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Trust Your Eyes

Written by Linwood Barclay

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TRUST YOUR EYES

LINWOOD BARCLAY



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PROLOGUE

IT was just by chance he turned down Orchard Street and saw the window when he did. It easily could have been a week from now, or a month, even a year. But it turned out that this was going to be the day.

Sure, he would have wandered down here eventually. Sooner or later, when he got to a new city, he hit every street. He always started out intending to be methodical about it—follow one street from beginning to end, then head over a block and backtrack on a parallel street, like doing the aisles in a grocery store—but then he'd get to a cross street and something would catch his eye, and all good intentions would be abandoned.

That was how it turned out when he got to Manhattan, even though, of all the cities he'd visited, it was the one that most lent itself to being explored in an orderly fashion, at least those parts of the city north of Fourteenth Street, which was laid out in that perfect grid of streets and avenues. South of that, once you got into the West Village and Greenwich Village and SoHo and Chinatown, well, it was chaos down there, but that didn't bother him.

It certainly wasn't any worse than in London or Rome or Paris or even Boston's North End, and he'd loved exploring those cities.

He'd turned south onto Orchard from Delancey, but his actual starting point for this stroll had been Spring and Mulberry. He'd gone south to Grand, west to Crosby, north back to Prince, east to Elizabeth, south to Kenmare, then east, continuing along Delancey, then, when he got to Orchard, decided to hang a right.

It was a beautiful street. Not in the sense that there were gardens and fountains and lush trees lining the sidewalk. Not beautiful like, say, Vaci Street in Budapest, or the Avenue des Champs-Élysées in Paris, or Lombard Street in San Francisco, but it was a street rich in texture and steeped in history. Narrow, one-way, running north. Old brick tenement buildings, few more than five stories, many only three or four, dating back a century and a half. A street that represented so many different times in the city's history. The buildings, with their skeletal fire escapes clinging to the fronts, reflected the Italianate style popular in the mid- to late nineteenth century, with arches above the windows, stone lintels projecting outward, ornate carved leaves in the trim work, but their ground floors housed everything from trendy cafés to designer dress shops. There were older, more conventional businesses, too. A uniform shop, a real estate agent, a hair salon, a gallery, a place that sold luggage. Many of the closed stores were shielded with drawn-down steel doors.

He meandered down the center of the street, not particularly worried about traffic. It wasn't a problem right now. He always found you got the sense of a place by walking down the middle of the road. It offered the best vantage point. You could look ahead or from side to side, or whirl around 360 degrees and see where you'd been. It was good to know your surroundings and your options, in case you had to make a fast move.

Because the building blocks of a city were his primary concern—its architecture, its layout, its infrastructure—he paid

little attention to the people he came across in his travels. He didn't strike up conversations. He wasn't interested in saying so much as hello to that redheaded woman standing on the corner, smoking a cigarette. He didn't care what kind of fashion statement she was trying to make with her leather jacket, short skirt, and what looked like deliberately laddered black tights. He wasn't going to ask the athletic-looking woman in the black baseball cap who was darting across the street in front of him how she thought the Yankees were going to do this year. He never watched baseball, and cared nothing about it. And he was not about to ask why a dozen people with guidebooks sticking out of their pockets were listening to one woman in the center of the group, although he guessed she was a tour guide of some sort.

When he got to Broome Street he spotted an inviting-looking restaurant on the southeast corner with small white tables and yellow plastic chairs set up on the sidewalk. But there was no one sitting outside. The sign in the window read: "Come in and get warm." He went up close, peering through the glass at the people drinking coffee, working on laptops, reading newspapers.

Reflected in the restaurant's window was that car he'd been seeing throughout his travels. Nondescript sedan. Maybe a Civic. With the apparatus on the roof. He'd seen the car before. Many times. If he didn't know better, he'd think it was following him. He put it out of his mind and looked through the glass, into the restaurant.

He wished it were possible for him to go inside and have a latte or a cappuccino. He could almost smell the coffee. But he had to keep going. So much of the world to see and so little time. Tomorrow he had plans to be in Montreal, and, depending how much ground he covered there, maybe Madrid the day after.

But he would remember this place. The sign in the window, the tables and chairs outside. The other businesses on Orchard. The narrow alleyways between the buildings. Plus everything

that he had seen on Spring and Mulberry and Grand and Crosby and Prince and Elizabeth and Kenmare and Delancey.

