

Body and Soul

by

Carter Nipper



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The Most Grandiloquent Miss Snark
and many, many more Angels Unawares too numerous to mention who
have been there for me when I needed them.

Daryl Simmons almost fell on his face when he stumbled out of Pat's Place on Route 27. He leaned against his car and dug for his keys. "Happy Birthday to me," he shouted into the night. His twenty-ninth birthday was almost over. Just a quick drive home and crash into bed. Another year older, but unfortunately not a whole lot wiser.

Luckily, he swerved off the road to his right, instead of into the oncoming traffic. Luckily, he only killed himself. Daryl was actually alive when he reached the Emergency Room, but only just. His birthday turned out to be his lucky day after all. Daryl Simmons was just what Doctor Grant was looking for,

Cathy shifted in the leather easy chair. She couldn't get comfortable. She was pretty sure she would never be really comfortable again. Not after tonight. The Waiting Room door swung open, and she stifled a scream. Dr. Grant walked in, and Cathy jumped to her feet. Blood rushed to her head, and her guts twisted.

"Please sit, Mrs. Grove." The doctor's voice was calm and pitched low.

Good training, Cathy thought as she sat. *Or maybe lots of practice?*

"Cathy. May I call you Cathy?"

"You can call me anything, Doctor, as long as you're not calling me a widow." Even though she forced it out, her chuckle threatened to run away screaming into hysteria.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Cathy. Your husband is still alive. The bad news is that he is being kept alive by a respirator. You indicated that he, Earl, is an organ donor, is that right?"

Her earlier flush plunged into icy numbness. "That's right." She could barely hear her own voice. She nodded to be sure the doctor would know she agreed. Her mind froze to a single thought: *He can't die! Earl cannot die! I won't allow it! I just won't allow it!*

The Doctor Grant's voice shocked tears into her eyes. "Cathy, I want to talk to you about a very serious matter. You -- and Earl -- have a chance to do something unique in the world's history to this point. You have a chance to pioneer a procedure that could save hundreds, maybe thousands of lives in the future." He paused, watching her.

"What are you talking about, Doctor? What can we do that's so important?"

"I'm talking about a new type of organ transplant. Something that's only been a dream until now. Only recently have the necessary anti-rejection drugs and sub-microsurgery techniques been developed that might make this possible. I have to tell you up front that this procedure has never been tried before. It's controversial. A lot of people think we doctors should not be going so far. If you agree to this, you may wind up in a really hot seat."

Cathy's grief grew a halo of wonder as the doctor explained further. Maybe Earl's death could bring new life to someone else. That was something, anyway.

When Daryl finally woke, he remembered being asleep for a very long time. That thought troubled him. How could he remember being asleep? His memories were full of grey shadows and sounds he almost heard. He remembered a very long time of nothing to remember.

Figuring he would understand in time, or maybe never, he rolled his eyes. He saw lots of white and silver, sprinkled with shapes and colors. The more he looked, the more the jumble resolved into known things. Several IV bags hung on poles beside his bed. Their metering devices flashed lights and numbers that meant nothing to him. A large clock told him the time was 3:42. AM? PM? Did it matter?

Daryl tried to sit, but could not. Something was holding him down. Rolling his eyes down as far as he could, he saw wide leather bands across his body.

"What the fuck?" His attempt at speech sounded a lot like a duck quacking.

He heard a door swoosh open nearby, and a breeze ruffled his hair. A face entered his field of vision. Blonde hair, cut short, blue eyes, round cheeks. the face smiled.

"Welcome back, Daryl. We were starting to worry that you wouldn't wake up."

Daryl liked her voice. Alto with a touch of hoarseness in it. He had always liked whiskey-voiced women.

He tried to smile, but his face felt wrong -- like it was on crooked. He tried to say "hi", but only quacked again.

Her smile broadened. "Just keep trying, Daryl. You'll get the hang of it. There are a lot of things you have to re-learn how to do. Just keep at it. My name is Nancy. I'm the night-shift nurse."

AM, then. He raised his eyebrows and gabbled, trying to form even a single coherent word.

