

FRANK MARTIN



THE  
SANDMAN

Story of the Month Club Edition – 2015

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The Sandman  
By Frank Martin

It's strange how the greatest pain you can endure is not felt by you but by those you love. Physical. Mental. Emotional. It doesn't matter because when you're helpless to stop the suffering of a loved one, the only choice you have is to watch.

I would know. I've spent too many nights sitting alongside Clara while she cried in my arms for hours over a brother who overdosed, a sister who killed herself and a father who was never there. From the moment she was born, a curse hung over her head to feel nothing but agony, which no amount of love from me could cure.

Don't get me wrong. The good times far outnumbered the bad. But it's strange that the bad are so much easier to remember. And she knew that all too well. Memories of a drunken mother plagued her mind so that even when I made her smile I could still see a tortured soul behind her beautiful eyes.

Her entire life had been a series of nightmares overshadowing our happiness. Or so I thought they were nightmares. I wanted so badly to just shake her out of it. To tell her she was asleep and it was all just a dream. But dreams you can escape from. No matter how bad it got, a nightmare wasn't true. It wasn't real. But Clara's nightmare was. That is...until the Sandman woke her up.

I don't remember much from before the accident. They told me I fell asleep at the wheel and drifted into an embankment. I do recall being tired and Clara in the passenger seat. But the rest was a blur. The next thing I remember was waking up in a hospital with Clara lying in the bed next to me, her serene face resting peacefully on the pillow.

A nurse injected a silver liquid into the IV, and Clara's eyes began to flutter. They eventually shot open surprised, quickly looking around the room confused. Her eyes then locked onto a smiling doctor at the foot of our beds, and he calmed her down with his first simple words. "Welcome back."

I couldn't tell if Clara could recall how we arrived in our current situation, but she looked just as confused by the doctor as I was. He stood with his hands clasped in front of him and spoke with an air of confidence. "My name is Dr. Nathaniel.

I'm from the Hoffman Research Clinic for Somniatic Studies.”

As the nurse finished at Clara's bedside, she nodded to Dr. Nathaniel and left the room. He then continued on with his explanation, at the end of which I was completely and utterly in shock.

What confused me wasn't that Clara and I had both been in a coma for several days as a result of the head injuries we suffered during the accident. Or even that we were the first patients to receive a new drug he had been developing to revive coma patients called Sandoxin. What confused me was what he said to Clara afterwards. “Your family is outside waiting for you.”

For anyone else that might've seemed normal. In fact, my own family was on their way. But for Clara this seemed impossible. Besides two dead siblings, the only family Clara had was a father who could never remember her birthday and a mother who was too drunk to care. Could this be the family Dr. Nathaniel was talking about?

He waited for a response, but Clara simply tilted her head to the side, obviously just as confused as I was.

“Should I bring them in?” Nathaniel finally asked.

I could have answered for her, but instead I waited for Clara to blankly nod her head. Dr. Nathaniel moved over to the door and waved someone in. We waited for a moment, and then the impossible happened: Clara's entire family walked through the door.

Her father was the first through and greeted Clara with a hug full of love, but gentle enough so not to hurt his bedridden daughter. “You have no idea how good it is to see you awake?”

Still in disbelief, Clara accepted the hug speechless.

Her mom then pushed the father aside, stealing Clara away. “We were so worried.”

She then glanced up at me with a sparkling smile. “For both of you.”

Then, as Clara's parents backed away, her older brother and sister, seemingly back from the dead, approached the bed. “You two need to stop joyriding,” her

sister said, allowing an opportunity for her brother to chime in. “Well, at least wear your seat belts next time.”

Clara’s four happy family members joined together in a laugh as Clara looked over to me silently asking, “is this real?”

I just shrugged my shoulders and glanced over to Dr. Nathaniel, suspiciously grinning by the doorway. He then moved over to Clara’s bed, escorting her suddenly perfect family out of the room. “I’m sorry to interrupt the reunion, but there’s still a lot of recovery they both need to do. You’ll be able to see them again later.”

