

THROWAWAYS

A Jake Savage Mystery

Elliott D. Light

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IN MEMORY OF TSUKI

My friend, my muse, and my enigmatic companion, Tsuki, was the consummate feline, an expert at practiced indifference who made me smile every day. I miss her.

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I view this section of a book as a slippery slope. Letting folks know that their support is appreciated is a noble undertaking. The danger is that once you start, you may leave someone unrecognized.

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Elliott

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DAY 1

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2019

CHAPTER ONE

A young girl's body drifted over the reef where I was scuba diving. Had it not been for the shadow cast by the body, I might not have looked up.

Just moments earlier, I'd been hovering beneath the surface of the warm Gulf water off Key West, enthralled by what nature had brought me. Highlighted by a ray of sunlight, a lionfish, a beautiful brown-striped creature with feathery pectoral fins and venomous spines, bobbed in the gentle current, watching me. This particular fish wasn't just a curiosity, but an invasive species that was not only threatening the Florida ecosystem but the waters of the Caribbean and northward into Georgia.

Through no fault of its own, the lionfish had become a top predator, eating much of the food once shared by the indigenous marine life and upsetting the fragile balance of the local ecosystem. As a research volunteer with ClearSeas, I was tasked with counting these invaders, photographing them, and uploading my information to a database.

Before I could frame the fish properly, the sunlight illuminating its ethereal beauty dimmed, the rays lost to a shadow of unknown origin that seemed to be moving with the current. I looked up and

found the shadow's source. An object floating on the surface had drifted over the reef where I was diving. For a moment, I was curious, transfixed, the shock of its sudden appearance having slowed the processing of what I was looking at.

Understanding gave way to horror. Adrenaline flooded my head. My heartbeat sounded like thunder; I was sucking air from my regulator but couldn't catch my breath. Despite the impulse to deny what I was seeing, I slowly realized that my photographic session with a lionfish had been interrupted by the body of a young girl floating face down in the water. Her hair had fanned out in a halo of sorts, undulating gently on the surface. For an instant, I thought — or hoped — she might be watching me, but she had no snorkel or mask. She wasn't wearing a swimsuit, either, but was clad in only a shirt and panties. As I came closer, I realized she couldn't have looked at me because she had no eyes. *She had no eyes!*

Continuing its trek eastward, her body drifted past me and the sun returned. I didn't want to go to her, to see what I knew were the tortured remains of a once living human being. I had seen ravaged bodies up close and dreaded the idea of seeing hers. I wanted her to leave. I wanted her to disappear. If I just waited a few minutes, she would be out of my sight, a tiny speck in the vast Gulf waters. A voice pleaded with me to let her go, but despite being repulsed by the condition of her face, I simply couldn't leave her to the whims of the wind and tide. She deserved better.

Approaching her from underneath, I held my breath to avoid hitting her with my bubbles. I stopped a few feet below her but avoided looking directly at her. To calm myself, I tried to imagine her alive, what she might say, the sound of her voice, the story she might tell me. "How," I would ask, "did you arrive at this place? Where is your family? What events conspired to take your

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life? Are you cold? What am I supposed to do? How did you find me? Why me?”

Even if alive, the girl who had momentarily blocked the sun might have refused to answer my questions. She didn't know me. She wouldn't understand the reasons her story was so important to me or why and how we were now connected. If she'd asked, I don't know that I could have told her.

Swimming past her, I turned and grabbed the collar of her blouse and slowly guided her to my anchor rope, securing her with string from my collection bag.

On board my boat, I fumbled with my phone, finally steadying my hands sufficiently to call the police. The dispatcher was calm to the point of indifference.

“You said your name is Jake Savage and you live on Raccoon Key?”

“That's my name. I live in Old Town, but the boat is registered to my mother, who lives on Raccoon Key.”

“Your mother is Ethel Savage?”

“Yes. My adopted mother.”

“Are you a minor? Adult?”

“Adult.”

“Age?”

“I'm twenty-seven.”

“Ok. So, you found a body in the water? Is that why you're calling?”

“Yes, goddamn it. That's what I said.”

“Please, sir. I'm just trying to confirm the facts. A dead body?”

