

TWA DEATH, WAITIN'

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*...each of us earns his death, his own death, which
belongs to no one else... (George Seferis)*

516 MANOR ALLEY...11PM THURSDAY (THE 23RD)

Ben heard the wind slam into the drive behind him, suddenly, long before he felt it. Long before, though just parts of seconds, interminable while he stood there dangerous in the dark.

Bouncing wildly between the trees both sides, the blustering madness startled its way down Manor Alley. Charging toward Ben, banging back and forth across the drive like a violent gutter ball just trapped in this tree-tall 'gutter' where he hid. It woke a cold racket of leaves as it barreled down at him, shaking, shouting loud!

Ben froze.

The head-high bushes concealing Ben shoved aside, their branching cover now held pressed back, shuddering away from him all around. Held back by this breath of destiny now fixed on Ben and blowing steady.

Exposed, in peril...all lost?

Three nights he had waited just to be safe, three more nights spent waiting for this dark sky and new moon. Three more people dead too, probably, maybe, for Ben's waiting. The terrible fee of his own safety. Now, in spite of that awful cost, he stood exposed anyway. The night's shadows blown madly aside, casting him noisily into the bright starlight with a big "TA-DAA".

Ben stood still, spotlighted, stage fright clutching his heart.

But with equal shock the ruckus suddenly stopped. No rider was chasing the first, no ensuing winds, no stampeding gusts followed. Just the one chasing, or fleeing,

its...*God-knows-what?*

The blast calmed quickly and the night settled quietly back into place. Back to black and bland and protecting again. The women up on the deck hadn't noticed, didn't stir or shift their attention at all. Ben was left safe where he stood off the drive below them.

"Maybe one of them caused it...?"

The night's natural breeze gently murmured again, and Ben breathed again, in time with it as before, shallow and slow, returning to his patience. His dark form, stationary but unnoticeable to the untrained, his being and presence, melting into the shifting shadows of the leaves around him.

From other nights watching Ben knew he must wait while the three women prepared themselves, each summoning their own strengths, he guessed. Wait until they focused their beings on each other. As he waited and watched, Ben wondered why *he* could sense when it was about to happen, why *he* could see it at all when it did.

"Why me?"

But no longer than it took to lament, the Halloween madness started again, just as it had each of the other nights. Ben felt the shift of focus among them, the change coming to the atmosphere around them. He felt the clench in his gut too. And the release, and the fluttering butterfly emptiness. They were about to become one again, to be more than three alone, and would, soon, become so much more than one together.

Ben teased his revolver's safety until he felt it release, felt the click that made no sound.

No sound at all.

But still, just then, the big dark-one creep-ed open that right eye, the dead one, with no pupil or iris, no white either. The reflection of the candle off it's blank wet sheen slashed through the moonless night. It's bright glint hacking at the concealing blackness between them made Ben squint, almost flinch, expecting pain.

No sound at all.

But still, the pale-one, florid-drained and near glowing in the dark of the covered deck, slowly, so slowly, tilted her head back, eyes closed. Searching her mind's

heavens for the source of his intrusion, beating the void's shadows to flush his soul into view.

And across the low table from her, the other one, the hard turbid-skinned-one, together with the others, cocked an ear slightly twitching, but only generally toward Ben. Listening to the night around them, toward the bushes lining the drive turn-out below their porch. Toward where Ben hid...and didn't move.

Or breath. Or even think.

Ben froze again, still, dead, and if he had dared to think, would've hoped he wasn't, dead. But again the three women didn't seem to see him, or hear or sense him either, just like the other times before this time...this last time.

One way or the other, the last time.

The eternity of the moment passed and nothing happened. Then they all relaxed, back again into their trance together. All focus and purpose given back to it alone. Their eyes closed, or squinty open, or whites-only showing rolled back up into her head, as were the pale-one's. All mouths again together barely mouthing words, though not the same words together.

Words, it seemed, that needed no breath to be heard by whomever was supposed to hear them.

Unseen and soundless, yet tangible, felt, a presence grew among them, flowing through them, amorphous floating out over the table between them. Over the candle that began to flare, up tall and skinny, but didn't waver. Reality beyond the women appeared to distort, it oozed, trying to reach Ben through whatever the thing was that wasn't really growing there.

Couldn't be.

Waiting for the time he had chosen, Ben focused on the target he had fixed, the big dark-one, sitting directly across from him, just ten feet away in the center of the other two. His mind tensing, his body tightened, then all releasing as the end drew near. Pushing out some precious breath, Ben raised his weapon, pulling its sights up to the aim of his eyes. But a flash of insight slapped him at the last second and shoved his aim inches to the right as he squeezed.

The pale-one took the shot in the temple.

The night froze like a photograph. All else ceased as Ben watched a red mist slowly release from the small hole an inch from her left ear. Then a vapor rose from it, wispy and transparent, like steam rising from the spout of a kettle not quite boiling, then...

Suddenly, in nearly real time, her head sprang violently away from Ben, jumping madly after the tiny bullet trapped inside her skull. At the limit of her stretched neck her head jerked downward, lifting her left arm upward a little, slightly outward, as if it was trying to wave. With a teasing shake of yellow hair her head slammed into her right shoulder and then viciously bounced back at Ben, her little wound fly-casting a string of bloody mucus out and up into the air.

The big dark-one immediately went slack, an inanimate loose slump engulfing her tiny child's chair. She looked half-melted...though only half-thawed.

The turbid-one tensed, mouth thrown full open as her head jerked backward, all the muscles of her face and neck, of her whole body, stretched rigid and terrifying, silently screaming.

In the same split second the presence between them brightened, and moaned, then disappeared. But not before Ben felt the recognition it gave him, the shiver it cut sharp through him as shards of its transparent distortion exploded outward into the night. Each piece fading quickly into nothingness.

A startling coolness pressed back in, suddenly from every direction, in toward the center of the women. It prickled at Ben's hair all over, softly, like a spider creeping across his skin.

Then the candle extinguished without flickering, without drama.

"It's gone, the other two are done even if they're not dead...enough is enough."

Ben lowered his arms, safetied the revolver, and hurried off to conceal himself and the rest of it. The plop-and-splatter last sounds of the pale-one echoed in his mind, over and over, accompanying his footsteps as he made his escape. The always awful yet predictably trite final utterance of the head shot, pumping out in *his* head, again, then again, as Ben retraced the twenty-some paces

back home.

Repeated why? So the sound of it could be remembered pristine, without the gunshot, without the gasping silence? Sounds of fish gut flipped from sticky fingers, flopping wet on a cold wood dock. Repeated why?

"Always the same. Always."

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His screen door partially open, resting against his back to obscure him in the shadows of his own porch, Ben pressed the remaining 'specialty' shells under the plywood trim and over the brick veneer next to his front door. Listening closely as each dropped down inside the wall to the foundation below, one after the other trickling down behind the brick and into oblivion. He would add the spent, pin-marked casing to the dozens more in the gym bag he carried to the target range.

