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Because You Have Seen

• John F. McGlynn

HE SAT AT THE WINDOW, staring into the dark summer night. Behind him his wife moved restlessly, watching him. A soft wind blew at the curtains. He was wearing only a sweat shirt and pajama pants, but he was not cold. The chill was inside him as he waited for the *presence*—how else could he call it?—to make its appearance.

He drew long breaths from a cigarette and he stared into the night that had no sound, no movement. There was only the ticking of the alarm clock on the night table beside him and the creaking of the bed springs under the fitful movements of his wife's body.

His toes had just shifted to a colder position on the radiator when his wife spoke.

"Maybe not tonight, Jim."

"Maybe," he said, but he knew better. There was plenty of time, surely. One night he had waited for two hours before the visitor came.

And there had been seven such nights. Seven nights, while his wife slept, he had watched at this window, and someone had appeared in the glow of the lamp across the street and walked towards him; someone whom he had recognized from an earlier meeting, a nightmare meeting months before, in a town fully thirty miles away.

All week long he had gone through the motions of normal daily

life, while inside he wrestled with the forms of fear. Night had become a vigil time, sleepless, terror-wracked, bringing back with a clearer and clearer sight the terrible long vigils of his early childhood: vigils he thought he had erased forever from his mind along with the fanatic religion which had evoked them. Now, in the midst of this new fear, how slight a reference it required to call forth that towering, fierce-eyed presence of his father: standing over their beds like the incarnation of Doomsday itself, warning them how their sins were eating at their flesh; while they would lie in bed in terror, magnifying every shadow into an agent of Satan and fearing every footfall on the stair as some dark power come to whisk them off. And they used to hear their mother cry out in the dark.

Finally, the weight of memory and actuality was too much to bear, and on this, the eighth evening, when they were at dinner, he had told his wife.

She had been in the process of pouring tea, and it must have been fully ten seconds that she stood unmoving with the tea pot poised over his cup and the steam curling upward from the angled spout. In those few moments he knew that she believed him, and more, was convinced that it was no hallucination but some actual and ominous presence. Even though she laughed

at the idea a little later on and said it was just a coincidence, somebody going home from a late-shift job and his imagination working overtime. She was convinced, and later, as she lay awake and he sat watching, he told her the whole story.

"Peg, you know, I saw him before." He paused without turning his head, but there was no response so he went on.

"A couple months ago, over in Louisburg. It was the night I went to pick you up at the McCulloughs. Remember, I waited for you in the car. You weren't ready when I rang the bell. You were out in the kitchen with Flo, getting a recipe or something. It was a fine night and I told Bill I'd wait in the car. I guess it was only a couple of minutes till I heard someone come out of the building. I thought it was you, he came out of the same apartment building. I even started up the motor. That's when I saw him first. He was standing on the walk, not ten feet away from me, lighting a cigarette. I remember being startled, but I figured it was because it wasn't you. Then he started walking away and I lost interest in him, thinking of other things.

"I don't know how long it was when I suddenly noticed him again. He was standing at the curb at the corner and he was staring right at me through the windshield. And a horrible chill came over me. For though he was fifty feet away I could see every detail of his face, especially his eyes that seemed to bore right inside me, all bloodshot

and protruding and grinning like a devil.

"While we stared at each other, he started walking towards me. Slow, but with the most brazen confidence. As though I knew him. As though he knew I'd have to let him in the car. His crooked face grinning. Then I got panic stricken, I tried to do ten things at once. For a second I thought I was lost. His face came even with the window and his fingers were on the door handle when I finally had presence of mind to push the lock. His face changed—you can't imagine the look. He started for the back door. The car was still idling and I jammed it into first and shot away from the curb. Three blocks away I began to feel foolish. I swung around and went back, but he was gone."

The bed groaned as Peg sat upright. "Jim, you're shaking like a leaf."

"How many times I've seen his face since that night! The unspeakable ugliness of it. The sly confidence . . . as though I had committed some loathsome act, and he knew! Or as though we had done it together. But it was always only in my brain—until last week."

"How can you be sure it's the same person? You saw him close up only that one time."

"I don't know how, but I know. I'd know him anywhere. I'd know him with his back turned. I'd know him in a thousand."

And at that instant, as though to lend weight to his conviction, a figure materialized below them, on

the corner opposite, a figure shadowy and slumped under the foggy street lamp.

