

An Excerpt From

# RESURGERE

By David Christopher Perez

Senior Year. Late March. I had finally parted ways with Jose (he moved in with his boyfriend) and had been living in a newly renovated one bedroom apartment off campus, near the downtown commercial district. My mother paid the rent. I only waved at Laurence and Eddie whenever we happened to bike past each other. Melinda had moved out of the Kappa house, but since her plan was to graduate and enter med school before moving in with me, she got her own place – a 310 square foot studio apartment that was tucked up against a freeway overpass and provided no insulation against mold, the neighbor’s pot smoke, and ants. It was the best place she could afford. I thought it was a waste of money, especially since she was still sleeping over with me almost every night.

It was a Wednesday morning. Around nine o’clock. I had just stepped outside my apartment to head to class. Late and in a sour mood. The sun was shining clearly and brightly, but the air was frigid and it bit through the wool sweater I was wearing, giving me a headache. Melinda had left my place early to go on a morning jog, which along with a vegan diet and herbal supplements, had become part of her strategy to combat a persistent case of insomnia. She said she had a busy schedule the rest of the day and didn’t know when we’d be able to meet up. It was like she didn’t want to see me. So when she called my cell phone as I got on my bike, I was taken a bit by surprise.

“Hey. You forget something?”

Her words were incomprehensible. “Going in circles. Spinning and spinning, over and over. I’m spinning out. Stop! I can hear blood! Hear it? Stop it, Danny! Stop the spinning, I’m going to die.”

She hung up before I could articulate any sort of response. I tried calling back but was thrown into her voicemail.

Worried, I jumped on my bike and began to trace the looping route through campus that I knew she liked to run. After eleven, angst-ridden minutes I found her. She was lying on her back on a patch of grass near the main Tucker Business School building. I flew off my bike and ran up to her. She was laughing, but not in her usual jovial way. The laughs were slow and mechanical, like a talking doll with a worn-out battery. Melinda's eyes were staring up at the cloudless sky until she noticed me and bounced up to a seated position.

"Can't see this? Every night, every dark night. It burns my ears! Happy? Dreaming of rocks? It's become so dark now, I know things...I know!"

A couple of B-school students sauntered past, barely looking at Melinda. They traded barbs.

"Drunk on weekday?"

"Pathetic."

Next to Melinda on the ground was her cell phone, shattered as if she had smashed it against the concrete sidewalk. There was also a small puddle of brackish vomit next to the broken phone. I tried to reach out to Melinda, but she swatted my hand away.

"Danny! Can you see it? Can you see what it's doing? Little spinning circles. Spinning in my eyes. No! My ears are bleeding! Make it stop, make it stop, make it stop...."

Melinda's body dropped back to the ground and she started whimpering. My heart began to claw its way out of my chest. Her eyes were jumpy and uncertain, as if she knew her speech was unintelligible but she couldn't do anything about it. My throat began to close. Before my voice shut off, I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and dialed 911.

The day passed as if I were stuck reading the same dreary passage in an arcane textbook even though I felt my fingers turning the pages. The passive act of waiting was a vile terror.

Melinda endured a multitude of prying and invasive tests, scans, and samples and I was bombarded with phone calls and texts to and from family and friends repeating the same questions, same answers, same concerns – all of which were various ways of articulating, *I don't know shit*. While Melinda rested in a hospital bed after receiving a cocktail of sedatives and analgesics, I was battered by waves of insulting, icy worry that overpowered the nausea I had received from lying down on waiting room chairs covered with sticky, buttery plastic that reeked of Pine-Sol. Melinda requested no visitors. I went home and didn't eat or sleep as Melinda spent the night the hospital.

In the evening of the following day, Melinda was released. She had spent thirty-three hours and seventeen minutes in the hospital, and in the end, had been given only a banal diagnosis of temporary delirium brought on by acute stress. Stress supposedly from a lack of sleep, school exams, millennial generation blues – no physician could provide a definitive source – and I felt like the world was awash in ignorance. Knowing the imperfections of science, I have since forgiven the doctors, but my anger never truly subsided. Although every test came back negative, she should have never been released from the hospital. She needed time to let her traumatic confusion pass. But of course, I didn't understand the importance of this until much later.

