

Birthmark

by Ryn Cricket

“Ay mates, let's get some pub grub.” Katie decided. “Ya with me?”

It always seemed like her group of friends followed any idea she threw out. If she decided it would be a good idea to go swimming in the ocean in October, they'd be right behind her, and then tell stories about it at the pub for weeks.

“Will we be goin' to The Barking Spider or Flannery's t'night?” Colm asked.

“I'm leanin' towards Flannery's because their boxy is brilliant.”

So the six college seniors headed towards Flannery's on a well-deserved night off after a week of particularly difficult final exams before the Christmas break. As they burst onto the premises, they saw an announcer facilitating pub games. That was a bonus, because a night with pub games always ensured a good time.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have something a little different for ya t'night. Rather than your typical trivia or drinking game, I would like to demonstrate the mystical magic of hypnosis.”

Katie leaned over to Bridgette and whispered, “This ought to be great craic!”

“So do I have any victims —I mean...volunteers?” the man said sweeping his arm over the audience who was drunk enough to laugh.

Katie got up. “Sure, I'm game.”

“Beautiful! Now then have a seat here.” He said patting the back of a black leather chair in front of him on the stage. “And just relax.” So she sat down, gave a smile and little wave to her table of friends, and closed her eyes.

The man leaned down to her left ear and whispered, “Now, I'm not going to do anything dodgy, and I promise you'll remember everything.” She gave a quick nod in acceptance. He smelled like soap and lime juice and the clean scent lingered with her bringing another little smile to her face.

“All right my dear, what's your name?”

"Katie. Katie McGinty."

"Great! Well Katie, I want you to just close your eyes and relax." He motioned for the whole pub to hush, and they did.

"Just listen to the sound of my voice, Katie. You are feeling very sleepy...and so relaxed...Your breathing is becoming steady as if you were sleeping...you couldn't possibly open your eyelids for you haven't the energy or need. When I count backwards from five to one, Katie, you will be asleep. Five...breathing steady...four...so relaxed...three...sinking deeper...two...one. Katie, whatever we do, you will remember."

Someone almost began to speak, but the man waved his hand. "Katie, you will only hear to my voice." The man said quickly. "No one else is here, so there are no other sounds except my voice. Now let's go back to your third birthday. Are you there?"

"Yes." She said meekly.

"And what do you see?"

"There is a pink cake with butterflies." She said in a high little voice. "I can count the candles! One, two three!" The audience gasped and a few giggled a little.

"Very good, Katie. Is that how old you are?" He asked.

"Yes." She said with a big beaming smile.

"Let's go back even further, Katie." There were murmurs and questioning in the audience. Where was he going back to? Her birth?

"All right Katie, what's the first thing you remember? What do you see?" The man asked.

"I'm in a big bed. The walls are white-washed and there are flowing curtains over windows with no glass. The breeze feels so good on my face... I think they want me to focus on the air, the cool air, breathe."

The man seemed a bit startled. At first he thought she might be describing the hospital where she born, but it wasn't any hospital. "Go on...What is happening? What are you doing?"

"I'm holding on to the bedpost and squeezing it when the pain comes because I don't want to scream. There are four other women

in the room around me in colorful saris. One of them is his wife. She is standing in the corner with her arms crossed, looking at me with contempt and maybe jealousy. She's had no children yet."

The man was amazed and had no idea where this story could be coming from, so he just shrugged his shoulders to the audience, and encouraged her to go on. He was careful not to say her name now because he was quite sure she was no longer Katie.

"They're talking so fast! I can't understand them. I smell curry. It's really strong. I used to love it, but now, here, it makes me want to throw up! They look scared. They're talking so fast, it's making me nervous. What are they saying? I'm giving birth! Oh my God, I'm having a baby! Oh, it hurts! IT HURTS! But the women are trying to help me. The woman in red and gold with the painted hands gave me some herbs...it's coming so fast...but everything is... floating away...I can't feel them...the voices...the smell...it's fading...it's turning white..." Her voice trails off, into voicelessness.

The man wasn't sure what to do, so he took her out of it as quickly as he could. "Ladies and gentlemen, let's give a big hand to Katie!" There was a round of applause from the audience and the man immediately decided to go back to the usual fare of trivia/drinking games.

Katie had managed her way back to her table in what her friends thought might be a slight daze. She couldn't speak, because there was nothing to say. She downed the rest of her Jamison and grabbed a few chips off of Bridgette's plate.

"Hey mates!" She said putting on a somewhat forced smile. "I'm done in. I'm gonna head back. It's been a long day."

Bridgette thought she should go with her. "No, no, I'm top notch." She assured them. "Really. Enjoy yourselves. Sláinte!"

As soon as Katie crawled into bed, she fell into a heavy, dreamless sleep, as if she hadn't slept for days. And even though she forgot to set her alarm and subsequently slept in, she managed not to miss her noon appointment with her Anthropology professor, Dr. Singh.

"Hello, Katie." He said in his British/Indian accent when he saw her in the doorway. For some reason, she almost couldn't recognize him.

"Hello, Dr. Singh," Katie said as she handed him her research paper. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course, Katie. What is it?" Katie noticed that he had really large eyes with long eyelids that didn't really go all the way up but made his eyelashes even more pronounced. It was hard for her to look away from them.

She sat down in the big soft chair in front of his desk. "In your religion you believe in past lives, right?"

"Yes, reincarnation is a tenet of the Hindu faith." He replied.

"As Catholics, I think we believe that only Jesus had the power to come back."

"Yes, it's an interesting little snag in Christianity."

Katie laughed a little nervously. "So how does it work exactly?"

"Well," Dr. Singh began leaning back in his chair and touched his long, bony fingertips together. His fingers showed his age much more than his face did. "For those who are interested in these things, they may see the details in a meditation or a dream perhaps. Most often they remember their own death first, because it's usually the most traumatic thing they experience."

"Really?" Katie looked up with big eyes. "How do they know it's real?"

"Sometimes they carry something with them: a favorite food, a fear, an allergy, even a birthmark." He explained.

"How can you keep a birthmark?"

"Sometimes you chose to have one to remind yourself. Listen," he said as he stood up and grabbed his jacket. "I was just about to go for lunch. Would you like to join me?"

"Ok." Katie agreed, and they walked to the local curry house. Dr. Singh ordered food and talked to the waiter in Hindi. Somehow Katie could tell that what he ordered wasn't on the menu, but the waiter just nodded without question.

“So as we were saying...if there is something to be remembered, the spirit will find a way to remember it.”

Katie watched Dr. Singh take a hollow ball of crunchy fried bread and put a potato and pea mixture in it. Then he added a teaspoon full of a spicy green water inside and popped the whole thing in his mouth. She imitated him. The taste was unexplainably shocking. It was delicious, but she could feel the white walls and flowing curtains swirling around her in a dizzying wind.

“Tell me, do you have a birthmark behind your left shoulder?”
Dr. Singh asked breaking the spell.

Yes...yes, I do, but how did you know?”

He looked up and focused his big eyes directly on her. “All my life I have lived with the guilt of my mother's death, and now...finally...I can redeem myself to her.”