The group collectively moaned as they exited the room while waving and blowing kisses. Nathaniel gently shut the door behind them and turned to us with a smile. “You should feel lucky to have a family that cares for you so much.”

Clara’s dumbfounded face stood still as her eyes followed Nathaniel between our beds. “That can’t be my family.”

Nathaniel continued smiling as if the smirk was burned onto his face. “Of course it is. Why would you say that?”

“Well for one, my brother and sister are dead. And my parents can’t talk to one another, much less be in the same room together.”

Nathaniel chuckled, as if Clara’s depressing statement was part of a big joke only he knew the punch line to. “Wow. That was sooner than expected.”

I shared Clara’s confusion, but let her ask the questions for the obvious reasons. “What was sooner than expected?”

“The side effects of the drug.”

Clara and I glanced at one another during Dr. Nathaniel’s pause. He then continued on. “Many aspects of a coma patient’s mind are still a mystery. But the drug I created is designed to treat the coma as nothing more than an intense sleep, one which the patient can simply wake up from.”

“So then if I was asleep...”

“Yes, Clara. That means you were also dreaming.”

Clara lowered her head, trying to process the information. “The memories of



my family...it was all just a dream?”

“Precisely! Because of the intense nature of a coma, any dream experienced during one would seem all the more real. And since your condition was caused by a horrific accident, it’s not surprising the content of the dream was also horrific.”

Clara continued to gather her thoughts, filling the air with a confused silence. I then decided to take over for her and asked my own lingering question. “But I also thought Clara’s siblings were dead and her parents divorced. How is that possible?”

Nathaniel answered the question without hesitation. “Like I said, a lot about comas are still a mystery. Since you entered the condition at the same time and were given the drug at the same moment, it’s likely you might have even shared the same dream.”

Clara and I once again shared a bewildered glance, but the good doctor saw fit to try and ease our shock. “I’ll tell you what. You two can have a moment to talk alone, and if all goes well, you can be discharged by tomorrow. Sound good?”

Nathaniel left the room, but Clara and I didn’t talk. We just sat in our beds, silently taking in what we just experienced.

My family arrived around dinnertime. Her family visited again the following day. Needless to say, it was just as strange the second time around. Like he said he would, Dr. Nathaniel discharged us with nothing more than a business card to call in case we experienced any more...unusual side effects.

After returning home from the hospital, everything was the same. I worked in the same office. Played cards with the same friends. Ate at the same restaurants. The only thing different was Clara’s family was now a part of our lives.

Neither of us knew what to make of it at first. They were always eager to get together for lunch or a night out on the town. Always smiling. Always happy.

It wasn’t long before Clara opened up to them. Little by little she let them in, until finally they took the place in her heart she had always reserved for them. Even though she never said it, I could tell Clara had always wished for a perfect family.

She would sometimes stare off into space, imagining what it would be like to just pick up the phone and call someone who loved her unconditionally since birth. And now she had it.

But that wasn't all she had. Suddenly, new recollections began to assimilate themselves inside Clara's mind. The sudden existence of an active father and sober mother adapted Clara's memory to a life she never had. The mere presence of two loving parents created an alternate and loving childhood for Clara, one that didn't result in a strung out brother and suicidal sister.

But as she smiled more and more every day, I could feel the world pulling me further and further down. A weight dragged on my mind that I just couldn't shake. The people around me looked like shades of their former selves, carbon copies of what I knew to be true.

I would lay my head down at night and see nothing but blackness. My only escape from reality was a world of darkness that filled my head at night. I asked Clara if she felt the same way; I could tell she did. Every morning she woke up with empty eyes from a dreamless sleep. But she didn't care. Her happiness blinded her from what the world had become and filled her with false euphoria.

I called Dr. Nathaniel and told him how I felt, but there was no solution. He explained I had been dreaming for so long my body didn't need to anymore. But I was beginning to suspect that was a lie, just like everything about him.

