

2,900 words

She Left Behind

by Jenny Maloney

1

Natalie, the woman who died, left behind her keys, a small keychain-canister of pepper spray, a broken t.v. and a cell phone. She arrived home late and interrupted a home invasion. Her husband was unconscious – hit with the baseball bat he kept for protection. Two teenagers, later identified as Hank Ellerby and Thomas FitzGerald, both high school seniors who thought breaking-and-entering would be a kick, were lifting the flat screen when she walked in. She managed to dial 9-1-1 only because her cell phone was already in her hand. They dropped the t.v., and there was a physical struggle as she tried to get to her husband. She pepper sprayed one of the boys, Thomas, but the other one, Hank – who brought the gun – panicked and fired wildly. The police arrived as the boys ran out of the home. They were arrested. But the police and paramedics were too late to save Natalie, who was shot beneath her left armpit. She bleeds out in her living room.

2

Natalie left behind her wedding rings, and her twin girls, who had mercifully been with Natalie's mother that day, a closet full of clothes, her wedding dress, her prom dress, and her high school yearbooks. Her toothbrush, hairbrush, deodorant. All of this she left to her husband. He kept some of it. He threw other bits away.

At the funeral, he received the condolences. Hugs from women who smelled of talcum powder and strangely perky perfumes: rose water and lily of the valley. Oddly clingy, not cloying, and more appropriate for a spring picnic or an Easter egg hunt than a mid-November funeral.

"I'm so sorry for your loss."

"She'll be missed, truly."

"A brave woman."

They whispered as if he would break under their words. But the guests could have shouted at him and he would have responded the same way:

"Thank you for coming."

"Yes, she will be missed."

"Brave, yes, brave."

There was no breaking him further.

He received all the well-wishes, all the 'thinking of yous' but he also received the questions. Why was she dead? Why couldn't he protect her? How was he supposed to live every day, watching his daughters grow into replicas of his wife? And there were two of them, so he would be reminded in duplicate. But the question that gnawed at him more than any other; it had been in his brain before he even opened the door and found two teenagers standing on the stoop:

Why the hell was she so late getting home that day?

3

The man who could answer that last question, Alan, would never do so because he asked a different question of himself: Why had she left so early that afternoon?

If she'd stayed beside him, naked, in bed, she would still be alive.

At first, Alan thought Natalie's husband kept everything she'd left behind. Her kids, her clothes, her heroics – Natalie had left Declan his life, every breath he inhaled and exhaled was a gift from Natalie who had stepped between him and the gun. The husband received all the sympathies, all the casseroles and pitying glances. The husband received Alan's own handshake at the funeral, he received Alan's own sad smile. Alan himself received nothing.

For two years he'd spent two evenings a week with her. She was a workaholic, she claimed to her husband, and that bought her a couple fun hours away from the family. It began innocently enough: a penny poker game with friends after work. She had joined Alan and a couple other coworkers to 'build camaraderie' or some shit like that. The other coworkers – a man and a woman who Alan suspected started an affair of their own – fell away after a few weeks. But Natalie still showed up. Alan and Natalie discovered they enjoyed pizza and beer and gin rummy alone as much as penny Texas Hold 'Em in a group. He didn't know at first if she liked him, or the fact that his house was a nice stopping point in her one-hour-and-ten-minute commute. A nice break from the driving.

## 4

As he pulled in his driveway after the funeral and parked the car Natalie had never ridden in (why hadn't she ever been in the car? why had they never gone anywhere together?) Alan realized he was jealous. When he climbed out of the car and went into the house there would be nothing of hers to remind him she'd ever been there. She hadn't even left a toothbrush. She always carried a small toiletry bag – a case with a small hairbrush, deodorant, a spare toothbrush, travel-sized mouthwash, and toothpaste. There were no spare clothes in the closet. She hadn't left behind a sock or pantyhose. No makeup.

He went into the kitchen, which was just off the garage. Everything was put away. The counters were wiped down. He could see the dishes stacked in the cabinets – the glass doors didn't have a fingerprint on them. She had teased him about his neat ways but he had taken it as a compliment; he provided a haven where she didn't

have to change diapers, or do laundry, or load the dishwasher. On the afternoon she had left too early, he had immediately washed the pizza stone on which he'd cooked the chicken, artichoke, and bacon pizza. He had placed her plate and her glass with the chapsticked lip marks in the dishwasher. When he turned the knob at that point, he had not realized he erased the last noticeable trace of her.

She hadn't kept extra clothes or cosmetics around for his sake.