Once inside his apartment, screen door locked, front door closed but not locked, *"...enigmatic details, the more the merrier"*, Ben headed directly through to his bedroom in the dark. He casually wiped off the empty revolver while Jack purred at him from somewhere across the shadows, then dropped the gun into the heavy canvas bag containing his other "target" pistols. Each one wrapped in an oily cloth. Each always left needing a good cleaning.

Ben tossed the dark green flannel shirt, the same one he'd worn to the target range earlier that afternoon, over his gun bag on the floor, and his pants on the chair next to it, over the bright red-and-white plaid he'd worn conspicuously around the neighborhood earlier that evening.

In the bathroom, waiting the old man's wait for the barely hissing tinkle he would probably not be allowed to relieve later, Ben listened for sounds through the party-wall. His duplex neighbor's bedroom light had come on just as he passed toward home, and her side-deck sliding glass door squeaking open as he slipped through his own doorway. Not that unusual, her trips out there for air were a near nightly occurrence. But the little "pop" of his .22 was surely a noticeable intrusion if she had been awake. And since the view from that deck looked directly onto the scene he had just left...?

Ben listened for her sticking door to bang shut again.

If it didn't she had probably seen the mess he'd made, would hurry for her phone without closing it.

It didn't.

"Me first, me first."

Ben spoke softly into Gracie's ear. Jack's sister was trying to crowd in next to Ben at the bathroom sink for a drink of the much favored running water. He double rinsed the gun-oil soapy residue from the drain and left the faucet trickling for her. And thanked her, mentally, for giving him yet another silly detail, "...*smoke and mirrors.*"

Stretching, crawling into bed, Ben thought he just might have time to catch some convincing sleep in his eyes before the police arrived. Before all the commotion and play-acting began.

And he did.

Ben dozed off listening to Gracie and Jack's calm munching at their bowls in the kitchen.

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*Life is the first cause of
death...(Buddha)*

520 MANOR ALLEY...3PM MONDAY (THE 13TH)

Benjamin Jonah Clark is a lonely man. Not as much lately, not since he has been by himself alone for so long now. But he is still quite lonely.

Quietly lonely, just a whisper in his ear when the world is unlikely calm.

Loneliness, that one symptom of a soul dying which fools everyone. Always has. Not pain or emptiness or heartbreak, not self-indulgence or self-pity, nor fear either. No, loneliness is the withdrawal shakes of a soul deprived of joy. The quivering of fatigued emotional sinew, dear and near dead. Loneliness is longing need, the first and last warning, the death rattle. It is the stuff of the soul...hopes and dreams, memories and madness, faith and experience...crumbling without its foundation, its mortar, without its pinnacle and purpose. Without joy.

When joylessness kills a soul, loneliness is the soft screaming tremor forecasting its demise. When loneliness is silent, well, then it's too late.

Ben Jonah is still lonely alright, but maybe, sometimes, a little too quiet about it now.

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"...any more than a mouthful is wasted anyway!"

Ben was remembering, a conversation with his best friend in high school, and at the same time trying to keep a straight face as his new neighbor Ty(*okay...sure, why not Ty...?*) went on and on about the latest soap-opera novel she was reading. He was also trying very hard not to stare at the buttons undone and at her tight, tanned, water-balloon shaped boobs. More than a *handful* for sure, so exposed there, curving down, in clear view to the bottom of her under-wire.

And those tattoos, two of them trying to crawl their

way out of her low-slung, shrunk-up shorts. He feared she'd notice how much they piqued his interest. Ben certainly didn't want to be caught anywhere near the place they were escaping.

His eyes were also avoiding her severe eyebrows, but for the opposite reason, plucked so thin to menacing high arches. Or were they just so dramatic because her hair was pulled so tight, stretching them up higher with the taunt skin of her forehead?

Even before she accentuated them, most of Ty(?)'s natural features were pretty severe, though not at all unattractive. She had inherited a thick tarp of warm Mongol coloring, stretched tight over a chilly Roman bone structure. A little hard-rounded and sharp-cornered, yes, but pleasantly enough sculpted, titillating even, from several points of view. She just shouldn't have dressed to dramatize every curve and angle. And proudly adding that much-too-darkened tan pushed her skin-tone to a noticeably uneven patina. Hints of red from the Arabian Sea over here, with Mediterranean-olives under there, were tinted, almost all over, with a very unnatural mud-brown.

"If only she thought 'soften' instead."

Still, she was truly a vision, this "Ty(?)", an eye roll and wry grin, Oh-My-God! vision.

Ben was remembering, a post-adolescent conversation he hadn't thought of since way back then, and now realized his buddy really was hinting that he had, that he knew from experience, and that he certainly would say no more...so don't ask, but *"eat your heart out"* anyway. Thirty more years of his friendship since then, of dealing with that special smile Ben was picturing now, and he knew his friend really was the first of them to reach *those* bases beyond. Ben's smile at the thought must have caused Ty(?) to pause...

"I see, yes...I guess, it does sound more psychological than just heart-wrenching..."

"Absolutely, and then minister is tempted to..."

And away she goes again as Ben noticed again that little beauty-mark mole he was hoping most to ignore, floating there in a near placid sea of faint stretch marks. Resting far enough forward on her breast to remain in sight, and 'steady as she goes', whenever her cleavage

winked at him. That one remaining visible, and poignant, reference to her well concealed human-ness. That thick little girl of not so long ago, womanhood falling on her like a load of bricks, so suddenly. And terrifyingly noticeable, Ben guessed, to all the safe and genderless men of her childhood prior to that moment. How quickly did she notice her new powers? How they grew in kind as she grew, filling out and into her new shape and form?

Did her terrors grow also?

Ben thought so. As cynically as she made up her image, she must be terrified still.

Ty(?) had “yoo-hooed” Ben through his screen door, leaning down to see under the glare of the upper glass panel, peering through the nylon-screen below. Luckily she used the dread word “borrow” before Ben, near-napping on his couch by the door, could be blinded by her breasts, hanging there, exposed as they were, and within reach.

A young woman, mid-twenties, asking to borrow a tool, usually expected to get some muscle attached to it. Especially when dressed like this one was, or rather, wasn't. *“She was wearing sweats just an hour ago...?”*

And even though her tugging at the sinew attached to the muscle was the hook to get what she wanted, the sinew wasn't often welcome. Especially when muscle was as old as Ben's, “look but don't touch” would be “see but don't you dare look” in his case. Afterwards he would be stuck with a *sexy* ‘daughter’ he didn't care to raise, or a disgruntled neighbor who thought him a pervert. He wanted none of it. Ben hadn't yet overcome his chivalrous upbringing, not completely, but chivalry was dead now, after all. Beaten to death by the women of his own time. So it was okay, now, for him to fight against his ingrained need to help. And these too frequent little tests turned out so much better when he won.

“Smaller usually works better with a Phillip's-head, with most screwdrivers actually, you can transfer more power to the screw if it fits in all the way into the groove.”

“Why play the randy old smart-ass with this raunchy little...? Because she'll never know? Never get it?”

“Anyway, I'm sorry I can't help you. I was looking for one just the other day and all I could find was a tiny jeweler's and the big broken one I carried in my VW as a

pry-bar. Amazing how few tools you needed with those old Bugs. Couple of screwdrivers, a ball-peen hammer, three wrenches, you could drop the engine and..."

