

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

*Scott David*

### **Intrusion**

MY SISTER PEERS OVER MY SHOULDER as if the intruder might yet be hiding in my apartment.

"Again?"

I nod. He's done no harm, but we all sense these light-touch visits are precursors to something far more calamitous.

"You should call the police," she suggests.

"No."

"I'm going to call if you don't."

"No. It's fine."

I don't want to call the police. I don't want this to end in some ordinary way, in cuffs, a mental health evaluation, a restraining order. I want to trap the bastard and tame him. Feed him, and ask him to stay.

"I'm not going to force you to do what you don't want to do," my sister says, but she sounds as if she just might. She's a tough no-nonsense broad with a husband and four good kids. She was the one who dragged me to the firing range after the attack. We shot pistols for hours and hours. I got better than she will ever be, which gave my sister more satisfaction than if she had proved the more talented.

"I'll leave you alone now," she says. "But please ... for me. Do it. Make the call."

As soon as my sister goes, I take the usual precautions: lock the doors, rig the alarms, monitor the closed circuit TV, weigh my Glock 19, and wait.

I'm not going to make the call. I called the police once already. The first time. That conversation went something like this:

"How do you know he was here?" asked Officer Beefy, an oversized Italian who looked as if he had trouble keeping his hands to himself.

"How do you know it's a he?" asked Officer Cooper, a female African-American officer who was a succession of half-circles: round face, round shoulder, wide hip, big butt.

*How do you know anything?* I thought. *How can you be certain of your own name?*

The officers skeptically examined the meager clues: scuff of dirt, adjusted photographs with telltale trails of dust, a depression in the sofa cushions, the radio left playing, the bathroom light on. The smell.

"Can't you smell that smell?" I asked.

The officers conferred softly.

Officer Cooper gently suggested perhaps I was just experiencing the aftermath of my grief. "Perhaps you should go stay with your sister until your head's in the right place?"

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Officer Beefy, a gallant man's man, the kind of guy who hates to see a woman cry, shook his head and said ominously, "I've seen this happen before. They read about you on the news so much they think they know you. There's all kinds of sickos out there."

I was drawn to Officer Beefy's gallantry, but I bristled at the word *sicko*. My intruder wasn't *sick*. Or at best, he was sick at heart, like me.

"We can station a detail here," Officer Beefy offered, but unenthusiastically. He wasn't sure he believed me. But he did have a brother in law with a business installing closed circuit TV.

"Would you like that?"

"Sure," I said, "I'd like that. So I can watch my own murder."

He looked shocked, so I told him it was a joke, a bad one, and he chuckled gallantly.

I said, "Send your brother in law over."

Now my entire life is televised to an audience of one. Today's tape watches me watch yesterday's tape over and over. This is how I spend my days.

Before the intruder started to come, I used to leave the TV on for company. But every once in a while, someone would reminisce about the bombing or profile another victim's relentless courage and recovery and indomitable spirit.

"One thing to lose a leg," I would shout at the screen.

Three straight weeks of no show and clutched Glocks and endless loops of closed circuit television convince me I'm finally rid of my intruder. Gone. Forever. Back where he came. His disappearance empties me. For the first time since the attack, I force myself to sort through closets and old photographs as if I could be refilled.

"I can do that for you, you know," my sister says, but she's not eager, so I tell her it's something I need to do for myself. She nods like she understands. She smiles. I smile. I have no idea what I mean by what I've said, but the response is conventional enough not to elicit pity, which is what I get when I say something really weird.

When the intruder's visits resume, I am thrilled and relieved. I put aside other projects to deduce the pattern of his visits. Their rhythm. If, as Officer Beefy suggested, he is drawn to my loss, its crests and valleys, the intruder must see what I don't see. To me, the grief is always the same dull toothache. Unlike him, it doesn't come and go.

When I go out, clerks notice the name on my credit card. They gasp, "You're not the girl who ...? I'm so sorry for your loss."

Some want details, but are afraid to ask. Some want reassurance. Some just want me gone, out of sight and mind. Calamity always seems contagious.

A few simply go quiet. Their eyes fill, and -- pressing my card into my palm -- they hold just too long. Their mouths open, but no words emerge, because what would be the point?

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The intruder, I expect, will have more to say. Obviously, he already knows the details. He's not uncomfortable. He's not afraid of contagion, and I've seen no evidence of sympathetic tears. He has a purpose in coming here. It's not random.

Officer Beefy comes back, this time without Officer Cooper. He's a huge presence, as big as a horse, standing maybe too close to me, but I don't cede ground. I've called him because I need to feel believed. I show him the footage from the closed circuit TV. There's an undeniable shadow crossing the floor.

"I wasn't here," I said. "It must be him." As proof, I furnish a credit card receipt that matches time with the tape.

Officer Beefy regrets the truth of his own two eyes, because he now wants me crazy. If I'm crazy, he can go home to his wife and kids, avoid the paperwork, enjoy a beer and not be kept up at night. He runs the footage back a few times as if he could erase it, then sits back and sighs. Now, officially, he'll feel guilty if anything ever happens to me.

"OK," he finally says.

"OK I'm not crazy?"

"OK, we have something here."

