

CLUB REINCARNATE
by Dave Biscella

“Have you ever killed yourself?” John asked the group of nine people sitting in a circle of chairs while looking right at Thomas, who was seated directly to his left.

“I have not,” Thomas answered. “I’ve been close a few times, but have always overcome it. The closest I came was in ‘73. Tried and failed a few times, but eventually worked through it. I was pretty close a few years ago too, but then things started to turn around and all of a sudden, life was great. Then, wouldn’t you know it, I get killed in a hit and run by a drunk driver out of nowhere. So there went that,” he shrugged and smiled.

The group lets out a collective giggle, smiling towards Thomas.

“I did, twice,” Judith said through a fading smile. “I tried to work through it both times, but just couldn’t. Once was pills, the other was off a bridge.”

John nodded at Judith. “You know that’s not your fault, right, Judith? Sure, you did twice, but think of all the times you were probably close and didn’t. I’m willing to bet you did that a whole lot more than twice.”

Judith’s smile returned as she soaked in what John was saying. She was used to carrying a lot of guilt around with her, but every week John’s words made her feel slightly better about herself for a day or two.

“Who is he?” Tim asked, pointing across the circle of chairs towards Bryce Daniels, who was attending the meeting for the first time, and hasn’t said a word the entire time.

Bryce shifted in his chair nervously. He’d been observing the whole time, soaking it all in, but this was the first anybody has paid any attention to him.

“This is Bryce Daniels,” John answered. “Bryce is a writer, working on a book about various support groups. He reached out and asked if he could observe one of our meetings, and I said ‘yes’ after having a long talk with him and trusting him not to have wicked intentions. I was going to introduce him at the end, instead of at the beginning. I didn’t want anybody holding back tonight. I wanted his experience to be as genuine as possible.”

“Did we put on a good show?” Tim asked aggressively, staring straight at Bryce. “Did we give you plenty of material for your book about weirdos?”

Bryce took a deep breath. He hated confrontation and tried to avoid it at all costs. “It’s not a book about weirdos. That’s not what it’s about.”

“Then what are you looking for?” Tim disputed.

“I’m just looking for experience. Unique experiences, unique belief systems,” Bryce began to explain, trying his best to not sound like he was writing the back of the book cover on the fly. “It started with going to support groups for people who had been abducted by aliens. Then to people whose life was being altered by magic, people who had seen Bigfoot, people who believed they were clones. I started looking for any type of group I could find, and I stumbled across this one and reached out to John, who was gracious enough to explain to me what this group is about and let me come to a meeting.”

Tim grumbled. “Is that what we are to you? Believers? In your stupid little mind, we’re just people who believe we have been reincarnated? It’s just a silly fantasy that we made up and don’t have to struggle with, life after life after life?”

Bryce sat up in his chair even more, straightening his back and leaning forward. “That’s not what I mean, Tim. Not at all. What I mean when I say you believe it, is that you can tell when listening to you talk, not just at this meeting, but at all the meetings I’ve attended, that you truly believe this. You truly believe this unique experience is happening, this type of experience that

most people would consider crazy. But, when you listen to you talk about it, it's hard not to believe you. They don't come off like stories, they come off as experiences, which is what I believe they are. And that's what I want to convey to readers through this book."

Tim relaxed back into his seat a little bit. There was a sincerity in Bryce's voice that felt honest. Tim wasn't one to trust strangers, but for some reason he no longer felt threatened by Bryce's presence.

"I'm sorry, Tim," John interjected. "This is my mistake. I should have been honest with you and introduced Bryce at the beginning. I meant no ill will and I apologize." John looked around the circle, seeing forgiving smiles. "I think that about does it for tonight, though. We'll call it quits a little early. We'll see you all next week."

The group get out of their chairs and begin small talk. Bryce works his way over towards John and reaches out to shake his hand. "Thanks again, John. This was definitely a great experience."

"Thanks for coming, Bryce. You're welcome anytime," John said with a firm handshake. "Did you have any other questions about how this all works? If so, I'll be more than happy to answer them as they come up. You can text me or call anytime."

"Thanks for that. I do have a few questions, but I think I have enough for tonight," Bryce answers. "I'll be in touch for sure."

Bryce worked his way towards the door and into the parking lot. He nodded and smiled as he passed members of the group while exiting the building and making his way towards his car.

"If you had any other questions, I'm headed out for coffee if you wanted to join me," a voice said politely from behind him. Bryce turned around to see Eileen. He noticed Eileen when he first walked into the meeting. She was petite, and very pretty with short blonde hair and big

green eyes. She said something very brief at the beginning of the meeting, then sat quietly throughout the rest of it. Bryce paid attention during the meeting, but couldn't help but glance in Eileen's direction more often than he probably should have.