And away Ben goes...with his eyes locked on her forehead, but his brain on that damn mole, so both out of focus. Caught in one of those typically male dilemmas which has unlocked his tongue, freewheeling now in high school mode, talking about things often talked about but never actually done...until he can change the subject with a question slightly off topic. And then another. And so, somehow, the book discussion began and went sour for her and now she must look for an out.

Which was easy, she just had to stand up to leave.

"You're welcome to borrow it when I finish, Ben, if you like. It's so utterly interesting I'm sure it will be a quick read. Plus with the chaos of moving and all, it's been a welcome distraction."

"She's completely dropped the 'ditz' from before, good, replacing it now, of course, with the 'wise beyond her years'. The next step might actually be regular person and reasonable, friendly neighbor...I hope?"

"Thanks. Sorry I couldn't help you out with the Phillip's-head. What I can put my hands on right away wouldn't be what you're looking for, I'm afraid."

"Played again, and...? There it is...whoosh!?!"

"Well, that's okay, really...thanks anyway. It's not like I don't have plenty to do to finish moving in. The table can wait until I find mine. Speaking of moving in, I best get back to it now. See ya, Be-e-en."

As she turned to leave, deliberately hesitating a moment to give him a good look before walking away, Ben couldn't help but notice what she had waited for him to see, the fairly intricate compass-star tattoo centered in the small of her back.

"Ouch! That had to hurt..."

At the top, the letter "T" instead of the expected "N", then an "L" and an "R" described the next two direction points, each way around and down the fleur-de-lour star. Her label for the southern pole was obscured by the *waist* of her shorts, barely obscured, along with all but the first hint of her plumber's parody. Ben wondered, but not long,

if it was marked with a “B” or an “A”?

“How can she imagine I’d add her, or any of those so-forced-trite little-girl parts, to my long-loved sweet memories? Idolized, hell...worshiped images secreted away from moments of wondrous intimacy, and quiet passion, and my so few glimpses at the sublime purity of living alive, connected. Was I that naïve at her age?”

Ben knew he was indeed that naïve at her age, in some ways probably more so than her. But he also knew his time was not so banal, so shallow, and certainly not so ignorant as this generation lost to itself. Deaf to the direction and guidance of self-worth, so self-reduced to vacuous conduits sucking in and spewing out the ‘no-fear’ narcissism of glitz, *glamour*, violence and sex. Lemming-witted young men, young women half-harpy/half-harlot, mirrors of their time rather than beacons of their age, and often, sadly, nothing more attempted.

Typical of so many under-thirty these days, Ben guessed Ty(?) had built herself up, inside and out, from a hodge-podge of media-erroneous perceptions, her natural-human insecurities, and the equally-inaccurate reactions of all those ‘other’ people around her. Presenting herself only, probably knowing herself only, as that construction. And so she barely, if ever, noticed the little bit more that still caused whatever channeled through her to whistle a little bit out of tune.

Ben was pleased. Another case study of this *hat-backwards* world he was now forced to occupy and survive. Another chance to find any interest in the ‘*brave-new*’ around him and possibly some meaning in the direction it had taken. And just maybe...he would see again that bright little light of recognition behind the customary incredulous stare, if ever she realized he really didn’t care what ‘they’, those ‘other’ people, thought of *him*.

“What fun!”

So...to help spur his interest, Ben ‘let’ himself notice her rump as she bounced down his porch steps. It was nice, caress-ably formed and quite firm.

“You could probably crack an egg on it.”

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Ben Jonah had watched a number of young women pass through Manor Alley since he moved there. Always the

oldest resident, now, in just five short years, he was the longest-in-residence as well. This row of duplexes between a ritzy back-water drive and a busy backside street mainly attracted the upwardly-mobile transient, working their first 'great' job downtown. Few stayed a full year, none more than two, moving on to their first 'great' mortgage as soon as was possible. A few richer-than-most graduate students, like Ty, filled in the rest of the vacancies. Most were back in school hoping to double their income with a quick Masters.

These young tenants, mid-twenties to late-thirties, so not too young, were one of the reasons Ben stayed on so long. Diverse and sometimes interesting new lives in transition. Plus, people close to his own age were either still married, dead boring, or '50+single' and just too damn scary to be around. At Manor Alley Ben had a thick hedge of at least ten years separating him from his closest neighbor. This age barrier worked well, in most cases, as one of those proverbial 'good fences'.

But the main reason Ben didn't move was because Manor Alley was quiet. Even the weekend 'party' noise seldom approached too-loud. In fact, the only real racket around the place was caused by his eighty-ancient landlord fussing about with things tenants had asked him to leave as they were. A self-professed "I'm a bastard! Always been one, just ask my wife!", the five-foot-nothing, pugnacious little prick always had some cash-only under-minimum workman or woman beating and banging away just around the corner...just for spite. Showing whomever needed it at the time he, the Bob, was still and always 'Squire' of the Manor.

But once Ben let go of his righteous indignation concerning the old fart, and also stopped talking to him beyond waving "hey", this near constant hubbub was barely a distraction. And the information gained from befriending these busy, and quite talkative, little ants who scurried all over the neighborhood was invaluable. Idle gossip and a not-feigned interest in the people around him kept Ben up to date on the who, what, and where, as far as a block away. Fortunate, since his own reconnaissance would have been suspiciously conspicuous, so probably not much more accurate.

Manor Alley was really no more than a double-wide

driveway as long as a long city block, passing by and connecting five small, 'hidden' duplexes to the rest of the city. From the west, from Back Bay Boulevard, Ben entered a single drive between two of the upscale homes facing a minor branch the river and Little-River Park on the other side. Just west and in front of Ben's building a free-standing wood fence, visible from Back Bay, blocked through traffic beyond the garage court he shared with one of the houses on the Boulevard.

The rest of the tenants entered a similar drive off Waco, a minor collector street just east of the complex serving the Midtown area of downtown. This driveway pressed between a beautiful old Victorian home cut thrice into apartments and a high wrought-iron fence along the north side of an open church parking lot. Without notice from the street, Manor Alley widened to two tight lanes as it snaked to the west, depositing cars and neighbors at barely-double garages and tight parking turn-outs between the duplexes along the way. It jogged abruptly south and then back west to miss Ty's building, thus stopping most accidental or 'just-curious' intruders at this point with a view of the fence down at Ben's.

A single deep backyard ran along the south side of the Alley, from the backside of the street-lighted church lot, on west to it's big ivy-covered home fronting Back Bay. Wooded and overgrown, old-fashion wound-wire fencing on all sides, this yard was patrolled by a quiet old Chow preferring her outside watch...no matter the weather. Wise, reserved, and wary by day, coal black so invisible at night, Sheba was loud only when, but also whenever, it was meaningful and well worth looking into. She could also be sudden and fast, contrary to her mature demeanor, still making the land route to the many bird feeders scattered around her backyard a suicide mission for most squirrels. Nobody entered Sheba's grounds without her 'family's' presence and permission. Nobody.

