

THE SURROGATE

Written by

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INT. ROOM

JANET

Everyone has this way of looking at their past, as if it's someone else's. You're looking at your experiences as if it didn't happen to you. It doesn't feel like your life. How can it be your life? You grow up into such a different person, how can that be you? Memories become two dimensional, images with no substance, no heft. It's weightless. It's like finding old photographs floating out in the middle of the sea. And these images make no sense out here. But you know: something awful happened for them to be out here. Drifting.

MUSIC

Pause.

JANET (cont'd)

My first time in the Lashley was with this older man. He'd lost his wife and son in a boating accident. They weren't wearing their PFDs but he survived. He didn't have any siblings. No relatives. His in-laws were never close to him and, well, blamed him for the loss of their only daughter and grandchild. He tried it on his own for about two weeks before calling a therapist. That led to anti-depressants. And when that failed, I was called in.

END MUSIC

JANET (cont'd)

There's two beds. He got into one and I got into the other. There's no exchange of names. It's our policy. He just nodded at me. It's better that way. And then, the technicians did their thing. I remember so many lights that first time. It took me a while to get used to it. Maybe... maybe my seventh time? It didn't scare me so much. But, yeah, that was the first time I took it on.

(MORE)

JANET (cont'd)

That's what we call it. "Taking it on." You know. Their pain. And everything that comes with it. Which, you know, would drive most people insane. Except for people like me. I know it's a rare thing...what I have. It still hurts, emotionally, but...I never really had a major problem with it. (pause) Except that last time. When the grief...turned into memory. And those memories, came alive. And the dead...the dead came back. For me.

TRANSITION MUSIC

INT. STUDIO

MICHAEL

From QRX you're listening to The Big Loop. I'm Michael Kim. Today's episode: "The Surrogate." We begin with Part One.

MUSIC FADE OUT

INT. ROOM

JANET

I first knew I had this capacity when I was four. I remember my parents had been yelling. And my dad left the house for a few hours. And I went to look for my mother and found her in her bedroom, sitting on the edge of the bed. She was picking at the edge of her shirt hem. And I was only four, but to me, she looked like a little girl. Like me. And I put my hand on her back, and I could feel all these things, these emotions that I knew instantly weren't mine. But hers. And everything in the room turned this...pale blue. Well, shades of it. It's not literally color, but it's color to me. It's hard to explain, but how else do you describe this? Well, as I got older I realized it's a thing I have. And not just me.

(MORE)

JANET (cont'd)

There's a bunch of us spread all over the world. (thinking) Well, that might be an overstatement. Last I looked, there were seventy-three registered grief surrogates in western Canada. And, you know, the job title says it all. We're surrogates. For your grief. You've probably seen our ads. I'm in that commercial, in the back. "Why carry your burden alone? Let us carry it for you." (jokingly) That's me. Carrier of your burdens. Like Jesus. Or, you know. Every woman you know.

TRANSITION MUSIC.

INT. ROOM

JANET

I'm good at handling emotions. That's why I'm good at my job. I'm what you call Tier One. They give me the big ones to take on. The real, devastating grief. The kind that borders on suicidal. Usually it's a family member who survives a tragedy that they caused. Like that guy in the boating accident I told you about.

INT. ROOM

JANET

My dad died when I was seven. My mother remarried, and then he left her for another woman. I think that's why my mother and I were so close. You know? It's like, no matter what, we'll always have each other. I think that's also why I'm good at my job. There's something about mothers and daughters. I've found that a woman's happiness is so closely tied to that of her mother's. So if you grow up with a sad mother, chances are you're going to find it a challenge to be happy. It's a generalization, but in my experience, I've found it to be true. My mother was a sad woman.

(MORE)

JANET (cont'd)

And like most daughters, I bared some of the burden of trying to make her happy. So I grew up attuned to my mother's emotional state. And even at a young age, I knew all this while experiencing it. So when she died, even though I was nineteen and away in college already, I was still her little girl in my mind. She was...my mother. And, I realize as I'm telling this that I come across as detached. But that's what made me such a high value vessel.

