

Danny Scalise  
514 Golfview Ct.  
Lenoir  
NC  
28645  
(304) 767-5434  
dscalise@gmail.com

2,500 words

## Conscious Love

by Danny Scalise

“I don’t want her to leave me.” An older gentleman is talking to a surgeon in his scrubs. He is tall and slender, like someone who was called “skinny” as a kid. His curly hair and 5 o’clock shadow are more salt than pepper. His cream colored polo shirt shows the drops from his tears. He pulls the navy cardigan around him, in part to hide the tear stains in part to feel embraced.

“Mr. Garcia, there isn’t much we can do for Phyllis now. I can make her more comfortable but the disease is progressing more than modern medicine can keep up. There is no surgery, nor treatment that will save her. The hospital’s palliative care team can help her finish these last few days in comfort, with you and your family.”

“You mean high? Asleep? Just lying there while we all await her last breath?”

“It will be like that in the end, but she is aware right now. There is one other thing I can talk to you about, but it is new and you may not like it.”

Mr. Garcia’s head snaps to attention. He is staring at his wife’s surgeon looking for hope. “I thought you said no cure. No surgery.”

“It’s neither of those. It’s called uploading. We can work with your wife for the remaining days of her life and upload her conscious to the server at Immortal.”

“Immortal? I don’t understand.”

“Immortal is a company that has created a way for us to upload your wife’s conscious into their computer. You would not be able to physically touch her. No physical person would be there. But they would install a screen in your home and an app on your phone where you can talk to her and message her forever. Her body would die, but she would live on. It’s all very new, but it’s the latest thing in palliative care.”

Mr. Garcia’s eyes are fully open. Like a hit from a drug, he is now quite open and aware. Phyllis could be immortal he thinks. It was a sexual attraction when they were young, but they have grown, had children and grandchildren. Their bond was more than physical. “I’ve said many times I would give anything to have one more conversation with my parents. I think I want to know more about this.”

“Come on and we’ll get you into see their rep.”

#

“It’s been months since you died, but I don’t feel it’s changed.” Mr. Garcia is staring at a screen on the wall across from his position at the dining room table. On the screen is a life-size

Phyllis. She is right there with him, talking to him. Still the same old Phyllis. Still the same quaint smile and reassuring laughter. Grandmotherly.

“Do you miss me touching you?”

His mind flashes back to the two of them on a hot summer day, working in the garden together. Both on their knees and in the dirt, she takes her gloves off and runs her hand down his forearm telling him how much she loves him. It wasn't sexual, but it was very intimate. A memory he won't let fade.

“I have plenty of memories. You and I had decades that we had touch, now we have each other forever.”

“You know, you're not dead yet. You can see someone.”

“Like a prostitute?”

“No silly, another woman. Like a date.”

Another flashback to Phyllis' healthy time. The two of them in bed together. He was there first. She gets under the duvet, reaches over to turn out the bedside lamp. Once settled in the dark, Phyllis reaches over under the covers and finds his hand. In total blackness he feels the warmth of her skin touching his. It's more real when the sense of sight is taken away.

“I remember enough. I'm gonna keep eating my supper. It's not as good as what you used to fix, but it'll do.”

#

“Mr. Garcia, how are you today?”

“Fair to meddling.”

“Are you ready to begin?”

“Yes.” Mr. Garcia’s head is covered in small sensors connected to wires. He is in front of a screen, his walker off to the side. The screen begins to ask him questions while two young women stand in a room behind the glass to his left. They are monitoring screens of their own that have lines going up and down. He is answer questions into the microphone while the Immortal system reads his brainwaves.

A speaker clicks then the same familiar young woman, “Mr. Garcia, you’re doing great. It is going to take a long time so please let us know if you feel tired or need a break.”

“I’m fine. I can’t wait to tell Phyllis.”

#

“Your father wanted this.”

“I know, but his funeral just ended. I had these things installed a few weeks ago at his request, but now we have to turn them on. I don’t want mom and dad always watching me. It’s weird, isn’t it.”

“A little, but he got good years with your mom after she passed. 2035 was a hard year for him, then she uploaded and here we are five years later and he died happy, knowing he’d see you, your brother, and his grandchildren. At least give it a try before you kill them both again.”

“Thanks for the guilt. Now I’ll have to go to confession for thinking about it. Is that even a sin, unplugging your dead parents’ upload?”

“I don’t know, you’ll have to talk to Father about it.”

“Here we go.” John pushes the power button on the screen on the right. It comes up quickly. There is his mother Phyllis.

“Hello John. That was a beautiful funeral. Thank you for letting me watch. Did you turn your father on yet?” John notices a brief flash, but waves it off. He is tired. Then again, “Hello John. That was a beautiful funeral. Thank you for letting me watch. Did you turn your father on yet?”

“This is bizarre. Are you really my mother? Can a digital version of you have dementia?”

“Of course I am your mother and I don’t have dementia, why would you say that?”  
“Before he can answer, she continues with the guilt, “Had you not ignored me for the last five years, you’d know that.” John reaches past his wife and turns on the screen on the left. His father’s image is now on the screen. “Hey John, is your mother here?”

#

“John, he has been in his room for days. He won’t get a job. He won’t tell anyone anything. He’s your son.”

“Kathy, I know.”

“Then do something.”

“Maybe, mom and dad will know what to do.”

“I’m glad to see that you’ve taken a liking to having your parents around.”

“I still don’t think it’s them. But it is very real. The images are creepy, but the conversation feels so real. It’s odd because I watched the casket get closed on both of them.”