Ben's rear yard was an open lawn filled with single trees scattered here and there, enough of them to make the space feel intimate, but not one bush anywhere to mow around...or hide behind. This hidden private park ran behind all the duplexes on the north side of Manor Alley, making it about the size of a football field, and every tenant shared access. The various back fences of the Ninth Street homes beyond were its continuous north barrier, and

became a bright backdrop in the glare of several security lights pointing toward it at night. The backyards of the homes on Waco and Back Bay were mostly unfenced but still formed an obvious and protected enclosure to the east and west. The view out Ben's bedroom windows was beautiful, peaceful, and usually deserted since none of the duplexes had the rear north doors necessary to make access easy and use of the space intimate or personal.

Located and surrounded as it was, a half-a-dozen steps up from the ground around it, Ben's one-room-plus-one apartment was an elevated fortress of unobstructed views and guarded seclusion, day and night. Standing at his bedroom threshold Ben could see his every window and door, every entry and approach to his home, and from that vantage there was only a quick back-step into the cover of his windowless bathroom. It was probably as strategically and tactically advantageous a place to live as he could have found anywhere. And now, four years beyond the 'visit' he had finally received after a waiting vigilance of nearly a year, Ben felt reasonably *safe* at Manor Alley. Safe because the 'visit' didn't kill him. It was to tell him he was *out*, but only because they said he was out. Removing the leash he'd been dragging around, dangerously tangled underfoot, since he stole away from them three years before.

Of course, they were also letting Ben know, just by finding him, the collar he wore would never come off...ever.

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*After the first death,
there is no other... (Dylan Thomas)*

520 MANOR ALLEY...6PM TUESDAY (THE 14TH)

Ben saw Laurie turn the corner at the jog in the drive, a hundred-twenty feet or so east of his porch, and quickly tugged loose the belly of his shirt. She was looking at the bird feeders over the neighbor's fence, out behind Larry's duplex, so wouldn't notice his small vanity.

Though well beyond the age of sucking it in, Ben still wouldn't leave the front of his shirt stretched out like an overstuffed satchel. Especially when he wanted to hold a woman's attention in his eyes. His last best feature, Ben's eyes were still bright and now icy blue like his father's, their youthful greens and brown flecks leached away by his fifty-plus years.

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Ben had more than a little of an old-man's-crush on this young woman, or at least on their chance and harmless interactions. Laurie passed Ben's porch nearly every night heading for her evening runs. To be fair to the old-man, she did run by when he wasn't sitting out, but always walked by when he was. Ben took this observation in with much meaning and more compliment. Unmistakably, she was making it easier for him to engage her...how nice.

How wonderful!

Laurie walked with a juvenile bounce in her step, childishly content and uncharacteristic for her early thirty years. Her gate was coupled with an almost uncoordinated syncopation of her hands and feet, a "*sweet little hitch in her get-along*" that kick-started Ben's grin, and his pleasure, whenever he saw her.

Ben thought of "pneumatic" when he looked at Laurie, if he had the time to think at all, even though he'd forgotten exactly what Huxley had meant by the term. Reading such a revolutionary author when just a teenager,

the Ben back then went directly to, and so always first remembered, images of pliant flesh, youthfully soft, forgiving...and giving. Laurie slipped nicely into the deeply scored grooves of this sensual '50's image. She fit comfortably in Ben's brain. Even by twenty-first century standards she was quite lovely. Laurie could easily say to a friend she needed to lose five pounds and the friend wouldn't immediately think: "You mean twenty."

Alabaster would be a predictable, though insultingly inadequate, descriptive color for Laurie's skin. But with a blue hue, or rather, just an aura of blue...translucent, provocative, captivating. This whispering glow must be *pneumatic* to the touch, Ben thought, like a baby's skin, new, fresh, sensual...only with sex added, lots and lots of sex, shuddering and sighing.

Laurie's skin captured Ben's gaze, captivated his mind, his soul. His eyes touching it made him feel a little drunk, made his tongue thick.

Whenever they met Ben fixed first on the brightening of the smile in her eyes when she first saw him, and languished in the warm gentleness of the smile she invoked in his own. Once engaged, in small talk about the weather or whatever else he could think of quickly, his wonder moved on, to her cheek, the lobe of her ear, then slowly down her neck, resting at last in the long divot just below her shoulder, pressing gently into the soft triangle of resisting flesh behind it. Generally one of his favorite places to be with a woman, before and after, this lovely crevice was often a conversation safe refuge for Ben, perceived unobtrusive when eye contact became to intense to bear.

By the time Laurie went on her way, there was usually a soft rosy stain running from the dimple of her throat down into the stretched-out top of her rumpled, oversized t-shirts. As if she were receiving Ben's inadvertent message...the waves of uncontrolled and unavoidable pheromones he surely spewed, tsunami strength, whenever he saw her.

She never let on though, not one hint dropped, either way, ever. Their short conversations remained pleasant and uncomplicated every time...always just "nice".

Ben gave Laurie their usual silly queen-mother-on-the-dieses wave as she approached. She returned it with a beauty-queen-in-the-parade, grinning brightly up at him “...*thank you very much, again, my dear...*” on his deck.

“Ben! So nice to see you. How are you?”

“Very good, Laurie. How’re you? You’re looking well, wearing this lovely evening beautifully.”

“Now stop, you’ll make me blush.”

“Not my intent, but you’ll wear that beautifully too. How’s work? That crazy rush project over? All the overtime settled down, I hope?”

“Yes, finally. I get to relax for a couple of weeks.”

“Was it well received, worth all the pain?”

“Yes it was, as a matter of fact, and I’m so excited. I’ve been wanting to tell you. I wrapped up the work late Sunday night and knew I’d have it presentable just before lunch today, so, like we talked, I called...”

Laurie’s sentence was cut short by the dilapidated old Mercedes sputtering around the corner down by Larry’s duplex. Its engine clattering, knocking loudly, exhaust popping and belching black, until a loud backfire shut it down in front of Ty’s. Ben noticed the hood ornament was bent to the left now, instead of right like the last time this faded once-blue ‘luxury’ arrived.

“Wow.”

“Yeah, one of my new neighbors.”

Ty did her usual movie-star, arched-back exit from the passenger seat. It appeared some invisible cord might be attached to the center of her ribcage, pulling her from the car. Slowly presenting her in a comical upward swan-dive, breasts first.

At the same time a big dark woman in a bigger dark muumuu poured herself out of the driver’s side door. The bolt of purple material was covered with bright orange and yellow splotches the size of Ben’s open hand, “...*hundreds of ‘em,*” and the clickity-clack of the beads in her dreadlocked hair was just as noisy. She was talking loudly in a fake-y Jamaic-ey accent, continuously, without stopping to take any breath. “*Voodoo-Mama,*” Ben had dubbed her the first time he’d seen her, laughing at her affectations, the “M’on” this, and “M’on” that “M’on”. He

thought her typical and reaffirming of his already set opinion of Ty.

“Wow.”

“Yeah, the passenger lives here, moved in last week. The driver’s her frequent guest.”

“Hi Ty.”