INT. ROOM

JANET

So, the first generation of Lashleys were a bust. It was nothing like the Lashley V.19 we use today. Back then, they couldn't just download your grief. Because it was so closely tied to memory. So it would wipe your memory too. And it left people so detached from their experiences. From their own lives. They walked around like zombies. I've read the reports. They smile, and laugh, but there's nothing going on emotionally behind all that. So many of them ended up taking their own lives because it was so empty. There was that one lady out of Toronto who saw herself on TV in a documentary. And she's watching it and had no memory of having accidentally kept her car running in her garage and killing her husband and daughter. She just jumped off her condo balcony right there. It's awful. They tested all these other methods after that. They even tried uploading artificial memories to the clients so that they wouldn't feel this gaping vacuum inside them, this huge nothingness of memory. And then there were the surrogates. It drove them insane too, carrying around all these awful memories from strangers. They weren't memories the way you and I remember things. They came in their dreams. In their nightmares. And in the worst cases, in waking dreams.

(MORE)

JANET (cont'd)

I read about one surrogate who took on the grief of a woman who accidentally drove over a child on a bicycle while backing out of her driveway. Complete accident, but...it devastated her. So she came to us, and this one surrogate. I guess the grief so so strong that it overwhelmed her. She started seeing illusions. I read she woke up once to a child by the side of her bed with her head cracked open. And it's not like you can just get rid of a client's grief and memories. Because once it's downloaded onto one person, it's degraded to the point where the only person who can take on that surrogate's downloaded grief...is the original client. And what client wants that grief back? So they had to fix that. And they did. By the time the Lashley V.10 came around, they started realizing they had to find a way to separate grief from memory. And, sure, there have been some hiccups, but the Lashley V.19 was as smooth a piece of technology you could get in the grief industry. So, because of its recent safety records, business had been booming, with more clients willing to download their grief onto strangers. And with that, of course, all these people coming out of the woodwork to get jobs. But...you can't just be a grief surrogate. Very few people can deal with their own personal traumas, let alone anyone else's. So, every time someone walks through that door to see me, I try to remember, I'm their last resort. Their last grasp at trying to live a normal life without the pain of their grief, their trauma, holding them down. Because what's the point of living if you can't live it with purpose, or joy?

TRANSITION MUSIC

INT. ROOM

JANET

She looked to be in her mid to late forties. About my age. Maybe slightly older. She got into her side of the Lashley, I got into mine. Lights, upload, download. Transference. Done. There was nothing unusual about it. She left, and I went to decompress like I always do. Everyone's grief is so different but the same. It's like trying to explain colour. What is colour to someone who's never seen it? Well, you know you're looking at colour, but they're all so different even though they're the same thing. And most Tier One grief surrogates like me don't experience that colouring until about twenty-four hours after taking it on. So...I was surprised when hers came down that night just a few hours later.

TRANSITION MUSIC

INT. ROOM

JANET

I was driving home. It's Vancouver so of course, it's raining. And, of course, at this one busy intersection, there was a homeless woman asking for change. So I rolled down my window when I got next to her. And I held out the coins. And, she just stood there. Her hair was long, black. And completely drenched because she didn't have a hat or umbrella. And I'm calling to her, to take the money. And she just stood there. And then, she starts to walk off the median and towards my window. And...she comes right up to the car, and starts putting her head into my window. Her hair was over my chest and I'm yelling at her to back off. And then, she turns her head my way. And that's when I see it. She doesn't have any eyes. None.

Pause.

JANET (cont'd)

So, I hit the accelerator and gunned it through a red light. Cars were honking, and...I'm lucky no one got hurt. I looked in my rear view mirror. And she was gone.

