

Revenants

About an hour after they left the scene of the accident, he pulled the car into the motel parking lot. He got out stiffly, feeling the day's long drive in his legs and back, and went around and took the two small overnight cases from the hatch, set them down by the passenger side and opened her door. The amber light from the motel entranceway striped her face, and where it did not mark her skin, she was as waxen as the woman who had warned them, the woman they had seen walking toward them on the highway. Dark hair had made a backlit corona around her face and she had stepped out of the dense fog with the stiff-legged gait of a movie revenant. He had felt the soft descent of his lover's hand on the sleeve of his jacket then and felt something of her thoughts; if she had said anything, it might have been, "Oh my god," "What's happened?" or "Jesus Christ, an accident."

The woman had appeared to float toward them and his car, too, was floating. He expected to hear at any moment a theme song from an old television show or movie from the black-and-white period. According to the script, he would raise his arm in a slow-motion gesture as he drove them slowly out of the frame and into some real place, brightly lit.

Instead they came slowly upon the wreckage. The collision had been close to head on, with an angle of attempted escape at the last possible moment. The SUV still retained its shape, but he could not even tell the make of the small car. The jaws of life were just then prying the top off of it.

"Don't look," he was mouthing, numb, but it was too late.

She turned in her seat, turned toward the wreckage and saw a giant can opener prying the lid off a tin of dead creatures. She glimpsed the leg of some kind of silky blonde dog stiffly erect in the back seat. She saw the woman's face pressed against the passenger window, looking out at

her with the widest expression of surprise. She imagined the woman saying, “Christ, don’t try to pass here in this fog—don’t--” the way she herself had at times challenged a driver. Drivers never listened to passengers.

“Are you able to stand?” he said. But she remained folded in the passenger seat. She did not even look at him.

“A moment,” he said. He opened the heavy motel doors, the mean kind that always pushed against you, closing again if you did not brace yourself. Whose idea of hospitality? He felt like saying something about the quality of meanness and hardness in people and doors, and this in the face of the possibility that death might overtake us at any moment. But instead he approached the desk, placed the bags on the faded carpet and gave the woman, who still did not look up, his name and reservation number. In fact, he handed her the faxed slip of paper with the necessary information on it.

“No,” she said into the phone. “I don’t see nothing wrong with a greenback shower per se, but what rots my socks is she put a figure on it.”

“Excuse me,” he said, “excuse me. Can you take care of this, get it set up? I’ve got a friend in the car who’s had a bad shock. There was an accident.”

She looked up. “Just a second, sir,” she said. Then, into the phone, “I gotta go Ramona, there’s a man here with a accident victim.” She sounded important, seemed to grow a little taller in her orange chair.

He left her with his credit card and went back outside. She was still sitting there with the door hanging open, the overhead light on, oblivious to the ding-ding-ding ringing in the air all around her. He folded himself down until he could look up into her face. He touched her cheek. She did not respond. Her lips appeared bluish and there was a faint rime of sweat along her upper lip.

“Look,” he said. “Just let me get you inside. You’ve just had a shock.”

He unfolded her, bit by bit. She pushed against him.

“Please,” he kept saying, “please, don’t resist, just let me get us inside and straightened away.” The room had become for him a faraway grail, a refuge where he could finally close a door and sit on a bed and perhaps collapse.

She was as stiff as a board. The desk thing seemed to be taking an unnecessarily long time. At any moment he expected to see her fall, stiff as a plank, to the floor. Instead she wove dangerously in his peripheral vision; she seemed to have become destabilized at the hip joints.

A coded entry card, finally. He was a juggler on the way up, pressing the elevator button while holding onto the card, two overnight bags and a woman in a vertical coma. A short hall, a door, juggle, oops, gotcha—comic book words--and then she fell on the bed. When her head hit the pillow, her feet went up, and he remembered an old Newfoundland story about tying and untying a corpse in a state of rigor, so that it appeared to sit up during the prayers at its own wake, driving the mourners out of the upstairs window and into the rose hedge below. That corpse could have been no stiffer than this woman. Something rose in him—relief? anger? He felt he would laugh or cry any minute now; one or the other was pricking at his eyes and the corners of his dry mouth.