Nurse Nancy laid a cool hand on his forehead. "Don't strain yourself. Doctor Grant will be along shortly. I paged him before I came in. He can explain some things, and then we'll start on your rehabilitation plan."

Rehabilitation? What the Hell had happened? He remember celebrating his birthday at that bar, what was it? Oh yeah, Pat's Place. Things got pretty fuzzy after a couple of hours, and then faded into black and gray. Oh, well. Maybe this doctor would explain. In the meantime...he rolled his head to the side. Nice tits. Nurse Nancy giggled, jiggled slightly, and moved away to fuss with the various machines. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all.

"How do you do it, Cathy? How do you stand it, you know, knowing?"

Cathy looked up from the arrangement she had been fooling with. Kristi's face was red, but she met Cathy's eyes. Cathy shrugged.

"You just have to adapt, you know? It was hard at first. Knowing Earl's body was still alive, trying to reconcile that with him being dead. It still kind of gives me the creeps, you know, like his ghost is watching me, but it's something I just have to live

with. Even after almost a year, I have days...But it gets easier with time." She shrugged again and turned her attention back to the flowers.

"Do you, uh, do you ever want to, you know, see him?" This time, Kristi looked away.

"Why so curious? Are you thinking about asking him out?"

"Look. I'm sorry I brought it up. I'm sorry." Kristi's hands were shaking. She twisted them together.

"No, it's alright. Really." Cathy laughed, trying to ease the tension. "I'm OK with it. I know people are curious, and I respect you for having the courage to ask. I know a lot of people think it's horrible, I'm horrible for letting it happen." She shrugged once more. "They're entitled to their opinions. I made my decision, and I don't regret it. As far as seeing him, well, I don't know. I've thought about it a lot. Maybe one day, you know? Not right now." Cathy reached over and touched her friend's hand. "It really is OK, Kristi. We can talk about it."

Kristi burst into tears and collapsed onto Cathy's shoulder, knocking over the flower arrangement. Cathy held her and murmured soft words of comfort. She even let a couple of her own tears out. But only a couple.

"Mister Simmons!" Nurse Nancy wriggled and slapped at his hand, but could not dislodge it. Daryl grinned. She could not move away, or he would fall. He squeezed her butt lightly. Nice and firm. She wiggled again. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry, Nurse. I don't quite have control over my body, yet."

"You have better control than that. Let go of me!"

He gave her another squeeze and moved his hand back up to her waist. They continued their slow walk around the room. He had only been half kidding. His body didn't feel right. It was too big. His hands and feet tended to flop when he moved them. The doctors and nurses continued to reassure him that he would regain control, but he was bored with the slow progress. He wanted action. He glanced over at his assistant. He wanted a nurse. Badly. They continued their slow shuffle around and around.

I wonder if she's a natural blonde, Daryl wondered. He grinned. There was one part of his body he did not mind being larger.

"It's a really bad idea, Cathy. Don't do it."

Cathy picked at her salad. She spoke without looking up. "I know. I know it's a bad idea, but I still can't decide. I mean, it's Earl. I mean, I know it's not Earl, but still...it's Earl."

"Look at me, Cathy. Look at me."

She lifted her head. It weighed a ton. Nancy was leaning over the table, her blue eyes boring into Cathy's brown ones. "It's not Earl." Cathy shook her head. Nancy raised her voice a little. "It's not Earl! Earl is gone, Cathy! Earl is dead."

Cathy shook her head again. *No*, she thought. *No, he's not dead*. And there it was in front of her at last. She looked up

again at the nurse she at had come to know and love so well over the past eighteen months.

Nancy leaned back and sighed. "You're going to do it, aren't you?"

Cathy nodded. The stone blocking her throat kept her from speaking. The hard twist deep inside that she had lived with since Earl's...whatever...cinched tight.

Nancy leaned forward and grabbed Cathy's hand. "Don't do it, baby. Please! Don't do it! It's not Earl! Trust me on this. This is not the man you loved...love."

Cathy forced out a hoarse croak. "I have to, Nan. God help me. I have to see him. Just once. Just one more time. I have to." She hung her head and whispered. "God help me."

Daryl smelled her hair while they hugged. Clean and fresh. The feel of her breasts mashed against his chest brought a stir from below. He moved his right hand down over the curve of her butt. Round and firm.