TRANSITION MUSIC

INT. ROOM

JANET

I was at home. I live alone. It's hard to have a relationship when my career involves taking on other people's trauma. Because...I'm never in a place to listen to other people. I don't want to hear how badly your day at work went, or how awful your commute was. Because I'm in a place where I'm carrying around the grief of someone who's just lost a whole family, or is responsible for overturning a boat and drowning some children. People pay a lot of money to use me as a vessel for their grief, and I have to carry it around for a few months until it dissipates. And I'm good at having it leave my body through just...rigorous training. Running. Swimming. Routine. So I'm pretty structured. I sit on the same side of the dining table every night so I can face the TV. I have a cup of green tea. I don't like the taste of alcohol so I don't drink wine or anything with my dinner. Again, structured. Predictable. And I was waiting for the rice to cook, and I'm watching the news, and the whole room started fading to black. As if someone were dimming the lights, but only at the edges of my vision. And the television screen, it started to turn red. And then...I heard something. It wasn't the TV. I heard...crying. A baby crying. And then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something moving on the ground. It was...what looked like blood. But I wasn't sure. It...it was so much blood.

(MORE)

JANET (cont'd)

Like, a stream of it, moving under the table. I turned towards it and stood up, and it disappeared. Like it was never there. Of course, it was never there, but...I saw it. I heard it.

INT. ROOM

JANET

That night I had a dream. A nightmare. I never have nightmares. My apartment was on fire. I was in my bed, on my back, surrounded by this wall of flame. And I could hear someone crying. This time, a woman. I think. Or a girl. It was...hard to tell. So I turned to look towards the sound, and through the flame, next to my bed, was a child. A little girl. And she was smiling. But her smile stretched from ear to ear, and her mouth hung open like it was going to fall off. And out of her mouth, these...these sounds. Like, echoes. Of people. Of lots of people screaming. As if they were trapped in her body and she was smiling through the flame, because she wanted me to hear them. And then I woke up.

INT. ROOM

JANET

I took it to my manager the next day. She ran the full diagnostics on me and said everything looked fine. But that was HR talk. She asked me what colour the grief was, and for the first time in my career, I didn't know. She looked concerned, but not overly so. Which bothered me. To be honest, the company had grown so big the last year that little mistakes were piling up. And when it comes to my job, a few small oversights in the tech department could potentially mean my life. So I insisted on a follow-up. And because I was a Tier One, she gave it to me.

INT. ROOM

JANET

On my way home I stopped by the mall to get a new coat. I also liked the food court there. There were always a lot of people. I liked that. When you see a lot of people eating by themselves, it reminds me that I'm not the only one. This city. It's so beautiful. Even when drenched in rain. But there's something about it that's so...isolating. So... impenetrable. New condos went up every few months as if trying to convince ourselves that things were changing for the better. With so much glass everywhere, you could see into each other's lives, but only on the surface. You couldn't ever really reach each other. So I ate there. Then went looking for a coat. I wanted something a bit more water resistant. I was at the sale rack, and it was packed with coats. And as I'm sliding the hangers over one by one, something touched my hand. I pulled back, and looked at the rack. And under the coats, I could see a pair of legs. Someone was standing... in the rack. That person had touched my hand. So, I pulled back the hangers quickly, and no one was there. There was nothing. Just the other side of the rack. But I know what I felt. I'm highly in tune with my environment. You have to be in my profession, to keep other people's emotions separate from yours.

INT. ROOM

JANET

When I got home I left a message for my manager asking for a system review. It's one thing for the grief to overload your system, but it's another for it to become tactile. I've heard of these cases before, and it's usually a sign you're being overworked.

(MORE)

JANET (cont'd)

I had taken on four clients back to back and was starting to think I might need a break.

