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Of the Night

by

Cliff Burns

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for Val Lewton, Jacques Tourneur and Samuel Fuller

“Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh,
Shadows of the evening
Steal across the sky.”

The Evening Hymn
(Sabine Baring-Gould)

Someone was screaming, loud enough to wake the dead.

The room gradually filled in around him, growing walls and a ceiling, sprouting furniture and a hideous green area rug. Flood went to raise his head and paid dearly for it, experiencing near lethal levels of pain. A real fucking skull-splitter. He finally managed to roll over...and saw what's-her-name, Amanda, cradling Conrad's head as he stiffened and trembled, in the throes of some kind of fit. His heels rattled on the floor and she was having a hard time holding on to him.

"*Help me!*" she cried. "Oh, God. Wake up, baby, *pleeeeeease...*"

None of them was in any position to offer assistance. Stu and Karen were sprawled a short distance away and maybe it was his thermonuclear headache, but he couldn't see their auras; nothing, not even a flicker.

Amanda kept wailing away. Why didn't she shut up? Flood crawled toward her, making slow progress. By the time he reached them, Conrad was as still and breathless as the others. "*O my God o my God...*"

"Can't...can't..." Can't *what*? Flood couldn't find the words. The pain short-circuiting his higher brain functions. He moved away, making for the door, to find help or maybe just to escape (at that moment his motives weren't crystal clear). Amanda said something about calling an ambulance. It sounded like she was talking into the other end of a long, hollow tube. He grasped the doorknob, pulled himself upright.

"*Where are you going?*" she shrieked. "Get back here, you asshole—" But by then he was in the hallway, nearly legless, using the wall to support himself. His vision confined to a narrow cone, his depth of field and focus completely out of whack.

The hallway was a mile long and rippling at the edges. He lurched and stumbled his way down the corridor but it was tough going; his legs kept getting tangled up, refusing to obey his commands.

Navigating the stairs was like trying to scale K2. *On acid*. His coordination fucked, motor skills AWOL. He fell twice during the descent, it was a miracle he made it down in one piece. Fortunately it was only two flights to the main floor. He drew stares from an elderly couple, heard the woman say something about "blood". Reached up and swiped at his nose. Yes, blood and lots of it. He yanked out the bottom of his shirt and used it to staunch the flow. Now he was at street level, about to push through the door—

Wait.

Cautiously cracking open the door, peering outside.

It was all right, it wasn't...that other place. What was it called? But the name eluded him. He had a vague, gauzy recollection of a city, acres of

ruins and something hiding there but...that was all. The rest of it evaporating away like a day-old dream.

Flood crept from the building. His head was still killing him but it felt better being outside, in the cool night air. When he got to the sidewalk, he stumbled again, tripping over his feet.

Fuck. No shoes. Thin socks between him and the ground.

Stupid.

He was lucky it was so late, hardly anyone about, his behavior not attracting attention. Staggering into the alley, his headache so ferocious he felt disoriented, nauseous, retching into the long weeds beside the fire escape. Smelled piss and dead things.

Need somewhere I can crash...but the cops are coming...drugs...jail...got to get away...run away...run...

Run.

Yes, put some distance between him and this place. *Run! Go!*

There was no rhyme or reason to his reckless, desperate flight: down refuse strewn alleyways, through courtyards and abandoned lots, seeking out dark places, concealing himself in accommodating shadows.

Every so often casting an anxious glance skyward, conscious of some threat he couldn't precisely name...

2

It would end up as one of those gory vignettes that lead off the local news, a somber, ageless anchorman like Phil Calvert offering "this stark illustration of the perils of city life, an urban horror story, if you will, the latest in a long litany..."

There you go, Gus Novak thought, *fucking thing writes itself.*

A Caucasian male, identified as Alfred Whitlock, comes sprinting out of a side street and starts telling anyone who'll listen to him that something's after him or tried to grab him (accounts from witnesses vary). The guy acting hyper and excited, laughing, clearly relieved at having survived a close scrape. Then, still distracted or otherwise preoccupied, he steps off the curb, directly into the path of a city transit bus. The bus veers but the side mirror clips him and basically decapitates the poor bastard. Dead in less time than it takes you to sneeze.

Novak questioned those few eyewitnesses who stuck around afterward. They weren't much help. Some appeared to be in shock and who could blame them? More than one speculated on the victim's mental state. "He was really messed up," as one kid put it. Long, lanky dude who was reluctant to give his name. "He was laughing, talking to himself. Saying

shit like 'they nearly got me' and how lucky he was, stuff like that. Then he walks out and it was fuckin' game *over*."

"Fuckin' wild," his friend Pammy agreed. "His head split open, like *poosh!*"

In the midst of that grisly scene, Novak got *another* call, relayed by Vic Anson, a report of a body in a back alley behind Smith Street. Anonymous phone tip....patrol car already at the Smith Street location...*no further details at this time*.

"Information Age, my ass," Novak muttered.

They made it in just under fifteen minutes. There were two marked cars, both with their flashers going—they lit up the area and right away he saw the body. His stomach gave a funny little jump. Happened every time.

The senior guy, Wiggins, wasn't bad and recognized a crime scene when he saw one, bless his heart. But then he made a nuisance of himself, hanging about, expecting a pat on the ass or word of praise. Disappointed and pissed off when he got neither.

Novak couldn't decide who smelled worse, the dead guy or the bum rambling on about his macabre discovery. He barely listened, letting his partner take down the particulars. Anson was proficient at shorthand and could work a computer like a demon. Unfortunately, as far as real police work went, he appeared to possess the intellectual and deductive faculties of a parsnip. Novak could tell he half-suspected the bum, which was a laugh. The guy was too addled. Not the bloodthirsty type. Notice how he positioned himself so he wouldn't have to look at the corpse? Not guilt; *squeamish*.

Novak couldn't blame him. The body looked... pulverized. Like someone had bashed it repeatedly with an industrial-sized hammer. He pointed his flashlight at various sites of interest, letting its beam linger on the upper body--

"I thought somebody rolled the guy," the old derelict explained. "That happened to me last week. Couple of punks. Sheet, those boys stomped me *good*."

"Okay, Andy," Vic Anson nodded, feeding him lines, "that's great. That's the kind of thing we need to hear. It could set up a pattern. Maybe the same guys did this."

"Some people don't like bums." Andy couldn't remember his last name. Macleish or Macleod or something like that. He had no fixed address and if they cut him loose there was no guarantee they'd find him again. Not that he'd given them much. Out foraging, trying to get the jump on the competition, he comes across John Doe lying in the middle of the alley, looking like a pressed patty. Goes to the nearest phone booth, dials 911 and makes a report. Waits for the cops to arrive like the good, solid citizen he

is and leads them to the body. Didn't see anybody, didn't hear anything, too far gone to do much more than chew gum and walk erect.

Technically they could hang on to him as a material witness, keep him in custody pending further inquiries. In the meantime he could dry out, have a couple of hot meals, sleep in a clean bed—

Novak released him, a small act of humanity to redeem an otherwise lousy night. He thought he saw gratitude in Andy's eyes as he shuffled away, his knapsack clanking with bottles and keepsakes. Anson didn't like it but Anson's opinion didn't count for squat. The kid was a bubblehead, dumb as a lug wrench. Their very first ride together, he went on and on about his favorite off-duty activity, singing karaoke with his insufferably perky wife. Their version of "You Don't Bring Me Flowers" was a real show-stopper. Sometimes people in the audience actually *cried*.

