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A Tap on the Window

Written by Linwood Barclay

Published by Orion Books

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A Tap on the Window

LINWOOD BARCLAY



First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Orion Books,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback) 978 1 4091 1505 2
ISBN (Export Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 1506 9
ISBN (ebook) 978 1 4091 1507 6

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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ONE

A middle-aged guy would have to be a total fool to pick up a teenage girl standing outside a bar with her thumb sticking out. Not that bright on her part, either, when you think about it. But right now, we're talking about my stupidity, not hers.

She was standing there at the curb, her stringy blond, rain-soaked hair hanging in her face, the neon glow from the COORS sign in the window of Patchett's Bar bathing her in an eerie light. Her shoulders were hunched up against the drizzle, as if that would somehow keep her warm and dry.

It was hard to tell her age, exactly. Old enough to drive legally and maybe even vote, but not likely old enough to drink. Certainly not here in Griffon, in New York State. The other side of the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge, maybe, in Canada, where the drinking age is nineteen and not twenty-one. But that didn't mean she couldn't have had a few beers at Patchett's. It was generally known your ID was not put through a rigorous examination here. If yours had a picture of Nicole

Kidman on it and you looked more like Penelope Cruz, well, that was good enough for them. Their policy was "Park your butt. What can we getcha?"

The girl, the strap of an oversized red purse slung over her shoulder, had her thumb sticking out, and she was looking at my car as I rolled up to the stop sign at the corner.

Not a chance, I thought. Picking up a male hitchhiker was a bad enough idea, but picking up a teenage girl was monumentally dumb. Guy in his early forties gives a lift to a girl less than half his age on a dark, rainy night. There were more ways for that to go wrong than I could count. So I kept my eyes straight ahead as I put my foot on the brake. I was about to give the Accord some gas when I heard a tapping on the passenger window.

I glanced over, saw her there, bending over, looking at me. I shook my head but she kept on rapping.

I powered down the window far enough to see her eyes and the top half of her nose. "Sorry," I said, "I can't—"

"I just need a lift home, mister," she said. "It's not that far. There's some sketchy guy in that pickup over there. He's been giving me the eye and—" Her eyes popped. "Shit, aren't you Scott Weaver's dad?"

And then everything changed.

"Yeah," I said. I had been.

"Thought I recognized you. You probably wouldn't even know me, but, like, I've seen you pick up Scott at school and stuff. Look, I'm sorry. I'm letting rain get into your car. I'll see if I can get a—"

I didn't see how I could leave one of Scott's friends standing there in the rain.

"Get in," I said.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah." I paused, allowed myself one more second to get out of this. Then: "It's okay."

"God, thanks!" she said, opened the door and slid into the seat, moving a cell phone from one hand to the other, slipping the purse off her shoulder and tucking it down by her feet. The dome light was a lightning flash, on and off in a second. "Jeez, I'm soaked. Sorry about your seat."

She was wet. I didn't know how long she'd been there, but it had been long enough for rivulets of water to be running down her hair and onto her jacket and jeans. The tops of her thighs looked wet, making me wonder whether someone driving by had splashed her.

"Don't worry about it," I said as she buckled her seat belt. I was still stopped, waiting for directions. "I go straight, or turn, or what?"

"Oh yeah." She laughed nervously, then shook her head from side to side, flinging droplets of water like a spaniel coming out of a lake. "Like, you're supposed to know where I live. Duh. Just keep going straight."

I glanced left and right, then proceeded through the intersection.

"So you were a friend of Scott's?" I asked.

She nodded, smiled, then grimaced. "Yeah, he was a good guy."

"What's your name?"

"Claire."

"Claire?" I stretched the name out, inviting her to provide a last name. I was wondering if she was someone I'd already

checked out online. I really hadn't had a good look at her face yet.

"Yep," she said. "Like Chocolate *E*. Claire." She laughed nervously. She moved the cell phone from her left to right hand, then rested the empty hand on her left knee. There was a bad scratch on the back, just below the knuckles, about an inch long, the skin freshly grazed and raw, just this side of bleeding.

"You hurt yourself, Claire?" I asked, nodding downward.

The girl looked at her hand. "Oh shit, I hadn't even noticed that. Some idiot staggering around Patchett's bumped into me and I caught my hand on the corner of a table. Kinda smarts." She brought her hand up to her face and blew on the wound. "Guess I'll live," she said.

