



**Half a Person**  
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# Half a Person

by Joshua Hale Fialkov

"Jessica? WHERE ARE YOU?" Steve's voice rang out in the darkness.

This was not how the average day in the life of Steve and Jessica Albertson usually went. In fact, Jessica could never remember her husband ever screaming out with such agony, not even the time he fell off the roof while re-shingling after that big storm last fall. She jumped from the bed with a start, grabbing her husband with the ferocity of a mother bear protecting her cubs.

"What is it, Steve? Baby?"

"Please! I can't see you... "

"I'm right here." She pulled him closer, but his sobs didn't desist.

Jessica knew there was something wrong when she looked in Steve's eyes. They were sallow, empty, the pupils dilated as though the room were pitch black, the wide swath of sun coming through the curtains having little to no effect on him. "We better get you to the hospital," was all she could muster, although, she suspected whatever the problem may be was beyond what a trip to the emergency room could fix.

They dressed, or, more precisely, Jessica dressed first herself and then Steve. He argued with her when she tried to grab any old t-shirt off the top of the hamper.

"Do it properly," could be heard amidst his sighs and groans. And so, she did it properly, pulling a crisp new dress shirt out of the closet, and inserting the collar tabs into their slots. She didn't put the tie on him, and he didn't seem to notice. The slacks and shoes were a matching charcoal gray, and his shirt an olive shade of beige.

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She made a point not to look him in the eye. There was something... not sinister, that's perhaps too loaded a word, but, certainly not right, about the blackness of his pupils spreading so widely as a shaft of light

splayed out on his face. She did her best to keep a smile on her lips, for him, she told herself, because he wouldn't like to see me scowl.

Steve stared at himself in the mirror, despite not being able to see anything.

"How do I...?"

"Handsome as always."

And so they left. Jessica drove fast. Had Steve not been in a state of shock, she thought, he'd be tsk-ing and harumphing at the speedometer rising a good fifteen miles above the limit. Steve sighed, which caused her to ease off the pedal, and the gauge to drop down to a hair below 60 miles per hour. She couldn't help but feel that she somehow deserved this.

As they got to the hospital, she pulled into the Emergency entrance, and ran to Steve's side of the car. She opened the door, and Steve didn't move. "Are we parked?"

"No, darling, we're in the entrance, I'll park the car once you-"

"It's a red zone, though, isn't? It's for emergency vehicles only... What if an ambulance comes? They'll smash the car, or have to tow it or-" She didn't let him finish. Instead she closed the door, returned to the driver's seat, and turned the key. She parked about ten spaces down on the far left row, and quietly lead Steve towards the entrance.

Steve sat with his arms folded and the kind of snarl on his face that made him the most hated teacher at Franklin Regional High School as they sat in the dingy waiting room, watching the people on gurneys go before them. If Steve could see them, she thought, he'd not be amused.

"They probably think I'm faking it."

"I don't think they-"

"You do, too, don't you?"

"No, not at all... It's very strange, though. Don't you think?"

He was silent, chewing on his lip.

A mother and her three children walked by, the mother holding the youngest, who was screaming bloody murder, his leg clearly broken. She kissed him on the head repeatedly to calm him, and repeated a litany of "You're a big boy, you'll be okay, stop crying, please baby, it'll be okay" and so on as she carried him.

Jessica felt extremely guilty for the pangs of loneliness she felt in her gut.

"What's wrong?"

"Hmm?"

Steve had turned to her, staring past her, his hand shaking as he put it on her lap.

"You're crying."

She raised her index finger to her eyes, and sure enough, she was crying.

He was called in sometime thereafter, and taken to see the doctor.

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"No, he didn't accuse me of faking, Jessica. He just implied it. I bet he even gave you a look as if to say, 'Is he crazy?' and knowing you you probably nodded that big stupid head of yours-"

There was silence. Long, aching silence. They kept driving towards home, without a word for another few miles. As they were passing the Eat N Park, Jessica took a big whiff of the air. Fresh cinnamon buns were always a favorite of his, and he had a preternatural ability to detect their proximity, even in his newly weakened state. Jessica saw the longing look that quickly took over her husbands scowl, and pulled into the parking lot.

"Come on. Let's get breakfast."

Steve fumbled with his seat belt, and Jessica reached over to help. He slapped her hand away, and managed to unlatch the belt himself. He opened the door of the car and stepped out. The triumph of doing something for himself.

