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Sometimes I Lie

Written by Alice Feeney

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SOMETIMES I LIE

ALICE FEENEY



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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For my Daniel. And for her.

My name is Amber Reynolds. There are three things you should know about me:

1. I'm in a coma.
2. My husband doesn't love me any more.
3. Sometimes I lie.

Now

Boxing Day, December 2016

I've always delighted in the free fall between sleep and wakefulness. Those precious few semi-conscious seconds before you open your eyes, when you catch yourself believing that your dreams might just be your reality. A moment of intense pleasure or pain, before your senses reboot and inform you who and where and what you are. For now, for just a second longer, I'm enjoying the self-medicated delusion that permits me to imagine that I could be anyone, I could be anywhere, I could be loved.

I sense the light behind my eyelids and my attention is drawn to the platinum band on my finger. It feels heavier than it used to, as though it is weighing me down. A sheet is pulled over my body, it smells unfamiliar and I consider the possibility that I'm in a hotel. Any memory of what I dreamt evaporates. I try to hold on, try to be someone and stay somewhere I am not, but I can't. I am only ever me and I am here, where I already know I do not wish to be. My limbs ache and, I'm so tired I don't want to open my eyes – until I remember that I can't.

Panic spreads through me like a blast of icy-cold air. I can't recall where this is or how I got here, but I know who I am: *My name is Amber Reynolds; I am thirty-five years old; I'm married to Paul.* I repeat these three things in my head, holding on to them tightly, as though they might save me, but I'm mindful that some part of the story is lost, the last few pages ripped out. When the memories are as complete as I can manage, I bury them until they are quiet enough inside my head to allow me to think, to feel, to try to make sense of it all. One memory refuses to comply, fighting its way to the surface, but I don't want to believe it.

The sound of a machine breaks into my consciousness, stealing my last few fragments of hope and leaving me with nothing except the unwanted knowledge that I am in a hospital. The sterilised stench of the place makes me want to gag. I hate hospitals. They are the home of death and regrets that missed their slots, not somewhere I would ever choose to visit, let alone stay.

There were people here before, strangers, I remember that now. They used a word I chose not to hear. I recall lots of fuss, raised voices and fear, not just my own. I struggle to unearth more, but my mind fails me. Something very bad has happened, but I cannot remember what or when.

Why isn't he here?

It can be dangerous to ask a question when you already know the answer.

He does not love me.

I bookmark that thought.

I hear a door open. Footsteps, then the silence returns

but it's spoiled, no longer pure. I can smell stale cigarette smoke, the sound of pen scratching paper to my right. Someone coughs to my left and I realise there are two of them. Strangers in the dark. I feel colder than before and so terribly small. I have never known a terror like the one that takes hold of me now.

I wish someone would say something.

'Who is she?' asks a woman's voice.

'No idea. Poor love, what a mess,' replies another woman.

I wish they'd said nothing at all. I start to scream:

My name is Amber Reynolds! I'm a radio presenter! Why don't you know who I am?

I shout the same sentences over and over, but they ignore me because, on the outside, I am silent. On the outside, I am nobody and I have no name.

I want to see the me they have seen. I want to sit up, reach out and touch them. I want to feel something again. Anything. Anyone. I want to ask a thousand questions. I think I want to know the answers. They used the word from before too, the one I don't want to hear.

The women leave, closing the door behind them, but the word stays behind, so that we are alone together and I am no longer able to ignore it. I can't open my eyes. I can't move. I can't speak. The word bubbles to the surface, popping on impact and I know it to be true…

Coma.

Then

One week earlier – Monday, 19 December 2016

I tiptoe downstairs in the early morning darkness, careful not to wake him. Everything is where it ought to be and yet I'm sure something is missing. I pull on my heavy winter coat to combat the cold and walk through to the kitchen to begin my routine. I start with the back door and repeatedly turn the handle until I'm sure it is locked:

Up, down. Up, down. Up, down.

Next, I stand in front of the large range oven with my arms bent at the elbows, as though I am about to conduct the impressive orchestra of gas hobs. My fingers form the familiar shape; the index and middle finger finding the thumb on each hand. I whisper quietly to myself, while visually checking that all of the knobs and dials are switched off. I do a complete sweep three times, my fingernails clicking together to create a Morse code that only I can decipher. Once satisfied that everything is safe and secure, I go to leave the kitchen, lingering briefly in the doorway, wondering if today is a day when I might need to turn back and begin the whole routine again. It isn't.