Not that his own life was any great shakes, mind you. Novak was forty-six years old, unmarried, with no immediate prospects (of any kind). He had recently been demoted a grade for various crimes against the system but wasn't brooding about it. It went with the territory. He was bright, competent and conscientious in his duties. Socially adept, however, he was not. He never tried to fathom the politics that went with being a cop and his manner was too cold and dismissive, perhaps even insubordinate.

Part of the problem was that he had lost faith in quaint notions like "rule of law" and "justice" and no longer believed in the essential decency of the average human being. He saw himself as nothing more than a glorified zoo keeper. Minding the animals and making sure their cages were swept out.

"We could've sweated him," Anson insisted. He was a fountain of clichés and cop speak. Bad guys were "perps" or, his latest favorite, "toe rags". Private citizens were "civvies" or, more often, "assholes". Anson worked with cops and drank with cops and thought like a cop. They had been partnered for a little over a month and so far it wasn't working out. It was nothing personal. Novak never got along with *any* of his partners. He'd lost count of how many he'd had over the years. Anson was merely stupid, which made him one of the better ones.

Kudelka, the deputy M.E., arrived soon afterward and went about his grim work in typical ill humor. "Cripes, guys, what d'you got here? Gonna need a spatula to scrape this guy up," he bitched.

"That's why they pay you the big bucks," Novak cracked. He and Kudelka didn't get along. It went back a ways. Long story.

"So, Doc, waddaya think?" Anson gestured at the tenderized meat. "Somebody run over this guy with a tank or what? I mean, Jesus, look—" Flicking his light to a sneaker lying about ten feet from the body. "They knocked the guy right out of his shoes." Kudelka pointedly ignored him. Stung, Anson turned to his partner. "Waddaya say, Gus? Hit and run, by the looks of it."

“Looks more like he fall down and go boom,” Kudelka quipped and Lorne, his assistant, sniggered sycophantically.

“No glass, no tire marks. I don’t like it, kid.” Novak directed his light at the worst of the damage. “Not a vehicle.”

“So what then?”

Novak exchanged glances with Kudelka. “Use your detective skills, Vic. Look at the body, especially the shoulders and head.”

“Fuck, he’s a mess.”

“That’s because he hit head first.”

“Yeah, but hit *what*?”

“The *ground*, goddamnit. When he hit the *ground*.” Novak was tired of dropping bread crumbs for the dope. “Look—see the road there? The impact was hard enough to actually *crack* the asphalt. Know how far a person would have to fall to do that?”

“Couple hundred feet,” Kudelka supplied helpfully. “At least. That’s why the shoes came off. Happens with jumpers. Force of the impact.”

“Look around you, Vic.” Novak gestured at their immediate surroundings. “There’s a restaurant thirty or forty yards over there and a parking lot and that sporting goods store. That’s it. Nothing near enough or tall enough to account for this.”

Anson nodded. “So where did he fall from?”

“That’s the question, *partner*. That agile mind of yours has leapt to the crux of the matter. I see a bright future for this one, don’t you, Tom?”

“Fuckin’ kid’s a regular Sherlock Holmes,” Kudelka agreed easily enough.

Vic Anson ignored their jibes. He moved a short distance away, the picture of bewilderment. “So where did he fall from?” he murmured. He tipped his head back, scrutinizing the night sky. Airplane? “Maybe he was a stowaway, y’know, hiding in the landing gear. They do that sometimes.” They didn’t bother answering him. *Bastards!* Never mind, he’d figure it out for himself.

Private plane? Helicopter? Easy to check, airports kept close tabs on every flight in and out, especially since 9/11.

It wouldn’t take long to wrap this one up, he predicted, and it would be slow and steady police work that paid off in the end. Not some brilliant leap of logic or fancy shmancy guesswork. *And you can put that in your pipe and smoke it, Detective Novak, you pompous fucking ass.*

Gus Novak raised the hinged hatch and retrieved his mail. Fliers, mostly, and a telephone bill. He used another of the stubby keys on his ring to open a box a level above his and collected Darla's stuff. Couldn't help snooping through it: personal letters and a postcard of some Greek amphitheatre; the latest *Utne Reader* and an urgent reminder that it was time to renew her *Greenpeace* membership.

Grown up people's mail.

She told him he didn't need to bother but he always knocked. Two brisk, cop-like taps, then letting himself in.

She was waiting for him in the kitchen, seated at a round, cherrywood table. Wearing her floral bathrobe, looking as pretty as the early hour allowed. The coffee was freshly made, brewed strong.

"You're a godsend, Darla," he told her, dipping to plant a chaste kiss on top of her head as he passed. She waved him away.

"It's just that I pity you," she told him.

"The hooker with a heart of gold?"

She made a face. "Ancient history, kemo sabé. And need I remind you, my profession served me better than yours ever will."

An old argument, resurrected on a regular basis. Darla had retired on the spoils of her illegal activities and used her earnings to make canny investments in local real estate. She owned this building and two townhouses in the west end. She was set for life, financially secure, whereas he, well, he had his pension to look forward to and that was about it.

"More honest way of making a living too," he admitted.

"Yes," she sighed, "but look at me now." Raising her arms, as if inviting inspection. She was a large woman, over three hundred pounds. The weight was unevenly distributed. Her head, hands and feet looked diminutive compared to the rest of her. There was something about her, though, that hinted at a former allure. A certain way she held herself, the light that sometimes flashed and sparkled in her eyes. Not a hooker, a highly sought after call girl, more correctly a *courtesan*. And then Mother Goose to a brood of working gals, banking the proceeds, getting out of the business before it did permanent psychic harm.

Nope, he hadn't been nearly so lucky.

She was looking at him, expert at reading his moods. "Bad one, huh?"

He shrugged. "The usual. Shootings, stabbings...one guy just about got his head torn off by a city bus. That was fun. I may never eat spaghetti and meatballs again." She didn't react, used to the blood and guts stuff by now. "But the weirdest one..." --sneaking an extra helping of sugar into his coffee-- "...was this guy in a back alley." He told her about

the body Andy found, its condition indicating a fall from a substantial height.

“That’s...different.” Clearly intrigued. “I assume you’ve talked to someone at the airport.”

He nodded. “Nothing, regular or private. Nobody veering from established flight paths, no unexplained blips on the radar.”

“UFOs? Was he wearing a Spiderman costume?” He shook his head. “Okay, you’ve got me. I’m officially stumped.”

“I thought you were supposed to be the big mystery maven.” It was easily her favorite genre and Simenon the best of the best in her opinion. His tastes ran more to Elmore Leonard and Charles Willeford. To each his own.

“I need more information,” she protested. “Let’s hear *your* theories, smart guy. Come on...”

He shook his head. “I’m with you: it doesn’t add up. It’s...what would you call it? Death by misadventure? *Christ*. You should see my report--I should’ve made you a copy. Renfrew’s gonna flip. I can just hear him.” He suppressed a yawn.

“Forget about that for now. You wanna borrow my couch?”

He shook his head. “I’ll head home. Thanks, anyway.”

She grinned. “How’s that young kid, your partner. What’s his name? Adams?”

“Anson,” he corrected her, “and he’s dumb as a post.”

“That’s what you say about all of them. You never give anybody a break.”

“As long as they stay out of my way.”

