

THE MARK

By Stephen Doe

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The wadded up money hit the counter and sat there for a few moments as the store clerk went to the shelf to get the bottle. He placed it inside of a paper bag on the counter. "Will that be all?" he asked as he smoothed out the bills to put them into the register. The customer had no reply. He took the paper bag containing his purchase and tucked it under his arm.

He walked out of the store and the ding of the bell on the door caused him to pause. It was slightly jarring even after going there everyday for almost a month. He walked down the street, noticing everyone who passed him yet never looking anyone directly in the eye. The need to blend in was strong in him – it permeated his psyche. He didn't want to appear like he had something to hide. He reached his hotel, a shabby six floor walk up in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It was a pre-war apartment building which was renovated then converted from housing units to hotel "suites".

Entering the building he passed by the concierge who slept behind a glass divider. He was always sleeping. Most of the business of the hotel was conducted by the man's son who also served as the bellboy and the handyman. The son nodded to him as he walked by. He liked the son, they had a quiet understanding. He never asked questions he just wanted to get paid on time every week.

He opened the door to his room. It was a lightly furnished studio with only one window which faced a back alley. He took a seat at the kitchen table. It was one of two pieces of furniture he used since he had been staying there, the other being the bed.

He unscrewed the bottle and took out his journal to write his daily musings. The journal was made up of hotel stationery stapled together multiple times. The alcohol and the writing were the only things that helped him concentrate – say focused. The burning sensation as the liquor went down his throat caused his heartbeat to slow down. He reached into his shirt pocket and took out a prescription bottle which had a label that read: Take one per day for anxiety. He popped the top and took a pill which helped the building anxiety subside. He flipped to a clean page and began writing.

Day 27

I follow the same routine, go to the same places yet none of this seems familiar. I feel I should alter my movements yet something tells me if I do I won't find out what happened to me. All I know for certain is that twenty-seven days ago I woke up with no memory of the previous day – hell my previous life. I had a wallet full of money, a credit card, a watch that stopped keeping time and a prescription bottle. The wallet had a drivers license issued to Russell Nixon with my picture on it. Am I this man? Am I missing? Am I on the run? And if I am one of those things why has no one bothered to look for me?

Russell's leg started to itch. He tried to ignore it but it overcame him and he scratched causing him to grimace in pain. There was a scabbing wound running from his ankle to the middle of his calf. It was almost healed. He wondered if the scar had anything to do with his situation. Was someone trying to hurt him? Was he in danger and unaware? Whenever he went out he was always fearful of someone attacking him in the street – unsure of who was friend or foe. Russell was starting to believe that he was schizophrenic. That he should turn himself in to the authorities for testing. Not only to help himself but to keep him from being a danger to society.

He looked at the broken watch he wore on his wrist. Many times he thought of discarding it but could never bring himself to do so. For some reason, unexplainable for him to comprehend, it was very important that he held onto it. He had a cloudy recollection of it being given to him by an old man. Not old really, the man in his memory had graying temples but his face had an out of place youthful quality to it.

Russell took another drink from his bottle and sat in the chair thinking as he had done everyday, trying to remember something – anything – that could help him regain something more substantial from his past.

#

New day – same routine. Russell closed the door to his room and took the bottle from the bag. He looked at it for a while studying it with meditative thought. He went to the sink and let it run for a while then took a glass and filled it. He popped open his prescription bottle and swallowed a pill. He walked out his front door deciding he wanted to take a walk. He felt he must break his routine no matter the chance of danger.

#

Russell found himself in Chelsea. Walking down a busy street he saw a man exiting a building. The man would never stand out to anyone else but for some reason to Russell this man seemed as if he were the only person standing in a crowd of people. Russell approached cautiously, not wanting anything to seem out of the ordinary. The man, oblivious in his expensive tailored suit, walked down the street without a care in the world. Russell dodged the busy Manhattan commuters as he chased down this man who had caught his eye.

