

## **Death Threats**

*I actually believed I was dying. No kidding, I thought it was only a matter of time.*

*I had all the classic symptoms: dizziness, blurred vision, head aches; heart palpitations and shortness of breath. Loss of libido, lack of appetite, insomnia...*

*I remember trying to tell you about it. Not making a big deal out of it or anything, just mentioning in passing that I wasn't feeling so great. But it was after we'd turned in so maybe the timing wasn't right. Yes, that explains it. Because you were tired and noncommittal. Not exactly forthcoming with the reassurance I was seeking. Falling asleep within a few seconds, as usual. Leaving me to thrash things out, wakeful and fretting long into the night.*

*And it wasn't about turning forty or the latest stuff with my dad or Carlie's chemotherapy, Uncle Arnold's dementia. Those may have been contributing factors but there was more to it than that. I'm sure of it.*

*I developed mortal dreads. Seriously. Convinced myself it wasn't safe to leave the apartment. The tenants would call and I'd say I had the flu. Sometimes I'd sit in our big armchair all day and shake. I had visions—very real and sickeningly*

*graphic—terrible things happening to you, of being brought to the morgue to identify your body, your features pulped almost beyond recognition.*

*It lasted a week or ten days and gradually dissipated.*

*You never suspected, didn't even have an inkling of how bad it was.*

*That whole time there was this sense of something awful looming over us, a hammer strike about to descend and shatter our peaceful little existence.*

*And I'd be churning everything over in my mind, an endless series of gruesome scenarios, trying to anticipate what might be coming, expecting the very, very worst...*

Tess walked in as I was weighing myself. We have a digital scale, accurate as an atomic clock. Bright green numerals, easy to read. I was still mulling over what they signified when she made her unexpected entrance.

Normally the bathroom is a “no go” zone when I’m in there. Call it a guy thing...or maybe it’s a manifestation of childhood fears of inadequacy or merely a petulant display of emotional immaturity on my part. When I’m in the john, I’m in there on private business and she usually knows to wait until I’m done.

But she was sort of hustling that morning and, to be fair, gave a couple of taps before barging in. Looking for the mate of her favorite earring which, it turned out, she never found. A pearl teardrop doohickie that she picked up in Italy. Wouldn’t tell me what it cost.

It wasn't on the counter by the window so she reversed direction, preoccupied and annoyed, finally noticing me, perched on the scale like a giant, sway-backed crane.

"You're losing weight," she observed. Reaching out and pinching a narrow flap of skin by my navel. "Lookin' good." She had to stand on tiptoes to peck my cheek. Then she was gone.

"Down four pounds in the past week," I called after her.

"Good for you." Still thinking about her bloody earring.

And there I was, y'know, *dying*.

The internet. Designed and built for the socially impaired and chronically self-obsessed: trivia buffs, perverts, fan boys, completists and hypochondriacs.

It took me only moments to discover I was seven pounds lighter than the optimum weight for males my size. Then I started poking around, looking up various conditions and afflictions and found out far more than I needed to know about heart disease, cancer, diabetes, M.S., Cystic Fibrosis, ALS and leprosy (hey, why not?).

I blew an entire Saturday morning surfing from site to site, reading reams of stuff on chronic, wasting illnesses...and for the rest of that weekend I was *useless*. I couldn't get over how many different ways there were to die and how few of them were pleasant and dignified.

I also learned that cloudy urine might be a sign of renal dysfunction and my dizzy spells could be caused by a walnut-sized tumour on my cerebral cortex. The

tingling in my fingers and toes, how cold my extremities got, indicated poor circulation, and the constant cramping in my legs might be relieved by taking extra doses of potassium and drinking more water.

I came to the conclusion that the most merciful end for me would probably be a massive heart attack. It would hurt like bejesus but hopefully I'd lose consciousness right away. No prolonged, painful death for yours truly, I wouldn't be able to handle that.

--flashing to the face of Coach Busby, yelling at me as old Mike, our trainer, tried to straighten my ring finger after a collision with a monstrous centre from a rival school. But I was bawling and even after they taped me up, I wouldn't go back in. Sat on the end of the bench and cried like a baby. What a dope.

"Big bastard like you," Busby snapped at me the next day in his office, "acting like a sissy, disgracing our team. You should be a man among boys," he said, his tone more resigned than angry at that point. "You always play like you're afraid of getting hurt."

I was benched, Travis Brossard taking over at point guard. Coach Busby stuck to the story that my finger was to blame for the demotion. A small act of kindness on his part.

But my team mates were there and saw what happened and I could see from their faces that none of them were fooled.