“I’ll bet if you gave him half a chance—”

“He’d fuck things up royally.”

“I think you like being miserable.” He stared at her. “How about breakfast?”

“I need to crash.” Patting his pockets for his keys.

“God, look at you. You’re wore out.”

“It’s this fucking night shift. It’s throwing me off.”

“But you’re a nighthawk.”

“That’s just it. Who the hell wants to spend the best part of the day at *work*?”

“Ah,” she acknowledged, “I see your point...”

His apartment was small, spare and comfortless, consisting of one room and a kitchenette. A bathroom the size of a phone booth. Two windows looking out on nothing. Home sweet fucking home.

No pets, no plants: no point.

There were bookshelves along two walls and uneven stacks of magazines and CD's just about everywhere else. No television or DVD player. No computer. Again, why bother? He was either sleeping or working. No time or energy for anything else. Sometimes he watched football with Darla but she was a diehard Cowboys fan and just about insufferable when they were on a tear.

Novak turned on a lamp and his Yamaha CD player. He required Sibelius this morning, some mood music for the terminally depressed and down-hearted. The Sixth maybe...

Kicked off his shoes and stretched out on the short couch, giving himself over to the music. It was gorgeous, sublime. Sad as a December funeral. He felt lighter, free of everything that had been burdening him, the things he had seen—

Until the asshole across the hall slammed his door and stomped off to work. There was a steady increase of traffic in the hallway, people opening and closing doors, the plumbing rattling as tenants fired up their morning showers. Sibelius never had a chance.

“Philistines,” he hissed.

He was drowsy but nowhere near the point where he could sleep. His mind wouldn't shut down.

Where did John Doe fall from? What happened? What fit the facts?

Basic questions for which there were no answers (at least, none that made any sense).

They'd gone through all the scenarios, no matter how ridiculous. Anson came up with some doozies. Example: some poor shmuck gets loaded with his buddies, they talk him into jumping out of a plane and he's halfway to the ground before he realizes he forgot his parachute. *Adios, muchachos*. His pals take, like, this death oath never to divulge what really happened and--

Ah, shit, maybe it was fucking UFO's.

Something wasn't right here. This one wasn't going to tie up into a neat bundle. No way. It had the distinctive hallmarks of a Class A clusterfuck with all the trimmings attached.

And I'm right in the middle of it, Gus Novak reflected, *right in the shit*.

Funny how some things never changed.

Franklyn Danuta had the best fucking job in the world.

For eight hours, from eleven 'til seven in the morning, all he had to do was guard an empty building. Which basically meant sitting at the front desk reading or fucking around on his laptop, getting up every hour or so to have a bit of a reconnoiter and make sure nothing was amiss.

What could happen? The place was locked up tight, no one could get in and even if they did, the joke was on them: the joint was as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard. No tenants, no furniture, no staff, no *nothing*.

Franklyn's presence was a mere formality, a requirement of the Leiber Building's insurers. The new owners, a consortium with a head office in Dubai, footed the bill.

Not that Franklyn was complaining. Rich people wanted to pay him ten bucks an hour to sit on his ass playing *Halo* all night long, shit, that was fine with him. When he wasn't at the front desk or wandering the halls, he'd unlock the roof access and check out the scenery. He liked it up there, especially on clear, calm nights, staring up at the stars, stoned out of his gourd.

The Leiber Building was nearly seventy stories tall so the view was fucking *whacked*. A few times he'd even snuck his girlfriend Sandy in and they'd fucked like wolverines seven hundred feet above the ground. Not quite the "mile high" club but nothing to shake a stick at either. Totally against the rules, of course, but that was another sweet thing about the job: nobody *ever* checked up on him. He had the place all to himself until the relief guy showed up in the morning.

The security gig was a contract thing, which meant forget about benefits but, *shee-it*, he was only twenty-four, he didn't need health or dental plans at this point in his life. He intended to string this out for as long as he possibly could.

The elevator arrived and he selected a button at random. Got out on fifty-five and took a noisy piss in the toilet of a condo that had once commanded a seven figure price tag.

Not any more.

The place was a fucking *tomb*.

Well, okay, that was the one drawback to the job: it got creepy sometimes. Alone in a huge, deserted building. He'd call or text his friends to get his mind off it. Surf internet porn.

Three or four times he swore he felt it *move*. But they told him the structure was sound, no problem there. So if that was the case, why did all the tenants bail or refuse to renew their leases? What was up with *that*?

He knew there was some kind of history associated with the tower but the details were sketchy. A hotshot developer used to own it and the condos went for big bucks. But then somebody tried to blow it up. That had been a few years back and he hadn't been living in Ilium at the time, still at the U of A, partying it up and pretending to work on a commerce degree.

But its notoriety worked against the place. People, even in the 21st century, are superstitious and the tower had been “tainted ” afterward (that was the word Ian, his supervisor, used).

Apparently the folks in charge were planning a complete overhaul, including a renaming, but so far it was just talk. If he was lucky, he had six months of steady employment doing absolute fuck all before they got down to business. Who knows, the building might change hands again, another flip, a new set of owners. Fine with him, as long as the checks cleared, he didn't give a damn.

After he finished, Franklyn conscientiously wiped the rim, lowered the seat and flushed. He left the suite, got back on the elevator and rode it right to the top. As the car slowed, he plucked a doobie from behind his ear, sniffed it appreciatively.

Life is beautiful.

He climbed a surprisingly rickety set of stairs to the access door, pushed it open and stepped out on to the roof. The surface beneath his feet had the look and feel of pebbled asphalt. The big cooling fans were off so it was quiet, peaceful. Far above the city's roar. The perfect time to spark a joint and reflect on the—

Franklyn heard a scrabbling sound and a pronounced *thump* from nearby. It came from over by the air circulation equipment, which took up a substantial proportion of the rooftop.

He moved in that direction, pausing when he realized, *fuck*, he'd left his flashlight somewhere, maybe the john on fifty-five. Probably just a bunch of pigeons—but this high up? Maybe it was those peregrine falcons, they liked roosting in tall buildings. Those things were scary motherfuckers.

Whump.

Fuck, that sounded *big*. Maybe there was a nest in among the ducts. Was that something he should write up? It would show he was doing his job, checking things out. So...check it out, Frankie-boy.

He figured there was probably enough ambient light to see by so he might as well take a quick peek. If *it* was those falcons, they might not appreciate his presence and they could be pretty savage. Should he be making more noise, letting them know he was here? What was the protocol for dealing with enraged, killer raptors? He couldn't recall that being part of his training and orientation.

Then again, fuck it, this was *his* building, he wasn't about to get all bent out of shape over a bunch of fuckin' birds. He peered around the piping and ducts, some of them wide enough to swallow two men, but couldn't see anything. He didn't fancy climbing up and sticking his head inside. They weren't paying him *that* much.

There was another *thud* and this time it came from over there, by the edge of the roof. He moved closer, conscious of his position, experiencing a touch of vertigo, nothing too bad. He'd spent a lot of time up here over the past couple of months. There was a railing, about waist high. A gap underneath, wide enough to--

More scratching; he hunkered down, listening. Birds?

And then another thought occurred to him: *fuck me, maybe somebody's climbing up the side of the building*. Surely not a thief, more likely some thrill seeker, one of those human fly fuckheads. Wouldn't look too good if the prick made it to the top without anyone noticing or, worse yet, missed a handhold and ended up splashed all over the street. Franklyn could hear Ian Persall: *Where were you, Danuta, while this individual was climbing my building*. So much for the cushy job. Back to being a rent-a-cop, rousting bums at the Spalding Mall. No thanks.