"Yeah," Bryce began, trying to play it cool. "That'd be great. Thank you."

"Awesome," Eileen said with a smile. "It's a coffee shop about an hour and a half away, I'll drive."

Bryce looked at her confused, but her smile was preventing him from questioning anything. "Better be some damn good coffee for a three hour round trip," he laughed.

"It's better than coffee, trust me," she said, getting into her car.

Bryce got in the passenger seat and buckled up. It had been a weird night already, but after nearly an hour of listening to people talk about past lives they've lived, and personalities they've inhabited, he definitely had some questions. What better way to get some more information than a long car ride with the cute girl he's struggled to keep his eyes off of. It was a weird night, for sure, but he couldn't complain about where it had ended up at this point.

The first twenty minutes or so of the drive was simple small talk. Bryce wasn't in a hurry to dig into his questions, and he was genuinely enjoying hearing Eileen talk. She worked in a small used bookstore in the middle of town, loved The Cure, and had a poster of a cat that she had named Ludo. She wanted a real cat, but didn't trust herself to take care of it, so the poster would have to do. Despite the odd way of meeting her, Eileen was one of the most down to Earth, real girls Bryce had met in a while.

"Stop dancing around it, Bryce," Eileen said, abruptly dropping her smile and getting serious. "There's a lot to process about us, so I know you have questions."

"I do," Bryce confessed. "I'm not sure I understand how it works. I always thought to be

reincarnated meant to die in one life, then be born into another. Like, as a baby, where you start all over from the beginning.”

Eileen smiled, not looking away from the road ahead of her. “That’s a common confusion. You’re not wrong. That’s being reincarnated in the truest sense of the word. That’s a different experience. We’re not reincarnated, we’re reincarnates. There’s a bit of a difference. We don’t start over every time. We join a body, or a soul, at a point that a person has given up. When they need a fresh start, we inhabit their inners and kind of take over. We have their memories, their personality, everything they had before we got there, we just kind of come in and take over so that their original soul can go get the healing it needs.”

“So, you just take over a body that’s already living? Then their soul comes back when they feel better, for lack of a better term.”

“No, they never come back. Once they leave, they’re gone and it’s all us. We’re in there until this body expires. Sometimes it’s years, sometimes weeks, it varies. We usually end up in a pretty shitty situation to start out with, and it’s up to us how hard we fight to get through it.”

Bryce takes a few seconds to process Eileen’s answers and try to make sense of them. “So, who am I talking to? How much of you is Eileen from before, and how much is...,” he pauses, “you?”

Eileen laughs, still not looking away from the road. “I’d say mostly Eileen. We carry memories and personality traits from everybody we inhabit, but they start to fade away overtime as the memories and habits of the new body are already strong and only get stronger as you live through their daily life. So, I have memories and stuff from other lives, but they’re mostly event memories. How I died, how I was feeling, events leading up to it, but not a lot of memories of that person’s memories, or personalities. Some stuff sticks, some stuff is there and can be

triggered with a memory from the present, but I'd say it's probably 85-90% of the current body, and the rest is small pieces of everybody that came before them."

Bryce smiles and hesitates. Through this entire process, he had grown extremely interested in the subjects he had been covering. There was legit curiosity, even if a lot of it sounded flat out crazy. He took a breath and hesitated, not wanting to offend. "So, I'm sorry if this is too far, but if you end up in somebody, what if you don't like them? Couldn't you just go through with a suicide and end up with somebody else?"

Eileen looks away from the road for a second to look at Bryce. She wasn't offended, and could tell that wasn't his intention. She saw the sincerity in his face. She was never comfortable talking about suicide, but there was still a long drive ahead, and she didn't want the conversation to turn sour. She didn't want to make his questions feel unwelcome. "Well, it's not that simple," she began to explain. "If you're homeless and haven't eaten a meal in days, and somebody brings you a fresh, warm hamburger, you'll take it, right? What if the meat is slightly overcooked and they used American cheese when you'd prefer provolone? Do you toss the burger in the trash and assume the next stranger will give you a perfectly cooked burger with provolone? Or do you eat it because it's what you got, and you have no idea if there's even going to be another stranger with a burger?"

"So you don't know? There's a chance Eileen is your last body?"

"Do you know what's going to happen to you when you die?" Eileen asked. "Are you absolutely certain what comes next? Is anybody? We didn't sign up for this, we didn't ask for it. It just happened. We don't know why, or how, or why us, we just know it happened. Doesn't mean it'll happen again. We just gotta make the most of what we're given and try to live a full life, just like everybody else."