"Daryl!" Nancy pulled back and slapped his hand away. "I have to go to work. We don't have time." She was grinning. "Later, though."

Daryl grinned, too. "Later, babe." There had been a lot of "later"s since he had left the hospital. Nurse Nancy had pulled a lot of strings to get assigned as his liaison. He put his hands on her shoulders, leaned over, and placed a demure peck on her cheek. Then, he tweaked her left breast and skipped back laughing as she swung her pocketbook at him.

"Damn it, Daryl! Now I'll be walking funny all day!" She pouted for a moment, then laughed with him. "You just wait! I'll get you back."

The door clicked shut, and Daryl looked around his sparsely-furnished apartment. He still had a lot of trouble thinking of it as "home". Home, to him, was a hospital room. He had lived there so long, he was a little scared to be out. Having Nancy there every night helped. It helped a lot.

After his shower, Daryl faced one of the hardest parts of his day. He had finally gotten used to his new body, but he wasn't sure he would ever be able to look at his face without a shiver. It was like wearing a mask -- a dead man's mask. His face was now too wide, flatter than it used to be. The scar on his forehead from the time he had totalled his car at sixteen was gone. His skin was smooth, his mouth too wide, lips too full. He had to admit he was a lot more handsome than he had been, but still, it was not his face. It never would be.

He shaved very carefully -- he did not dare let his mind wander during that dangerous operation. Maybe he would grow a beard. While he dressed, he thought about his lunch date. Nancy had been insistent that he refuse to go, but there was no way he would pass up this chance. He had to meet this Cathy Grove. He had to see what kind of woman his donor had had. Maybe he could figure out some way to thank her. He grinned, then shuddered. That would be just too weird. Even for Daryl Simmons, Weirdness Magnet, that would be over the edge.

Cathy sat in her car outside The Salerno. She tried to convince herself that she was just fixing her make-up, but it was already perfect. She had been sitting there for fifteen minutes and was ten minutes late.

"I want to do this," she said to the mirror. "Don't I? I'm the one who set it up. Don't I want to do it?" Even to herself, she did not sound sure. She looked herself in the eye, snapped her compact shut, and turned off the motor.

Her first step out of the car was wobbly, and she had to grab the car roof to steady herself. After a deep breath, she smoothed her skirt and walked to the door. A bell attached to the door tinkled as she entered and sent a chill down her spine. The hostess smiled her hostess smile, and Cathy spoke quickly.

"I'm meeting someone. He should already be here."

She took a couple of steps to the side, so she could see the dining room. He stood out to her eyes like he was sitting in a beam of sunlight. Her knees watered again, and she considered bolting out the door. Maybe it really was a bad idea. Then he raised his head from the menu and looked at her. She closed the distance between them as if drawn by a rope.

He stood when she stopped at the table, and Cathy stopped breathing. It was Earl. Dear God, it was Earl. He was alive! He held out his hand.

"Ms. Grove?"

Earl's voice. She took his hand and shook it. Earl's hand. She trembled all over. Her eyes burned, and her nose dripped. She let go of his hand and sat heavily.

"Ms. Grove? Cathy?" He moved to her side and squatted beside her. "Are you all right?"

Of course she wasn't all right! She was meeting her dead husband for lunch. There was nothing all right about that. Hysteria bubbled up in her brain. *Focus*, she thought. *Breathe*. She struggled upstream against the black current that tried to pull

her under. Cathy drew a deep, shuddering breath and opened her eyes.

His face was close to hers. *Not Earl*, she reminded herself. *Earl is dead. This is not Earl.* She shivered. "I'll be OK. It's just a shock, you know. Seeing you...him, again. It's confusing."

"Maybe we shouldn't do this. I can see it's too hard on you."

"I'm...I'm OK. But maybe if you weren't so close?"

"I'm sorry." He drew back as if she had suddenly turned into a copperhead. "I wasn't thinking."

"S OK." Cathy straightened in her chair. "White wine," she said to the solicitous waiter hovering beside the table. Not-Earl sat down and ordered a beer. No, that was definitely not Earl. He hated beer. She felt better.

