

The Welcome

By

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Rachel tucked her legs underneath herself as she sat in the oversized office chair where she spent her days, the rich smell of her heavily creamed coffee rolling through the air like a fog. She sipped greedily at the large, pink mug her father had sent her as a house warming present as she waited for her laptop to finish starting the programs she'd be using for the day.

The baseboard heater did little to hold back the early morning's February chill, and even in the house she could see her breath, warmed by the coffee. She didn't need to look outside to know that it would be the dismal overcast morning that it seemed each day in a Washington winter started with. She wouldn't have traded it for all the sunny beaches in the Caribbean though—cold as it may be, she was in *her* office in *her* house, getting ready to work for *her* company. Granted, one person hardly constitutes a “company” (as she constantly reminded herself.) But still, Laramie Graphics and Web Design was registered with the county, and she even had a bank account for it. An all but empty bank account, but taking up disk space on whatever computer Wells Fargo held their account information. She shuddered with the half-sleepy giddiness she'd woken to most mornings since moving in.

It was quite a stroke of luck that she had gotten this place, one of those strange points in life where everything just falls into place, as though orchestrated by a composer standing just on the edge of view. Although exceptionally bright, she was far from the world's best student, and had taken the five-and-a-half year plan through the art program in Seattle. Her parents, thankful to see her finally with degree in hand, had given her the last five thousand dollars they had held for her tuition.

A week after she graduated, still fruitlessly scouring both the Post-Intelligencer and the Times for jobs, she received a phone call from Keith, a former classmate and fairly close friend. Just calling to say hi, how's it going, and oh-by-the-way did she happen to know anyone in the market for a house in a little hick town down south? His uncle had just passed away—so sorry to hear that Keith—and had left Keith's dad a little fixer-upper that could be a good little starter house or rental property. Her mother was a real estate agent, and Rachel told him that she'd pass the information along.

Fed up with the lack of entry-level positions for a graphics designer (“They all want

experience, but no one's willing to give you any" she often complained to her mother, both during school and after graduation), a plan started to take shape as she hung up the phone. She called Keith back later that day and asked him how much they were asking.

"Forty-five, give or take. It's small, and it needs a good helping of TLC, but it's livable and dad wants to get rid of it as soon as he can. Taxes and stuff. Why?"

"Just wondering." She thanked him, talked for a couple of minutes about stuff they had already covered just to be polite, and called her mom.

Two weeks later, she had a house of her own in beautiful Laurie Falls, Washington, her own little chunk of the Pacific northwest. Her mom was able to whittle the down payment to three grand, and then split her commission of the sale with Rachel, leaving the new grad with slightly under thirty-five hundred dollars to her name.

With that money to back her up, Rachel purchased a hosting package and designed her own website, printed up several dozen attractive flyers, and went door to door seeking clients for Laramie Graphics and Web Design. She had no clue what she was doing or getting into, like most first-time entrepreneurs, but was still lucky enough to land three clients in her first week of marketing.

While business hadn't exactly been booming in the past month, she still had those three clients, which were keeping her busy enough and paying her well. She enjoyed getting up in the mornings, having her two or three cups of coffee, and working on their projects until the early evenings.

She took another sip of her coffee and set the mug down as Outlook finished checking her email and Photoshop finally finished loading its plug-ins. The morning dose of spam included no news from any of her clients—she'd been hoping to hear from Trent at Olympic Paint & Body about the proofs she'd sent him last week, but still nothing. She quietly chuckled and shook her head at the amount of male enhancement ads she had to delete, and switched over to Photoshop.

Hardly had she opened her latest project, a small newspaper ad for Kenneth's Lighting in Tacoma, when the cheerful doorbell-chime from the speakers told her that her instant messenger had someone wanting to chat with her. She switched over to the message, and regretted a slight tinge of disappointment to find her dad and not Trent.

RobLaramie246: Good morning sweetheart. How are you doing?

Rach330: hi dad! i'm great. you? mom?

She waited; her father was far from a fast typist, trying to ensure proper (or at least decent) spelling and grammar as he pecked at each key with the determination of someone putting together a jigsaw puzzle.

RobLaramie246: Oh, we're both doing pretty good. She's still asleep. How's work going?

Rach330: good! just getting started for the day.

RobLaramie246: That's good. Well, I just wanted to say hey and see how my baby girl's doing.

Rach330: i'm fine dad.

RobLaramie246: No wild parties or anything?