The man walked into the subway with Russell in pursuit. He stood on the platform waiting for his train. Russell took a seat on a bench where he could get a good look at the man. He didn't want to stare but he couldn't help doing so. Why did seeing this person bring him to this place? Who was he? The train pulled up to the platform. Everyone began to pile into various doors looking for seats. The only person who remained motionless was Russell who followed the man's every movement intently with his eyes. When everyone had boarded he was left alone on the platform as the door closed and the train hissed to life ready to crawl into the tunnel.

The man finally faced him. Russell finally had a chance to see the face of his object of curiosity. Russell moved closer to see him through the glass, the man still oblivious that his every move was being watched. The man looked exactly like him. Same eyes, same nose, same hair, though his was neater and better groomed. A thought immediately ran through Russell's mind, irrational as it was he still let it grow. That man had stolen his identity.

#

Thoughts of who this man was caused him to toss and turn through nightmarish dreams during the night. So exhausted was Russell when he went to the building where he had seen the man the previous day he had bags under his eyes and a look on his face that any trained medical physician would call shock yet his calm demeanor as he sat on a nearby bench would belie any rational diagnosis. He had been sitting there all day.

His heart rate jumped – he was having an anxiety attack. This was not his normal routine – the cycle was broken. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out his medication. He took a pill which was hard to swallow without water. I'm not prepared, he thought to himself. He wasn't sure of what he would do when the man came out. He didn't want to confront him – cause a scene. He only wanted to know what was going on – what this all meant.

When the man finally exited the building to make his way to the subway, Russell was almost at a loss of what to do. For a moment he contemplated staying put. He didn't really know who this person was. For all he knew the man was dangerous. Maybe he was after something that Russell had and would stop at nothing to

keep his impersonation of him from being compromised. Russell decided to follow him. Keep him at a distance and let him be comfortable. Let him go through the motions of his life and see if he could get any answers that way.

Just like the previous day the man boarded his train. This time Russell got on and was careful to not be seen. On the way to the station he had purchased some sunglasses and a hat which he wore in a way so as not to look like he was covering his features. He didn't want some concerned citizen to blow his cover because of suspicion. He watched the man read his newspaper. He studied him looking for any clue as to his personality. Was the man doing an impersonation of Russell from his previous life? Is this the way that I am, he questioned internally. Had he watched me and picked up all my movements before he made the switch? Why has he left me alive if he wanted me out of the way so badly? Those thoughts consumed him so deeply that he didn't realize that the train had stopped and the man was one of the passengers who got off. Quickly Russell jumped from his seat before the door closed.

He followed the man out of the subway to the port authority bus terminal in Midtown, Manhattan. Russell hesitated before going into the terminal. He saw police and bomb sniffing dogs outside. The police stood motionless like sentinels holding their machine guns looking for trouble. He walked inside of the crowded building. People moved at a fast pace to catch their buses to go home. After a few moments he was able to catch a glimpse of the man boarding a New Jersey Transit bus. Russell boarded the bus and sat in the back passing the man on his way to the rear.

After passing through the Lincoln tunnel into New Jersey and riding a bit, he watched as the man pressed the buzzer to get off. Russell watched the man walk down the street and then hit the buzzer so that he could get off at the next stop.

Russell walked briskly to back track and catch up with the man. It wasn't hard to catch up with him because he stopped at a deli to pick up a roll of bread and some cold cuts. He continued to follow the man until he reached his house. The house was a modest sized two story building with a freshly cut lawn and hedges. The man entered the house. Russell casually approached and found a window that he could peek into without being seen. Inside the man was talking to a woman. She was a beautiful woman who looked to be in her late twenties. She had long straight brown hair and had beautiful striking facial features which were enhanced by a smile that was etched in her face from ear to ear.

Russell could only hear muffled sounds from inside. He watched the man smile and pick her up in a warm embrace and swing her around. Russell saw a pregnancy test on the table behind her. The celebration made sense. She was having a baby.