"Peg, it's him again. My God, it's him! Do you see?"

She was beside him now. He heard her gasp, felt her fingers clutch his own icy ones.

They watched together as the figure stood motionless for perhaps ten seconds and then stepped into the street and began crossing to their side. His footfalls sounded with a hollow insistence in a night of otherwise perfect silence. The windows of the houses opposite were black, unblinking eyes beneath an oppressive sky. And to Jim Grey the low wind seemed to hold off for as long as that shadow-figure moved.

Suddenly, he did a desperate thing. Thrusting his head through the window opening, he called out, "You, down there—!"

His voice failed him, for the head jerked back and the twisted face glared up at him, breaking on him sickeningly like the unexpected sight of worms on opening a tin of fruit. The blood-soaked eyes with that grin of shared evil floated up at him. Some preternatural power of inflicting harm appeared then to surround the man on the street, and Jim had a sudden terror of the open space between them. He pulled himself inside, slammed the window shut, locked it, and threw himself on the bed in a paroxysm of fright and loathing.

"Jim, Jim!" His wife's voice beat at him like a hammer. He turned his face to her from the pillow.

"That won't be all, Peg. He doesn't let you off this easily! Listen!"

And from three flights down, along the dusty, panelled hallway and up the narrow, dusty staircase, the sound of a door slamming came to them, and the same slow footfall, only muted now.

"In this building! Jim, what can it mean?"

"Listen."

He fell to counting, hypnotically, the steps getting closer, anticipating the different set of sounds as each landing was reached. And then they were very close and his wife stood by the bed with her hand to her mouth, and a mouse scurried in the wall behind him and he finally made a wild, desperate leap, just as in the car that night, and shot the bolt of the lock home.

The steps were on *their* landing now, echoing hollowly like sounds in a nightmare. Did he imagine that they halted outside their door? An interminable second and then they retreated down the hall. Quite distinctly he heard a key being inserted in the door of the next apartment, and then noises on the other side of their bedroom wall. Both he and his wife stood transfixed while seconds lengthened to minutes, until eventually the curtains stirred again at the window and there was the sound of the neighboring bed sinking beneath a heavy weight.

After this sign, Jim looked across the dark of the room at his wife, but he had to step closer to make out her features. She hardly moved

except to face him and in her eyes he saw the struggle of disbelief and fear. He had the uneasy feeling, as she flinched away from the automatic gesture of reassurance, that some of that fear was directed at him.

"If only I could believe it was some elaborate practical joke. Or even the twisted notion of revenge of someone I might have harmed in some way." There *was* fear of him in her eyes; perhaps she thought he was going insane.

He was beginning to seem insane to himself. But he had to keep away the other alternative; the superstition, the belief in spirits and devils, the face of his father, the fanaticism, the footfalls of the demons in his mind. If his father was still alive and could see him now, how complete his triumph would be: the whole hobgoblin world torn open beneath the son's protesting fingers, all the most fantastic forms of that world he had locked away from his thoughts alive in his brain like a Hallowe'en nightmare.

"You did *see* something, Peg!" He suddenly needed that assurance.

"Yes," she said. "But . . . but . . . I can't believe . . . I can't talk about it. Not now, at least." Whether from disbelief or physical exhaustion—he could not be sure—her voice trailed off and she sank in a sobbing heap back on the bed.

Next morning, putting on a light summer coat before the bureau mirror, Jim Gray made a decision. The sun had just risen over the

rooftops opposite, and its light streamed into the bedroom, flecking everything, coverlets, carpet, Peg's clothes strewn on a chair, with a golden haze. It gave him courage.

He would have liked the added courage that resides at the bottom of a cup of coffee, but he did not want to wake Peg. Her night had been quite as sleepless as his own. He looked around at her, sprawled awkwardly, covers kicked aside, sleeping the sleep of exhaustion.

As he stepped into the hall, he had to fight to maintain his resolve. He allowed himself a minute to gain his composure and then he tiptoed to the door of the adjoining apartment. He listened with his cheek barely touching the panelling. Nothing.

He could not knock. That would be to put the thing or person or whatever it was on guard. He could not stand the shock of being discovered first. He had to take the other by surprise.

With infinite care and slowness, his hand gripped the door knob and began to turn it. What if the person inside were watching? Suppose he was listening at the other side of the door! Jim strained to hear, but there was nothing, and he put such thoughts from his mind. The knob turned all the way and he began pushing the door to. As a crack of light appeared, he thrust the door completely open. The color drained from his face.