Ben waved back at Ty but didn’t really speak loudly enough for her to hear him. Just the obligatory mouthing of “hello” to signal acceptance but not invitation. When he looked back at Laurie she was near completely distracted. Caught in one of those moments of confused recognition, of seeing or feeling something familiar but not yet quite remembered. Her unfocused gaze was fixed toward the two women down the drive.

“Last week, huh? I haven’t seen them, her, before...”

“Yeah, works nights at some bar, I hear. Though she told me she’s a student. Usually not around at this time of day. Must be her day off.”

“Must be...”

Laurie was still staring off into the space down the drive during this now-stilted exchange. Ben suddenly felt like an intruder blundering through a private encounter. He looked back to the east and saw both of the women staring back Laurie. The big one was still talking, but no longer so loudly, and Ty was leaning slightly toward her, giving the ‘Voodoo-Mama’'s words her rapt attention. All Ben could hear of it was “Oh-M’on, Oh-M’on” a couple of times. Their recognition of whatever it was about Laurie seemed stronger, already fully known and quite startling to them.

And then, flash!, there it was, shining dully at him in the lowering western sunlight. Ben hadn’t seen it before, as if it hadn’t been there. He assumed this was because she always faced north as she walked, quickly for such a large woman, from her car and up Ty’s steps. So her right side had been turned away from him. She was then, of course, always in the shadow of the porch roof, so he wouldn’t have seen it up there either, he assumed...had to be. It couldn’t have suddenly just appeared.

That dead right eye so blatantly present now. There, occupying the socket, but without any defining circles of

color and tone, concentric or otherwise. Nothing was there but a bulging wet bulb of dull sheen. Nothing there...save Ben's strong sense that it could probably *see* better than any live one.

Laurie starting to speak shook Ben away from this new weirdness, and just as he swung his head back toward her, he noticed in the corner of his eye that both Ty and the big one aimed their stares toward him. And they stayed fixed on him as he then saw Laurie was now looking square on him too. Ben could feel them all continue to look, it felt like...through him, as she spoke.

"Well, I best get on with my run, Ben. Nice talking to you. See ya."

Ben's "okaybye..." was largely said to her departure.

When Ben turned around to go inside, he saw both of his cats staring back at him through the sliding glass door. And it was immediately, vividly, obvious they too had sensed something very unusual in the air out there.

Jack was up on the table, leaning out toward the screen, toward Ben, his entire body beefed-up by bristling fur. His ears were performing a twitchy-alert 360-search for specific dangers, syncopated and often pointing in opposite directions. But Jack's eyes were intently on Ben, looking for signs from his *co-alpha* of what to do next. For any sense of how bad this new strange thing really was.

Gracie was on the floor below the table, fear-crouched but so far too fear-filled to run. Her tail was bushed-out further than Ben had ever seen it. Bigger around than his upper arm, standing straight up and menacingly still. Her ears were pressed back flat against her skull, as if they alone were stretching her mouth slightly open and holding it frozen in a fangs-bared vicious hiss.

For the first time ever, Ben didn't comfort his scared kitties with the "it's okay, it's okay" he always used for jet planes and big trucks and lightning. For the weather siren tests every Monday noon and whatever else he could assure them wasn't a real danger to house cats. But the sure intensity of their reaction was proof enough of his own instincts...this *thing* was not okay.

Ben looked out at the drive again as he moved for his front door. Laurie had stopped at the edge of the garages, a

hundred or so feet away, where the alley continued past them toward the street. She was turned around and looking back east, staring really, standing still and lost in deep concentration.

Laurie should have been in soft silhouette from the setting sun behind her, but she was glowing with it instead. Her visage seemed translucent to the light around her, absorbing, emitting. She was more stunning than Ben had ever before experienced her. Beautiful, compelling, exhilarating. Exhausting. Unworldly.

Ben forced his eyes away from Laurie to follow along her gaze east and saw the 'Voodoo-Mama', alone now on the drive. She was still also, held motionless by Laurie's presence, exactly where she had stood before. She seemed to be talking quietly, rapidly chanting to herself as she scanned the empty space toward Laurie with that dead eye.

Ty had moved up her porch steps and out onto the adjoining deck. She appeared to be staring toward Laurie too, but her eyes were closed tight. Ben had the strange sense most of her attention was still focused on the big dark woman in the drive below her rather than on Laurie. Listening intently to the one, but only tentatively toward the other.

His initial feeling of recognition between the women had grown so strong now, had become so powerful in his mind, the link was almost visible. Ben found it difficult to turn himself away from his, this, enchanted curiosity.

When he finally did, his cats were no where in sight.

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*Half our dayes wee passe in the shadowe of the earth,
and the brother of death exacteth a third part of our lives.
A good part of our sleepes is peeced out with visions, and
phantasticall objects wherin wee are confessedly deceaved.
The day supplyeth us with truths, the night with fictions
and falsehoods; which uncomfortably divide the naturall
account of our beings. And therefore having passed the day
in sober labours and rationally enquiries of truth, wee are
fayne to betake ourselves unto such a state of being,
wherin the soberest heads have acted all the monstrosities
of melancholy, and which unto open eyes are no better
then folly and madnesse. (Sir Thomas Browne)*

516 MANOR ALLEY...11PM THURSDAY (THE 16TH)

Jack hit the foot of the bed as stealthily as ever, but Ben had heard him sneak across that one extra-squeaky floorboard at the bedroom threshold.

“What’s you doin’, boy?”

Jack gave a little meow of complaint at being caught as he carefully stepped between and across Ben’s legs, walked up the valleys of the sheets behind his big buddy’s back, then jumped across the pillows and over Ben’s head. After a single 360-turn, giving Ben an over dramatic nose touch in the middle of it, Jack settled into the crook of Ben’s arm, pressing his back into Ben’s chest. His way of giving Ben a hug before purring them both to sleep.

Ben purred back, as well as he could, while Jack stretched into his nightly nighty-night belly rub. Gracie, Jack’s sister, was already up on the window sill behind the rotated-open vertical blinds. Level with the head of Ben’s bed, and just three feet away, she was silhouetted in the light of a full moon. The day was ending as most did now...nicely.

“Night Gracie. Don’t let any of ’em get past ya.”

The cool night breeze that managed to slip past Gracie rattled the blinds a little, lulling Ben’s half shut eyes to half focus. Just as he was about to slip peacefully

away the bright white light burst into the bedroom...FLASH!

Gracie, good always to the irony of her namesake, immediately slammed straight backward from the window, through the blinds without plan or in-flight correction. Adding a clattering cacophony to the explosion of light. She would have hit the side of the bed, hard, if not for Ben's outstretched arm, which she latched onto clumsily at her last opportunity. Painfully fully-clawed.

Jack was kinder, pure cat in his reaction, leaping straight up in the air and clear of Ben, landing down at the foot of the bed. Already turned 'round facing the window, crouched, ready for whatever was next. The power of his agility, though, cost Ben a much deeper gash to his upper ribcage than the several punctures and scratched rivulets of blood Gracie had given his arm.

!BLINK...and the flash was gone again, even before Ben could focus awake. Still he managed to check his start, moving as little as possible until his cats had settled, lest he be considered the intruder in their moment of instinct.