He told me the life I knew before the accident was a dream, but it was the world I was living in now that felt almost like a nightmare. Everywhere I went I felt alone. I would sit in our living room with Clara's family and stare through them with disgust. They walked around as if their past neglect of Clara's love was just a figment of our imagination, but I knew the truth. I understood their loving existence was nothing but a lie.

Without so much as a second thought, Clara discarded her past horrors as if they were fiction. But in moments of solitude, I remembered them as if they were my own. I could still hear her cries and taste her tears of a night spent anguishing over a family that betrayed her. I could still feel the pain and helplessness of



watching her cry herself to sleep over memories she didn't wish she had. But I was forced to hide my feelings for the sake of her manufactured happiness.

In a fading blur, days became weeks and weeks became months until I couldn't tell the difference from one moment to the next. Drifting through this artificial fabricate of reality took me to an autumn night in which my apathy reached its boiling point. The parents I knew Clara to have lived in a broken down trailer and rent controlled apartment. But now it was commonplace for Clara and I to join them in their immaculately kept colonial home for dinner. They had invited us all out to their suburban abode, Clara's siblings included, for a meal alongside their own personal familial savior: Dr. Nathaniel.

Clara's mother made sure the dinner consisted of an impressive spread of homemade specialties. A wholesome dish covered every inch of the table and the party's attendees wasted no time filling their plates. But as they treated themselves to a hearty meal, I could only poke and prod at what little food Clara dumped in front of me. Truth be told, I hadn't eaten in days, but the disgusting falsity of the scene did nothing to invoke my appetite.

Instead, I took the role of antisocial hermit throughout the evening. While everyone else enjoyed the food, drink and conversation, I isolated my thoughts to keep myself away from the depressing event I was obligated to attend. Since the accident, these people had been a regular part of my life, but the truth was I didn't know them at all. They were and meant nothing to me. As long as Clara had been in my life, her family had only ever been a source of pain. And now that I was forced to socialize with them, it was damn near impossible to fake a smile.

I tried my hardest to escape inside my mind but was jolted back to my surroundings by a sudden roar of laughter. I couldn't tell whom, but someone had told a joke that ignited a sentiment of hilarity around the room. Stuck between anger and awkwardness, I sat at the table helplessly watching as all their heads rocked back and forth like a pack of drunken hyenas. Lost in their ignorant amusement, the fools chuckled gleefully in a chaotic wave of inebriated revelry.

And Clara was one of them.

Without any apprehension or worry, she joined in on their merciless cackling as if she'd been doing it her whole life. But I couldn't. To me, they would always be the selfish deviants who leeches onto her happiness. And this scene was just an orchestrated illusion crafted by the wolf sitting peacefully among us.

Although he was a part of their laughter, Nathaniel's amusement had its own source: me. While the others around the table were engulfed in their own snickering, Nathaniel's eyes stayed firmly locked in my direction. He knew I saw through his lies. He knew I couldn't stand what he'd done to Clara. But he also knew there was nothing I could do about it.

The love between Clara and myself was still strong and binding, but the contrived joy Nathaniel had given her challenged our relationship. Clara saw no obstacle between her family and I. She couldn't possibly understand why she couldn't have us both. But that was the trick he had crafted for her, and I hated him for it.

After the subtle uneasiness had been building within me for so long, I could no longer fake a smile for the sake of Clara's serenity. My ability to tolerate the presence of her concocted family collapsed, and I stormed out of the house in silence. The persisting laughter in the room barely stuttered as I pushed the front door open and walked onto the street.

Once outside I tried to calm my nerves with a breath of fresh air, but even that had the stale smell of the dreamscape I was a prisoner to. I stood alone in the suburban wonderland, surrounded by cookie cutter houses and immaculately pruned trees. But to me, all I could see were the bars of the invisible jail I could never escape from. I gripped my head in tormented frustration and cursed the fake world and everyone in it. For too long I sacrificed my pride to Clara's happiness, all so that she could experience the love of a family that so many take for granted. But the lie had been slowly eating away at me to the point where I would rather die than see her held ignorantly captive for the rest of this dreaming life.