"You don't quite look old enough to be a customer," I said, giving her a reproachful look mixed with a smirk.

She caught the look and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well."

Neither of us said anything for half a mile or so. The cell phone, as best I could see in the light from my dash, was trapped screen down beneath her hand on her right thigh. She leaned forward to look into the mirror mounted on the passenger door.

"That guy's really riding your bumper," she said.

Headlight glare reflected off my rearview mirror. The vehicle behind us was an SUV or truck, with lights mounted high enough to shine in through my back window. I tapped the brakes just enough to make my taillights pop red, and the driver backed off. Claire kept glancing in the mirror. She seemed to be taking a lot of interest in a tailgater.

"You okay, Claire?" I asked.

"Hmm? Yeah, I'm cool, yeah."

"You seem kind of on edge."

She shook her head a little too aggressively.

"You're sure?" I asked, and as I turned to look at her she caught my eye.

"Positive," she said.

She wasn't a very good liar.

We were on Danbury, a four-lane road, with a fifth down the center for left turns, that was lined with fast-food joints and a Home Depot and a Walmart and a Target and half a dozen other ubiquitous outlets that make it hard to know whether you're in Tucson or Tallahassee.

"So," I said, "how'd you know Scott?"

Claire shrugged. "Just, you know, school. We didn't really hang out that much or anything, but I knew him. I was real sad about what happened to him."

I didn't say anything.

"I mean, like, all kids do dumb shit, right? But most of us, nothing really bad ever happens."

"Yeah," I said.

"When was it, again?" she asked. "'Cause, like, it seems like it was only a few weeks ago."

"It'll be two months tomorrow," I said. "August twenty-fifth."

"Wow," she said. "But, yeah, now that I think of it, there was no school at the time. 'Cause usually everyone would be talking about it in class and in the halls and stuff, but that never happened. By the time we got back, everyone had sort of forgotten." She put her left hand to her mouth and glanced apologetically at me. "I didn't mean it like that."

"That's okay."

There were a lot of things I wanted to ask her. But the

questions would seem heavy-handed, and I'd known her less than five minutes. I didn't want to come on like someone from Homeland Security. I'd used Scott's list of Facebook friends as something of a guide since the incident, and while I'd probably seen this girl on it, I couldn't quite place her yet. But I also knew that "friendship" on Facebook meant very little. Scott had friended plenty of people he really didn't know at all, including well-known graphic novel artists and other minor celebrities who still handled their own FB pages.

I could figure out who this girl was later. Another time maybe she'd answer a few questions about Scott for me. Giving her a lift in the rain might buy me some future goodwill. She might know something that didn't seem important to her that could be very helpful to me.

Like she could read my mind, she said, "They talk about you."

"Huh?"

"Like, you know, kids at school."

"About me?"

"A little. They already knew what you do. Like, your job. And they know what you've been doing lately."

I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised.

She added, "I don't know anything, so there's no point in asking."

I took my eyes off the rain-soaked road a second to look at her, but said nothing.

The corner of her mouth went up. "I could tell you were thinking about it." She seemed to be reflecting on something, then said, "Not that I blame you or anything, for what you've been doing. My dad, he'd probably do the same. He can be

pretty righteous and principled about some things, although not *everything*." She turned slightly in her seat to face me. "I think it's wrong to judge people until you know everything about them. Don't you? I mean, you have to understand that there may be things in their background that make them see the world differently. Like, my grandmother—she's dead now—but she was always saving money, right up until she died at, like, ninety years old, because she'd been through the Depression, which I'd never even heard of, but then I looked it up. You probably know about the Depression, right?"

"I know about the Depression. But believe it or not, I did not live through it."

"Anyway," Claire said, "we always thought Grandma was cheap, but the thing was, she just wanted to be ready in case things got really bad again. Could you pull into Iggy's for a second?"

"What?"

"Up there." She pointed through the windshield.

I knew Iggy's. I just didn't understand why she wanted me to pull into Griffon's landmark ice cream and burger place. It had been here for more than fifty years, or so the locals told me, and even hung in after McDonald's put up its golden arches half a mile down the street. Folks around here who liked a Big Mac over all other burgers would still swing by here for Iggy's signature hand-cut, sea-salted french fries and real ice cream milk shakes.

