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# Never Fear

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Extract

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We all have secrets. In childhood they're innocent, tucked away in the imagination like a favorite toy hidden from a sibling under the bed. If you're lucky, that's the way they remain. I haven't met many lucky people.

My mother divorced my father when I was five. What I know of him comes mostly from reruns on Nickelodeon that appear late at night, replacing actual memories of my own. On an episode of *Gunsmoke* he was a hapless traveling salesman who was tarred and feathered by drunken cowboys for trying to sell them bicycles to replace their horses. On an episode of *Bonanza* he played an Indian who was shot to death for falling in love with a white woman. He was in one movie titled *War of the Colossal Beast,* a low-budget horror film about a giant Cyclops that terrorizes L.A. The beast stepped on Dad while attacking the Griffith Park Observatory. They're what I have instead of home movies.

He was in his late twenties when he got the roles. A

journeyman actor whose Richard Widmark–like features and crisp, penetrating eyes even today seem to look right through me from the television screen. Shortly after the divorce he disappeared from our lives. Not one letter was ever sent. Not one phone call made. Not on birthdays, or Christmas, not ever. Two episodes of television, a Cyclops movie, and my presence are the only evidence of his existence.

I don't know what his secrets were. I don't remember the touch of his hand, or the smell of his aftershave. I imagine for a brief moment he dreamed of becoming a star, but instead played a hapless salesman, an Indian, and a Cyclops victim. What I know for sure is what's left on the screen – a perfect smile, dark hair, and a voice that sounds just a little too high for his good looks. And I also know that without any proof to the contrary, I don't believe my father was one of the lucky people.

# one

It was 6:30 A.M. when the dream woke me. I've had it for as long as I can remember. Or at least for as long as I can remember since I became a cop. There's a dead body in my bedroom closet going through all my clothes. I smell the ripening of decaying tissue. I hear the sliding of the hangers on the rail – the soft fall of fabric, as one outfit after another is dropped to the floor. A Maurice Sendak nightmare for the clothes-challenged homicide detective. If it were about anything more than that, I'd rather not know.

I pulled the sheet up around my chin and tried to settle back into the pillow. I knew from experience that there would be no more sleep, but with a little luck I could at least hold off thinking about what was ahead for another hour.

The heat of the day was already beginning to gather, slipping in through the open window. It has a sound all its own, or more accurately a quality of silence that is

different from any other – and one that always seems to hold the potential for change.

The slap of a newspaper landing on the driveway interrupted the spell. A mourning dove's singsong and the soft rustling of wings outside my window marked the first rays of sunlight reaching over the San Gabriels. I took a long, deep breath and pulled the sheet over my head.

Five minutes passed, and another. I listened for a sound coming from my daughter's bedroom down the hall, as I have every morning since the killer Gabriel turned our house into his own private horror show. For weeks after we returned home Lacy greeted every dawn with a shriek of fear as the memory of what he did invaded her dreams. Months gradually turned shrieks to soft whimpers, the night sweat-soaked sheets gradually dried. A year later each day finally arrived with silence, if not promise.

I slipped out of bed and walked down the hallway to her open door. I've done it every day, even after the dreams had quieted. And now three days after she left for college I'm still doing it. Staring at her empty bed. 'Small steps' is what the therapist called these routines. Each step taking you that much closer to the life we had before, as if normalcy were something that had just slipped through our fingers and could be retrieved like a misplaced set of car keys.

I hate therapists.

It was Lacy who ended the sessions with the shrink by

saying to him, 'You just don't have a fucking clue, because if you did, you would be embarrassed to listen to yourself. It's not your fault, you've just never had a bomb wired around your neck.'

After she said it she looked at me and smiled. I knew right then that she was going to be all right. *You go girl. My girl.*

She's just across town at UCLA, but it may just as well be across the country for my ability to protect her. Not that being within arm's reach worked out so well before. She's registered under my maiden name of Manning. I had wanted her to use a completely fictitious name but she wouldn't have it. Gabriel had taken enough of her life and she wasn't going to let him take anything more. Using my maiden name was as far as she would go.

She'd had firearm training and self-defense, and both of us knew it would probably make no difference should Gabriel ever descend into our lives again. I lingered at the door for a moment, then the phone rang. The clock on Lacy's nightstand read 6:40. I felt my heartbeat quicken. *Someone in Pasadena is dead.*

I sat down on Lacy's bed and picked up the phone.

