

Kaleidoscope

by K. D. Wentworth

K. D. Wentworth says her current projects include a western fantasy for young readers and a pair of books she's co-writing with Eric Flint. Her charming new story owes its origin to a neighbor's escaped German Shorthaired Pointer, but we're hopeful that the rest of the story is more fancy than fact.

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After she took early retirement at fifty-two from her job at the university library, Ally Coelho's life ran along like an old car, occasionally missing on one cylinder or the other, but in the end, usually getting her at least close to where she wanted to go. Of course there were disappointments, especially in the relationship department, but she made do with whatever came along until the universe started amusing itself by playing dice with her life.

It had begun with a stray dog that bounded past the front yard when Ally was on her knees, weeding geraniums. The day was golden June, the temperature already climbing toward the nineties. Her auburn hair clung to her perspiring face like the calyx of one of her flowers.

The dog was a sleek German Shorthaired Pointer, lean as a racing hound and panting from the day's heat. Ally lured it with a bowl of water and then examined its tag, which revealed its name was "Sadee." She phoned the owner, who drove over in a silver van and collected it with many expressions of gratitude.

That was how it had happened. But she also knew that the dog had merely glanced at her with freedom-crazed eyes, then careened off into the street where a Ford Tempo had knocked it into the gutter. That time she'd checked for a tag and called the owner, too, who had arrived with two weeping boys, eleven and nine, to collect Sadee's broken body in an old blanket for burial.

Both scenes played in her mind like dueling movie trailers. She remembered the boys' beaming faces when they hugged their retrieved companion and their tears as their mother picked up the pointer's carcass.

It wasn't one or the other. Somehow, it was both.

She knew she could resolve the question of which memory was real by calling the family, who lived less than a mile away, and asking after the dog, but she feared the answer. As long as she didn't inquire, the pointer might very well be frisking in its backyard, digging holes and playing ball. If it was buried under a tree somewhere, she did not want to know. So she didn't even drive past the dog's house, hoping to catch a glimpse. She just tried to put the whole matter out of her mind and worked on dividing her hostas for replanting.

But then her young friend Melinda, a former coworker from the library, called to say she and Carl, her longtime beau, were finally getting married. They would have a huge ceremony at the Methodist church and then leave on a wedding trip to

Scotland. There were rings to buy, invitations and music to be selected, the perfect dress to be found. It was all joyous and anticipatory, as though Christmas and Thanksgiving both had arrived in June.

When Ally got up the next morning, though, she also knew that Carl had been transferred to Rio and not asked Melinda to go with him. Instead, he had said it was too far to carry on a long-distance relationship. They had best agree just to be friends. Melinda was inconsolable and no longer answered the phone.

Ally felt she must be going crazy. Both time lines ran in her mind, equally valid. Surely one of them had happened first, but when she tried to remember which, they danced through her memory, woven together and inseparable.

Later that afternoon, when she was pruning her roses, she realized that Melinda had caught Carl with another woman at the local bingo casino and ended the relationship herself. Melinda had booked passage on a cruise to Alaska, alone. Carl had gone out drinking and wrecked his car. His arm was broken in two places.

She would not think about it, Ally told herself firmly. It was just her imagination running away with itself. She would call her friends, Lynn and Ron, go out to dinner, and forget all this nonsense.

They accepted and agreed to meet her at a favorite local Mexican restaurant, the one that resembled a festive village inside and featured a two-story waterfall. But she waited there at the hostess station alone on the green vinyl couch, as parties of diners came and went, for forty minutes until her cell phone rang.

Where was she, Lynn wanted to know. They were at Caruso's, a popular Italian buffet, and the hostess wouldn't seat them until Ally arrived. Aghast, Ally pleaded car trouble and apologized, then went straight home and shut herself into the dimness of her bedroom. Hungry, head whirling, she curled up in her favorite old green throw.

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The next morning, Saturday, she remembered that the three of them had eaten dinner at a P. F. Chang's restaurant, how Ron, engaging as ever, had teased her about the threads of gray in her auburn hair, and Lynn had told stories of her fourth grade classroom. They'd ordered the monstrously large chocolate cake, split it among the three of them, and still couldn't finish.

Her life seemed to be going on without her, splintering off into a hundred different directions. Maybe she needed Prozac, she told herself. Or Valium. Maybe it was time to hibernate, or she should talk to a counselor.

But no. She was just letting her mind wander. All she had to do was pay closer attention to what was going on around her and all this ... confusion ... would melt away.

Just after lunch, Lynn dropped by to see Ally as she was trundling the lawn mower around to the backyard. Her friend parked her Ford SUV on the street and got out, long legs tan and fit. Her dark hair was caught up in a clip on the back of her head and she wore threadbare cutoffs. “Wasn’t that Barry a card last night?” she said as she walked across the grass. “I don’t know when I’ve laughed so hard!”

