

LITANY

A SHORT STORY

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LITANY

I haven't been sleeping lately. I don't know if it's because I've moved into a new condo and the strangeness of it me awake, if it's bad dreams, or if I'm just getting to that age where sleep no longer comes easily or stays all night. I had a bout of insomnia once before, but that was years ago.

It's starting to make me feel crazy, this lack of sleep. I walk around in a constant daze, no matter how much coffee I guzzle. I bump into things, and bruises have started to appear. Last week I thought I saw a man on the tiny deck off my living room but when I looked again I only saw the sagging geranium and dusty yoga mat that are always there. Does a lack of sleep make you hallucinate?

These are the thoughts floating through my mind as I sit at a tall table in the back of a crowded bar waiting for a man I've never met. I look down at my phone to check the time – ten minutes late already. I'm not sure what I expected. I take a sip of my Pinot Grigio and wonder if I should have come at all.

He'd called me at my office last week, said his name was

Morgan and that he needed to talk to me about Claire. He didn't have to say *which* Claire. I knew instantly who he was calling about. I almost dropped the phone when I heard her name, almost hung up on Morgan. But I'm not the kind of person to do something like that. I'd looked around my spacious office for verification of that fact; I noted the leather chairs where clients sit and pay for me to tell them how to put their lives back together, the wall of degrees and awards I've earned, my latest book, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Adolescence*, sitting at the corner of my desk with my name in big letters across the bottom. All of it added up to a responsible, if a bit lonely, middle-aged woman who did not hang up on people.

I'm not even sure what this Morgan guy looks like. Although he obviously recognizes me because suddenly he's sitting across from me, reaching out a cold hand in my direction. I shake his hand and give him a tentative smile, which he returns. His gaze focuses on the bar and I use his distraction to get a good look at who I'm dealing with. My first question is whether he's a junkie. I don't notice any of the telltale signs – the twitch in the eye, the restless fingers and legs. He's got a worn plaid coat on so I can't see his arms, which would probably tell me a lot more. He's wearing a Cubs cap and tufts of reddish hair stick out over his ears. A bit of stubble on the face and his cheeks look hollow, but that's a fairly common look these days. It could either mean he smokes crack or that he's getting ready for his next Abercrombie photo shoot.

He orders a beer and shakes his coat off before meeting my eye. Clears his throat. "Thanks for meeting me," he says.

"You said you wanted to talk to me about Claire? Is she okay?"

He looks around the bar, frowns. "I hate that we have to

meet like this. Claire always had so much to say about you. I figured we would meet eventually. Just not like this.” He looks at me pleadingly, it seems like he wants me to stop him, but I don’t. I can’t move, can’t will my mouth to make a sound. “Claire made me promise I would call you if anything ever happened.”

Now it’s my turn to look around the bar. It’s the usual after work crowd, ties loosened, suit jackets slung over chairs, martini glasses clinking. I watch as a woman in a grey skirt suit and very high heels leans over to kiss a man and sloshes a little of her cosmo on his shoes. Just your average Friday evening in Chicago. I have a sudden urge to run out the door. I’m pretty sure I know what Morgan is about to tell me but I don’t want to hear it.

I don’t notice the brown paper package he’s set on the tabletop until he moves it to make room for the foamy beer the waiter sets in front of him. But once I see it, I can’t stop staring at it.



CLAIRE ALWAYS HAD a notebook with her. She carried it around like it was made of gold. The first time I met her she had it tucked under her arm as she rode up and down our street on a green and yellow banana bike. It was the summer I turned thirteen and I thought my life was over. We’d just moved from the big excitement of downtown Chicago to what I though was hell – the suburbs. I sat on a low wall in front of our new house and watched her circle the neighborhood a few times, eyeing me each time she passed. At some point she must have made up her mind about me because she pulled to a stop right in front of me. She sat on the seat with her notebook tucked under one

arm and stuck her other hand out to me. "I'm Claire," she said. Her arm was covered in freckles and her brown hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail, like my blonde. I shook her hand.

"I have a spy club. Do you want to be in it?"

"I don't know. What's it for?"

"We spy on the neighborhood. Make sure everything's legit. Take notes. In case there's any trouble or anything, we've got the evidence."

"Is there a lot of, you know, non-legit stuff happening?"

She looked up and down the street, warily. "It's been a pretty quiet summer so far. But between you and me, I've got my eye on that house," she pointed to a wood two-story with an overgrown yard down the street. "There's been some unusual trash lately. I saw a bone once. Heard some strange noises."