INT. ROOM

JANET

We have a pool in our building. Rarely used. I find it relaxing floating in it. I think it has to do with that sense of returning to your mother's womb. The safest you've ever felt in your life, even though you don't remember it. And then I put on my goggles and started doing laps. I focused on my breathing, in and out. And...I was in the middle of my sixth lap, and I looked down, and at the bottom of the pool, was a boy. He was sunk to the bottom. On his back. So, I immediately looked around to see if anyone could help. No one was there. So I took a deep breath and dove down to him. His eyes were closed. He looked dead. So I reached out to grab his arm, and...he grabbed me. On the wrist. And his eyes suddenly shot open. And he smiled. This...open mouthed smile. And no bubbles came out. And he started pulling me down towards him. And I'm desperately trying to swim away but I couldn't. And so I curled up my legs and forced them into his chest and he let go. And I swam to the surface. And I raced to the edge of the pool. And...and there was no one there. There was nothing in the pool except me. And water.

INT. ROOM

JANET

I went to the security desk and asked them to review the tape. It showed me going under the water, and I was gone for about thirty seconds. And you can tell I'm in a panic. But there's nothing. No one. Just me.

INT. ROOM

JANET

I went for my system review the next morning. The tech hooked me up to the Lashley again to review the last download. He began a scan sequence of the client's upload to look for any anomalies. This part usually takes the system about twenty minutes so he excused himself to use the restroom. Which is technically against protocol, but again, little mistakes adding up. But I noticed the cables were long. So, when he left the room, I quickly stood up and walked to the screen, careful not to pull the cables off my straps. The data didn't make any sense to me because I didn't know what I was looking at. But I did notice a few things. One, her name. Tammy Leickner. Age, forty-three. Lived on Maitland Drive over in Burnaby. I searched the screen for anything else I could interpret. And finally, I saw it. Her history. She's a chartered accountant. Before that, she was an actuary for a local firm in Vancouver. Prior to that, a law clerk. And then, I saw it. Way at the bottom on the screen in tiny print: UCT-1. It's a code. I know that code. Because it's the code I use for my job. Tammy Leickner...was a grief surrogate. Like me.

INT. STUDIO

MICHAEL

When we return, the conclusion of "The Surrogate," after these messages from our sponsors.

[MIDROLL ADS]

INT. ROOM

JANET

I waited in my car in front of her house the next day. She got home around five thirty.

(MORE)

JANET (cont'd)

I rang the doorbell two hours earlier and no one was home. It was a fairly modest house, but too big for one person. And it was November so it was already dark and overcast. But no house lights were on. So, given that she uploaded her grief, she must have lost her family. It was a family neighbourhood. Not the kind a single woman moves to. I walked up and rang the doorbell. She opened the door and looked surprised. I asked if she was Tammy Leickner, and she responded by asking how I knew who she was. I asked if I could come in to explain. And she stood there thinking about it for what seemed like minutes. And then she finally let me in.

INT. ROOM

JANET

We sat in her living room. She didn't offer me anything. It was obvious she didn't want me there, but I also got the feeling that a part of her couldn't help wanting to see how this played out. So I asked her, why was a former grief surrogate coming to upload her grief. Because it's not unheard of for one of us to be overwhelmed by a client's grief. Sometimes, we break down. I haven't, but my colleagues have. And...it's horrible. Your own pain is bad enough, but having someone else's grief take over your mind is like having a person's blood injected into you and it's not the right match. So I asked her, what happened.

INT. ROOM

JANET

She said she was a grief surrogate. But this was when they were using the Lashley V.9. That was seven years ago, before they learned how to separate grief from memory. So she had a young client. This woman.

(MORE)

JANET (cont'd)

She'd been driving home drunk and drove into oncoming traffic. She killed a family of four. Husband, wife, two children. But she survived. She was trapped behind the wheel and watched as the two children screamed for help in a burning car. She watched them die.