Lynn and Carl had brought a friend—a single gentleman her age—with them to Fuddrucker’s, Ally realized. He’d had thinning silver hair and deep brown eyes half-buried in smile lines. He worked at the zoo with the hoofed animals, technically known as “ungulates,” specialized in zebras, and had been divorced for five years. She stared at Lynn, clutching the lawn mower’s battered handle, unable to speak.

“He wants to go out with you.” Lynn waved a persistent fly out of her face. “It’s okay that I gave him your phone number, isn’t it?”

“Sure,” Ally heard herself say, though her voice trembled. Sweat soaked the back of her old T-shirt. “He was quite—charming.” And he had been, she knew now. How could she have forgotten?

“Who knows?” Lynn said with an affectionate smile. “This could be the start of something big.”

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Barry called that afternoon. They made a date for that evening, dinner at a retro diner that served wonderful milk shakes, and then a movie. Ally hadn’t been out on a real date for more than a year now. Sweet old-fashioned anticipation washed through her, laced with a bit of fear. What if he hadn’t really called? Any minute now, she might remember how much he’d disliked her.

But the day wore on and the date stayed firm. Maybe she’d just dreamed all those other things. Maybe she’d even go see the pointer’s family and assure herself that Sadee still romped in her own backyard. Everything would be all right.

She dressed in a cool white summer skirt with her favorite aqua blouse and met Barry at the door. He was taller than she remembered and mostly bald. His lips were thinner, and he didn’t look like he found much in life amusing.

“Did you work at the zoo today?” she asked as they walked to his car. The air was hot and sticky, and she fanned herself with one hand. Cicadas were droning like a Greek chorus in the neighborhood trees.

“I sell life insurance,” Barry said, giving her a sideways glance. “I thought Lynn told you that.” He opened the car door. It was a black Jaguar, low-slung, sleek, and somehow menacing.

Ally slid in across the fine leather seat, heart thumping.

They drove to Finelli’s, a shadowy Italian restaurant staffed by sneering waiters, to eat bruschetta and garlicky ravioli. He related mind-numbing tales of his

best sales months, the reluctant clients he'd coaxed aboard, and the thrill of exceeding his quotas, then drove her to a claustrophobic club to listen to progressive jazz.

The discordant music washed over her, battering her nerves. Each chord seemed to reinforce all the strangeness of the last few days. She knotted her fingers. What had happened to the other Barry, the one with the shy smile? That was who she was supposed to see at her door tonight, not this slick stranger with his intimidating expensive car.

It was like the universe was playing tricks on her, tantalizing her with the promise of one thing, then sending her quite another. All her life, she had determinedly dealt with whatever came her way, but she didn't know how to cope when everything kept changing, second by second.

He took her home at midnight, and they parted with only a chaste peck on the cheek. She wasn't to his taste, she was quite certain, and she had definitely been expecting someone else when she'd answered the door.

Her sleep was filled with dreams of a silver-haired Barry who charmed her with tales of fractious zebras and red-spotted deer. They finished huge chocolate milk shakes, then left the diner, skipping the movie to walk the zoo after hours, where he pointed out the different ungulates in their paddocks by silvery moonlight.

When she woke, though, that scenario stayed only a dream, the night with insurance salesman Barry a reality. She was disappointed. Though the chronic changes of the last few days had been disconcerting, just this once, a different outcome would have been welcome.

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Insurance-Barry didn't call again, nor did she expect that he would. Most likely he'd made the date with someone else, too, a different Ally, who was sure and sophisticated, twenty pounds slimmer, well versed in progressive jazz, and decked out in tottery high heels. Perhaps the universe had played a trick on him, too. If so, she was sorry for her part in the deception.

Thereafter, life calmed down for a few days, running only on a single track, almost boring. Lynn called to see how her date had gone, but wasn't surprised. "He already has four ex-wives," she said. "I was surprised you agreed to go out with such a jerk. Ron only asked him to sit down with us at dinner because it was obvious he wouldn't go away."

Of course, she hadn't agreed to go out with that particular Barry, but she couldn't explain that.

At loose ends that afternoon, after watering her backyard impatiens, Ally drove across town to the zoo and walked its winding pathways for hours. The ungulate paddocks were just as she'd dreamed them, though not nearly as

glamorous by daylight. She hung on splintery wooden fences and studied water buffalo, camels, giraffes, and the exotic okapi with its striped legs. Large and small, they each moved with a grace that brought peace to her heart.

“Lovely, aren’t they?” a voice said behind her shoulder.

She looked around. “Barry?”