"Okay," I said. "What do I need to do?"



TWO YEARS later we'd grown out of spying on the neighbors but Claire still carried a notebook everywhere she went. We were inseparable by this point; when neighbors saw me alone they would always ask where Claire was. It's funny, really, how well we got along even though we were so different. Claire was wild, full of plans and big ideas. I went along with everything, never being much for scheming myself. Her house was constant activity, kids running around, parents doing strange projects. Dirty dishes and dust gathered in corners and on ledges but no one slowed down long enough to notice. My house was quiet and well kept. Both of my parents were "professionals." I had an older brother away at college and I was expected to put

school before all else in life. A maid came weekly to make sure no dust collected in our corners.

We were about to start high school and it's all we could think about. It was a summer of movies – we watched *The Breakfast Club* and imagined we would be of the outcast variety too, indignant, ready to put our fists in the air. All we knew of high school was what we got from those movies and the few snatched bits of conversation overheard from the older kids in the neighborhood. Our spying days were over, but we'd trained ourselves well in the art of eavesdropping.

Claire was excited about the high school boys. She'd already tongue-kissed Tommy Wilcox at the swimming pool. She thought the high school boys must all be sincere and darkly handsome, like the boys in our movies. Truthfully, I was scared of the boys. They intimidated me and I wanted nothing to do with them. Maybe without realizing it I was also afraid of losing Claire to them.



MORGAN TAKES a sip of his beer and I watch something change in his face. It's a look I know well, the ease of tension only an alcoholic gets when taking that first drink. I wonder now if I should have invited him to a bar, if we shouldn't have met at Starbucks instead. I push the guilt away; *I don't know this man, I don't know his life. I'm not responsible for another person's actions.* This last a litany I've instructed dozens of clients to repeat over the years, something I work into almost every therapy session I conduct. I call it the litany against unearned guilt, good for just about anything that ails you.

Morgan is attractive enough, once you get past the stubble; I just can't bring myself to find facial hair attractive, no

matter who's face it's shadow is cast upon. He's got intense green eyes and very long lashes. It's too dark in the bar to see if they're bloodshot. A full mouth, one probably very good at kissing. Although it's been a very long time since I kissed a man so I find just about anyone kissable these days. I avoid looking at the table where the package sits between us but it's the only thing I *want* to look at.

"I met Claire in rehab," he says. "A little over a year ago."

"Here in the city?" I'd always wondered if she had stayed or found her way somewhere else. I'd often searched the faces under the bridge on my way to work but I never saw her, not even once. I know this is horrible, but part of me was glad of it. I'm not sure what I would have done if I had seen her there – stopped? Kept walking?

"Yeah. Over in Englewood. We moved into a group home together about six months ago. Things were going really well for a while. We were both doing a lot better, I had a job at the Randall's near where we lived. Claire got a job as a secretary for a lawyer." Morgan smiles, a hint of pride, and takes another sip. "We helped each other through the rough times, you know? Made each other go to group every week."

He stops and finishes his beer, orders another. He begins to look around the bar as if he's got nothing else to say. Should I prod him? Has he forgotten his story? But I'm not really ready to move ahead with our conversation either. I'd just as well like to sit and enjoy my wine, imagine that I fit in with this swanky after-work crowd, so at ease with one another.

Finally Morgan breaks the silence. "I hadn't mentioned it to Claire, but I was going to ask her to marry me on our one year anniversary. It seemed like such an important time, you know? One year together, one year sober. One year of living a

really good life.” His voice cracks and I turn away. I don’t want to see him break down. That is the last thing I need, to sit in a bar with a crying drunk I don’t really know. I’m off the clock, thank you very much. I feel my face flush with embarrassment at the thought of this man crying in a crowded, jovial bar. I know it’s the last thing I should be worrying about but I put my hand to my cheek and feel the pink warmth there anyway.

I scan the bar and flag the waitress down; it occurs to me just how heavy this conversation is about to get. I’m going to need something a lot stronger than Pinot Grigio.



I REMEMBER VERY CLEARLY the first time I met Dale. It’s one of those memories that solidifies after the fact, after you’ve been over it so many times it sets into your grey matter like engraving on a stone. Dale was Claire’s cousin on her mother’s side. His mother had been sent to jail, and his father had been MIA since before he could walk so Claire’s parents took him in. He seemed a lot older but at seventeen he only had three years on us. He had stubble on his face, wore a puffy down coat that just about swallowed his skinny frame, and spit tobacco constantly.

