



Polka Dot Dress

*By Pat Nolan writing as
Patton D'Arque*

They showed her a blowup of a blurry black and white photo and wanted to know if she recognized the polka dot dress.

“I’d never wear something like that.”

The woman in the robin breast red pants suit brought the high heels of her black pumps together and looked down at her notes. A professor at a small college upstate, she had a grant to do archive research, and that had brought her to All Soul’s Care Home. The man with her was large boned, long limbed, square faced with the pale eyes of a northerner. He wore a dark blue suit that was not his, or one he had outgrown many years ago. His scuffed brown oxfords were massive. The professor had introduced his instantly forgettable foreign name which he acknowledged with an expressionless nod. He didn’t say what he did.

The window onto the small patio porch let in a muted gray light. A lamp was switched on over in one corner of the private room by the bedside table but not much use where they were, seated crowded together on the settee across from her armchair. A polished wood coffee table sat between them. Among the piles of mail, the TV remote, and next to a struggling underwatered potted violet, the professor had placed her smart phone on a tiny tripod and was recording the interview.

She wanted to know about the letters. The pictures and the letters, and what the letters said, and what the pictures showed. There was a picture she said that looked like her in a polka dot dress although the young girl had a different name. Yet their body signatures were the same, the DNA matched that of a Connecticut woman born Mary Ellias Anders.

She waited for what the professor would say next. Yes, there was a picture of young woman in a polka dot dress if it was her as they claimed. She appeared young, very young, with a crooked mischievous smile. It could be, but she had no supporting memory of that being her. There was a block as solid as if it had been made of granite when it came to remembering a certain time in her life, the time the professor was interested in, and, presumably, the man. The other picture, not posed, was of what appeared to be the same dress. A glare of streetlight overhead, silhouette of a narrow brimmed hat and dark masculine profile, a fall of blond hair over the shoulder of a black and white polka dot dress blurred by the couple's movement. She couldn't imagine herself in such a dress. She favored pastels and florals, something that made her feel anonymous and unnoticed. And besides, her name was Sharon, Sharon Salton.

The professor, Pam Pearson, was asking questions that she didn't know the answers to although they made her feel vaguely uncomfortable, almost as if by not remembering she was deliberately lying.

The things she did remember they didn't seem interested hearing about. She did suffer from memory lapses, but that wasn't unusual at her age. And she had only a dim recollection of her life over fifty years ago.

She had been in an accident, a car accident, maybe. She remembered being told that, repeatedly, by the man who raped her, also repeatedly, and that she should be repeatedly grateful that he had saved her life and had not left her to die in a dry arroyo full of snakes, rats, and coyotes. She had suffered broken ribs and a broken leg. The man, Luke, she recalled, had applied basic first aid and kept her immobile. The pain was just a vague memory. He had acquired pain killers and while they helped, they also left her confused. She was kept in a drugged stupor, and only dimly aware of her surroundings. The smell, she would always remember. A cool dankness mixed with a rancid clammy sweat, his. But also bacon, and burned beans, and bitter coffee. In a lucid moment, tied to the

wooden bedframe, she realized that she was underground, and sometime later, that she was being kept in an abandoned mine.

In one of the letters the professor claimed she had written she announced her arrival in Los Angeles. It was dated December 12th, 1967, and addressed to the Honorable Mark Edwards Anders of Sharon, Connecticut. The professor said that Judge Anders was a controversial political figure, a staunch anti-communist and John Bircher, in Western Connecticut with an estate on the outskirts of Sharon near the border with New York State, and that he was her uncle.

She could tell by the professor's questioning look that this revelation was supposed to light up some dark corner of her memory and substantiate her identity as this other person, Mary. They had reached this point before, on the professor's previous visits, and all she could express was bewilderment because she really had no memory of her past before her imprisonment in the abandoned mine. Amnesia was a likely diagnosis. And when she forced herself to go back further in her memory an uncontrollable fear shook her, as if she were poised to hurtle down a deep dark hole like the mineshaft that Luke had threatened to throw her down when she didn't act the way he thought she should. It always made her tremble. Her eyes would water, she would stutter gibberish as if she were having a fit.

At that point Angel Baby would rise from her chair in the darkness by the door to the room, shake her head, and inform the professor that they were done for the day. The professor, eyes flashing with exasperation, would gather her notes and smart phone before rising and following the care center director out of the room.