Now he was royally pissed off, the scenario playing out in his head: the guy hauling himself up, pumping his fist in the air and congratulating himself on a job well done. Well, fuck that and fuck him and the mother who shit him out.

Franklyn wasn't armed, nothing, not even pepper spray. He checked but there wasn't anything lying around he could use as a weapon. *Fucking useless!*

But the guy was vulnerable, had no idea what was waiting for him. He'd swing his leg over the side, start levering himself up...and there Franklyn P. Danuta would be, ready to either take him into custody or beat the mortal shit out of him. He knew the procedure for making a citizen's arrest, it was part of the training. He was allowed to use some degree of physical force or coercion if required. The laws were kind of vague as to how *much* force he could employ but that didn't overly concern him. To be honest, he kind of hoped the prick would put up a fight. Make things interesting.

Franklyn knelt and wriggled under the railing, right up to the edge. A rustling sound, maybe a rope dragging on the side of the building. He couldn't tell how close, decided to risk a quick look—

At first he couldn't see anything. Pulled back, momentarily confused. What the *fuck*. He stuck his head over the side, leaned further out. There was kind of an overhang or cornice and he saw a long, black shape clinging to the underside. A flurry of movement, *something lunging toward him*—

He jerked his head back so quickly that it collided with the steel guard rail, knocking him senseless.

Disoriented, he crawled in what he thought was the direction of the access door but he was dazed, his brain still wobbling around inside his skull.

He sensed a figure approaching from his left. He turned his head, but he was seeing triple. It was huge, whatever it was, towering over him. A sudden bout of dizziness and he found himself face down on the gritty deck. He started to rise—

Something slammed into the back of his head with terrific force. He felt his skull give way, consciousness wavering, flickering, dissipating to a pinpoint...

Gone.

The morning man found nothing immediately amiss.

Terry Sikking was an older guy, in his early sixties, but wore his years well. He'd worked at a variety of menial jobs throughout his life and now, thanks to a heart ailment, was semi-retired, picking up whatever extra income he could with the help of a placement agency. He was particularly proud of the fact that, as of last month, he was officially bonded, which meant he could now handle and transport large quantities of money. He'd been urging Franklyn to go the same route but so far his colleague had exhibited little enthusiasm for the notion. Never mind that it opened up a whole host of job opportunities and future prospects...

Terry liked Franklyn but worried the kid lacked ambition. He lived kind of a dead end existence. All he seemed to do was party and waste his money. He found the roaches Franklyn left on the roof, disposed of the evidence before someone else spotted them. Eventually he was bound to grow up and turn things around. Terry was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

He had his keys out but Franklyn buzzed him in from the desk. Terry tugged open the door and came inside, calling out a greeting to the younger man. Odd...for some reason Franklyn was wearing a hardhat, likely left behind after the building's last series of renovations. His hair was plastered to his forehead, damp and oily looking. He watched Terry approach but there was something wrong with his eyes, one seemed to be wandering off target.

"*Hola*, Frank. Anything interesting to report?"

"Anything..." Franklyn repeated, that one eye swiveling around independent of the other. Jesus, the kid was stoned out of his tree and not just on pot either.

“Whoa, man, you’re really out of it. Listen, I’m here now so why don’t you—”

“So...so...” Franklyn strained for the right words. “I will...show you...yessss...” It took two or three tries but he made it to his feet, teetering, moving with short, abrupt steps.

“What’s with the hardhat, amigo?” Terry joked. “You thinking of joining the working class?”

A blank, uncomprehending look. “Come...show you...” He led the way toward the elevators. Puzzled, Terry fell in step beside him. They got inside and, *whoa*, up close the kid smelled like he’d been rolling in something. It was all Terry could do to keep from gagging. The back of Franklyn’s shirt was sticky and the fringe of hair visible under the hardhat matted with slippery, viscous goop—

“You been crawling around somewhere? Shouldn’t screw around in this place, something could happen and nobody would know ’til I got here.” Franklyn pressed a button. “All the way to the top, huh?”

“Yessss.”

“And it’s something you want me to see?” A slight dip of his head in acknowledgment. “Any hints?” Another vacant stare. “Or is it a surprise?”

Franklyn blinked, a really...slow...blink. First one eye, then the other. It was freaky. “Surprise. Yes. You will be.”

A few seconds later, the door opened.

“Surprise,” Franklyn said.

Terry barely had time to scream.

Andre Brossard had the three-to-eleven shift.

He was a bit unnerved to find both Terry *and* Franklyn waiting for him. For some reason the two of them were wearing head gear, the younger man in a hardhat, Terry sporting a ball cap with a Minnesota *Twins* logo.

They greeted him, sort of. Neither seemed capable of formulating a coherent sentence. Andre wasn’t impressed. They were eager to show him something and weren’t likely to piss off and leave him to his crosswords unless he played along. “This better not be bullshit,” he warned, following them into the elevator.

The door closed and they turned toward him.

He shrank from their empty gazes and pale, slack faces. “What’s with you guys?” he muttered.

But they didn’t answer, just kept *staring* at him.

And all the while, the car rose higher and higher...

A face of grotesque proportions loomed over him. Flood grunted and the figure squawked and jumped back, retreating to a safe distance. Flood shook his head, recalling...something huge hovering over him, regarding him with cool detachment just before...before...

It wouldn't come. The memory would not be coaxed or drawn forth. Just a lingering impression of danger and menace, an inexplicable desire to flee...

....run...

"Jaysus," the filthiest human being he had ever seen remarked, "I thought you was dead. That would make my second one today. I betcha that would've been some kinda record."

Flood was curled up on a thirdhand sofa parked outside the rear entrance of a venerable-looking apartment building, not far from a dumpster. He could feel protruding springs and smell moisture and rot. The couch had been there for some time. He squinted at the sky. Late afternoon. But what *day* was it? How long had he been here?

"Somebody beat on you, man? Huh? 'Cause you're all bleeding and shit."

The flow from his nose had stopped but the front of his shirt was a mess and his face felt like it was crusted in a thin, scabby beard of dried blood. He likely looked worse than the rummy.

"Can I get something to drink?" he croaked.

"There might be a tap around front. For the lawn." They found it and Flood twisted it on, catching handfuls of cold water and gulping it down. It tasted of old plumbing and rust.

He stuck his head under and the frigid water came away pink. When he was done, he peeled off his shirt, used it to dry himself and scrub his swampy armpits. He rinsed it, wringing it out as best he could. The worst of the stain was gone but he resisted putting it back on while it was still damp. The old bum, who introduced himself as Andy, saved the day by producing a scratchy, long-sleeved shirt from his knapsack. "Keep it," he told Flood, "I got another one." The garment didn't smell *quite* as bad as its owner but it wasn't fresh either.

Andy seemed reluctant to leave him, trailing after him, jabbering almost non-stop. He was an annoyance but when Flood looked at him, he was framed in yellow light. A good person, no question, regardless of his mean circumstances. He told Flood some disjointed story about finding a body and helping the cops search for the murderer, who had to be some kind of super-villain since he could fly and had no compunction about killing people.