Somehow I'd forgotten the Seattle conference. Maybe I'd blocked it out.

But there was no denying it now: her bags were on the bed and I could hear hangers rattling in the closet.

My legs gave out and I sat on the end of the mattress, feeling very shaky. I didn't want to be left alone. Not in the state I was in. I'd be too freaked out. The emptiness of the apartment. Suppose something *really* went haywire in the building, something I couldn't handle? And if I went out, the streets would be filled with faces and none of them would be welcoming or familiar.

I'm a creature of habit. Last year the owners decided to repaint the exterior of our building. They hired this local outfit to scrape and sand it down and redid the whole thing in this drab blue, so neutral it's almost grey. Every time I go outside, it *still* gives me a jolt.

And this past winter Tess changed the towels in the bathroom, replaced the blue ones with a nice, marine green set. I hated them and had to pretend it was all right, no problem, change whatever you want, nail the furniture to the ceiling for all I care. Feigned nonchalance: I'm getting good at it.

But meanwhile, preparing for Seattle, departure time looming...

Making small talk. What sessions she'd be attending and the name of the keynote speaker. All of it acknowledged, noted and quickly forgotten.

On to more important things. Apropos nothing: "So if I was, uh, y'know, an invalid, like braindead or that locked in syndrome, comatose but not technically dead—"

“I’d smother you,” without hesitation and then off to find a cream blouse to go with her favorite skirt.

Later, as she deliberated between two different pairs of walking shoes: “And—and if I found out I had only three months left to live—”

“Empty our savings and go on a round the world trip,” she filled in without pause. “Paris, Rio, Rome, the whole shebang.” Settling on the Merrill sneakers, they were better for her ruinous arches.

She caught a cab to the airport. Told me there was no point me tagging along. Kind of a brusque “good-bye” at the front door. Warning me to behave myself and managing to miss my mouth with an errant kiss.

I waved from the entranceway, telling myself to be brave, she’d be back in a week, no worry on that account and that it was stupid to keep standing there, she was *gone* and nothing was going to change that simple, irrefutable fact...

I made out my will. Tore up the old one and started out fresh.

Except I couldn’t think of anything to say. Total blank. Finally had to resort to taping the previous version back together and recopying it. Except for the poem at the end. I switched to something by William Butler Yeats. From a book I found at a thrift store, fifty cents and highlighted all to hell.

Dr. Varney wasn’t convinced anything was wrong but booked me for a round of tests anyway. Blood work, urine...I even had to provide a stool sample.

But my intestinal fortitude was further tested when he announced his intention to perform a digital rectal examination. “You’re, what, nearly forty years old. It’s probably time.” Looking at me, unable to hide a flicker of amusement at my obvious discomfort. “And we want to eliminate all possibilities, don’t we?”

I’d come too far by that point to back down. “Fine,” I agreed, and the next thing I knew I was making an appointment to undergo the most invasive medical procedure a human being can be forced to endure. That was one red-bordered square on the calendar I wouldn’t be looking forward to.

Varney tried to put me at ease. “Nothing to worry about,” offering me a rare, crooked smile, “you’re still a pup.”

“What about the weight loss?”

“Keep it up,” he headed for the door, “I should lose some myself.”

Edith Carmody was a more sympathetic audience. I explained the situation in detail as I banged away ineffectually beneath her sink. There was a leak somewhere but do you think I could find it? I paused and just then a drop of water splashed onto my cheek. Where the hell did *that* come from?

I cursed but ol’ Edith didn’t seem to mind. She was eighty-five, deaf as a tree and mostly blind. Thanks to a stroke she hadn’t spoken in a decade but despite her infirmities she still somehow managed on her own. “Sorry, ma’am.” I crawled out from under the sink and wiped my hands on an old t-shirt I kept in my toolkit. “This one’s beyond me.”

She didn't respond, hardly seemed to be breathing. It had taken her ten minutes to walk a few steps from the living room to the kitchen. But she'd done it. Still putting one foot ahead of another, operating more out of instinct than conscious intent. As light and insubstantial as a flapping sheet. If I was getting on the thin side, she was positively *spectral*.

“Looks like we're gonna have to call in Ernst for this one, Mrs. C.” In truth I was hopeless at plumbing and even worse when it came to wiring or anything to do with the building's ancient heating and air circulation system. I think my ineptitude was an open secret among the tenants. They didn't seem to hold it against me; at least I knew enough to bring in an expert rather than try to jury-rig something that was bound to go south at the first opportunity.