Daryl gulped at his Budweiser, thankful for the bite of the beer on his tongue. *Jeez!* he thought. *Scared the shit out of me.* He wasn't just thinking about the girl's fainting spell, either. He knew who she was as soon as she walked in the door, even though he had never seen her before in his life. Daryl Simmons had never been one to spook easily, but he was way off base just then.

He knew what her laugh sounded like, knew what button to push to make her mad, knew just how to make up. In bed, she was a moaner, seldom letting go enough to scream. He knew how to make her moan.

Daryl gulped the rest of his beer and looked for the waiter. Maybe another one would take some of the shake out of his hands.

"You were right, Nan. I should have listened to you."
Cathy's shoulders slumped, and her head hung down. Just the effort to speak felt like as much as she could do.

The telephone was silent for a moment, then Nancy spoke.
"Cathy? Cath, what's wrong? What happened?"

"Nothing happened. Nothing happened, but everything's wrong."

"Talk to me, baby. Tell me."

"Nancy, I can't expect you to understand, and I don't. Hell, I don't even understand it myself. I know Earl's dead. His spirit, his soul, whatever you want to call it is gone. It's not even his brain in there. But..."

"But."

Cathy drew a deep breath, then let it all out at once. "I need him, Nancy. I need Earl. I've needed him since the day we met. Since he died, I've needed him more than ever. Maybe his soul is gone, but his body is alive. Our bodies know each other. We both felt it. Our bodies know each other and need each other. Earl is dead, and his body is alive, and, God help me, Nancy, I'm willing to take what I can get."

"Oh, Cathy. Don't. Please, baby, don't. You need help, sweetie. Let me give you a doctor's name and number."

"I don't need help, Nancy. I need Earl. If his body is all I

can have, then that's what I'll take. You'll never understand. Nobody will. I don't have any choice."

"Don't, baby. Don't"

"I'm sorry, Nan. I'm so sorry. I have to."

Daryl knew who it was as soon as he hear the knock. She was looking at the floor when he opened the door. He held out his hand, and she laid her limp fingers into his palm. He drew her inside and closed the door.

Her shoulders heaved. Her sobs came from deep, deep inside -- down where words cannot go, where thoughts have no meaning. He gathered her into his arms. His hands knew what to do, how to hold her; his mouth knew what to say.

They held each other without thought, without words.

THE END

Special Bonus Section

"We'll Always Have Paris"

by

Carter Nipper

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Sometimes a man just has to drink alone, and Gentleman Jack was providing the only companionship that I cared to have. That was the night after Gwen's funeral. Following her death, my life had been a confusion of family, friends, and arrangements to be made. Now they had returned to their lives, leaving me to deal with the void in my bed, my heart, and my life, a hole as cold, wide, and empty as the abyss between galaxies. After a while, I abandoned the glass and drank straight from the bottle, watching ghosts flicker through the empty house while moonbeams crawled across the floor.

It was the longest night of my life, and it was followed by the longest day, a hot, pounding, spike-pained, hungry-nauseous, dry-bloated, Hell-driven hangover of a day, for we always pay for our pleasures, however dubious they may be. Gwen was gone, and our life together ended, but endings are also beginnings.

I thought it was just an after-effect of the booze. I would see a movement out of the corner of my eye, but my head wouldn't turn fast enough to focus on it. It just hurt too badly to move that fast. My eyes were playing tricks on me, they had only this morning suddenly developed the habit of moving in different circles, and the almost-heard giggles I wrote off as the auditory component of morning-after hallucinations.

Gwen and I had known each other all our lives and had been married for twenty-three of them. We had our ups and downs, just like everybody does, and some of the battles were epic. There was the Great Clam Chowder Controversy, for instance, but

that's another story for another time. Mostly, you could say that we loved each other fiercely and forever, and when we exchanged our wedding vows, we meant them.

The main story of our twenty-three years of marriage was one of increasing comfort in each other. As her honey-blond hair grew paler and lightly streaked with gray and as mine grew more and more transparent, we grew comfortable with ourselves and with each other. She had her chair, and I had mine. She had her books, while I tended more toward magazines and newspapers. We had each other, and we thought that we had all the time in the world.

