

# **Substitute**

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The young woman stood in front of the house, and fell in love all over again. The pictures didn't do it justice. The house just dripped of whimsy, from its chocolate shingles to its bright buttercup shutters. Frankly, it looked like something that Willy Wonka would have made in his spare time. Her fiancé, Bill, had laughed at her fascination with fairy tales, but knew that it wouldn't change. After all, she was named Dorothy because her mother loved the Wizard of Oz. It was ingrained in her DNA. So, they purchased the house in preparation for their marriage. Things were perfect.

Months later, Bill sensed that something was off. Dorothy seemed to lose color from her personality. Dorothy had always been a vivacious girl, but now she just seemed...colorless. But no matter what he tried, he kept losing her to the dream world. And none of her friends could reach her either.

One bleary morning, Bill pried one eye open and spied an eerie blue light misting across Dorothy's body like an ephemeral shroud. After hearing low murmurs, he shocked himself into full awareness but couldn't find the source of any intrusions. Out of his peripheral vision, an elongated grey shape flit into the remaining shadows as the dawn light slowly penetrated the room. Dorothy stirred slightly with a content smile on her lips that matched the outside sun. Bill spent several moments just watching his partner to see if she was alright,

because he'd felt shaky from the experience. But as she continued to sleep peacefully, he turned his attention to the alarm clock which was now blaring out the local news. Not wanting to wake her from her happy dreams, Bill shut off the clock as he slid from the bed and slowly prepared for work. Finally when he noticed the late time, he forced himself to leave with a brief kiss to her forehead. It was her day off, so he left her to rest in the safety of their home. Or so he'd hoped.

Weeks followed with much the same pattern, causing Bill to worry about his fiancée. She had finally resorted to working at the house full-time. Soon, her friends realized that she was slowly receding from them. The phone rang continuously throughout the day, but no one answered the summons. The house seemed to barely hold a glimmer of the spirit that it once had.

Life had marched on, but the house had somehow been left behind. Grass grew high, the shutters were faded to a pale yellow, and even the chocolate shingles looked like driftwood. People passed by daily, but few noticed that no one entered or exited the house anymore. It sat like a relic from the past.

The house now stood out from the others because of its lack of color. Residents seemed to remember the past occupants, but assumed that they'd moved away. Time marched on, until...

Nothing but white...

Where was my stuff? Although the bones of the room were still there, everything else was gone. My treasures, no, my version of heaven had simply vanished into thin air. Although this didn't feel so simple to me.

When did it happen? How did it happen? The only thing left in the room was my computer with its blinking prompt yelling at me. The screen had words on it, but they didn't make any sense. Nope, nothing's more important than finding the answers to this nightmare. Closing my eyes, I muttered a little prayer and gulped. The little prayer made me choke out a laugh because I wasn't really religious. Opening my eyes again, I saw nothing but white. Why was this room so stark? Where were my colors? Oh my god, all of my precious things that defined me were gone. It felt as though someone had vacuumed me out the room. If this was someone's idea of a joke, I wasn't laughing.

Panic gripped my insides like a painful vice, and caused stars to appear before my eyes. It hurt so bad that I couldn't breathe. I knew that I had to go check on my library. Because if it had also vanished, then I'd simply have to die. That room contained my soul, and needed to be kept safe. Stumbling to my feet, I suddenly

realized that there was also an overstuffed white couch. The couch reminded me of the whipped cream that I'd inhaled the night before.

Sure, narcolepsy limited my life and made me seem so abnormal (*god, I hate that word*). In fact, it had ruined my perfect dream date that could have led to the rest of my beautiful life. Of course, I refused to admit that my date was anything other than perfect because I needed that image. All I could see was my perfect husband with my perfect children living in that gorgeous Italian mansion that I'd fallen in love with while watching TV. Hmm, where was I?