Rach330: lol no, nothing like that.

RobLaramie246: lol?

Rach330: laugh-out-loud

RobLaramie246: Oh, sorry.

RobLaramie246: lol

Rach330: i need to get back to work dad. love you.

RobLaramie246: I love you too honey.

Rach330: oh, hey, when are you guys coming to visit? you still haven't seen the new place.

RobLaramie246: Hopefully soon, if I can ever get some time off.

Rach330: k. love ya, call you later.

RobLaramie246: Bye sweetheart.

She closed the messenger window and went back to her project.

Work flew by for a few hours, tweaking pixels, filtering colors, touching up smudges on stock photos she'd found on the internet. She was about to take a break and go outside for some fresh (albeit still cool) air, when the doorbell-chime sounded again from her computer. This time she didn't recognize the name.

Lfc1843: hi rach330. how r u?

She hesitated. The program was supposed to alert her when someone she didn't know sent her a message, before actually sending it to her. *Maybe it's a new client, or maybe someone who just wants to chat for a bit.* She couldn't think of how anyone could get her screen name without her knowing about it, but she was sure there must be some way. She figured the least she could do was be polite and reply, where was the harm in that?

Rach330: hi. i'm fine. who are you?

Lfc1843: i'm fine. hows work?

Rach330: good. do i know you?

Lfc1843: kind of.

Rach330: who are you?

Lfc1843: how do you like your house?

Rach330: barb? are you my real estate agent?

Lfc1843: no

Rach330: who are you?

Lfc1843: humor me, plz.

Rach330: k. the house is great. i love it.

Lfc1843: do u like the town? people nice to u?

Rach330: yeah. i haven't met too many, but so far everyone seems nice.

Lfc1843: that's good. your hair is pretty today.

The words startled her so bad she spilled coffee on her hand. She glanced up at the curtained window to see if someone could be watching her from outside, and another message came on before she could think much more of it.

Lfc1843: just kidding. i hope i didn't scare you.

Rach330: you did.

Lfc1843: sorry.

Rach330: i have to go

Lfc1843: can i ask u one more question? plz?

Rach330: what?

Lfc1843: why the pink mug, rachel? don't u like the blue one better?

She stared at the screen, frozen by fear. *Who was this? Were they in the house?* They had to be, there was no other possible answer. She looked around for a weapon and found only a couple of pens. Although possible of causing a nasty infection with a good jab, Bic wasn't known for making viable self-defense products. She turned the instant messenger program off and got up from the desk, looking around for any intruder.

She cautiously made a circuit of the house, looking at windows that could've been opened, various doors both leading outside and to other rooms. All entrances were securely locked, just as she had known they would be—she was almost obsessive-compulsive when it came to locking the house down at night, checking each door two or three times. She went to the kitchen, thought about grabbing a butcher knife and decided she'd probably end up cutting herself before she could so much as realize someone was about to attack her. She went to the bathroom to wipe her face with cold water, and gave the phone in the living room consideration before moving on—what could she say to the police? Someone on the internet knew her name and what color coffee mug she was drinking from? Since she turned it off, she wouldn't even have the message window open as proof, and even then, they'd figure the person on the other end was probably just someone she knew who was playing games with her.

She returned to her office and sat back down, shaken but otherwise none the worse for wear. *Had to have imagined it, or it's someone just screwing around. No one's in the house, no one could've come in.* But how did they know about her mug? *Lucky guess, that's all. Had to be, no other explanation.* The sight of her cell phone next to the computer, emergency numbers within easy reach, made her relax a little in spite of her self-assurances that there could be no danger.

To steady herself, she decided to get back to work. She had a new marketing campaign she wanted to test out, and now would be a good time to work out some of the text for it. She opened Microsoft Word and waited until it finished loading so she could get rid of the annoying little paper clip that always wanted to help her do some entirely irrelevant task when she was in a hurry to get her ideas out.

She sat for a few minutes, thinking, and wrote out two paragraphs of good first-draft level copy for her brochures. She sat back to read through it, and each letter removed itself from the screen.

Her first thought was that she had her finger resting on the backspace key, so she moved her hands away from the keyboard before she realized the letters were disappearing at random. With

her hands hovering slightly above the keyboard, she watched in fearful astonishment as the letters vanished with increasing speed. As the last letter disappeared, she tried typing again, just random words and letters this time. Again, each letter decided it had more important things to do, and removed itself from her screen.