I creep across creaking floorboards into the hall, pick up my bag and check the contents. Phone. Purse. Keys. I close it, open it, then check again. Phone. Purse. Keys. I check a third time on my way to the front door. I stop for a moment and am shocked to see the woman inside the mirror staring back at me. I have the face of someone who might have been pretty once, I barely recognise her now. A mixed palette of light and dark. Long black lashes frame my large green eyes, sad shadows have settled beneath them, thick brown eyebrows above. My skin is a pale canvas stretched over my cheekbones. My hair is so brown it's almost black, lazy straight strands rest on my shoulders for lack of a better idea. I brush it roughly with my fingers before scraping it back into a ponytail, securing the hair off my face with a band from my wrist. My lips part as though I am going to say something, but only air escapes my mouth. A face for radio stares back.

I remember the time and remind myself that the train won't wait for me. I haven't said goodbye, but I don't suppose it matters. I switch off the light and leave the house, checking three times that the front door is locked, before marching down the moonlit garden path.

It's early, but I'm already late. Madeline will be in the office by now, the newspapers will have been read, raped of any good stories. The producers will have picked through the paper carcasses, before being barked at and bullied into getting her the best interviews for this morning's show. Taxis will be on their way to pick up and spit out overly excited and under-prepared guests. Every morning is different and

yet has become completely routine. It's been six months since I joined the *Coffee Morning* team and things are not going according to plan. A lot of people would think I have a dream job, but nightmares are dreams too.

I briefly stop to buy coffee for myself and a colleague in the foyer, then climb the stone steps to the fifth floor. I don't like lifts. I fix a smile on my face, before stepping into the office, and remind myself that this is what I do best; changing to suit the people around me. I can do 'Amber the friend' or 'Amber the wife', but right now it's time for 'Amber from *Coffee Morning*'. I can play all the parts life has cast me in, I know all my lines; I've been rehearsing for a very long time.

The sun has barely risen but, as predicted, the small, predominately female team has already assembled. Three fresh-faced producers, powered by caffeine and ambition, sit hunched over their desks. Surrounded by piles of books, old scripts and empty mugs, they tap away on their keyboards as though their cats' lives depend on it. In the far corner, I can see the glow of Madeline's lamp in her own private office. I sit down at my desk and switch on the computer, returning the warm smiles and greetings from the others. People are not mirrors, they don't see you how you see yourself.

Madeline has got through three personal assistants this year. Nobody lasts very long before she discards them. I don't want my own office and I don't need a PA, I like sitting out here with everyone else. The seat next to mine is empty. It's unusual for Jo not to be here by now and I worry that

something might be wrong. I look down at the spare coffee getting cold, then talk myself into taking it to Madeline's office. Call it a peace offering.

I stop in the open doorway like a vampire waiting to be invited in. Her office is laughably small, literally a converted store cupboard because she refuses to sit with the rest of the team. There are framed photos of Madeline with celebrities squeezed onto every inch of the fake walls and a small shelf of awards behind her desk. She doesn't look up. I observe the ugly short hair, grey roots making themselves known beneath the black spikes. Her chins rest on top of each other, while the rest of her rolled flesh is thankfully hidden beneath the baggy, black clothes. The desk lamp shines on the keyboard, over which Madeline's ring adorned fingers hover. I know she can see me.

'I thought you might need this,' I say, disappointed with the simplicity of the words given how long it took me to find them.

'Put it on the desk,' she replies, her eyes not leaving the screen.

You're welcome.

A small fan heater splutters away in the corner and the burnt-scented warmth snakes up around my legs, holding me in place. I find myself staring at the mole on her cheek. My eyes do that sometimes: focus on a person's imperfections, momentarily forgetting that they can see me seeing the things they'd rather I didn't.

'Did you have a nice weekend?' I venture.

'I'm not ready to talk to people yet,' she says. I leave her to it.

Back at my desk, I scan through the pile of post that has gathered since Friday: a couple of ghastly looking novels that I will never read, some fan mail and an invite to a charity gala, which catches my eye. I sip my coffee and daydream about what I might wear and whom I would take along if I went. I should do more charity work really, I just never seem to have the time. Madeline is the face of Crisis Child as well as the voice of *Coffee Morning*. I've always found her close relationship with the country's biggest children's charity slightly strange, given that she hates them and never had any of her own. She never even married. She's completely alone in life but never lonely.