His silver hair gleamed in the late afternoon sun. His eyes were half-buried in smile lines. “Have you been here before?” he asked. His name was stitched in red thread across the khaki shoulder of his keeper’s uniform.

“No,” she said slowly, heart thumping, “but I’ve thought about it.” She watched the stately giraffe amble across its paddock, ears wagging. “It’s a bit like my gardening, so many different varieties, each with its own requirements for water, sunlight, and food.”

“Exactly.” He leaned on the rail beside her and gazed at the giraffe as it stretched its elegant neck to nibble oak leaves. His face creased in thought. “Most people prefer the big cats, though, because they’re so dramatic, or the reptile house for sheer shock value.”

“They have their own attractions,” she said, “but I’ve been dreaming about these.”

“I’m pretty much finished with my duties for the day,” this Barry said. “Would you like a backstage tour of the facility?”

So they walked through the barns as he explained each species, what was special about it, what unique care it required. The smell of baking earth, hay, and feed filled the air, along with the redolence of dung. She watched his face more than listened to his words. He loved his work—in fact, in many ways, he *was* his work.

The zoo closed at six, so he walked her back to the entrance as families of tired children drifted toward the parking lot. “This was lovely,” she said, stopping beside the pond that isolated Monkey Island. The green water rippled, and then a turtle head broke the surface to stare at them. “Thank you so much.”

“We’re always looking for volunteers,” he said, “especially docents to handle tours.”

“I would like that.” She fumbled in her purse for a stray scrap of paper, then wrote her name and number. “Please give my information to the proper authorities.”

She drove home in a warm joyous haze. She had taken her fate into her own hands, and for once things had come out at least close to the way she wanted.

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The next morning, she knew that she had encountered only a mumbling man

named Art working the ungulates section of the zoo. She'd walked for hours and seen nothing of interest but animals half-stultified by the intense heat. Now all she had to show for the adventure was a sunburn.

But the afternoon with Barry had happened too. They both were true. When the phone finally did ring, it was like an electric current ran through her—but it was only Melinda, planning her Puerto Vallarta honeymoon, not Barry, or even the zoo, confirming her offer to volunteer.

She met Lynn for lunch at a local sandwich outlet and ordered a steaming meatball sub. “That wretch Barry called Ron last night,” Lynn said as she slid into the booth. “He had the nerve to ask us if we had any friends with a bit more ‘go.’”

Insurance-Barry, Ally hoped, not Zoo-Barry. “Well, he’s certainly not my type,” she said. “Ron should do it, if he wants.”

“So he can insult another friend of ours?”

“This is bald Barry, isn’t it?” Ally asked as the blood pounded in her ears.

“Bald as a billiard ball,” Lynn said, “if you don’t count that silly comb-over.” She’d only ordered a salad and now picked at a cherry tomato perched on top.

They chatted through the rest of the meal, then Lynn looked at her watch. “Goodness!” she said. “I have to drop by school to pick up Carina for her doctor’s appointment.”

“Carina?” Ally’s fingers gripped the plastic soda cup too tightly. It crunched in, portending collapse.

“My *daughter*,” Lynn said with a wry smile as she picked up her purse. “*Your* goddaughter. *That* Carina.”

Lynn and Ron had no children. But with a rush, Ally realized they had three: two boys who were excellent students, currently in third and fifth grade, and then Carina, sixteen, in high school, who was always getting into scrapes. She smiled as best she could, which wasn’t very well at the moment. If this went on, she thought, she’d never have to worry about smile lines around *her* eyes. “Of course,” she said, as a hot flush crept up her neck. “Give her my love.”

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The zoo never called, nor did Zoo-Barry, though another zoo memory surfaced to take its place beside the others: a middle-aged zookeeper, a woman named Emma, who had stopped to chat as Ally watched the caribou.

Emma had complained about the heat, her wages, her coworkers, and zoo patrons who fed the animals even though it was strictly forbidden. The woman had droned on and on into Ally’s ear until she fled the zoo well before closing time.

Lynn's daughter, Carina, came by to drop off some gardening magazines, and Ally wondered how she could ever have forgotten that angular young face, topped at the moment by a bristle of outrageously red hair. "Are you dating anyone special?" she asked her goddaughter as she opened the front door.

"God, no, Aunt Ally!" Carina laughed. "This isn't *Leave It to Beaver!* No one *dates* anymore! That's so hopelessly—retro!"

"Yes, I suppose it is." Ally shared a Diet Coke with her, then watched the girl drive off on her orange motorized scooter.

Lynn and Ron had been seriously committed to the Zero Population Growth movement. They'd never wanted children, had in fact taken early steps to end their fertility. She knew that as well as she knew Carina's face.

Maybe if she didn't go anywhere or see anyone, things would calm down. All the alternate memories that kept bobbing like corks up into her consciousness involved people, so if she just stayed home, there would be nothing to drive her crazy.

