

—THE TRAUMA STATEMENT

by Stephen Bacon

In two days a child will be born with a cleft palate because I don't want to lose my wallet in the park. To prevent someone breaking into my car, an elderly woman will fall in her home and break her left wrist.

I'd better explain.

I suppose it all started when my wife, Elaine, died last year. I kissed her as I left for work that day, a damp October that scattered brown leaves across the road in front of me and caused the streetlights to wink through the gathering mist. When I took the mid-morning call from my receptionist to say she was sending them through, I cradled the receiver with a puzzled look. As I watched the police officers approaching through the glass doors, a cold twist of anxiety shifted within my stomach. The sombre look on their faces conveyed the feeling that I needed to prepare for something.

They went through it all—the crash, what had happened. Her car had skidded on wet leaves, fishtailed out of control, overturning into a ditch. The paramedics were there straight away, but my wife was pronounced dead at the scene, massive head injuries.

So for the first time since our marriage, I was alone. Alone with my guilt.

Then followed the usual 'picking up of the pieces.' I spent the next six months reeling, my life cushioned only by the support of our son and daughter, and the speed with which I threw myself back into work. I moved out of our house to spend the first few months with Alison and her family. I told myself that I was supporting them as much as they were supporting me, but the reality was that I was frightened to go home. I knew the space that Elaine and I had shared would be choked by the spectres of the past. I dreaded returning to the familiarity of it all, and so I spent some time at Damian's, our son's. That was an entirely different postponement than the one I had taken at Alison's. Damian lived in a plush apartment and enjoyed the life of a single man. It was fine at first, but as the weeks passed we began to grate on each other's nerves. I took this as a sign that it was time to move on with things. The inevitability of going back appeared less daunting, and so as spring swept in and the evenings grew warmer, I went home.

It was painful. The last two years of our life together had been tough, to say the least. I'd had a stupid affair with a woman from my advertising firm, nothing more than a one night stand really, and I'd gone in almost over my head, contemplated leaving Elaine. We had been through a real rocky patch. The woman I'd slept with left the company, and I had thrown myself at the mercy of my wife. She'd never said so, but

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I still wondered whether she had actually ever forgiven me. Certainly our marriage altered. Beneath the surface there was a pulsing throb of resentment, an unspoken rift that had been levering Elaine away from me. We went through the motions for the benefit of the family, although I had increasingly come to question whether Elaine still loved me.

I sorted through the stuff we'd shared and the years swept over me again, recalling the good times and counting myself fortunate, rather than brooding over the misfortune. The house was filled with her absent whispers. I donated lots of stuff to charities, and smiled fondly as I organized cds, filed photographs, and tidied away Elaine's belongings, albeit with a burden of suppressed guilt. And then one morning I found, amongst the papers and folders that were stacked in a bureau in her study, The Trauma File.

It was a plain manila folder filled with papers. I began reading the first page and the more I read, the more I felt like the fabric of life was being torn from around me.

The setup of The Trauma File was very much like a collection of lists, printouts involving dates and events that were ordered chronologically. The dates on the first page began in the mid 1970s, the paper yellowed and creased. Glancing at the first entry, I worked it out to be around the time we moved into this house, not long after we married. By the condition of the paper it had been poured over many times, taken out and reread endlessly, and the first entry caught my attention instantly.

FIRE IN YOUR HOME--deducted.

NEIGHBOUR'S DOG DIES--credited.

Frowning, I read on. The dates skipped over a couple of weeks.

FOOD POISONING--deducted.

WORK COLLEAGUE'S CAR STOLEN--credited.

As I read through the entries I was aware of my hands shaking, fighting an overwhelming urge to throw up. A circular coffee-stain obscured part of an entry further on, but I could still make out the text:

BREAKING BEST DINNER PLATE--deducted.

UNKNOWN TEN YEAR OLD CHILD RIPS FAVORITE SHIRT--credited.

The events described in the lists were horrific. Yet some of the entries stirred a strange feeling within my body, an uneasiness which gnawed away at my memories. And then the telephone rang at that precise moment, and I almost forgot about the file.

"Hello?" My voice was flat and hollow.

There was a long pause and I almost replaced the receiver because the sound was a distant hum and static clicks, like wind rattling wires on telephone poles at night. Then came the voice.

"This event will occur sometime in the future... your son, Damian, will lose his job at the bank."

I searched for an answer. Then the voice returned.

"Or... a man unknown to you will be imprisoned for a crime he has not committed. His term will be nine years. You have ten seconds to decide."

I stared at a point on the back of my dead wife's chair. I wanted to speak, but my urge to listen was overwhelming. I was aware of traffic moving out on the road. My neighbour's cat crept around a bush out in the garden.