

EPISODE 13: SHORT STORY EXCERPT: *FOLDING MAN*

*I was six years old the first time I saw someone fold up and disappear. It was on the midway at the county fair on a perfect blue sky summer day in 1968. It was my first fair, and I was about as happy as a little kid could be. Then, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Twenty feet ahead, in the middle of the busy midway, a bright crack appeared hanging in mid-air, from just above the asphalt to a point higher than my dad's head. It was like someone had opened a door to a room on the Sun. The crack existed, dazzlingly bright, for only an instant, then it faded, leaving burning red afterimages in my eyes.*

*I stood there, amazed and scared, staring at the spot where the light had been. The charged feeling got stronger. I started backing away, pulling on Mom's hand. I didn't want to be there anymore.*

*"Peter, what's wrong, sweetie?" she asked. She and my father had both stopped walking when I had. She knelt beside me. Dad just stood there, looking impatient and annoyed.*

*I don't know how it was they hadn't seen the light.*

*But since they were both looking at me, they didn't see the tall man ahead of us, the man eating funnel cake as he walked right toward where the light had been.*

*I shouted, "No, stop!" In my six year-old heart, I knew if he walked where that line had been, something terrible would happen.*

*Everyone around us turned and looked my way, even the man with the funnel cake. But he didn't stop walking, and when he reached the spot where the line had been, his mouth formed a small oh as he suddenly flattened, like he'd walked into something immovable and the rest of his body just kept going until he was as thin as a piece of paper. If he hadn't been at a slight angle, I*

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*wouldn't have been able to see him at all. Then, in the space of a second, his outer edges folded inward, once, then again, faster and faster, until he disappeared in a tiny flash of golden light.*

*He was gone, and so was the charged feeling.*

*I screamed, again.*

*I tried to explain, but no one believed me. No one else had seen anything.*

*"You're over-tired," Mom said. She ran her fingers through my buzz cut. "We probably shouldn't have let you have so much cotton candy."*

*Dad was pissed. He said it was all in my imagination. When I protested that I'd really seen something, that I wasn't making it up, he blew up and made us go home early.*

*For several days, I tried to convince someone, anyone, that I'd seen something terrible. The only person who believed me was Dale, my best friend. I gave up. Eventually, even I believed it had all been a result of too much sugar. I forgot about it.*

The summer of 1980, Dale, my best friend joined the Marines, and Gloria, my high school sweetheart, the love of my life, went off to Europe. Her parents said was was to broaden her horizons, but we both knew it was to get her away from me.

On the plus side, I got admitted to MIT on an academic scholarship. Mom and Dad bought me a new Ford Pinto for graduation. Best of all, before she'd left, Gloria had made me a promise. "I'll be eighteen when I get home, Peter. I'll be ready."

At the time, we were snuggled up together on a blanket we'd spread out on Boston Common, enjoying one of the first warm days of spring, and our last ones together until she returned.

"And that means?"

"You know what I mean," she said, kissing me. "I'll come back a day early, and you can

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get us a hotel room. But it better be some place nice!”

I saved all summer and made a reservation at the Omni Parker downtown. Gloria told her parents she'd be getting back late the next morning. In truth, she was scheduled to get in to Logan at ten pm. We'd finally have a night all to ourselves. I'd even picked up some weed from a buddy of mine. The baggie was tucked into my back pocket.

Things don't always go as planned. There as a strike in France and bad weather over the Atlantic. I was still waiting on her flight at two in the morning. All the kiosks and shops were closed up. I had about a dozen other people for company, all of them waiting with me outside customs on that one flight.

I paced, too excited about seeing Gloria to sit quietly. I was getting more and more frustrated with the wait. Every minute longer it took for her to arrive, was another minute I couldn't spend alone with her.

She'd been so busy trying to see things on her last days in Europe, that she hadn't had time to write her usual long letters. The last letter had been a hasty note, “Better not keep me waiting!” and her itinerary. Then, just before getting on the plane she'd called. “I can't wait to see you. I love you,” she said. In the background, I could hear them announcing the boarding of her flight.

My plans for the evening had included a late dinner with Gloria, so I hadn't eaten and I was ravenous. I went searching for a snack machine.

I found one down a short corridor that ended in one of those ubiquitous “Authorized Personnel Only” doors. The snack machine was tucked into a nook right beside the door.

My joy at this discovery was short-lived. The machine hadn't been restocked after a long day of feeding hungry travelers. All the good stuff was gone, the only choices left were garlic

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and onion potato chips and pineapple chewing gum. No chance of a kiss if I ate those chips. And pineapple gum, really? I gave up, went back to waiting with the others, still hungry.

I must have dozed off, because I was startled awake by the announcement that Gloria's plane was landing. I suddenly realized I needed to use the facilities, so I dashed off for the restroom. I figured I had just enough time to get cleaned up a bit and get back before they started letting people off the plane.

The first and closest restroom was being cleaned, so I had to run to the next one. I hurried things along as quickly as biologically possible, splashed water on my face and ran back.

The last few passengers were coming out of customs, meeting up with those waiting for them and heading for the exit. I didn't see Gloria. A couple minutes later, the flight crew came walked past, and I realized I must have missed her.

My heart sank. Did she already go and get a cab? Did she just assume I wouldn't be there because the plane was late? I peeked around the corner and didn't see her at any of the baggage carousels.

A grandmotherly woman saved me. She must have seen my confused look and came over. "I'll bet you're the one that pretty young thing was looking for," she said.

"Gloria? Did she leave already?" I was picturing the look of disappointment on my girlfriend's face.

"Oh no," the woman said. "I could tell she was looking for you. I told her you'd be right back. I think she went over to the snack machine."

"Thank you!" I said, and sprinted in the direction of the snack machine.

I rounded the corner, and felt it, a charge in the air, like lightning was about to strike. I skidded to a halt. In a rush, the memory of seeing that man fold up at the fair came back. And,

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just like then, a wickedly bright vertical line appeared, hanging in mid-air. Gloria was just beyond, kneeling with her back to me, getting something out of the machine.

The line shimmered and faded.

Gloria stood, turned and saw me. She grinned, waved. “Peter!” She started toward me a grin on her face.

She was going to walk into that ... whatever it was. This time, it wasn't going to be a stranger who disappeared, it was going to be Gloria. She was going to disappear from my life, from the whole world, forever. I couldn't let that happen. I charged toward her.

Gloria misinterpreted what I was doing. Laughing, she dropped her carry-on, opened her arms, and rushed towards me.

I tried to yell, “Stop!” But, I stumbled and went flying forward, sure I was going to slam into her.

Instead, I hit something cold, solid and invisible. In that brief instant, I saw Gloria's expression change from delight ... to terror.