

Dark

1

It all started out on the beach at a campfire. She was there, as were a few other friends of mine.

“You’re really a jerk,” she said.

I told her she was right. I’d been trying to tell her that for months. Perhaps she’d not heard me. But I doubted that. She might have purported herself as simple; that lilting Southern accent and her insistence that I was somehow verbose and she to the point.

I knew the first time I looked at those big, brown eyes that she didn’t miss much. Unless she wanted to. In which case, one could wave the fargin’ Goodyear Blimp in front of her face and she would swear the only thing that she saw was something blurry in her left eye.

“I know I’m a jerk,” I told her. A couple of my friends laughed. “Shutup,” I told them. “I’m perfectly capable of making a fine ass out of myself without your help.”

I pointed at her. “Or yours.”

“You sit here and go on about people like you’re superior to them. Like you believe you’re smarter than the average person.”

I laughed. “I *am* smarter than the average person. The average person puts more time into their boob tube than they do their own brain. The average person really believes paper or plastic is a difficult decision. The average person buys life insurance, auto insurance, medical insurance, home insurance –hell, they’re insurance poor and yet the last thing they ever seem to think about doing is driving a bit damned slower, laying off fast food, taking care of their blood pressure or, for God’s sake, remembering to turn off the iron.”

“You eat fast food.”

“Thank you, really. Thank you for pointing out the obvious. But, here’s the thing: I’m not insurance poor.”

“And that’s an excuse,” she said. No, she didn’t ask. She stated it. A declaration. Her point being made without the aid of my admission.

“Whatever. Look, let me ask you something.”

(At this point, my other friends gathered around the fire began to murmur to themselves about a local bar, or some food. Clearly bored to tears as our fun little insult session had become something more personal between us. Perhaps they felt the sexual tension and it made them all uncomfortable. Strange thing about her and me: arguing seemed to get us hot. Clearly, we both had issues. Entertaining issues, but issues nonetheless.)

“All right. Ask me, then,” she said, lighting a cigarette.

“I’m trying to. Jesus. Do you think you’re smarter than the average person?”

She seemed to ponder this for a brief moment. Then she smiled. It wasn’t a polite smile. “Yes, I reckon I do.”

“You *reckon*?”

“Yes, I *reckon*. I guess you don’t think I’m smarter, since I don’t use nice, big words like you and I fall back on my Southern roots from time to time.”

“No, not at all. I think it’s funny. I enjoy getting at you about it. But I don’t think it makes a hill of crap as to whether or not you’re smart. I think you’re very smart.”

“Whatever.”

Damnit, I was so hot at this point that I wanted to attack her right then and there. Why the hell hadn’t my friends left yet for wherever they were going?

“Dude,” Keith said, “we’re heading to the bar up the street. You two staying?”

I looked at her. She said something, but I wasn’t sure I heard it because she said it with her eyes. It could have been, ‘yes, we’re going, don’t even think about it,’ or it could have been something else. I made an executive decision.

“Nah, you guys go ahead.”

She continued to smoke her cigarette, completely nonplussed by the whole thing.

“See ya later,” Keith said.

“Yup. See ya.”

As they left, I wondered what the hell would happen next. Ocean breeze. Cool evening. Warm sand. Hotel room not even two hundred feet away. I’d really gotten myself into it again.

“Do you really believe you’re superior to most people?”

“In a lot of ways, yep, I really do,” I said. “But I’m never afraid to admit when I’m not superior.”

“Whatever. Name one.”

“Well, for one thing, I can’t compete with you on being an asshole by a longshot.”

“Ha, ha,” she said.

“Wanna go up there?” I asked.

“You know I do.”

“Then let’s go.”

“You know I can’t,” she said.

“Well, yes, damnit. I know it perfectly well. I’m the sort of fool who mines for gold in a closet.”

“Shutup.”

2

Later that night, I lay on the bed in the room a couple of doors down from hers. I turned the lights off, opened the curtains and stared out at the crisp, moonlit beach. I fought off my emotions with a ball peen hammer and thought about how I might fall asleep.