“Yes. I’ve secured her to my boat. You need to send a recovery crew.”

“The victim is female?”

“Yes.”

“Are you related?”

“What? No. I said I found her while diving.”

“Was there an accident?”

“No. I don’t know. What’s wrong with you? I said I found her at the GPS coordinates I gave you. I don’t know her or where she came from or anything about her. Someone needs to come and recover her body. That’s why I’m calling.”

“It’s important to remain calm. Okay? Let me see what I can do. Things are kind of crazy here because of Fantasy Fest. I’m sure you can understand how busy we are with festival week.”

“She has no eyes,” saying out loud a thought that just popped into my head.

“Who...what...?”

“The body I found. She had no eyes. Why would that be?”

I heard a sigh. “I don’t know, Jake. Fish maybe? Try not to think about that right now. I’ll get someone out there as quickly as I can.”

I sat on the bench at the aft of the boat watching clouds building in the west. I did my best to think about nothing, grimacing away the images of the dead girl that forced their way into my thoughts.

I have no idea how long it was before I saw flashing blue and red lights approaching. The police boat pulled next to mine. A young officer started to question me, then realized we had attended high school together.

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“You don’t remember me. I’m Freddy Squires. I was the bench gofer for the varsity basketball team your senior year. You were pretty good.”

“Not really. At six-three, I was too short to be a forward and too slow to be a guard. I could shoot, but that’s about it.”

Revisiting our high school days a few feet from a dead child struck me as surreal. I glanced at the anchor rope, thinking that we should be helping her, not revisiting the long-forgotten days when we were her age. But the questions continued. Freddy was thorough and trained to consider every person involved in an incident as a suspect — even a former classmate. His suspicions addressed, he entered the water with a marine body bag and a camera.

After a few minutes, he popped to the surface and handed his camera to me. “Batteries are dead. I’m afraid that with this current getting her into a body bag is a two-person job.”

The thought of seeing her again wrapped me in dread, so much so that for a moment I didn’t move.

“I’m sorry, Jake. There’s a storm coming so we have to hurry.”

I returned to the water. Freddy pointed to places on her body he wanted photographed — marks on her neck, shoulders, and thighs. Together, we positioned the body bag around the young girl and secured it with straps. A few minutes later, she was on board the police boat. I transferred the photos from my camera to the officer’s laptop, returned to my boat, and watched as Freddy and the remains of the young girl headed back to Key West.

The return ride to Raccoon Key was challenging. The normally flat waters had begun to churn because of wind-driven rain, tossing my small boat like a cork and actually bringing the engine briefly out of the water. Once inside the key, the waters calmed even as the rain fell in torrents. I eased the boat into its slip,

tied it off, and sat under the canopy as rain fell around and on me. Looking toward the house, I saw Ethy standing under the eaves of the second story balcony. She watched me for moment before turning away and disappearing inside.

Despite being wet and exhausted, I was reluctant to join her. Ethy was a worrier. But rather than addressing the source of her angst, she would lash out at those who made her fret. Today, because of the storm, because I was late, that would be me. At least for the moment, I was better off on the boat.

My relationship with Ethel Savage is complicated, primarily because she isn't my biological mother and because she often reminded me of that fact while growing up. I came to live with her and Maurice Savage when I was four, just after my mother died. Maurice and Ethel owned the bar where my mother worked. Maurice loved me like one of his own and was the force behind my adoption. Ethel went along with the idea but was never warm or welcoming. As a child, I referred to Maurice as "Pop" and Ethel as "Ethy." I still call her by that name, despite her protestations, or maybe because of them.

Things became even more complicated a few months back when Ethy had a mild stroke. The rehab facility where she was treated wouldn't release her to her home unless someone was there to keep an eye on her. Her biological son was in prison for murder and her biological daughter was living in Orlando with a man who had three kids. Having finished college and grad school, I was self-employed, specializing in the statistical analysis of complex systems. Ethy equated self-employment with unemployment and insisted I was the ideal candidate to provide her care.

Realistically, Ethy could afford to pay someone to stay with her. While Maurice had made a lot of bad choices during his long business life, buying and selling real estate wasn't one of them.

