23Don’t Look Now

I guess that if I was truthful I have seen them all of my life, a shadow snagged in a corner where the edge of the deepest dark lies, something half-seen beneath the roots of an ancient forest elm, a glimpse of a wizened sharp-cheeked face peering out of the cobwebbed window of an abandoned dwelling, or even in modern life in that hustle of fast-lane living, trying to get to the office in time from a late train, a face among the striding legs… a child caught there, no, another small person far more sinister…

When in my spotty, hormone raged years the condition was often thought to be caused by sleepless nights and a cholesterol packed, fast-food diet. Doctors would nod sagely to my mother and reach for the prescription pad. The result, another course of tablets ‘new-on-the-market’ and sure to put things right, ‘Take two with meals…’ they said. I just took them and kept quiet. But I knew they were still there, at that very edge of conscious sight. For my family and others they simply did not exist.

The years rolled by with barely a sight of anything that could not possibly exist in the *real* world and I was happy. But then one morning on the way to my new posting at a High Street bank in a provincial Midlands town, I caught a reflection in my peripheral vision, a shape… no a face, in a window display beyond a perfectly normal bus queue waiting for the free supermarket shuttle. I stopped, suddenly blocking the tide of commuters forcing them to jostle around me and I stared.

By God, the thing was still there, its evil eyes gimlets of terror and fixed on me. The slash of its mouth was opening showing two rows of sharp pointed teeth, it was speaking… to me. My body jerked alive and I was in the road, cars and taxis hooting savagely as I staggered from one near collision to another. I remember the shocked faces of those human skittles in that bus queue that fell aside as I catapulted into them. I was down and on my scuffed knees staring up into the window display of an ethnic emporium that sold imported exotic artefacts from countries of a lost empire. As a worthy concerned citizen helped me to my feet, content with my muttered profuse thanks; I looked again for that horror behind the glass, but there was just a blank faced wooden doll in a scrap of a beaded dress, her crudely painted expression greeted none in particular.

My late arrival at the bank was greeted by quizzical looks and shocked expressions but no one approached me for an explanation or to offer a kind word. Instead they bent their heads to the mundane on the desks before them, tasks to get through, balances and checks to be completed before the doors opened and we were exposed to the general public. I headed straight to the men’s loo, a sanctuary for male employees anytime. But I was not alone with my administrations for long, in fact I had hardly began to run a tap when the door opened smartly and the sonorous tones of the under-manager boomed at me.

“The manager’s office… now!”

The screams came first and quickly muted after harsh muffled demands. At first I could not picture what it meant. They say sudden high stress can do that, the brain simply dismisses events that it does not want to consider, it’s like some sort of bio-failsafe thing to protect the rational thinking part of the mind. But I knew…Slowly I eased the door open, my intention to crawl to somewhere safer behind a counter because they would be checking the loos first. There had to be nobody out of view that could trigger a silent alarm, the pro-teams all knew that.

I had made it and was face down leopard crawling between those cheap plastic teller stools that are behind all bank counters. Where had the staff gone? I thought for a second and then I heard the timid protests.

Did I want to see more? Of course I did, why the hell are we so curious to face death close to?

I dared a peek at the scene, frightened white faces were staring back at me from the far side, all except dear Janice, she was from Jamaica, bless her and from her bulging eyeballs she was scared too. Some of them, mainly the men, stood with their hands up like in the best traditions of a Hollywood movie; why for heaven’s sake?

There was a man, definitely not staff, built like a prop-forward and masked in eye-holed black. It’s always black. This guy held a bat like he was about to go to a baseball batting plate. He even tried a couple of air-sweep practice swings. Mavis, a woman that looked older than her fifty-eight years, the general file-clerk and comforter of younger girls, re-acted with a screech. The man looked at her and belched. She flinched and cried.

Another, maybe their leader had the under-manager Jenkins, by the scruff of his neck and with the business end of a huge Browning pistol pressed into his ear he pulled the poor man to the vault. Only a few scant feet from the two of them, I smelled rather than heard his bowels prematurely vacate a newly digested breakfast, not nice. No one laughed. A third unseen robber was collecting cell phones, pagers, I-pads and all manner of gizmos into a plastic dustbin liner. I wondered idly why he was not interested in wallets and purses but I then guessed it wasn’t part of his job remit.

All was going well for this band of robbers, the main door was locked and guarded, the bank alarms disabled and the staff cowered…but they had no idea…

Neither did I really until I happened to glance up at the ceiling and there it was, grinning back at me, its little pinched face full of intended mischief. It was completely naked in ash-grey wrinkled skin, its head larger proportioned than its body giving a child-like appearance. No mistake, it was an imp. The light fitting, a fluorescent unit with a diffuser hung on two chains, was immediately above ‘bat-man’ and as I looked transfixed it proceeded to saw at the chain next to it with a short dagger.

Thus began the mayhem that was to follow.

The light swung downward on the single attached chain, its arc of travel ending abruptly with a sickening thud as it contacted the skull of a masked robber. He collapsed with a soft moan and no thoughts to trouble his cerebrally challenged brain, for it had shut down on impact. The sound of the chorused gasps and the crash of a stunned colleague startled the door guard and immediately stressed his own limited decision making processes. Should he dash to offer help, check the bank staff from attacking them or stay at his post? The latter became his choice, offering an expletive that started, “What the …?”

The man, who I mentally dubbed ‘boss man’ dropped the hapless squirming Jenkins, whose interests only being his own soiled nether regions and strode forward waving his gun menacingly before pausing and looking around embarrassingly because there was no obvious target for his wrath. I had somehow remained unseen and the imp long disappeared, like imps do. The ‘locked’ doors of the bank rattled hard as though struck by a sudden un-forecasted tornado, the armoured glass shook then shattered, reinforced steel frames buckled and flew inward with a tremendous crash of twisted metal and we were met with an avalanche of sounds, squealing police sirens and loudspeaker barks hammered our ears. Dropping their guns they fled or at least they tried to. And only I saw them waiting with those wicked eyes looking at me; this time two of them, one each side of the door, a length of electric cable stretched between them at human ankle level. Their exit was the envy of amateur circus clowns attempting to master the technique of a ‘prat-fall’.

The police were kind an considerate with their enquiries, gently questioning us all but all our statements were much the same and I could add nothing further as I had somehow became locked in the men’s loo for the most of it. Well that was my story, how could it be different?

Jenkins took early retirement and we never saw him again, Mavis told everybody of the wild nightmares it had given her and Janice’s hair had turned snow white. As for me life is still much the same, though I am expecting a transfer to a bigger branch of the bank any day now and the imps… yes they are still there at the corner of my eye, in a flickering shadow, a squat reflection around the next corner, ready for what…?

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