A ray of sunlight shot past into the hall. It dazzled him, but only briefly. The first thing he noticed was a chest of drawers, with a water

pitcher atop it and a glass half-emptied. Then his gaze caught the bed; it had obviously been slept in, the pillow rumpled, the covers, awry, but the room was deserted. Yet, he felt some ominous presence still. And in a moment his roving glance told him why.

The door to the adjoining bath was open, and on the floor was a long, broad shadow. It was utterly motionless, but he knew it was cast by some palpable presence. He knew then that they were together once more, more intimately than ever before, each waiting, with only that open door between. Time and all the world beyond these two small rooms seemed to hush. Some strange compulsion to close the awful gap took hold of him, and he found himself, half against his will, moving forward. There *was* a secret they shared! This was the thought that struck him, and for a second he reveled in that same evil power that seemed to radiate from the counter-presence beyond the door.

A cloud came before the sun and the wide beam of light retreated from the window, changing the room to a ghostly grey. His former dread welled up inside him and he burst from the room, slammed the door behind him, and ran. Blindly, past his own door, past the fire exit, down the stairs two at a time, through the echoing hall, and onto the street, where at last he felt secure. The sun had appeared again. Three young girls, arm in arm, went past him to the bus stop. Cars flashed by in both directions. A

boy at the corner whistled.

He had forgotten his desk keys, but he would not go back. Resisting the temptation to look up at the window of the room he had just left, he crossed the street and lost himself in the noises of clanging trolleys, screeching taxis, and the chatter of stray acquaintances, work-bound in the morning coolness of a summer day.

The one man had leaned back, and for awhile no word passed between them. They sat across the table from each other in a vast, drafty, high-ceilinged room. The only light, from a small lamp in the center of the table, was pitifully inadequate. A ring of illumination perhaps five feet in diameter revealed the scratched, hard surface of the long table. And it created a strange effect. As each man in turn leaned his face forward in his anxiety to communicate to the other, his face would flare up out of shadow, so that their conversation was like a code passing between the semaphore-lights of ships.

"It's a strange story," the one finally conceded. "I can't pretend to know what it means, or even if it means anything: I don't know why this thing or person appeared to you. I don't know what it was. From what you say it could have been almost anything. Possibly a hallucination, possibly a manifestation of the devil, or possibly just a night-shift worker, as your wife thought."

"She won't think it anymore, Father. Remember, two of us have

seen him now. Don't forget that."

"There is the possibility that both of you were worked up to such a pitch—"

"Father, he's real. I know that with as much certainty as I know you're sitting across from me now. I even have an idea what he's after."

"Yes?" They were both leaning forward now.

"He's evil. It's all around him. You can almost touch it. It's like sores on his flesh."

"Well, my only advice—and, mind, it has nothing to do with my vocation—would be to confront him. Have it out once and for all. You have faith—"

Jim looked quickly away, so that the priest added, meaningfully, as if in proof, "You did come here tonight. And—" with a smile, "you have two powerful-looking fists there."

"But if he—I don't know how to put it, but I think in another moment there this morning I would have lost my soul."

Another long silence passed between them. Somewhere in the night a train whistled.

"How can you know such a thing?" There was even a touch of annoyance now in the voice. "What of your own will power? Are you sure you're not giving in to some fanciful impulse?"

"I don't know what you mean, Father." But he did know the answer was not in this room.

"Do you recall the last time we talked together?" the priest asked.

Jim nodded. "In this very room." His eyes moved from shadow to

shadow as if trying to find some memento of that former time.

"You had a strange notion then, too."

Strange? Jim thought to himself. *Strange to want to forget a life that denied life? A religion that was built on terror?* The exact words of his protest came back to him: *How can I believe in a faith—in a God who allows my father to mouth His name even while he commits the most despicable crimes?*

The priest was speaking again; "Don't you see the irony of your position? You couldn't believe in spirits then, in a devil, so you said. And now you imagine you see one."

Yes, and don't you see the deeper irony, Father Garrity. You who did believe, so you said, who told me so many stories of Satan in the world, of persons selling their souls, of persons possessed—now you are confronted by such a person and you say I imagine.

The priest was smiling in gentle mockery. "I guess you know the story of Thomas?"

Who doubted? Yes, Father Thomas Garrity.