#

Around four months had passed. Janet, that was her name, he was able to find out their names, was showing. Mrs. Janet Littman, wife to Michael Littman a junior executive at a marketing firm. Her dress was blowing in the breeze causing her pregnant form to be notable in her outline. He watched her everyday as he felt a stronger connection to her than to his doppelganger. She didn't work so he watched her daily routine which normally consisted of running errands and doing light yard work outside. From his perception of her, gauged solely from visual contact and a few overheard random remarks, she seemed to be a woman of high standards used to having the finest things in life. She wore pearls with lavish and expensive dresses and had shoes to match every pocketbook in her closet.

Russell had all but abandoned his hotel room. He rarely ever went there anymore except if he needed something. He had taken up residence in an abandoned burnt out house that was about two blocks away from Janet and Michael. The outside of the house was dark and charred and slumped forward in the ground. The inside was burnt out, almost hollow. The only rooms were the top of the house and the basement. He spent most of his time in the basement in case someone came when he wasn't expecting them.

One day he decided to build something in the house — a room perhaps. It was a whim that he felt he should indulge. He went to a local supply store and began filling a shopping cart with all the material and tools he would need. Russell paid for these items with his credit card. He paid for most of his purchases with his credit card which seemed to have an unlimited balance. He was even able to rent a truck to bring his new purchases to the burnt out house. Russell wondered why he was so well supplied with money. These questions, while valid, seemed to be a waste of time since he would most likely never find out until he talked to Michael. He just needed the right opportunity.

Russell found building to be easy. It seemed natural to him as if in a past life he was an architect. He wondered how many past life's he had. Junior executive, architect, what else could he find out about himself? He decided he would try something new everyday to find out – test his limits.

He could only work on his project for a few hours during the middle of the day when he would arouse the least suspicion. On the outset he had no clue what he was doing. Was it to be a room for him to sleep in and take up permanent residence here? Or was it something more sinister than that? After building for three weeks he finally had his answer. Putting the last nail in he stood back and looked at his creation. It was a room – a cell was actually the proper term. Russell was going to capture Michael and have it out with him. He was going to find out who this man was and why he was messing with his life.

#

Michael was taking a walk. He walked every evening for an hour to clear his head. It was the only thing that helped him keep everything in order. The stress of his job and jitters from readying himself to become a father had caused him to smoke again. He promised Janet that he would quit. He would walk for a few blocks, smoke one cigarette – only one, that was the compromise he made with himself – then we would return home, have a shower to wash off the evidence and play the happy expectant father for his wife.

Russell knew that Michael would pass by the house because he had watched him do so every night. He could almost time it. Watching Michael was the final activity he did before he turned in for the night. He would watch Michael walk past the house from a tiny peephole he built. He saw the red amber of the cigarette burning in Michael's mouth as he approached. He had to time it right. One false move and he would never get another chance at it

.When Michael got closer Russell had already moved from the basement to the outside, waiting in the shadows. He held a rag in one hand and in the other a syringe that he got from a medical store filled with a cocktail that would put Michael to sleep long enough to get him inside. This was what he had been waiting for. He seized his opportunity. Without a sound he pounced. The struggle between the two men was brief. Michael had no time to react before he had a rag over his mouth and a syringe in his neck. He didn't even get to see his attacker before he blacked out.

#

The smell was the first thing that hit Michael as he came to. The violent, disorientating sensation of consciousness caused him to vomit on the floor. He was in a small room. The room contained a cot, a toilet with no seat and a single metal door with a slit at eye level. Michael walked over to the door to examine it. It had no handle on his side of it and no latches at it's joints. The slot on the door slid open sending Michael back a step. He saw two dead eyes staring at him, unblinking.

“Michael Littman?” spoke an ominous voice. “Yes?” said Michael, not hiding the shaking in his voice. He was scared and didn’t care if his captor knew it.

“Why did you bring me here?” he said.

“What part do you play in all this?” he replied.

“I don’t understand the question,” he said, “please, tell me what is going on.”

The door slot slid closed. Russell was sweating, his heart rate was up, anxiety burned at the pit of his stomach. He wanted answers and none were forthcoming. He reached into his shirt pocket and took out his pills. He was running low and had been rationing them. He put the bottle to his lips and let a pill pour into his mouth and slide down his throat. The effects of the pill caused him to feel relief. He could think again. He felt rational once more. He would let Michael stay inside the room, he would take control of the situation. He would make him break and tell him what was going on no matter how long it took.