I'd committed myself to giving this girl a ride home, but a spin through the Iggy's drive-through window seemed a bit much.

Before I could object, she said, "Not for, like, food. My

stomach feels a bit weird all of a sudden—beer doesn't always agree with me, you know—and it's bad enough I've got your car wet. I wouldn't want to puke in it, too."

I hit the blinker and pulled up to the restaurant, headlights bouncing off the glass and into my eyes. Iggy's lacked some of the spit and polish of a McDonald's or Burger King—its menu boards still featured black plastic letters fitted into grooved white panels—but it had a decent-sized eating area, and even at this time of night there were customers. A dishevelled man with an oversize backpack, who gave every indication of being a homeless person looking for a place to get in out of the rain, was drinking a coffee. A couple of tables over, a woman was divvying up french fries between two girls, both in pink pajamas, neither of whom could have been older than five. What was the story there? I came up with one that involved an abusive father who'd had too much to drink. They'd come here until they were sure he'd passed out and it was safe to go home.

Before I'd come to a stop, Claire was looping the strap of her purse around her wrist, gathering everything together like she was planning a fast getaway.

"You sure you're okay?" I asked, putting the car in park. "I mean, other than feeling sick?"

"Yeah—yeah, sure." She forced a short laugh. I was aware of some headlights swinging past me as Claire pulled on the door handle. "Be right back." She leapt out and slammed the door.

She raised her purse in front of her face as a shield against the rain as she ran for the door. She disappeared into the back, where the restrooms were located. I glanced over at a black

pickup, its windows tinted so heavily I couldn't make out who was driving, that had pulled in half a dozen spots over.

My eyes went back to the restaurant. Here I was, late at night, waiting for a girl I hardly knew—a teenage girl at that—to finish throwing up after an evening of underage drinking. I knew better than to have allowed myself to get into this position. But after she'd mentioned that some guy in a pickup was putting the moves—

Pickup?

I glanced again at the black truck, which actually might have been dark blue or gray—hard to tell in the rain. If anyone had gotten out of it and entered Iggy's, I hadn't noticed.

What I should have done, before she'd gotten into my car, was tell Claire to call her own parents. Let them come get her.

But then she'd gone and mentioned Scott.

I got out my cell, checked to see whether I had any e-mails. I didn't, but the effort helped kill ten seconds. I hit 88.7 on the radio presets, the NPR station out of Buffalo, but couldn't concentrate on anything anyone was saying.

The girl had been in there five minutes. How long did it take to toss your cookies? You went in, you did your thing, splashed some water on your face, and came back out.

Maybe Claire was sicker than she'd realized. It was possible she'd made a mess of herself and needed extra time to clean up.

Great.

I rested my hand on the ignition key, wanting to turn it. *You could just go.* She had a cell phone. She could call someone else to come and get her. I could head home. This girl wasn't my responsibility.

Except that wasn't true. Once I'd agreed to give her a ride, to see that she got home safely, I'd made her my responsibility.

I took another look at the pickup. Just sitting there.

I scanned the inside of the restaurant again. The homeless guy, the woman with the two girls. Now, a boy and girl in their late teens sitting in a booth by the window, sharing a Coke and some chicken fingers. And a man with jet-black hair, in a brown leather jacket, was standing at the counter, his back to me, placing an order.

Seven minutes.

How would it look, I wondered, if this girl's parents showed up now, trying to find her? And discovered me, local snoop-for-hire Cal Weaver, waiting here for her? Would they believe I was just driving her home? That I'd agreed to give her a ride because she knew my son? That my motives were pure?

If I were them, I wouldn't have bought it. And my motives hadn't been entirely pure. I had been wondering whether to try and get some information about Scott out of her, although I'd quickly abandoned that idea.

The hope of getting her to answer some questions wasn't what kept me here now. I just couldn't abandon a young girl out on this strip, at this time of night. Certainly not without telling her I was leaving.

I decided to go in and find her, make certain she was okay, then tell her to find her way home from here. Give her cab fare if she didn't have anyone else she could call. I got out of the Honda, went into the restaurant, scanned the seats I hadn't been able to see from my outdoor vantage point, just in case Claire was sitting down for a moment. When I didn't find her at any of the tables, I approached the restroom doors at the

back, which were steps away from another glass door that led outside.