Angel Baby wasn't her real name. She was Doctor Babba Angeli, an East Indian woman, and the director of the psychiatric care home. Most of the residents just called her that. Not to her person, but she was probably aware of it. It was an affectionate turn. She had reluctantly agreed to allow the interviews on the condition that she could end them if she thought they were becoming disruptive. She hadn't wanted to allow it at all but there were considerations. The trust fund paying for Sharon's care had been impounded by the Justice Department. She might have to be moved to assistance and shared housing. And she didn't want that, did she? The professor had a grant that might guarantee her continued level of care if she agreed to the interviews. She always felt that Angel

Baby had her best interests at heart. A lot of the residents felt that way about her.

They did not feel that way about Mr. Chowdray, or Mr. Ray, or to some, evil Ray. He was vice president of operations for the corporation that owned All Souls as well as many other care and assisted living facilities. When he was around, every one became agitated, from the director to the janitor. The overworked aides were pushed by their own scheduling conflicts as well as the emotional disturbance of the man's presence. Extra meds were then doled out.

Then Angel Baby became ill. Everyone was getting sick. Not a few residents and staff died. Angel Baby was one of them. They were made to wear masks and were not allowed visitors. And the aides stopped coming to work because members of their family were getting sick or dying. It was always on the TV, pictures of helpless men pretending to be doing something. And Mr. Ray was appointed the director of All Souls, something he made sure that everyone knew he wasn't happy about, at all. And because the care home was not getting any new referrals, only the most desperate cases, it was floundering financially.

Sharon was forced into a three bed living space with no private patio or any of the amenities her single private room had afforded her. She had two roommates, a woman who was borderline catatonic and Karen, someone who felt that she had to voice her opinion about everything, and when she didn't have an opinion, she had a complaint. And she smoked, which was against policy but she did it anyway, standing by the outside window open a crack even in the coldest weather. One of the night duty aides sold her the cigarettes. She never wore her mask and claimed they would have to kill her before she allowed them to vaccinate her.

Sharon did get the shots, and got sick, but her symptoms were mild compared to some. She'd got the booster, too. Karen got very sick and they had to take her to the hospital. She hadn't returned and for a while Sharon had the room to herself and the vegetating woman addled by treatment and medicine. May, as the aides called her, as she was at any one time May Be or May Be Not.

And she now had full control of the remote and didn't have to always give in to Karen's choices, silly crime dramas or twenty four hour news infusion, nothing that actually represented real life. Her own preferences were cooking shows and outdoors living. She only checked the news channel for the weather forecasts. No matter

that she didn't go anywhere and was hardly allowed outside. Because of staffing shortages, the number of hours residents could be supervised safely outdoors had been cut back. But weather reports were her one abiding interest. It punctuated with regularity her days.

Then Mr. Chowdray informed her that he was allowing the interviews with the professor and her associate, once a large boned man in an ill-fitting suit now apparently a woman in an ill-fitting wig, to continue. The professor herself had put on a few pounds and her Kelly green pants suit strained in places. And they both wore masks. The professor's was a custom brocade design and the large boned associate wore an out of the box blue surgical mask that struggled to contain all of her nose and large jaw. All she could see of their faces was their eyes, the professors more expertly done up than her associate's.

"Call me Pam" wanted to review some of what they had covered in the previous sessions, and pointedly asked Mr. Ray for permission, bypassing Sharon and assuming she was compliant. Mr. Ray nodded in agreement and then looked at his watch and announced that he had pressing business to resume.

They told her again who they thought she was. They asked her questions she didn't know the answers to, again. She had no clear memory of long ago events, especially around the dates they were interested in, June of 1968. It was all a blur. However, during the lockdown and travel restrictions, Pam explained, she'd been busy with additional research.

For instance, the trust fund that was paying for her residence was one set up by her uncle, Judge Anders, something that had already been established. Pam had traced the credit lines to an offshore account that was on a watchlist of foreign government sponsored assets used either for money laundering or funding intelligence operations or both. Because of the ongoing investigations the trust fund had stopped paying into the account. And which explained why Mr. Ray was eager to allow the interviews to go forward. Her cooperation might mean a return to the comfort of a private room he'd intimidated.

They wanted to clarify some points that they had covered before. How she had come to be committed to All Souls. Why the attorney and doctor named in the court documents committing her to psychiatric care were untraceable and had been employed by a

firm that was no longer in existence, and may have been a dummy front funded by the same trust fund set up by her uncle, leaving only the barest of records.