"Auu...gh...ouch! What the hell?!?"

Gracie released her claws and fell noisily, paws, knees, and maybe a hipbone, hitting the floor at the same time. Her slip-scattering terrorized retreat, first under the bed, then out of the bedroom, was followed by her bounding sounds up the stairs and a frantic dive to silence behind the boxes in the storage room above.

Jack waited until Ben moved.

Rolling out of bed, Ben jerked back the window blinds as loudly as he could. Noise was his ally in the dark of his own home. Awake now, focused, Ben was startled again by what he saw out of the window.

Nothing was there.

No bright light, no sounds. Not even an intruding dark shape among the familiar shadows of his moonlit backyard. Nothing.

Ben heard Jack hit the floor behind him, his noiseless leap had carried him to the doorway across the room. The two quick galloping steps that followed, then silence, told Ben Jack was on the back of the couch in the living room, watching. A new tactical perch out of the way

of the loud clumsy human who battled the big stuff.

His cats settled, so all his focus on the window, Ben shoved his head up close to the screen to look below.

Nothing still.

Then he remembered a sense of the light moving to the east as it extinguished and peered out around the window mullion, toward his neighbor's duplex. There, barely brighter than the still dimmed motion-sensor security lights, discernable only because its color was slightly cooler than the moonlight, a faint glow peeked around the corner back at Ben.

Floating between the two buildings, brighter to the south toward their front porches, a faint cold glow peeked around the corner...

...*back* at Ben.

This third time startled by the eerie unexplained, Ben felt his heart stopped, and the sudden awareness of not breathing. Then he tensed tighter at the return of its pounding beat, faster than normal, loud, as reality hit his chest in slow shallow breaths.

Now wanting to hide in the dark of his home, moving as carefully as possible, Ben headed for his front door. Through the mini-blinds over the door's divided glass-lites he again saw the glow, brighter here in the front, brighter still east down the drive, but still just faintly present. Ben turned the prone to stick deadbolt and his struggle with its resistance sounded suspense-movie loud. Hoping it wouldn't squeak, Ben lifted up on the door as he slowly pulled it open.

Too slowly...it squeaked.

Releasing some of his upward pressure, Ben quickly, and "*thank God*" quietly, swung the door open all the way. And opened the eyes he hadn't realized he'd closed in the process.

The glow was still there.

But still no sounds. No shadows either, cast by it, or cast through it.

No movement. Just the sense of its floating, and the strange feel of presence rather than appearance. "*Being,*" not state of being, Ben would think later.

He unlocked the screen door and stepped through,

remembering to quietly shut the main door behind him. What Ben saw on his neighbor's deck down the drive caused him to release the screen door, to forget it would soon slam shut. Caused him to forget about being quiet and sneaky curious.

Ben stepped straight out to the center of his porch and gawked opened-mouth at what he saw to the east.

Ty's deck was flooded bright with that cold white light, floating there above the short table and kindergarten chairs she used to gather with friends. Three women were setting around it, the 'Voodoo Mama' on the opposite side, facing west toward Ben, Laurie and Ty flanking her south and north.

"*Laurie...?*" Ben thought, was head-back facing upward and shining much brighter than the others.

The light hovering under the deck's roof and over the three women couldn't be described as anything because it had no discernable shape. The vaguely distinguishable ribs or arms or seething tentacles connecting it to each of the glowing women couldn't be reasonably described as such either. The light appeared almost rolling in on itself cloudlike, a sometimes brightness moving here and there, or a slight intensity flowing back and forth. But this was not anything like a cloud, definitely not a form pushed and pressed by outside forces.

Ben felt it, like a being alive, obviously willful.

All of the women were aglow with a cold aura as thick as a overstuffed comforter, a hooded snowsuit of dead light. They radiated the same brightness that was pulsing above them, beating and feeding both ways between it and them. A candle burned in the center of the table, its warm colored flame stood straight-up without flickering, and was at least three foot high but no bigger around than normal.

Ben stood mesmerized, taking all this in like a flash card, fast, then sensed an overall climax growing, close. He fearfully regained focus on his Laurie, just as the screen door slammed shut behind him.

Everything in front of him went black.

Gone, out, lost in the sudden contrast of the night slamming back into the Alley. All just hidden, he thought, in the deep darkness under the roof over Ty's deck, in the black shadows cast by the suddenly bright again moon. But

as his eyes quickly adjusted he could see the deck was now empty. In an instant no one remained anywhere in sight. Bewildered, Ben knew there had not been the time for this complete escape.

Not nearly enough time.

Ben stood transfixed by this the even more unbelievable and was jump-startled by the sputtering explosion of the Mercedes starting in the drive. In the dome-light's flashing on and off he saw only the big dark woman at the wheel, her alone in the car. His instinctual back-step into the shadows obscured him from the headlights that then flooded his porch.

Ben slipped quickly back into his apartment, shaky but quiet, laughing as he remembered one of Scarlet O'Hara's better lines, "*I'll think about that tomorrow.*"

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"Hi, Ben."

"Hi, Larry. How's the self-promotion going this sunny morning?"

"Pretty good, actually. I pick up the final copy of my mailer from the proof-reader this afternoon. Thanks for your suggestions, by the way, incorporated several and managed to increase the typeset to 12 point. Now it goes back to the artist for the last time...I hope."

"Good. Bet you'll be glad to have it done."

"Yes, sort of, it's been a process I've enjoyed. Say, was that your screen door I heard slam last night? A little before midnight? Did you see that light or whatever it was? What was that?"

"Yeah, probably. Were you out and about then?"

"Yes, well, sort of. I had fallen asleep on my porch and that really bright light flashed and woke me up, wham, almost fell off my chair. And then it was gone, blink, and nothing else till I heard your door slam. Wasn't sure whose it was, no porch-lights anywhere down your way. Did you see that sudden light? What was that?"

"I don't know, I was asleep too, in bed. Something scared the cats and woke me up. I thought I'd seen a light, so I went out front to see what it was. Sorry about the door slamming."

"No, it's okay. I was glad to hear someone else out so

I didn't have to go looking around. It was so weird and still, with the moonlight and all. Strange how dark it was, though, usually Amy or that new girl...Ty isn't it?...have an outside light on. Wondered why they didn't. Couldn't see a thing on any of the decks or porches down the drive toward you. Strange. What was that, Ben?"

"Really...?"

"Really...? Larry...on none of the decks? Nothing?"

"Larry, I just don't know? Nothing looks out of place this morning, though. If you find something out, you'll let know, won't you?"

"Sure. Weird, though."

"Yes it is."

"...yes it is!?!"

"See you later, Ben."

"Enjoy your walk, Larry, and your day."

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The Wichita Eagle, Friday, August 17th

CITY BRIEFS

RIVERSIDE

Gloria Sternman, 54, of 927 Porter, was tragically discovered dead in her front yard Thursday evening, by her grand-daughter, Susan Finkle, 6, of Clearwater.

Officials at the scene suspect heart attack or stroke as the probable cause death. "Though drowning may be the ultimate cause, since that poor little girl didn't think to pull her

grandmother out of the water," officials said, "when she found her face down in that puddle from the sprinkler."

