

## I'm Still Here

By: Paige Rudnick

Waving her hands over the surface of the tablet computer positioned on her lap Regina scaled, translated and typed text over an image of a glass of water to spell out, "Break into someone's mind using this one weird trick!" In the moment afterward, she stared at it for a moment before sitting back and breathing a deep sigh of discontent. For the last 15 years her thoughts had been dominated by thinking about thinking. What she would give for the mental freedom to think about boys, or beer and wine or even what she wanted for dinner. Something that was a normal, everyday thing. Instead in even her downtime Regina thought about the same ole' same ole' cups of water and the consequence of her telepathy.

Looking down at her tablet where the screen's contents still displayed the most recent testimony to her one track mind, Regina shook her head and deleted the screen with a subsequent hand gesture. There was nothing weird about her imaging pressing a glass against someone's head to flow into their consciousness like so much water. That was just how her telepathy worked for her and had always worked. Neither thing was really prone to being called weird at this point in her life.

Regina leaned back and blew her brunette bangs out of her eyes. With no one else around she had some time to kill in this church it seemed. So! Ok! Boys! She would think about boys. Boys. Boys. Actors? Benedict Cumberbatch and Tom Hiddleston? Wait. Why did so many girls and women swoon over them? Where was the appeal? Of course she could find out by flowing... Ah drat!

Footsteps. Regina was no longer alone.

Slowly turning her head, Regina sent a glance out of the corner of her eye to catch movement, a woman, walking down the aisle toward the pulpit. It would be a few minutes before the woman got settled and began to pray, if she was even here to pray, leaving Regina with additional time to kill.

To keep herself from staring at the woman, Regina tried again to create a moment of relaxation by letting her attention drift to her surroundings. She found she liked traditional Churches like this. The spacious nave. The stonework. The stained glass windows. The stale smell of 100 years worth of burned incense. The place felt old, established and safe. Of course these very looks could be deceiving as she knew from her blood line.

Double drat!

Regina heard murmuring from the woman. Right. Time to flow.

Closing her eyes, Regina lifted her imaginary glass placed it against the woman's head and flowed on in to her, ah, the woman's name was Jessica, Regina flowed into Jessica's mind.

"I don't quite know how to put this." We now join this prayer, already in progress. "I mean, I love you and I want to be with you Lord my God but... I'm not ready yet. Please Lord I pray just, heal, my cancer. Let me be a Grandma to my Grandchildren for at least a little while. Let me see them grow up if only for a little while and let me be there for them so they can remember me, remember me with their own memories of me, before you call me home. Please, heal my body. In your name I pray, amen."

Regina dripped back out and while taking the utmost care to ensure her own thoughts stayed in her own mind she thought, "Good luck with that." The care to not be heard was important. If those praying found out that she was there with them with their most private conversations with God, well first there was the risk of confusion that her voice would be mistaken for the voice of God and Regina wasn't interested in committing any acts of blasphemy through her efforts to reach out and touch her maker. She was however, very interested in finding someone praying the prayer she was looking for.

Not that Regina had the foggiest notion of what that prayer would be about.

At all.

If only finding that prayer wasn't necessary Regina lamented in silence and topped it with a wish that since finding it was necessary, that she didn't have to involve anyone else.

But on the bright side, at least she had... A plan!

True it was a less than ideal plan, but it was a best effort given the circumstances... A plan!

And what she had was preferable to not having... A plan! At all.

While the whole plan thing was annoying, what really chapped at Regina now was her life was like a comedy bit where someone has a ton of time to avoid getting run over by something but gets run over anyway, only she was minus the comedic effect. She had 14 years to get away after all. It wasn't until after her father Phil Sinclair, brought her into the family work that she understood that oh! Ok! Some families passed down the family farm, some passed down stories over the generations, her's since 1947 had been participating in the quiet invasion of Earth. That was all! Only before that education Regina had just been going through the motions of being devout. Praying all the time was just something to do like flossing. Ya phoned it in.

Oops.

Her fate met, she learned how events really happened in 47'. Turned out the interesting stuff wasn't happening in the New Mexico desert. That was a diversion for the action that was happening at the real alien landing site by a humble little church in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. That was where the Aklack found that church's pastor, Regina's paternal grandfather Paul Sinclair, when they arrived.

"Hello there," grandfather Paul had said from behind the pulpit where he'd been preparing for the coming Sunday's sermon. Seeing the little humanoid gray bodies with the giant almond eyes characteristic to the Aklack species passing into his church hadn't phased the man. At least that's what Regina surmised as thanks to the differing chemistries of male and female bodies, emotions didn't transfer between men and women so while she had Paul's memories, she lacked his guts. It was other memories she had from him about what he saw during World War II, the fighting, the disfigurements and the rest that told her why in the moment he met his first Aklack, Paul didn't act like was phased in the slightest over learning humanity is not alone in the Universe.

"We wish. We wish to know God," the frontmost alien of the group had said. When she looked at the world through the lens of only her grandfather's memories, Regina's own heart understood why he got her

family line involved with the Aklack. But, Regina didn't just have her grandfather's lens. She had her own and she had her father's.