Sharon couldn't answer those questions. She had told them before, a lawyer, an associate of the private detective who had contacted her, came and made her sign some papers and told her that by doing so she would be set for life. It was part of her husband's insurance policy they said. When she thought of her husband, it made her sad and she would blubber and lose composure. Usually that would end the interview, at Angel Baby's insistence. But Angel Baby wasn't there anymore and the professor and the large man dressed as a woman simply waited until she stopped.

Her husband was a plant mechanic for one of the big casinos in Reno. He died in a vehicle accident on his way to work the night shift just a few weeks before his retirement. She met him while she waitressed at the restaurant that was part of the casino, kind of an upscale Denny's. Up until then her life had been a careening pinball bouncing from bumper to flipper with no hope and no future.

Hikers had found her chained to the bed in the abandoned mine tunnel. She didn't remember how long she'd been there without food or water. Luke had just stopped coming back to abuse her and yell at her and rant his antigovernmental conspiracies. The hikers had called the sheriff who had called the ambulance who'd called for the helicopter. The hospital, after determining she was indigent but with no serious health problems other than a poorly healed femur that caused her to limp, contacted the county welfare department who put her in a home for abused women after they'd heard her story. She didn't remember her name and that was a problem for the case workers because they told her that she could only remain a Jane Doe for so long. If she could remember her name, they could begin a search for relatives and process her package. They had fingerprinted her only to learn that she had never been in jail or in the military. She was not on any national missing persons roster as far as they could tell.

A name had come to her, out of the blue fog that consisted of her memory, Sharon. It was a start. And she remembered the green road sign they'd passed when they were driving her to the shelter. She told them her name was Sharon Salton. And they gave her a temporary ID card with that name on it. To get a driver's license she would need a birth certificate. But in the meantime she

would be able to find work which she did in a soup kitchen in Bakersfield but that did not last long because they sometimes served kidney beans and she hated kidney beans. Just the thought of them sent her into hysterics. Then she met a woman who told her she could make good money in Vegas as a cocktail waitress and she would never have to see a kidney bean again.

What she did see however was a parade of handsome ugly men and ugly handsome men all with one thing in mind, possession of her body for a short time or longer, none, after a while any different than Luke, the man who had chained her to his bed. She understood she was damaged goods, besides the slight off kilter gait to her walk. Some men said that's what they liked about her, and her smile, she had a nice smile, even after all she had been through.

When Vegas got to be too much and the man she had been living with was arrested for murder in the course of an armed robbery, she left for Reno, taking the bus upstate, all that she owned in one suitcase. Her impression of the biggest little city in the world was that it was a gritty bleaker version of Vegas, that the glitter and neon was hardly bright enough to hide the desperation of so many of its inhabitants.

She'd found a job in housekeeping in one of the downtown hotels, and then waitressing in a couple of chain restaurants. She didn't mind the winters, they reassured her for some unfathomable reason, and she loved to ski which she did on occasion with the new friends she had made. And in the summers she hiked the mountain trails of the Sierras. There, camping in the rough desolate wilderness, she found relief from the anxieties of not being able to recall anything of her life before her rescue from captivity in the mine tunnel. With the exception of bouts of sleeplessness and the occasional nightmare that had her waking in sweats, her life had settled into a predictable routine and slowly remade itself as if the first twenty or so years were incidental and not worth the worry.

Then she met Mack, Bill McKensie, an older man whose kindness provided her with a sort of refuge. He was easy to like, undemanding, with a sense of humor and a hearty laugh, ex-Navy so he liked to drink and only occasionally to excess. Everyone has their demons he'd told her and they have to be let out every once in a while. The last time she remembered was at the turn of the century, the eve of the year two thousand. They'd been together that long. How time flies was a cliché that never grew old. But they had grown

old, together, and Mack was due for retirement although he dreaded the thought of it because he knew he would go stir crazy without a job to go to. They'd often talked of getting a fifth wheel and hitting the road and seeing some of the country, looking up some of his long lost relatives in the Midwest. He had long ago stopped asking her about her kin, knowing how much it upset her and caused her sleepless nights. She'd been prescribed pills but she hated the way they made her feel.

One Christmas he'd surprised her with a genealogy test that might trace her heritage and perhaps lead to some long lost relative. At first she had been angry, and fearful. The great unknown of her past after all that time might be waiting to reveal who she really was. But she was content with who she was, those two decades conveniently erased were nothing to the more than three decades she could remember. But Mack had insisted and so they had sent her spit off to be tested.