He'd sold the bar in old town Key West for a substantial gain, invested in property out of town, and built the two-story house on the water where Ethy now lived. A trust fund would have provided the money for Ethy's care, but Ethy insisted she would rather be dead than cared for by strangers. The crying, self-pity, and theatrics about being unloved in her time of need took their toll on my better judgment, so I agreed to play the role of guardian.

After a month, it was clear to me that living with Ethy would drive us both mad. I placed an ad for someone to take my place in exchange for free rent. After sorting through dozens of responses, I interviewed Tess Simpson. A twenty-something woman with a degree in history, she had grown up as a military brat who traveled to places I couldn't find on a map. She was assertive without being aggressive and exuded a confidence I found comforting. I'll admit that, before entrusting Ethy's care to her, I should have asked more questions, particularly about what she was doing in the Keys. But Tess was just so likable, and I was so desperate to get out of the house, that I offered her the job on the spot. She was also very pretty.

To my relief, Ethy agreed to give her a try. I agreed to stay in Key West, which is just a few miles away, while Ethy and Tess became better acquainted. I moved into a small ramshackle house left to me by my biological mother and decided to spend Tess' trial period renovating it. Tess turned out to have the patience of a stone requiring me to handle smaller doses of Ethy's passive-aggressive behavior. Gradually, I found a balance between my obligations to her and my desire to renovate the bungalow where I had spent the first four years of my life.

The rain ended as quickly as it began. I gathered my camera and wet towel and headed to Ethy's place. When I stepped inside, Ethy was seated in front of the television. She spoke without looking at me, first complaining that Tess was late, then insisting

that I put my wet things in the laundry and, last but not least, warning me not to clean the fish in the kitchen because it always smelled bad afterwards. “Maurice would never listen. You’re just like him.”

When I told her I had caught no fish, she shouted something about wasting my time on her boat. I promised to make something later for dinner and went outside to the lanai, a beer in hand, to watch the sunset and to clear my head of the image of the dead girl with no eyes.

Sergeant Detective Trent Murphy arrived an hour later. I heard him talking to Ethy. She was asking whether I was in trouble, and from there commented on how I spent so much time on her boat, how hard it was for her, having just had a small stroke, but how easy it was for me, because I was tall and good at sports, even though I didn’t really practice much. She even mentioned I had a photographic memory, which gave me an advantage on tests. *Blah blah blah.*

When she saw I was listening to her, she made sure I knew I had pissed her off.

“Then he gets a couple a college diplomas, comes here, and struts around like one of those island roosters. He doesn’t have a job other than fixing boats and working on that old house his mother left him. Sometimes he looks for treasure, just like my dead husband Maurice did. Lot of good college did for Jake, or anyone for that matter.”

What Ethy didn’t mention was that I had turned down a job offer from ClearSeas as head of statistical analysis in order to take care of her. I saw no reason to remind her.

“Jake’s outside,” she continued. “I don’t know if he’ll talk to you without an appointment.”

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The detective stepped out onto the lanai and introduced himself. He took a seat opposite me, took out a notepad and a small pencil, and sighed loudly.

My memory is conditioned to make observations and imprint information quickly. Detective Murphy was in his late fifties or early sixties. His face wasn't so much wrinkled as defined by creases, pockmarks, and the subtle development of jowls and a small wattle under his chin. His gray hair was receding, leaving a large space between his eyes and his new hairline. His right eye was noticeably higher than the left.

Impressions are what happen when information is filtered through lenses of experience, bias and, to some extent, wishful thinking. First impressions tend to be lasting because they are, well, first. Besides being tired, Detective Murphy struck me as a sad man, or more precisely, a man who rarely experienced joy. He exuded a vibe of indifference, a man going through the motions of a job that frustrated him.

What Detective Murphy couldn't know was that before he said or did anything, I was inclined to distrust him. I had plenty of experience with police investigators — repeatedly attempting to get them to reopen my mother's murder case, pressing for new forensic testing of old evidence, mining new state DNA databases, whether legal or not, and using genealogy to link crime DNA to relatives in hopes of finding a suspect.

