

# I'm Still Here

*by* David DeJong

During the night and in the fog of halfsleep Ben shifted and felt the weight of Miranda gone from him, the bed empty. In the quiet of the house he thought he heard a footstep and the soft shutting of a door, and as his eyes searched the dark he waited for any other noise: the creak of the floorboards as Miranda returned to bed, the engine of her car starting outside. But there was only the tick of the clock in the kitchen, and then the hum of the heater beginning again, and he slid back down into the ether. Somewhere the whistle and rattle of a train sounded in the distance.

When he finally awoke flat sunlight was filtering past the curtains, and he was alone. Buzz and Gonzo pacing and whining at him from the foot of the bed. He turned toward his nightstand and felt soreness and a twinge of desire, and he wondered if he should have asked Miranda to stay the night, though that was not something she ever did, not in all the times she'd come to his house. They ate, they drank, they had sex. Sometimes they did a little coke. That was the extent of their time together.

They'd met at a party seven months before, had stood on a balcony that jutted out from the Hollywood Hills and made Ben imagine earthquakes, tumbling down a ravine. Within half an hour they'd both admitted to being emotionally unavailable but sex-deprived from the years of sleeping back to back in their respective marriage beds. That night they'd ended up back at Ben's house. Miranda told him she was separated from her husband, though she still lived with him. Until the divorce, she said. To save money. Ben had an ex-wife whose love notes he still sometimes found in old suitcases, I love you scribbled beside crooked hearts.

In the past seven months they'd developed more of an

arrangement than a relationship. Ben would call Miranda when he felt like getting drunk and having the warmth of a body beside him, or she would call and say she was in the neighborhood, and soon after she'd arrive tasting of cigarettes and vodka and things would proceed from there. Nights of indulgence, she called them. Consolation prizes for their failed marriages. You couldn't complicate something like that with ideas of the future. At least for awhile. But awhile seemed to be coming to an end.

The night before as he'd slid into his vodka-induced slumber Miranda had lain awake beside him, rambling on about whether they expected too much from marriage and how could two people ever be compatible really? He could tell she wanted him to listen but he was no good at it, not in the state he was in, and he remembered her saying that if she had a child but never fell in love again that would make her happy. As he'd begun to drift off to sleep his mind uttered words he could not be sure he wasn't saying aloud into the darkness. That was when she told him she loved him, her words spreading over him like blood clouding through water. He heard her but pretended to be already asleep, and then he was.

Once he realized Buzz and Gonzo wouldn't stop their protests Ben reluctantly rolled out of bed. Naked he stumbled to the bathroom and sent an arc bowlward. The dogs' toenails pattered back and forth on the hardwood floor outside the bathroom.

"Hang on," he told them, and Gonzo uttered forth a low whinge of disappointment. In the mirror he rubbed at the stubble of his beard and looked at the gray sprinkled throughout, some of it blonde he hoped, though the first strands of silver were already attacking the dark hair at his temples. A study of his beer-padded midsection as well and then he went to the bedroom. He pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater that itched against his bare skin and strode into the kitchen, sockless but booted, the shitkickers he'd worn the night before with their leather insides cold and smooth against his bare feet. After swallowing a handful of Advil with some orange juice he splashed water on his face, then looked at Buzz and Gonzo hanging

back in the doorway. "Alright, come on," he said finally. They trailed him as he walked toward the back door, and then suddenly they were barking and pushing past him, running into the yard as he opened the creaking screen door outward.

Miranda was curled up and sleeping on an Adirondack chair, wrapped in a blanket she'd scavenged from his closet. An ashtray and a crumpled pack of cigarettes on one side of her and an empty glass on the other. The dogs with tails clocking back and forth like metronomes circled her but she didn't stir, not until Ben was standing in front of her. Then she looked up as if he'd brought her breakfast in bed.

"What time is it?" She gently pushed Buzz down so he wouldn't knock over her ashtray.

"A little after seven," said Ben.

"Jesus, it's freezing."

She was pale and small in the chair, barefoot and clad in tight jeans and one of his sweat shirts. Dark haired, dark brown eyes with shadows beneath them. Her pert nose red with cold. The faintest outline of a blue vein traced up along her temple, and her lips were nearly absent of color, like they'd been outlined on her face.

He sat on the footrest and reached beneath the blanket and found her hand. Icy in his.

"How long have you been out here?" he said.

"I don't know." She yawned the words, shook her head. "Do you have a cigarette?"

"No, I don't," he said. Fog of breath coming from both their mouths. He wanted to kiss some warmth into her, was repelled and attracted at the same time to her fragility.

She moved as if to get up. "I might have some in my purse."

"I'll get them," he said.

She touched the crumpled pack. "I thought I had one more left."

"When did you come out here?" said Ben.

"A while ago. Did you say it was seven?" she said.

Ben rubbed her hands between his own. He was still startled at

finding her in the backyard. He realized he didn't want her to be there right now.

"Do you... is it okay that you're here still?" he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Nothing."

"Alex is away on business," she said. Her eyes flitted to his face but then looked around the yard, as if she couldn't quite focus.

Buzz got his paws up on the arm of the chair and began trying to lick her. Miranda held back his head and scratched him behind the ears.

"No, Buzz, down," said Ben.

"I couldn't sleep," she said.

Ben clicked his mouth at the dog. "Buzz..."

"He's okay," said Miranda. She rubbed Buzz's muzzle and then the dog got down on his own, casting a disapproving look toward Ben.

"Is it alright?" she said. Doubtful eyes. Eyebrows raised at him.

"Is what alright?"

"Me still being here."