She realized she was holding her breath in her fear, but couldn't release it, couldn't bring herself to gasp or scream. Was it a virus? No, viruses didn't play such dramatics with the computer, they only deleted files and changed settings. Had someone hacked into her computer? No, couldn't have, or at least they couldn't have done this—they may have been able to see what programs and documents she had, but they couldn't manipulate a program she was working with, not like this.

As if finding the blank page of importance once more, letters began to draw themselves without her assistance, although in a different font, not the default Times that Word opened with and that was claimed in the toolbar at the top of the window, but a large, bold Courier-esque typesetting reminiscent of some typewritten political manifesto or ransom note. Just as they had disappeared from the screen, the letters appeared in random places, like a puzzle being placed together by an unseen but omniscient hand that needed no box cover to know the proper place each piece belonged.

**HELLO RACHEL. WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO RUN FROM ME?
PLEASE DO NOT RUN FROM ME. I DO NOT LIKE YOU TO RUN
FROM ME. RACHEL PLEASE DO NOT RUN FROM ME AGAIN I DO
NOT LIKE YOU TO RUN RACHEL DO NOT RUN. DO I SCARE YOU
RACHEL? I DO NOT MEAN TO SCARE YOU I DO NOT LIKE YOU
TO RUN. PLEASE DO NOT RUN RACHEL RACHEL RACHEL DO NOT
RUN RACHEL PLEASE.**

The words on the screen had the opposite effect of what the writer seemed to intend; she was more than scared. “Scared” was the result of watching a horror movie late at night, alone with the lights off. She'd been “scared” by someone jumping out of the closet to play a gag on her. Even walking home down the dark streets in the bad side of town when she was in school, wearing her skimpy waitress uniform that seemed to scream “Please rape me now! I look like I want it, don't I?” Those nights, though few and far between that she couldn't find a ride home, those nights had “scared” her.

This was more than that. This was an invasion she couldn't wrap her mind around. A normal burglar, a rapist, a drug-crazed murderer, those were tangible. Those were fears she could comprehend, intruders that she would be able to see, touch, defend herself against. Those were concrete, rational fears. This was...what *was* this? Her brain rejected every possible explanation before the thoughts were even completely formed.

A simple idea came to her mind, one that she was surprised she hadn't thought of sooner. She moved the mouse to the icon in the upper right corner of the window and clicked. She let her breath out in a sigh of relief as the program closed. She closed her eyes and tried to calm herself again. *This isn't really happening; you're just working too much, too hard, stressing out about it. That's all; you just need to take a break. That's it.* Relaxed now, she opened her eyes again to the sight of Microsoft Word, a document filled with the words she had just closed, words that should not be still in the computer's memory without having been saved to disk, but that were there in front of her. There was a difference this time; the same words were now being repeated, over and over, page after page. She looked at the page counter in the bottom left of the screen. Forty pages, forty-one, forty-five. Sixty, seventy-three, ninety-two. The numbers were growing faster than she could count.

Out of habit she started to shut the computer down using the proper method, but decided that wouldn't work, *couldn't* work, it would take too long and whatever had taken control of her laptop would stop it from happening. She pushed the power button and held it down for a couple of seconds to force the computer off, the words flying past on the screen, too fast for her to read. Without the normal musical fanfare her laptop used to signify it was saying goodbye for the evening, the screen went black. She took a deep, cleansing breath, afraid to close her eyes out of fear of what she'd see *this* time when they opened, and closed the laptop and started out the door.

She had only taken one step when the familiar music that greeted each of her workdays rang from the speakers on her desk. She stopped and turned around. The laptop was still closed, but somehow it had turned itself on again. She could see the light of the screen glowing from around the edges of the thin block of plastic and electronics on her desk, a blue, sickly hue that stained the wood grain it rested on in a way it never had before. Just as quickly as it came on, the cheerful goodnight-great-working-with-you-see-you-tomorrow music played and the glow went out. The laptop turned on again, then off, on then off, continuing in such rapid succession the screen's glow appeared to be a strobe light at a dance club, and the music it played at startup and shutdown came in bleeps and blurps.

Breaking a paralysis she hadn't even noticed, she turned and ran out the office door into the

hallway, where the lights had started flickering on and off in much the same rhythm as her laptop had been. Her first thought was to hit the light switch by the office door, the one that controlled the hall lights, but as she reached for it she saw that it was already in the off position; this wasn't some strange power surge, the lights themselves had come alive. She looked into her bedroom to her right, and saw that the lamp by her bedside had started into the strange dance of light and darkness as well, and a glance to her left into the living room showed enough evidence to believe that the rest of the house was partaking in this strange event as well. She started to run towards the living room, to get to the front of the house, when the walls started speaking to her, stopping her in mid stride.