Flood tried to focus on what he was saying but it was hard. He was crashing, big-time. His dopamine right on “E”. And still a long way from home and flat broke and not only that—

“Where’re your shoes, man? Those punks steal your damn shoes?”

“Lost,” seemed the simplest answer. Left at Conrad’s pad along with three dead people and Amanda cursing him as he fled. That part was coming back. Some kind of bird flew overhead, the flutter of its wings amplified by his flayed senses and the relative quiet of the back alley.

Flood cowered...and then there was a jolt as something clicked into place, a snap recollection, those wingbeats...realizing too late that this memory hadn’t been forgotten so much as *suppressed*—

“You guys all right?” Conrad looked shaky but he was the first one to get over the shock of finding himself...wherever. The rest of them turning in slow circles, trying to accommodate what they were seeing. “All right? Everybody?” He grabbed Flood’s arm. “C’mon, man, stick with me. I need you...”

“I’m here,” Flood said, “wherever the fuck that is.”

It was a blasted landscape, an untidy topography of rubble and the scattered remnants of unknown architectures, nothing recognizable, everything showing the effects of the depredations of time. Even the sky was old. Off in the distance, hazy and aloof, a tall structure. A tower of some kind--

“What is this place?” Karen was trembling, wide-eyed.

“It ain’t Kansas,” Stu muttered.

“Looks like it was a city,” Flood observed. “It’s big enough.”

A city that had been shattered, reduced to its component parts. But was that the work of endless eons or the product of ancient conflict? Collateral damage from a war fought long ago. The destruction so complete it was impossible to tell.

The wind was gusting, raising dust and blowing it into their eyes and mouths; they tasted ashes. And, simultaneously, became aware of sounds and movement in the surrounding ruins, low growls and snarls that caused them to huddle together uneasily.

“I want to get out of here,” Karen whined.

“Kind of stating the obvious there, Karen,” Flood snapped.

Conrad shot him a warning look. “Cool it.”

“Yeah, don’t be such an asshole.” Karen’s eyes were darting about, her complexion paling as the full extent of their predicament became apparent to her. “Oh, God. You guys...I think we’re in Hell.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Stu, the ex-altar boy, spooked at the thought, his voice betraying his unease. “This is...some kind of hallucination. That stuff we snorted—”

And then Flood saw it. Coming at them fast, skimming low over the ground. By the time his strangled vocal cords issued a bleat of warning it was too late. The others spun and stood, transfixed, as the thing bore down on them. The creature resembled a super-sized bird of prey and as it swept past them, it extended fearsome talons, sheering off the top of Stu’s head. He remained standing for several seconds, wearing an expression of puzzled consternation. Then blood bloomed from the wound, spilling over onto his face and he toppled backward—

“Oh, Jesus...Jesus...” Karen’s mouth got wider and wider and she started screaming—but another raptor swooped in and hooked her through the back and legs, its talons digging deep, piercing skin and soft tissue, bearing her away while the two surviving members of the party looked on helplessly.

Only now Conrad was moving, yanking Flood down as a third beast slashed at the air where he’d just been standing. He dragged Flood over to a low, broken wall or foundation, crouching beside him.

“Stay down, stay fuckin’ down, you hear me?” Flood wasn’t listening, nearly catatonic at that point, trying not to believe what he had just seen. But Conrad wasn’t having any of it, shaking him roughly. “We’re gonna get out of here, you understand? We’ll figure out a way. But I need your help.”

“I can’t...the way they...didn’t you see...”

“You gotta fuckin’ help me. I can’t do this alone. I need you, man.” Flood started to say something but then he glanced over Conrad’s shoulder and saw another of those things coming at them. And it was just like before, he tried to warn Conrad but it was too quick—

When it pounced, Flood broke away, leaving his friend, abandoning him, ignoring his screams and pleas for help. He ran blindly, a ridiculous, blundering flight. Tripping, falling, then gathering himself and tearing off again. Running until his body gave out, literally refused to take another step. He keeled over, heaving, gasping, completely spent...

One by one, the creatures descended, dropping gracefully, almost noiselessly to the ground, forming a loose ring around him. He was dizzy, his brain starved for oxygen, no longer thinking clearly. But he knew it was over.

One of them left its position and approached. Flood pushed up, raising himself to his knees.

It dipped toward him and he gazed into its eyes; large, black ovals, devoid of pupils or irises. They were smooth, reflective, he could see himself in them. He sensed something, not intelligence, more like insatiable

curiosity. They stared at each other for a long time. Then it blinked, breaking the connection. An instant later, it reared back, stamping its clawed feet and Flood closed his eyes, bracing for the blow he knew was coming—

--waking to Amanda screaming, trying to hang on as Conrad bucked and heaved in her arms, the two of them watching the life ebb out of him, his exploded brain no longer responding to her urgent entreaties--

“—all right? Huh? Mister?” Andy was concerned. “All of a sudden you don’t look so good.”

“And I alone survived to tell thee,” Flood whispered.

Then his eyes rolled back and he was vaguely aware of falling...

For the second time that afternoon he woke to Andy’s ugly puss. A grubby hand grasped his shoulder. “You passed out, man.”

“Yeah...” Flood’s head felt like an over-ripe pumpkin, fit to burst. Andy helped him up. A woman was watching them from a ground floor window, her expression inscrutable. His companion glanced about nervously.

“I think we’d better get out of here, mister.”

“I told you,” he mumbled, “it’s Flood. That’s what everybody calls me.” He swayed, woozy. “Listen, I’m really fucked up. I gotta...”

“You want some food, man? You look like you could use it.”

Flood realized he was *ravenous*. “Yeah...maybe that’s it...low blood sugar...only...” Slapping his pockets. “Ah, fuck. No money.” His throat closed up and he found himself perilously close to tears.

“Hey, no problemo,” Andy assured him, “I know where we can get something. And it’s free and everything.”

He thought about it. What did he have to lose? “Sure. Thanks.”

“Hey, guys like us, we gotta stick together, right?”

Flood managed a smile. “Absolutely.”

“Must be close to five. We’ll go by the Mission.”

“Is it far?”

“Naw, only a few blocks.” Andy stared down at his feet. “Can you walk all right?”

“I’ll have to,” Flood said. His guts felt scraped out. “I haven’t had anything since...” How long had it been? The party started Friday, which meant it was either Monday or Tuesday. “What day is it?”

Andy shrugged, mystified. “Beats me. It don’t matter, they’re open every day.”

“But,” indicating his bedraggled appearance, “do I look all right?”

“Believe me,” Andy told him, “they’ve seen a lot worse.” They started off slowly, in deference to Flood’s lack of footwear. “We might even be able to hook you up with some new clothes. Shoes too.”

“You think they’ll loan me cab fare home? I’ll pay them back.”

“You could *ask*.” Andy appeared doubtful. “You might have to settle for a bus ticket.”

“That’d be great.” Flood tottered along beside him, mindful of glass and stones. “Better than a kick in the ass, right?”

“They serve good grub too. You’ll see.”

“And you’re sure they won’t give me any trouble?”

“You don’t understand, Mr. Flood,” Andy explained patiently, “it’s people like us they’re s’posed to be helping.”

The facilities and fare at the 22nd Street Mission were pretty basic: no waiters, no candles, no menus. The two of them were seated at a fold up, cafeteria-style table in the basement of a deconsecrated Baptist church. The organization running the place lived by some vague interpretation of the Gospels that prevented them from adopting a formal name. They practiced a simplified, bare bones version of the faith; a brief prayer was deemed sufficient and then their guests were encouraged to tuck in.

