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Meeting the Past

Youthful Indiscretion

Douglas Newton died peacefully in a hospital bed, surrounded by flowers from his friends, and a huge card signed by 73 volunteers of the Association for Responsible Drinking. At the same moment, Annabel was pulled aside in Heaven and told that she would be testifying at the Soul Trial of a man named Douglas.

Annabel knew how a Soul Trial worked; she had been through one herself, after her own death as a teenager almost 30 years ago. Her testimony would help determine whether Douglas's soul would remain in Heaven, or be banished. She didn't know who Douglas was, which was why she was told to proceed to an interview room where he was waiting, disoriented but calm. Annabel walked silently into the room, her long pink gown flowing behind her. Her head was crowned with a sparkling tiara. In Heaven, she was the princess she had dreamed of being in life.

The room was decorated like a law office, with a sturdy wooden table resting in front of a wall of books. The table had soft black leather chairs on both sides, and a small lamp illuminating the swirling grains of the mahogany. Douglas was leaning back in his chair, flipping through the crisp white pages of a book entitled, "Summer Camp: First Month".

Douglas looked up from the book when he saw Annabel. He gestured to the pages before him, and then to the shelves behind him. “This is me. This is my life,” he said in awe, his deep voice echoing against the walls. “This was my life,” he corrected, “I’m dead now?”

Annabel nodded awkwardly.

“I remember,” he added, “liver cancer.” Douglas was still wearing his sea green hospital gown. The leather was cold against his bare back.

“This is a waiting room,” Annabel said, her high young voice falling crisply away. “There’s going to be a trial,” she tried to smile at him, to put him at ease, “to see if you get into Heaven. I’m supposed to be speaking at it.”

Douglas put down the book and examined the girl, leaning forward in the chair. The new leather protested his movement. “Do I know you?” he asked.

“I don’t think so.” Annabel scanned the spines of the books on the shelf, looking for something to spark her memory. “I guess I should find out about your life, so I have something to say. What did you do?”

“Have you heard of ARD? The Association for Responsible Drinking?”

“No,” Annabel shook her head, “We can’t see what’s happening on Earth.”

“Oh. Well, it’s a non-profit organization. We fund advertising campaigns and do talks related to drunk driving. We try to teach people how to enjoy alcohol without endangering innocent lives. I spent the last 27 years as their managing director. I was also the founder.”

Annabel’s face lit up. She smiled at Douglas through glistening blue eyes. “I understand now,” she explained, “why they asked me to speak!”

Douglas tilted his head, pleased by Annabel's positive reaction.

Annabel was quiet for a minute, fidgeting with the frills of her dress. "I was killed," she finally spoke, avoiding his eyes, "by a drunk driver. It was a hit and run. I was walking home from my friend Katie's house. She lived just down the block from me. I didn't even hear the car coming, and the headlights were off. There was a thud, and I blacked out." She trailed off.

Annabel remembered more than she was telling. She could see in her mind the peaceful Connecticut street tumbling as she rolled across the hood. Quiet maple trees twisting with brilliant colors muted by the shroud of darkness. She could feel herself hitting the cold pavement, moist with dew. She landed facing the retreating car. The grey Mazda weaved gently as it vanished around a bend. It looked so unaffected. The driver didn't even seem to notice. She was just a bump in the road.

Throughout her story, Douglas had grown visibly uncomfortable. His calm demeanor had altered perceptibly. Pearls of sweat had formed on his pale brow as he began to slouch. Long grey hairs became matted down. He ran his thick fingers from his hairline to the crown of his head, plowing lines among the oily strands.

"But that's why," Annabel looked up at last, "That's why they asked me to speak. I'm supposed to say what a wonderful thing it was for you to work with ARD. You devoted your life to preventing deaths like mine." She noticed his reaction. "Are you alright?"

Douglas sniffed and nodded. "Yeah, yeah. I'm really sorry about what happened to you. You know, I've spent years talking with people who knew people who died in accidents like this. I've even spoken to people who were behind the wheel in these fatal

accidents. But here's a face and a voice behind everything that I worked to protect." He gestured toward Annabel, cocking his head with pity. "I'm so sorry."

"What you did was wonderful. You probably saved hundreds of lives like mine."

"Deaths due to drunk driving dropped by almost 50% in the first five years after ARD was founded." Douglas shifted unconsciously into his marketing pitch. "We flipped the trends completely around." He had straightened himself proudly in his chair and leaned forward again. His elbows were on the desktop, with palms pressed together in front of his face.

"Your family must be very proud of you," Annabel stated decisively.

Douglas frowned. "No family. No kids. No wife, not after..." He stopped and looked directly at Annabel. "I was an alcoholic, you see. A real mess. There were nights I would come home and not be able to tell her where I'd been. Some nights I didn't make it home. Woke up in the drunk-tank of some local jail, head pounding something awful and the twang of vomit on my lips."

"So she left you? And that's why you started ARD?"

"No. She left me after I stopped drinking, during my depression."

"Why did you stop drinking?" Her question again disturbed Douglas, but Annabel knew he was avoiding something. "What happened?"

Douglas stood up in his agitation. He paced before the bookshelf, halfheartedly browsing the titles. ARD Founding Ceremony. Therapy Session #34. Divorce Proceedings. Douglas stopped there and turned his back on the books. He paced to the other end of the shelves, to his childhood. He was breathing heavily.

Annabel got up from her chair, the poofy fabric rustling. She walked to the middle of the shelves, adjusting her tiara as he turned her chin upward to browse. Douglas eyed her nervously. She walked the spines with her fingers, stepping into his past. First Therapy Session. Wife Moves Out. Suddenly, there it was. She ran her finger up the smooth leather binding, passing gently over the gold-leafed letters. The Accident. She pulled it from the shelf and Last Drink spilled over to fill the gap.

“It’s there, isn’t it?” Douglas slid down against the wall; legs sprawled in front of him. “You know, I’m not even sure what it says.”

Annabel eyed him suspiciously. She flipped open the book and began skimming it, looking for clues. But Douglas was explaining it himself.

“I woke up the next morning and found blood on my hood. There was a dent.” He cringed as he said the words, hugging his knees against his chest. “I didn’t even know I had hit anything. But people were talking: there had been an accident. I never found out who it was, or whether they had. I couldn’t even think about it.”

Annabel was flipping the pages frantically. Douglas’s voice faded in her head. She knew already what she was going to find. What does it say? He pleaded. Her name, in his book. I never touched another drink, he said. She walked, trancelike, to the far end of the shelf. ARD 25th Anniversary. She grabbed it. I’m sorry, he wept.

She looked down the long row of shelves to Douglas cowering in the corner. She remembered how few books there had been for her. She held The Accident in one hand, ARD 25th Anniversary in the other. She stood there, feeling how heavy they were. Weighing them.