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The Hours Happened

Lauren stood there in the last photograph with the city as a backdrop, the blue sky out behind the outline of the Empire State building, the green trees of Central Park far away in the distance, Lauren smiling with her dark sunglasses on in the forefront.

I walked over to the back windows of our apartment, which overlooked most of Manhattan rising up like a floating heaven out behind our building.

The morning sun was higher now and it flooded the canyons in this beautiful shade of gray and yellow that I had never seen before. Windows sparkled and steel glistened and everything out there seemed to be the way it should been on this day.

But inside our apartment I held the photograph of my wife to my chest as this horrible feeling of anguish began to rip right through me. The apartment suddenly became still and empty, and the only sounds I could recognize were the ticking of the clock on the kitchen wall and the beating of my own heart where the picture lie against my chest.

Lauren came out of our bedroom bathroom with this giant smirk on her face. There was a tight smoothness to her mouth and her deep blue eyes were shimmering like she was standing in front of the Adriatic.

"You owe me big time," she said to me.

I began to smirk.

"I owe you?" I said. "Let me see: I do the clothes. I cook dinner. And wasn't it you who said: 'I promise I'll clean the cat litter if you just let me have this one cat!' I think you can handle cleaning the toilet for once!"

Lauren looked guilty standing there next to our bed. Her perfect mouth

scrunched up and her forehead tightened, but there was no way out of it.

"I did change the cat litter the week you hurt your back," she said like a lawyer.

I faked a back spasm that time. "I think it's hurting again," I said.

"Michael Gerrard— You're not funny!"

I took Lauren's hand and pulled her close.

My wife's body fit perfectly against mine near the bed, her small breasts slightly pushing upward against my chest, her head on my shoulder, her arms around my back. Her newly cut blond hair had the redolence of vanilla and coconut in it.

"You do owe me though," I said to her, only half-kidding.

Lauren pushed back from me and laughed.

"Our anniversary isn't over yet," she said.

She mischievously began to pull me across the apartment, grabbing her pocketbook and camera off the kitchen table. We were scooting through the kitchen together, down the corridor toward the front door.

"Your keys!" she said.

I snatched them off the key hook as we went past.

"Where are we going?"

As we went out the front door Lauren stopped, crouched down like a baseball catcher, and snapped a photograph of our cat, Rohan, as he was standing just inside the apartment door.

"Got him!" Lauren said with this excited look in her eyes.

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I kicked little Rohan all the way back inside and shut the door behind him.

"Let's go to my work," Lauren insisted.

"On our day off?"

"You've never been. Come on!"

"I don't want to. It's our anniversary."

"It's a tourist attraction."

"Not on our anniversary."

We began to go down the stairs.

"We're going," Lauren insisted.

I saw this delightful smirk come up in her face. We stopped one landing down, where I went to grab and kiss her, but she ended up grabbing me first and pinning me against the wall like she was going to seduce me into doing what she wanted. She leaned in. I felt her warm mouth kiss me slow and gentle. Lauren leaned back. As soon as I saw the look in her eyes I felt this tight feeling in my throat. "You owe me, buddy," she said. "Now let's go."

We went down the stairs and outside onto Grand Street into the sunny afternoon.

As I looked up toward lower Manhattan I could see the sky was clean and bright. The mugginess had cleared out and it seemed like a new world in a different skin.

This was our 6th wedding anniversary, but it was our first in Manhattan. We used to live in Far Rockaway in a two-story cottage on Hanson Court, but Lauren got this new job at Morgan Stanley and we made the move to the city to better ourselves. I got a transfer from my position with

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Citigroup and I worked over in the offices on East 53rd Street now. It was the second marriage for both of us. Neither one of us had any children.

"Come on, babe." Lauren rushed ahead of me down the sidewalk like she was in a hurry.

I pointed toward the record store. "Don't you want to go in?" I asked her.

"I only want to go if you want to go."

I hesitated. "Sure," I said. "I can look for that Eva Cassidy CD."

She looked at me skeptically. "You're just saying that!" she said.