The results must have come back around the time of Mack's death. It sat on the tiny writing desk in the front room along with all the other unopened mail, bills, and such, nothing that she could bring herself to look at or deal with. And she was taking more pills and sleeping whole days away, not answering phone calls, stumbling out into the late night to the 24 hour supermarkets for more of the same frozen dinners. She was slowly letting herself die. I'll be dead by the time I'm sixty she'd told herself. As if it had been a promise. And then a man who said he was a private detective showed up at her door.

Pam pestered her with new documents and had new questions about old documents. She had scanned and copied them as files to her tablet.

It took her a while to get the knack of focusing on the device. She didn't even own a smart phone though she knew some of the residents had tablets they could do something called 'facetime' with and which became very popular during the lockdowns. But she had no known relatives, that is until Pam and her companion claimed that she was not who she thought she was and she did have a close relative, now deceased. And cousins undoubtedly.

Pam showed her how to pinch the screen of the device to make the document larger. It showed a handwritten letter, a scribble of underlined words and exclamation points that she had no trouble

reading. *“We did it! We stopped the Communists There won’t be anymore Cuban Marxists or Chinese Maoists threats to our beloved country from within! The evil Kidney Beans have been eliminated!”* She felt a pulse of revulsion when she read the words and caught her breath.

Pam noticed and inquired if she were all right, had what she read triggered a memory? She shook her head no and stared at the name signing off, “your devoted niece, Mary.”

Pam, showed her another file, this one she recognized as a text Pam had previously asked her to copy out. “Do you see the similarity of the two sample?. I submitted them to a graphologist. He stated that there was a very high likelihood they were written by the same person.”

“You’re saying I’m the same person who wrote the first letter.”

“Yes, the one dated June 19th, 1968. Does that date have any meaning for you?”

She shook her head, confused, why that date, so long ago? All of her time before she was rescued was a blank or a blur, vague shapes and indistinct voices, an amnesia caused by the trauma of her imprisonment and sexual assault. “But my name is Sharon,” she insisted.

Pam gave her a tight lipped smile and glanced at her companion, the man who would be a woman, typing on the small keyboard of the laptop computer with her large hands.

“Jean has prepared a short video for you to view. It’s a documentary about the sixties, that period of time you are having difficulty trying to recall.”

And when she seemed reluctant, Pam insisted. “It’s quite short, right, Jean?”

“Less than fifteen minutes,” Jean answered in a low raspy timbre giving a vague orange lipstick smile.

Sharon acquiesced and Pam touched the screen to begin the video. After a while she recognized some of the images as ones she had seen before on TV shows, particularly the ones that depicted various decades in the past. Karen, her former roommate liked watching them, and she didn’t mind them all that much although she felt no nostalgia for those bygone days. The narrative started by showing trending fashions of the time, an actress wearing dark sunglasses and a polka dot dress, comedy shows, upbeat popular

music TV spectacles with large sparkling floating spheres or dots, strobing lights and dancing musicians, some looking decidedly scruffy and uncouth. It was all very amusing except for the occasional bright flash of light that blanked out the screen. After the first few times she found it annoying and said so.

Pam waved a hand, dismissing her concerns. "It's a glitch in the software. Don't worry about it, you won't notice after a while."

She continued watching and the fun and games of the sixties era had subtly shifted to footage of mushroom clouds and submarines launching missiles, mobs of protesters and men in uniform beating them with clubs, bombs being dropped on jungle terrain, a man in a motorcade slumping forward, and a military funeral, a black man giving a fiery speech and then a picture of his dead body. The images of violence picked up their pace showing buildings set afire, flaming bottles thrown aloft, police cars being overturned, National Guard cordons, and then another man in the arms of others, blood on his shirt front and superimposed on the image, the date June 18th, 1968. It was all overwhelming and fatiguing, causing a spike of senseless emotion to well up. She had enough and closed her eyes, handing the tablet back to the researcher.

"Are you alright? Did any of these images trigger a memory. Do you remember where you were when those events occurred, especially of June 1968?"

She began trembling as she often did when she encountered the barriers to remembering, as if she were in a maze whose walls became narrower and narrower as she sought the memory that would allow her to exit. It frightened her. She was standing on the edge of a precipice overlooking a smoky fiery abyss. She repeated the words that seem to rise out of the void like a vapor. "The kidney beans, the kidney beans. Kill the kidney beans!"