Then came that day, a whirlwind, a tornado, one of those days that grabs you by the throat and shakes you like a dog with a rag toy. A single phone call destroyed my life, a single moment that changed everything. There's been an accident. Someone ran a stop sign. Come now.

A doctor and a police officer met me at the Emergency Room. Gwen was dead. Just like that, no goodbyes, no time to prepare. They were sorry, of course. I have no doubt of that. But she was gone, nonetheless, and nothing that anyone could do would bring her back.

These things occupied my thoughts all through that charcoal-cured night and the flaming, pounding Hell of a day that followed. At first I thought I was imagining things, a half-heard giggle, an almost-seen figure disappearing through the doorway. During the weeks that followed, memories of Gwen were my constant companions. Small things captured my attention, the necklace casually dropped on the dresser, a strand of her hair nestled among the bristles of her brush, the second toothbrush that was too much a part of my life to be discarded. I could feel her in the

room, sometimes, and would turn, expecting to see her standing there, only to be disappointed.

At work, I was fine. Nothing there reminded me of Gwen, and I had my work to occupy my time and mind. At home, though, the small noises and flickers of movement, a feeling of a presence just out of sight, many small things created a growing anxiety, a tension like a spring coiled too tightly, and I feared for my sanity.

One night I looked up from my newspaper and she sat in her chair, reading a book. Her reading glasses were perched on her nose and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She wore faded blue jeans and her favorite bootleg Calvin and Hobbes T-shirt. A surge ran through my body, a two hundred twenty-volt thrill accompanied by an arctic chill. She was gone before the feeling completed its journey, but the image burned itself into my mind, and it persists to this day.

I cried her name, begged her to come back, but her chair remained empty. I sat very still and concentrated, focusing all of my energy on bringing her back, but to no avail. Grief returned, a fresh bleeding wound, a sharp, clear pain replacing the dull ache that had weighed on my heart. I called in sick the next two days and exhausted myself in fruitless attempts to bring her back.

On the second day, turning from the sink after brushing my teeth, I saw her walk across the bedroom, sit in front of her dresser, and vanish. I stood absolutely still for a long time, fixing the sight of her in my mind. I remembered the way her body moved beneath her bathrobe, her hair swinging gently as she walked. I smelled her in the room, and I cried for joy and heartbreak.

It soon became a daily thing, a glimpse of her, hearing her

throaty chuckle from the next room, feeling her warmth beside me as I cooked my supper. I became used to it, relished it. If I couldn't have my Gwen, then her ghost would do.

She began to stay longer, too. Sometimes I could see her for seconds at a time. Sometimes she looked at me, as well. On more than one occasion, she turned towards me, and her mouth opened, but no words came. She never stayed very long, only moments each time. I longed to hear her voice, to touch her again, feel her warm and soft in my arms, smell her hair as it tickled my nose, but phantoms make lousy lovers, and my fantasies remained unfulfilled. Still, I could see her sometimes, and that was better than nothing at all.

One night, during the dark, dead hours when the walls between the worlds grow thin, I woke to see her face only inches from mine. I could almost feel her warmth beside me, her breath against my cheek. I don't know how long we lay staring into each other's eyes. It felt like forever. She raised her hand, caressing my cheek. I closed my eyes and felt her hand in my memories, soft, warm and loving against my skin. When I opened my tear-filled eyes, she was gone.

That was a breakthrough. Gwen became my companion again, appearing more often, staying longer each time. I would tell her about my day, reminisce about our life together, or just prattle on senselessly. Gwen would stand or sit and watch as I moved nervously around, never sure when she would vanish. Sometimes, she would open her mouth, as if to speak, but no words ever came, and she would close it again and just sit or stand very still and look at me.

Gradually, the look in her eyes changed. At first, she seemed glad to see me. I saw a sparkle in her eyes and a crinkling at the

corners. Over time, though, her eyes became more and more resigned, almost sad.

Then one night, I awoke to find her once again in the bed, her eyes staring into mine. Her eyes were sunken, and the skin on her face sagged like it was old and tired. Her hair lay dusty and dead on the pillow, and I felt the coldness of the grave in her ashen skin. I realized then what I must do.

