



Gone

A SHORT STORY BY

Jason Colavito

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The Cult of Alien Gods: H. P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Pop Culture (Prometheus, 2005)

Knowing Fear: Science, Knowledge, and the Development of the Horror Genre (McFarland, 2008)

“A Hideous Bit of Morbidity”: An Anthology of Horror Criticism from the Enlightenment to World War I (McFarland, 2009)

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Cover image: Old doorway, Savannah, Georgia, 1939 or 1944 photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston (Library of Congress)

MY WHOLE LIFE is a lie.” That was the whole of the note Mark’s wife left behind on a warm Friday in June. She had used a piece of lined paper, torn from their daughter’s social studies notebook, and she had printed the message in small, neat letters, giving it a schoolgirl quality that Mark had once found charming in her old love letters to him. He found the note when he returned home from picking Ashley up from soccer practice. Mark was at first confused and called for his wife, who did not answer. He canvassed the ground floor, the upstairs, the attic, and the basement. He checked the backyard and the garage. He asked the neighbors. He called her cell phone and her work number. The cell rang in her closet; her office had not seen her. She was gone.

She did not return that night, or the next morning either. For a few days Mark went through the motions expected of someone whose wife had gone missing. He called her friends and asked after her, but they knew nothing. He even checked her email for signs of some clandestine rendezvous. After enough time had passed, he filed a missing persons report, and he acted suitably upset when a sympathetic cop named Hannah asked a number of questions for which he had already rehearsed his answers.

“When is mommy coming home?” Ashley asked again on Tuesday night, as she had every night since Emily had disappeared.

“I don’t know, baby,” Mark said.

After Ashley was asleep, Mark went to the basement to let himself grow angry and vent his frustration. *A lie? How could you call it a lie? Don't you know how hard I worked to give us—you—this life?*

Mark slammed his fist into the drywall of the half-finished basement renovation and punched and punched until his fingers were bloody and the wall had become an irregular lattice of gypsum and shreds of paper. He screamed and he cried and he curled up in a ball on the basement floor and felt surges of anger, frustration, sadness, and love wash over and through him until there was nothing left for him to feel. Then, rising, he willed himself calm and set a deadline. He would wait until Friday, one week since Emily had left, for her to return.

When Friday was all but over and Emily had not come back, Mark conceded defeat. He understood that she was really gone, and this upset Mark more than he could admit. He thought he had given her exactly what she wanted—a loving relationship, a charming home, a beautiful daughter. How could she throw it all away—*again?*

Mark knew what he had to do, but it grew harder each time. Now they had a daughter, and he simply could not look Ashley in the eye and tell her what would happen. He loved her too much to gaze even for a moment upon her before he...well, just *before*. Instead, he went down into the basement and reached into the hole he had beaten into the drywall, a covering he had placed over a door he thought he would never need to open again. He pulled and yanked on the boards until the drywall was down. Then he drew from his pocket an oddly shaped hexagonal key that he inserted into a recessed lock in a shiny black panel. He pushed the door open, entered the tiny closet, and pressed the small red button inside.

Standing now in his laboratory, Mark adjusted an electrode emerging from Emily's neck. There was little left of her, of course, just a brain and half a face and some bits of muscle and bone terminating in a partial shoulder. Her major arteries and veins fed into small plastic tubes that ran out of a sterile plastic bubble toward a machine that kept her

supplied with oxygenated synthetic blood. The electrodes emerged from the exposed brain stem and fed into a computer interface where a second set of electrodes climbed up to meet a terminus implanted in Mark's own neck. He pulled out these wires and stared at Emily.

What was it this time? he wondered. *What was wrong? It was the longest session yet—almost ten years. And we even had a daughter this time. Damn it, a daughter! Just like you wanted. I loved her, Emily, almost as much as I love you. But no matter. We'll try again, like always. I'll do better. This time your mind won't reject the world I made, won't crave to remember before. This time you'll accept my gift, and you'll appreciate it, and you'll stay. Forever. This time will be different.*

The elderly scientist sat down in a dusty chair and began to type line after line of code with fingers stiff from years of disuse. What was left of Emily sat silently beside him.

About the Author

Jason Colavito is an author and editor based in Albany, NY. His fiction has appeared in several anthologies and magazines. His nonfiction books include *The Cult of Alien Gods: H.P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Pop Culture* (Prometheus Books, 2005); *Knowing Fear: Science, Knowledge, and the Development of the Horror Genre* (McFarland, 2008); and more. His research has been featured on the History Channel. Colavito is internationally recognized by scholars, literary theorists, and scientists for his pioneering work exploring the connections between science, pseudoscience, and speculative fiction. His investigations examine the way human beings create and employ the supernatural to alter and understand our reality and our world.

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