunch of new underwear.

"Thanks, Matt. I'm okay now."

"You sure? I can stick around for a bit, just to make sure nothin' happens."

It took a few more not-so-subtle hints before Matt finally left her alone.

Amber stopped in her tracks upon opening the washer. Where were her clothes? She checked the dryer. There they were. What the hell? Matt didn't...? No, he wouldn't have had time. Could the homeless guy have dried them? Why would he?

Amber shrugged and kneeled down to begin unloading her laundry. A ten dollar bill dropped into the basket. Puzzled only for a moment, she realized that she had forgotten it in a jeans pocket the other day. Sticking it in her jacket pocket next to her cell phone, she mused that it's always nice to find unexpected money. Amber was now sure the homeless guy didn't do this; he definitely would've taken the cash.

Just as she grasped the basket to stand up, a muddy shoe attached to the foot of the dirty homeless guy landed in front of her. Just as unprepared for this as before, Amber stifled a shriek and stumbled back, looking up at her frightener.

Lips quivering, he took another step closer. He twisted his hands around. He seemed all around unsure of himself, except for his eyes, which never wavered from hers.

In an instant, Amber grew mad. Pissed.

Great job checking the basement, Matt.

Without any words, she dashed upstairs and as soon as she was safely inside her apartment, she whipped out her cell phone. She pressed 9...1... But then she noticed the other thing that she had yanked out of her pocket with the phone: the money.

* * *

Where the hell is it?

Amber knew it had to be in this box somewhere. Mom insisted that she take the pepper spray and put it on her keychain "just in case." But it was too ugly on her keychain. So she threw it in her junk box.

She finally spotted the little red and yellow canister. Just in case.

* * *

A ten dollar bill hit the grungy basement floor. The homeless guy looked up. Amber was standing several feet back. The money between them.

“Here,” she said, “take this.”

He didn’t.

“Now will you please leave?”

He didn’t.

“Well?” She was getting pissed again. The hand in her pocket clenched into a fist around the pepper spray. “What *do* you want?”

He just stared at her. Didn’t even glance at the money. Amber huffed. She snatched up the cash and stormed out, but as she reached the second floor, she remembered her clothes. Dammit! She didn’t want to have to go back down there. But there it was. The laundry basket was just beside her door. She must not have noticed it when she left her apartment.

Why the hell would that guy do this?

She spent the next hour trying not to think about it. So all she did was think about it. How was she going to get him out of the building without going through all the trouble of calling the damn cops?

Her textbook was even less interesting than earlier. TV still sucked. But she was hungry. So she went to the kitchen and started making a sandwich. She stopped. She was thinking about it again.

* * *

“You, uh, you hungry?”

Amber was standing over the homeless man with a sandwich in one hand. The pepper spray was in her other. Out in the open this time. He didn't reach for the sandwich. He didn't say anything.

What's wrong with this guy?

She was so caught up in her head that she almost missed it when he said, softly: “What about you?”

It took her a second to say: “No, I, uh... already ate.” She leaned in a bit closer and he grabbed the sandwich, immediately biting into it as if he hadn't eaten in days.

Man, maybe he hasn't...

As he ravaged the sandwich, Amber began to step back. But she abruptly stopped; her eye caught something familiar. Momentarily losing her apprehension, she knelt down, blurting out, “That's one of my favorite books!” She was pointing to an old, beat up copy of *Alice in Wonderland*, sticking out of his backpack. “My brother used to read that to me in our favorite park when I was little...”

Slowly, softly, as if it was hard for him to speak, he said, “Someone used to read it to me too, by a lake... I think...”

“Sure it wasn't by a rabbit hole?”

“I've been following the white rabbit ever since!” He said, much more urgently. Amber was knocked off her memory cloud and snapped back into reality. She gripped the pepper spray tighter as she stood.

“Look,” she said, “I’d like to help you and all, but maybe you should go find a shelter or something.” As she moved toward the stairs, she glanced back. He was just finishing his sandwich. All he had left was the backpack, the book, and his thin, torn clothes.

* * *

Nighttime. Finally. But sleep was not a speedy visitor. Amber lay there, listening to the blasting heater. It was actually so warm in the bedroom that she shed off a blanket. She suddenly sat up, staring at her loose bedding.

* * *

Swirling and dancing in the bitter air, the steam from the tea cups wafted up towards Amber’s face as she carefully made her way down the basement stairs. She paused, wondering what the hell she was doing. What if this guy was some maniac? Being nice to him wasn’t going to get him out any quicker. But he didn’t seem dangerous. He could have hurt her by now if he really wanted to. Lord knows he’s had more than one opportunity. On the contrary, though, he seemed scared. Alone. Amber strained to understand how someone so young could end up like that. Probably drugs. Well, whatever it was, first thing tomorrow, if he wasn’t gone, she’d have no choice but to call the cops. This guy couldn’t stay here forever.