Zoo-Barry called that night with the schedule for upcoming docent training classes. She'd meant to turn down all potential interactions for the time being, but found herself agreeing to attend.

All the way across town to the zoo the next day, she kept telling herself he wouldn't be there, the Barry she wanted to see. It would be someone else, taller, skinnier, fatter, meaner, female, older, or younger. That was the only given she could depend upon these days. Every time she thought she had a handle on reality, it twisted out of her grasp like a snake, as though someone Up There were having a really good laugh at her expense.

Of course, it was possible, she thought with a shudder as she turned into the vast zoo parking lot, that she might be slipping into early Alzheimer's; but if so, she wanted to keep it to herself as long as possible.

Admissions checked off her name on a list, then sent her to an administration building. The day was already hot as she followed the sidewalks, dodging eager children towing balloons and detouring dropped Popsicles melting in the sun. Over on the east side of the zoo, one of the elephants trumpeted as though to welcome her.

When she reached her destination, most of the other potential docents were at least her age, older genial people with time on their hands and an interest in nature. She sat at the back of the room, perched on a metal folding chair, and listened to the zoo director, a tall lean woman with an intense manner and braided graying hair, as she explained their educational "mission statement."

Barry was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he was feeding the elk, she thought,

or maybe whatever Barry was in existence today liked working with the tigers or the penguins instead, and had no time for the poor ungulates.

The trainees split into small groups, each led by an experienced docent, and went out into the zoo to start learning the facility. Ally's instructor was a seventyish man named Oliver who had volunteered here for eleven years. The gorillas were his passion. He knew everything about them, regarded them, in fact, as surrogate children and visited them even on days when he wasn't working.

She found them unsettling, though, their gaze so humanlike and yet so alien, and was relieved when their group moved on to the Large Cat Pavilion.

A sinuous black panther, sprawled in the midst of a faux jungle, stared through the glass as they walked into the air-conditioned coolness. Its golden eyes were heavy-lidded, its manner disdainful. A man in a khaki uniform and work boots was examining the exhibit, checking off items on a clipboard. He had more hair than Barry, was a bit shorter, a tad stouter around the middle.

He turned around as Oliver was explaining the history of the two cats on display, and she felt her cheeks warm. "Barry!"

The man smiled uncertainly. "I'm sorry. Have we met?"

This Barry had blue eyes rather than brown, but he was pretty much the same guy. "Back when you worked the Ungulates area," she said, easing away from her docent group as Oliver droned on about feeding schedules and the success of the breeding program. "You were the one who inspired me to volunteer."

"Gosh." Barry scratched his head. "That's been a good two years now. You'll have to forgive me. I'm not very good at remembering faces, Ms.—?"

"Coelho. Allison Coelho. My friends call me Ally." She put out her hand and he automatically accepted it. His grip was warm and firm, and, this close, his uniform gave off the aroma of sun-warmed hay. Her head whirled and she had to make herself release his fingers.

"Are you going to specialize in one particular area," he said, glancing at the trainees, "or work as a general guide?"

"I'm especially fond of the ungulates," she said.

"Really?" He smiled and there were all those smile lines, nested at the corners of his eyes, just as before. "We don't get too many volunteers requesting that area. Ungulates were my particular favorites until I got promoted. I still spend as much time with them as I can manage."

He fished in his pocket, came up with a battered black case, and removed a card. "Please feel free to call me if you have any questions after you complete your training."

She clasped the card in nervous fingers. “Th-thank you,” she managed as he tucked the clipboard under his arm and strode back out into the fierce June sunlight.

On the other side of the glass, the panther leapt to its feet and snarled. Its eyes, she noticed, had gone green.

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Twice a week thereafter, Ally reported for docent training, but never saw Barry again. Once she asked about him at Admissions and was told no one named Barry worked on the staff. After that, she was afraid to ask, as though her conscious efforts forced him farther away in this vast river of possibilities that was carrying her along.

Carina dropped by again, decked out in a nose ring and dog collar, and shyly admitted that she was hanging around quite a bit these days with a guy in her “posse” by the name of Jerret. “Not that we’ve got a thing for each other,” her goddaughter said defiantly, waving a Twinkie in the air like a conductor’s baton. “We just, like, see eye to eye, some of the time, and I’m way better in math than he is. The poor slob can use all the help he can get.”

Hang onto him, Ally wanted to say. If you’re not paying attention, the universe can sweep him away any second. But she just smiled and opened a second package of Twinkies, Carina’s current poison of choice.

After two months, Ally qualified as a docent and began taking small tours out on her own, mostly groups of unruly children who thought the zoo had nothing to offer that they couldn’t see more often and better on television.