It wasn’t just the fact that I was trying not to think of her. It was what had happened to me the other night. It was something I hadn’t been able to tell anyone. I knew they’d laugh at me. I laughed at myself when I thought about it, really.

It was the first night we’d gotten to the beach. We all checked into our respective rooms, me bunking in here with my buddy, Mike, and everyone had collectively decided on some high class strip joint to bombard, and I’d said no. I couldn’t be in those places. Putting twenty dollar bills into a garter on a woman who really only knew me from my money was not my idea of a wise way to dispense my cash. It just made no sense to me. Oh, trust me, I love seeing a naked woman as much as the next man. Maybe more. But not in that setting.

What can I say? Despite all my railings about this world and its silly rituals, parts of me were still old fashioned.

Later that night, after everyone had been gone a while, I pulled a book from my suitcase, flopped into the hotel room recliner and began to read. It was a while before anything happened.

What happened first was that I noticed the curtains move. Subtly, but purposed. As if to get my attention. I mostly ignored it, thought it was a draft. Who thinks about these things being anything else?

It got my attention when the comforter on the bed moved.

I put the book down and watched, something cold easing its way up my spine like a burglar picking a lock.

The curtain once again moved and I was just about to write it off as a draft and go back to reading when I saw it.

Dark.

That's the only way I can explain it. Where this thing was, there was no light. It rose up behind the bed stand to the right, covering the wall like sentient black paint, rising to the full height of a man and then some. And the shape was vague and yet somehow familiar. It did look like a man, but only in the sense that this was the image my own brain forced upon what my eyes were seeing in order to rectify things.

I sat shivering somewhere between disbelief and plain batshit terrified.

It moved behind the headboard and around the side wall, and was making its way to me.

But I didn't give it time.

I ran out of the room like a twelve year old girl that had just seen the bogeyman in the form of a giant, evil Pokemon ripping up her stuffed toy collection.

I went straight down to the beach, fell onto the sand and panted until I could catch my breath again.

I told no one.

Here's the thing about pride. It makes us do the most asinine things. Like not telling friends when something has frightened the hell out of us. There are synapses in our brains that are triggered by certain events. When those events trigger those synapses, signals are sent out. Serotonin levels shift. Chemicals realign and pour into our systems that tell us to fight or run like hell. Pride has the sort of astronomical strength required to just damn well ignore every thing our mind and body is trying to tell us.

And here's what I was doing that pride had driven me to. Lying in a bed in the dark alone, the only person I knew some two doors down from me. Lying there when I knew perfectly well that something was in here with me. And I pretty much knew by the sheer volume of horror novels I'd read that this thing wasn't here for a beer and conversation.

And so here I lay. Trying to beg my body to sleep. I suppose I thought that sleep might ward off whatever was in here.

The curtain moved.

I froze up like an engine that had run out of oil. I could have sworn my heart stopped for at least a second or more.

Please come in here, please come in here, please come in here, I thought. Perhaps hoping she and I had also learned how to communicate telepathically. But she did not. I knew she would not. Damn her, she wasn't short on resolve.

Just once! Just once can't you drop the resolve, I thought. *I need you to come in here and save my life this time!*

Something shifted in the room and I knew it was here. God help me, it was here. I could see shadows moving all around the room. Some moonlight, others nothing having to do with moonlight.

I finally willed my body to move and I flipped on the lamp.

Darkness had completely covered the wall in front of me. It had covered the wall, the small dresser and the even the screen of the small television that sat on that dresser would not reflect the light of the lamp.

I tried not to hyperventilate. I also tried not to soil myself. Thankfully, I managed to keep from doing both.

Should I call her?

No.

Why not?

She'll just make fun of me.

Dude, she's not that cold. She's not cold at all.

I would make fun of me.

You wouldn't belittle her if this was happening to her.

Good point. Still. I can't do it.

Why not, are you that stupid?

Yes. And Proud. I can't.

My eyes grew wide as the darkness on the wall began to move, collecting itself toward the center, and then moving outward—three dimensionally—toward me.