Then, as if on cue by design, my internal ramblings were interrupted by the

comforting sound of Clara's voice. "Hey. What's wrong?"

I turned around and there she stood in front of the house having chased after me from the dinner table. Seeing her standing there with a look of innocent concern almost brought me to tears. But I had no other choice than to shake my head in defeat and disappointment. "I can't do it anymore, Clara. I just can't."

It wasn't the first time we discussed the worries that were brewing inside me, and she immediately knew the trouble I was about to cause. "No. Not again."

I firmly pointed towards the house, trying to balance my tone between compassion and rage. "Those people in there are not your family."

But her will to reason had been so blinded all she could do was look on to me in frustrated betrayal. "Yes, they are. And I'm happy now. Can't you see that?"

My pleas continued as I held out my hands emphasizing the words. "Don't you remember what they were like? What they did to you? How can you forget that?"

And like any competent individual faced with insanity, she talked down to me from a place of what she thought was helpful concern. "We've talked about this. It was just a dream. The drug's side effects are..."

"No! I'm telling you. THIS is the dream. It's not real. None of it."

The madness of my assertion had taken its toll and was reflected in her expression of disbelief. "Do you even hear what you're saying?"

Our raised voices must have caused the orgy of laughter inside to cease because the door to the house swung open and out came Clara's meddlesome family. The dinner party slowly exited the house and approached Clara and me with an aura of concerned curiosity.

Upon seeing them, I moved in closer to Clara in an effort to avoid their nosy ears. "I know. It sounds crazy. But I need you to trust me. Please."

"Calm down. Just listen to me." She grabbed me by the wrists and moved them to her chest. "Do you feel my hands? Can you touch me? I'm real. I'm right here. You're not imagining things."

And I could feel her. As real as the thoughts rushing through my mind. But

despite all my senses, it didn't feel right. I couldn't ignore what I knew to be true. That the surrounding world was a blank canvas Nathaniel had painted over to keep us contained. The trees. The people. The starry sky. It was all nothingness. It was all an empty void. The only thing true was me, Clara and him. He stood there blending into the crowd, watching Clara fall deeper into his lie. But I couldn't let him have her.

I grabbed onto her hands and pulled her in close. "Clara, how can I show you? How can I prove it to you? Just tell me, and I'll do it."

My sudden movements gave her a quick rush of fright, to which her brother reacted. "Hey! Let her go!"

He stepped forward from the crowd, asserting his dominance. I gave him a brief passing look, almost ignoring him completely. My attention was only turned back to Clara for an instant, before her brother once again lunged forward and placed a firm hand on my shoulder. "I mean it! Let go!"

His grasp was strong enough to send a slight pain down my shoulder, but the thought of him even touching me sent a chill down my spine. In her eyes, Clara's brother might've now been viewed as a shining white knight, a hero who could do no wrong. But through her stories, I could never shake the image of a degenerate junkie from my mind. Regardless of the artificial puppet Nathaniel molded to his image, I would never believe the man before me to be Clara's flesh and blood. He was an abomination. A golem. A mockery of truth, self respect and the years of therapy Clara went through to mend her emotional wounds.

In short, he represented everything I came to despise from this replicated world. He was nothing but a tool used to wrap a vice around Clara's caring heart and seal her away from the truth. With every moment that went by she fell deeper into his spell. And eventually there would come a point when this illusion would become our permanent home. If I were to ever escape and free Clara from this cruel prison of the mind, I would have to prove to her that none of this mattered. That it was all truly a dream, and the real world still lied beyond the horizon. I had to show her and I had to do it now.

In one swift motion, I threw the brother's arm off my shoulder and lunged forward, grappling my hands around his neck. Clara's brother flew backwards from the force of my body and fell hard onto the pavement. With one hand still wrapped around his throat, I landed on top of him and raised my fist ready to strike. A fleeting expression of shock and surprise flashed across his terrified face before I threw my arm down, pounding my knuckles into his jaw. One after another, my jabs danced around his face, cutting off parts of flesh and spilling the man's blood in every which way.

