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## The Vernal Pool

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## The Demons in His Mind

By Valerie Nguyen

It's the fourth time around. I'm always here, just waiting for him to walk out, clutching his damn medallion in one hand and cheap donuts and cold coffee in the other. I love him and said forever. So, here I am waiting for him to walk out after what feels like an eternity. On cue, the clock strikes eight, and he's the first out the door fleeing from demons I have never seen nor will I understand. We don't speak; there is no embrace between lovers who have grown as people, just walking to the car. His hand quickly grazes mine, but nothing else happens. Nothing that gives me an indication that he even cares. His meeting was kept confidential to all, not letting anyone know about those demons keeping him awake.

I drive, as he continues to stuff his face with those god awful donuts. Managing a forced smile, I turn to look over his profile. "How was the meeting, honey?" Silence. I continue driving as I try to continue the conversation. "Apparently, Joe, from down the street, fixed that lousy mower after weeks of us nagging." More silence. There he is, holding whatever that shiny thing is in his palm. "Are you even hearing what I'm saying?" I look over at him again. "Mike?"

I turn on the car's radio, to this smooth jazz station, when Mike distractedly moves the medallion to the dim car lights. "What's that?" He grunts in response and quickly shoves it into his pocket. I turn onto our street.

We arrive at our small, average suburban home, and he quickly walks into the kitchen. "Mike? Is everything okay?" I look at his eyes again. It's the same fogginess I saw when he first arrived home from the war. I stand

there helpless, watching him walk up to our bedroom to finally get some sleep.

I've given up talking to Mike for the rest of the night. He must've had a conversation with someone that brought back those demons. I grit my teeth. Those demons are the reason why we never communicate anymore. That's what's killing him. That's what's ruining him.

After a few minutes of waiting alone in the cold bed, I turn off the light. Mike is probably sleeping in the other room tonight. He usually does if he's had a beer or two. I struggle a little more and slip into a silent darkness.

Laughter. Soft laughter fills my ears as a gentle breeze goes through me. I give a quick shiver. "Is it a little chilly for you?" someone asks as they put a jacket over my shoulders. I look around, seeing the same person smile at me. I smile back. This someone looks familiar, and it takes me a little bit until I realize that it's Mike. My Mike! He reaches for my hands and kisses the top of them. "I love you..." his voice trails off as he stares into my eyes.

Before I can comprehend anything, I whisper back, "I love you too." I close my eyes, enjoying the moment. "Mike, do you ever think..." I open my eyes as I'm suddenly greeted with the scent of sulfur and gas.

Frazzled, I look around. There's shouting. A lot of it. I crane my neck around, trying to figure out what's going on. There's Mike, in front of me. He's panicked, though. He's covered with dirt, wearing that army green that he began to familiarize himself with. His eyes look strained, looking at me like I'm all he's ever had. "Mike!" I scream, trying to get him to walk toward me. "Mike! Come to me!" I repeatedly yell, almost losing my voice. He continues to look at me, without any recognition of what I'm saying. My voice then barely reaches above a whisper. "Mike?"

I shoot up from my bed, covered in cold sweat. I slowly walk downstairs and grab a glass of water. I sip the water, looking around the kitchen. There are breadcrumbs on the counter. Rolling my eyes, I quickly clean up the crumbs from his late night sandwich. Of course he decided to cook food so late at night. I wouldn't expect anything less from Mike. Remembering my dream, I continue to wonder if there were any implications in it.

But were there any implications? Was it something I could control? His thoughts go past my everyday civilian life. What do I do anyway? All I've done is nothing out of the ordinary. I've had an average life, until I met Mike. He added excitement into my life, and it was like no other relationship I've ever had. Finishing my water, I walk back up the stairs.

Out of habit, I stop by Mike's other bedroom. I slowly open the door and smile softly at his snoring body moving up and down, like a slow rhythm. Mike's face is peaceful, like all of his horrible memories have vanished. But then I see the beer bottles, thrown aside on the ground. I smell a hint of mint, as he obviously tried to mask the scent of the alcohol. I stand at the door a few more seconds, reminiscing about when Mike used to be that peaceful. I close the door and quietly walk back to our shared room. It takes a while to sleep again, but eventually, I find comfort in the darkness.

