

## CHAPTER 1: Mr. Bleachy?

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It was just after 11 o'clock on a Friday night when two Memphis police detectives knocked on my door. I didn't know exactly what they were going to tell me, but I knew it wasn't going to be good.

Our three dogs, Sammy, Allie and Steve, were barking because of the disruption and I opened the door and asked the cops to wait while I put them in the back yard. I walked them back through the den and out to the yard and shut the door.

I started shaking. I was shaking hard as I got back to the front door. That day started out with me waking up alone, walking to the window in the living room and looking out at our driveway only to see nothing there. I wanted to see our car and was thinking Melinda had fallen asleep before she got into the house and all I would do is walk out and wake her up to see if she was doing okay.

There was nothing in the driveway and I got scared.

I walked back to the front door and opened it. It was late spring and the officers, one bigger and bald, were in long-sleeved shirts and ties. They had "cops" written all over them. Was Melinda in an auto accident? Was she ok? Did they find her? Where was she? Oh God...where was she?

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I opened the door and the smaller one spoke first: Mr. Bleachy?

It's Beachy. There is no "L" in my name. He got my name wrong. Bleachy. It kept sounding over and over in my mind. It began to fester.

Bleachy.

Can we come in and speak to you?

Bleachy.

I opened the door further and motioned them in. The living room included the standard sofa and chair but I doubted they wanted to sit down. This was their business; a social call was not what brought them to my door at this late hour.

Could you have a seat Mr. Beachy? The smaller one got it right this time.

No. What's going on?

If you'll have a seat we will tell you.

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No. Tell me, what's going on?

Please Mr. Beachy, we have been doing this a long time and it will be easier if you sit down.

I was getting more frustrated by their insistence and the Mr. Bleachy greeting was starting to fester inside me. I still didn't know what they were going to tell me and I wasn't in the mood to coax it out of them. This was my house and if I wanted to stand, I was going to stand. But it didn't seem to matter and I continued to plead with them to tell me what they were here to tell me.

Please, just sit down.

I knew this was bad. You don't insist a person sit down if you are going to tell them their wife was safe and sound and got pulled over for drunk driving or something like that. A lot of things went through my mind. I thought Melinda was not at home and wasn't answering her cell phone because she was the victim of some type of random crime. Memphis was known as a violent city and I thought something bad had happened to her out on the streets somewhere. I couldn't figure out what that would be, but I knew it

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wasn't good, otherwise these two officers wouldn't be insisting that I sit down. I replayed the previous two minutes in my mind and I locked onto another thing they had said, right after the smaller one called me Mr. Bleachy.

They were detectives in the Memphis Homicide Division.

Oh God, Melinda, what happened?

I finally sat down, not because they insisted, but because my knees buckled. I had no choice but to sit down, it was becoming difficult, if not outright impossible to keep standing. I regretted sitting down because then it allowed the two detectives to go ahead and tell me what they were here to say.

Mr. Beachy...this is never easy...

Oh God, Melinda, my lovely wife, what happened?

...but it appears that your wife is the victim of suicide.

All the air rushed out of my lungs and I gasped loudly and put my hands over my mouth. I was shaking. Harder now. My world closed in on me and

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the darkness seemed overwhelming. I was in shock and it would be several days, if not several weeks before the news that the two homicide detective insist I sit down for would actually sink in. The natural numbness defense mechanism kicked in;

*I didn't hear him exactly but the small one asked something about why and he was gesturing with his hands and both were looking at me and I glanced at the back door expecting it to open and Melinda to come in any minute but it never did open and I couldn't catch my breath and it felt like someone took a 2-by-4 and hit me as hard as they could in my stomach and the smaller detective was still saying something but it sounded like Charlie Brown's teacher only not so coherent and my field of sight seemed to close in and I was thinking if I were outside and could see the sky it would be pitch black because my world was dark and no stars could shine and the bigger one talked this time but the teacher thing was still running through my mind and I pictured Melinda when she walked out of the door the night before and I could see our car back out and go up the street and the smaller one was gesturing and I think he scratched his head but I couldn't be sure because my vision was fuzzy around the edges and that damn teacher was still occupying their bodies and they said more words and glanced at me and the back door was still closed and I was still sitting down and I think the bigger detective knelt down and touched my shoulder and the smaller one*

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*was still talking and didn't he realize he was talking in wah-wah audibles and nothing he was asking was making any sense and the walls got closer and my heartbeat was pounding in my head and I didn't know what it was then but later realized my bones had started to ache and the back door remained closed and my hands shook and my head bobbed back and forth because I just couldn't seem to keep it still and I could feel the bigger detective touch me somewhere and he must've been saying something because I thought I could see his mouth move and I still couldn't breathe and I was still shaking but harder this time and...*

...breathe.