Once I've sorted the post, I read through the briefing notes for this morning's programme, it's always useful to have a bit of background knowledge before the show. I can't find my red pen, so I head for the stationery cupboard.

It's been restocked.

I glance over my shoulder and then back at the neatly piled shelves of supplies. I grab a handful of Post-it notes, then I take a few red pens, pushing them into my pockets. I keep taking them until they are all gone and the box is empty. I leave the other colours behind. Nobody looks up as I walk back to my desk, they don't see me empty everything into my drawer and lock it.

Just as I'm starting to worry that my only friend here isn't making an appearance today, Jo walks in and smiles at me. She's dressed the same as always, in blue-denim jeans

and a white top, like she can't move on from the 90s. The boots she says she hates are worn down at the heel and her blonde hair is damp from the rain. She sits at the desk next to mine, opposite the rest of the producers.

'Sorry I'm late,' she whispers. Nobody apart from me notices.

The last to arrive is Matthew, the editor of the programme. This is not unusual. His skinny chinos are straining at the seams, worn low to accommodate the bulge around his middle. They're slightly too short for his long legs, revealing colourful socks above his brown, shiny shoes. He heads straight to his tidy desk by the window without saying hello. Why a team of women who produce a show for women is managed by a man is beyond my comprehension. But then Matthew took a chance and gave me this job when my predecessor abruptly left, so I suppose I should be grateful.

'Matthew, can you step into my office now you're here?' says Madeline from across the room.

'And he thought his morning couldn't get any worse,' Jo whispers. 'Are we still on for drinks after work?'

I nod, relieved that she isn't going to disappear straight after the show again.

We watch Matthew grab his briefing notes and hurry into Madeline's office, his flamboyant coat still flapping at his sides as though it wishes it could fly. Moments later, he storms back out, looking red-faced and flustered.

'We better go through to the studio,' says Jo, interrupting my thoughts. It seems like a good plan, given we're on in ten minutes.

'I'll see if Her Majesty is ready,' I reply, pleased to see that I've made Jo smile. I catch Matthew's eye as he raises a neatly arched eyebrow in my direction. I should not have said that out loud.

As the clock counts down to the top of the hour, everyone moves into place. Madeline and I make our way to the studio, to resume our familiar positions on a darkened centre stage. We are observed through an enormous glass window from the safety of the gallery, like two very different animals mistakenly placed in the same enclosure. Jo and the rest of the producers sit in the gallery. It is bright and loud, with a million different-coloured buttons that look terribly complicated given the simplicity of what we actually do; talk to people and pretend to enjoy it. In contrast, the studio is dimly lit and uncomfortably silent. There is just a table, some chairs and a couple of microphones. Madeline and I sit in the gloom, quietly ignoring each other, waiting for the on air light to go red and the first act to begin.

'Good morning and welcome to Monday's edition of *Coffee Morning*, I'm Madeline Frost. A little later on today's show, we'll be joined by best-selling author E. B. Knight, but before that, we'll be discussing the rising number of female breadwinners and, for today's phone-in, we're inviting you to get in touch on the subject of imaginary friends. Did you have one as a child? Perhaps you still do . . .'

The familiar sound of her on-air voice calms me and I switch to autopilot, waiting for my turn to say something. I wonder if Paul is awake yet. He hasn't been himself lately: staying up late in his writing shed, coming to bed just before

I get up, or not at all. He likes to call the shed a cabin. I like to call things what they are.

We spent an evening with E. B. Knight once, when Paul's first novel took off. That was over five years ago now, not long after we first met. I was a TV reporter at the time. Local news, nothing fancy. But seeing yourself on screen does force you to make an effort with your appearance, unlike radio. I was slim then, I didn't know how to cook; I didn't have anyone to cook for before Paul and rarely made an effort just for myself. Besides, I was too busy working. I mostly did pieces about potholes or the theft of lead from church roofs, but one day, serendipity decided to intervene. Our showbiz reporter went sick and I was sent to interview some hotshot new author instead of her. I hadn't even read his book. I was hungover and resented having to do someone else's job for them, but that all changed when he walked in the room.