I caught up to her and began to pull her by the hand.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

I led her by the hand into the record store.

A little bell rang as the door swung open. "Come on." I pulled Lauren along and plopped her right in front of the D's over in the Pop section.

"Look!" she said. "I'm getting it."

I watched her pick up this CD:

Neil Diamond
THE GREATEST HITS
1966-1992

"You've got to be kidding!" I said.

Lauren took the CD and held it against her chest.

"I'll play it at my work," she said very defensive. "My dad used to play his records all the time. I was just telling Rachel the other day."

"Have you heard him sing lately?" I asked. "Yucko!" I reached over behind me and picked up a Third Eye Blind CD. "I'll get this."

Lauren and I headed over to the cashier. He was dark and had a bony face with a thin black beard. It was obvious he was from India. At work I had a friend from Pakistan, another from Sri Lanka, and yet another from India. They all came to this country to find work. We had a lot of nice Indians from India in our apartment building also.

Suddenly I saw my wife reach into her pocketbook for her wallet. I rushed my ATM card out and jammed it into the hand of the cashier.

"No. I'm paying for it!" Lauren objected. "You already paid for lunch!"

"So?" I said. I nodded for the cashier to ring it up.

Lauren stuck her tongue out as I signed the receipt. She then took out her camera and snapped a photograph of the cashier as we were walking out.

"No. No," the cashier said. "You mustn't do that!"

"I'm sure it's outta film," I told him as we went out the door.

Outside, we noticed an Italian festival going on along one of the side streets.

"We should go!" I said.

We walked over to the festival, where we saw al fresco dining out on the sidewalks, outdoor eating contests, souvenir vendors. You could smell fresh fish cooking, barbecue chicken on a grill, fried dough, steamers, popcorn, sausage and peppers.

A man came rushing up to us. He pushed a pamphlet into my chest. "Let's not elect Bush in oh-four either!" he screamed. "Lyndon LaRouche in two thousand and four!"

It was so strange. There was this beautiful chaos all around us.

I reached over and grabbed my wife's camera. I quickly snapped a photo of the guy. He glared at me.

"Gimme that!" he said, and he actually reached over and grabbed the pamphlet back that he had just given me.

Lauren began to laugh.

There was this family watching us—I think they were from Japan, because they were holding maps as they stood there on the sidewalk. I politely nodded to them. This one old man walked forward from the group. He held his camera out. He kept nodding.

"He wants you to take a picture," Lauren said.

I took a step forward and the old man handed me his camera. He showed me which button to press and I took a few steps backward until I could see his entire family in the frame of the picture.

"Say cheese!" I said.

They all laughed as I took the picture. I smiled over at Lauren. She pulled her camera out and happily took a picture of the old man. The man nodded and bowed toward her like she were a princess.

After the Japanese family began to walk away I noticed another young man across the street over on the sidewalk. He seemed out of place in his newly ironed white shirt, his beige slacks, and in his brightly colored red tie. He began to approach us.

"Would you like to hear some good news?" the young man asked. He smiled as he held a magazine out. "There's no obligation. It's about Jehovah's kingdom."

I felt Lauren nudge me on my side.

"Sure," I said to the young man. "I'd love to read it."

"But only if we can take your picture," Lauren interjected.

The young man smiled. "I guess that would be okay," he said.

Lauren snapped his picture and the young man smiled back at us. We then watched as he went off and approached someone else.

Lauren came over and put her arm around me.

"Today's beautiful," she said. "I think this is the best anniversary we've had yet."

There was a man selling super size hats over on the sidewalk. Lauren left me and went over and grabbed a purple Mad Hatter hat. She put it on.

"How's it look?" she asked. She began to pose with it. "Sexy? Huh?"

"You look like a pimp," I told her. "I'm definitely buying that thing for you."

I went over and paid the guy who was selling the hats. Lauren put the hat on as we went off down the street.

We walked a couple of blocks. Off on another side street there was a big band on a small stage. They were playing Bobby Darin, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin.