While I might have been more tactful, all the various police explanations for not pursuing the case had one big thing in common — the belief that it wasn't worth expending police resources to solve an old case when other more recent crimes needed attention. Fair or not, I construed this to mean that my mother's life wasn't worth bothering with.

Against this bias, Detective Murphy sat in front of me, fulfilling the obligations of his job with all the enthusiasm of a man who mopped floors for a living.

He introduced himself again, then said: “Thank you for helping to recover the body and for photographing it. As the first person on the scene, I need to hear from you directly how you came to find the body, if you know who the young girl is, and how you tied her to the anchor rope. The details matter.”

I related what I saw and what I did, then asked what would be done to identify her.

“If she’s not local or on a missing persons list, the odds of learning who she was diminish significantly. The officer you met seems to think it was an accident. We get transients and runaways down here all the time who pay to go on a party boat cruise. Sometimes they get loaded and fall off, but usually no one drowns. At least, no one reports it because of possible drug usage. Besides, party boat operators don’t like cops.”

Whatever the detective meant, what I heard was that the victim’s social status mattered, reminding me what had been said or implied about my mother.

“Is there a department that specializes in crimes against transients?” I asked.

Ethy soon joined us on the lanai, stood by the detective, and stared at me, fear in her eyes. “I don’t think Detective Murphy meant anything like that.”

The detective glanced at us, puzzled, unaware of the live wire he’d almost stepped on.

Looking to reassure Ethy that I wasn’t going to verbally assault the detective, I smiled at her. “I’m sure he didn’t.”

“You don’t think it was an accident?” he asked.

I said I didn’t and went through my reasoning: “her blouse wasn’t buttoned correctly, and her panties were on backwards. She wore no jewelry, despite having pierced ears. Her makeup looked fresh despite a lot of time spent in the water, suggesting she could afford expensive, waterproof products. Marks on her shoulders and thighs suggested she was assaulted. Most notably, she had a rather elaborate tattoo of a butterfly on her left thigh. Tattoos like that cost a lot of money.”

Detective Murphy made notes, then cautioned me against jumping to conclusions. He assured me he would look at the crime photos and the Medical Examiner’s report and do what needed to be done. He was adamant that it was a police matter and would be handled properly. I agreed, without much conviction, that he would do all he could.

When he left, Ethy uncharacteristically gave me a sympathetic look. “You saw a... body?”

I nodded. “A young girl. She’d been desecrated by fish and crabs, but she looked to be a teenager.”

“You took pictures?”

“The camera on the police boat wasn’t working. It’s no big deal. Really. I mean, you heard the detective. The police will handle it. Anyway, I didn’t have time to spear any lionfish. After I finish my beer, I’ll make dinner.”

“I think we should do carryout,” she said. “Let’s do pizza. My treat.”

Tess arrived just after I came home with the pizza and beer. She apologized for being late, talked about the storm, and accepted an invitation to join us for dinner. Ethy and I let her talk,

acknowledging her comments with nods and smiles, but otherwise ate and drank without speaking.

While cleaning up, Tess took me aside.

“Are you okay?”

I shrugged. “Yeah. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know, maybe because Ethy wasn’t picking on you and you weren’t looking at your watch?”

I shook my head. “We’re good.”

Ethy appeared in the kitchen with a plate of leftover pizza. “Jake found a body today,” she said, “and a police detective came by to question him. The cops think it was an accident, but Jake seems to think otherwise. Jake’s really good with details.”

For a moment, Tess seemed stunned.

I was too. It did indeed sound as if Ethy was bragging on me.

Tess stepped in front of me on her way to the dishwasher. “Curious what passes for good with you.”

I stepped around her and put the empty beer bottles in the recycling bin.

“How did the girl die?” asked Tess.

I shrugged. “Hard to say. I think the operating theory is that it was an accident. She drank too much and fell off a boat. For reasons no one can explain, no one reported her missing.”

“Of course, you think it was something else.”

I looked at Ethy. “What I think doesn’t matter.”

Tess started to speak, but Ethy shushed her with a shake of her head.

I took the leftover pizza slices and headed home.