INT. ROOM

JANET

Yes, it was horrible, but that's what we do. That's the job of the grief surrogate. I've heard worse. But, she pointed out that I'm only feeling the grief of the client. It's different with their memories, because it infiltrated yours. It became mixed up with your own memories, and ended up in your dreams. In your nightmares. When the newer Lashley models that separated grief and memory came out a few months later, and she couldn't fully upload her client's grief. Well, she could, but she retained the client's memories of that car crash. She was stuck with those memories. It was unfortunate that she downloaded all those experiences just before the new Lashleys were released, but that's what she signed up for. And, to be complete honest, I found myself judging her. Because it's hard to feel sympathy for someone who knowingly walks into a job like this for the money. And she sensed all that because, you know, she's a grief surrogate too. She's very sensitive to emotional nuances and registers. And...she called me on it. She said, "You're judging me." And, I told her her, "Yes. I am. I'm sorry." And I explained to her why that was. And that's when she leaned back, and just sat there with her hand over her mouth, as if I'd offended her, which I'm sure I had. And she said, "You don't know, do you? About the sign up?" And, I didn't.

JANET (cont'd)

She thought about it for a while. And I just sat there waiting for her to decide if she was going to tell me or not. And finally, she told me. She said a technician told her that the only way to fully extricate the memories was to split it with the client. She had to find the client and get her to agree to getting those memories back. And, of course, that's not going to happen. Who's going to pay all that money to erase an awful experience from their life only to get it back a few years later? But then, she said, she found a way. She said those were the days when clients and surrogates weren't anonymous. They had meetings. They even talked over coffee before going into the Lashleys to kind of get to know each other. Which sounds ridiculous, and you can see why they changed that policy. But that was back then. So she said she knew the identity of her client. But there was no way she was going to approach her to ask if she can take her memories back. It'd be a waste of time and illegal. Surrogates are not allowed to contact their clients after tranference.

JANET (cont'd)

But, one day, she was watching TV, and saw a commercial. It was one of ours. The one where they say "Why carry your burden alone? Let us carry it for you." Well, she said she saw her client in the commercial. And, that's not strange. There's not a lot of us doing this line of work. And then she stared at me. And, it made me uncomfortable, the way she was looking at me, as if waiting for something. And then she said, "It was you."

JANET (cont'd)

I told her she was mistaken. I was never involved in a car accident. I didn't drink and drive because I don't even drink alcohol. She said, "You don't now."

MUSIC

JANET (cont'd)

And then she said..."Your name is Janet Grunsten. Almost twelve years ago, you were charged with vehicular manslaughter for the deaths of Hanif and Aliya Jiwani, their son Bobby, and their daughter Samantha."

Pause

JANET (cont'd)

She told me...I was sentenced to a fifteen years. But my sentence was reduced to three years in exchange for volunteering to have my memories of the event erased in the testing of what would become the Lashley V.10.

Pause

JANET (cont'd)

It apparently worked so well on me, because of my natural disposition to empathy, that they offered to reduce my sentence even more to have more of my memories wiped, to become a full-time vessel. To be their on-staff surrogate. They said...I was so eager to forget everything that I became a perfect vessel for others.

JANET (cont'd)

And she's telling me all this, and I'm thinking, it's impossible. I never went to jail. I didn't kill anybody. I went to college. I worked after that. And then Tammy said, "Try to actually remember specifics of any of your memories. Words spoken at parties. The smell of barbecue at work picnics. Moments of true heartbreak or sadness not related to work. And...I couldn't. I couldn't remember the specifics of anything. And she said, they implanted vague memories in all of us at the time. We all had similar senses of memory, vague scenes. But they weren't ours.

Pause

JANET (cont'd)

I wanted to ask her more but she looked incredibly uncomfortable. She told me she wasn't allowed to tell me any of this. But I asked her if there was anything else. And...she just shook her head no. And she insisted I leave and not come back.