Eileen's smile faded as she stared ahead at the road. Bryce had felt like maybe he went too far too fast. The rest of the drive wasn't quiet, but he went out of his way to make sure it didn't feel like an interrogation. He asked a few questions, some he was curious about, like how long are they usually in a body, what's the longest they've lived, the oldest they've been, and some silly, like ever been a boy, ever been somebody that's even too weird for you, stuff like that. But for the most part he wanted to know more about Eileen. Not Eileen the reincarnate, but Eileen, the adorable, smiley girl that was driving him an hour and a half away for coffee.

The conversation stayed light, and her smile eventually returned, and that was enough to keep Bryce from regretting taking this road trip.

They eventually pulled off of a dark road that seemed to lead to nowhere but emptiness into the parking lot of a diner that was in the middle of nothingness. Hess's Diner, the sign flashed from its roof. These were the only lights anywhere around and could be seen from quite a ways away. Eileen never gave warning that these lights were the end of the destination though. She just pulled in, put the car in park, and sighed deeply.

"You didn't have to come here for this. I shouldn't have brought you," she said, for the first time since meeting her sound doubtful or lacking confidence.

"Are you kidding me? You drive almost 100 miles for a cup of coffee, I'm damn interested in how good that coffee is," Bryce said through a laugh, trying to bring that smile and confidence back to her.

Eileen chuckled and smiled. "To be honest, the coffee's pretty gross here. And don't get a burger, it's always overcooked and they use American cheese."

Bryce smiled and got out of the car, working over to the driver side. He held the door open as she got out of the car and closed it behind her. He wanted so badly to hold her hand, or

put his arm around her waist, or anything, but he resisted. It just felt right to him, but in reality he knew that it was probably too soon for her to even think about wanting anything like that.

They sat at a booth handpicked by Eileen. Right across from the countertop with a view into the kitchen. They each ordered coffee, and she wasn't lying when she said it was terrible. They talked and laughed, all while Eileen's eyes were fixated into the kitchen. She never made Bryce feel ignored, but he could tell her mind was somewhere else, and it had something to do with that kitchen.

Bryce tried to sneak a look into the kitchen to see what was going on. There was a young kid washing dishes, the waitress who hasn't checked on them since bringing them coffee leaning against the wall chewing gum, and an older, bald man with a moustache working the stove. He was a bigger guy and looked filthy. The last kind of person you'd want overcooking your meat. Upon seeing him, Bryce was instantly happy he didn't order any food.

After an hour or so of cold coffee and staring into the kitchen, Bryce felt it was time to turn the conversation back to where it started. "So, are you always so quiet at the meetings?" he asked.

"Not always," she replied, staring into her coffee. "Just didn't have much to say tonight, I guess. I tend to shut down when suicide comes up."

"I think that's a pretty normal thing to be uncomfortable about."

"Maybe," she said, looking at him straight in the eyes without smiling, showing sadness and emptiness in her eyes for the first time. "But it's not normal to have done it as many times as I have."

Bryce stopped. There were words that wanted to come out of his mouth, but he felt it best not to let them. He obviously wanted to know how many times, why, how recently. Was Eileen suicidal? She didn't seem to be, but something was clearly bugging her. Bryce ran

through a lot of thoughts to say outloud, vetoing one after the other. He slightly opened his mouth to begin saying what he thought would fix the situation...

"Oh, let's go!" Eileen said in a hurry while looking into the kitchen. She stood up, tossed some money down on the table, enough to cover their coffees and a tip, and headed towards the door. Bryce assumed this meant they wouldn't be coming back, so he double checked to make sure he hadn't left anything and chased after her.

"What are we doing?" he said, exiting the diner and chasing after her as she worked her way to the edge of the building, turning to walk along the side of it.

Eileen walked in a rush and didn't slow down when Bryce caught up to her. They worked towards the back of the building, then turned. There was a dumpster under one dim light stuck on the back of the building. Standing underneath it was the big, dirty guy from the kitchen.

He looked over and saw them, "There's no need to be back here. There's a bathroom inside," he yelled in a voice filled with bitterness and anger at life.

"She knows it was you!" Eileen said fiercely.

Bryce was in shock and had no idea what was going on. The guy from the kitchen took a few steps towards them, which still left him roughly 20 feet away from them.

"What are you on about?" he asked. "Son, you need to get your little girl in line and get her out of here."

"You thought the mask would hide you, but she knew it was you the whole time," Eileen continued, never moving. "You loved her, but knew you couldn't have her. But you had to have her, but didn't want her to know. She knew."

The man dropped his cigarette and jaw and stepped a few feet closer. The angry, bitter look on his ugly face now turned to fear.

“She knew the whole time, and she hated you,” Eileen continued, starting to take steps towards the man. “She tried to pretend. She tried to not get sick to her stomach when you came over for dinner. She tried not to hate you for everything. Not to get sick at the mere mention of you. She tried, but she couldn’t.”