'Delillo.'

'You were staring into Lacy's room, weren't you?' said my old partner Dave Traver. 'You were standing at the door, staring into the room. That's why it took four rings for you to answer.'

'No, I was sleeping.'

'I bet you're sitting on her bed.'

I started to stand, then sat back down. I thought I could hear Dave smile over the line.

'You can't help it, you're a mother.'

'That would be Lieutenant Mother to you.'

'You want to come over and look at the twins? You've never seen anything so perfect. I still can't figure out how I produced something so beautiful.'

'You know the first night they go on a date you'll be hospitalized.'

'They're never going on dates.'

If Traver were as natural a detective as he was a parent, no crime would ever go unsolved.

'Where's the body?' I asked.

'An apartment near Caltech. ME believes it's natural causes.'

'You want me to come and look?'

'No, I think he's right.'

'So you called because . . .'

'Because you're alone for the first time in years, sitting in Lacy's room.'

'I'm not alone, I have you.'

The silence on the other end lasted a moment longer than is natural between us.

'What?' I asked.

'It's probably nothing, but you got a fax last night at the office – part of a fax, a cover sheet. It's on your desk.'

'From?'

'That's the thing, it's the same last name that Lacy's registered under at school.'

'Manning?'

'Yeah, first name John. It said one page to follow but it never came through.'

'Where's it from?'

'Two-one-three area code.'

'Downtown?'

'You know a John Manning?' Traver asked.

'No.'

'You want me to look into it?'

'No, I will.'

'You think it's something?'

He meant did I think it could be Gabriel.

'I don't know.'

The truth was, even a year after our encounter I thought just about everything could be a result of Gabriel's work. I saw his face in passing cars on the freeway. I heard his voice in telemarketers trying to sell phone service.

I quickly hung up and called Lacy's cell as I had done a half dozen times when I thought she was at risk. On the third ring she answered.

'Did I wake you?'

'No, I was having a PTSD moment.'

My heart jumped a beat.

'Are you—'

'I'm joking. I'm lying in bed listening to the radio. I have a class at nine. Are you being a cop, or is this an empty nest thing?'

'I received a fax from someone using the name John Manning. It's probably nothing, but until I check it out I want you to be alert.'

Lacy said nothing for a moment.

'How could Gabriel know I've changed my name?'

'He couldn't.'

'Then why are you calling?'

'You know why. I'll figure this out; until then, you remember the drill?'

'Don't be alone, stay in public places.'

Neither of us said a word for a beat. At some level words seemed useless when it came to what Gabriel had done to us.

'Like I said, it's probably nothing.'

'Then who's John Manning?' Lacy said.

*

It was just before nine when I pulled into headquarters on Garfield. A Santa Ana wind was beginning to blow down out of the mountains – hot desert air rushing toward the Pacific that can blow fifty miles an hour. If the winds continued for twenty-four hours you could bet the car that crime would be up in Pasadena. If they blew for forty-eight hours, bet the house that a fire freak with a box of matches will start an inferno.

Detective Dylan Harrison was waiting for me at the entrance to the building with a cup of coffee. The crescent-shaped wound near the corner of his eye from Gabriel's explosion in my kitchen had healed into a thin raised line of pink skin. He held out the coffee and looked

at me with those penetrating green eyes. Though as supervisor of Homicide I didn't have an official partner, if I decided to take a case, Harrison would be it. It was probably the only reason I hadn't made a fool of myself with him yet. Too many people are always looking for ways to see me fail. Falling in love with a subordinate would be like lighting a fuse to my own career. Being five years older than him didn't particularly help, either, at least in my own head, which of course is the most dangerous place.

'Traver call you?' Harrison asked.

I nodded as we headed into the building. 'Have you tracked the number?'

'It came from a Western Union office in downtown L.A.'

I stopped walking. 'They would have video surveillance.'

Harrison nodded. A wave of relief swept through me. There wasn't a single photograph of Gabriel in existence as far as we knew, and he wouldn't walk into an office where he knew a camera would be watching.

'It's not Gabriel,' I said.

Harrison nodded. 'I don't think Lacy's in any danger.'

'So who's John Manning?'

Harrison looked at me for a moment, then looked away. 'He's dead.'

A gust of hot wind blew open the door to the lobby and sent leaves and scraps of paper swirling across the floor.

'There's something else,' I said.