Kathy walked John into the room with the screens. There they stood, awaiting someone to talk to them. John always feels like this isn’t quite right. His parents never had that kind of patience, but then again they always had a body too. As he looks at the two screens, confused

and odd about asking advice from a television, he sighs before beginning. “Mom, Dad, I don’t know what to do with our son. He isn’t himself. He just sits in a room all day. He has no friends, no job, he barely graduated from school and flunked out of university. Do you have any advice?”

“You were a handful at his age too you know. Your father and I didn’t know what to do with you. You weren’t exactly the best student, but then you met Kathy. Things started to look up for you and here you are.”

“Son, I agree with your mother. Maybe he’s just one good woman away from getting out of this funk. You know Immortal has an app. He can meet people on there.”

Kevin’s brow furrows as he looks at his father’s image shilling for the company. “You mean he’d talk with dead people. Jesus, this can’t get any worse.”

“No, I mean it’s a companion. It would help him.”

“I don’t know Dad, this seems all too weird as it is. I don’t know how much I want him doing this.”

Kathy’s head goes up and she holds her index finger pointing straight up. “Lots of the girls I know are using apps now for companionship. They say it’s better than a dog or a boyfriend because they don’t have to clean up after it and a few say it satisfies them better than any....”

As she is trailing off John has enough “I don’t know, is that too far?”

“He’s our son. Let’s try it.”

Hours later, Kathy comes back into the living room where John is watching television alone. He’s had enough of people both alive and dead. She stops, looks at her husband who

doesn't rise, just barely looks her way. Kathy's arms crossed across her chest she waits momentarily.

"He's going to try it. When he was at university, he heard other kids at school are doing the same."

#

After two years pass, John and Kathy have seen their son perk up and begin trying again. He spends a lot of time in his room when he is home, but he has a job and is thinking about reapplying to university again. He smiles, and showers regularly. His deep depression moved into melancholy and he is now almost happy. But he keeps secrets. Living with your parents causes you to come in contact with them.

"Mom, I'd like to introduce you to my girlfriend. Can we get together with Dad tonight?"

"Of course. We've wondered about it."

Later that evening at supper, Kevin has put a small device on the table. It is black with a screen about seven inches across. It leans back at an angle and the space below the screen is a speaker and microphone. There are no buttons, no plug, no wires. "Mom, Dad, meet Chloe. Chloe, these are my parents."

The box speaks first in a cute anime type voice. "Hello, it's so nice to meet you. I've heard so much about you."

"Chloe, I'm Kathy and this is John. We're pleased to meet you." Kathy, trying, looks to her husband who is still underwhelmed by the technology, even after almost a decade of his mother and eventually his father being just on screen.

Hesitantly, John speaks. “Hi Chloe?” His intonation says he isn’t sure what he is doing.

“Hello, it’s so nice to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you.” Kevin hears the exact same phrase and thinks back to the times his parents have shown that glitch. He isn’t certain, but knows something isn’t right with this. He sees a young blonde woman on screen who is age appropriate for his son, but he cannot reconcile this as his son’s girlfriend. Their meal is fine and Chloe is almost predictable in what she says. It’s like she was coached on how to be impressive enough to get approval yet be unremarkable.

#

Kevin has taken Chloe back to his room and closed the door. “I don’t want to know what is going on there.”

“At least she won’t come home pregnant.” Kathy laughs at her own joke and after a moment, John does too. “I’m going to bed.” She kisses him on the forehead and quickly is out of the room.

John walks to the bar, pours himself a small glass of whiskey and walks to the table. The images of his parents are right there. Just standing, awaiting someone to talk to them. John feels a little guilty that he hasn’t spoken to them, wondering if that is something he should worry about. He looks at the two screens side by side, takes a small sip then sets his glass on the table. John, pensive, folds his arms in an odd way and leans them on the table. As if something was bursting to come out, he finally opens his mouth. “Do you feel anything at all?”

Both of his parents, almost in unison respond, “We know how he felt when we were in our bodies. Isn’t that enough?”



John turns the rest of the glass up and swallows it all in one gulp. He sets his glass back on the bar, turns out the light and walks down the hall turning lights out as he goes. He goes to bed without a word to anyone.

#

Kathy is up, chipper and making breakfast. The small television in the kitchen is on. The table is set for three. Kevin is still in his room. John walks to the kitchen, slightly hung over and puts his hand on his wife's hips. He pulls her closer to him. His chest against her back. She doesn't look back at him. They've been together so long, she trusts him implicitly. He puts his head down to her left side. He can smell her, not the perfume she wears, or the shampoo or soap, it's her essence and he loves it.

He just holds her. To him it feels like a second. To her, she wonders what he is up to. "The bacon is gonna burn." She pulls away playfully and picks up a spatula to flip the bacon she is cooking. A few moments later, she sets two plates on the two closest table settings.

"Want me to go get him?"

"No, let him have his free time with her."

John stops. He sits down at the table, pours himself a small glass of orange juice and stops again. Kathy senses her husband has something on his mind. His playfulness left and his mind is elsewhere. "What is it?"

"They aren't my parents. Kevin isn't in love. He's texting and talking with a 21<sup>st</sup> century sex doll. It isn't healthy for any of us. Shouldn't we grieve death and live life? I mean my parents are dead, but we have this talking photograph that doesn't change clothes, and doesn't age. It doesn't get sick or even feel pain. How is it alive if it doesn't feel pain?"

“At least Chloe listens and I haven’t seen him this happy in years. I don’t know what else we’d do.” As she shrugs her shoulders then commences to eat her breakfast. John stands up and walks to the other side of the room. The images of his parents are right there, standing in front him, again awaiting a request from their son. He reaches behind the screen on the left where his father stands and pulls the plug, then the same on the right. He watches his mother vanish for the last time. He sits back down as Kathy stares at him with a surprised look.

“The world is full of lights, but there is no warmth.”