Grandfather, had been a tool.

A lot of what her family did for the Aklack over the generations wasn't bad per se. Populating pop culture with images of what the Aklack looked like so when the aliens were seen the people saying, "Oh my God! Alien!" were brushed off onto talk shows and other dismissals. There was a lot of prayer to see if the connection to Heaven had opened up for the Aklack but that prayer always followed and experiment. Experiments, without fail, were bad.

"How are you doing dad?" Regina asked in his mind where even her mental voice quivered.

This was an experiment of compassion, taken up in the spur of the moment and actually seemed like a good idea back at the time.

"Scared," Phil said with a quiver in concert with hers. Outside their minds Regina clutched at her fathers hand. It was already cold from the blood loss thanks to the car accident. A car accident! A stupid car accident thanks to a car going the wrong way down the road was doing this good man in? Not right! "You going to be ok?"

"Of course," Regina said taking the moment to be grateful that her father could have no idea how she really felt.

"I know you will. You're strong. Always have been." Pain! The mixing of their thoughts made the pain as acute to Regina as it was to Phil. The sensation was even enough that Regina had to pull back a little to keep from loosing herself. "I think I'm going!" Phil cried out.

"Daddy!"

"Regina! Parents always want better for their children but... don't do better than me... be better than me! Save yourself!" Regina held on to her father's consciousness. He started out strong like a rock against the tide of death. But the tide eroded at the mere man, oppressive, undaunting, until he was worn away into nothing.

Nothing.

No rescue. No escape. No salvation. Just... nothing.

Regina was never one to swear.

"Aw shit," she'd said all the same.

Cradling the torso of her father's body, Regina ran her fingers over the scar hidden beneath his hair that marked the place where the Aklack had gone in to graft a piece of Aklack brain onto his. Her grandfather had such a scar, just as she did. It was those alien cells that had granted all of them telepathy and those alien cells were responsible for all of their broken connections with God.

The hope and expectation had long been that when the body died those cells which blocked their Human souls would die with it, leaving the soul free to move on to the next life. Turned out, the expectation was wrong.

The knowledge of her father's death set off a brainstorm in Regina's mind. Go to a Doctor, there would likely be media attention and things may well unfold from there into suddenly too real sci-fi tropes where Regina would be hauled away to be operated on. Then her examiners would find what gifted Regina her telepathy and the world would change and yeah... that was out. Going to the Aklack and being all, "Hey, could you do me a solid and remove this hunk of crap from my noodle?" would likewise have her see the same fate as her father and grandfather. God? That wasn't an option!

Or! Ohhhhhhhhh!

Prayer!

There were connections to the Lord all around Regina! She just needed to piggy back on on one. Right? That would work. Couldn't it? Why wouldn't it? Sure! Never-mind that nothing like hitching a ride on a prayer had ever been carried out in an experiment before. By trying to take over a prayer Regina would be going into uncharted territory and she had no idea what could happen to herself or to her host.

What could possibly go wrong?

But if she didn't try... Given enough time nothing would surely swallow her.

Time.

In the time since she first hatched her plan to now Regina had gotten to know temptation.

"Lord God blah blah blah. Could you help me find a job? I'd like appreciate it n' stuff. M'kay? Thanks and amen." Prayers like that were less than bi-directional. Regina could have tried to take advantage of the strong connection out, suspecting as she did that God heard all people praying just fine. But they were still praying and

while their attention might not be focused upon a response, whatever communication made it back to their soul, well, who was Regina to get in the way of a successful divine message?

"Come on God! Can't we go home? We sang you three whole songs already! Can you give my Dad diarrhea or something so we have to leave Church? I wanna get back to my game!" Ok, that one had been extra super really tempting to piggy back on. But the thinker was a child. How could she risk the life of a child when there was the possibility of something going bad? Even if the thinker were an adult just who did she think she was sitting in judgement over what God might or might not deem worthy to hear?

Without finding her prayer, Regina's heart beat in a countdown that at times she was all too aware of as she bounced from church to church, flowing in, flowing out, waiting, flowing, beating, flowing, counting down all the while.

*pthump THUMP... pthump THUMP... pthump THUMP...*

Regina cast her eyes up toward the ceiling and her mind set beyond as far as it would go. "Do you wonder what happened to us?" Regina asked the night. "Do you even care where my family has gone? Are you up there worried about us? Or did you never even notice us... blinking out?"

*pthump THUMP... pthump THUMP... pthump THUMP...*

Regina surmised that it was entirely possible that maybe God had noticed her grandfather and father blink away. They didn't act devout before they were drafted. They were legitimately devout. With that being the case maybe God did find her father after she lost contact with him and he was still alive? Yeah. That was a nice very unlikely thought and in any event if everlasting life was contingent being devout, Regina still had fighting to do for herself.

*pthump THUMP... pthump THUMP... pthump*

"Lord hear my prayer!"

*THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!*

Regina looked up and followed the wake of words she heard out to a man shaking and keeling at the pulpit. "Lord, help me. I'm afraid-- I'm afraid I'm going crazy!" All the words crashed into Regina's mind despite her not reaching out. He was doing a good job keeping his panic contained to his prayer though. To her eye, he was just praying really really hard. Normal for these parts. "I keep having these visions of blades and drills and creatures. For a decade or more now."

The head of an Aklack came to Regina's consciousness in a memory that was not hers.

Her reaction was immediate.

Hello!

Breathing deep Regina put her head down, positioned her mental glass and pushed back with her own thoughts against the torrent coming out of the man to gain entry into his mind. Richard. Richard was his name.

Time to do this thing.

Richard's mind was frothing. Light images, dark images, dogs barking, tools whirring, raspy Aklack voices telling him things would be all right. Regina tried to ride the waves, tried to let them carry her to the connection he was building out to Heaven but if it was there she couldn't find it.

"Lord hear my prayer!" Richard cried out again prompting Regina to think he wasn't finding the connection out either. No good!

Another image crashed upon Regina. She gasped. It was of herself, still a teenager, with her father tutoring her as she tried to sweep up Richard's mind at the end of his abduction.

"Oh you gotta be kidding me!" Regina thought.

"God? Is that you God? Oh God heal me!" Richard cried out. Crap!

"I'm working on it," Regina said.

"God? You're, you're a woman?" Uh oh.

"Gender is... a fluid thing for me," Regina replied. Be cool. Be cool. Be cool. "You got a problem with me being a woman now? I mean, I can just, go, you know? If me being a girl now makes you uncomfortable."

"No!" Regina felt the current of Richard's thought on her physical arm. Woah! Good sign for the connection, she just needed to move the focus in order to open it up. "I just didn't expect that you would be, fluid. I mean, I always thought God was more like, consistent. Are you really going to heal me?"

"I'd like to," Regina replied. "But this is a two way street. Talking is one thing but I need you to pray. I need you to believe in me, to take me into your heart as your Lord and savior so I may reach

back to you and heal you my child." Ok! That was totally blasphemous! Hopefully this moment would stay her and Richard's little secret.

"Yes Lord! Oh yes ma'am!" Richard shouted.

Words. Not Richard's and not Regina's and not English plunged into their combined consciousness from on high. Words Regina could hear spilling out of Richard's mouth from his place before the pulpit. Regina tried to cling to the sound of his speech. The torrent crashing down, mixing herself with Richard keeping hold of her own identity was growing difficult. Where'd he go?!?

No good!

"Richard! I can't hear you anymore my child!" Regina shouted. Nothing. No change. "Richard!"

Regina considered bailing out. She had no idea what she was causing to happen to them. She should just flow out, while she still knew where she all was in the froth, let things calm down then clean up his mind to leave Richard in peace.

Regina's feelings eased. No. Wait. Both her's and Richard's did. She was the problem! She was the pollution in the stream disrupting the flow! She had to blend in.

The calm came to be enough for Regina to find Richard's heart. She relaxed, and set her heartbeat to match his.

Peace.

"Hello?" Richard asked, "God?" No reply. "Can you heal me now? Make me forget?"

"What's up?" Regina asked.

Cold. Focus. The feeling like everyone ever was looking at you and speaking your name in unison.

"God?" Richard asked.

"In a moment, I'll get to you," Regina replied, "You've done well." With that she let Richard go, sending his body collapsing onto the pulpit and leaving herself alone with the Focus. It held her, but with Richard gone she felt like she was a pool of water draining through fingers. Time was short and Regina supposed there was just one thing for her to say.

"I'm still here."



And, the Focus was gone. Whatever had found Richard and her was still out there. Of that Regina was sure. It was something big, everlasting. Older than the Universe. Regina just hoped that whatever it was it understood her message.

Reconnecting to Richard, Regina found him asleep. This was good as with her mind a mush from the encounter she was in no shape to work hard. Rummaging through his mind Regina found the places where the abduction was and set about doing a proper job of banishing the memories from Richard's mind, unlike her earlier younger effort. Fortunately, Richard's memory was average so he wouldn't likely notice that his pool of life experience was a little lower.

Provided she did one more thing.

Regina crafted a simple narrative: A downpour drove Richard to seek shelter in the church and the cold and rain tuckered him out the point he fell asleep inside. Regina found she felt temptation to leave in the gender fluid God Richard and come to know but she opted to take them back out to ensure she left only peace unto Richard.

Work complete, mission accomplished, so smoke em' if ya got em', Regina stood and headed out the the street unnoticed by the other parishioners that had arrived and who were now busy trying to wake Richard up. For her part she felt good. Optimistic. She wondered how the Angel felt. Angel? Was that the Focus an Angel? Maybe her very own Guardian Angel? That would be a heckuva thing and for the moment that's what Regina chose to believe.

Despite her taking her connection to Heaven for granted before it was severed, she and God were both looking for each other after all.