Whenever she passed the ungulate paddocks, she always remembered that marvelous dream when she and Barry had walked the zoo by moonlight. Of all the things her wayward mind insisted upon remembering, this was the only one that had never really happened.

Every time one of the male zoo staff passed, she checked his uniform, but indeed Barry did not seem to work here anymore. She wondered if he’d become Insurance-Barry for good, or perhaps a plumber or car salesman. Even if she could have located one of them, those Barrys were not the one she wanted. Instead, she applied herself to what she did have, accepting extra tours when no one else was available, learning more and more about the animals, so that the job was its own reward.

Carina had quit dropping by, and it seemed that Lynn and Ron had no children again. Lynn had looked at her strangely the last time she’d asked after her goddaughter, so now she just waited for the subject to be brought up, and for the last month, it never had been. Ron and Lynn were planning a trip to Greece, in fact, which they never could have afforded if they had three children to put through college.

Ally felt mired in this life where nothing was certain. Everyone she liked kept going away—Barry and Carina, and even that stupid dog she'd rescued, which insisted on being equally dead and alive in her memory.

One Wednesday, she reported to the zoo and met her tour group in the late afternoon, a father and his four children. According to her slip, the three girls were three, six, and seven, the boy, fourteen. They waited for her at the pond around Monkey Island. The father, tall and silver-haired, turned to her.

It was Barry, or a version of him anyway, more angular and careworn than she'd last seen him, his face grooved with sadness. "Ms. Coelho?" he said, and held out his hand. "I'm Barry Frey and these are my children, Anna, Sylvie, Marty, and Brent."

She took his hand, trying not to stare. The first two Barrys she'd met had been divorced. Had any of the others been married? She'd never known. She made herself smile. "Shall we start with the giraffes?"

They strolled through the sweltering August afternoon, seeking shade as often as possible. The girls were entranced with the stately giraffes. They hung on the fence and pointed, though she could tell the boy was already restless.

"They lost their mother at Christmas," Barry confided as they left the giraffe paddock and headed toward the water buffalo. "I keep trying to find ways to distract them, but nothing really works."

"Maybe Brent would like to volunteer with the Zoo Teens program," Ally said. "It's quite popular with young people, and he might meet some new friends." Carina, she realized, was doing such volunteer work, mostly in the Raptor House. The owls were her goddaughter's favorites. She was even collecting grisly owl pellets made of mouse skeletons for her next year's science project.

After the tour, they dropped by the administration building and signed Brent up. His eyes looked alive for the first time that day as he read the brochure. Barry thanked her and then bundled his family into a dark green Honda.

So many Barrys, she thought bemusedly, as they drove off, each with his own attractions and problems.

Thereafter, the universe seemed to relent. She ran into Barry almost every day, or at least some version of him. One was a concrete contractor who had come to repair the seal pool. He had a stronger brow than Zoo-Barry and a badly healed broken nose. Another was a gap-toothed deliveryman trundling in cartons of frozen confections for the concession stand. There was White-Collar-Barry, complete with briefcase, auditing the zoo's finances, and Advertising-Barry who was putting together a media campaign to increase zoo attendance. She met Grant-Barry who was writing grant applications for the zoo and Mayor's-Aide-Barry who was scheduled to conduct a press conference on-site about zoo funding.

So many Barrys made her head swim, too much of a good thing, and in truth, she still longed for Zoo-Barry, who had an openness most of the others lacked. Oftentimes, that dream walk in the moonlight seemed truer than anything that had actually happened.

One evening in early September, just after she'd finished watering her garden, the doorbell rang. She opened it and found Barry, or at least *a* Barry, standing there. This one looked tan and genial, dressed in carefully pressed jeans and a blue-checked shirt. They had a date, she realized, a movie out at the old Admiral Twin, the only drive-in theater left in town.

Her face was smudged, her clothes sweaty and damp from wrestling with a leaky hose. "I—" she said.

Barry laughed and there were those smile lines again. It was *him*, she thought with a swell of hope.

"You forgot, didn't you?" He stepped inside and swept her into a hug. "I love it that you get so carried away with your garden. It's all right. We still have plenty of time for you to change your clothes."

They'd been dating for three months, every Friday night like clockwork. The memories surfaced in her head as she darted back to the bedroom and peeled out of her dirty clothes to shower. The hot water beat at her, and she used juniper-scented soap, his favorite. They'd been good months, too, and recently he'd introduced her to his grown children, Brent and Marty. Things seemed to taking a more serious turn, their times together rich with promise.

Tears bubbled up in her eyes. Tomorrow she'd wake up and realize Barry was married to someone else. The two of them would have quarreled, or he'd be dead. His children would hate her, or he would have a job in Siberia, so that they'd never met at all. It was like being on the old-fashioned merry-go-round where you kept coming around to see the brass ring, then being whirled away again, empty-handed.