"If I hadn't sent Susan, maybe I could've saved my Mom," Mrs. Finkle said. "Of course a little girl couldn't do anything, it's not her fault she panicked. It's just not her fault."

An autopsy is scheduled for this afternoon, officials said.

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The Wichita Eagle, Saturday, August 18th

SECOND MYSTERIOUS DEATH IN TWO DAYS

Westside Wichita man drops dead on the front steps of his home shortly before midnight Friday, second in two days to die of unknown causes.

Evelyn Murphy, wife of deceased, George, 33, 1133 N. Emporia, said they were arriving home from a movie when "he just collapsed next to me on the porch stairs, he just suddenly went completely limp."

"I grabbed him but couldn't support him...no, his head

landed on my foot, that's when I fell over too, hitting *my* head on the sidewalk. I guess I blacked out for a couple of minutes after that, I'm not sure."

According to police detectives at the scene, Mr. Murphy's body had no apparent physical trauma, though they wouldn't yet rule out foul play, pending the Coroner's report, due later today. Mrs. Murphy was treated and released at the scene by Co. EMS.

Mrs. Murphy said her husband was in good health and she had “no clue” to the cause of his sudden death.

Aaron Marvel, 46, the Murphy’s next-door neighbor to the south, said he heard the Murphy’s fall. He said he was sitting on his porch, and had just said hello to them, when “a couple of seconds later I heard the ruckus and Evelyn’s little squeal.”

Mr. Marvel said the only thing he saw before, or after as he ran to help the Murphy’s, was a “weird whitish glow, or vapor or something, rising outa George laying there on the steps...and then it sorta shot off north as it vanished into thin air.”

Police said no other witnesses could be found at the scene and asked if anyone could provide any information to please contact the Patrol West Substation.

The other still unexplained death happened sometime after eleven P.M. Thursday, the 16th, in the Riverside area, less than a mile from last night’s tragedy.

Gloria Sternman, 54, of 927 Porter, was found lying dead in

her front yard by her granddaughter, Susan Finkle, 6, of Clearwater.

Susan’s mother, Beth Finkle, said her mother, Mrs. Sternman, had gone out to adjust the lawn sprinkler and hadn’t returned in long enough that she and her daughter “got curious.”

“Unfortunately, I was watching Leno and sent Susan to look for her grandmother. My daughter’s horrified and hasn’t stopped crying since. Keeps saying she saw ‘Gram’s ghost,’” Mrs. Finkle said in an interview today.

Speculation at the scene Thursday that Mrs. Strenman had had a heart attack or stroke, has since been found baseless according to the Sedgwick Co. Coroner’s preliminary report. Drowning, another suspected cause of death since she was found face down in a puddle of water from the sprinkler she collapsed over, has also been ruled out as a cause of death.

Further testing is underway, according to sources at the Coroner’s office, “with an eye to a possible link” between the two mysterious deaths.

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KHAT-TV channel 7, 10PM News, Sunday, August 19th

“TIP-BACK TO YOU, WICHITA” CALL-IN SEGMENT

(Partial transcript):

Male Personality: “Here’s one that got us married guys in the newsroom going...and in a lot of trouble as well, you can imagine...but after a couple similar calls, we checked it out.”

Female Caller: “I was wondering if you knew what the deal is with the street lights...at least I think it’s the street lights? Almost every night lately I’ve seen these sudden bright lights flare up through the windows around midnight, then they die down pretty quick. Sometimes it’s out front up the street and sometimes it’s out back at the alley, once it was right at the street corner. My daughter thinks there must power surges causing it, so I’ve been unplugging TV and all the other electrical appliances before I go to bed. My son thinks we’re both crazy. Can you help? I live just a block from Little-River Park and my friend on the other side of the Park says she’s seen some lights too, but doesn’t think it’s the street lights. She thinks...well, never mind that.”

Male Personality: “Well, okay, since some of the other calls were wondering about the same sort of unusual lights, and also questioning power line sparks and shorts, we called Kansas Power. Their representative confirmed receiving similar calls, a lot of them, actually, all from the Little-River Park area. But they assured us that after a thorough inspection of power lines the area, and a recheck of their monitors and logs for the last couple of weeks, there have been no power surges and there is absolutely no need

for concern. I guess your son is right, though far be it from me to agree with his characterization of 'crazy'. From the number of calls that would mean your whole neighborhood went 'zap' together."

(End of transcript)

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Little-River Weekly, August, No. 4
(it's your news we just print it)

WHAT'S STEALING SOULS IN WICHITA?

Phone message, 12AM Saturday, August 18th (verbatim):

"Listen!"

"I don't know what you guys are doing over there, but if those bright flashes overhead are what's causing my satellite signal to keep going out...well, stop it."

"I want it stopped!"

(End of message)

Phone message, 4AM Monday, August 20th (verbatim):

"Yeah, hi."

"Say, I read somewhere, I mean, I been thinking about all these poor souls who have died and people been seeing white lights or ghosts, or whatever, ya know...after. And I remember reading back somewhere that death was the balancing force to life, 'cause there couldn't be life without it 'cause it'd be too powerful and chaotic. So when life happens death comes attached and grows, or fluxes I guess, along with it, keeping things in line, stable-like."

"Anyway, I also heard somewhere else that the energy in nature and the universe, the winds and heat and light and stuff, is sorta alive just like living things, and living things are energy just like in nature. So what I remember hearing was that there had to be a balance to that energy in nature too, and it was similar to death, like the opposite of life, and was needed all over the place, but just sometimes, so it just might be stored inside living things all over, instead of just floating around, so nature and the universe didn't ever just cancel out and stop being."

"What they were telling me then was that this might be why people and forests and other stuff just hav'ta die sometimes without any good reason. It was this guy's explanation for stupid accidents and senseless stuff that other people call Acts of God...the universe just needs to get equaled out real quick-like somewhere, and whatever or whoever is right there on the spot gets picked...the universe just steals that opposite energy away from them right there on the spot."

"All this sounded pretty reasonable to me then, but the same guy also told me that the only reason he could think of for his moving all over the country was that the universe needed some of his stuff somewhere else, and then different stuff somewhere else, and so on, so it had him moving all around to keep the stuff of the universe balanced right...so I didn't really pay the first part much mind till all these people started dying funny-like recently."

"Your machine just beeped me so I'll hurry: I drew a line on the map from all the places where people died, in the direction where people said the white lights fly off, and they all sorta cross in the same place...just south of Little-River Park...down by your offices. Anybody else notice that?"

"And I been thinking, if you think about the awful

lot of power that has to be attached to what I just told ya about, if it is true, of course, then it makes you think something's awful wrong down by the park. Somethi..."
(End of message, no call back recorded)

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*How can you gather together
the thousand fragments
of each person? (George Seferis)*

520 MANOR ALLEY...5AM FRIDAY (THE 24TH)

"Haven't found out who you are, Mr. Benjamin Jonah Clark...not yet. But still I will admit you've made my job a lot easier. Gravy in fact, as soon as I can prove you simply did murder."

"I did no murder. I don't understand you."