“Holy shit.” I said out loud.

Run, I said to myself.

I moved from the center of the massive, king-sized bed and slid my legs over. I suppose part of me had seen this coming, because I hadn't undressed. Just taken my shoes off. I slipped them on and started to go for the exit, but the only way to the exit from my bed was to move within ten feet of the darkness.

I had no choice.

I walked toward this gathering mass of darkness. I could barely breathe. I could barely think straight. Thoughts pummeled my brain at a rate that I could not decipher.

And then all hell in my mind broke loose when the gathering mass of darkness moved toward me. I screamed and ran past as fast as I could, threw the door open and run like a track star. Straight to her room.

3

I hammered on the door. Nothing. I hammered again.

“Jesse! Open the fucking door!”

A voice from inside. "What? Wait. Ok, one second."

I looked back at my door. Nothing was emerging from it.

Yet.

Please open the door, Jesse. Please.

She opened the door, her hair mussed in a way that had I not been scared out of my wits I would have thought very sexy.

"I told you, *I can't.*"

"I know. I know. This isn't about that. Please, can I come in? *Please?*"

She looked in my eyes and saw the terror.

"My God. What's wrong? Are you ok?"

"Hell no, I'm not ok. Let me come in, please. Before...I don't know. Just. Come on, let me in, will you?"

"Sure, sure. Come in."

I went in. She shut the door and I immediately looked through the window next to the door at my own room. Still nothing, no darkness was crawling (or walking) from my room.

I was breathing so hard that my lungs hurt. She took my hand. I shook.

"Tim, what happened?"

I didn't move.

"Tim, come on, talk to me. What happened to you? Was it a bad dream? Did someone break in? Hey, come on. What's wrong?"

She pulled me toward the bed and I sat down without thought on the edge.

And then I looked at her curtains, her walls, her floor. If it was here, I couldn't stay.

"Tim, you're scaring me. What the hell happened?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. No one would."

Then, the look on her face changed.

“Is this a joke? Some sort of trick? Because, I swear, if it is...”

“Do I look like I’m fucking joking, Jesse?”

She backed up a little. “Okay, okay. I just had to make sure.”

And so I told her. I told her about the first night. And then about tonight. All the details, I spared nothing. I spit it all out so fast I wondered if she would be able to keep up. And the longer I talked, the more frightened I got. I’m still young, but there were moments I honestly wondered if my own heart would just give up the fight and die on me.

Finally, my story was done and she looked at me with a mix of caring and pity.

“You don’t believe a word of it, do you?”

“Well, it’s not that,” she said. “But I know how your imagination works. I mean, you’re a writer. You think these kinds of stories up all the time, right?”

“Yeah, I do,” I said.

“So, don’t you think it might have been a dream?”

“I wished it were. God, how I wish I’d dreamt this, or wrote this or just imagined this.”

“How much did you drink tonight, Tim?”

“Not *nearly* that damn much, Jesse.”

She smiled. “All right. Just checking. You know, you are damn near an alcoholic.”

“Well, you also said I’m a writer. The two are nearly synonymous.”

Neither of us could manage a laugh.

I sat on the edge of her bed for a long time, my face cradled on her shoulder. I was too terrified to remember that I felt like a complete coward. She held me as I shivered, and I thought between wondering what the hell I would do next that it was just about the best thing I had ever felt in my life.

Finally, she lifted my head.

“You can’t stay like this all night. What will you do?”

“What, like I know? I’m clueless. I’m so scared to go back in that room I might as well be ten years old again.”

“What do you think that thing was, or is?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Want me to check out the room with you?”

“NO!” I said. A lot louder than I’d intended.

“Okay,” she said. “But I’m not helpless. I can take care of myself.”

“Well, shit, I know that,” I said. “But I will not put you in a position where you’re forced to.”

“Are you going back in there?”

“I guess.”

“Why? There’s no reason to.”

“Sure there is,” I said. “It’s called my sanity.”

“Or stupidity.”

“That, too.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

“I know.”

“But you are anyway, aren’t you?”

My answer was to get up and walk out of the room.