Paul's publisher had hired a suite at the Ritz for the interview, it felt like a stage and I felt like an actress who hadn't learned her lines. I remember feeling out of my depth, but when he sat down in the chair opposite me, I realised he was more nervous than I was. It was his first television interview and I somehow managed to put him at ease. When he asked for my card afterwards, I didn't really think anything of it, but my cameraman took great pleasure commenting on our 'chemistry' all the way back to the car. I felt like a schoolgirl when he called that night. We talked and it was easy, as though we already knew each other. He said he had to go to a book awards ceremony the week after and didn't

have a date. He wondered if I might be free. I was. We sat on the same table as E. B. Knight for the ceremony, it was like having dinner with a legend and a very memorable first date. She was charming, clever and witty. I've been looking forward to seeing her again ever since I knew they had booked her as a guest.

'Good to see you,' I say, as the producer brings her into the studio.

'Nice to meet you too,' she replies, taking her seat. Not a flicker of recognition; how easy I am to forget.

Her trademark white bob frames her petite eighty-year-old face. She's immaculate, even her wrinkles are neatly arranged. She looks soft around the edges, but her mind is sharp and fast. Her cheeks are pink with blusher and her blue eyes are wise and watchful, darting around the studio before fixing on their target. She smiles warmly at Madeline as though she is meeting a hero. Guests do that sometimes. It doesn't bother me, not really.

After the show, we all shuffle into the meeting room for the debrief. We sit, waiting for Madeline, the room falling silent when she finally arrives. Matthew begins talking through the stories – what worked well, what didn't. Madeline's face isn't happy, her mouth contorts so that it looks like she's unwrapping toffees with her arse. The rest of us keep quiet and I allow my mind to wander once more.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star . . .

Madeline interjects with a frown.

How I wonder what you are.

She tuts, rolls her eyes.

Up above the world so high . . .

When Madeline has run out of unspoken criticisms, the team stand and begin to file out.

Like a diamond in the sky.

'Amber, can I have word?' says Matthew, dragging me from my daydream. Judging by his tone, I don't have a choice. He closes the meeting room door and I sit back down, searching his face for clues. As usual, he is impossible to read, void of emotion; his mother could have just died and you'd never know. He takes a biscuit from the plate we leave out for the guests and gestures for me to do the same. I shake my head. When Matthew wants to make a point, he always seems to take the scenic route. He tries to smile at me but soon tires from the effort and takes a bite of his biscuit instead. A couple of crumbs make themselves at home on his thin lips, which frequently part and snap shut like a goldfish, as he struggles to find the right words.

'So, I could make small talk, ask how you are, pretend that I care, that sort of thing, or I can come straight to the point,' he says. A knot of dread ties itself in my stomach.

'Go on,' I say, wishing that he wouldn't.

'How are things now with you and Madeline?' he asks, taking another bite.

'Same as always, she hates me,' I reply too soon. My turn to wear the fake smile now, the label still attached so I can return it when I'm done.

'Yes, she does, and that's a problem,' says Matthew. I shouldn't be surprised by this and yet I am. 'I know she didn't make your life easy when you first joined the team,

but it's been hard for her too, adjusting to having you around. This tension between the two of you, it doesn't seem to be improving. You might think people don't pick up on it, but they do. The two of you having good chemistry is really important for the show and the rest of the team.' He stares at me, waiting for a response I don't know how to give. 'Do you think you might be able to work on your relationship with her?'

'Well, I suppose I can try . . .'

'Good. I didn't realise quite how unhappy the situation was making her until today. She's delivered a bit of an ultimatum.' He pauses, and clears his throat before carrying on. 'She wants me to replace you.'

I wait for him to say more but he doesn't. His words hang in the space between us while I try to make sense of them.

'Are you firing me?'

'No!' he protests, but his face gives a different response while he considers what to say next. His hands come to meet each other in front of his chest, palms facing, just the fingertips touching, like a skin-coloured steeple or a half-hearted prayer. 'Well, not yet. I'm giving you until the New Year to turn this around. I'm sorry that all this has come about just before Christmas, Amber.' He uncrosses his long legs, as though it's an effort, before his body retreats as far back from me as his chair will allow. His mouth reacts by twisting itself out of shape, as though he's just tasted something deeply unpleasant while he waits for my response. I don't know what to say to him. Sometimes I think it's best to say nothing at all, silence cannot be misquoted. 'You're

great, we love you, but you have to understand that Madeline *is Coffee Morning*, she's been presenting it for twenty years. I'm sorry, but if I have to choose between the two of you, my hands are tied.'