(No reaction.)

"I don't know what you mean, 'Who am I?' I'm Ben Clark. That's all. I didn't kill anyone. I had nothing to do with what happened next door. What did happen next door? Who's dead? These are my neighbors! I know them! Won't you please tell me?"

"Ri-ight. For now, it's better if you tell me. You have anything more to say?"

"Anything different? No. The same...again?"

(No reaction.)

(A deep breath and slow release...without the sigh this time.)

(No reaction.)

"Okay...something woke me up, I don't know what. Awake, I heard a strange noise, a moan maybe, and saw a strange light...or glow maybe, out my bedroom window, from the east. I got out of bed, at 11:43, put on some pants, went out on the porch, nothing was there...no sound, no light, nothing. None of the security lights had been tripped, either end of the alley, no lights on the neighbor's porches, nothing. I walked down, out on the drive, to look up at the sky. It was clear, pretty, with some clouds. Then I went back in, took a leak, and went back to bed...at 11:57, I looked at the clock again. Your guys woke me up later, loud, 12:24, beating on my door. I peeked out through the glass door blinds, saw all the uniforms, and all the guns

swinging to point at me. You know the rest from them.”

“Ri-ight. You were very careful then, knew and made all the right moves, very careful indeed. One could even say...professional.”

(No reaction.)

“Ri-ight. Give me your simple explanation again, how you knew just what to do.”

“I watch a lot of cop shows, read crime novels. I think about them too. Quick and stupid gets you killed, especially when guns are drawn. Everybody’s always tense, itchy. I was scared but remembered. I switched on the light inside. Opened the blinds, hands showing and up. I then slowly opened the door and backed away. Slow and smart, that’s all.”

(No reaction.)

“And yeh...simple, huh?”

“Ri-ight.” The same wry stare met Ben’s same feigned bewilderment. No flipping of pocket notebook pages this time, no checking notes from the other times through. No need, it was pat. So, the same wry stare.

(No reaction.) A pat story, solid, meant either a good lie or the simple truth, and it was their job to find out which. Ben knew not to help them figure it out. Presumed innocent meant ‘pat’ was on his side. Ben played the good citizen...professionally? Maybe too little emotion, a little deadpan, maybe, but he read crime novels...right? Watched cop shows and sorta knew the game...right? Besides, when his own wry smile slipped by his vigilance, or an occasional deep breath pause and start over, again, couldn’t be helped and they fit in okay.

“Ri-ight. Tell me about your day again, from the beginning, all of it, again.” A good citizen stays a little scared, all the way through, remembering everything they’ve done since grade school that they don’t want found out, certainly not now. Most of them get frustrated, maybe even a little pissed, because they really didn’t do what they’re being badgered about, but they usually don’t get indignant and clam-up. A citizen wants to trust the good guys, help find the bad guys. They want to be a good citizen, maybe a little bit of a hero too.

“From the beginning, all of it...again?!?”

(No reaction.)

“Okay...okay...! I’ll start with breakfast...? Lunch...?
Of course. The target range...my little bag of guns.”

(No reaction.)

“Hey, Sarge! Oh, sorry...but the Lieutenant needs you
out here before EMS leaves.”

Ben was relieved and tried hard not show it. He needed a short mental break, though his mind started wandering again through that Tulsa rail-yard of seven years ago. He’d spent a lot of time wandering there lately, but it was definitely not the best place to be under the present circumstances.

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“This is it? The light at the end of the tunnel?”

“Not near what was promised. Not at all. Where’s the overwhelming brightness. The warm glow. And that peace...where’s the wonderful feeling of peace? It’s bright, yes, in all this darkness, but so disappointingly...”

Ben always remembered his teasing himself, or his poking fun at God, whichever it was. He wished he could remember more of it, and less vaguely. That joking around convinced him later, once healed and reasonably whole again, he hadn’t really thought he was dead, hadn’t yet faced off with death, not squarely at least. Ben was sure he’d just forgotten he was alive for a while.

“Why is this shaft of light so narrow, slashing across the sky of this dim new world? Why doesn’t it welcome me, or even include me? How can it save me from way over there?”

Ben’s beseeching, his berating, trying to cajole the little beam of light to shine on him, to protect and save him, was probably what kept him alive for days in that boxcar. Or kept bringing him back to life, after the moments he would listen to the arguments of his wounds. The hateful belligerence of those three slugs in his stomach, or the constant sobbing of the bled-out bullet crease across his skull. Worse, the screaming protests of his left arm and right leg, twisted into positions impossible without those horrible breaks to their bones. All these voices had convincing enough reasons for him to die.

Ben often questioned his delusions about the little

beam, a rail yard floodlight reduced to penlight size by a hole in the wall, he guessed, seen so bright because of the boxcar's darkness. Was his little mind-game known to him first then intentionally forgotten? Had he first thought to save himself, or had his life-force merely willed it?

The red-haze he remembered, coming, and going, then returning again, and again, was probably the brighter darkness of his days in there, the glow of baffled sunlight through closed eyelids. Or maybe that was the color of first footfalls in Hell? There were some glimpses, or imaginings, of the thing he was teasing the light to be, right near the end, he thought. Of the overwhelming light. Of being prodded toward its source.

The last thing he remembered before falling into his blackness, his 'coma' they called it, was a great flash of cold pain, the first he'd felt of himself for such a long time, and the faint joyful sound of his own voice. With these that great bright flash of unimaginable white light, the color of a cool autumn wind, howling, swelling up all around and through Ben's consciousness, then soaking back into it cold and gone again.

The doctors never determined for sure if Ben had 'died' and come back. The scans were inconclusive.

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"Come on, Bub, wake up. Time to hit the road. Come on, wake up!"

Sidney kicked the foot of what he thought was just another homeless derelict, fallen drunk, sprawled awkwardly, and sleeping it off in 'his' boxcar. Another one he couldn't be as vicious with as his partner down the line, it just wasn't in Sidney's nature. Sidney Norton, lying-SOB, a reputation he would always deserve even though he'd been a model husband and father for over a year now, and truly believed he'd remain so from now on. He simply could not do that part of his job. Sidney couldn't make himself violently discourage these poor wretches from returning to this rail yard he was 'protecting'.

"Wake up!"

Sidney kicked the foot a little harder, but not much harder, then moved around the unflinching body to shine his flashlight in the drunk's eyes. That's when Sidney saw the pool of blood sticking the side of that awful dead face to

the dirty floorboards of the boxcar. Then the bigger pool all around the body's facedown belly. And that hand, facing backwards up at him at such an unnatural angle.

Then too is when Sidney Norton needed to leave soon or soon throw-up and started thinking he could just leave all this mess for someone else to find. And almost immediately wished he hadn't thought it, though he still wished he could make himself do it.

"But she'll kill me if I screw up this trip. She'll never believe this...she'll think I'm lying again...Damn it! You'll keep me here till mid-day at least. A dead body...damn...I'll miss the flight!"

"DAMN IT!"

One last frustrated kick before calling for help, hard this time, luckily to that crooked right leg, and a long pent-up panic moaned quietly from the body of Ben Jonah.

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