

T H E A P P A R I T I O N

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

STILL HALF-ASLEEP, Randall glanced at the lighted face of the clock. Five AM. Too early to be awake. He tried closing his eyes again. His body hummed like he had his fingers in an outlet. From the far side of the bed came the faint rasp of Gwen's snoring. It was a physical effort to hold still, to stay in bed at all.

You need sleep, he told himself. With the long drive coming up this afternoon and the work still to do on those programs...He kicked irritably at the covers and rolled onto his back.

A man stood at the end of the bed.

Randall felt his hands claw into the mattress. He blinked hard, trying to make his eyes clear and his heart start beating again.

In the faint light from the street outside the man was just an outline, little more than a shadow. His arms came up as Randall watched, and he seemed to be pushing out with them in slow motion, like someone under water.

Randall beat at the night table, trying to find the switch for the lamp. Finally he got his hand around it and fumbled it on. In the sudden wash of light he saw the apparition clearly for an instant, then it faded away.

Gwen came awake with a short cough. She rolled onto her forearms and stared at Randall. "What time is it? What are you doing?"

Randall stared blankly at her, seeing her as a stranger for an instant. Then, as the shock wore off and he kept looking at her sleep-swollen eyes and her tangled nest of graying hair, he wanted to turn away from her and not answer at all.

"Robert? Are you all right?"

"It was nothing," he said. "A bad dream." He pulled the covers up around his shoulders and stared at the wall behind her. "Go back to sleep."

"Are you going to leave the light on?"

Randall turned it off and settled back under the covers with his back to her. He couldn't seem to get warm, and he was afraid to close his eyes again. Afraid that if he did, he'd see that ghostly face again.

The face that looked just like his own.

HE DRANK AN EXTRA cup of coffee to make up for the sleep he'd lost. All it seemed to do was twist his stomach into a tighter knot. Gwen sat across the table from him in a rumpled bathrobe, her face hidden behind the *Dallas Times Herald*.

It's not her fault, Randall thought. It wasn't like they had that much to fight about. They both had good jobs and the money was all right. It was an empty marriage, that was all. If they'd had kids it would only make things tougher when the breakup came, and Randall now believed that breakup was inevitable. And until it finally happened there would be the long silences and the short flares of temper.

He carried his cup into the kitchen and went back to the bedroom for his

coat. The day had come up cloudy and the room was nearly as dark as it had been at five that morning. Randall stood right where the apparition had been, at the foot of the bed. He felt cold again and turned away, grabbing a handful of tapes from the shelf behind him to take along on the drive.

"Maybe you shouldn't go to Tyler," Gwen said as he started for the front door.

"Why not?"

"I don't know what happened to you this morning, but you don't look so good."

"Thanks a lot."

"Something scared you."

"The only thing that scares me is that if I don't get out of here, I'm going to be late for work."

Gwen sighed. "When will you be home?"

"Tomorrow night. Late, probably."

She followed him to the door. "I'm sure." She pecked at his mouth and walked away.

What a jerk I am, Randall thought as he got in the car. I can't even manage to say a civil goodbye to my own wife. For a second he thought about going back inside, trying to patch things up, but he knew Gwen wouldn't even understand the gesture. It's over, he thought.

He started the car and slid the heat controls all the way to high. It was cold, even for late October, and the damp grey sky overhead didn't help things.

While the engine warmed up he glanced through the tapes. Something light, he thought, something to get him through the traffic on 635. He picked out a Mozart quartet and pushed it into the tape player. After a second of silence the car filled with the crisp sound of violins.

Randall took the Tollway north, holding his speed to 55 and letting the other cars roar past him on the left. Without his wanting to, his mind went back to what he'd seen that morning, like fingers touching the edges of a fresh wound, trying to define it, to make it real.

Nothing like that had ever happened to him before. When he thought of the occult he had an image of the *National Enquirer*, with headlines like "Elvis Speaks From Beyond The Grave." It was something that people who'd been to college could only laugh at.

Then why couldn't he just dismiss it as a trick of the light, or a holdover from a bad dream? What made it so frightening?

He jockeyed for an opening in the line of cars merging from Forest Lane. Finally someone slowed for a tenth of a second at the yield sign and Randall got in. He missed the light at Monfort, as always, and eventually got onto the 635 access ramp. Cars shot past him at 70 and 80 miles an hour, the drivers sprawled behind their wheels, fish-eyed and hostile. Randall saw a gap and went for it, flooring the Cutlass and feeling the characteristic lag in the transmission.

This was part of the problem too, he knew. The pressures of the city were enormous, the crowding, the traffic, the dirty air. For a job he cared about or a family that meant something to him it might have been worth the strain. But his job was routine, subject to shifting office politics, and the company had just gotten too big for him. Driving to work had become like swimming in an Olympic-sized pool of sharks, twice a day, for reasons that no longer made sense to him.