I hesitated outside the door marked WOMEN, screwed up my nerve, then pushed the door open half an inch.

"Claire? Claire, you okay?"

There was no answer.

"It's me. Mr. Weaver."

Nothing. Not from Claire or anyone else. So I pushed the door open a good foot, cast my eye across the room. A couple of sinks, wall-mounted hand dryer, three stalls. The doors, all closed, were painted a dull tan and bubbling with rust at the hinges. They stopped a foot from the floor, and I didn't notice any feet beneath any of them.

I took a couple of steps, extended an arm and gently touched the door of the first stall. The door, not locked, swung open lazily. I don't know what the hell I was expecting to find. I could tell before I'd opened the door there was no one in there. And then the thought flashed across my mind: what if someone *had* been in there? Claire, or someone else?

This was not a smart place for me to be hanging around.

I exited the bathroom, strode quickly through the restaurant, looking for her. Homeless guy, woman with kids—

The man in the brown leather jacket, the one who'd been ordering food last time I saw him, was gone.

"Son of a bitch," I said.

When I got outside, the first thing I noticed was an empty parking space where the black pickup used to be. Then I saw it. Turning back onto Danbury, flicker on, waiting for a break in the traffic. It wasn't possible to tell, with those tinted windows, whether anyone was in the car besides the driver.

The truck found an opening and took off south, in the

direction of Niagara Falls, the engine roaring, back tires spinning on wet pavement.

Could this have been the truck Claire'd been referring to when I allowed her to jump in at Patchett's? If it was, had we been followed? Was the driver the man in the leather jacket? Had he grabbed Claire and taken her with him? Or had she decided he was less threatening than she'd originally thought, and now was going to favor him with the opportunity to drive her home?

Goddamn it.

My heart pounded. I'd lost Claire. I hadn't wanted her in the first place, but I was panicked now that I didn't know where she was. My mind raced while I worked out a plan. Follow the truck? Call the police? Forget the whole damn thing ever happened?

Follow the truck.

Yeah, that seemed the most logical thing. Catch up to it, come up alongside, see if I could catch a glimpse of the girl, make sure she was—

There she was.

Sitting in my car. In the passenger seat, shoulder strap already in place. Blond hair hanging over her eyes.

Waiting for me.

I took a couple of breaths, walked over, got in, slammed the door. "Where the hell were you?" I asked as I dropped into the seat, the interior lights on for three seconds tops. "You were in there so long I was starting to worry."

She stared out the passenger window, her body leaning away from me. "Came out the side door I guess when you were going in." Almost muttering, her voice rougher than before. Throwing up must have taken a toll on her throat.

"You gave me a hell of a start," I said. But there didn't seem much point in reprimanding her. She wasn't my kid, and in a few minutes she'd be home.

I backed the car out, then continued heading south on Danbury.

She kept leaning up against her door, like she was trying to stay as far away from me as possible. If she was wary of me now, why hadn't she been before she'd gone into Iggy's? I couldn't think of anything I'd done to make her fearful. Was it because I'd run into the restaurant looking for her? Had I crossed some kind of line?

There was something else niggling at me, something other than what I might have done. It was something I'd seen, when the light came on inside the car for those five seconds while my door was open.

Things that were only now registering.

First, her clothes.

They were dry. Her jeans weren't darkened with dampness. It wasn't like I could reach over now and touch her knee to see whether it was wet, but I was pretty sure. She couldn't have stripped down in the bathroom and held her jeans up to the hot-air hand dryer, could she? I could barely get those things to blow the water off my hands. Surely they couldn't dry out denim.

But there was more. More disconcerting than the dry clothes. Maybe what I'd thought I'd seen I hadn't seen at all. After all, the light was on for only those few seconds.

I needed to turn it back on to be certain.

I fingered the dial by the steering column that flicked on the dome light. "Sorry," I said. "Just had this thought I left my sunglasses at the Home Depot." I fumbled with my right hand

in the small storage area at the head of the console. “Oh yeah, there they are.”

And I turned the light back off. It was on long enough for me to be sure.

Her left hand. It was uninjured.

There was no cut.