Take deep breaths.

Just breathe.

My bones now throbbed in pain. My heartbeat got louder my head.

No!

Why? The Charlie Brown teacher hasn't left.

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Breathe.

Slow and deep.

Take it easy.

Do you want something to drink?

I didn't hear him exactly, but I think the smaller detective asked me if Melinda would have any reason to commit suicide.

Suicide. It's a final act, but in my mind, at that immediate stupor-filled moment, I was thinking she would be home after spending a few days in the hospital getting better. Did they say attempt? Oh please say she attempted suicide and that would mean she didn't really do it and I would be able to talk with her and find out exactly what she was thinking and I could help her.

I think the two detectives were still talking, but I didn't really hear them. Something about someone should be with me because they didn't want to leave me alone. I knew they were thinking suicide.

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Mine.

So was I.

I didn't have to search my mind very long to realize no guns were in the house. Melinda didn't like guns, so none were in the house. She called me one day from work and I was having a rather bad "MS day." She asked me how I was doing but I knew she could tell.

Lousy.

That bad?

Yes. It's a good thing you don't like guns in the house because I sure could use one right now.

I have to go, Hon. Busy here today.

Click.

The dead receiver was still in my hand when I could hear Melinda pulling into the driveway. I recognized the sound of our car. I looked out and I saw



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Melinda walking in the back door. She worked not far from our East Memphis home, but she hung up the phone with me and hopped into the car. She wanted to be with me, and I wanted her with me and here she was.

She was good. She told me the last place she wanted to be right now was at work. She heard the frustration and pain in my voice and she wanted to be with me. There wasn't much she could do when I was having a bad "MS day" beyond 'just being there for me,' but she was always there for me.

A bad "MS" day means that the usual symptoms of MS are cranked up to the stratosphere.

Off the charts

More Ibuprofen.

Now. The sooner the better. Please make it stop. I can't get away from it.

The buzzing and the burning in my hands and feet and the vision amounts to a trifecta of pain and crap. Oh, the vision is very good. I can see very well, just two or four of everything. I blink to try and get focus but my brain is not cooperating. I feel like I stuck my tongue on a 9-volt battery and the shocking sensation goes through my entire body. The buzzing and burning

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is getting worse. My hands and feet would steam if I poured water on them because they are hot. They feel hot. They are hot. My brain thinks they are. I can't get cool. The heat makes me sweat and Melinda knew if she saw a bead of sweat on my forehead I was going downhill rather quickly.

She held me. That's all she could do. But she was there and that meant more to me than any cool vest I could put on.

While I didn't pay attention at the time, looking back on it I realized that the "Mr Bleachy" remark wasn't the only mistake the pair, mainly the smaller one, made that evening. If, indeed, the two were very experienced in dealing with delivering tragic news to family members, they sure didn't show it, and that was a mistake.

In the letters I wrote in the days following that evening I wanted to make sure the cops knew how to treat grieving family members, what is kosher and what is not. I didn't know how to react, I was new to this sort of thing, but they did and, therefore, didn't have any excuse for being lousy at their jobs. That night was nothing, however, compared to how I was treated in the subsequent days.

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They didn't try to consol me when they said the word "suicide" and used the word "victim" to precede that dark and menacing word. They acted like what they were doing was nothing more than a routine act of their official duties.

Do you have someone who could stay with you this evening Mr Beachy?

(Again, the smaller one got it right this time).

What?

Do you have someone to stay with you?

Jenny and her husband, Brandon, were with me earlier but they had since left. Jenny was Melinda's bridesmaid in our wedding and she helped me throughout that day because I was home alone without a car.

No.

Can you call someone?

I'll be alright.

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But, Mr Beachy, you should have someone here with you. Now the smaller one seemed concerned.

Too little, too late.

I picked up the phone and dialed Brandon's cell. Can you guys come back over here?

What happened?

They told me she was a victim of suicide. I barely got those words out. I had never been in shock before but I was sure this was what it was like. I hung up.

They're coming.

Good. Here is my card and you can call me in the morning and we can talk more. The card read: City of Memphis Homicide Division, Detective Mitch Oliver, with his phone number. My shaking hand took it and I made a mental note of his name. Mitch Oliver. Detective. Homicide Division.

What happened? I didn't know and they didn't offer any specifics.

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We don't know. We weren't the lead investigators on this case. We came to talk to you because you have been making some frantic phone calls to the department.

I did.

Brandon and Jenny were with me earlier in the evening when I called 9-1-1 and no one answered.

No one answered! How could someone NOT answer a 9-1-1 call? Instead, I got an answering machine.

Leave a message? No thanks. Click.

The phone rang immediately after I hung up. The woman at the emergency dispatch center wanted to know the nature of my emergency.