"I'm sorry I didn't mean-"

"I know, Steve. Let's just get some food."

To be fair to Steve, this was a particularly peculiar and taxing day. Jessica decided it was best to let his outbursts go. And she did.

They ate breakfast. Jessica ordered their usual, and chuckled with Judy, who'd waited on the pair of them since their very first date, some ten years prior to today, about his strange new condition. Judy suggested that Steve was merely trying to be a pain in the ass in new exciting ways. Jessica laughed, Steve, unsurprisingly, did not.

After breakfast, Jessica got up from the table, the ticket in hand, and headed for the cash register at the front. Steve barely reacted to her movement.

"I just have to go to the bathroom before we leave, I'll be right back for you."

She paid the lady at the counter (Suzie Bentley, who Steve had taught when he was still teaching middle school, and in fact, he found it amusing that the girl who couldn't do simple mathematics is now the check out girl. He made sure to check his change every time.) and headed towards the restroom.

She walked through the door and stared at herself for the first time that day. She looked exhausted, like today had been forty some hours long, and that's just before noon. She put her hands under the automatic sink, and splashed water on her face. The chill woke her just enough for to see the bags under her eyes. How long had it been since she slept the whole night through?

The banging on the door of the bathroom brought her back, she was out on her feet for a few seconds... or was it longer?

"Mrs. Albertson? Are you in there? Please... Come quickly... Your husband... " It was like a dream. *Am I really... a 'Mrs.' Anybody?* she heard the voice in her head say. That moment before sleep becomes wake was taking much longer than usual. But soon she was back and alert. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, and headed for the door.

The scene she saw as she crested the swinging ladies room door was the sort of awful tableau usually contained in old biblical paintings. The back of the restaurant was strewn with knocked down busboys and waitresses, and standing above them all cackling from the table was a wild-eyed Steve, his feet kicking out desperately as the two busboys who've been left standing try to wrestle him downwards. He was screaming something... . obscenities? No, Not Steve, thought Jessica. He never liked swearing. As she got closer, cautiously, mind you, she could finally make out the mutterings spilling from the belly of the man she had loved almost certainly when her head hit the pillow the night before.

"You won't take the rest... NO! NO!"

"Steve!" She screamed at him, her voice not her own. The shrill power that came from her mouth seemed to freeze him in his place.

"Jessica? Is that you... "

It took nearly twenty minutes to extricate Steve from the restaurant, as Jessica tried desperately to reason with him, while talking the manager out of calling the cops. The drive back home was much quieter than that.

"What happened back there?"

Nothing.

"Steve?"

She turned her head, and saw him staring out the window... drifting in thought. She gently placed her hand on his leg, and he jumped.

"Who-

"It's me, baby. Are you okay?"

He felt her hand, feeling the ring that he had put there five years ago. Feeling the scar that she got when they were in that car accident when he taught her how to drive... He felt her hand, and then he relaxed.

"I... can't hear anything, Jessica. What's happening to me?"

She squeezed his hand softly, and turned the car around, heading back towards the hospital.

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The marriage of Jessica and Steve was no picnic before the incident began, but, now, between Steve's incessant sobbing, and Jessica's slow retreat into herself for what she would later deem 'her own protection,' the next few days were guaranteed to be the very definition of torture.

Their first year of marriage was like a considerably more sexy version of the year before it. They went at it like animals sometimes, and not just intimately. They'd have fights, raging, screaming, knock down drag out, near violent, but never actually hitting, make up, and then do it all again fights. Steve was unhappy at work, Jessica was unhappy at work. They both hated their small house in the suburbs, with mold in the basement, water pipes that burned them in the shower when the other flushed the toilet (always without warning), and the possible infestation of vermin that Steve obsessively thought were burrowing through the walls and into his boxes of cereal.

They settled down after that, perhaps both realizing it might've been a bad idea, but, each stubbornly refusing to admit it. One of their friends, Stacy Hill, got divorced, and they both tsked their tongues and spoke in hushed tones about it. Neither was particularly devout, and in fact, both were from homes of divorce. One can assume this contributed to their foolishness in trying to make something broken work.

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Ring. Jessica had given Steve a small bell to ring whenever he needed something. Ring. Ring. Ring. He couldn't actually hear the bell when he

shook it, so he shook it extra hard and extra long, as though if he shook it just the right way or the right number of times she would come faster, or hear it more clearly than just the first time which she heard just fine.