Pam frowned and turned to her companion, "I think we're done for today, Jean."

"Kidney beans," the large woman said, "It is some kind of code. We have come across it in several other instances. I am convinced that it is a key. A trigger, perhaps, or a safe word."

Pam nodded in agreement. "I think you may be right." And then regarding Sharon with concern, "I better ring for the attendant and get her something to ease her agitation."

Sharon did calm down after the drug took effect but she was still upset and fearful. She told the aide that she didn't want to see those people again, and the aide agreed that they should not be allowed to get her all worked up like that and that she would mention it to Mr. Ray. But she did have some good news. Her old roommate, Karen, had been released from the hospital and would be rejoining her and May.

The day Karen moved back she was in a wheelchair and on oxygen. And the same day All Souls was locked down again because of another outbreak in an adjacent wing of the facility. And Christmas was less than a week away.

"What a great Christmas present!" she'd announced as the aides helped her into her bed, "From the frying pan into the fire!" At least her sense of irony was still healthy. "Where's the remote? I can't watch this garbage!"

And she'd caught a different virus while she was in the hospital, conspiracy, and of course she'd known all along, just as she'd suspected. "Stop the steal!" she would yell at the TV, the breaking news that flickered across the wide screen with regularity, the scenes of violence and war, or threats of civil war. It was just as depressing as the video clip of the sixties the man who would be a woman had made her watch. Fifty years separated those events and nothing had changed except that the definition was sharper and the color better. She found that she spent more time in the recreation room, doing puzzles, or watching movies. Fortunately Karen slept more because of her medication and would often doze off with the remote in her hand offering a little respite from the constant badgering of pro and con pundits.

It was sometime after the beginning of the new year and the quarantine had been lifted that the day shift supervisor informed her that the team from the college upstate had asked for another appointment for the next day and Mr. Ray had agreed. But not to worry, the attendant had reassured her, "With this snow storm they predicting for overnight? Ain't nobody going nowhere unless they got a sled and a dog team."

All evening she fretted about the visit from Professor Pam and the She-Hulk, a name one of the aides had dubbed Jean. Just the thought of them made her shiver. And it didn't help that Karen couldn't decide what to watch and was flipping from channel to channel, surfing for the right wave of pixels that would keep her

attention. She finally paused on a news broadcast, the chyron under the young woman talking to the camera read *Governor Denies Parole*, and then footage of a grey haired compact little man whose parole had been turned down.

He looked older, of course, but the mannerisms hadn't changed, the way he held himself, erect, unbowed, and a complete obliviousness as if he were existing in another world. She couldn't help thinking, hypnotized. The picture of him when he was first sentenced was more familiar. She recalled being in the same room with him, they were playing an odd card games, a droning deep voice guiding them. Had she dreamt that? It was all too real. She gave a little sigh and tried to push it from her mind. Karen took notice and commented for her benefit. "It was a conspiracy. He didn't do it, he didn't have the brains to plan it, and nobody's that lucky! But who's to say? That guy in Dalles wasn't so lucky. At least this one's still alive."

Then the lights flickered and the power went out. An emergency generator switched on somewhere in the maintenance room and powered the dim emergency lights in the hallways and the bedside monitors in some of the rooms. The aides could be heard assuring everyone that it was just the storm, a powerline had probably been knocked down, and that everything was going fine. They should all close their eyes and relax.

The sudden blackout was almost a comforting relief. And as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, her memory returned as if it had never left. There it was in a dusty corner of her consciousness, obscured by a tangle of specious suggestions. She could visualize it all, the faces, the names, everything.

Because she was the only woman in the room she felt at the periphery although the men gathered there in celebratory post mortem of whiskey and cigars, fumes and smoke, the careless jocularly, boastful claims made in confidential conviviality, had thrown her an occasional curious glance of the will-she-or-won't-she variety, they were intent on what the distinguished older gentleman was saying. He spoke with persuasive assurance, what one might expect from a university lecturer in tweed, tartan vest, horned rimmed glasses, and hand tied bowtie, a Doctor of Psychology, perhaps, and the talk had turned to hypnotism and the idea that a hypnotized subject could not be made to commit a crime, say a murder, if it violated an innate moral sense.