There were about forty hard luck cases in the room. Most were in fairly rough shape. Threadbare clothes, scraggly beards, matted hair; lean, addict faces. But no matter how bad off they seemed, how far gone, at least *they* had shoes.

As if on cue, Brother Dennis appeared at his side, holding a pair of sneakers. And what a pair of sneakers they were, cherry red, with velcro straps instead of laces. Draped over his arm were a blue cotton t-shirt and lime-green windbreaker, both still on hangers. “Thought you’d like to try these on for size,” Brother Dennis offered.

Flood stood up, glanced around the room, thought *fuck it*. He unbuttoned the smelly shirt Andy had given him and handed it back to its owner. Pulled on the t-shirt, which was too big and the windbreaker which was a tad short in the sleeves. The shoes fit okay, that was the main thing. He thanked his benefactor profusely, almost overcome with gratitude.

“Quite all right,” Brother Dennis said, “please, finish your meal.”

Flood had been too shy so it was Andy who spoke on his behalf. They stuck with the story that he had been robbed and beaten. Reseating himself, Flood leaned over and whispered his thanks. Andy waved it off, his mouth too full for a proper reply.

Now properly kitted out, Flood devoured his food with gusto. Someone even came around and refilled his coffee cup.

He found a bus token in the pocket of the windbreaker (bless you, Brother Dennis). Already visualizing the ride home, opening the door to his apartment, curling up in his own bed and sleeping for a solid *week*.

His reverie was interrupted by a commotion at another table. A man whose wardrobe and appearance made Andy look like an investment banker propelled himself to his feet. He swatted away the restraining hands of his neighbors as Brothers Neil and Dennis hurried over to intercede.

“—tell you I have seen it and breathed its foul scent. It is the *Beast*, the Beast as foretold in the great books of old, revelations that have withstood the ages—”

“Yes, all right, Kenny, we understand,” Brother Dennis, trying to placate him, “now please settle down and stop disturbing everyone.”

“That’s Kenny,” Andy supplied helpfully.

“And? What’s his story?”

“Once he gets going, he’s pretty hard to stop.”

The guy certainly seemed to be working himself into a lather. He glowered at everyone in the vicinity, fending them off with a radioactive glare. “It has the head of an eagle and six wings and as it is written in the Revelation of John, Chapter Six: *Behold, I heard the voice of the fourth beast. And yea verily I looked and besaw a pale horse and a rider and the name of that rider was Death...and Hell followed with him. And power was given to them to kill by sword and hunger and death.*” The self-styled prophet looked across at Flood. “*You.*” Kenny pointed at him. “You know what I’m talking about. You have the mark...” Flood felt exposed, as if the man could see right through him. “It’s coming and you will be among the first to be reaped.”

“Kenny, are you listening to me? C’mon now...”

All at once, the self-styled orator seemed to deflate, allowing them to guide him back to his seat. But he kept glancing at Flood, the sheer wattage of his gaze unnerving.

After he scraped off his plate and set it in a plastic tub by an ancient Hobart dishwasher, Flood turned and found himself literally nose to nose with, who else, Kenny the kook. His aura was a fright wig of livid reds. Dangerous, volatile, unstable.

“It’s not too late for salvation,” he whispered hoarsely to Flood. “Repent and ye shall be saved.”

“That’s good to know,” Flood humored him.

The man’s eyes blazed with conviction. “I saw it, last night. *The Beast*. Like a great eagle, swooping down to carry off fornicators and—”

“You saw it?” Flood’s heart was pounding.

“Yes...and heard it pass. It was *hunting*.”

“Hunting?” Both of them speaking in whispers now. “What was it hunting?”

“I told you, the unworthy. Sodomites and sinners. That is why you must repent.” He grasped the front of Flood’s new used jacket, his voice rising. “Hurry, make haste...before it’s too late. Offer your prayers and devotion to the one true God—”

“Hey, hey, Kenny, that’s enough.” Brother Dennis gently prized the lunatic’s fingers off Flood’s windbreaker. “Respect his space.” Kenny moved off, muttering about Armageddon. Dennis shrugged. “Kenny can be a bit insistent when his passions get the better of him.” He smiled. “We serve breakfast and lunch here too, just so you know.”

“That’s okay, I’ll be heading home right away.”

“You have a place?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re fortunate. Most of these people...”

“Yeah, I know. That’s why what you’re doing here is, y’know, so important.” He offered his hand. “Thanks again, Brother Dennis.”

“I live to serve,” he responded modestly. With a smile and wave, he returned to his duties.

Flood watched him go. Dennis didn’t realize it, of course, but he was giving off a solid, brilliant glow. A good person, selfless, motivated by genuine kindness and compassion. A *holy man*, to use an expression that was currently out of vogue, though from Flood’s perspective it seemed perfectly apt.

6

The bus ride home was like an out-take from a Rob Zombie video.

Flood dropped his token into the receptacle and the first thing the driver said to him in lieu of a greeting was: “Those are some cruel fucking shoes, dude.”

He wasn’t sure how to react so he just kept his head down, saying nothing. He sagged into a bench seat somewhere near the middle and only gradually became aware of the people around him. Was it his imagination or was every single one of them some kind of *mutant*?

The woman across from him was cradling a tattered shopping bag from *The Tool Shed*. Her wig was askew and he could see she was practically bald underneath. The dude next to her had a face the color of silly putty and a mole the size of a teacup on his right cheek. Ugly? Like a poor man’s ass, as Flood’s father had once unkindly remarked.

The bus lurched and there was a *smack* as something struck the front windshield. The driver cursed and wrenched the wheel, braking hard, narrowly avoiding clipping a row of parked cars. As soon as the vehicle jolted to a halt, the driver opened the door and stormed out, snarling

imprecations under his breath. Flood, along with the rest of the passengers, leaned into the aisle, trying to see what was going on.

A crow or some other large, black bird was plastered to the glass. It had hit hard enough to stick and leave a smear of bright blood as the driver gingerly tugged it off and let it fall to the street. The window was cracked, a mandala of fissures branching out from the point of impact.

“Ain’t seen that before,” someone grunted from nearby.

“Even the birds are committing suicide,” the bewigged woman marveled.

The driver returned to his seat. “Sorry, folks. Minor mishap.” He radioed in to report the incident and within moments they were back underway. Not soon enough for the commuters behind them, however, who had been blowing their horns non-stop.

A few sweeps of the windshield wipers and some generous jolts of washer fluid cleared away most of the blood and mess. Flood got off two blocks from his building and made it the rest of the way without further mishap.

When he opened the door to his apartment he found a note from his landlady, Mrs. Tarnovsky, on the floor inside. His rent was overdue *again* (underlined twice) and he was to “remit the full amount without further delay, providing proper recompense”. Her people were peasant stock from some shithole Russian republic—Whogivesafuckistan--and, as a result, she took great pains to write formally in order to cover her lowly origins.

So, let’s see: his rent was overdue, he was failing two classes *and* his part-time job at the bakery was, so to speak, toast. He was broke, facing eviction, starvation, life on the fucking street and what was he going to do?

Unplug the phone, pull the curtains, crawl into bed and sleep.

Yes, for fuck’s sake, let me sleep...

7

The Sanchez Brothers.

You had to love it.