CHAPTER TWO

My house in Key West is in a neighborhood of small block homes, bungalows and clapboard cottages referred to as Cayman Village. Some of these residences were restored; others were decidedly in disrepair. To an untrained eye, they simply looked old and cramped, a thousand square feet or less of living space, typically with two bedrooms and a single bath. But this was island living where space was at a premium. For decades, families lived here, working hard to provide food, drink, and cleaning services to the seasonal snowbirds who flocked to the island every fall and departed in the spring.

My mother, Gretchen Favor, acquired this house from her parents and then left it to me. Maurice managed it on my behalf, renting it, repairing it, and keeping it livable. After he died, the house was all but forgotten. The trustee who managed Ethy's money continued to pay the property taxes, as Maurice had directed, but no one bothered with maintenance, and for the last few years, the house remained unoccupied, at least by anyone paying rent.

When I returned to Key West to take care of Ethy, I found the property overgrown and the house infested by rodents and an assortment of Florida's largest insects. Using plywood, I covered a few broken windows and tried to remove the colonies of mold

flourishing in the rain-soaked drywall below them. Several bottles of bleach later, I realized that making the house livable again would require a full renovation.

One day, I woke up, and being more than a little impulsive, took a two-pound hammer and went to work removing walls, baseboard, and bathroom fixtures. I was a human tornado. Only the kitchen, a toilet, and a shower escaped destruction. Unfortunately, I later realized how much easier it was to demolish a house than to put it back together.

I left Ethy's house and arrived at my cottage just after nine. Sitting on the porch with a beer and a bag of chips, I did my best to avoid thinking about the dead girl and Detective Murphy's honest but infuriating explanation of how the girl's death would probably remain unexplained. Of course, by trying not to think about these things, they quickly occupied my mind. I countered by reminding myself that the dead girl wasn't my problem to solve. The problem belonged to Detective Murphy and the Key West police, neither of which seemed to give a damn about figuring out who she was or what had happened to her.

I wasted a beer on this exercise, finally deciding that my time was best spent sanding drywall, an impulse that lasted only few minutes. With little accomplished and no motivation to tackle anything else, I headed for bed.

An instant after I flicked the bedroom light switch, the lightbulb exploded in a shower of sparks and glass fragments. With the aid of a flashlight, the reason for the pyrotechnic display became apparent: the light fixture was nearly full of water. Closer inspection revealed a brown stain on the ceiling surrounding the fixture, and a puddle on the floor below it. The storm that had swamped the boat had exploited a void, pushing water into the

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attic space above my room. With rain likely every afternoon, the problem couldn't be ignored.

I fetched a bucket, caulk, sealing tape, and a trash bag and pulled down the ladder that led to the attic. I gripped that ladder and stared into the dark rectangle above me. "Why does every fucking thing have to be so hard?" I thought.

I was gripped by an irrational but palatable fear of dark spaces, particularly those that were playgrounds for bats, rats, and spiders. I scolded myself for being frightened of the dark, screamed a loud "shit" and forged ahead.

Popping my head into the attic, I was met by a cloud of hot, humid air heavy with the scent of wet wood and urine. I panned the dark space with the flashlight, its narrow beam catching the remains of old chairs, broken mirrors, a highchair, and a pile of old carpets. Closer to the entrance, the floor was littered with mice droppings and shredded paper. Seeing no eyes staring back at me, I stepped into the attic, located a light bulb hanging from a wire and, before turning it on, slapped the socket to make sure it wasn't electrically hot.

Even in the dim light, I could see multiple stains in the plywood sheathing that formed the roof. On the front side of the roof, a section of plywood had partially collapsed. Above my bedroom, water had darkened a large area of sheathing and was still dripping.

In order to get a clear view of the leak, I needed to move a pile of old furniture covered in spider webs and mouse feces. Bracing for a swarm of mice and angry palmetto bugs, I slid the old carpet to one side and then started with the furniture. Underneath an old wicker rocking chair was a small wooden box, the word "MEMENTOS" barely visible in faded red ink. I retrieved

the box but thought better of opening it. Placing it aside, I focused the flashlight's beam on the ceiling's wet area. A few minutes of poking and pressing made it clear that patching the leak from the inside would be futile. I placed the bucket under the drip, grabbed the box, turned off the light, and climbed down the ladder.