He tours the apartment, looking for *modes of ingress*. (These are his words, not mine.)

"Who else has a key?" he asks.

"No one. My sister. The super, I guess."

"The super."

"It's not him."

"How do you know?" he challenges. "How do you know it's not him?"

Officer Beefy would like it to be the super. He'd like to have a suspect, preferably uncooperative, whom he could violently subdue.

"I know," I said firmly.

"People aren't always what you think they are."

I don't correct him, but the truth is, since the bombing, I've known *exactly* who people are. Every single one of them. Just one glance.

Listen: I looked in the bomber's eyes. I may even have smiled at him, or said excuse me. I don't allow myself to think that. I don't want to have done him any kindness. Or even politeness, which is not the same thing.

"I know who *you* are," I say.

Officer Beefy flushes beet red. He's clearly been having dirty thoughts about me. Which ought to be gratifying, but is only interesting. Slightly.

I describe the exchange to my sister.

She snaps, "It's probably that cop. Or his brother in law. Excuses so they can come back again and again."

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My sister resents their easy good looks. She's drawn to them. She doesn't like me to be alone in the apartment when strange men are there.

"You need to be careful," she says. "Trust no one. What if he came when you were home?"

"The cop?"

"The guy."

The question elicits a naughty thrill. *What if I contrived to be home for one of his visits? What then?*

I admit: I take to faking my own absence. I sneak around back in the alley, where I have wedged a rock in the seldom-used door to the basement laundry that the super rarely disturbs. I come back up in the service elevator and sit in the dark. It's like lying in wait to kill God, or grief. Or even your lover. Or even your little boy. I imagine how the bombers must have felt, waiting. Which makes me queasy.

This was madness. If the intruder is indeed watching me, as I certainly hope he is (or why all the fuss), he would detect my tricks. He would think they were beneath me. Not that it matters. He probably doesn't mind seeing the worst of me: the dishes in the sink, the unwashed underwear, the bras on the shower rail, the pitiful shrine to my lover and my little boy I can't bear to disassemble. These are the only clutter in the whole apartment. The rest I cleared out, because objects seem to have sharp edges and I was always cutting myself. And objects they always seem to multiply and get too close, like people offering condolences unwanted.

When the intruder's visits persist, my sister conceives a different explanation, something supernatural.

"Wouldn't that be sweet," I say.

"I wish you would come with me to church," she says.

"No," I say softly.

"There are some nice guys there."

I kiss my forefinger and place it on her lips.

"I know," she says, "it's too soon. I'm sorry."

"I can't quite conceive of how it could ever be time enough," I whisper. "Which is probably what people mean by *too soon*. I'm guessing you never really arrive at a good place with grief; you just decide one day to go through the motions. And everyone's relieved and declares you *over it*."

"You can't blame me for trying. You're my sister."

"I am," I say.

I laugh. There's solidity in sisterhood. Timelessness. A false sort of security, maybe, but not nothing at all.

Still, all things change. Some change sooner than others. Some in a burst of noise and flame and regret. Some when your guard is let down.

Be vigilant, I tell myself. A watched pot never boils. I am boiling.

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My sister tells me to get some rest.

"What if I fell asleep and he came while I slept and I missed him?"

"Don't even tell me," she says. "You're hunting him. You're lying in wait. You're *provoking* him. I know it. I *know* you."

"Maybe."

"I forbid it. I absolutely forbid it." Her tone tightens, pitches high and breaks.

"You're just afraid you might get caught," I accuse. "You're the one whose doing it."

"What? Why on earth would I do something like that?"

I explain: she's been so intent on trying to comfort me: the guns to re-bolster my sense of security, the single guys at her church, the desensitization training so I can again tolerate loud noises in public without breaking a sweat.

"Maybe this is supposed to be a kind of comfort or distraction. So I won't be alone in the world."

"That's crazy," she splutters. "Who would want to have a stalker watching you all the time?"

"Beats being alone."

"And besides ..."

"What?"

"I was with you last time you said he was here."

"Maybe you gave your key to someone else," I say.

She produced her key ring from her purse.

"It's where it always is," she says quietly. "You can count on it."

I try to look reassured. She gives me a hug, kisses me on the forehead. There's really nothing you can count on. We both know that. Nothing but bombs. Bombs are forever.

"Why is it you believe me?" I ask. "The cops don't believe me."

She looks discomfited, fidgets, picks up a photograph, sees who it is, and quickly returns it to place. Contagion.

"You're my sister," she says and looks away.

She absolutely refuses to entertain doubts. She would feel disloyal. She is agnostic, in a way. She believes I believe. Or, no, more than that: she brackets the question of belief as beside the point, and doesn't make a judgment one way or another. She lives *as if*.

It's not a bad way to live. Truth is, I never really suspected her. I just wanted to pick a fight.

I walk her to her car and wave goodbye and then I doubleback through the alley. This time, I climb the fire escape to a window left open and let myself in. I sit facing the door in the dark. The phone rings once and goes

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dead. The blinds flutter. The building sighs and settles. A roof turbine spins. I've decided that this will be how the intruder comes: not by breaking and entering, but through the front door. Like a real man. Brimming with dread and anticipation, I want more than anything that the door holds tight.