“Don’t know why I have to ride this mother fuckin’ bus anyways,” he grumbled the first day he showed up at the bus stop with Claire. “Not going to no fuckin’ school,” he said and spat, making a nasty black spot in the snow. He stood in the bank of ice at the corner away from all of us and scowled.

Claire seemed excited to have so much drama in her life and pleasantly answered the questions the kids at the bus stop asked until Dale told her to “shut the fuck up with that

shit.” She stopped talking but I could tell how excited she was.

None of us could have known just how much he would disrupt things. But I guess you never know something important like that until it’s too late, do you?



“SHE OVERDOSED TWO WEEKS AGO.” Tears are definitely coming now, I can’t ignore them anymore. I clench my fist under the table to keep my own eyes dry, my face calm. “I was at work when it happened. They called me, told me she was at the hospital. I left right away but she was already gone when I got there.”

His shoulders shake. I’m not sure what to do. I can feel a pain in the palm of my hand and look down to see the deep purple marks my fingernails have dug into my own flesh.



CLAIRE and I split apart so gradually that I didn’t realize it had happened until the day she found me on the bleachers by the football field. She looked so different – her hair unwashed, clothes so loose on her body, and rings under her eyes. As I watched her walk up the steps I wondered just how long it had been since we’d hung out.

She didn’t meet my gaze but plopped down hard beside me and pulled out her notebook and a Hershey bar. I watched the football team run at one another on the field as I waited for her to say something. The hard crack of their helmets punctured the afternoon air. Finally, when I was about to get up and leave she turned to me, her forehead creased and her eyelids low.

"I haven't seen you in a while," she accused. The blue ink staining her fingers caught my eye and I focused on the smudgy blot instead of her face.

"I know. Sorry. I've been busy."

She grabbed my hand suddenly, forcing me to look at her.

"I have to tell you something." She squeezed my hand and looked at the boys bashing one another on the field. "It's about Dale. He..." she turned to me again. "You promise not to tell anybody?"

I nodded and she squeezed my hand harder.

"Say it, promise me."

"Okay, I promise."

"Dale's been coming into my room at night." She dropped my hand and picked her notebook up again, hugging it to her chest. "He's been doing things to me." Her voice cracked and I felt my heart gallop away from me. I wasn't sure what she was telling me, but I knew I didn't want to hear.

"It started with him touching me. I told him I didn't want to, that I would tell. But he covered my mouth. He was so strong I couldn't fight him." She began to cry as she said it.

I started shoving my things into my backpack, trying to figure out how I could make it off the bleachers without hearing anymore.

"But the other night," she whimpered and grabbed my hand again, cutting off my circulation with her strength. "He did it. He went all the way. I should have called out. I should have stopped him. But I was so scared." Tears glistened on her cheeks and her eyes searched my face, for understanding or sympathy, I'm not sure. I continued to stare at the ink on her hand.

"What are you talking about?" I said finally, pulling my

hand away from her. My heart was racing, I could feel it in my ears. I was afraid and I didn't want to understand what Claire was telling me.

She looked at me with her mouth open, confused as the tears kept falling.

"Dale. He *raped* me."

"Are you sure you didn't dream it? That you didn't just make this up? I know how you like to make things up." I wanted to shove the words right back into my mouth but they hung in the air like so many bullets shot from a gun.

Her eyes turned cold then. She wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"Claire, I didn't mean..."

"No. I don't care. Forget I ever said anything." She picked her things up and brushed past me so quickly she almost knocked me over.

I could have called to her. I bet if I would have stopped her, would have apologized that everything would have turned out differently. But that's not what I did. What I did was stand on those gray bleachers and stare at the ink on my hand where Claire had grabbed my own.

Oh Claire. What I wouldn't give now to go back. Say the words you needed to hear. I know them now. Know them by heart. I've repeated my own litany against unearned guilt a thousand times, a million maybe. But the truth is, nothing will ever make my guilt go away.



MORGAN WIPES his eyes and takes a long drink just as my scotch and soda arrives.

"We were doing so well. We'd started talking about moving into a place of our own. We'd both been sober for so

long. Sure, some days got hard and the cravings got intense, but I really thought we were over it.”

I nod, unsure what to say. I hear variations on these thoughts from my clients every single day.