She saw him. Curled up on some old newspapers. He sat up, startled at hearing her footsteps. Or was he startled from something else? Something he saw in his sleep, perhaps?

“I never thanked you for the sandwich.”

Amber set down the tea cups and thrust out the blanket she had been carrying under an arm. "Here," was all she could manage.

"No. I'm okay."

"Just take it."

He wrapped it around himself like a caterpillar would a cocoon and slightly rocked back and forth. They stared at one another for a long moment. Amber looked away, but not because his staring was creepy and intrusive like Matt's. No, this man's gaze held a much different kind of longing. Amber tried to ask who he was or where he came from, but those questions only reverberated around in her head. For some reason, she was at a sudden loss for words.

"Your book. It's my favorite."

"I know. You told me."

"It's um... I lost my copy..." She hadn't. It was upstairs on the shelf.

"Would you... Would you like me to read some?"

He had read her mind. "Oh," she said, "and I made some tea." She handed him a cup and leaned back against an old chair someone had left down there. The pepper spray poked her side, but she didn't want to pull it out now.

"Where do you want me to start?" He asked.

"Wherever you left off."

He took a sip of his tea, then retrieved the book. As he began to read about Alice swimming around in a body of water made up of her own tears, Amber finally, for the first time in who knows how long, began to relax. Her head

became heavy, so she laid it on the chair. And then her eyelids became heavy, so, after some futile struggling to do the opposite, she closed them.

* * *

It was the silence that woke her. Amber looked up to find that not only had she drifted off, he had stopped reading. She scolded herself for being that stupid. How could she have let herself be that vulnerable in front of him? If he had done anything, she knew she'd have deserved it. And yet, she suddenly felt much better about him.

"Sorry," she said, "I always used to fall asleep when Chris'd read that to me."

"Chris?"

"He's... Was my brother."

"Oh..."

To Amber, he sounded genuinely concerned. He was actually turning out to be a pretty nice guy.

"It's okay to go," he said, abruptly.

"What?"

"You don't want to sleep down here."

"No, I'm fine. I'm enjoying—"

"Please. *It's okay*," he said, in a final sort of way. He handed Amber's blanket back to her.

Amber sat there in disbelief. After being so nice to him, he was going to throw it back in her face?

“Fine.” She grabbed the blanket and strode towards the stairs. She glanced back. He had laid back down, shivering.

* * *

Amber woke up in her cozy bed, not feeling so cozy. She kept trying to tell herself that this was no big deal. Just some random homeless dude probably trying to buy her trust so he can con money for drugs out of her or something. But why didn't she believe that at all? And why was this bothering her so much?

Spreading grape jam on a warm piece of toast, already late for class, Amber made up her mind that she'd just go down there and get some answers. And if he wasn't willing to give them, she'd make him leave. For good.

* * *

“Hey. I have some toast—” Amber stopped at the bottom of the stairs; he wasn't there. His things were, though. She set down the plate of toast and sat down on the creaky, old chair.

She knew she should be feeling glad that he was finally gone. But was she? She noticed the *Alice in Wonderland* book propped up against the empty tea cup from last night. It was in worse shape than she had realized; burnt around the edges with pages falling out. Wait—that wasn't a loose page, it was too glossy. Amber gently slid a charred piece of paper from the book and turned it over.

Her heart stopped. She was staring at a picture of herself. A picture taken on a vacation to Hawaii. In the picture, her freckles were more pronounced because of sun exposure, she was in a blue dress, her hair was pulled back, and

a colorful lei hung around her neck. She was beaming. This was a picture that she had only let one other person see. She had never known what this person looked like himself because he had died in combat with Chris. And his body was never recovered.

She rushed out of the basement.

* * *

Amber waited by Laura's front door while the American flag fluttered against her from the bitter wind. Amber ignored it. The door finally opened and Amber squeezed in past her mother without speaking.

Watching her clamor for the black shoebox in the living room, Laura asked, "Amber, what is it?"

"You're never going to believe this."

Everything from official, typed letters to short notes scribbled on scrap paper were strewn across the dining room table now. Half covered up by a note written to Amber about how the desert wasn't as bad as she warned it would be was a picture of Chris in his formal marine uniform. Amber suddenly gasped in delight as she pulled another letter from the pile. This one was written sloppily with a sharpie. A photo accompanied it.

