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**L**et's face it—we all can be self-involved at times, though none of us want to believe it of ourselves. I certainly didn't. Then when I was abducted I was forced to reevaluate my behavior. Actually, being abducted forced me to do a lot of unpleasant things, but more on that later.

We were sitting, tied up at the dining room table, if you could call it that. It was actually a cheap card table with a plastic gingham tablecloth draped over it. His photo albums were spread out in front of us, and the smell of sautéed onions and tomatoes permeated the stale cool air.

“You betrayed me,” he yelled, directing his rage equally towards the three of us. “So now we're going to do things my way!” I hate to admit it, but he was reminding me of myself. “You all are going to take turns. When it's not your turn, you will watch. Then you will know how it feels.”

“How what feels?” she asked.

“How it feels to be betrayed.” I answered for him. He turned to me.

“Oh, so you understand. Wonderful. You get to go first.”

Somehow that didn't sound like quite the reward it was meant to be. And this is what I got for following my instincts? Looking back on it now, it's hard to decipher my bad decisions from my good ones. Perhaps I need to tell the entire story in order to achieve true perspective.



First, let me explain one thing; I am a normal person. Actually, I am so normal that I border on boring. My name is Faith Emerson, I am 27 years old, I teach high school English, and I've lived in Minnesota for my entire life. However, I do have one "quirk," as you may call it—I have always felt I'm psychic. Most of my friends and family laugh at me for this, and lately I can't blame them. I didn't predict being abducted after all.

Granted, my psychic abilities have never been incredibly potent, but it used to be I'd always know when something bad was about to happen because my skin would hurt. In turn, when something good was about to happen, my toes would itch.

That said; the best place to begin my story is in Duluth, Minnesota, approximately two years ago. The remarkable chain of unpleasantness—which ultimately led to my abduction, began with what else – a guy. I met Peter at this coffee shop by the shore of Lake Superior where he worked. I grew up just north of Duluth, if you can believe anyone actually lives north of Duluth. After college I got an apartment of my own and a job teaching English at one of the high schools in the area. It was a plum time, and meeting Peter made the plum all the more sweet.

He was kind of aimless, which I loved. I've always been a rule follower, but Peter wasn't even aware of what the rules are. He said that he wanted to be a writer, so he worked in a coffee shop because it gave him time to pursue what he truly cared about. Also, all the people he met while working there gave him inspiration for his novel.

Anyway, when I first laid eyes on Peter it was a Saturday, and I had just bought a new book. I had planned to treat myself to a leisurely hour or two, reading while sipping a mocha. But I couldn't concentrate on anything but him.

I was consumed with his bright blue eyes and dark blond hair, hidden in part by a fedora. I would later learn Peter idolized Frank Sinatra and chose to dress like him. So he draped his long, thin body in old suits he found at the Goodwill, complete with vintage ties and

bright red socks, usually with holes in them.

But I knew none of this on that first day in the coffee shop when I sat there for quite a while, wanting to speak to him but not having the nerve. I did go up to the counter at one point, but I got all flustered when he looked at me with his intense gaze, and asked me what I needed. I wanted to say, "You! I need you!" But I chickened out, and ordered a brownie instead.

I went back for three more Saturdays, always unable to do anything but stare. I couldn't help behaving like I was in junior high, rather than the college graduate, woman of the world I was supposed to be. I had been in relationships before, but never with a guy like Peter. The guys I had been with were as predictable as my life up to that point. They were stable, nice, Wally Cleaver type of guys. Peter was like a cute but eccentric Eddie Haskell.

Finally, on my fourth visit there, Peter recognized me, and grinned. "Back again huh? How's that book you're reading?"

I had just missed the Saturday morning rush. Dishes were piled along the wooden bar, and the baked goods stand was nearly barren. He obviously should have been cleaning or restocking, but he chose instead to talk to me. I looked down at my book, which was Jane Austen's "Persuasion." I had read it many times before, being a huge Austen fan. But somehow I couldn't think of a thing to say about it. "Well," I stammered. "It's good."

Peter smiled. "Jane Austen. Hmm. You must be one of those literary types."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." I replied. "I've just always liked to read."

He tilted his head, and gave me a look that transformed the shape of his long, angular face. "You like to read, huh?"

"Sure." I said.

"Well, I hope I don't seem too forward, but perhaps, if you're not in a hurry, you wouldn't mind reading this." He reached into his backpack from behind the corner, and brought out a thick manuscript with the words: "The Infant Phenomenon, by Peter Belfer."

I looked up at him and my toes started to itch.

"I'm writing a book," he said. "So obviously, I have nothing against you literary types. Do you mind reading it?"

"I'd love to."

"Great," he said. "Go have a seat. I'll bring you out your skim, no-whip mocha as soon as it's ready."

I smiled and walked towards a seat by the picture window, with a view of Lake Superior sparkling in the late morning sunlight. It was early April, and the dark blue waves were hitting the shore with unusual ferocity. But I barely noticed. He remembered what I drink! That was surely a sign. I sat down and began to read.

