

ZOETROPE



When my wife died, the world just spun in place. All our friends were her friends, and when she was gone, they drifted away like smoke from a snuffed candle.

Soulmates, we always said.

Soul. Mate. I lost both.

My only light was that damn toy she brought home from the antique store. “It’s a zoetrope,” she had said. “A collector’s item.”

I found it while sifting through her things. It had a brass hand crank. You could look through slits in the side of a metal drum to watch a horse gallop or a clown dance. Netflix for the Victorian era.

Something else. Polaroid photos, trimmed to fit the device. Pictures of... her.

I loaded them in the machine, and her flickering image sprung to life. She turned, looked at the camera and smiled. When the drum made a full rotation, the image reset.

Turn, smile – reset.

Turn, smile – reset.

I cranked that handle for hours, day after day, to the point of exhaustion. I didn't feel alone, I could... sense her. I heard things. The clinking of dishes. Her phone's ring tone. I know it wasn't real, but for the first time in months I felt joy. She was gone, but still with me. Maybe I would be okay.

Turn, smile – reset.

Turn, smile...

The image didn't reset. Still smiling.

I looked inside the drum. The photos hadn't changed. How was this possible?

She mouthed "I love you" and walked away.

No! I couldn't let her leave me, not now. I stopped the crank.

Turned it the opposite direction...

The device resisted. It wasn't meant to turn that way. The metal gears screeched. I forced it, kept turning. Her image moved in reverse, coming back to me. Like the machine, she too resisted. Her face full of anger and disappointment. She wailed.

The house itself joined the chorus. The walls heaved and the ceiling sagged. Threatened to crush me, to turn this house into my tomb. I cranked harder, pulled her back to me.

Pictures fell from the walls. The carpets were wet with blood. Tendrils grew from the floor, tried to pull my hand from the crank. A thick layer of dust covered everything, like crematory ash.

Enough! I stopped.

The drum began turning, by itself, in the correct direction.

Her beautiful smile, restored. She nodded, turned and walked away.

This time I let her go.

This was my submission for the Final Round of the [NYC Midnight Scary Story Challenge 2025](#).

In this round, contestants were tasked with writing a story under 400 words, and each submission was required to include the following:

- Scare: A wrong turn
- Action: Sifting
- Character: An exhausted person

I think the story will work better as a screenplay, and I'm currently working on expanding the story and writing the script. The goal is to produce a short film based on this idea, hopefully later in 2026 or early 2027.