I had to force every single step I made toward that room. Sweat poured down my face and arms. My heart thudded like a death metal song in my chest.

She's right, jackass. This is stupid.

Shutup. It has to be done.

What, are you in a movie or something?

Are you going to help me with this, or are you going to keep bitching?

Fine. Our funeral.

The door, after miles and miles of walking, finally was in front of me. I reached around the frame with my hand and turned on the light.

The whole room was darkness.

The curtains swirled. The comforter on the bed flew up and down as though a brisk wind was coming from beneath the bed. The television was spinning in place like a top, around and around at a velocity that made my mind feel groggy.

Something grabbed my shoulder. I screamed and cleared the ground by at least half a foot.

“Dude! Hey, it’s just me, man.”

“Mike?”

“The tooth fairy, jackhole. Of course, Mike.”

I cocked my head to the side as I looked at him. I knew it was him, but I couldn’t be sure. My brain was a fifteen car pileup on the interstate.

“Hey, you all right?”

“No, I’m not all right. Look in the room, man!” I pointed through the door with a shaking finger.

You already know what Mike saw.

I walked into the room realizing that this wasn't some movie. It was a Ramsey Campbell novel. And not one of his better ones.

Of course there was no darkness. Of course the television just sat there, dull, dead, reflecting the light of the lamp. No curtains whipping in the wind.

Just a damn hotel room. Bring a black light in here and the only terror you'd find would be wondering just how that stain had made it all the way to the ceiling.

I looked behind me, feeling someone standing there. *This would be it, I thought. Now Mike will see.*

But of course, it was only Jesse.

"Everything all right in here, boys?"

"Oh hey, Jesse!" Mike said. "What are you doing up at this hour? Thought you liked to sleep?"

"Oh, I do," she said.

Please don't, Jesse. If you care about me as a friend even a little, just don't.

"I couldn't sleep," she said. "Thought I'd come see what you two are up to. Anyone for a movie?"

"Sure," Mike said. "I think *Constantine* is on Showtime tonight, matter of fact."

"Perfect," Jesse said. And smiled at me.

My God, I thought. I love you.

For the rest of the trip, I wasn't in that room alone for so much as a nanosecond.

6

The trip ended without incident.

We were all back home, back to work, back to the routine. Jesse and I didn't talk about that night. For once, I was glad I was the verbose one. Because I just

couldn't talk about what happened. I still walked around every room in my apartment turning lights on before I went in.

I slept with the lights on.

My two cats noted my trepidation with a sort of vague indifference. I still fed them, petted them when they walked over to me purring. They were happy.

People should be so easy to please.

A couple of weeks later, my brother Jim called. Wanted me to meet him at some bar in town. Had someone he wanted me to meet. I said okay.

I'm not much of a barfly, but some times it beats sitting at the house alone.

I arrived at the bar, went inside, paid the cover and found Jim.

"Hey, Tim"

"Hey, Jim."

"This is Lisa, my friend."

I stuck out my hand. She took it. "Hi, Lisa."

"Hi, Tim."

I went to the bar and ordered a Corona.

"So, Tim, Lisa here's a big horror buff."

"No shit," I said.

"I shit you not," Lisa said.

I liked her already.

There was a band playing. They weren't bad, but like most bars of this sort, the people there were far more interested in hooking up than listening to the band. I felt some compassion for the guys. You play your heart out, ending every song with not a single shred of applause. It can be defeating if you're not used to it. They seemed to be, plowing on after each song, almost as indifferent to the crowd as the crowd them.

I figured they'd be fine.

“So,” I said to Lisa, “favorite author?”

“Clive Barker.”

Not bad.

“Favorite book?”

“*Salem’s Lot.*”

Even better.

“Favorite horror movie?”

“*Event Horizon.*”

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a winner!

“Want another beer?”

“Sure.”

I made my way up to the bar. There was a line so I stood there for a while. Some muscle bound fellow tried to push his way past me, but I held my ground. He could have mopped the floor with me, but there’s principles to be had in this world between men. That’s what I tell myself, anyway. He was nice enough. Apologized for bumping into me. I said fine and we waited.