The soft pounding on the door prodded him out of his thoughts. He opened the slot on the door. “Please,” pleaded Michael, “I have a wife, you have to let me go.”

Russell closed the slot on the door without reply. He had taken Michael’s wallet, house keys and other possessions off of him while he was unconscious and put them in a corner of the room. He walked over to them and looked inside of Michael’s wallet. He took out Michael’s driver’s license and compared it to his. He was going to take Michael’s place. He needed to know what part Janet played in this conspiracy against him.

#

The house was empty. Janet was out. He found a note and read it. She was with her mother looking for a crib. She said that she knew he wouldn’t be interested in coming and that dinner was on the stove. Her husband wasn’t a professional shopper like she was.

Russell went into their bedroom and looked around. He saw pictures of the happy couple on the dresser. He sat down on the expensive sheets and looked around. He wondered if he had been here before – if this was his home. The place didn’t seem familiar to him. He got up and went into the bathroom, stripped naked and took a shower. He hadn’t showered in weeks. He was filthy. The sludge on his body was so thick he had to use his toe to push it down the drain. He finished and dried off. He saw himself in the mirror. His hair was messy; it needed a trim. He wanted to look exactly like Michael. He found some scissors in the medicine cabinet and trimmed his hair. When he finished grooming he threw the towel on the bed and proceeded to take a tour of the house naked. He walked downstairs and through the living room and found an office, his office — Michael’s.

Michael’s office was very orderly. Russell rummaged through the file cabinets looking for documents. He was looking for anything that had the name Russell Nixon on it. Anything that related to a plan – a scheme. There was nothing, just files for clients and other work related papers.

As Russell exited the office he heard the front door being opened. He turned and saw Janet walking in. The sight of him naked in the dark startled her. “Michael, what are you doing?” she asked. Russell stood silent looking at her for a moment. “Nothing,” replied Russell. “You’re lucky my mother was too tired to come in,” she said, “you would have really caused a scene.” Janet took her bags into the kitchen and put them down on the table. Russell walked in looking at her. This was as close as he had ever dared to come in contact with her.

He felt a sudden impulse to grab her and didn’t fight it. He kissed her long and passionately. She sunk into his arms and he could feel her nails digging into his back. He took her upstairs and they made love. He

watched Michael with her a few times from outside during their private moments. He watched him touch her – how he touched her and where he touched her. He knew what she liked and he did everything he knew to fulfill her every desire during the night.

Afterwards he laid next to her and watched her sleep. For a moment he forgot that he was out of place. He felt that he was where he belonged. He couldn't even imagine going back to the burnt out house. He could just leave Michael there – let him die. He could take his place without any trouble. If he could fool her he could fool anyone.

“Michael,” she said drowsily as she rolled over, “you alright, baby?” “I'm fine,” he said, more easily able to answer to the name, “you get some rest, we have a big day tomorrow.”

#

Michael had given up trying to tell time. He had no watch and his cell had no windows so the passage of days had no way of being noted. The only source that gave him the impression that he was still a participant of time was the full beard he grew and his scruffy hair which shagged at his temples.

Even after all this time he had no clue about his captor. He didn't know what the person looked like or why he had decided to lock him in this dungeon. There was never any interaction from outside the room. The only time the person came to him was to bring him a plate of food. One plate of food per day, that was all. The food was to be eaten and when the slot was opened it was to be placed through it to receive the next days rations. Michael at first tried to get answers but never got any replies so gave up this line of communication.

Russell had been enjoying his time with Janet. He was able to slide in and take Michael's place with no problems what so ever. He set it up with his office to allow him to work from home so that he could spend as much time with his expecting wife as possible. After a few days he was able to do Michael's job easily which consisted of signing his signature to reports completed by his underlings. The only problem Russell encountered with his rouse was one night when Janet noticed the scar on his calf from his mysterious wound. She asked him where it came from, never noticing it before and being an expert in every inch of his body it intrigued her. He told her the truth, he didn't know where it came from. After a few queer looks she never brought it up again. He visited Michael in the evenings to bring him food and water. He never answered to Michael's plea's for release because he was hoping to break him. He knew this clueless attitude was all a ruse. He wanted him to admit it, that was all.