“We have just proved that idea erroneous. It has nothing to do with morals at all. And there’s nothing innate about morals to begin with. Man is the only animal that is possessed of them which would lead to the conclusion that morality is something that is learned, and if it is learned, can it be unlearned or at least modified? It is primarily about survival, the will to survive and how strong is the life force in a particular individual. You’d be surprised by whom possesses it. One might naturally assume that the archetypical he-man would be a repository of such a force, but it is often the scrawniest, most unassuming of vessels that have the greatest resilience. The ancient Greeks had a saying, the bigger the pot, the easiest to crack. And as we know even a rabbit will attack when cornered.

“Combine that with the concept of the heroic, a romantic notion of eternal life, something that will bring acclaim, live on the lips of men, so to speak, leave a mark on history, the catalyst for chaos and change. If those two traits can be brought together in the same mind set, the heroic and the survival of the embodied ideal, any ideal, then those conditions create their own moral basis and justification. Certain individuals can be hypnotized to do just about anything. In some cases, hardly any conditioning is required, especially among the chronically depressed when potential questions overwhelm potential answers. Given the notoriety that comes with being associated with a cause, however fleeting, these subjects can be easily convinced to surrender their lives because the most momentous of all decision has been made for them.

“Of course the Ruskie were on to that early on, but we caught up with them. Now the Chi Coms and the Koreans, they’re not very subtle about it. They’ll take a square peg and fit it into a round hole, and they’ll use a big hammer to do it with. Brutal. Our thinking on this matter, and I mean the community, it is more instructive and cost effective to get the square peg to think it is a round peg and will fit easily into the hole. It’s called ‘rescripting’ among the academics. They know that it can be done and they’re wondering why it can be done. We only care that it can be done. And we did it. A reliable untraceable patsy is the key to this type of operation.”

She had grown bored of the stuffiness and the words she didn’t understand, and after all, being a good looking eighteen year old in a polka dot dress like the one Audrey Hepburn had worn in

Breakfast At Tiffany's, yet no one was paying any attention to her and she'd given Eugene the look she hoped he'd recognize as one of bored agony.

Eugene was the one who had met her at the Los Angeles Greyhound Bus Terminal. Over the Christmas holidays she had left the snow bound east and spent a week crowded, cramped, and cold crossing the continent, and Eugene, or Gene in less formal moments, was like a knight in shining armor in his dark suit and narrow tie, trilby cocked to one side of his mischievous expression, long sideburns, and an accent she just couldn't place, Southern perhaps. He had come to escort her to the location where she would be staying, a horse ranch on a bluff overlooking the Pacific that was home to a two story farmhouse and a collection of mobile homes and trailers. She had carried one hundred thousand dollars in cash in her make-up case along with a sachet of gems to deliver to the mysterious Mr. Chad. She did not see him again for the six month she had stayed at the ranch or in the Los Angeles area until the day before everything was set to go, and then only in the distance, talking to Gene out by the stables. Otherwise she played cards with the cook and her sister who lived in one of the trailers. Or watched TV, comedy shows mostly. And participated in the sessions, but that was only toward the end. Gene would come around to relieve the boredom. There was a private airfield nearby and he said he was training to get his pilot's license and fly planes down south of the border where there was a lot of money to be made. It was always about the money for Gene, but they got to be friends, then more than friends. He would take her to the racetrack on occasion. He knew many of the grooms and some of the jockeys.

Still, those six months had passed so quickly and she was sitting in the living room of an expensive home in Palm Springs while a group of men inflated their egos by venting hot air.

"Wouldn't you also say, Hal, that along with an untraceable patsy, a backup plan is essential should things go sideways." The man posed the question with stiff military severity.

"Agreed, General, but we must also trust our expertise and planning will succeed so as to avoid using a second option."

She'd become aware that their eyes had turned to her as if they had expected her to join the conversation. And her mind had gone blank and she blurted the first thing that crossed it. "Is it possible to erase someone's memory by just hypnotizing them?"

The man who'd been holding forth nodded sagely and steepled his fingers. "Erase memories? I don't think that is possible, but blocking memories, that can be done, and has proved to be quite therapeutic in some cases. But only on the most susceptible of subjects. Never on a strong willed individual such as yourself, that would be near impossible."

"Surely there must be some sound scientific basis for the method," the General insisted.

"Of course," and the man in the horned rimmed glasses had launched into a long explanation about the science and theory behind the method and what was occurring in the cognitive pathways, and it was once again very boring.

