



Raindrops speckled the windshield, so he flipped on the wipers, then winced in pain all the way home as they flicked back and forth in time with the pounding in his brain.

He barely made it home. The migraine he was suffering from was one of his worst, and now, as he sat smoking in his easy chair and staring at Samantha and the strange landscape behind her, he was in no mood for jokes.

"Get Mike," Steve said. "The joke's over."

"He's not here," Samantha replied.

"Where are you, exactly?" he asked.

Samantha hesitated, then said, "I'm here."

"In my TV set," Steve said sarcastically.

"Yes," she answered.

Steve winced as his head pulsed. He'd had enough.

"Samantha you've given a great performance, but I'm not buying this and I need to get some rest," Steve said as he got out of his chair. "Nice meeting you," he added just before he pulled the plug out of the wall socket.

The picture brightened slightly, then collapsed into a small pinpoint of light in the center of the screen. The pinpoint slowly faded as Steve stumbled back to his chair and sat down. He lit another cigarette, took a deep puff, closed his eyes and tried to relax.

A few seconds later, there was a popping sound. Steve opened his eyes and watched as the screen lit up. He looked over at the wall socket. The TV was still unplugged.

"I can help you," Samantha said.

Steve tried to get out of his chair, but his headache had sapped his strength. "This has got to be a dream," he thought as he tried to calm down and collect his wits.

"I can help you," Samantha repeated.

She was in the same place, by the lake with the dead trees, but now the bright light of a setting sun was casting deep shadows across the landscape.

"How can you help me?" Steve asked, lost for anything else to say.

"I can get rid of your migraines forever," she replied.

Steve squinted at the screen. What he was experiencing was too real to be a dream, but too unreal to be really happening. "I'm *not* dreaming," he thought, "I'm hallucinating."

"Do you want me to help you?" Samantha asked.

Steve picked up the remote control and tried to turn the set off, but that didn't work. Then he tried to change the channel. Finally, he struggled to get out of the chair to unplug the TV, then slumped back when he remembered that he'd already unplugged it. His brain was tied up in painful knots, pounding so hard that he began to shake.

"So, do you want me to help you?" Samantha asked again.

"If I let you help me, will you go away?" Steve asked. He was scared and tired and just wanted to be left

alone so he could get some sleep.

"I promise I'll go away," Samantha answered.

"Well, as nice as you are," Steve said, "right now, I'd do just about anything to get rid of you. Let's get it over with."

"Believe me," she said with a smile, "this will be all my pleasure."

Steve didn't like the way she said that. He was trying to muster his strength in an effort to make one last attempt at an escape when the screen dimmed.

He watched the picture fade, his heart racing as he braced himself, but nothing seemed to be happening. He pushed himself up, then cried out as a flash of light shot from the TV, knocking him back into the chair and engulfing him in cell of pure energy. Steve closed his eyes against the bright light, then blacked out as a loud ripping sound pierced the air.

"You can open your eyes now," Samantha said.

Steve's eyes opened slightly, then quickly opened wide.

He was staring Samantha right in the face. She smiled at him, then asked, "How does your head feel?"

Steve barely noticed that his migraine was gone as he looked around him. He gazed silently at the dark water and dead trees, unable to believe he was there. He pinched himself.

"You're not dreaming," Samantha said with a chuckle.

Steve turned his head back to her. "How?" he asked.

"I don't know, exactly," she answered. "You kind of just get this power after you've been here awhile, then you go from there."

"What do you mean you don't know exactly!" Steve yelled. "I'm not going to be here awhile! You're going to get me out," he said, reaching to grab Samantha's arm.

His hand came up empty. He tried again and watched as his hand drifted right through her.

Samantha's eyes twinkled as she began to hum the theme song to "Casper the Friendly Ghost."

"I never can remember the words to that song, can you?" she asked.

"Listen, I'll do anything, just get me out of here," Steve said.

"I can't help you now," Samantha said, "but I will be able to help you soon," she continued as she began to walk into the black water of the lake.

"Where are you going?" Steve asked, panicking at the thought of being left alone with no way to get out of the strange landscape and back into his living room.

"I'm going to the other side," Samantha answered. She was waist-deep in the dark water and sinking fast as she made her way further into the lake.

"Wait!" Steve shouted, but she continued walking. He clenched his teeth, then stepped into the water. Samantha stopped and turned back to

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