She dressed in a beige skirt, sandals, and a lacy cotton blouse, and grabbed her purse. They headed out through the firefly-laced dusk to the movie (something about treasure and blowing up trains—she never did get the title straight) and snuggled like two kids the whole feature.

The next morning, she woke next to a warm presence pressed close to her back. "Barry?" She put out a hand and traced a shoulder nestled against hers.

"Mmmm?" he said.

They had made love for the first time last night, she remembered. It had been slow and sweet and—

Utterly wonderful. And the universe had let her keep it.

Smiling, she got up and made him chocolate chip pancakes from scratch. He sat across from her at the kitchen table, talking about his plans to acquire a new zebra stallion from the San Jose Zoo. The current stud had gone a bit senile, it seemed, and preferred the company of his own sons to receptive mares.

She watched him, entranced. Every moment seemed precious because tomorrow she would remember it a different way. "I have to work this afternoon," Barry said, finally laying aside his fork. "George Spencer is off and I'm filling in."

"I'll go in, too," she said hastily, afraid if she took her eyes off his genial face for a second, he'd turn back into Insurance-Barry or any one of his thousand other iterations. "Maybe they need some help somewhere."

Barry smiled and pulled her into his arms. He lowered his face and murmured into her hair, "They always do."

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By the time they'd gotten to the zoo, however, she remembered how they'd agreed last night to "put the brakes on," as he'd termed it. His son, Brent, was getting married next month and wanted Barry to walk his ex-wife, Brenda, into the church and then sit at her side, in some ghoulish fantasy of "if things look all right, then they are."

Ally wasn't invited to the wedding, because that would make Brenda unhappy. It was Brent's big day, after all, Barry said. He was sure Ally understood.

And Ally did understand, all right. The universe was having at her—yet again.

They emerged from his Jeep Wrangler in the parking lot. The asphalt steamed up at them, and he waved at her wearily. "Okay, meet you back here at five?"

Somewhere, she knew, the universe was laughing. It had once again showed her what she most wanted in the whole world, then swept it away before she could even catch her breath.

She spotted Carina, just beyond the Admissions booth, carrying a broom and walking with a group of Zoo Teens toward the penguin exhibit. Her sometime goddaughter had pink hair today and looked enthused as Ally had rarely seen her. This roller-coaster ride was at least doing *her* some good.

Ally whirled on Barry, who was startled and stepped back. "No," she said with a forcefulness entirely foreign to her orderly soul, "it is not okay with me!" She glanced up at the sky. "Do you hear that?" Seizing his face in her hands, she pulled him down to her for a desperately passionate kiss, the likes of which she could never remember planting on anyone before, Barry or not.

His arms encircled her, and they stood locked together in the middle of the parking lot until someone passing snickered. "Hey, gramps, get a room!"

Barry laughed and broke the kiss, though he still held her close. That night at the drive-in, she thought frantically, trying to hold on to this particular slice of reality, smile lines, silver hair, a warm and welcome presence in bed. He shimmered, as though she were seeing him through waves of heat. His hair thinned, receding even as she looked.

Insurance-Barry, she thought grimly. “No!” she shouted at the universe. “Not this time!” She kissed him again, more insistently, until her brain had the consistency of warm custard. Her knees threatened to give way and she could think of nothing beyond this moment.

“I—” Barry stopped, apparently unable to continue his thought. His mouth gaped as he stared down at her, now wearing the concrete company’s black uniform.

They’d been married for ten years, her memory told her, and miserable for nine. Her stepchildren hated her and had driven them apart. She’d secretly consulted a divorce attorney just two days ago. Barry was a selfish, grasping, miserly—

She threw her arms around him again and held on, though she could feel his confusion. She wanted her one true Barry, no one else!

The parking lot wavered, and then an industrial park stood in place of the zoo, which had been shut down years ago by the city as an unpopular, unprofitable enterprise. Auto glass was now fabricated here and wooden pallets for shipping.

There was no Barry, no Carina, no wonderful old drive-in where you could watch movies under the starlight. Her arms were empty. She was standing alone. Her hands dropped to her sides.

Why did the pieces of her life keep shifting, falling into new configurations—some beautiful, others plain, or boring, or even outright depressing? Had she committed some great unpardonable wrong for which she had to keep paying over and over again? It was like something basic inside her head had come unstuck. Maybe she *was* developing Alzheimer’s.

“I want it back,” she said hoarsely to the sky in the busy parking lot as massive delivery trucks maneuvered past her. “I want *him* back!”

The universe, of course, paid no mind.