No answer here. It was all too nebulous a thing, too incomplete. He had more than an inkling now, but there were still loose pieces rattling around somewhere.

At the door of the rectory, Father Garrity said something that stirred his thoughts as he walked towards home. Maybe there was something that had happened on that first day when the visitations had become regular. Or perhaps something that would link that day with the night

in Louisburg. He tried to recall every single event, even every thought, every desire. And when the enlightenment came, gradually, he tried to hold it back, for it was even more terrifying than anything that had gone before.

In the car that night he had been thinking of his father, that strange and violent man, and of those terrible, nightmare things he used to tell them. Of how he would come to their bed at night and stand over them and tell them their sins were eating away their souls. "Remember, sin doesn't only bring punishment. It's a corruption. It affects your whole being. You become the evil things that you do. It's a leprosy that destroys by gradually eating away your soul—and your body, too." They would cringe down into the blankets and bury their faces in their pillows while his heavy boots went down the stairs.

Then one day the father had disappeared. It was said he had molested a child on the street. In any event, he had gone away, never to return. Until perhaps . . . and Jim Grey shuddered and thrust away the thought.

He *had* been thinking of his father in the car that night, and of the curious idea of sin as a leprosy. If it was true and his father should come back, what leprous change would his black sins have wrought? And now, he remembered, it must have been almost at that very juncture in his thoughts that he had glimpsed the eyes staring at him, through the windshield. He thought he recognized now those flame-

flecked eyes and the slow, heavy, ominous step.

There was only one thing that still bothered him. One piece that would not fit. Or that he was deliberately holding back, unable to face the dread consequence.

He recalled many other things his father had said about sin. How it could split a man's soul. How, if indulged, it could set itself up as emperor of a man's will. How it could split away, till a man was like a dual personality. How it was even literally possible to come face to face with one's evil self . . . on the streets. . . .

In that instant he knew, even as he had an uncontrollable impulse to glance over his shoulder. It was there, the same figure, following him from a block away. And as he looked, the face broke again into that grin. He gave a piercing, despairing scream and ducked wildly into the alley that would take him to the rear of the apartment building. He saw nothing, heard nothing but his own hysterical cries. With luck, he kept saying to himself, the fire exit door will be unlocked. He dared not think of the opposite alternative. It was unlocked, and as he pulled the metal door shut behind him, he fumbled for the bolt that would shield him from his tormentor. Then the face was there again, through the glass, and he realized with a sickening fear that there was no lock on this door. He turned and stumbled up the stone steps, screaming unintelligibly for his wife to help him.

Finally, gratefully, he was home,

the door locked behind him and his wife facing him as though he were a madman. He caught at his breath in sobs, and soon he began to feel sick in his stomach. His wife made no effort to come to his assistance. She seemed stunned.

He must ask her the question right away, or risk his sanity.

"Who was it?" he demanded. "Who was it you saw last night?"

Her words sounded slow and strange and distant, like drops of molten lead.

"From the first, I had a terrible feeling of knowing the person. But I tried to put it away. I thought we must both have been momentarily out of our minds. And then I remembered a picture you had, of your father. I never saw him, but I couldn't forget that picture. I recall his resembling you so much."

For one instant he dared hope, but despair looked back at him.

"No. Not him. Not your father. You. You, Jim! You! You!"

Arise, My Love

● Brother Adelbert

Penelope, my love, wed not, but keep
Well widowed in your hallowed hollow cell,
Weaving, weaving webs of wise devising,
But love them not, my love, Penelope.

Night-shelled within your cell, unravel all
The patterns of day dreams, the warp and weft,
Lest loving them you tie the threads and say,
"Yes, this is well. Yes, this is all."—And wed.

Ulysses-like, I call to you there where
Your mind, blind Polyphemus, counts his dreams
In Plato's cave, your tomb and womb of love;
My love, Penelope, I call to you.

Weep not, Penelope, for I shall come
To king your palace halls, where now the band
Of sodden suitor-like desires have spread
Themselves like cobwebs on your hearth and heart.

From my mouth's bow the arrows of my words
Will wing and quiver stinging in the flesh
Of your besiegers; then, the palace cleansed,
I'll show the scar, and you will know your lord.

Penelope, my love, to Ithaca
I rush to reach you, running upon the waves
Where waters of my headlong love fall head-
Over-heels-in-loveliness to lave your tears.