"Stop it, Steve." She stood in front of him, waiting for him to speak, like a servant and her master.

"I heard it, Steve." His head tilted sideways, like a dog trying to decode. "I'm sorry, babe. I'll come quicker next time, I promise. Okay?"

Silence. Does he even know I'm talking? echoed through her head. He nodded a sad little nod, and sat back, answering her question.

"I'm hungry." The words had a childishness to them as he sat back and folded his arms over his chest, his mouth in a rictus of disdain. He clearly didn't know if she was there or not, and was simply giving up, hoping against hope she'd magically hear from downstairs.

"I'll bring you something." She put her hand on his leg, a sign that she understood and heard him and that everything was going to be alright. Of course the one thing that was abundantly clear to her was that in fact, nothing was going to be alright. Nothing was going to be right ever again.

Their pantry was particularly bare that day, as Tuesday was supposed to be grocery day, and the incident had interrupted her weekly schedule. That schedule used to feel so stifling, like a yoke she had to wear, but, in light of everything, she wouldn't mind having to go from groceries to dry cleaner to liquor store to wherever else she's supposed to go on a Tuesday, a Wednesday, or even a Thursday. *The florist... these're long dead now.* She touched the delicately wilted flowers sitting on the island in the middle of her kitchen.

Her kitchen. It was so nice to own something. That was before. Now, she'd give anything to run away. To cease being Mrs. Steve Albertson, and instead be away from the awfulness that her life had become.

Has become.

She made Steve his sandwiches, and warmed up a can of condensed tomato soup on the stove. She sprinkled some of the sea salt she kept in it's own small grinder over the top of the bubbling cauldron, added a pinch of oregano, and a shake of red pepper. Just the way he likes. She took a taste. It was too salty... just the way he likes it.

Those words echoed in her mind as she climbed the stairs, her hands shaking slightly, and then as she rounded the corner, her eyes averted, as if by not looking at him, he might... No, you mustn't, she thought. She smiled a warm smile, and looked him in the face, and all she saw was cold dead eyes. She put the tray in front of him, took his hand, and

placed it around the spoon, which she helped to give it's first ladle of soup.

She smiled at him, "Just the way you like it, baby."

And yet, across his face, there was nothing. No reaction. No joy. No sorrow. No "that's nice," or "you overcooked it again, Jess." Nothing. It was as though he'd taken a spoonful of air flavored water.

She realized it before he did.

"No... Steve... not... "

He just put his spoon down, and leaned back in bed, with tears forming in his eye. She picked the tray up and walked away.

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*Three out of five*, she thought as she lay on the edge of sleep, *then it'll be done*. The guilt that came with that thought seemed much smaller than she expected it to be.

Steve didn't eat much, if at all, over the next day. He sat in stolid silence, not a whimper escaping his lips. He would sip at the blended shakes Jessica put in front of him, but, it was more for her benefit than his own. They both knew it, and yet, some force beyond either of their understanding compelled them to continue the charade.

A series of doctors proceeded to check in at irregular intervals on their mystery patient.

"Perhaps we could bring him into the lab-"

"It's most likely temporary, but we'd like to bring him in-"

"If he wouldn't mind just coming in-"

But he did mind. He furiously did mind. Deaf and blind, he still knew what these men were proposing, and Steve refused to be a part of it. And, realistically, Jessica couldn't blame him. The first few trips to the hospital had shown doctors with one of two attitudes. Either they think he's faking or they want to use him for some sort of journal article they're writing. When Jessica looked at Steve, she could read one thing in his eyes... "I'm nobody's joke."

He gave up talking days ago at this point, and while it seemed to be part of the condition at first, it became clear to Jessica that it was psychosomatic, and, in fact, it was the only part of this that was in his mind. He'd still grunt thanks and disappointment at appropriate times, and, as her brief research showed, if he could grunt he could still talk. At least that's what the doctors told her.

Jessica had been dousing herself in perfume so that when she entered Steve's room, he would know she was there before she touched him. She'd gone through two bottles of Chanel No. 5 this week alone. The things money can buy seemed a little less valuable, and slightly more functional now. When she entered his room, he would smell the familiar scent, and she would see his body relax, almost like a baby sensing it's mommy. Since he lost his sense of taste, he seemed overly sensitive, so she'd been slowly backing off the dousings.

So, when he didn't react to her entering that afternoon, she assumed that it was because she used too little perfume.