"What if another, available woman comes over?" she'd told him. "An extra toothbrush will be difficult to explain."

At the time, her argument made sense. But their relationship filled whatever hole he had, whether or not there were physical items to reinforce it. Now that she was gone, he realized how foolish that was. There had to be some piece of her, of them. But as he looked around, he saw every scrap that could have existed had been scrubbed, vacuumed, or laundered away.

## 5

At work, she left behind office items. A calendar with geometric designs, with scribbled appointments and notes-to-self; ultrasound photos of the twins; a mouse pad with a picture of Einstein sticking out his tongue; and post-its with more notes-to-self stuck on the computer monitor. The legal pad where she'd doodle seasonal pictures – a turkey for the last Monday update meeting she attended. Thanksgiving had come and gone by the time Alan saw every scrap and iota of her personal items had been gathered by human resources, packed away in a sealed cardboard box, and shipped to the husband. By the time Alan got a chance to go and look at her small space it was cleared. A generic cubicle. A plain computer. Empty counterspace, and shelves with three ring binders on company policy.

"Such a shame, right?" said a voice behind him.

Alan turned from the opening of Natalie's cubicle. The person who spoke was a petite, cartoon-looking intern he'd seen around from time to time.

"Yeah," he said. There wasn't anything else to say. He felt as stripped as the office.

"We should put flowers or something here. Like a memorial." She

was babbling. Thinking about Natalie and how she had died made everyone babble. Nervous energy. He could only stare at the babbling girl. As if a bunch of flowers in an empty office would be as touching a reminder as wreathes or crosses on the side of the road. As if that would remind anyone of Natalie's life – no, it would just remind people that someone had died.

## 6

Natalie left behind a Facebook page. She had posted nothing of interest – only requests or bonuses from the games.

There were photos though and, for a little while, they made him feel better. Natalie in a puffy blue ski jacket, her eyes covered by Audrey Hepburn sunglasses, her cheeks slightly sun-or-wind burned. Natalie in a little black dress, holding a champagne glass up to the camera, a paper crown proclaiming 'Happy New Year' on her head. A very tired Natalie in a bathrobe.

Then the rest of the picture came into focus for him. Her husband standing beside the ski-jacket Natalie, his fingers giving her bunny ears. His arm around Natalie in the little black dress, the point of her crown brushing his cheek because her head rested on his shoulder. The tired, bathrobed Natalie holding two tiny pink bundles.

He looked at her page and lost her all over again.

## 7

Natalie left behind her fear. At night Alan's dark thoughts came stronger, harder. He lay in bed alone, staring at the ceiling. He couldn't help but see her walking through her own front door, walking in on the two guys robbing her, holding a gun to her, threatening her. And Declan on the floor. Letting her step between him and the bullet. In the quieter moments he thought about being there in Declan's place; he would have kept her calm, everyone walking away intact. Sometimes this thought was so powerful it would travel with him into sleep and he would dream it. His arm around her – safe, safe, safe.

But, more than once: if he had been there, it would have been him between her and the bastards. And, even more often: if he had been there, he would have had the gun and one or both of those little shits would be in the ground instead of her. The dreams after those thoughts left him shaking, and angry.

He would wake, unable to save anyone; he felt afraid; he felt impotent; he felt the emptiness he had been left with.

He wanted to eat the men who had taken Natalie. He wanted to consume them raw.

One morning he called the sheriff's department trying to find out where the two men were held. He was informed by the female deputy that the defendants were in protective custody – no visitors except lawyers and immediate family – due to the publicity of the case. So Alan was only one more in a stream of people who were terrified of home invasions and who righteously demanded punishment. He was no more important or impactful than a single voice amidst a shouting crowd.

## 8

He hung up the phone and stared. The computer stared back with its blank, black face. Something about talking to the police constricted his chest. How could he matter so little? He pressed the power button on his computer. There was nothing of her in the flowing Windows boxes – red and green and yellow and blue. He clicked on a game of collapsing boxes and jewels.

He thought about putting music on. Any song seemed inappropriate.

Today was a Saturday around four o'clock.

They would meet on workdays. Monday through Friday. She was at his place by four-thirty, in his bed by five-thirty. Sometimes they just hung out. Sometimes they still played cards. Every now and then she had played at this very computer while he finished up something for work.

Alan lost himself in the primary colors of the game. He let his mind wander away from everything except the dream that this was a business day: he was off early; any moment now Natalie would walk

in the front door; she would tiptoe up behind him. He could feel the brush of her hair on his neck as she leaned in; her arms around his shoulder; her hands meeting over his chest; they clasped over his heart. He felt her breath humming in his ear, doing that almost-moan that made him tighten.