Now, you would think I would have been all self-conscious reading his book in front of him, but I wasn't. I was instantly so engrossed with what I was reading that I barely even noticed when Peter brought me my mocha. His novel was about how the little incidents from childhood determine who we become as adults, with every other chapter written from an infant's perspective. Then it would switch, and we would hear from the infant as an adult. I know it sounds kind of typical soul-searching coffee shop guy, but it actually wasn't. It was inspired.

I told Peter that. He chuckled and looked down at his shoes. At the time I took the chuckle as being modest. Now when I look back, I wonder if it wasn't superiority.

"I'm glad you like it," he said. "It's obviously not finished though. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Suggestions. Gosh, I don't know. I'm an English teacher, so the only kind of suggestions I'm used to making have to do with grammar."

He tilted his head, and gazed like he was considering asking me a question, and then thought better of it. It was a look I would soon get used to.

"How does it compare to Jane Austen?"

I laughed. "It's nothing like Jane Austen."

"Does that mean it is not as good?"

"Well, I don't know about that. However, she is one of the most brilliant female novelists of all time. What am I saying? She's simply

a brilliant novelist; her gender is irrelevant. So for me to say that you are as good as her would be a huge compliment. But that's beside the point, because it's impossible really, to compare you to her. There is obviously such a difference in style, and of course, in syntax. It's almost like you're speaking in a completely different language, and considering the way the English language has evolved, or devolved, depending on how you look at it, I don't think saying that is a stretch."

I couldn't help babbling. I felt hot all over, and he hadn't even touched me. Yet.

Peter smiled. "Perhaps we could discuss this more, later? My boss is giving me some evil looks, so I should probably get back to work."

"Oh! Right, sure. I understand. I should go too. I actually have a very busy day." Big lie—but I was trying to play it cool.

"Are you busy tonight?" he asked me.

My heart skipped a beat. I had been sure he was trying to get rid of me. Ideally I should not have accepted an invitation out for that night. Perhaps if I had played a little harder to get, our relationship wouldn't have ended in the way it did. But I hadn't had a date in what seemed like forever, and I was in shock, so I jumped at the chance.

"Um, actually, no, I'm not busy."

"You want to get something to eat? I know a great Korean place."

"Sure. That would be fun. I love Korean food."

"Wonderful. Hey, by the way, I'm Peter."

"Nice to meet you Peter. I'm Faith."

"Faith, huh? As in you gotta have it?"

"Something like that." Even though it was kind of dumb, we both smiled.

"Well anyway," he said. "About tonight. How about I meet you there? I would pick you up, but I don't have a car."

"Oh. Well, do you want me to pick you up?"

"If you don't mind?"

"I don't mind."

And that was how it began. A significant beginning, in that I found myself saying "I don't mind" quite often over the course of our

relationship. But I told myself I never did mind all the impositions during our two years together. Having to pay all the time when we went out was no big deal because money isn't important. He was a struggling artist, and I had my steady teacher's salary to rely upon. When Peter would cancel a date at the last minute because he suddenly got the urge to write, I figured I was sacrificing for a higher cause. At the same time, when he would show up unannounced at my door in the middle of the night because he, as he put it, was feeling "romantic," I was eager enough for the affection to not worry about getting up at 5:30 a.m. for work the next morning.

However, the next day when I was exhausted I might feel a tiny bit of resentment. Or, when Peter got kicked out of his apartment and lived with me rent-free for three months, I confess I felt mildly annoyed, especially when he ate all my food and never did any house work. He wouldn't even change the roll of toilet paper. "You use more of it than I do," he would say when I brought the subject up.

Why didn't I break up with him? Sometimes I wonder that myself. But you see, being a high school teacher in Duluth is not an optimum position to be in if you're single. Most of my fellow staff members were female, save for a few married gym and shop teachers. And in the winter it's too cold and dark to want to go out, so I didn't meet many people. I was afraid of ending up bitter and alone, and besides, Peter did have his good points.

There were times when he gave a lot. He wrote me poetry all the time, poems about me (like how beautiful I am, or how much he loved me.) We would go for romantic walks along the beach of Lake Superior, which if you've never seen it, looks just like the ocean. We had long talks about important things. Peter didn't care about sports or other guy things; he was more into his feelings. And, he was hot. Being with him was an adventure I couldn't turn down. But in the end, he could.

"We need to talk," he said to me.

"That sounds ominous." I replied. "Is something wrong?" I had asked mostly out of courtesy, because as soon as he had said it, I realized there was.

"Well, I was wondering, where do you see our relationship

going?”

Panic shot through me like a strong urge to pee. We were sitting in my apartment late on a Sunday afternoon. Peter hadn't come over all weekend, begging off because he wanted to write. However, Sunday morning he called, saying he would be over around one. We went to get something to eat, and over pancakes and coffee he had been chatty about odd things. The whole day felt like a General Mills Coffee commercial gone wrong.

“Um, I don't know. I don't think about it that much because I'm happy with our relationship as it is,” I said with a smile. That seemed to be the safest answer.

“You don't think about us?” he said in an incriminating tone.

“I... well, obviously I think about us some. But I don't feel like...”