What kind of state would we be in, he wanted to ask her, if I too let myself fall apart? To say this would be a pre-emptive strike, because he knew later she would thank him for being so good to her, and she would slip in the observation that he was lucky not to be as sensitive a person as herself.

He said instead, “Would you like some tea?” The room had a little alcove that stood in for a kitchen. He put the kettle on. When it began to boil, he rummaged in her bag and found a small kit of what she considered necessities. He put a camomile bag in her cup, China black in his own.

“What would you like in it—honey?” he asked

“There’s no need to call me honey now. You never used endearments before.”

“I mean the tea. Do you want honey in it? Or?” He lifted her supplies. Raw sugar. A

lemon and a knife in a hemp sheath. Small containers of honey.

“I don’t care,” she said.

“Honey it is, then.”

He brought the cups to the night table closest to where she lay.

“What do you think? Should I turn on one of these lamps and turn off the overhead light?”

“Do whatever.”

He stood with his tea, the cup warming his hands, and drank deeply. He felt himself come alive inside the way he did after walking through a winter snowfall until he grew numb and had to bring himself back to life with a searing liquid. He looked around for a mini-bar, but there was none. They had gone cut-rate. He wished now they hadn’t. He would have liked to pour one of those little bottles of brandy into the tea. A stiffness lingered in the corners of his mouth, and he realized that he had driven that whole, silent last segment of the journey with his jaw clenched. He turned to the mirror, saw his hard gritted expression. No wonder she wouldn’t talk to him. She had not touched the tea, but still lay there, her right arm shielding her eyes.

“What are you doing?” The question seemed to cost her a great deal of energy.

“Nothing.”

“You’re looking at yourself in the mirror. At a time like this.”

“Not really. I’m just...”

“In a daze?”

“Yes.”

“You’re doing better than I am. You can function.”

“Is that what we came here for? To function?”

He had not meant to say it. But the words were out, and if she observed that they were bitter, acrid and charred, then he couldn’t argue with her this time.

“You’re absolutely right,” he said. “Before you say anything else, you can claim the high

ground right now.”

He saw her eyes in the mirror. They had opened wide and appeared to be solidly black. She edged herself up, propped herself against the pillows. Against the sickness of the bedspread’s faded swirls of pink and green, she seemed damaged. Her left leg was bent at an odd angle. Any minute now the emergency response team would rush in and bear her and her stretcher away. This was not really a motel room. This was not really a vacation.

He thought he must do something about the bright light. On the far side of the room, there was a standing lamp by a table next to a small balcony partially obscured by vertical blinds. He switched the lamp on, then looked for another. There was a reading lamp on what would be his side of the bed, and he turned that on too. He walked to the entrance and switched off the one overhead. It was a relief the way everything softened. And now that her eyes did not have the thick wet gleam of leeches, he felt he could approach her.

He sat on the edge of the bed and removed her shoes and damp socks. Her feet were ice. He tried to warm them by abrading them between his hands, but instead it was as if the cold was spreading out from her and seeping into his fingers so that he could feel the first seizures of what might be arthritis in his joints.

He massaged her ankles, let his fingers wander slowly upward under the legs of her loose pants. There was a sharp stubble there. This felt almost too intimate for his touch now but he persisted. She did not seem to mind, but turned on her side as if to get more comfortable. He edged his body along the bed and stretched out beside her. He molded himself into her curved shape and wrapped his left arm around her. There was a swatch of bare skin between her t-shirt and pants, and this was almost as cold as her feet.

“I can’t tonight,” she said. She sighed heavily. “I hope you don’t think--”

“Oh no, no, I’m not trying to. I’m just trying to rub a little life back into you. You’re freezing.”

She turned to face him. She said, “I’ll never get that picture out of my mind.”

“I tried to warn you. I wish--”

“I would have looked anyway. Christ, that thing like a big can opener. That dead woman’s face. Fuck. I’ll never get it out of my mind.”