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By the next morning, she had the zoo again and her volunteer job as a docent, but not Barry. They’d never met, her rogue memory told her, as she poured coffee into a travel mug, though she had caught sight of him working in the giraffe paddock once. She moved through her day in a daze, speaking when required, being polite to her tour groups.

Even her garden at home gave her no pleasure. The hostas seemed gray and

unreal, the geraniums terribly ephemeral. Her little house, so snug and reassuring before, seemed likely to become a pizzeria when she wasn't looking, or the lobby of a bank. Perhaps she would wander homeless then, begging for quarters at intersections with a hand-printed sign. Nothing was for certain. Nothing lasted, and she couldn't do anything about it.

That evening, one of the Barrys called, but she just hung up before she figured out which of his many versions it was. Even if this was the right one, it hurt too much to spend time together just to have him snatched away mid-kiss.

He called again, every night for a week, but she could not bear to exchange a single word with him.

Finally, toward the end of September, her friend Melinda stopped by. When Ally opened the door, all of Melinda's possible lives danced through her mind, equally real: Melinda's wedding, abandonment, honeymoon, Carl's betrayal. "How—are you?" Ally said unsteadily, having no way to tell which particular Melinda had come to see her.

"I've brought the honeymoon pictures," Melinda said, sweeping past her into the living room. "But the real question is—how are *you*?" She flung herself down on the green-sprigged couch, dislodging an open gardening book to the floor, and gazed at Ally disapprovingly. "You're breaking his heart, you know."

"*His* heart'?" Ally closed the front door and followed her inside.

"Barry's," Melinda said, as though Ally were a foolish little girl. "At least tell him what he's done."

"*He*—hasn't done anything," Ally said. Despair seeped through her.

"Of course not." Melinda pulled a huge packet of pictures out of her purse. "This is *Barry* we're talking about. He's so perfect, he makes my teeth ache."

"It's just—" Ally locked her hands together and stared at her tennis shoes, fighting tears. "No matter how hard I try, I can't have him. The—universe—won't let me."

Melinda sorted through the pictures, her expression intent. "Why in heaven's name not?"

"I don't know," Ally said. "I've tried and tried to make it work out, but, for whatever reason, it just isn't going to happen."

The doorbell rang. Ally excused herself to answer it and found a blue-haired, pierced-nosed Carina waiting on her porch, towing a pimply young man decked out all in black and three sets of earrings.

"Aunt Ally," she said with a crooked, shy smile. "I brought Jerret by, so you

could meet him, like you asked.”

“Wonderful,” Ally said, as her mind whirled. “Come—in.”

She seated them in the living room, across from Melinda, and left the three of them examining the Puerto Vallarta honeymoon photos while she rummaged through the refrigerator in search of something to serve at this impromptu party.

The doorbell rang again. Who now, she thought crossly, Lynn and Carl? The next-door neighbors and their five children? A twenty-piece brass band from the local high school? All she’d wanted tonight was a chance to be alone and wallow in her misery. Wasn’t the universe going to allow her at least that much?

She heard Carina answer the door, then toenails clicked across the parquet. A slim brown-spotted dog bounded around the corner into the kitchen and jumped joyously up to lick her. It was Sadee, the dog she both had—and had not—rescued. A dark-haired woman trailed behind, leash in one hand and something wriggling in her other arm. “Down, Sadee!” she said breathlessly. “I’m so sorry. We just wanted to drop by.”

Ally dropped to her knee on the white tile kitchen floor and smoothed a hand over Sadee’s sleek head. She was gloriously alive.

“Sadee had pups eight weeks ago, courtesy of her adventure that day when she escaped the yard,” the woman said. “Because you rescued her, my sons wanted you to have the pick of the litter.” She set a brown-furred puppy down on the floor and it promptly piddled. Sighing, she snatched up the paper towel roll from the counter. “From the thick coat, we think the father might have been an Akita, though it’s hard to tell just yet. I know you might not want a dog right now, but you were so kind to Sadee when she got loose, and I promised the boys I would ask.” The woman tore off towel sheets to soak up the puddle. “She’s not housebroken, yet, I’m afraid.”

“It’s all right,” Ally said, entranced. “No harm done.” She gathered the bright-eyed ball of fuzz up and cradled it to her. The puppy yapped, then licked her neck, so soft and warm.

“It’s real,” she murmured to herself.

“Very real,” the woman said wryly. “And I’ve got seven more just like her, in case one’s not enough.”

She heard the front door open again, though this time the bell hadn’t even rung. Were Carina and Jerret leaving already? Carrying the puppy, she went back into the living room. Barry was standing in the doorway, talking with Melinda.

“There you are,” he said, turning to her.

Ally steeled herself for the disparate and unsuspected memories that were sure

to surface. Which Barry was this? The one she'd married, with such unhappy results? The one who sold insurance? The one who fixed pools? Would he stay for a minute, or an hour, or even a day before the universe snatched him away?