For the first few seconds, I could sense everyone around me watching in shock. Especially Clara. She just leaned over me in disbelief that I could hurt someone she loved so much. But it wasn't her brother. It wasn't anyone. Even though I could feel my fists pounding into his flesh, in my mind I was swinging through air. Punching straight through him with every blow. His blood splashed up onto my face, but it wasn't real. It was just a dream, and it all meant nothing.

By the time I finished, I couldn't say for certain how long I stood over Clara's brother, beating my fists into his face. With my figure thoroughly covered in blood, I stood and looked down at the pummeled mess that lay before me. But I knew it meant nothing. It wasn't a body. It wasn't even a man. It was a figment of my dreaming subconscious. And I hoped to look up and see that same revelation in Clara's eyes...but I didn't.

Instead, I turned to her and saw a revolting look of horror. My actions hadn't freed her from this fantasy. It didn't snap her back to the waking world. All it did was further poison our relationship and show to her that I was indeed as crazed as Nathaniel would have her believe.

Still appalled by what appeared to be the death of her brother, Clara backed away from me and entered the embrace of her shocked family. And right there to comfort her, with an arm around her shoulder, was Nathaniel. His eyes penetrated deep into my soul and told me everything I needed to know. This reality he created was just a game, and I was nothing but a pawn.

He looked on at with a mixed stare of smug disappointment. He wished to

have kept me a part of this charade. Like Clara, he wanted to snare me prisoner in this world he created. But with single act of brutal defiance, I rejected it all in a murderous fashion. In the moments since denying the life of Clara's brother, I could feel Nathaniel's hold on me begin to slip. I fractured the perfect existence he had hoped to contain me in. And with that little sliver, I could feel a path of escape laid before me.

But as far as the doctor was concerned, Clara was his real prize. She was the one he wanted to keep as a trophy. And although destroying one of his creations had loosened his grip on me, it drove Clara deeper into his grasp.

I could fight him and deny the dream he paraded in front of me as a life. But for Clara, the thought of resisting Nathaniel's temptation never even crossed her mind. The manipulative doctor put his puppets in front of her and masqueraded them as the family she always wanted. And my rash attempt to free her only solidified her place among them. Seeing Clara blend into the crowd of her family, I finally realized she was truly a part of them. And I was all alone.

After committing myself to this path, there was no other choice for me now but to escape by myself. I couldn't stay trapped in this world a second longer. I had to get away. I had to break free. And I left the scene in front of me the only way I knew how. I ran.

Passing by house after house of the same carbon copied home, I could feel the world around me start to give way. As I sprinted further and further, my perception of this reality, what Nathaniel crafted as a blissful dream, was losing its grip on me and becoming a twisted nightmare. The ground rumbled and shook while the dark, cloudless sky flashed and thundered above. Trees along the sidewalk grew and towered on top of the road like monsters, as splashes of psychedelic color dripped from the air all around me. It was clear my awareness had finally sharpened and pierced through the thin veil of illusion draped over my eyes. Nathaniel's prison walls were crumbling, and I could feel his fabricated dream falling apart. All I needed to do was continue on, keep running until this land faded away completely and I was free from this horror.

But no matter how far I reached, Nathaniel's voice followed me inside every moment. I could hear him laughing with every step. Screaming out at me. Spitting in my face. Taunting me that he had Clara in a stranglehold and there was nothing I could do. So I pushed on running. Past every cramp. Past every burn. Past every breath because it wasn't real. This wasn't my body. The pain was just an illusion, and it wasn't going to stop me.

I soon rushed past the suburbs and into the city, where I hoped to find some solace and refuge among the crowds. But what I found instead was that this falling journey had taken me deeper down into a crumbling rabbit hole. Normally littered with lights from every direction, the urban landscape was now plagued by darkness. A blackout had crippled the skyline and turned the city into a lifeless canvass absent of light. My aimless running took me down street after street and was guided solely by the random, thundering flashes from above.