Harrison nodded. 'The coroner called. They'd like you to come and ID him.'

'Why me? I don't know a John Manning.'

'They said he's your brother.'

# two

The county coroner is housed in a nondescript white industrial building a few miles east of downtown L.A. Twelve million people, give or take, live in L.A. County, and a good percentage of them are eventually headed right here. I'd been to the coroner's dozens of times investigating murders, but never as a next of kin.

The choice of placing the building on a street named Mission Road never struck me as ironic until that morning. The Spanish peasants of the land-grant days would bring their dead to the missions to be blessed and then buried. The ceremonies performed here were slightly less spiritual. Outside of New York City, more bodies passed through this building than anywhere in the country. More than a few cops have referred to it as the death factory.

'You want me to come in?' Harrison asked.

I nodded and got out of the car.

'I was an only child,' I said, looking at the entrance. 'I

don't know who they have in there, but I want to know why he tried to send me something last night.'

I showed my badge to the receptionist, who directed us to the suite of cubicles where the investigators did their work. The air smelled of a little too much cleanser, but other than that, nothing gave away what took place on the examining tables and in the toxicology labs at the far end of the building.

The coroner's investigator in charge of determining cause of death was waiting in the hallway when we stepped inside.

'Lieutenant, I'm Margaret Chow.'

She was a small woman in her mid thirties with shoulder-length jet-black hair, dressed in black slacks and a white blouse. There was a wedding ring on her finger. She looked like she should be teaching sixth grade rather than sifting through the remains of L.A.'s dead.

'I'm sorry to—' she started to say.

'I don't have a brother, Ms Chow.'

She looked at me with a certain amount of doubt in her eyes. Denial of all sorts was something she dealt with on a daily basis. The fact that I was a cop didn't appear to register on her radar.

'I know these things are difficult.'

'It's not difficult. I was an only child.'

She nodded uneasily and glanced at Harrison as if to get a reading on my state of mind.

'I'm sorry, this is Detective Harrison. You talked on the phone.'

'I don't know what to say, Lieutenant,' Chow said. 'The paperwork I found in his apartment left no doubt that you are his only known relative, at least in his mind.'

'What was the cause of death?' I asked.

'Single gunshot to the head. Pending the autopsy, ballistics, and residue tests on his hands, it's being treated as a possible suicide. Detective Williams from the Northeast division is in charge of the investigation.'

'I'd like to see the body.'

'Should I move him into a viewing room?' she asked.

Assuming I wouldn't need privacy, I shook my head.

She nodded and started walking toward a door at the end of the hallway. The body vault was a large open refrigerated room with the deceased lying on gurneys. Most of the dead were wrapped in white sheets, a few of the more seriously decayed or damaged wrapped in plastic. There appeared to be at least forty individuals awaiting the final disposition of their remains, and there were two more rooms just like this one. Even with refrigeration the air inside the vault was filled with the odor of death.

Chow walked down the center of the room checking the numbers taped to the sheets. When she found the one she was looking for she quickly double-checked it with the number on the toe tag. There is nothing private about dying. Bodies are probed until the last piece of information gives itself up. For the most part secrets aren't taken with someone at death. More often than not they're spread out for all to see.

'This is him,' Chow said. 'There's a wound on the right—'

'You can uncover him,' I interrupted. If there was something I needed to find out from a body, I preferred to discover it myself.

Chow slipped on a pair of surgical gloves, then stepped to the other end of the gurney and unfolded the sheet that covered his head and shoulders. John Manning's skin had the look of old bone china that had faded and yellowed. I stepped forward and examined the small wound in his temple just in front of the ear – a little dark hole barely big enough for a pencil to fit in. A small amount of fatty tissue was evident in places around the wound. The skin surrounding it was discolored by the powder blast of a close contact wound. The black hair above it was matted with dark blood that hadn't completely dried yet.

'No exit wound?'

'No,' Chow said. 'The gun was a thirty-two. We haven't retrieved the slug, but I'm guessing it mushroomed enough to slow the trajectory down so it couldn't penetrate the other side of the skull.'

I stared at the wound for another moment and then looked at his face for the first time. Death had relaxed the muscles. There wasn't a line anywhere on his face. I tried to take a breath, but my lungs fought it. I knew him, but I had never seen him before.

It reminded me of the face that occasionally looked out from the television set at two in the morning. The Cyclops victim, the hapless salesman, and the Indian who kissed a

white woman on *Bonanza*. My home movies. I was looking at a memory.