He would remember it all.

He was about a third of the way down the block from the Broome cross street when he made that upward glance.

That was really where the element of chance entered into it. It wasn't at all remarkable that he ended up on Orchard. It was the fact that he looked above the storefronts. He didn't always do that. He scoped out the businesses and read the signs in their windows, studied the people in the coffee shops, made a mental note of the numbers above the doors, but he didn't always cast his eyes above the first or second floors. Sometimes he forgot, and sometimes he was short of time. He might easily have gone down this street and never glanced upon that particular window of that particular tenement building.

Then again, he thought, chance might have had nothing to do with it. Maybe he was meant to see this window. Maybe, in some strange way, it was a test. To determine whether he was ready, even though he believed he was. But those who would make use of his talents—they might need some convincing before taking him on.

The window was on the third floor, above a place that sold cigarettes and newspapers—there was that car again, reflected in the window—and a second shop specializing in women's scarves. It was divided into two panes. An air-conditioning unit stuck out from the sill, taking up half of the lower pane. Something white, above the air conditioner, had caught his eye.

At first, it looked like one of those white Styrofoam heads department stores and hair salons use to display wigs. He thought, *Isn't that funny, to put one of those in a window.* A bald, featureless white head keeping watch over Orchard Street. He supposed that in New York you could find just about anything in someone's window. If it had been his, he would have at least put a pair

of sunglasses on it, to give the head some personality. A hint of whimsy. Although, he had to admit, people did not tend to think of him as whimsical.

But the more he looked at it, the less sure he was that it was a white foam head. The surface appeared more shimmery, slippery even. Perhaps plastic, like the bags the grocery stores used, or a dry cleaning bag, but not one of the clear ones.

He attempted to get a better look, zero in.

The thing was, this white, almost circular object in the window still had the shape of a head. The plastic material strained against a protuberance that could only be a nose. It hugged tight across what appeared to be a brow near the top, a chin at the bottom. There was even a trace of mouth, the lips open as though gasping for air.

Or screaming.

It was, he thought, as though a white stocking had been pulled down over someone's head. But the material's sheen still made him think it was plastic.

That wasn't a very smart thing for someone to do. To put a plastic bag over their head. You could suffocate yourself doing something stupid like that.

A person would have to be pulling on the plastic bag, twisting it from behind, to make it conform so tightly to the contours of their face. But he didn't see this person's arms or hands doing anything like that.

Which made him wonder if someone else was doing it.

Oh. Oh, no.

Was that what he was witnessing? Someone putting a bag over another person's head? Cutting off their air supply? Smothering them? Could this account for the mouth that seemed to be struggling for air?

Who was this happening to? A man? A woman? And who was doing it to them?

Suddenly he was thinking about the boy in the window. A different window. Many years ago.

But the person in this window, right now, didn't look like a boy, or a girl. This was an adult.

An adult whose life was coming to an end.

That certainly was how it looked to him.

He felt his heart begin to beat more quickly. He'd seen things before on his travels. Things that weren't right.

But they were minor compared to this. Never a murder.

That's what he was sure this was.

He didn't shout out. He didn't reach into his jacket for a cell phone to call 911. He didn't spring into the nearest shop and tell someone to call the police. He didn't charge into the building and race up two flights of stairs in a bid to stop what was happening behind this third-floor window.

All he did was reach out, tentatively, as though it were possible to touch the smothered face of this person on the third floor, to feel what was wrapped around his or her head, make some sort of assessment as to—

Knock knock.

Then, maybe then, he'd have a better idea what was actually happening to this person in—

Knock knock.

He'd been so transfixed by what was happening at the window that he did not, at first, realize someone was trying to get his attention. Someone was at the door.

He took his hand off the mouse, spun around in his padded computer chair, and said, "Yes?"

The door opened an inch. From the hallway, someone said, "Get your ass down for dinner, Thomas."

"What are we having?" he asked.

"Burgers. From the barbecue."

The man sitting in the computer chair said flatly, "Okay."

He spun around and resumed looking at the frozen image of the window on his oversized computer monitor. The blurry, white, wrapped head suspended there. A ghostly visage.

Had anyone seen this at the time? Had anyone looked up?

No one had seen the boy when he was in the window. No one had looked up. No one had helped him.

The man left the image on his screen so he could study it more closely when he came back up after dinner. Then he'd make a decision about what to do.