Lauren and I stopped and listened for a while. I took my wife's hand. We began to dance a little right in the street. People kept walking by us and laughing. Some people smiled. One old Islamic woman came over and touched Lauren's hat like it might come alive. She laughed after she touched the hat. She said something. I don't know what.

When I turned I noticed Lauren was smiling. There was this content look on her face.

"We can go visit your work," I finally told her.

This beautiful smile came up into her pretty mouth.

"Just for a little while," she said very happy. "We'll just go up to the observation deck."

We went and took the subway. We sat on an E train and held hands the entire ride. I was getting hungry, but I didn't tell her.

Soon the train slowed and we came up into the World Trade Center subway station.

We got off and headed toward the end of the platform, where there was a hallway leading up to the mall. There was an art's project with over 300 mosaics up on the wall—the eyes of children taken from hundreds of photographs; and there was the sudden rush of a downtown A train going by; the smell of crayons, perfume, and the smell of meatball grinders everywhere

As we headed to go up into the south tower of the World Trade Center I saw Lauren smiling like there was one less place on her mental checklist of places that she had to take me.

There was an open elevator and we went over and got inside.

"Aren't you afraid someone will see you?" I asked.

She confidently shook her head no. "It's my day off. I can do anything I want."

We changed elevators about midway up the tower.

On the second elevator Lauren pulled out her camera and aimed it up toward the number of each floor atop the elevator doors. When the 74th floor lit up in a white glow she snapped a picture of it.

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"That's my floor," she said very proud.

The sound of her voice made me smile.

When we reached the top of the World Trade Center the walls were lined with enormous murals, each one telling a story about the city of New York. We walked past the murals and over to the windows. Each set of windows looked like a wall of water, something you could slip out of. My stomach began to feel like it was on a roller coaster.

"Let's go outside," Lauren said excited.

She dragged me by the hand and we went outside, where there were great crowds lined up against the railings of the observation deck. We found a small open spot and snuggled ourselves in against the railing.

"There's the Brooklyn Bridge!" I said.

I pointed toward the span as it stuck out like a sore thumb out across the river. We could see the roof of the Chrysler Building shimmering in the sun—Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty sitting out there in the blue bay.

I took my wife and put my arm around her. She leaned in with her cheek against mine so that we were looking over the city together. I could feel her smile and shiver and she began to hold onto me for dear life.

"It's so beautiful up here in September," she said. "We should take another day. Just like this. Maybe next month."

"Okay," I said. "Sounds like an idea."

Lauren let out this frustrated breath.

"I don't want to go back to work tomorrow," she said. She looked out at the city down below us. There were small little cars that looked like red and green ants driving along the streets, minute black pinpoints that were people walking on the sidewalks, the small movements of wind in

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scattered trees here and there. Lauren turned to me and smiled. "I wish everyday could be like this one. Every day should be like September tenth."

I nodded.

I began to smile as Lauren reached over into her pocketbook to take her sunglasses and camera out. I watched her put her sunglasses on, and then she began to fidget with her camera.

"I think there's one picture left," she said a little unsure. "Sometimes the last picture doesn't come out."

"Well let me take it of you," I said.

Lauren nodded her head like she didn't want to.

"Yes," I insisted. "I don't ever want to forget this day."

She looked at me with this grin on her face.

I took the camera from her and backed up a step.

Lauren leaned back against the railing of the observation deck, fiddling with her sunglasses, quickly running her hand through her short blond hair. She had the most serious look on her face. I stared at my beautiful wife through the lens of her camera—Lauren stood there with the city as a backdrop, the blue sky out behind the outline of the Empire State building, the green trees of Central Park far away in the distance, Lauren smiling with her dark sunglasses on in the forefront.

I must have stared at her up there on the observation deck of the World Trade Center for what felt like a million years when really it was only one moment in our lives.

"TAKE THE PICTURE!" Lauren shouted at me like she was this petulant child, "TAKE THE PICTURE, SILLY! HURRY UP! TAKE THE PICTURE!"

I stared at her for one last second, staring at her radiant face right up until the moment when I pushed the little button of her camera on the best day of all of our lives.