“Who are you?” his voice trembled.

Bryce stood back, shocked and confused. He didn’t know if he should step up between her and the man, but there was a ferociousness in her eyes that made him question who he’d be protecting if he tried.

“She got lucky, she thought,” Eileen said, a painful anger filling her voice. Her body obviously wanting to yell and scream, but her mission making her resist. “When Daddy got that job a year later, she had to move. She’ll be far away from you. She’ll never have to see you again, never have to smell you, never have to hear your obnoxious laugh. Maybe she’ll be able to forget you.”

“WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU??” the man screamed, stepping to Eileen, standing face to face with her, looking right in her eyes.

“But she couldn’t,” Eileen said, staring into the man’s soul as tears started to form in his eyes. “She tried for a year, but could never forget you. Could never forget what happened. She knew it was you, but you made her feel helpless. You made her feel worthless.”

The man dropped to his knees, sobbing. Unable to form words, but trying so hard to.

Eileen didn’t care.

“She tried for almost a year, but it wasn’t working. She didn’t want to live with that anymore. So she stepped in front of a train. She was 13 years old.”

“Noooo,” the man managed to put together, in between sobs. “I did love her, and she should have loved me.”

“She didn’t. And never would have.”

“Poor Celine, I’m so sorry,” he begged at Eileen’s feet. “I’m so sorry, Celine.”

Eileen stepped back to avoid his tears falling on her shoes. “She doesn’t care. Because she’s dead. Because of you.”

Eileen turned around and walked towards Bryce, walking past him towards the car. “Let’s go. I’m done here,” she said as he stood still, staring at the puddle of a man that was crying hysterically and begging for forgiveness in a pile of himself.

Bryce took one last look at the man and turned to follow Eileen back to the car, where she was already behind the wheel in the driver’s seat. He took a deep breath and opened the door, sitting next to her as she stared straight ahead. Her smile now gone and a distant memory to the rage in her face.

He had a million questions, but Bryce knew when it was best to not talk. And that’s exactly what he did. For the entire drive home. An hour and a half, not a word spoken between them. He was going over scenarios in his head. He could gather who Celine was, and what had happened. She had laid that out pretty clearly, there was no need to ask about it. But, he wanted to.

He really wanted to.

They arrived back at the hall where the meeting began early yesterday evening. Bryce never imagined his night would end up taking him into the early morning. And he certainly didn’t expect it to lead to what he had just witnessed.

Eileen pulled up next to his car, still staring ahead. “I’m sorry,” she said softly. “You didn’t need to see that.”

Bryce looked at her. “I’m glad I did.”

“You gonna come to the meeting next week?” she asked, looking towards him for the first time since they left the back of that diner.

“Should I?” Bryce asked, looking into her eyes for what he felt may possibly be the last time ever.

“I’d like that,” she responded, as her smile slowly started to reappear on her face. “I enjoyed your company.”

Bryce’s hesitancy turned to joy as his face lit up. “Then I’ll be here.” Bryce closed the door and headed to his car.

Eileen started to pull away before slamming the brakes. She rolled down the passenger side window and looked at him from behind the wheel, her face filled with joy again. “Bring an overnight bag. We have another visit to make.”

Bryce smiled nervously, unsure how serious she was, even though he could tell in her tone the answer was ‘very.’

Eileen pulled away before he could respond. Bryce sat in his car and took a deep breath. He then let out a big smile and laugh.

“Was the coffee good?” a voice asked from the back seat, startling Bryce.

“What the...” he turned around to see Thomas from the meeting sitting in his backseat. “Thomas, what the hell are you doing? You almost gave me a heart attack.”

Thomas leaned forward, putting his face right next to Bryce’s. “I hope it was just coffee. Wouldn’t want you getting behind the wheel drunk again.”

Bryce’s body tensed up, he immediately knew what Thomas was referring to.

“He was a father, and now three little girls are growing up without a dad and being raised by a mom who isn’t dealing with grief well.”

Bryce gripped the wheel, staring straight ahead.

“Anyways,” Thomas said as he opened the back door, reaching back to put a hand on Bryce’s shoulder. “We hope to see you here again next week. Thanks for coming, Bryce.”

“Are you going to tell anybody?” Bryce struggled to say as his entire body trembled.

“How?” Thomas asked. “I personally don’t know the man, have no connection to the man, and was nowhere near the area when it happened. I just don’t want to see you again.”

Bryce let out a slight sigh, still shaking from fear. “Thank you.”

“Hey,” Thomas said, looking into the car from outside the back driver’s side door. “If you’re looking for people that believe in second chances, you definitely came to the right group.”

Thomas smiled and shut the door behind Bryce. Bryce breathed heavily, gripping his steering wheel, as Thomas walked away, disappearing into the dark.