All I can see is white. In the center of the white room stands Mike. He gasps for air, as tears stream down his face. I stand in front of him, speechless, as he looks up. His eyes light up in recognition as he reaches his hands out to touch my face. "I- I'm so s-sorry," he whispers, bringing his forehead toward my own. "I'm so sorry for everything, my love." He pulls away, and reaches his hand to wipe another tear. "This isn't your fault. It

never has been,” he tells me, turning his back toward me.

“Mike, what do you mean? I love you.” I look at his back, confused. Mike still doesn’t turn around. “Mike?” His body stops shaking as he becomes still. “Mike!”

I quickly open my eyes. It’s morning already, with light filling my room. My husband. I must find Mike. I get up and walk over to his room. Knocking, I wait for him to let me enter. “Mike, it’s me,” I tell him, knocking again. “If you don’t open your door right now, I will open it myself.”

After enough knocking, I push open the door and look at his bed. “Enough already! Mike! What are you... Mike?” It takes a little bit for me to comprehend what’s going on. Mike was there, although he wasn’t in the form I would’ve liked him to be.

I thought seeing violence on television would have the same effect as seeing it in person. It never occurred to me how much it would affect me if that person was someone I was close with. Shooting is such a normal thing in movies, why couldn’t I deal with it when it was Mike’s body? Someone I loved.

I stand there for a few moments before bursting into tears. He is actually gone, isn’t he? I call the police and wait in silence.

They eventually ruled it as a suicide. The worst part? The worst part is that I didn’t have anything to tell them to convince them that they were wrong. I believed them. Mike was depressed. He experienced trauma back in the war, and he was never the same. Since then, he turned to drinking. The drinking escalated to the point where everything was too much for him to handle. He never confided in me after he returned, and it hurt me to see that he stopped trusting me. I tried my hardest to be there and comfort him, but it never ended up helping. Eventually, those AA meetings were what

helped him the most. Helping him, but also giving him a false understanding of sobriety, where he would pretend to be sober, just for a false instance where he was not himself. A false impression that earned him that damn 30 day medallion.

Mike dealt with more than I've ever experienced. He stopped listening to music with hard beats in it to stop giving him those flashbacks. He never tried asking me for help. He never cared enough to tell me what was going on, how his life was, or anything that was bothering him. I spent nights alone, worrying while he was getting more therapy from alcohol than a professional or even, his own lover.

Mike relied more on midnight snacks and beer bottles than me. He didn't put enough freaking faith in our relationship while I was trying to do whatever it took for the old Mike again. Or was I? I spent those countless hours waiting for him outside of those horrible meetings. I read article after article about PTSD, depression, or anything that could have arisen after his return.

I spent the rest of the day wanting to rip apart the pictures we had taken together. He could've trusted me. I could've tried harder. I should've done something. I could have. I just didn't.

Instinctively, I look around the room. There's a shiny glint of a reflective surface that hits the wall. I walk closer to it and pick it up. The medallion. I put it in my palm as I close my eyes. Mike would never let me hold it, much less inspect it closer. I reach for one of the unopened beer bottles in the corner of Mike's room. Lifting it to my lips, I close my eyes and let the smooth liquid run down my throat. Oh, it's warm. I wince a little bit, and finished the bottle.

He smells like aftershave. He looks at me, almost mad. "You could've

done something. You could've stopped all of this. You could've..." He stops, looking me hard in the eye. "You could've, but you didn't."

I try to reach out to him. My eyes water as my voice breaks, "Mike, I tried, I really did."

Turning away, Mike starts to fade. "Is that really what you're going to say after all that's happened?"

I wake up to tears covering my face and a headache that I can't quite shake. Looking around, I find multiple beer bottles surrounding me. He found comfort in alcohol, and maybe I can find that comfort too.