They spoke to her in a strange mixture of voices, a ransom note of sound, pieced together of clips and phrases of conversations she'd never been privy too, spoken among people she'd never met. Children, men, women, some laughing, some crying, some yelling while others whispered, but the volume level remained roughly the same, as if it was recorded for a television show. In spite of the difference in timbres and pitches, the voices flowed smoothly together as one, with phrasing and inflections scattered and insensible, but cohesive, like a collage that appears as a single picture viewed from afar but with each piece entirely distinct up close.

"Rachel, please do not run anymore. I do not mean to scare you, nor do I mean you any harm."

Terrified beyond tears, Rachel leaned against the wall. The eerie patchwork voice curdled her blood, but she could do nothing, not even hold herself standing as gravity slid her down the wall to seat her on the floor. She struggled to find her voice, to ask something, anything, to keep her feeling like she might have some control, but could barely find her breath, let alone a whisper or wobbly speech.

"I am glad to see that you have taken my invitation. I felt that you wouldn't at times, but you have arrived and I feel you will be a welcome addition."

The words made no sense to Rachel, but she felt that, between the laptop and the flickering lights, the incoherent ramblings of a disembodied quilt of voices were of little consequence. Suddenly the lights stopped flickering and the hallway was dark, darker even than the ambient light coming through the windows should have allowed.

"I would like to show you something Rachel," the voices said as the wall across from her started to glow a pale, light blue, like the edge of a clear morning's sky, so empty and depthless it gave her a strong sense of vertigo. "It may make no sense to you at this time, but eventually you will

come to understand it.” The wall started to flicker, and suddenly became a grainy replica of life, like a home movie that was being shown on a projector.

The wall flickered through still images that passed before she could fully grasp them, the continuity (if it could be called that) broken by scenes of lives she had never known, some lasting only long enough to detect movement, others lasting a second or two. None of it made any sense to her. A tree dying in a field, a black man and a white woman holding hands in front of a house on fire, a young man standing in a forest clearing, another young man walking to a car. She saw what appeared to be a plane that crashed into a forest, several images of a bright red, crystalline substances that seemed to flow like a liquid, the ocean, an elderly woman hanging from the edge of a roof, a young girl picking flowers, an aerial view of a forest receding into the distance, a view of a snow capped mountain that she almost recognized, destroying itself with a large explosion. Countless images, both horrid and beautiful, awe inspiring and awful, threw themselves from the wall at her, and then stopped with a purple glow.

For a brief moment she figured this purple glow was the opposite end of the blue light that had started this little film, that this was the end and the voice would start speaking again. Then she noticed a slight texture to the glow, creases and crevices, and they grew smaller as though the camera (although she had her doubts this was something actually filmed) was pulling away from some extremely closeup view of an object.

Instead of pulling out to show some larger object, the glow grew less distinct, then clearer, fuzzier then with more definition, and she realized that she was seeing some unearthly landscape, canyons and valleys and arroyos, hidden behind a non-terrestrial fog or cloud. With the suddenness of a roller coaster, the scene on the wall plummeted, driving her senses towards the ground being displayed so quickly that she actually felt a sense of tremendous speed, and a fear as though she were looking out the cockpit window of a plane in a suicide dive at full throttle to a final, explosive stop. The fog dissipated from in front of her, now below the cloud line she assumed, and she could distinctly see yellow desert hills and ravines stretching out below her.

Seemingly only feet above the ground, so close she could see gray and dull blue rocks lining the yellow sand, the angle changed and she was now flying parallel to the boulders and canyons she felt she had almost slammed into. The ground was mostly below her field of vision, with the majority of the wall filled with the purple glow she now knew to be some kind of clouds. Although unable to see much of the landscape for reference, and with the clouds having only some slight

definition, she still had the same sense of tremendous speed, moving faster than she ever could have imagined. The angle tilted again, towards the ground but not at the dramatic dive she just escaped, and she saw a large mass of rubble taking the center of the screen.