His hand, clicking away with the mouse, clicked faster. He was half in the world of the stupid computer game – clicking, eliminating obstacles, blowing shit up. He blew up the last thing and stopped.

She used to lick his earlobe. Her breath hot in his ear. If she whispered secrets, he never heard them. His hand released the button on his fly. He pulled back the elastic of his boxers, hitched everything down. Her head between his legs. Her hair – he could remember her hair – tangled easily, easy to slip his fingers into the strands and hold on. He saw her mouth close around him and his fingers tightened, dreaming, dreaming.

He didn't think her name. He just wanted sex. Just a moment of release.

But her name was there anyway. Natalie, Natalie. Natalie.

Alan's eyes were open. He saw her name over and over again on the computer screen. His hand stopped. So did his breathing.

Her name was on the screen nine times. The top ten list for the fucking computer game. Natalie was numbers two through ten. There, where her name must have been until a moment ago, was a blank space. CONGRATULATIONS! YOU HAVE THE HIGHEST SCORE!

And the cursor, blinking, asked for his name.

## 9

Natalie left behind a shattered mirror and seven holes in Alan's walls.

Alan started with the mirror because it hung over the computer and, when he looked up, his own face, his own bare ass stared back at him. His pants were just above his knees, showing his sweaty haired thighs and the remnants of what had once enjoyed Natalie's mouth. He threw the closest thing at hand: an ergonomic wireless mouse. It was solid. The mirror surrendered. A solid dent in the center spider-webbed out until the cracks reached the wooden frame. Alan followed up with his fist. The mirror collapsed.

He yanked his pants up. She was gone again. Simply gone. He hit the wall where the mirror had been. The drywall caved in before him. A smear of blood painted the crack. He hit the wall again. Natalie had bled. The men in jail had not. He had not.

The walls, which should have protected all of them, should have held her back just a little longer that afternoon – like Alan’s hands – should bleed. And he hit the walls. And the walls hit his hands. And they all bled.

## 10

Later, he lay down. His right hand surrounded by an ice pack. He could feel the heat from his knuckles radiating out, trying to burn away anything cold or numbing. Alan felt it up his arm. Everything hurt. Even his elbows. He lay on his stomach, staring unseeing past the bundle of ice. The sun was sinking, but it still shot its last gray rays through his open blinds. There were stripes on the wall, and down into his closet. Alan wondered if this was prison.

He sat up, as if to assert his freedom, and cradled his hand. He stared into his closet.

He’d always been neat. Coordinated. The closet was organized by business dress and moved to casual dress. Similar colors and styles together. It didn’t look like the closet of a man who would have a passionate affair with any woman. He hated himself for that closet.

There was a small chest of drawers. It had three drawers, so he used it to hold belts and random things like cuff links. Stuff he never used. The chest was an antique with clawed feet carved in the shape of bear heads. The feet raised the chest a full three inches. There was something underneath.

## 11

Natalie left behind a shirt. Not her own shirt – it was actually Alan’s. Blue and white checked flannel with a button-down front.

It had been their first night as the only two for penny poker.



Originally she wore a white Oxford shirt – crisp and pressed. They had pizza. A pepperoni fell on her chest. She panicked because she loved that shirt. He offered his washer and dryer. Then he offered the flannel. She accepted all offers.

When Natalie came back to the poker table in bare feet, dress pants, and his shirt – too large, the collar slightly gaping – he thought she looked adorable. She took all his pennies that night. He kept looking at her instead of his hand. At some point he remembered he said, “You’re beautiful.”

Then he remembered she said, “You’re beautiful too.”

He didn’t remember much after that except the new knowledge that she had never been with anyone except her husband, and that buttons were a waste of time. By the time they reached his bedroom, every button was popped off the flannel. The hallway was scattered with blue plastic bits. The next day he had picked them up piece by piece until he’d thrown every one away.

But the shirt stayed on Natalie. It gaped open, not hiding any part of her.

After that, Natalie’s Oxford was clean and dry, so she’d changed and gone home. He found and threw away the buttons. The shirt itself had gone away.

Now, with his hand throbbing under the ice pack, his head aching, he slid out of bed. On his knees, he went to the closet. The blue and white checks resolved themselves out of the striped shadows. He reached down. His fingers burrowed into the soft, warm fuzz of the flannel – dusty from hiding. He pulled it out. Strings that once held buttons dangled uselessly against the material. Alan held it his face and inhaled, as if one night could leave behind a scent.