They were silent. He searched for something to say, but nothing would come. The bedside clock gave a digital twitch, a small click, and the hour turned over. It was 11:00. It struck him that one never heard such things as this small clock sound except in the worst possible moments.

She had her eyes shut; the lids twitched at the corners. “I can see her now,” she said.

He tried to pull her close, tried to hold her to him, but she struggled away. He felt the motel door again against his tense forearms. He felt as if the world had been hitting him all day, daring him to hit back.

“Look, I’m sorry,” she said, “but I need to be in my own space right now.” She turned away. She said, “Excuse me, can you get up for a minute?” When he did, she pulled the bedding down and wriggled in, fully dressed.

He went to lie down again but something about the bed excluded him. It was the thing about her “own space.” He could not figure where it began and ended. It was impossible for him to talk about this without sounding sarcastic. He had been told this, by two different women. He had ideas about order and logic and symmetry but when he opened his mouth, they apparently turned to sarcasm.

He caught her saying something quietly now, “...rethink this, really.”

“Sorry, what?”

“I said, you or I could die in an accident and no one would tell the other one. We’ve got to rethink this, really.”

He had no answer and she didn’t seem to want one. He went to the small armchair under the standing lamp and sat, feeling irritated. He felt as stiff and sore as he did on one of those Saturdays when he dutifully shoveled compost all day long after a protracted procrastination.

This chair, now, this whole place was built for discomfort. The chair was too small to comfortably seat a human body, yet it was shaped like an armchair—what a joke. Every time he moved, something hurt, his back, his shoulders, his buttocks. The quality of the light too was brash and vicious, poking at his eyes. He listened to his lover’s inhalations and registered the shift into uneasy sleep.

The word “lover” was on his mind as he descended the stairs. What were we thinking? he asked himself. To slip away, to invent a story, to meet in a pretty restaurant by a river, to abscond, to drive down that long highway with its darkness and ghosts and skittish fauna, only to find themselves here, to cheapen it all with this inadequate place with not even a comfortable chair for the cast-out lover, not even a mini-bar for the drowning of such predictable sorrows.

The small bar had the air of a place in which one would wait for a taxi. It smelled like some furniture polish he remembered from a long time ago. There were a couple of figures hunched over drinks, solitary at small tables. One male, one female, both sour-looking. A bright light shining in from the street had turned their faces preternaturally white.

“What can I get you?” The bartender had turned to him.

“Just a beer, any kind, doesn’t matter and I think some change--”

“For the cigarette machine.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a devil trying to quit, isn’t it?” The bartender put the beer and the change in front of him. “Guy,” he said, pointing to the name tag on his shirt and then holding out his hand.

“Daniel.” He extended his own. This formality of introduction seemed oddly intimate to him, as if he and the bartender must now share some story, reveal to each other some smidgen of detail. Daniel found himself stumped, staring at his own reflection in the bar mirror behind Guy. It made him look as if he were in a whisky ad; a bottle appeared cradled to his cheek. A has-been and greyed Narcissus, lost in his reflection among the whorls of etched glass. For the second time today, he was caught looking at himself. Or through himself and out the other side.

There was nothing out there.

“Well, Daniel,” Guy said, “are you the fellow who was in the accident? Let me make you a stiff one. Darlene on the desk said the new guest and his companion were in an accident. Was that you?”

“We weren’t in it, we only witnessed it. And not it, but after. But she, ah, my companion, ah, Gail, she, ah, yeah, she’s kind of in shock.”

“Rough stuff, man. And you on your holidays. Rough stuff. Tomorrow, though, man, everything’ll look different. You just get yourselves to the beach. Wind’ll blow it right away.” Guy ruffled his own hair as if he knew all about wind and trouble, and could possibly conjure that wind right now.

Daniel opened the cigarettes reluctantly. He didn’t really smoke anymore, but there was a thing, a mechanism unknown and unnamed for which cigarettes were the nearest substitute. Gail. He’d stumbled over her name, as if he had no right to have it on his tongue. It struck him that he had not said her name for hours. It would have been saved for that first moment when they stretched against each other under the sheet. He would have brought his face close to hers and stroked her hair, said, “Gail...” But now.