She gave me a slow wink. Not my imagination, her left eyelid definitely drooped down in ironic acknowledgement; so someone was still in there after all. Someone all too aware what a useless caretaker I was. Not to be trusted with anything more challenging than a sticky door or more sophisticated than a plunger.

I'd fibbed—well, maybe it was more than that—when we first moved in, claiming I'd worked for my journeyman father, learning basic plumbing and wiring at his feet. Not quite true. Okay, not at all true. Before he got sick, my father worked for thirty years in the city greenhouse and didn't know one end of a hammer from another. But at that point I'd been out of work for eight months and Tess was just getting started at the bank so reduced rent sounded pretty good to us.

Most of the time I winged it and when I was stumped and couldn't stall any longer, I brought in someone like Ernst. The owners, some management company out of Calgary, occasionally grouched about the bills I sent them but considering the age of the building and the amount of deterioration, all in all I think I did a pretty good job. So far the place hadn't fallen down on my watch and we'd dodged major renos and that definitely worked in my favour.

"I'll see if he can make it by tomorrow. This has been going on too long."  
*Time?* What did time mean to someone her age? What was a day, a week, to her? Roughly the same significance it would have to a glacier.

It would be great to see Ernst again. Ernst Rathegeber. As in "Ernst Rathgeber & Son". Only there was no son and never will be. There was only Ernst, his four "majors", two bypasses and a pacemaker that kept him on his feet and gainfully employed.

If anyone could help me come to terms with my fears and anxieties, the terror of living day to day in the valley of the shadow of death, it was Ernst. He'd been there, *man*. On the brink of crossing over. Eye to eye with the abyss. And it hadn't fazed him, not one bit.

"I was dead two, mebbe tree minutes. Zey told me later. Zey gave me last rights, ja? Und no vone expected I should live. But here I am." A pack of Export A cigarettes crammed in his shirt pocket and an eager young apprentice along for the scut work. Lugging and toting while Ernst looked on with the haughty grace of a U-

boat commander. “Zis old building,” he shook his head. “One day, *ker-poo!* Vy do ve bother, eh? Bash it down, start again vit the new. No? You don’t sink? Okay, ’til then ve try to make it vork.”

“Don’t you have any sense of nostalgia?” I liked to kid him and he liked to be kidded. His assistant was unpacking his tools in front of the sink. Laying everything out like in an operating theater.

“What is zat? Everything old must make vay for the new. Zat is nature und you cannot fool vit nature. Ve die und somesing better succeeds us. Survival of the fittest. More power to it, I say.”

“I’m not sure I like the sound of that,” I confessed. “According to your standards, I’m already *obsolete*.”

He jabbed a thumb at Edith Carmody, who, having completed an epic journey of just over two meters, was slumped in a kitchen chair, snoring, her chin on her collapsed chest. “You vould rather be like zat vone? Caught between two vorlds?” Shaking his head in disgust. “Better to eat a bullet, *ja?*” He turned his attention to the recalcitrant sink, gave it a dismissive glance. “*Ach*. Und zis plumbing. It is even older zen *she* is...”

Tess called from Seattle. A rush job, between sessions and sounding like she couldn’t wait to get back at it. I said maybe ten words. She ignored them, even the last three, the most important ones, left hanging there, like a song missing its final notes.

*I love you.*

Her silence speaking volumes, long sentences that lingered in the empty space between us, two thousand miles and growing by the second...

A clean bill of health from Doc Varney and he was the only one who seemed pleased by the results. A single sheet in a file folder contained all the relevant information. Is that possible?

“Nothing anomalous, everything well within norms...”

I kept staring at him. He was expecting me to say something. Waiting for me to break into a grin and grip his hand in abject gratitude. Instead I just sat there, looking at him. Finally he leaned back in his ergonomic chair, his expression vexed. “I must say, this isn’t the reaction I expected--*what’s that?*” I must have formed the syllables. “What did you say?”

“You’re wrong,” I told him. “There’s something you’ve missed.”

Needless to say, he was unimpressed by my attitude. Snapped the folder shut and stood, signaling the conference was over. All but ushering me out.

I started the car, then reached over and turned it off.

Sat there awhile and, gradually, felt this weight, this sense of oppression that had been hovering over me sort of...well it wasn’t *gone* but it seemed to lighten. From a dangerous, threatening sky to a heavy overcast. But definitely an improvement.

No more bad spells, not even a month later when I found Edith Carmody on her living room floor. I didn't lose it and was even able to close her eyes for her. Maybe it was because she was so old and on some level I'd been expecting it. It also might have had something to do with the airless calm I felt in her presence that day. I didn't see any signs of pain or struggle, her passing swift and seemingly unforced, made without fuss or regret.

*End*

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