I waited outside the hospital entrance for her, struggling to breathe in the crisp, brittle air, as Melinda shuffled out the sliding glass doors, wearing the same clothes (jogging shorts and a University sweatshirt) as yesterday. I bolted up to her, slung my arms around her submissive body and blasted

her with questions about her well-being. Melinda's arms were folded across her chest and she said only two words back to me: *My place*. I hailed a cab and against my better judgment, instructed him to drive to her squalid studio apartment. On the ride over, Melinda didn't utter another word to me, even after I told her that her parents had managed to grab a cheap cross-country flight and would arrive by mid-morning. She continued her silence as I ushered her inside her apartment, my arm coiled around her waist like a starving python, and told her that I would take care of everything and she would be OK. I helped her take another dose of her prescribed sedative, undressed her and placed her limp body in bed. She shut her eyes as soon as her pillow ingested her head.

I asked Melinda if she wanted me to lie next to her. She appeared to nod slightly, but she may have already fallen asleep. I undressed, turned off the lights, and curled up next to her. It was a little after 7:30 PM and I was exhausted, but I couldn't sleep. I tried to imagine every scenario in which Melinda would wake up in the morning, completely healthy and normal, eager to make love before heading to class. I even imagined an outcome where we both came down with mutual amnesia that wiped out the memory of this entire ordeal from our minds.

"I cursed him."

The words had eked out of Melinda and at first I thought the murmur had only been in my mind. But she repeated, "I cursed him."

Had she not fallen asleep after all? "Are you OK, Melinda? Do you need something?"

She didn't answer me and it took me a moment to detect that her chest was rising in the slow and controlled manner indicative of sleep. Maybe she was dreaming. We both mumbled during sleep at times, nonsense words, sometimes politically incorrect words that we jokingly promised to write

down and use as blackmail for any future transgressions. Or maybe she was speaking the same type of nonsense she had uttered yesterday, on the phone and when I'd found her. I rubbed my eyes and resumed staring out into the darkness.

An hour passed. Or maybe two or three. I must have fallen asleep because my eyes flared open from a beam of harsh light. The ceiling light had been turned on. After my eyes adjusted to the invading glare, I noticed that Melinda was not in bed next to me. I assumed she had gotten up to use the bathroom.

I pulled myself out of bed which was more labor intensive than it should've been. It seemed as if I were moving in slow motion – the stereotypical nightmare scenario. But I was wide awake. I jammed my pinkie toe as I accidentally kicked my cell phone which I had carelessly left on the floor by the bed.

I inched over to her bathroom. The door was closed so I knocked. No response. I knocked again and tried the knob. It turned freely so I swung the door open.

Melinda was standing up against the sink, examining her face in a crooked bathroom mirror with deteriorating edges, its glass streaked with rust and lime. The medicine cabinet door to her left was open. Her eyes were sullen and red, but she was smiling. It was a strange smile and it unnerved me.

“Melinda, are you OK? Do you need something?” I repeated the same questions I had asked her back in bed as if stuck on a loop, in the middle of an adolescent nightmare.

“I did this to myself, Danny. I did this.”

“No, Melinda. This isn't your fault. Come back to bed and you'll feel better.”

“I cursed him. And he made me like this.”

“Cursed who?”

Melinda laughed like a petulant, five-year-old girl. "God! But you don't think he exists!" Melinda began scratching at her bare breasts leaving red trails of raised flesh.

"Melinda, you need to rest. You're still not well."

Melinda turned away from the mirror and looked directly at me. She pointed her finger directly at my head. "No, Danny. You're not well."

Her accusation was bewildering, but it still hurt. I struck back, another regrettable mistake. "I'm completely fine, Melinda. This has nothing to do with me."

Melinda laughed again. "Danny, you are completely blind!"

"How am I blind? What are you talking about?"

"You're right. He doesn't exist. You're alone. I'm alone. It wants to be alone."

I tried to fight against my growing frustration. "Stop it, Melinda. You exist. We exist."

"Blind! Blind! Blind!" Melinda giggled again. "And it's staring right at you in the face!"

Melinda was clearly not feeling well at all and I needed to steer her back into bed. But I continued my attempt to maintain a rational discussion with her. "What's staring at me? Are you still talking about God?"