As impossible as she felt it could be, the landscape below passed faster, moving towards her quicker than she could fully comprehend, and still the pile of rubble lingered in the distance for several long seconds. During these seconds, she again saw flashes of random images of people she had never met, faces she couldn't recognize, coming up only quick enough for her to notice the image had been displayed, then disappearing again into the distant remnants of some structure that was approaching faster and faster, but still very much in the distance. The images sprang up quicker, more frequently, until the wall was a blur of faces and desert, a landscape moving past her at unbelievable speeds alternating with smiles and grimaces and tears of strangers. Barely able to discern the landscape beyond this strange flipbook of people, she could see that it was still moving faster towards her, and gasped air for a scream she knew she'd never release as the broken chunks of some strange material filled the screen in between the random faces. She braced herself against the wall of the hallway for an impact she knew would have no effect on her.

The images ceased, and the landscape turned to black as though someone had flipped a switch. After the incomprehensible speed of only a moment before, she felt as though she were floating now, flying freely with no sense of gravity or winds. As she floated though, she could tell it wasn't completely black; there was a dim light in the center of the wall, a dark blue glow that pulsed, getting brighter and dimmer at a steady, moderate pace. She felt both terrified and awestruck, the glow was both utterly repugnant and breathtakingly beautiful. And it was getting bigger.

It wasn't growing, she realized, but she was moving towards it, with just as much speed as she had traveled the alien landscape before. And she felt something now, something real, something she could feel while sitting in her hallway and not just an optical illusion of motion. She felt a profound pain, a sadness, mixed with an exuberant joy and pleasure. It too both scared her and inspired her, and the feelings grew as the glow on the wall grew brighter and larger. The mixture of feelings was so alien to her, so undefinable, that it tore on her sanity, pulling her in different directions, as the glowing object grew so bright and so large that the entire wall in front of her was covered in the light, now as deeply blue as an ocean created to be perfect by a Hollywood set designer.

In a sudden blackness deeper and more complete than the one leading to the blue glow, the joyful pain stopped, and she sat there, shaken and confused.

After several moments of silence, Rachel found the strength to stand up. “Who are you? What do you want from me?” She asked in a voice on the edge of sanity, racked with barely contained emotion and fear.

“I only wish to welcome you home to Laurie Falls, Rachel,” the voices answered. “To your new home, to your last home. I know you will come to love it here. Everyone I invite always does. Eventually. Goodbye Rachel. I will be seeing you.”

Without ever having felt it settle on her, Rachel could feel a presence, like a heavy down blanket soaked with kerosene, rise from her shoulders. The house was empty again, she knew that. She had no idea *how* she knew it, but she felt alone again without ever having felt as though she weren't. She knew she had to leave. She could never spend another night in this house, she could never open her laptop again or sit with her pink coffee mug in her office. She raced for the door, expecting it to somehow be sealed shut by some mysterious force. She reached it, unlocked the deadbolt and the thumb lock on the doorknob, and tried the handle.

The door opened, without a hint of resistance, on beautiful, golden sunshine, so bright and gorgeous she almost forgot everything that had happened to her. The morning drear had turned to an almost warm day in the past few...hours?...minutes? She didn't know how long it had been since she first walked into her office this morning, but the beauty of the day made it seem unimportant, irrelevant, like a thread in a subplot of a soap opera she never watched.

The pine trees across from her house seemed greener, vibrant. The grass and dandelions in her yard seemed to bounce with life. Unseen birds sang alto and soprano lines in harmony with the bass drone of distant automobiles. Her first thought was that this was an illusion, designed to sway her into staying in such a beautiful scene, but she felt that this was more, that this was a reality, in some way. Still, she needed to leave, had to get out of this city now. She ran down the path from her house toward the street, and...

...was standing in front of her door with her hand on the knob. Startled, she tried again, turning and running to the sidewalk, only to find herself back on her porch as quickly and surely as if it had been a cut between scenes in a movie. Again she tried, and again she could feel her foot cross into the air above the sidewalk and then the cold brass in her hand, gripped as loosely and casually as though coming home from the store with an armful of groceries.

She would never be able to leave, she realized. This city, the presence in her house, whatever it was, would never let her past the city limits, if it even let her leave her house now. She

didn't understand why, in spite of the images and scenes it had displayed to her, but deep in her heart, she knew. She was a resident of Laurie Falls now, and, in time she figured, she would learn to love it. She went back inside and, with nothing else to do, opened up her laptop (now seemingly thoroughly exorcised, although she knew otherwise; the presence was just allowing her to use it.) She started Photoshop and Outlook again, grabbed her coffee mug, and tucked her legs underneath herself.