Black and white ghosts flickered across the TV screen. I returned to the exotic city of Casablanca, where betrayal and violent death lay close beneath a veneer of civilization, where love was an illusion, and no one was as he seemed. It was our favorite movie, and we watched it together every chance we got.

I always loved Humphrey Bogart as Rick, tough, cynical, hard as nails, and Ingrid Bergman as Ilsa, luminously lovely and slightly mysterious. Gwen always loved the feeling of the black and white film, the way light and shadow interplay to highlight the action.

We both loved the classic story of lost love found that I had been reliving for the last hour. Rick and Ilsa, torn apart by war when the Nazis occupied Paris, were now reunited in the supposedly neutral city of Casablanca. Rick had the Letters of Transit that Ilsa and her husband, a major leader of the Resistance, needed to get out.

It's decision time for Rick. Should he use the letters for Ilsa and himself or let her go with Victor, who needs her love and support to continue the fight?

Fog fills the screen, shrouding the world in mystery. In the

background, the ground crew prepares an old tri-motor airplane for takeoff. From the looks of the plane, that will be a chancy proposition at best. Rick looks at Ilsa with a tenderness that is impossible to imagine on that lined, world-weary face. The fog softens her features and her face glows through the fog like an angel's. She can't believe what Rick is saying.

"I'm saying it because it's true. Inside of us we both know you belong with Victor. You're part of his work, the thing that keeps him going. If that plane leaves the ground and you're not with him, you'll regret it."

No, Rick, don't let her get away this time! Grab her! Hold her! Run!

"Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life."

Don't listen to him, Ilsa! Stay with him! You know it's what you both want.

"But what about us?" she asks.

Yes, what about us? What about Rick and Ilsa? What about Gwen and me?

"We'll always have Paris. We didn't have, we'd lost it, until you came to Casablanca. We got it back last night."

Screw Paris! That was yesterday! What about today, tomorrow, and the rest of our lives? What about us?

Her voice is soft as she replies.

"And I said I would never leave you."

Rick speaks softly, too, his pain apparent.

"And you never will. But I've got a job to do, too. And where I'm going you can't follow. What I've got to do you can't be any part of. Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the troubles of three little people don't amount to a hill

of beans in this crazy world. Someday you'll understand that."

Yeah, I know, but why does it have to hurt so damn bad? As Ilsa and Victor disappear into the fog toward the plane that will take them into their future together, I think I see another figure walking beside them, honey-blond ponytail swinging gently behind her.

I turned off the TV and began to renew my acquaintance with the Gentleman from Tennessee. Gwen was gone, as surely and as finally as Ilsa was gone. Gone forever, surely to a better place. I don't know, maybe I'll find out some day. She couldn't stay, and we both recognized that in the end.

My need brought her here where she didn't belong. I could have kept her here, a pale shadow of the love that we shared, a constant accusation of my selfishness. We would have ended up hating each other, and I could not live with that. I couldn't let my desires interfere with whatever higher purpose she now served, and I let her go.

We'll always have Paris. The words echo eternally in my mind. We'll always have the prom, our wedding night, dancing close and wishing the song would never end, slow walks in the woods on a summer afternoon, sitting in a porch swing holding hands. We'll always have the day we met and our first kiss. We'll always have the fighting and the making up, the laughter and the tears, and the quiet evenings reading in the living room, just glad to be together. These things will live on, and Gwen will hold me and kiss me and love me again, but only in my dreams, and that

will have to be enough.

The liquor looked black and evil in the darkened room, a ray of moonlight glinting feebly off the liquid's surface. Jack and I will become good friends, and it will be a long time before I can get by without his help.

I'm weak, you see, not strong or noble like Rick. I can't give her up and send her away out of my life that easily. I don't know how to go on without her, so I'll crawl into a bottle until the pain dies down.

Time heals all wounds, or so they say. Maybe I can crawl out later, or maybe not. Who cares? I'm looking at a great big empty life ahead of me, and I'm afraid of being alone.

I waved the bottle at the ceiling and offered a toast in my best Bogart voice.

"Here's looking at you, kid."

THE END