I cannot find my wife I said trying to stifle a sob. I know that is not an emergency but in this case it is because the word "morgue" had entered into the conversation and the cops aren't telling me anything! Please help me. I need to find my wife!

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Jenny had suggested that I call the local hospitals to see if they had a record of my wife getting admitted. They didn't. I called a morgue. No record. I called the jail. Nothing. My God, Melinda, where are you?

I am sure she will walk back into the house after having spent some time by herself wondering what to do now that she lost another job. I told Jenny not to worry too much because I fully expected her to come back home soon.

But minutes turned to hours. Nothing. Melinda hadn't come home and I tried her cell phone repeatedly with no luck. The rings were re-routed to her voicemail. I left her several messages, but one in particular that I erased when I finally got her effects from Detective Oliver more than two days later: "Sweetheart, I hope this doesn't mean you don't give a shit, because I do." When I got her phone back I erased that, it was almost as if I could take those words back and things would be okay if only I could erase the message before she heard it.

She never did hear it. I later found out Melinda was gone several hours before I left the message.

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Jenny was crying when she and Brandon made it back to my house. I was too.

Even after the small detective told me that she was a victim of suicide I thought it must be a mistake and she would, eventually, walk back into the house through the back door like she had always done in the past.

Shock.

Sinking in further.

It can't be true; she would never leave me, would she? She promised me she never would.

I'm staying here with you tonight. Brandon was first to break the sob-filled sounds in the room.

No, I'll be okay...you don't have to do that. But I needed to be with someone. Jenny knew that and told me. She didn't ask, she told me that Brandon was going to stay that evening and many more if I needed.

I did need.

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I also knew I had to make some calls, first to my parents and then to Melinda's. What would I say? What could I say? I was glad that I didn't have extensive experience telling bad news to the families of 'victims.' Of all the dirty jobs in this world, that has to be the dirtiest.

I called my mom and dad first and I don't really remember what I said but I do remember dropping the receiver on my bed and yelling "She's gone!"

Mom crying.

Dad crying.

Me crying.

The shaking got harder.

I have to call my father-in-law, Don.

My dad got on the line. Do you want us there with you, son? Yes. I needed to feel safe. I needed things to be back to normal. I needed this nightmare



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to be just that: a really bad dream that someone gets when they take painkillers. I needed this to be one of those narcotic nightmares.

I had to look Don's number up. I never committed it to memory. I didn't have to. He called our house at 1 o'clock every Sunday afternoon. You could set your watch by it. If I answered the phone on those afternoons he would always ask me about my health, the weather, the dogs and then he would want to talk to "the kid."

I called their number. Don answered. I knew he would because Melinda's mom never used the phone due to her difficulty with hearing.

She's gone, Don.

He passed along the message to Elsie and I could hear her scream in the background and begin to cry. Very loud and very hard. "Oh my baby!"

I didn't know what else to say. I needn't say anything else. I hung up after a few minutes, I think, but I don't remember. All I remember is saying to Don that his daughter was now dead. That isn't the way things are supposed to be. Parents are supposed to, always, die before their children. That's a rule

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that is all too often broken and it's NOT supposed to be that way. It can't be that way. She promised me that she would never leave.

I sat at my desk not knowing what to do. I was thinking this is all a nightmare and somewhere along the way a mistake was made and Melinda would walk back into the house, through the back door like she always did, soon.

No.

No mistake. She was gone. She left me.

The exhaustion set in. One of the worst symptoms of multiple sclerosis is extreme fatigue. Melinda told me that I could fall asleep in mid-sentence and she was sure that extreme fatigue was a defense mechanism for those with MS, otherwise how could anyone get any rest without the help of a handful of sleeping pills? I took some sleeping pills in the month or so after I was diagnosed, but it got to a point where I was eventually taking pills to stay awake, not to sleep. Slumber was easy. It was my defense mechanism.

Doctors prescribe pills, like Provigil, for those with MS. Provigil is given to narcoleptics to help them stay awake. It works for those with MS, at least

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until your body gets used to them. Now, I can take a Provigil pill at 10 o'clock at night and fall asleep. When that happened, doctors tell you to stop taking them for about a month or two and then resume them again.

It'll be like new again.

I didn't know if I could fall asleep that night, but I had been up for nearly 20 hours and I struggled to stay awake. At least until I lied down in bed.

I woke up the next morning and reached over to Melinda's side of the bed.

She wasn't there. The previous day's events came crashing back into my mind and the tremors started again. I stumbled into the kitchen, but not before passing by our living room window that overlooked our driveway.

I looked out, hoping to see our car in the driveway. Nope. Our car wasn't there.

Nope, she didn't come home in the middle of the night.

Yep, I was alone.

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Nothing.

The first day of the rest of my life had just begun.