The men had laughed and she had laughed although she couldn't recall anything funny being said. And Gene had left, she hadn't noticed him leaving. One of the other men, a rougher darker sort with shifty eyes and gold caps, had slapped his knee, laughing, "You gotta be kidney me!"

She was certain she'd heard it right. Her uncle would fly into an apoplectic fury at the mention of their names, and she had come up with an alternative that he could accept as demeaning and because she had thought of it, precious. The Kidney Beans became their private code, the 'beans' standing for the brothers, in their shared loathing for them. And Diggs, that was his name, Harold Diggs, the hypnotist, knew this private detail. It had come out during the small talk after the sessions. Had he shared it with the others and she had not noticed? She had felt suddenly very self-conscious because she suspected that they were laughing at her. That was when she excused herself and went to find Gene.

She found him, or rather he had found her, putting his hand over her mouth with a whispered "quiet" and led her out through the patio doors, past the pool, and out the gate to where his car was parked. When they were in the car and he had started the engine, he'd explained.

They were going to get on the 86 and make the run down to Mexicali before the men in the house knew they were gone. But why? He was getting to that. Because those men would not let her leave the house alive and he was certain that they had the same intentions for him. Knowing what they knew, they were loose ends that needed to be tidied up. Of course, she didn't want to believe what she was hearing.

And then he told her that *she* was the ‘backup plan’ the General had been talking about, and she didn’t understand at first but then he told her about the purse. But she couldn’t remember. She had carried the purse with the bulky radio inside, he insisted. The one that was supposed to monitor the security detail frequency and that they had never used. It was a bomb, he’d told her, and still disbelieving, she had looked over her shoulder at where a rather conspicuous white leather purse was sitting propped up in the back seat, certainly not someone with any sense of style would have been caught wearing with a polka dot dress. He explained that had the first scenario failed, the second was the bomb. She would have been ushered into close proximity to the target.

Sharon stared out into the darkness of the room and listened to the sounds of the attendants dealing with the demands and complaints of their charges, assuring them that the power would return soon.

And he would have been the one to detonate it. But he was glad that he hadn’t had to because he had feelings for her, and once they got to Mexicali he knew some people who could help them with new identities and get them out of the country, down to El Salvador. And she remembered thinking even then what he was saying was just so fantastic and unreal that she had feared for her life, his behavior becoming more delusional and driving more erratic. He’d claimed that they were being followed, they had been found out, and they were gaining on them. And a large vehicle had indeed come up behind them and then passed them to speed ahead in the trafficless night, taillights disappearing into the darkness. And then frantically, as another delusion had overtaken him, he demanded to know what she had done with her purse, and they had both looked over their shoulder at the back seat.

He’d jammed on the brakes and she’d been thrown forward against the windshield. He’d pushed his door open scrambling to reach into the back seat. She had forced her door open as well and had stepped out in anger at his antics. He had the white purse in his hand when it exploded in a ball of fire. The shock wave had knocked her off her feet and down into the roadside ravine where she lay stunned trying to process what had just occurred. She had got to her feet and surveyed the flaming wreckage of what was left of Gene’s muscle car and her impulse had been to run, run as far away from where she was at the moment.

At an approaching vehicle slowing to assess the fire in the middle of the highway, she had cut away from the headlights to hide in the shadows off to the shoulder. She had not noticed that the ground fell away into a dry arroyo. And that was where she had been found by Luke. She couldn't recall how long she had lain there, leg broken, in pain, going in and out of consciousness, but she did remember the sense of relief at being found.

She fell asleep savoring and replaying those recovered memories and at each instance feeling more complete, more complete than she had ever felt in her life.

When she awoke the power was back on and the aides were distributing breakfasts and checking on the residents. Karen had already turned the TV news on to reports of the snow storm that was paralyzing roads and causing accidents, some fatal, among them a prominent researcher from the college upstate and her companion, a transitioning male by the name of Jean DuBois, who were killed when their car slide off an icy rural road into a ditch and caught fire.

Well, that will save some explaining, she thought. A wave of relief engulfed her, one that she could compare to having been found and regaining her life, no matter its fraught tragedy.

The attendant had been handing her a tray. "Aren't those the people who've been interviewing you?"

When she didn't answer, Karen chimed in. "Is that true, Sharon, you knew those people?"

"My name is Mary," she said, and at Karen's surprised expression, she laughed and laughed and laughed.