He cut me off. “So when you think about us, what do you think? Where do you want us to be, in say, five years?”

“What is this,” I said, “a job interview? I don't have a five-year plan for us Peter, if that's what you're getting at. I enjoy being with you, isn't that enough?”

He paused and tilted his head in that questioning and familiar way, then reached down and tugged at the loose strings surrounding the hole in his red sock. I wanted to know what he was actually thinking but could not read his mind. He said, “For you, no, it's not enough. You deserve better.”

“What do you mean, I deserve better? Better than what?”

“Better than me. Better than what I can give you.”

I flashed back to the one time I rode a roller-coaster, remembering the creaking sound of the wheels as the car strained uphill, and the awful pause at the top right before the terrifying plunge. I felt the same sensation now as I had at the time, desperate to grip onto something and powerless to stop what was coming.

“I don't know about that,” I said. “I'm not so great. Did I ever tell you about the time I stole my sister's Barbie dolls and cut off all their hair? Maybe I don't deserve crap.” I gave him a weak smile and a forced laugh. He wasn't buying it.

“Faith. Come on. I’m serious.”

My breath caught in my throat, my palms were wet, and my voice betrayed me, trembling as I spoke. “What are you saying, Peter? Is this you saying you want to break up?”

“Yeah. I guess it is.”

“Why? And don’t tell me it’s because I’m too good for you. Give me the real reason.”

“That is the real reason.”

“Please!” I cried, half in anger and half in hopelessness.

Peter got up and wandered towards my bookshelf, as if he was genuinely interested in perusing its contents one more time. He kept his back to me as he spoke. “No. Right now you may not mind so much, that I am always broke, that I don’t have a “real” job; that I care more about writing than anything else, including you. But what about five years from now? You’re the sort of person who will want to get married some day and start a family. I can’t promise you that that will ever happen with me.”

“I’m not asking you to promise me that.”

He still wasn’t looking at me, but now his gaze had shifted to out my window with its view of fast-food restaurants a block away. “Not yet. But someday you will.”

“Peter, why don’t you let me worry about me?”

He turned and faced me. “Because this isn’t just about you, Faith. It’s not always all about you. Jesus, sometimes you can be so selfish.”

That word—“selfish”—it set me off like I was a human cannon ball. I jumped from the couch and confronted him in a standing position. “Me, selfish? I’m selfish? I’m selfish when I pay for us to go out all the time with my generous teacher’s salary. Or when I let you live here rent free, while you eat all of my food, which you never even offered to pay for. I’m selfish when I drive you around town so that you don’t have to take the bus to do your errands. I’m selfish when I give up time with my friends because you would rather have us hang out with your pretentious writing group friends. Or how about when...”



He cut me off again. "You're right. I am the selfish one. You certainly do deserve better, and you obviously feel that way too. So we should break up."

Then I knew. In a sick moment of clarity I realized there was just no room for doubt. It took me a moment, but finally I said, "You set me up. You made that comment because you knew how I would respond."

"Faith, let's not do this. I don't want this to get ugly. After all we've shared, we should try and end this on a good note. That way, perhaps we can still be friends."

"Why?" I said, ignoring the 'friends' things. I mean, come on! "I don't get it."

"I told you," replied Peter. "We want different things."

"Peter, if you're going to do this, at least be honest. Tell me the real reason. Is it me? Was it something I did, or didn't do? What?"

"It's nothing like that. You've been great."

"Did you meet someone else?"

He looked down, away from me. My skin was burning and my heart was pounding. But I am proud to say I remained calm.

"Who?" I said in a voice from deep within me. I sounded more like Darth Vader than myself, and it scared us both. Peter looked up, startled.

"What does it matter?"

"Do I know her?" I asked.

Peter looked me directly in the eye, and simply said, "No." And I believed him.

"Do you love her?"

To that he replied, "Yes. I'm sorry, Faith." I didn't believe him on that one, at least not the part about his being sorry. But there was nothing left to say. Okay, there was nothing interesting left to say. Not that I didn't try. My dignity soon escaped me, and I kept Peter there for over an hour, begging him to stay, then screaming at him to go. It was not pretty. But in the end he left, and I was devastated.

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Afterwards I realized I had more experience with heartbreak than I thought. For instance, I wasn't making up that story about cutting the hair off of my sister Margaret's Barbie dolls. They had been brand new, birthday presents, barely even played with. I was curious what they would look like with short hair, and jealous she had recently been the recipient of all the attention. So I stole them from her closet, and gave them both a horrible butch haircut.

Margaret cried and cried, devastated I could have done such a thing. The only thing I regretted was my parents' decree that my allowance for the next three months would go towards buying her new dolls. Looking back, I am surprised at my ability to be so careless and cruel. But at the time, I was mostly surprised with my power to make another person cry. Now I wonder, what separates me from a cheating boyfriend, or even from an abusive stalker? We all make mistakes, and I'm certainly no exception. Perhaps in the end it all comes down to our comfort level with power.

I suppose that's my problem. The only power I've ever been comfortable with is one nobody even believes I have.