He worked his way across the lanes of traffic, trying to relax and concentrate on the music. He hummed a few familiar bars and made his hands relax their numbing grip on the wheel.

The music stopped.

“What the hell?” He ejected the tape and pushed it in again, but there was still no music.

Instead there was another sound.

It was like a distant wind, combined with a hiss like a radio between stations. Randall felt his neck tingling and stabbed his foot at the brake.

A car squealed and honked behind him. Randall could see an angry face in the rear view mirror as the car whipped around him. He pushed the brake pedal again and pulled the car off onto the center median.

The sound of the wind got louder, and Randall shrank into his jacket, his arms wrapped tight around his chest. He felt like the wind was blowing straight through him, arctic cold.

A voice came out of the wind.

It was a whisper, slurred with static, but Randall managed to make out most of the words.

“...not to take the (crackle) road...westbound in a (crackle, hiss)...danger is...(long hiss)...death...death...death...” The voice started to echo, building to a roar of feedback. Randall slammed the eject button with the flat of his hand. The cassette flew out of the machine, trailing loops of crumpled tape behind it.

It was five minutes before his hands were steady enough to let him drive.

COOL GREEN LINES of type scrolled up Randall's CRT as he tried to concentrate on his work. His program was caught in a closed loop, cycling back and forth and printing out the same message, over and over. It should have been easy to fix, but he couldn't get his mind to stay on the problem.

He looked up to see the programming manager standing behind him. “Hi, Janet,” he said.

“You going to have all that ready to take to Tyler this afternoon?” she asked.

“Sure. Just one little bug in the print program.”

“They won't be printing anything for a while, so don't worry about it. Just get it on up there as soon as you can. They need to start building their master files.”

“I'll have it,” Randall said. She didn't think he could handle this job, and he didn't want to give her proof she was right.

She nodded. “Rough night last night?”

Is it that obvious? he thought. “I...couldn't sleep,” he told her.

“Just don't flake out on the highway,” she said, and moved on.

Am I cracking up? Randall wondered. First Gwen, now Janet, telling him how bad he looked. He pictured himself sitting at this desk, eyes bloodshot and wandering.

He had to talk to somebody. He reached for the phone, thought for a minute, then looked up a number in his Rolodex.

“Tom? This is Bob Randall. Can you meet me for lunch?”

TOM CASEY WAS PALE and heavy, with black-framed glasses and thinning hair. He was still wearing his white jacket when he showed up at

Alaman's.

"So what is it, Bob?" he asked. "Problems with Gwen?"

"That too, I guess," Randall said. "I don't know what it is. I feel like I'm about to fall apart, start shooting people on the freeway or something, like all those people in the newspapers."

"That's just life in the big city."

"Yeah, but today it's different. Things have been happening..."

"What sort of things?"

Randall traced a circle on the table top with his glass. "It's hard to talk about...Look, Tom, you work with nut cases all day, but I know you've still got an open mind. I remember some of the things we used to talk about in college."

"Such as?"

"Supernatural stuff. Ghosts and like that."

"You've seen one?"

Randall described the thing at the foot of his bed, and the voice on the tape.

"Did you recognize the voice?" Casey asked.

"You mean, was it my voice? I don't know. It was a whisper. It could have been."

Casey began to massage the back of his left hand.

"I've heard of cases like this before. There's a German word, *doppelganger*, that describes them. The Britons call them 'co-walkers.' The legend says if you speak sharply to it, it'll just go away."

"But what does it mean? Why am I seeing this...whatever it is?"

Casey looked uncomfortable. "Well, it's supposed to happen in times of stress..."

"What kind of stress? Like my hating my job and my marriage? Is that what you're talking about?"

"Well, maybe that too..."

"C'mon, Tom, spit it out."

After a long pause, Casey said, "They say you only see your co-walker when you're about to die."

Randall slumped back in his chair. "That's not funny."

"It wasn't supposed to be. Hey, look, what are you getting so upset for? You never believed in this stuff anyway."

"You weren't there," Randall said. "You didn't see what I saw."

"Okay, maybe you did see something. Maybe it's just nerves. Either way, it seems like the best thing to do is take the rest of the day off, maybe the rest of the week. Stay close to the house, relax, don't take any chances."

"I can't. I have to go to Tyler this afternoon."

"Get sick or something."

"No chance. I wrote this software, I've got to install it. If it doesn't go in this afternoon, the company gets sued and I'm out on my ass."

"Have it your way," Casey said. "But take it slow and easy."

Outside the first drops of rain were starting to fall.

PLEASE STAND BY
The program was still in the loop. Randall had made three or four changes and recompiled it time after time, but it still kept cycling back to the same message.

PLEASE STAND BY

He had the listing of the source program spread out under his right hand, a pencil poised to come down on the error, but he'd been through it so many times he didn't even have to look at the code anymore.

PLEASE STAND BY

The program was like a maze, full of twists and turns. Now he was trapped in it, coming back to the same dead end time after time.