In a few minutes, he would be on the ground.

The bartender finally made her rounds to me.

Her question was formed by the look on her face.

“Corona and a Bud Light,” I said.

“Seven fifty,” she said.

While she worked, I fished out my wallet. I pulled out a ten and held it out. She took it and handed me my beer.

I dropped them both.

Behind her, the mirror was turning black before my eyes. It began covering the bottles on the bar. It began to creep over the other bartender as he stood there.

My bartender gave me a strange look and then I saw it. From her eyes, darkness crawled and began to cover her face, trailing down her mouth into her throat.

I turned to run and knocked the muscle bound fellow flat on his ass. He yelled something at me, but I was already past the band and headed for the door by the time he got up.

Jim saw me and tried to stop me, but I was already gone.

I hit the unlock button on my key fob and jumped into my truck. Cranked it, threw it into first and squeeled the tires on the way out of the parking lot. I caught myself as I was leaving just before I nearly sideswiped a cop.

It took everything I had to slow myself down.

I was out of there. It couldn't get me. Couldn't have caught up to me that fast.

I was safe.

I looked in the rearview mirror and, once again, my heart seemed to stop.

The back window was being covered with darkness.

I screamed, swerved, and the last thing I remembered was seeing the headlights of a tractor trailer truck right in front of me.

7

When I woke up, I couldn't move my head.

I could move my eyes, and even that hurt. I strained them downward and saw that pretty much my entire body was in a cast.

My God.

I tried to look around the room, but I had no peripheral vision with my head bound up as it was. I felt groggy, fuzzy. High on pain medication.

A face emerged in front of me.

Jesse!

“Well, hello there,” she said.

I mumbled something.

“Weren’t sure if you were going to make it or not. You almost killed yourself.”

What happened?

I couldn’t say it. Once again, I hoped for telepathy.

“Pretty much every bone you’ve got is broken. The cops have been in and out of here. They say alcohol was a factor.”

Even in my groggy state, I noticed she hadn’t said one smartass thing. This was bad.

“You know, Tim, I’m so worried about you. I’m not sure I can ever forgive you for this. How many times have you driven home like this? Do you even know? God, you could have killed yourself or someone else! What were you thinking?”

I only had two beers! Honest! It was that, that thing! I saw it in the bar! It was in my truck!

“Well, I know you can’t talk. And you’re tired. I got to go any way. I’ll check on you when I can, you know that.”

Don’t go! Please! Don’t leave me alone in here!

“Bye, Tim.”

And she left.

8

I was in and out after that. Sometimes I would wake to see a doctor. Some times a nurse. Some times a cop. I couldn’t stay awake long enough to find out what was going on.

Some time that night, I woke to darkness. But not complete darkness. The light from my monitors and the television gave the room an odd glow. Like neon without the noise.

A nurse walked in.

“Hello, Mr. Preston,” she said. “Feeling any better?”

I can't answer you damnit. And I feel like hammered shit.

“All right. This is going to hurt. I have to shift you a bit on the bed. But it will be over quick.”

She moved me and even my muffled scream was loud.

“All done,” she said, full of so much cheer I wanted to choke her. Or knock her in the head with my casts.

I looked at her as she pointed a little light at my eyes. She removed the light and when my vision cleared, I saw.

From her eyes, just like the bartender. The darkness was tendrilling out from them, beginning to cover her face.

I tried to cry out, but it was so muffled I couldn't make out any words.

“Hush now, Mr. Preston,” she said, the darkness running into her mouth and down her throat as she spoke.

“You can't run any more. We've made certain of that. So don't bother trying to fight it. We're here now and it's all over. Just lie still and let it run its course and all will be over soon.”

She was now completely darkness. A shifting, living shadow. She raised her arm over me, and positioned herself so that her face was above me.

She opened her mouth.

Darkness began to pour from her like crude oil, viscous and thick. Moving. Spreading out.

The last thing I remembered before the darkness suffocated me was that I liked it when Jesse called me an asshole.