'Can you identify him?' Chow asked, though I didn't hear her.

My heart began to race. As a cop I knew there was often nothing more unreliable than memory. What people remember is often more a reflection of desire than of fact. Was I seeing my father's face in his because that's what I wanted – a connection to a man who vanished from my life when I was a child? I felt Harrison's hand on my back and I unconsciously leaned into it.

'What can you tell me about him?' I asked.

'He was thirty-one. Lived alone in Los Feliz in a one-bedroom apartment. He was a private investigator for a lawyer named Gavin. They were involved in a car accident yesterday afternoon that critically injured Gavin. Sometime shortly after midnight he took a pistol registered to Gavin from the office and later fired one shot.'

'Where was he found?' I asked.

'Next to the river just south of Griffith Park. A park ranger found him by chance about three-thirty.'

I tried to think like a cop, but working it like just any other investigation seemed a long way off.

'How did he get there?'

'Apparently he walked. He wasn't wearing shoes and his feet have a number of cuts in them.'

I stepped to the other end of the gurney and lifted the sheet off his feet. Pieces of grit and sand were embedded in his skin. More than a dozen deep cuts now filled with

dried blood marked his feet like lines on a map.

Harrison stepped next to me and quickly examined them.

'He must have run over broken glass,' I said.

Harrison nodded. 'Why would a person do that?'

I tried to imagine a reason for a person to continue to run in such condition.

'If he was suicidal, maybe he didn't feel it.'

I let the other explanation go unsaid, but I could see in Harrison's eyes that he was thinking the same thing I was. There were two motivations that consistently rendered pain meaningless – love and fear.

'Do you know him?' Harrison asked.

I took a breath. 'I've never seen him before, but it's not impossible that he could be my brother, or half brother.'

'Would you like a moment alone?' Chow asked.

I shook my head. 'Like I said, I've never met him before.'

'What makes you think it's possible that he may be your brother?'

I stared at his face – the face of my father.

'Home movies,' I said.

'But you know nothing about him?' Chow asked.

'I know for the first time in his life he tried to make contact with me last night.'

Chow looked at me for a moment.

'How?' she asked.

'He sent a cover sheet of a fax to me, but the rest didn't follow.'

'That doesn't sound inconsistent with someone contemplating suicide,' she said. 'Maybe it was a suicide note and he changed his mind.'

'Maybe,' I said. 'Can you release his personal effects?'

'Everything but his clothes; we'll need them if this is determined not to be a suicide.'

She started to say something, hesitated, then finished the thought.

'Will you be making arrangements for his remains?'

I nodded. 'If he's my brother.'

I looked at his face one more time, turned away as Chow slipped the sheet back over him.

Outside the coroner's office I called Lacy and left her a message saying everything was okay, that Gabriel wasn't back in our life. But that was all I told her. The contents of the manila envelope I held in my hands, and the secrets that stretched all the way back to my father, if indeed that's what it was, could wait. I looked beyond the concrete banks of the river at the towers of downtown.

'Where do you want to start?' Harrison asked.

'What was the name of that lawyer she said he worked for?'

'Gavin.'

'Chow said he broke in there and stole the gun. We'll start there, work it forward. Chow didn't know about the fax, so I assume the detective in Northeast is unaware of it also.'

'You okay?' Harrison asked.

The Santa Anas were gaining strength, blowing all the

pollution toward the coast, where a brown layer of sky stretched across the horizon.

'Okay?' I shook my head. 'If he is my brother, I would like to know who his mother was. How he knew about me. Did our father stick around for him, or run from it all like he did to me?'

I looked at Harrison. 'I'd like to know if my father ever told him about me.'

I looked at the envelope in my hands. 'How are you at chasing windmills?'

'I've done my share,' Harrison said.

I thought about his young wife, whose death was never solved, and regretted asking the question.

'Do you have a brother?' I asked.

'An older one.'

'What's he like?'

Harrison smiled, or nearly smiled. 'He's my brother . . . which I guess means he's a bit of a mystery to me.'

I looked back toward the river. 'How many miles would you say it is from downtown upriver to Griffith Park?'

'Eight, maybe ten miles.'

I looked north, where the river traveled past railroad yards and industrial complexes before running past the hills of Griffith Park.

'I want to know why John Manning walked or ran all that way without any shoes on, and then put a bullet in his head.'