Besides being completely drenched in darkness, the desolate streets lacked a single car or person on the sidewalks. Fracturing Nathaniel's hold on me had turned the normally crowded city into a bizarre ghost town devoid of life. There was literally not a single soul left in this dream world he had created. I was truly alone but continued on, engulfed in madness and searching for a way through the doctor's tormenting laughter.

Free from any direction or goal, my journey turned into a marathon of pointless wandering. Beyond the endless laughter and haunting reality, I searched for a sign. I begged for a symbol to help me break away from this perpetual cycle of madness. And then, at the end of the road before me, I saw a light stand out from within the blackness. Pulling from whatever reserve of energy I had left, my muscles pushed forward until the small glow came into view. As I drew closer, the image intensified until standing before me was a tall skyscraper, piercing its way up into the world above. Unlike the fading, imaginary world around me, the building was as solid as could be. Like an anchor to reality, the edifice stood as a beacon, signaling my way home.

I busted through the series of doors outfitting the building's face and entered



into a bland lobby of concrete and stone. Still in a frenzied panic, I surveyed my surroundings for a moment before spotting the lobby's sole exit in the form of a doorway at the end of the hall. I resumed my sprint, racing towards the door, and found a staircase waiting for me inside.

Without missing a beat, my legs started up the stairs, fighting for every step. Every inch forward was an inch towards my escape and away from this worldly facade I despised. At the top I hoped to find my salvation, some key that would release me from this never ending odyssey to freedom. But until I reached the end, I kept my head down and my feet moving up the seemingly eternal staircase.

Without a break or pause, the stairs continued on forever, and I continued on with them. I climbed higher and higher until finally a single door came within reach. I lowered my shoulder, barreling through the thick steel as hard as I could. The hinges snapped and the door flew open, leading me out onto the building's rooftop.

Out of breath and fatigued, I slowly walked across the towering skyscraper in awe of my surroundings. The sky continued to flash and thunder as I approached the building's edge, still amazed at the dark world I found myself in. I stepped up to the roof's ledge and peered down the side into a void of nothingness. The street resided somewhere below, but the darkness covered it all creating an infinite abyss.

My gaze drifted up, and I overlooked the city's many rooftops revealed to me by the random flashes of light. I closed my eyes and took a final deep breath, preparing myself for an awakening. And then, as I lifted my leg to take the last step forward, a sweet voice I'd grown to love without question called out to me. "Wait!"

I slowly turned around already anticipating the sight before me. Clara stood gracefully at the center of the rooftop with a saddened look upon her face. And standing behind her, with both hands placed peacefully on her shoulders, Nathaniel leered at me with a condescending smile. I thought I could outrun him, but then I remembered he was the master of this world and no task was beyond his reach. In his desperation, he brought Clara to me in an attempt to secure his chains around my mind.

She took a step forward with an extended hand, trying to lure me away from

the building's edge. "Please. Come back with me. You don't want to do this."

I knew it was just a trick; that she didn't even know what was truly going on. But even being aware of Nathaniel's manipulation, I still couldn't help pleading for her sanity. "I have to. There's no other way."

With tears building in her eyes, Clara once again put her faith for my redemption in the false messiah behind her. "Yes, there is. There always is. Dr. Nathaniel can make you better. He can help you."

But I continued to fight, not just for my own sake, but for the slim chance that I could somehow breakthrough to her. "He doesn't want to help. He wants to control. Control me. Control you. Just like he's controlling this situation right now."

The shock of my unbelievable claim caused her to involuntarily chuckle. "That's ridiculous."

And to her it was, but Nathaniel's world was falling apart around me. Bringing her here was proof of his fleeting power, and I hoped to use that desperate trick against him. "Think, Clara. How did you get here?"

She scrunched her brow, still confused by the thoughts I was bringing to her mind. "What are you talking about?"

"We were at your parents and then I ran away. So how did you follow me?"

She casually opened her mouth to speak but struggled to find the words, as if the answer was obvious and yet she failed to grasp at it. She lowered her eyes, continuing to search her mind for the response. But I chimed in with the answer she was unable to comprehend. "He put you here, Clara. He's playing with your mind, trying to keep me locked up."