Somehow, I'd managed to reach the staircase without remembering how I'd gotten there. Even the stairs sounded cold and hollow as I slowly climbed step by step. Maybe I was still dreaming? Yeah, it had to be another nightmare. A glow emanated from the doorway that led to my sanctuary, and I was relieved that at least my favorite chandelier was still there. Otherwise, where was the light coming from?

In my mind's eye, I saw all of my treasures safe and sound. Those masses of color and texture made my life into heaven. Reality just didn't float my boat anymore. They just had to be there still! Having stopped a few steps away from the door, I tried to grasp at any sensible

thought but my brain just couldn't do it. This house wasn't me, and was screaming for things to be put back to normal. Even if I wanted to be normal, I didn't want this.

This sluggish feeling should've been my first clue that I wasn't in Kansas anymore. No, I didn't normally associate with Dorothy, my namesake, but I now understood how she must have felt on the yellow brick road. Even Toto and the Tin Man would hate it here. Shudders of terror trembled down my skeletal spine, though it wasn't noticeable because of the oversized white terry robe that covered me. When had I lost weight? How was the robe not too tight after THAT many cans of whipped cream? And what was up with all of this white?

The glow was brighter now, and enticed me to approach the door. Any minute now, I expected my friends to leap out and unveil their cruel joke. Oh, that's right. My friends weren't talking to me anymore, because I hardly ever left the house. A tiny chime tinkled from the computer below, telling me that I had a new message. The tinkle sounded like little fairies dancing, nothing like the soul trembling depth of my editor's chime, so I continued forward. Only a few more steps...

The door groaned like in a clichéd horror movie. Or maybe it was protesting at having to contain the weight of my dreams for so long. Inch by inch it opened, until I couldn't handle the suspense anymore. When all I saw was more whiteness, I finally collapsed in despair. This just couldn't be happening to me. My heaven was gone, and the culprit could claim one more enormous victory. He'd made me face the cold, harsh reality of consciousness. This waking state had me wanting to wail like a banshee.

Something was niggling at my brain, forcing me to pay attention. Right, maybe those annoying chimes from my computer had the answer? In any case, I'd have to turn off the alarm just to regain some peace for my shot nerves. Nothing got in my way as I climbed down the stairs, tumbling down onto my knees as I reached the bottom. Pain finally pierced my beaten brain, as blood flowed from my skinned knees. If this was reality, then I didn't like it because I **felt** so bad.

Looking at the computer, I noticed that the mouse prompt had moved further down the screen. Whoever had been trying to contact me was getting impatient at my lack of response. I really couldn't blame whoever it was because a one-sided conversation was really boring. It couldn't be my ex-fiancé, Bill, because he'd left after I disconnected with the outside world. My dreams had

taken me from everyone and everything in this world. Not that it mattered to me, because I was fine as long as I had my treasures. My dreams were my sanctuary. But now, even my dreams had left me alone and frightened.

The sudden flicker of the cursor showed a new flow of words erupting from the empty air. Someone really wanted to talk to me. My curiosity got the better of me, so I sat down to read the wavering words: "Hello, Dorothy. Where are you? I hope that you're planning to honor your end of our bargain. But, you will, won't you? After such passion from you, I just knew that you were my other half. And if you can't trust your soul mate, then who can you trust? Come on now, girl, I need you to talk to me."

What? I wasn't in a relationship. Who was this? The conversation was triggering such strong emotions that I'd never felt before. I finally felt alive, and I needed to find out why. My perfect moment had come, though it wasn't how I'd pictured it. So I cautiously typed, "Who are you?"

"What do you mean, who am I?" The words were typed in bold red letters that looked like the blood still dribbling from one of my skinned knees. But it was the next set of words that caused absolute terror to tremble down my spine. "How could you have forgotten me,



when we've become so close? You promised me, and you can't get away now. There's no way out because we're now bonded. Your blood signifies your agreement, just as we've discussed. It doesn't matter how I got your compliance, does it? Now that I have it, I can take my rightful place there, and you can take yours here - just as we've agreed. Oh, I am so looking forward to making your sanctuary mine. Now, close your eyes and everything will be right..."