Louis Weiskopf was born in the midwest, Iowa to be exact. His father was an aircraft mechanic and his mother worked in a travel agency. Lou’s best friend and partner, Darren Scala, came from a similarly whitebread background (Italian-Irish, God help him). As far as gene pools went, the two of them were about as Hispanic as William Shatner.

They came up with the idea in high school, made it part of their budding comedy act. Played up their roles to the hilt: a couple of bewildered wetbacks, Pedro and Miguel, doomed to wander the halls of

Central Collegiate, lost in a sea of fucking gringos. They stayed in character for *days*, to the despair of their parents, teachers, guidance counselors...even when faced with threats of suspension from school principal (and arch nemesis) Herbert J. Goss.

They were roughed up by jocks, called racist by a liberally inclined English teacher, snubbed by fellow students but did that dissuade them? No way, *mang*...

They debuted their act at a local comedy club on Lou's 17th birthday and bombed dismally ("Like a rapper at a bar mitzvah", as Darren quipped at the time). In truth, much of their material was lifted from other sources (scratchy old albums featuring Bill Dana and the inimitable Cheech and Chong) and their timing and delivery left much to be desired. So they dropped the performance angle and became the Sanchez Brothers comedy writing team. And gained instant legitimacy after selling one of their best jokes to *The Tonight Show*. Unbelievable. Jay fucking Leno. A cold sell through the mail. They were flying high for weeks. Jay never ended up using their gag but, never mind, thanks to coverage in the local media the legend was born.

The Leno thing turned out to be the high point of their comedy-writing phase. After that, they went stone cold, striking out even when they pitched for a local public access show. Once they finished high school, the lads pooled their resources and, with their parents' help, bought a half share in a failing sound studio. The Sanchez Brothers would make like the Glitter Twins and become *feelthy* rich producing records. The studio never got off the ground. A newer, better one opened across town, the overhead was murder, so they bailed out.

Then it was "Sanchez Brothers Productions", creators of popular and experimental movies, short subjects and industrial training films. Which was how they met Arnie Peabody, the dean of window washers. Darren called him "the *sensei* of the squeegee" and no way was that a putdown. He was the perfect subject for a documentary—affable, funny *and* he told a great story.

They had some used gear they bought off eBay cheap: a Canon digital camera, tripod and movie lights. They filmed Arnie first in his kitchen, then on the job. He showed off his rig, pointing out how everything worked, then proposed taking them up, giving them a bird's eye view.

"Nothing to it, boys," he stated confidently. He explained the safety gear, hauled out the harnesses, assuring them that in all the years he'd been on the job he had yet to suffer a mishap more serious than accidentally dumping a bucket of soapy water on passersby eighty feet below.

At the time, Arnie had a kid named Hector working for him, a warm body sent over by an employment agency, the latest in a long string.

Arnie could never get good people to stay on; many couldn't get over their fears and others were disenchanted by the (relatively) low pay and menial labor. The work *was* hellishly hard on the shoulders and back, no question.

The Plaza was next on Arnie's agenda and the sturdy, aluminum frame gondola could easily bear the weight of four. They could film him on the job, ask questions while he and Hector did their thing.

"Okay," Darren spoke up, "I'm game."

"Sure," Lou agreed. "The equipment's light. And we'll be wearing harnesses, like you said."

They showed up at four the next morning and accompanied Arnie to the top of the Plaza. The gondola was already attached and in position. Arnie was working alone again, Hector having vamoosed elsewhere. He didn't seem bothered though, as indomitable as ever.

Arnie was a man who took pride in his work. The twenty-foot gondola was well-secured, steady as a rock. Lou shot some footage as Arnie used a motorized winch to lower them into position, at the same time rhapsodizing about life above the city, the silence and sense of peace you experienced once removed from the bustle and clamor below.

"You're up here and you're on top of the world. It's the best view money can't buy. You see the people inside, working in their little pens and, boy, I tell you, I don't envy them one damn bit. They never look up, you never see them enjoying the view. Sometimes I think I'm the luckiest man in the world."

Inwardly, Darren permitted himself a whoop of joy. It was the perfect title for their first cinematic effort. *The Luckiest Man in the World*. Handed to them on a platter: thanks, Arnie. He glanced at Lou and saw he was nodding and grinning. It was like that between them, nothing weird about it, just a case of great minds thinking alike and all that.

It was hard for Arnie to talk, do his cleaning and operate the controls at the same time, so Darren ended up periodically spelling him while Lou filmed and vice versa. They soon discovered that not only weren't they afraid of heights, they were also fuckin' natural born window cleaners.

Arnie recognized their potential and broached the idea of the two of them coming to work for him, possibly even assuming part ownership in the business. But...wouldn't that mean putting their dreams of being great film-makers on hold? Not necessarily. As a matter of fact, it gave them some coin in pocket to upgrade their equipment, buy a new computer, some state of the art software. Professional quality stuff.

They mulled over the offer but not for long. The agreement was that Arnie would train them and eventually they'd take over the lion's share of the work, allowing Arnie to step back and take it easy. His back was

going, his shoulders plagued by arthritis—he welcomed the chance to shift some of the load on to a couple of reliable young go-getters.

The name change was part of the deal and he learned to live with it. *The Sanchez Brothers Window Cleaning Service*. Sure, why not? Eventually they'd be running the show so let them call it what they liked. In his view their *nom de plume* (or whatever) sounded a bit too ethnic, but the lads were adamant so in the end he graciously conceded the point.

The Sanchez Brothers still had their eyes on the big prize. Their window-washing business was but one subsidiary of their vast corporate empire. Meanwhile they continued to push their proposed reality TV series, a year in the life of a terminally ill person, working title "Last Gasp" (so far no takers). They were also brainstorming a graphic novel (though neither of them could draw for shit) and were in the process of developing a board game they'd dubbed *Cadaver*.

It was a heady time. Fame and fortune were imminent or, at least, within reach. Right on the horizon. They were working hard and living their dreams.

Look out Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the fucking Sanchez Brothers are on their way...

"—another idea for *Cadaver*," Louis Weiskopf was saying. Ideas were Lou's specialty, he was constantly coming up with refinements, little touches to give their projects and concepts that special imprimatur that said "Sanchez Brothers".

Darren was manning the winch, maneuvering them down to the next floor. Today they were doing the CommerzBank, which was a bit tricky because of a long slice carved in its glassine façade by some clever architect who never took into consideration the trouble it would present to honest, hard-working stiff's like themselves. They'd set up on the east side first so they could beat the sun, finish before the glare made their work a living hell. They both wore sunblock, hats, long-sleeved shirts. Arnie Peabody was an excellent mentor. For him, safety was paramount. He didn't want anything spoiling his perfect track record, including malignant melanoma.

Arnie still made the occasional trip up, despite some recently disclosed health problems, namely a troublesome ticker. It caused intermittent spells of light-headedness so the boys kept an eye on him and made sure his safety harness was clipped on.

This morning Arnie wasn't with them, though the Commerzbank was one of his favorite jobs. He told them he'd tag along when they did it again in the spring.

Darren glanced at his watch. Not yet four. Plenty of time to finish the top and spend the rest of the morning in the shadows of surrounding

buildings. Piece of cake. His partner was musing aloud as he prepared another batch of the *Sanchez Brothers Klear Dry Glass Kleaner* (patent pending). The unmistakable tang of ammonia; it cut the grease and helped prevent streaking.

