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## OPEN YOUR EYES

by Michelle Moskiewicz

The sidewalk was slanting under his shoes again, the tree in front of the house swirling around like a reflection in a funhouse mirror.

“I just need to make it to bed,” he thought to himself while trying to pull the keys out of his pocket. The moment he heard the keys hitting his wooden deck, he wished he had remembered to replace the lightbulb in the porchlight. Gripping the doorknob in frustration, he was surprised when it smoothly turned in his hand. The lines on his face slacked, before the panic set in.

He opened the door slowly, partially from not knowing what to expect and because any sudden movements would likely end with him face first on the floor. As he gazed into the darkness, every shadow became foe. He couldn't even remember leaving for the bar, but he knew he always locked his doors. Luckily, the Beretta was across the hall in the lockbox, he only had to grab it and load it.

Metal against metal, click. It was quiet enough but putting a round in the chamber was going to let anyone in the house know he was armed.

“Why'd you do it?”

The voice. On wobbly legs, he spun around and was face to chest with the impossible. “How did you get here? What are you even doing here? You’re dead. I saw you die, Bradley.”

There Specialist Bradley stood, wearing the same uniform he died in. Still covered in his blood. “Damn it, Gray. Why’d you do it?” There was a pain in his words that hit Gray like a cold wind.

“Bradley, I told you, I tried. I swear I tried!”

The Jim Beam on his breath stung his nose. His words were coming out gravely and he could feel the pressure of tears behind his eyes. “I did everything I could for you on that MEDEVAC. We just couldn’t get out of there fast enough.”

“You lived, and this is how you repay us?”

Gray squeezed his eyes shut. In the hundreds of times that he’d seen ghosts of the ones he couldn’t save, Bradley had never been one of them. When Gray opened his eyes, Bradley was gone. Usually, they didn’t leave so quickly. The ghosts, or “his demons” as he’d come to affectionately call them liked to stick around until he was curled up in a ball, screaming into the night.

The floorboards beneath his feet creaked as he made his way to the freezer for his whiskey. Laying the Beretta on top of his school papers, he took a swig right from the frost covered glass bottle. Last night’s demon had been the last death before he finally decided he’d had it with the Army and wanted to become a Physician’s Assistant. Less stupid rules, less running, and less death. The kid from last night was barely old enough to have to shave his face, but Gray vividly saw where the shooter had caught him right in the throat with his pop shot. Blood poured from the wound every time his heart was supposed to beat.

He had sat in Gray's room for hours calling for 'Mama' in an accent that could only suggest he was a good 'ol boy from the deep south woods. Eventually, Gray gave up on studying and began drinking. It usually numbed the pain and helped drown the voices out when they started blaming him for their deaths. Drinking simply made this boy's voice louder. Jacobson. That was his name. With a hole in his throat, thick blood pouring everywhere, he began clawing at Gray's legs begging to be saved.

Sirens in the distance jerked Gray out of last night's memory and brought him back to the present. There were footsteps echoing from the second floor and he guessed it had something to do with the unlocked door. He reached out for the pistol, but it wasn't where he'd left it. No matter, he'd have to use the bottle as a weapon.

Gray stepped towards the stairs, but not wanting to alert the intruder, he made his steps as slow and precise as possible.

"You need to open your eyes."

"Damn it Bradley," Gray snarled in a hushed tone, "Get lost. I don't have time to do this right now."

"You've got all the time in the world."

Gray looked back behind him, wondering what Bradley was getting at, but the only thing he found was dark space. Out of nowhere, whoever it was in the house came barreling through and pounding down the stairs. Even in the darkness, his face looked vaguely familiar, maybe a neighbor. Not being sure, without his pistol, and still reeling from the activities earlier in the night, Gray decided to just see what the guy stole and call the cops.

Needing another drink before stepping into the unknown, Gray realized the bottle was absent from his hands. He must have dropped it when the intruder ran through, he told himself. Maybe it was time to slow down on the drinking.

Wailing sirens were coming closer and seemed to be headed right for his neighborhood.

“Open your eyes, kid.”

Bradley was beside him again. Gray could feel his arm coming down on his shoulder. Gray glanced at his old friend and his blood-stained uniform. This close, he could see the holes that the bullets had made in his chest. Meeting Bradley’s eyes, Gray said, “I did try. It was just too much.”

The red and white flashing lights stopped right in front of the house, casting bouncing shadows through the windows. The sirens screamed in the background as Gray pushed the bedroom door open.

It was there that he found himself, with the missing Beretta and empty Jim Beam bottle. Where the southern kid from last night had been pulling on him, begging for life. Smearred across the ceiling and wall was his blood and fragments of what used to hold his demons. His eyes were open, the demons free.

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