"Does it really matter? If he told me he loved me would it be better if I said it was God?"

"What? Who loves you? Are you saying there's someone else in your life?"

Melinda slammed the medicine cabinet door shut. "Leave, Danny. It's all over."

"No. I want to help you. I will help you!"

"Too late. Help yourself."

"I will not leave you, Melinda."

Melinda crept closer to me. Her body trembled with every step. She was getting weaker. "Leave."

"No!"

"Leave! It wants to be alone!"

“I am not leaving! Not for anything!”

Melinda stood directly in front of me, tears falling from her eyes. Why was I arguing with her? I needed to console her. As I moved closer to her, she slapped me hard across the face and screamed, “Get the fuck away from me!”

I actually stumbled back from the stinging blow and stepped out of the bathroom. I had never been hit by anyone before and couldn't even contemplate that Melinda would do such a thing.

Melinda slammed the bathroom door shut. My mind swarmed with anger and doubt. I no longer wanted to help her. She had crossed a line and I no longer understood the woman I loved. Was all of this about someone else? Some other lover? Ridiculous. I was getting carried away with petty jealousy. But what did she mean? Did she not love me anymore? Or was she just completely out of her mind? I no longer knew what to do. Maybe we were no longer meant to be together. Maybe this was how our relationship would come to end. Maybe this was how all relationships ended. Love was a fraud. Love had no capacity to endure hardship. All it took was for one person to find the other crazy, insufferable, or incomprehensible and that would be enough to extinguish the will of the other.

I hastily got dressed and exited her apartment. I slipped out of her building and started half-walking, half-running, down her residential street in an aimless direction. I had never felt such resentment and fury over Melinda. All I wanted to do was make her happy! Now I wanted to leave her forever. Vanquish her face, her body, her dominating presence out of my life. Rip the resonant memory of love out of my brain that kept ricocheting like an overplayed pop song. I had become a self-indoctrinated fool, captivated by a naïve faith in revelations and miracles.

I had traveled several blocks from her apartment before realizing someone was following me. I glanced to my left and caught a glimpse of a figure walking about twenty feet directly behind me. I was in an area of town where some students had been mugged at gunpoint, but I knew it was Melinda behind me. She had come to apologize. Make amends. Treasure me for all I had done for her over the past forty hours. She probably wasn't even that sick, only testing the resolve of my love.

So I kept walking. I didn't turn around to face her as her footsteps got closer to me. My anger was actually increasing and I felt the sudden urge to yell at everyone in the entire neighborhood who apparently were all sound asleep. Where were the cars? It wasn't that late, was it? No wonder students got robbed – all the residents had air-tight alibis. *I was asleep officer; I didn't see or hear a thing!* Well, wake the fuck up! You're missing out on the latest episode of college students gone amok! The next reality show spectacle coming soon to cable TV! What time was it? I needed to record the time for the next generation of students. This was going to be the moment when the University's Greatest Love Story, the Kingdom of Melinda and Daniel, would reach its pitiful, bottom-of-the-ratings, end.

As I reached into my pocket for my cell to check the time, I realized I had left it at Melinda's. God damn it! Could I do anything right? I decided to turn around. Face the woman I no longer loved. And tell her all I needed was my stupid cell phone back.

But when I turned, there was no one behind me. The street was empty. The air smelled like Melinda – the scent of her hair, her skin, a smidge of her favorite Calvin Klein perfume that she dabbed lightly against her neck every morning. The perfume I had bought for her as a gift on our first Christmas together. That was three years ago and she had

worn it ever since. My righteous anger evaporated and I felt very foolish. And terminally alone. What was I doing? What was wrong with me? Melinda needed me. She was significantly ill and I was acting like a mop-headed high school student. A selfish little boy who lost his only toy. There was still time to set things right. I raced back to Melinda's apartment.

When I arrived, I flung open her door and shouted out to her. "Melinda! I'm so sorry. I am blind!"

Melinda didn't answer me. She was lying on the floor next to her bed. Rigid. Pale. A small trickle of blood had seeped from her lip where it appeared she had bitten herself. I threw myself down on the ground next to her, cradled her head and caressed her tenderly. She was breathing, slowly, too slowly, but her eyes, her kind, gentle, lovely eyes, had returned. I started to cry as she strained to focus on my face. How could I ever have thought of not loving her? Of not taking care of her? How could I have left her alone?