I took a long shower, which left me clean but wide awake. In the kitchen, I sprayed the wooden box with a disinfecting cleaner, then wiped it dry with a paper towel. After covering the kitchen table with newspaper, I set the box down and opened it. I'll admit to briefly entertaining fantasies of finding something remarkable in the box — perhaps a stash of gold coins or a map to an old pirate's treasure. The fantasies faded quickly when I gazed upon a mass of faded, cracked, and disintegrating photographs. I tried to pick up one photo that appeared to be intact, but it quickly crumbled into dozens of small fragments.

Under the photographs was a small stack of yellowed paper held together by a rusted staple. Even before I pulled the papers free of the box, I knew they were printouts of emails. Another minute passed before I realized I had discovered an actual treasure — something that gave me chills and made my heart race.

I was looking at an email exchange between my mother, “KWGretchen,” and someone identified as “KWJames.”

I handled the papers carefully, almost reverently, looking at them more than reading them. The messages spanned a week or so in January, eight months before I was born. Attached to the last page was an opened letter postmarked a few months before my mother's death.

I had vague memories of my mother — fragments of images of her smile and her eyes. What had stuck with me was her voice, a soothing and comforting sound that talked me to sleep before she

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went to work and lulled me from bed when it was time to get up. I could hear her laugh when we were being silly which was often but never enough. As I read her emails, I could hear her, conversing with the man I was certain was my dad. I had never heard his voice, but I could imagine it from the way he talked to my mother.

The thread of emails started with a congratulatory message from James.

“If you are reading this, then you have successfully logged into the email account I created for you. Now we can communicate wherever I’m stationed. I miss you! Know that once I’m out of the navy, we will be together forever. Write me back!!”

The emails that followed were of the same ilk: two young people separated by time and space clinging to each other, an exchange of words intended for their eyes only. The messages captured expressions of passion and intimate thoughts sprinkled with the mundane: “I can’t wait to kiss you, to touch you.” “It rained today.” “I couldn’t find my keys.” “A man left me a twenty-dollar tip because I talked to him about his dying wife.” “The computer at the bar quit working.” “I want you to hold me.”

But the warm and loving thoughts came to an end, terminated by an email from my mother that was blunt and intended to be so:

“I have enjoyed the last few months with you more than I can say, but you have to understand that you have no future with me. There is so much you don’t know about me, so much I can’t tell you. I beg you to leave me alone and to move on.”

The message seemed to come out of the blue, a “Dear John” delivered without any provocation. Perhaps there were other

messages that would explain my mother's change of heart, but if there were, they weren't saved.

The last item was a letter dated four years later, and a month before my mother was murdered:

“Dear Gretchen:

I'm not sure if you will receive this letter or read it if you do. I am coming to Key West for a conference and would like to see you, to talk to you about what happened so long ago. Please let me know if that is something you would be willing to do, and we can set up a time and place. I will understand if you decide not to see me but want you to know I've never stopped thinking about you or caring about you.

— James”

I took the emails and a beer and sat on the porch. It was after midnight. Crickets serenaded an empty street as a light breeze rustled the palm trees. A few hours earlier, I had sat here, my thoughts spinning around the death of a young girl. Here I was again, this time trying to grasp the significance of a handful of old emails and a letter that may never have been answered. Objectively, the emails changed nothing. My mother was still dead, and her killer still unknown. I had a pretty good idea of the first name of my father, but so what? The most definitive piece of information was that my mother had ended the relationship, but that knowledge also had no apparent utility. The timing of the letter — just before my mother was killed — was interesting but not meaningful.

Useful or otherwise, I gazed at the faded paper, taking solace in having something my mother had touched. I heard her voice, felt her hand on my face. Tears flooded my eyes, and I let them come.

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I was gripped by a familiar hollow feeling, an immense sadness that lives in the shadows of conscious thought, a feeling born out of an intense longing for someone who died decades ago and died again yesterday. I let myself sob and shake until the memory of that someone retreated, and the pain subsided. Exhausted, I headed back to my room, stepped around the broken light bulb, and fell into bed, shoes and all.