#

Months passed and the two men continued their private game with one another. “I've told you before about my wife,” said Michael as he took his plate from the slot, “she's almost due, I can feel it.” He was right. Janet was a week into her ninth month. “You have to let me get to her, she's probably worried sick about me.,” he said. Russell didn't reply to him. He was taking Janet to the hospital in an hour because her doctor thought the best course of action would be to induce labor. The strain of the pregnancy was too much for her to bare and it was safer to do it now than wait for a natural delivery.

Russell returned to Janet. The bags were already packed and loaded into the car. They had been that way for almost a month. Russell made sure of that. He didn't want anything to go wrong. He needed everything to go right with this baby. He helped her into the car and they drove off. They entered the hospital and checked in. Three hours later they were the parents of a little boy.

#

The first day home with the new baby was a great experience. There were a few people invited to the house who came and went, mostly close friends and family. Once the mandatory festivities were over and done with the happy family was left alone to begin the new chapter in their life. A brand new start with a new addition. A new person to share their love.

Janet slept with the baby in the crib next to her. Russell decided this would be the time to make his way to the burnt out house. In all the excitement he was unable to slip away and check up on Michael. It had been almost a week since he had taken him any food or fresh water.

The house seemed more ominous than normal when he entered it. Russell was so involved in the cheery mood of his life with Janet that entering this place of dark times was very jarring. He made his way to the basement and slid the slot on the door open. He looked inside to find Michael laying on the floor. Usually when the slot would open Michael would come right up to it and either offer up a plea for his release or stand silently looking through to see if he could catch a glimpse of his captor or captors. This break in their ritual surprised Russell. For the first time in months he called to him. "You alright in there?" He got no reply. There was no movement from the man on the floor, only dead silence.

Russell opened the door and went inside. The room stank. The putrid smell clung to his nostrils as he made his way to the body. He knelt over it to examine the remains. As soon as he put his hand on his neck to feel for a pulse Michael sprang to life. He had broken the porcelain plate and swung a shard of it as a weapon. He lunged at Russell missing him. Russell was able to grab at Michael and the two men fell to the ground. The piece of porcelain fell from Michael's hand and landed near them. Russell was able to make the rush to it first; he picked it up and came back at him. He wanted to end this. He was happy and this man was standing in the way of his new life with his wife and child sleeping at home. Michael's motivations were similar. This man was the gatekeeper to his escape to be with his wife and child.

Two beasts ready to attack – ready to kill. Russell made the first move, he was armed and more confident. He lunged at Michael with the jagged plate and missed him. Michael was able to strike Russell in the temple sending him falling to the floor. Michael saw his opportunity to escape. His path was clear. As he passed by Russell on the floor he took the plate shard and stuck it into Michael's leg right above the ankle and into the calf. All Michael could see was red. Before the pain of the wound could fully register in his brain he pulled out the plate shard and with all of his body weight, came crashing down on Russell on the floor. Michael grabbed at his wound which was wet and sticky from his blood. He squeezed it to apply pressure and slow down the bleeding. After a few deep breaths he put his hand down next to him and felt wetness. He looked at his palm, it was covered in blood.

Michael tore at his clothing looking for a wound, he wanted to know where the blood was escaping from but found nothing. He looked down and followed the trail. It was coming from Russell. The broken shard was sticking from his chest, he wasn't moving. He was in a pool of his own blood, dead.

Similar face, similar build was the first thing Michael noticed as he limped over to the corpse on the floor. He couldn't comprehend why someone would make themselves look like him. He didn't want to know who this person was or who he represented. All he wanted to know was if his wife was safe and if she was able to have the baby.