Laura had just sat down with two steaming cups of tea, but Amber didn't pause to accept hers. She immediately read the postscript to the side of the photo:

“Mom, this is a my good friend, Rowan. Please don’t show Amber this until we get back because Rowan’s afraid she won’t like him anymore if she sees his picture before they meet in person.”

In the photo were Chris and the homeless man in casual clothes. A military truck stood behind them. They were smiling with arms around one another. “He’s alive,” Amber breathed. Where Rowan had been, how he had returned, and how he found Amber—none of this mattered. All that mattered was:

“Mom. He’s *alive*.”

“What?”

“He’s been living my basement.”

“In your basement?”

“Yeah! I don’t think he even knows who he is... He just had that picture I sent him... My God, I gotta go—“

But as soon as she began to stand, her cell phone rang. She answered on instinct; nothing could be more important than this right now:

“Yeah?”

“Heya, Amber?” It was Matt. “This is Matt...from Haly Realty--”

“Matt. What?”

“Uh, uh, Mr. Haly gave me your number,” he spluttered. “I just wanted to let you know that I came by to fix those water heaters today and I saw that homeless dude in the basement.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, and he didn’t wanna leave, so I kicked him out. Told him I’d call the cops if he came back. Fuckin’ freeloaders...”

“You *what?!?*”

“I kicked his ass out---“

Click. Amber ended the call. She slumped back down into her chair, face in her hands. “Oh my God, Mom. He’s gone.”

“Well, go find him,” Laura said, not mincing any words.

“But... He could be anywhere.”

Laura looked Amber square in the eyes and asked with concern, “Why are you so defeated these days?”

“Mom. I’m not ‘defeated.’ I just...don’t know where he could be.”

* * *

On the walk back, the wind from the lake searing into Amber’s eyes, her fists hanging at her sides instead of in the warmth of her pockets, Amber wondered if she should have taken Laura’s offer to help her find Rowan. But why even try? Maybe these past couple days had been a dream. There was no point holding onto hope when everything’s taken away in the end, anyway.

But, as Amber searched her pockets for her keys at her front door, she noticed the side alley of her building from the corner of her eye. *What the hell*, she thought, and glanced around it. And since she was already outside, she might as well check the alleys across the street. Those alleys took her to more back streets and alleys, and soon, the park. The park led her to City Hall, then the underground subway stops notorious for the homeless to find shelter. The

business section. The historic district. The industrial area. Amber walked and walked, until her legs were shaking and her fists were numb. *To hell with it*, she concluded, and went home.

* * *

Amber's keys *clanked* as they hit her coffee table. She didn't mean to toss them down so hard, but just how futile everything seemed made her bitterer than the wind from the lake. The lake. The one place she didn't check. And as she stared down at the *Alice* book on the table next to her keys, which she had brought up from the basement, she remembered something distinct, and at the time odd, that Rowan had said about having the book read to him by 'a lake.'

She knew she would regret it forever if she didn't at least look, though at this point, the idea of hope was as desolate as the desert she had lost so much to.

* * *

It was cold. It was dark. She had searched almost the entire thing. A cynical grin had begun to find its way onto the corners of her lips. But just as she had made up her mind to go back to Laura's to burn the letters so that she could put the whole thing behind her, she spotted a lone silhouette of a person sitting by the water's edge, tossing stones into the black lake.

Amber crept towards him, not daring to let herself get her hopes up, when he noticed her footsteps and stood up.

Rowan.

He was illuminated by a nearby street lamp. His face looked more grim and confused than ever.

“I’m sorry,” he said, softly, “for all the trouble I’ve caused.”

Amber couldn’t understand why she wasn’t smiling. She didn’t know what to feel anymore. Though perhaps it didn’t matter what she showed on the outside. Hope wasn’t completely lost after all. Amber pulled something from her pocket and handed it to Rowan. He unfolded the letter, which had both the photo of Chris in uniform and the photo of Chris and Rowan together with it. Rowan stared at these, then again at Amber.

“You don’t have to chase that white rabbit anymore, Rowan. You’ve been through enough.”

Hearing his name seemed to have an effect. Amber wondered if Rowan would ever come to remember everything. *Maybe, she thought, it’d be better if he didn’t.*

Rowan’s hands fell to his sides. He stared at Amber. And she at him. Time seemed to melt away, until he said, “I had a strange feeling, once I’d found you...”

Amber realized that there were no words for this. But that didn’t matter. She took his hands in hers and squeezed them. They were so cold. She put her arm around his and led him away from the lake. All that mattered right now was to bring him back. Back to warmth. Back to friends. Back to home. Back to life.

THE END