She looked at him, and imagined that this is what he must've been like as a baby. His body was soft, purposeless. All he was concerned with was breathing, nothing else. He seemed peaceful, as though he'd exhausted all of his desperation and was now, finally able to push it aside and simply be. He'd grown gaunt, his appetite so non-existent, and his muscles seem to be atrophying as it had at this point been over a week since he left the bed.

Of course, when she reached out her hand and gently touched his arm, he jumped, his shoulders tensing as he moved defensively. She rubbed his hand quickly, her ring brushing his hand, reminding him who she was. He felt impulsively for the scar on her hand, and yes, there it was. He relaxed slightly. And then he did something unexpected.

"Jessica... "

His voice was cracked, like an old LP that's been gathering dust for twenty years getting put on the turntable.

"Jessica... I only have touch left. And, I don't think it'll be here much longer." There was a clarity in his words, that Jessica recognized. She'd heard it on the day he proposed to her. "I don't want to do this anymore, baby." His hands engulfed hers.

So big, was all she could think.

"I want you to get me the gun, Jess. Leave it here for me, and go out. Go out and don't come back for a few hours." He was sure. She knew how sure he got at times like this.

"I... " can't, she tried to chirp, but it wouldn't come. It wasn't fair to her to have to live like this either. Whatever was causing her husband's ailments was punishment for both of them, and she simply had all that she could take.

They sat there crying for a long moment. The moment seemed to stretch for hours, which in turn folded into weeks and month and years

and decades. The fact was that he would lose his final sense any minute. They didn't know how they knew this, but they both did.

Jessica walked downstairs and into the pantry where they kept the safe. Inside the safe was some traveler's cheques from the last trip abroad, and of course Jessica's fine jewelry. Behind that in a tiny velvet sack, was the small revolver Steve had bought on the eve of his first weekend away from home.

"Got to make sure my little lady's taken care of," he had laughed.

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She kissed him on the forehead and handed him the gun, her sobs were the only sound she made.

"Thank you." he croaked, as she sat in the chair next to the bed and held his hand.

"I'm sorry we fought. I'm sorry we didn't always get along, and that things weren't better." She started to cry harder.

"Baby?"

"Yeah?" she sniffed.

"Baby?"

"I'm right here."

"Oh god."

"It's okay, Steve." She went to him, trying to touch him, to let him know she was still there.

"I can't... "

His hand loosened. The gun falling from his numb fingers.

For a second, she knew what he felt like. She was paralyzed, helpless. She watched the scene in slow motion, watching the gun fall from his fingers, watching it hit the ground, watching the hammer depress, watching the bullet explode in the chamber and launch itself down the barrel. She saw the spark of gunpowder, she heard the bang, she even felt the bullet go into her throat. But still she stood there. Unable to react, a prisoner of the moment, just as her husband was a prisoner of his body.

"Jessica? Honey... I think I dropped the gun. Honey?"

She fell forward, still as if in slow-motion, and landed across the bed. Her weight was hard across Steve's body, which had become soft, almost hollow with the abuse of the past week. Her body was heavy, and he felt nothing. Her blood covered his sheets, and flooded over his flesh. She

tried desperately to reach for something to help her... anything, some way to push herself off his useless form. He didn't see her desperately try to give him his final moments of dignity. He didn't see her die. He didn't see the sadness that crossed her face. He couldn't smell the acrid stench of gunpowder, and he couldn't taste the droplets of blood that sprayed on his lips and into his mouth.

Worst of all, it turned out, he couldn't hear her last words.

"I love you."

### **About the author**

Joshua Hale Fialkov is the Harvey Award Nominated creator of the graphic novels *Elk's Run* and *Tumor*, as well as co-creator of *Punks the Comic*. He has worked on comics for Marvel, DC, Top Cow, and Dark Horse Comics. He was also the Executive Producer of *lg15:the resistance*. Much of his catalog is available in local comic book shops or on Amazon. His first novel should appear in 2010.

More information can be found at [www.thefialkov.com](http://www.thefialkov.com)

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### **From the same author on Feedbacks**

*Belly Button Reset (2009)*

The mother wants to have a child more than anything in the world. She gets her wish with the help of a man from another world, but, her child is not quite what she expected.

Satirical science fiction in the Vonnegut mold.

If you've enjoyed this book, please post a review either here or over on Amazon.com to say thank you!

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