MUSIC

JANET (cont'd)

I went home that night, confused and angry. I wasn't sure what was mine and what wasn't. Why was I feeling anything at all? What was the point of feeling anything at all? It's like bingeing a TV show and going through all these emotions and at the end of it, you're not sure what life you were living. You lived someone else's experiences, so why are you even here? What is it adding to my life right now? A life I'm barely even living for myself? I had to find my past. My real past.

JANET (cont'd)

I went to my storage locker and dug out my old boxes. It's in this really isolated part of our basement by the garage. And every unit has their own storage separated by a cage. Mine was filled with boxes. Dozens of them. I figured by now I must have hid or disguised these boxes on myself, knowing what was going to happen to my memories. Maybe there was something hidden somewhere in here. They wouldn't erase my whole past. It'd be too suspicious if I ever went looking. And I think I was in there for about three hours when I hear something in the locker next to mine. Because they're all cages, you can see into each other's storage unit. And that's when I notice there's someone there. Sitting in an old desk chair. Her back is to me. So I say hi. And she says nothing. So I say hi again but now I know there's something wrong.

(MORE)

JANET (cont'd)

And then, that's when I see her hair at the back of her head. It starts to move. To part down the middle. And that's when I see it. A mouth. And a pair of eyes. On the back of her head. And I think I dropped the photo album and she slowly stands up. And as she stands, her head keeps going higher, and higher. And it's almost touching the ceiling. And her hands are still near the floor. It was... grotesque. And...and she slowly starts walking out of that storage locker. And I'm seeing all this through the cage links. And that's when she slowly turns...and walks towards my locker. And as she's walking, her hand falls off. Then... another hand. And her hair starts to fall in these large clumps. One after another, falling off her head. And she reaches the entrance to my locker...and now her head is bare. And that's when I see it. Her head... is full of eyes. And she's looking at me. And...the colours...everything's changing all these colours all around me. And that's when...that's when I passed out.

JANET (cont'd)

When I woke up, I was still in the locker. But no one was there. And all these photographs had fallen out of one of the albums I was holding. And I went to pick them up and noticed, I don't remember seeing any of these. They were photos of me. And...my mother. But...we were older. She was older. They looked recent. But...my mother died when I was nineteen. I wasn't nineteen in these photos. I looked into my thirties. And that's...that's when it came back. That's when it all came back. What Tammy Leickner didn't tell me. What she couldn't tell me. I wasn't alone in the car that night. I was driving my mother.

JANET (cont'd)

I...I...it came back. It was coming back.

(MORE)

JANET (cont'd)

Picking her up in her care centre. I think...I think she had dementia. And I'd been drinking because it hurt. It hurt...so much. And I was taking her to dinner. And then we were arguing over...I think she forgot who I was? And...and that's when it happened. And then...and then...she was gone. My mother. My...momma...momma...

JANET (cont'd)

How do you come back from that? To lose your mother? Twice? Once, to her memories. Her sense of herself. Of you. And then to death?

JANET (cont'd)

You can't. You can't. I can't.

INT. ROOM

JANET

I searched the city archives and found her plot. It was in Oceanview Cemetary. I don't remember any of it. The funeral. The burial. None of it. and I stood at her grave. I stood there from noon until it got dark. And I started to talk to her. She couldn't hear me. I knew that. How can she? But I talked to her anyways. To tell her I missed her. I loved her. And that I'm sorry. I was sorry. There's now way to forgive that. Why am I still alive? How am I supposed to live with this? And I stood there waiting for her, for something, for someone, to show up. I didn't care how horrible it would be. Any vision was better than nothing. But... nothing came. Nothing. All it takes, is one awful decision. And...that's it. We end up...here.

INT. ROOM

JANET

And...that's why you're here. To record all this. And if you ever find me losing my way again, please, play this to me.

(MORE)

JANET (cont'd)
 To remind me why I'm here. Why I'm on
 this Lashley again. Just so I can
 keep moving forward.

Sound of Lashley operating. Erasing.

Done.

INT. STUDIO

[outro] MICHAEL