“It was all because of that fucker. She said you knew about Dale?”

I freeze a moment and then nod again, slowly.

“Yeah, well he showed up at our place a few days before it happened. Wanted to talk to her. I told her not to do it, that he was only going to cause trouble. It took everything I had not to attack the bastard. But she said that it was okay, that she was just going to talk to him. Ever since she’d gotten clean she’d been on a mission to help every lost soul she came across.”

Tears come again and he makes no attempt to wipe them away. I feel like I am a dead rock, sinking slowly to the bottom of a vast ocean. I feel like I should be crying too but instead I feel nothing at all.

“She wouldn’t talk to me about it afterward, said that he’d just needed someone to talk to and that he wouldn’t be back. Two days later she was dead.”



I AVOIDED Claire for almost two years after our horrible conversation on the bleachers. It was surprisingly easy – my parents bought me a car so I no longer rode the bus and I was so busy with school there wasn’t time for friends. I saw Claire often enough from a distance. She’d started hanging out with the druggies in the parking lot. Sometimes I saw Dale there with her, or the two of them walking up the hill from the bus stop.

The only time I let myself think about her was late at

night when the room was dark and there was nothing else to distract me. I couldn't push away the images of Dale, his big ugly body, his gross teeth, climbing on top of Claire. My heart would race and it would take hours of effort to dull the images enough to fall asleep. Some nights I wasn't able to sleep at all.

She spoke to me only once more before I moved away for good. It was near the end of our junior year and I ran into her coming out of a bathroom stall during fourth period. She was thin as a ghost and she was clearly stoned, her eyes red and puffy, the lids almost shut. It took her a minute to register my presence. All I could do was stare. The Claire I knew was gone, the curiosity and sweetness that had always been part of her now obscured with something much darker.

"What's your problem?" she demanded, wiping her wet hands on her jeans and brushing past me out the door. I guess she didn't recognize me either.



MORGAN FINISHES the last of his beer. His eyes are still wet but the tears are no longer spilling onto his cheeks. When the waitress comes with the bill he snatches it up quickly and pays for both of us.

"That's not necessary," I tell him.

"No, please. Let me. Claire would have wanted it." He stands and zips up his coat, gives me a smile. "She really cared about you, you know. Talked about how you were so close when you were kids. She always said she wanted to find you again, apologize to you."

"Apologize to me?" I'm shaking my head. "I'm the one who should have apologized."

“That’s not the way she saw it. Anyway, she wanted you to have this.” He pushes the package toward me. “Take care of yourself,” he says and with that he walks out of the bar and out of my life.

It’s a full ten minutes before I’m ready to leave the bar. I knock back what’s left of my drink in a daze, old memories merging together and running over me like muddy creek water. As I stand and shrug into my coat I think about leaving it there. But my old friend guilt tickles my insides and I pick the brown paper package up, knowing as soon as I do that it is indeed Claire’s notebook. I tuck it under my arm.

The blast of October wind feels good on my flushed cheeks as I step out of the bar. As my mind continues to dance over the images that have been dredged up tonight I hear myself beginning that old chant again, the litany I’ve recited a thousand times against the guilt of not being there for Claire when she needed me. But it’s no longer enough. I feel myself buckle at the knees, crouch down on the sidewalk, and tears are coming. I’m unable to control them. Claire is gone. I might have been able to help her out at one point, but even if I’d said the right thing to her all those years ago, who’s to say it would have ended any differently?

I clutch her notebook to my chest and rock on my heels. It feels good to cry after all this time. I suddenly feel dead tired and all I want is to curl up in my warm bed. I don’t think I’ll have trouble sleeping tonight. I don’t bother to wipe the tears from my cheeks as I stand and start walking again. I wonder if I’ll ever find the courage to open her book. If I’ll ever find a way to make peace with myself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nova Lee Walsh is a writer (both fiction and nonfiction), a lifestyle blogger, a former chef/caterer, and a mom. She's the author of the small-town romance series, *Crystal Falls*, along with two cookbooks.

Nova loves wine, reading, watching old movies, and devising reckless food experiments. She lives in Austin, Texas with her very patient husband, the cutest preschool/dictator known to man, and one very neurotic border collie.

See all of Nova's books by visiting her [Amazon profile](#).

You can find more recipes, how-tos, and stories on her website at novawalsh.com, as well as plenty of inspiration boards and cooking ideas on her [Pinterest account](#).