“—so instead of getting a health card, you have to get some kind of expensive medical procedure. Just to up the difficulty level...y’know, ‘tests show you need a liver transplant’ and if you don’t have health insurance, you’re fucked.”

Darren nodded and then stiffened when he glanced up and saw-- “What was *that*?” Fumbling with the switch, bringing them to a stop. Anxiously scanning the area. “There was something, like a big shadow...”

Lou didn’t seem concerned, his mind still focused on *Cadaver*. “Likely bats. This early in the morning--”

“Wasn’t bats. *Batman*, maybe. Fuckin’ big, whatever it was. I just got a glimpse but I’m telling you, it was *huge*.”

“Pedro, mang,” his partner pointed out, “sooner we get this thing done, the better. Otherwise we get our asses fried when the sun comes up.”

Darren took one last look around. “Yeah, you’re right. Fock this shit, Miguel.” Darren re-engaged the winch, got them going again.

“Coulda been anything. Shit gets caught in air currents. Newspaper maybe.”

Darren wasn’t convinced. Lou went back to riffing on *Cadaver* and Darren pretended to listen while keeping a sharp eye out for any more UFOs in the vicinity.

And then all at once they stopped. *Dead*. So abruptly that they were jostled, the platform shuddering beneath their feet.

“A bit heavy on the hoist there, bro,” Lou complained.

“It wasn’t me,” Darren shot back. “The rigging must be snagged or something.” Darren fiddled with the controls and the gondola started moving again only to grind to a halt moments later, stuck fast.

Darren killed the motor and then restarted it but when he tried to operate the winch in either direction, there was a high keen of complaint from inside the works. He hastily switched off before he did serious damage. “Well, we’re fucked,” he said, pronouncing sentence. “Must be jammed at the top, maybe the outriggers. Can’t go up or down.” He examined the situation from all angles, studied the alternatives but no matter which way he looked at it, “fucked” summed things up nicely.

“Hell, let’s call Arnie.” Lou, coming up with yet another brilliant idea. Brilliant, that is, except for one small detail.

“I didn’t bring the cell. I’m pretty sure I left it charging on the dash of the truck. Unless you grabbed it—” The bleak look on his partner’s face confirmed the worst.

“Aw, *man*. So what do we do? Write notes on paper towels and drop them over the side? Wait for people to show up for work and knock on the window?” Lou snorted in derision. “I don’t wanna make the news, *mang*. That would be *so* uncool if the fuckin’ fire department had to rescue us.”

“I don’t see any other choice,” Darren responded. “It’s not like we can just slide open a window and make our getaway.”

“Yeah, but can’t we—”

Louis didn’t get to finish because the platform was *heaving* as some force wrenched on the steel suspension lines on Darren’s side, raising the rig and dropping it, tossing them about with savage jerks. The gondola thumped and rubbed against the building but the rubber bumpers prevented serious damage.

“I thought you turned it off!” Lou yelled.

“I did!”

“Then what—”

Now the tactic was repeated on Lou’s side, catching them off balance, hurling them to the floor of the platform. Darren landed awkwardly and immediately began thrashing about in agony. “*Aaaahhh, fuck! My arm!*”

Lou could see from his friend’s pale expression and the way he was holding his wounded wing that Darren was in trouble. “It’s right down by my wrist....” He leaned over and retched.

Lou crawled toward him but at that moment something soared past the gondola, appearing and disappearing so quickly it registered only peripherally. And Lou understood immediately that Darren was right, it was no fucking bat. He reached Darren’s side and the two of them huddled together. “I saw it too,” he told Darren.

“Huh?” Darren was zoning out, dazed with pain.

“There it is again!” Lou gripped Darren’s good arm. “I think they’re *stalking* us, man.” It became obvious that each pass was bringing them—whatever they were—closer to the platform. “There’s at least two of them.

Haven’t got a good look at them yet...”

Darren was weeping, from the pain and their predicament. “Oh, man, I don’t wanna die up here—”

“Fuck off, *mang*, we’re not gonna die. We’re the Sanchez Brothers. Tough spics. Gimme that thing, reach behind you—*yeah!*” Gripping the five-foot metal extension pole. “Anything gets close I’ll fuckin’ brain it with this.” His show of bravado seemed to cheer Darren.

“Maybe we can...squirt some of our soap in their eyes.” They were tense and scared and the suggestion struck them both as hysterically funny. They laughed ’til it hurt. “You—you think they’ll come back?”

Lou shrugged. “It doesn’t matter if they do. We’re not going anywhere, right? They can’t get at us *and* we’re wearing our gear.” They were both secured by six-foot lanyard to an independent “life line” anchored to the roof. Even if the gondola suffered a catastrophic failure and broke away from beneath them, they were safe and sound. “We’ll wait it out and when it’s light, maybe another hour, we’ll bang on the—”

The platform gave another lurch, something plucking at the cables again, sending violent tremors through the apparatus. Darren cradled his sore arm, moaning in pain.

“It’s trying to *shake* us out,” Lou marveled. He peeked over the chest high safety barrier but couldn’t see anything.

Darren gawked at him. “Fuck that, man! What do you mean? What are you talking about?”

“Darren...”

“*We gotta get down, man, we gotta get off this fucker and—and—*”

“Take it easy,” Lou told him. “We’ll wait it out, like I said.” There was a sound, like a garbled growl. From close by, near enough to make them jump.

That was too much for Darren. He grabbed the rail with his good arm and surged to his feet. “Help! Help! We’re trapped up here! Hey! Hey, anybody—”

Something got him.

It came out of nowhere and snatched Darren Scala by the shoulders, pulling him off the platform. The safety tether did its job for about half a second, long enough for him to exchange a look with Lou, each recognizing there was nothing to be done. The winged creature yanked hard and something tore or snapped and Darren was *gone*, his screams trailing off into diminishing echoes until nothing remained of him.

Lou stared after his longtime friend, too horrified to react for several long seconds. He slowly sank to the floor of the gondola, sick, shaking, having a total meltdown. His thoughts a clamor of conflicting voices, most of them shouting or weeping, none offering anything like a coherent plan. He crawled to the winch, tried to get the platform going: up, down, he wasn’t picky.

Nothing. Still jammed.

He felt the gondola sway, knew without looking that he had company, something considerably heavier than a bat. He turned slowly, found himself confronted by a creature conjured from dark material, completely and utterly alien in appearance. It had to be at least seven feet tall and left no doubt from its aspect or mien that it was a predator. He couldn’t decide if it was bird or reptile or a bit of both.

“What the fuck *are* you?”

It cocked its head, studying him. Its beak was its most prominent feature, long and pointy, and he thought he could make out teeth. A ruffle of feathers or fur around the base of its long, crooked neck. He thrust the metal pole at it. "Keep away from me, you motherfucker," he whispered.

Another creature swooped in and perched on the side bar, the unit rocking from the added weight. Lou, recognizing the futility of the situation, began to slide down until he was huddled on the floor. Their wings were folded against their bodies. Both stared at him with malign interest. Finally one of them dropped onto the platform and before Lou could raise his arms, it was on him, stabbing with that sharp beak and tearing at him with talons the size of meat hooks. It ripped and gouged his flesh, eviscerating him swiftly, expertly. The platform was soon awash in blood, a torrent of gore that flowed and dripped through the sides and bottom of the apparatus, falling in slow, feathery rivulets toward the street far below.

End of Excerpt

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