"Of course," he said. "I was just worried about, you know. Your husband."

"Don't worry about that," she said.

"Where did he go?"

"Who?"

"Alex."

"Away. He had a business trip. Chicago, I think."

"You don't know?"

She shrugged. "We're like roommates, I told you. We just live in the same house."

"But you've never stayed out before."

She shook her head. "I just feel like that would be cruel. Rubbing his nose in it."

"Does he?"

"Alex? Never."

"Because why?"

"I don't know." She looked at the cigarette pack again. "You know I just need one. In my purse."

A breeze blew the windchime that hung over the back porch and the sound came like the soft clinking of wineglasses before fading into the wind and the trees.

"Fine," he said. "I'll get them."

In the kitchen he drank more orange juice, poured Miranda a glass, got more Advil, found her cigarettes. He thought for a moment of snooping but the purse was so cavernous and so jingling with loose odds and ends that it felt too daunting a task.

He looked at the Amex card and rolled up twenty on the dining room table and the empty bottle of Ketel on the counter and the guilt and fear of the night swept over him, the same checklist of bad behaviors.

And then looking still at the empty bottle he thought of coming home, maybe a year into his marriage, when things were already careening downhill, and finding a bottle like that on the kitchen counter and his wife passed out in bed, and being unable to wake her. Ten minutes of shaking her, and then finally wringing out a cold wash cloth over her face. Why did you drink all that? he'd asked. *Because I didn't want to hurt anymore.*

His mother in her last years had nothing more than Ensures in the fridge and half empty bottles of cheap red wine on her kitchen counters. His father, still alive, subsisted on cigarettes and bad bourbon.

He walked over to the counter and threw the vodka bottle in the trash.

When he was sitting in front of Miranda again she asked him if he was mad at her.

"No," he said. "Why?"

"Just asking."

"Well then, no."

The dogs were settled at their feet, watching Miranda as she lit

her cigarette. Gonzo sniffed the smoke in the air and then laid her head down.

Miranda blew out a thin stream of smoke and then stared up at the sky. "Alex isn't away on business," she said. "I left."

"Oh," said Ben.

"That's why I'm still here. I know you were thinking —"

"Not really."

"You were," she said.

"I didn't want him to come looking for you," said Ben.

"He wouldn't." She tapped her ash and then took another drag from the cigarette.

"You did this when?"

"Yesterday."

"Really," said Ben.

"I was going to tell you last night."

"Well. I mean that's okay," he said. "I mean why would you feel you have to tell me. It's your marriage obviously. This is, what we do, this is different. I didn't want this to affect your separation. Your decision about what to do."

"I wanted to tell you last night. I have my things," she said.

"What do you mean? You have what?"

"Nevermind." She looked up at him. "I thought, last night, I'd ask you if you wanted..." she took another long drag from the cigarette. "If you wanted me to stay here, but I don't think you do. I don't think it's a good idea, either."

"This is. I don't know. What we've been doing. It's different."

"An escape."

"Maybe."

So far their lives were somehow separate. Lives that only collided late at night, lubricated with vodka, drugs, darkness, touch, taste. As he looked at her now he could see the white of her scalp through the dark hair where the morning light was hitting it.

"Have you ever thought about it?" she said. "Doing that? You know, me being here?"

"Maybe," he said.

She frowned. "I'm not trying to push myself on you," she said.

"I know that," he said. "I didn't say that. Tell me. Why yesterday? What made you leave. Did something happen?"

"Nothing. We don't have to talk about it."

"I want to talk about it."

"It's making you uncomfortable, I can tell."

"Maybe I just wasn't expecting it."

The dogs got up and trundled to the backyard. Gonzo had a squat to pee while Buzz sniffed around her. A look upward at a bird. Ben wished for a moment that their lives could be as simple.

He looked back at Miranda. At the end of her cigarette the ash leaned, a tower ready to collapse. She tapped it into the ashtray and looked at him.

"I wasn't asking to stay here," she said. "I have a friend. Maybe I just wanted you to want me here. I wanted to see."

"I do. I just would have wanted to talk about it. Before."

"I know," she said. "Don't worry. I've got somewhere to stay."

"You could stay here," he said. "I want you to stay here."

"Maybe it would ruin everything," she said.

"I don't know," he said. He looked at her and then back toward the dogs. Alone now how many years? One. Two. And these interludes with Miranda, they were his lone connection. Maybe she'd push him back outside of himself. Maybe they'd stay in the house and drink themselves into oblivion. He wanted to somehow open up again, feel something when he wasn't drunk or coked up, wanted to feel again what he'd felt when he was first married and life seemed clean. Simple as two dogs lying beneath the trees.

Miranda was looking at him. He could feel her eyes. The dogs came trotting back. "What are you thinking?" she said.

Had the dogs not come back then, not placed their heads nuzzling at Miranda's thighs, would he have said what he did? He watched them greet her, watched her slender hands pulling at their coats and ruffling their fur, their shiny smiling mouths and lolling tongues, and in the glimpse of all of them together — this caravan of *Ben Miranda Buzz Gonzo* — he felt a shard of his heart loosen, or maybe it was

that it wasn't a shard at all now but beating again, warm and pliable, where before it had been cold porcelain cracked and crumbling, and he took her hand, and the dogs pushed into them with their wet snouts, and he felt a part of his face smile.

He heard his voice but felt the fear and then the words spilling forth, felt the words forming and thought *what the hell? Why not?* And then he was taking her hand and looking at her as she tried to read into his eyes the truth of what he was saying.

"I'm thinking," he said. "I should get your things."