Without even considering the possibility, she immediately brushed off my words while still clinging to this false reality. "Listen to yourself. You're talking crazy."

We could go on like this forever, but I was futilely trying to deny the inevitable. Despite my best efforts, the situation was frustratingly simple: Nathaniel truly had her, and there was nothing I could do.

I took a deep breath and allowed the grim realization of truth to set in. With my heels still teetering on the edge, I looked on at Clara's hopeful eyes. After all I've done, after all we've been through, she still had faith that it would all work out. That our destiny couldn't be anything other than a happy ending. She stood waiting, hoping that I would walk into her arms and it would all be over. That I could finally accept this world as it was and we could live on in happiness.

But then I saw Nathaniel still looming behind her, his figure peering from the shadows. He was the reminder that this life wasn't our own. He created it for us and was in control. He molded it to our desire and fed off our obedience. But I finally had enough of the lie; even if it meant abandoning all hope of Clara and I ever being together. Despite my love for her, it was time I faced the truth.

I turned and in one fluid motion fell forward off the rooftop's ledge. I could hear Clara's voice yell out from behind me, but her exact words never made it into my mind.

Instead, my attention was focused elsewhere. Probably on the first rush of wind hitting my face as I plunged down the side of the building and into the darkness below.

As with the accident that first brought me to Nathaniel's dream world, I don't remember the end. But who's to say people falling from a skyscraper remember hitting the ground anyway. What I do remember was the shot of life I experienced afterwards. The first few moments felt like a hazy *déjà vu*. I awoke in a hospital with a doctor watching over me and Clara sleeping in the bed next to mine. Only this time, she didn't wake up. She laid there motionless, lost in the dream world I had escaped.

I broke through the chains Nathaniel had over me and entered the reality I knew to be genuine. The bed underneath me existed, and the smell in the air was real. The world was not a hallucination or fabrication but certainty and truth. I was finally free. Or so I thought.

As I recovered from the car accident alone, I found the world I was living in

to be just like the horror I had escaped. Without Clara, the life I lived was nothing short of a nightmare itself. I felt myself drifting away and simply wasting time until death. And unfortunately, it wasn't long before I again began to question my existence.

In this life I returned to, my days were spent lost and detached from what I could only hope was the real world. While my nights were spent watching Clara mourn for my unfortunate demise. Every evening I closed my eyes and dreamt of the prison I escaped from. As punishment for leaving her behind, I was forced to gaze upon the love of my life as she visited my grave on a daily basis. Crying from abandonment, Clara would drop a flower before my subtle tombstone and wonder how I could betray her. How I could so easily turn my back on our life of happiness.

But Nathaniel still commands the realm of sleep and only ever shows me a glimpse of her sadness. Tormenting me for escaping his grasp, the doctor dangles her grief before my dreaming eyes so I could regret my decision to leave. Treating me like a voyeur, he brings her so close that I could feel her tears. So near that if I wanted to I could reach out and grab her. Wrap my arms around her and tell her it's all right. That I'm still here and he could never take me away. And then...

I wake up.

## About the Author

Frank Martin is a comic writer and author that is not as crazy as his work makes him out to be...seriously.

Since his writing career began he's had multiple short stories published in horror anthologies by both Burning Willow Press and Stitched Smile Publications. Frank has also had comic shorts appear in the "fluff noir" anthology series Torsobear and the all-ages horror anthology Cthulhu is Hard to Spell. Frank also wrote and produced the comic anthology series Modern Testament, which featured a wide ensemble of artists throughout its four volumes. His novels include the YA sci-fi thriller Predestiny published by Crossroads Press and the zombie horror Mountain Sickness published by Severed Press.

Frank currently lives in New York with his wife and three kids. To hear more about his work you can sign up for his mailing list at [www.frankthewriter.com](http://www.frankthewriter.com) or follow him on Twitter/Instagram @frankthewriter.