PLEASE STAND BY

The hum of the CRT was hypnotic, and too much food. at lunch had left him drowsy and dull. Almost without his being aware of it, his right arm began to move.

PLEASE STAND BY

PLEASE STAND BY

Suddenly his hand crashed into the side of the CRT and he sat up straight in his chair. What had happened to him? He looked down at the listing and saw the long, looping scrawl and felt a yell of terror straining inside him.

Dontgodontgodontgodontgo

He crushed the pencil into the thick pad of greenbar paper and bit his left hand until he tasted blood.

THE RAIN WAS FALLING straight, thick and hard. Holding the box of diskettes under his coat to protect it, Randall sprinted to his car. The temperature was in the high forties, but the rain was far colder, and mixed with bits of sleet.

Randall sat with the engine running and the heater on high until he had his shivering under control. Then he inched out of the parking lot and made for Central Expressway.

He tried the radio. Lightning kept sending bursts of static through the speakers that tore at his nerves. Two hours, he thought, maybe two and a half with this weather. I just have to be very careful for a couple of hours.

Central was jammed, a horizontal Christmas tree of flashing red lights. He inched along, squirming with impatience, flinching each time a big truck passed him and doused his car with its backwash.

Finally he was clear of the city and headed east on 1-20. The traffic had thinned out and Randall was able to relax a little.

Maybe it was just the strain. Maybe what he'd seen was a sort of wish fulfillment, as if his desire to get away from Dallas and Gwen had actually split him in half, left half of him behind to go on working and freed the other half to move on.

It was an appealing thought, but he wished he'd gotten the other end of the deal.

Still, he was getting away now. Even if it was only as far as Tyler. Every mile he put behind him felt better than the one before. A green and white road sign said Tyler was 71 miles away.

I should leave town more often, he thought. It's no wonder I've been seeing things.

A car pulled up behind him and edged into the left lane. Randall slowed, waiting for it to pass.

It didn't.

Gradually Randall realized what he'd seen in the rear view mirror. The car had been a maroon Cutlass, identical to his own. And the man behind the wheel...

Randall looked slowly to his left and saw his own face in the car next to him, glassy-eyed, mouthing words to him.

Randall could read the words. They were: "Go back. Go back."

The rain was falling through the image of the car. "Get away from me!" Randall shouted. "Get away!"

Casey was wrong, he thought, half hysterically. Yelling at it isn't doing any good at all...

For the first time Randall was completely terrified. The confusion and anger were gone, and his skin felt cold and damp. The car suddenly seemed like something huge, alien and hostile, barely in his control. He hit the brakes, feeling the Cutlass shudder, wanting only to be parked at the side of the road and not moving anymore.

The rear end slid a little and Randall let up on the brake, tapping it gently, pulling back hard on the steering wheel. He coasted to a stop on the shoulder and turned the engine off. His hands felt like two slabs of dough, completely without strength. He stared at them for what must have been a long time, then looked up through the windshield.

The other Cutlass was parked in front of him, a hundred feet away. The other Randall was standing beside the car, still expressionless in the headlights, waving to him. His arm made a sweeping, upward gesture, over and over.

It was like watching a closed loop of film.

What does he want from me? Randall thought, close to panic. He forces me off the road, and now he wants me out in the rain? For what?

In the distance, coming toward him from the westbound lane, Randall heard the low moan of a truck's horn.

Out of the car, he realized. He wants me out of the car.

He opened the door, and a gust of wind blew rain into his face. He stood up and shouted, "*What do you want? What is it?*"

He could see the truck now. It was coming fast, two big headlights out of the darkness, and Randall could hear the horn bellowing again.

Coming much too fast.

"Jesus Christ!" Randall started running toward the ghostly image of himself, who kept waving him on.

The truck hurtled the median, seemed to be sailing through the air.

Randall saw a culvert at the edge of the road and threw himself into it, burying his head in the icy water as the world exploded behind him.

AFTER THE SHOCK WAVE passed, Randall got to his knees and looked back. The truck had driven through the roof of his car, and fire spread through both of them, crackling in the rain and gushing clouds of black, oily smoke.

Behind the cracked windshield of the car, Randall saw something move.

He braced himself with both arms against the side of the culvert and looked again. It was still there. A body, slumped forward across the wheel.

His body.

As Randall watched, the eyes slowly opened. The skin of the forehead and cheek began to blister and turn black as the eyes looked out and found Randall where he lay in the ditch.

Closed loop, Randall thought. The circle joins itself. Except that this time I'm on the outside.

The head seemed to nod and one eye seemed to close as the smoke and

flames filled the inside of the car.

Randall got to his feet and began to run.

WHEN THE CAR stopped for him he was soaked through and shivering, but it didn't seem to matter.

“Where you headed?” the driver asked. He seemed friendly enough, a salesman type, and Randall climbed in beside him.

“Up the road,” he said, closing his eyes. “Wherever it goes.”

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