“Another?” Guy asked, pointing to Daniel’s drained glass.

“No thank-you. I think I’ll go out for a little walk and smoke outside.”

A walk was what he intended. But when he pushed the resisting door and found himself in the parking lot, the wind had risen. Small particles of sand and asphalt swirled in sudden gusts; a white plastic bag danced sideways toward him and sucked at his ankles. He thought the margin of the driveway, with its border of rhododendrons more beautiful than anything he had seen or expected in the last several hours, might be enough for him. Beyond lay a thick darkness.

He stood and smoked. He thought he heard his wife approaching. It was still at some distance, but unmistakably a shopping cart. The minute he left town, his wife went shopping. She went to all the big places, his small round wife, to Price Club and the Home Decor

Superstore and the designer discount outlets. When he came home, she usually had surprises for him. He would lie in new sheets, turn from his shower into thick towels he didn't recognize, as if he'd gone from one hotel to another. There might be shirts of Egyptian cotton. Always there were packages too large for them; they were dwarfed and diminished by everything from their cheese to their detergent. Once all the chairs had been slipcovered, the house crackling and smelling faintly of sizing.

“What?” he'd said.

“Oh, Danny, I hope you like it,” she'd said, using the diminutive that had suited him when he was twenty-two and she nineteen.

“Hunter green and dusty pink are out,” she said. “Really, really out. All the bakeries are using them. Too passé.”

“So what's this?”

“Pineapple. And kiwi. Oh—and this touch here—mango. The paint is ordered.”

To him it seemed like an unpalatable mixture of too many fruit acids, furniture to be metabolized rather than merely sat on, but this was the kind of thing he had learned not to say.

The cart was closer now. She would round the corner any minute, tiny and purposeful and dwarfed by the immense supercart. He felt a wave of love for her, so much so he found himself stepping out of the rhododendrons to confess all the mistakes he had made that had affronted her constancy and her warm heart. He stomped on the cigarette and wished he had a mint. Imagine her here, coming all this distance.

The shopping cart swung into view.

“Shit,” the woman said. “Holy shit.”

The cart careened by him and hit the hedge sideways, tipped over onto the pavement with a series of rough clangs. Broken glass.

“Now look what you gone and done. Jesus Christ. Hidin in the bushes. Jumpin out at people. Per—vert. Jesus Christ.”

A bag of plastic pop bottles was rolling away down the lot. Daniel ran after it. "Let me help you. Sorry, sorry, didn't mean..."

The woman turned on him. Her face was red and her eyes weepy. She adjusted a cap that at first seemed to be some strange arrangement of her grey hair. Daniel had the impression of a man's brown trench coat over pink sweats.

"You get outa here. Scarin people. Poppin out. Just tryin to make a livin, y'know. Jesus Christ. I got a good mind to yell rape."

She bent and picked up something shiny. "This yours? I'll just hang onto it. Case I need evidence. Got your name on it."

He saw her put the monogrammed lighter his wife had given him long before she thought he needed changing into her coat pocket.

"Now just a moment--" he began. But he stopped with his arms half out in a reasonable gesture. Something plummeted in him. He thought he might be water experiencing the descent of a stone. The parking lot seemed oddly lit, too orange. He saw the woman's wild hair and the puffy rhododendron blossoms tilting and shifting in the wind. Car lights swung over the space, and who knew what that car might bring. Nothing was rooted. It might all blow away. He turned toward the entranceway. His feet felt as if they were a few inches above the pavement. He tried to press them down, make hard contact. The car swung into the lot. He did not turn around.

Daniel made for the door, and he must have flung himself at it, for he found himself suddenly launched into the motel lobby at a speed that almost knocked him off his feet. Someone gasped. It was Darlene behind the desk, on her feet now, her hands raised in front of her in alarm. He looked behind him then, looked around to see what danger she might be trying to fend off, but there was nothing and no one. There was only himself.