"It's getting dark," he said, "and there's a full moon tonight. You always said you wanted to see the zoo by moonlight." He held out his hand.

Her dream. The puppy wriggled in her arms. "But you'll just leave me," she said to Barry—really, to the whole room, all of them, so transitory. "You always do."

"Hey, you're the one who won't answer the damned phone," Barry said. "I don't understand what that's all about."

"She just has trouble making up her mind," Melinda said, thrusting the honeymoon pictures back inside her purse. "Always has, as long as I've known her."

"Aunt Ally, you're so funny," Carina said reprovingly. "Don't be rude to the poor schmuck. Aren't you the one who's always telling me to 'take a chance'?" She lifted the struggling puppy from Ally's arms. It squirmed around and nipped her chin. She laughed. "Go with him. Jerret and I will dog-sit."

She did want to go, to make that dream image a reality, but how could she bear it when the universe snatched him away tomorrow?

"What is with you, woman?" Barry threw his arms around her. "You keep getting away from me. One day, you have blue eyes, the next, hazel. Your hair is short, then down to your shoulders. You live here and garden, then rent an apartment over on the other side of town and take up playing the piano. You volunteer at the zoo, but the next week, they've never heard of you. You say you love me, and then you won't even answer the phone. It's like I'm always on the trail of the real Ally, but she keeps hiding."

My god, she thought. Had it been happening to him, too? She tilted her head and examined his brown eyes. It *was* him, the one she had been seeking now for months, like a rare and splendid color glimpsed at dawn never replicated throughout the rest of the day. "I'm sorry," she said. Her pulse pounded in her ears. "I promise that I haven't been running away."

"Then, come on," he said and towed her out the door before she could even grab her purse.

* * * *

They used his keys and ID to get through the employees' entrance at the rear of the zoo. The bored security guard smiled and waved them past. Just as she had dreamed, moonlight made everything silver and mysterious: fences and the sleepy-eyed dun pony in the petting zoo, barns, even the stagnant old turtle pond.

Bats flitted overhead, black against the deep blue night sky, and wind rustled through the treetops. The air was deliciously cool.

She and Barry toured the drowsing water buffalo, the giraffes, the okapi, the zebras. He tucked her arm over his, so that their strides kept time with each other. With every moment, Barry seemed more solid, more really there with her. But it had been like that before, and in the end, she was always left at the mercy of all the other less desirable Barrys who crowded him out.

“This is lovely,” she said as they paused at the elk paddock. The lead bull’s eyes glittered with reflected starlight. “But it won’t last. It never does. I just don’t think the universe wants us to be together.” They walked on to the next exhibit.

“Forget the universe,” he said and turned her to face him in front of the mouse deer enclosure. The little animals had clustered into a wary pint-sized herd at the far end. “What do *you* want?”

“I want—” Sadee, the dog, dashed by again in her mind, equally alive and dead. Carina and her wildly colored hair wavered in and out of existence. Melinda and Carl bought a new condo and simultaneously filed for divorce. She struggled to focus. “I want—only to see the beauty in the world, the good things, whatever will make us happiest.”

“Then we’ll have to chart our course carefully,” he said. “Keep our eyes on the prize and all that.” He tucked a lock of her flyaway hair behind her ear.

Then he faded, and balding Insurance-Barry stood before her. As always, the corners of *his* mouth turned down.

She pushed them up with her fingers, squinting hard, picturing the headful of silver hair with all her might. “I have a puppy,” she said desperately, “*Sadee’s* puppy, conceived on the day I found her. She didn’t run in front of a car. She lived!”

That other terrible scenario, the one with the bloody carcass, faded until it was only a faint shadow, the echo of something tragic that might have happened, but, in the end, had not.

The night rippled, then his silver hair again gleamed in the moonlight. He seemed astonishingly, heartbreakingly, real. “I’m almost as good as a puppy,” he said helpfully, eyebrows quirked in that familiar appealing way.

“Almost.” The breath caught in her chest. Her arms stole around his neck, and she leaned in so close, she felt his heart beating under her cheek.

“*And* I’m already housebroken,” he said into her hair. “Let’s not forget that.”

The multitude of other possible Barrys pressed in, as though she were surrounded by a crowd of insistent ghosts. *I will not see you!* she told them. *You all*

belong somewhere else! Go away!

One by one, then, they faded like smoke on the wind. This Barry felt suddenly anchored, as though he were here to stay. Let those other Allys, who were undoubtedly all skinnier, younger, funnier, smarter, and more sophisticated, pursue their own versions of Barry, she thought.

She tilted her head back and gazed up at the glittering, cut-glass stars, holding on with all her might. This one, universe, was hers.