#

The house was dark. All was still in the night as he opened the front door. He limped upstairs leaving

a thin trail of blood in his wake. He opened the door and crept inside. Janet was sleeping peacefully, his movement didn't even stir her. He looked in the crib and saw the baby. He was dressed in blue, it must be a boy, he thought. He reached in and touched his hand to the infant's cheek. The baby cooed faintly causing Janet to turn over. She looked up at the man standing over the crib, her eyes not yet focused to the dark. "Michael, is that you?" she said. "Yeah, I'm home honey," he replied. Her eyes finally registered the image of the man in front of her. The sight of this strange person caused her to sit up hurriedly. He was dirty, mangy and covered in blood. He had a full beard and wild, frightening eyes. This stranger was in her home and she was frightened. She screamed for her husband. Michael came closer to her. The baby started to cry. "Honey, what's wrong?" he asked. "Who are you!?" she demanded. She got up and went to the crib to check on the baby. She picked him up and started to back out of the room. Before she could make it to the opening of the door she lost consciousness. Michael made it just in time to grab the baby but she hit the floor with a thud.

"She was bleeding internally. It must have happened during the night – complications from the birth," said the doctor. Michael heard the words but they were slow to register. "I'm sorry, we did all we could do," said the doctor patting him on the arm. The doctor walked away leaving Michael alone in the waiting room. He didn't move, he couldn't cry, he had no emotions left.

A man in a white suit took a seat next to Michael. "Shame," he said "I could help." Michael looked at him. The man had graying temples but didn't look a day over thirty-five. "How can you help me?" he asked. "I'm Michael Littman, Jr., he began, "I came here from the future, I'm your son."

#

"I don't understand how this works."

"I could explain it to you if you want but then you'd be even more confused."

"So you invented a time machine?"

"No, I work for the people who are in charge of them."

Michael sat down at the kitchen table. Michael Junior had helped him clean himself up. He was given a clean shave and his hair was trimmed, it was still sloppy but manageable. He also dressed Michael's wound. This was all too much for him to take. Michael Junior walked around the kitchen. Since they entered the house he was examining everything.

"This isn't the first time I've come back, you know. We've been in this position before, many times and it always ends up going wrong," said Michael Junior. "What do you want me to do?" said Michael. Michael took out a watch and put it on the table in front of his father. "Put that on," he said. "What is it?" asked Michael. "Think of it as your portal to the past," he replied. Michael slid his hand across the table and picked it up. He put it on his wrist. "Why can't you go back in time and warn us yourself?" asked Michael. "Because the machine won't let me. It only allows you to come back to a certain time after you were born, not before. And that time varies from person to person." he replied, "we don't fully understand it yet."

Michael Junior put a prescription bottle on the table along with a wallet. "Take those tablets once a day. You'll feel anxiety, that's part of the trip. Those pills will help alleviate any symptoms. I also gave you a credit card. Any machine reading it will register it as having a full balance of funds. You weren't properly conditioned for time travel so your memory will be sporadic. Nature will tell you to find shelter and then you'll hunt for your reason for being where you are. There's a note explaining everything inside the watch. Just look under the lid and you'll find it. The first time I sent you back I put the note in your coat pocket. You ripped off the coat and went naked through the streets of New York and were shot while resisting arrest. Your brain always remembers that the watch is important. You never want to get rid of it. So try to remember. Try to save her.

That watch is the most important thing in your possession,” he said. Michael Junior walked to his father and pressed a button on the watch. “What about you? The baby I mean,” he asked. “Don’t worry, I’ll take him to family before I return to my time,” he replied.

Michael felt weightless. His body no longer felt like it was being held to the earth. Suddenly there was darkness – suddenly there was nothing.

#

Michael walked down a street in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. His mind was blank, he didn’t remember starting the journey — it was as if he woke up from a walking sleep. He was cold, he wanted a place to stay; to sleep – after sleep he could think. He came upon a shabby looking hotel and went inside. He stood for a moment in the hallway. A man was behind a glass divider snoring. The bellboy came and helped him check in. He made his way to his room and went inside. He sat down on the bed and took off his shoes and his coat. He reached to unclasp his watch from his wrist but thought against it. He propped up his pillow and laid down. The last thought he had in his head before he lost consciousness was that he would figure everything out tomorrow.