She spoke feebly, but I had no problem hearing her words. "I'm sorry. Sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry about. I shouldn't have left you!"

"Didn't want to hurt you."

"It's OK, Melinda. I'm here. I love you!"

"Already knew that, Danny-boy."

The corners of her mouth tried to turn up as if to smile, but a jarring convulsion ripped through her body. She was having a seizure. I flailed around for a bit, trying to hold her steady until I realized I was being useless and I needed help.

I located my cell phone near Melinda's bed. It was 2:43 AM. Over eight hours had elapsed since I had taken Melinda out of the hospital and I had to dial 911 again to send her back.

The line rang once before my phone cut out. My phone had powered off and I couldn't turn it back on. Did the battery pick this moment to die? How? Why? Melinda's convulsions began to abate, but her skin had turned blue.

Tears were streaming from my eyes and I sat on the floor, motionless. Paralyzed. I needed to do something but my mind was shutting down and I couldn't think. The ceiling light flickered as if the bulb was ready to burn out and the quick flashes caused an insulting strobe effect that magnified my witless inertia.

A blast of humid air punched me in the face and I felt a stabbing pain in my stomach and groin. I curled up on the floor into a fetal position, cringing from an intense, burning ache that I had never experienced before. I wanted to shut my eyes, but I couldn't once I saw the figure standing inside Melinda's bathroom, staring into the mirror.

It was a naked woman. She looked like Melinda but she was horrifically gaunt and disfigured as if suffering from polio or some other wasting disease. Her hair wasn't blond, but a greasy shade of black. Wet, graphite strings of hair that clumped together in mats, exposing scattered bald patches that were tinged with fresh blood. It was as if chunks of hair had been ripped out of her scalp. Her crinkled skin matched the color of her hair and there was more blood streaked over her chest and legs. The woman turned away from the mirror and looked directly at me. She opened a toothless mouth and expelled a hollow gasp. I couldn't take my eyes off this foul being, until the woman reached out to the bathroom door and slammed it shut.

My pain abated and I managed to sit myself back up. Melinda, my Melinda, was lying motionless on the floor. I fumbled closer to her and touched her nose and mouth. She wasn't breathing. Her skin was rubbery and cold. She looked like she had been

dead for a while. My body began to shake from the enormity of what I was witnessing.

My cell phone rang. It had mockingly come back to life. It rang twice before I numbly answered it.

“This is 911 dispatch. Did you place a call to us?”

“Yes.” I glanced around the room. The bathroom door was open and it was empty.

“What is your emergency?”

“My Melinda. My...I think she’s...it’s too late she’s already...”

“Sir, what is your location?”

I might have mumbled out her address but I could no longer tell if I was vocal or coherent. I felt nothing and my ears buzzed with somber, white noise. I looked at Melinda. My Melinda. I tried to stop shaking so I could reach out and caress her. Warm her up. Stroke her shoulders. Her arms. Her sad and pained face. Why? Why did I have to leave Melinda alone? How could I have done such a thing? The future had already been set for us. We were supposed to laugh about this night, at some wondrous moment many years later, like after a tender candlelight kiss during our tenth anniversary dinner or as the dark punch-line of a joke told to our teenage son or daughter....

Instead, my Melinda was gone.

I noticed a small piece of paper resting in Melinda’s left hand. I pulled it free and saw that she had managed to scribble a few sentences on it, presumably before she had collapsed to the floor. Why had she used her remaining energy to write out these words?

The answer to my question was simple: because I had left her alone. She should have spoken these words to me. If she had only gotten a chance, I might have understood what was happening to her, and I might’ve called for help in time. But I was left with only a scrap of paper with three lines of

nebulous words, devoid of Melinda's voice and connotation, because I had left her in her greatest time of need. I have never been able to forgive myself for that.

The first written line said:

*I always wanted to believe in God.*

But I didn't. I couldn't. Not after this night. I couldn't believe in anything anymore.

The next two lines made even less sense.

*It wants to kill me, Danny.*

*And it's coming after you next.*