The voice echoed in my head as it always did. It was that same soothing baritone that'd always guided me through to my heaven: Morpheus. Now everything finally made sense and I knew that I'd lost.

*Hours later...*

“And on the local front, a young woman has gone missing, though no one is sure of when the disappearance happened. Her family and friends haven’t been able to get in touch with her for...”

The dark eyes of a man narrowed briefly as he watched the news bulletin. There was no way that anyone here could trace her back to him. He’d taken the computer and reformatted it repeatedly to destroy any evidence. He’d also made sure that she never had the chance to speak to anyone about him. He was finally free from his curse. He’d found his replacement, and just as the old gypsy woman had promised, he’d been released from his hell. Now, he had finally gained entrance into a heaven that he’d been denied for eons. He was part of humanity once again, even if it was nothing like he’d once known.

He would have to rebuild his new identity so that he’d fit in with the outside world. He’d also have to get a job in order to build the house of his dreams. Oh, he was so excited to buy his first item of color for his sanctuary. He hated white after his long imprisonment in the dream world. But, no bottles of any kind – just in case. Genies weren’t the only ones afraid of bottles.

In the middle of town, a discrete blue Victorian house stood apart from the Main Street stores and beckoned to a man with dark eyes. His feet carried him forward unconsciously until he reached a window. He stood staring at the small blue bottle, glinting from the sunlight falling through the store window. He couldn't seem to help himself. After all, it had been his home for such a long time. Why did he have to come back to this place? A discrete cough sounded next to him, and he looked down into the bright blue eyes of a beautiful young girl. What was with all the blue taunting him? It was too soon after his escape to be a coincidence.

“Would you like to see it up close? We just received it today from an estate sale, and had to display it. Isn't it the most beautiful blue that you've ever seen? The design is so intricate and unique that it must be something special, don't you think?” The girl blushed at the man's intent look. She'd frankly never seen a man as beautiful as this one, and had to approach him. He looked so lost and sad. “By the way, I'm Vivien.”

He returned her look with a smile, and nodded briefly while responding, “Good afternoon. My name is Laurence”. The bottle was simply too irresistible to him. It wouldn't hurt to get the bottle back in his possession. Just in case.

Over the next few months, the Willy Wonka house had returned to its former state of glory. It wasn't the same, but it at least had life once again. The entire neighborhood seemed to sigh with relief at the return to normalcy. Everyone even liked their new neighbor, Laurence, though he had a weird fascination with fairy tales and martial arts. He might not be like everyone else, but he was the new neighborhood hero because of his computer expertise.

But no matter how hard he tried to fit in with his surroundings, everything felt so wrong. He'd thought that this world was his salvation. Dorothy was as fascinated with his world as he was with hers. The perfect solution now felt like another curse. It seemed that the gypsy knew what she was doing so many centuries ago. Maybe it hadn't been a curse, but a salvation?

Later that night, the dream came unexpectedly to Laurence, who hadn't had one since he'd arrived here. He could feel her presence misting over him like a cool shower. A feeling of contentment fell over him as he finally felt like he'd come home. Dorothy whispered his name, his true name, as he reached out to hold her once again. He'd missed their encounters so much, and wanted a repeat like never before.

Cool lips merged with warm lips, as a cool breath entered into his lungs. As their essences merged, he felt their connection solidify and knew that he'd finally found his salvation. It had never been about his freedom. It had been about finding a true companion to share everything with.

Where the house had once stood, now stood a park filled with children's laughter. Parents congregated to watch the joy as they got to know one another. No one remembered that a house had ever stood there. Dorothy and Morpheus had left this gift to the community that had never truly been theirs.

The town museum was so proud of its new acquisition. In its prized location, a blue bottle with the most unique design stood on top of a velvet blue cushion. Its color was a deep brilliant blue, and it gleamed with centuries of secrets. The staff didn't know its history, but were enchanted by its mystery. For in the heart of the bottle stood a little Willy Wonka house as its perfect companion. Everything was perfect.