

**Invasion of Privacy
and
Other Short Stories**
by
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Invasion of Privacy

If you're the person who murdered my wife and think you've gotten away with it, think again. I'm looking for you, and I'll eventually find you.

1. Losing Diane

"This is my last job, I'm just waiting for the computer to reboot and then I'll run a quick scan," I say to my wife, Diane, while working in a client's home. "I should be back in less than an hour. Have you been very busy?"

"There were several customers earlier," Diane says, "but it's been quiet for a while now. I'm thinking about locking up and calling it a day, but I'll wait until you get back. What do you think about going out to dinner tonight? I've been hearing about a new restaurant—I've got to go, someone just came in. See you soon, love you, bye."

Arriving at the store about an hour later, I sit in the parking lot a moment. I still get a thrill when I look at the small business we've created. It might not look like much, but I remember it without the new windows added to the front. There's a customer walking out, carrying a laptop. Trying to be friendly, I say, "Hi, how's it going?" He doesn't respond and quickly gets in his car and leaves but not before I get a good look at him. He's about my size, just under six feet, with long brown hair. There's nothing unusual about him except he has a spider tattoo on his face, just under his right eye.

"Diane, I'm back," I say while walking in the door. I'm surprised she isn't at the front counter since a customer has just left. She's probably in the backroom. I notice the X-770 laptop is gone. *Spiderman made a good choice*, I think while walking past the display of new computers. There's a pile of papers lying on the floor, as if they'd fallen from the counter. It isn't like Diane to let something like that go; I'm always teasing her about her compulsive neatness.

I'm starting to get a bad feeling; something doesn't feel right. "Diane, where are you?" I hear a noise coming from behind the counter and rush over to look. Diane's lying there on the floor, bleeding.

"Diane," I scream, "What happened?"

There's blood everywhere ... so much blood. I grab her and press my hand against the wound on her neck to try and stop the bleeding. The warmth of the blood and the sticky wetness of it, surprises me.

"You're going to be fine," I say, trying not to panic, "It's OK, I'm here, don't worry."

Her eyes are closed, but they flutter open briefly, looking at me. The vacant look in her usually bright blue eyes frightens me. She's trying to tell me something.

"Don't try to talk," I say while dialing 911.

"911, what is your emergency?" the young woman calmly asks.

"My wife is bleeding, please send help."

“What is your address, please?”

“738 Harrington, Jim’s Got Web, the computer store, please hurry.”

“Sir, I’m contacting the medical dispatchers. Are you with your wife right now?”

“Yes... Please hurry. I’m trying to stop the bleeding—there’s blood everywhere.”

“Sir, an ambulance is on the way. I need you to stay calm. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Someone stabbed her—the man with the spider on his face—please hurry.”

“Spider? Sir, what are you talking about? Sir?”

I drop the phone so I can use both hands on Diane.

“Diane, please... You’ll be fine—you’re ok. The ambulance is on the way. No, please, no...”

She’s trying to talk again. I put my face against hers and faintly hear, “I’m sorry ... I love you.”

“I know. I love you too. Diane, listen to me. You have to hang on. I need you. Diane, please ... Don’t leave me.”

I’m trying not to think about losing her. What would I do? *Keep pressure on the wound*, I tell myself. I can’t believe how much blood there is. The metallic smell and the sight of the blood is starting to make me dizzy ...

“Sir, can you hear me?” a voice in the distance asks, “Can you stand up? Let’s walk outside ... Easy—take your time.”

The fresh air helps to revive me, “Diane,” I yell, remembering what happened.

“Your wife is on her way to the hospital. I’ll take you there. Are you feeling better?”

Diane’s blood is all over me. I must have passed out. “Is she okay? Damn it, how long have I been out? I was trying to stop the bleeding. I can’t believe I fainted ... Please, take me to her.”

When we arrive at the emergency room, I run up to the desk, “Where’s my wife?”

“Sir, please have a seat, I’ll get someone to talk to you.”

A young doctor walks up to me, obviously uncomfortable. He doesn’t have to say anything; I can see it on his face. The only thing I hear him say is, “I’m sorry ...”

The police officer waiting for me says, “I’m sorry for your loss, sir, but I’ll have to ask you to come down to the station with me to answer a few questions.”

I don’t remember the ride to the police station. It’s as if I’m in a nightmare and I can’t wake up. I’m seated at a small table with the officer across from me. Looking around the room, I notice a large mirror on the wall. I wonder who’s watching us from the other side.

“Mr. Gotweb, where were you when your wife was attacked?” the officer asks.

“I was on a service call.”

“Can anyone verify that?”

“You can ask the customer. The work-order with his address and phone number will be on my computer.”

“OK,” he says, while glancing at the mirror, “We’ll contact him to verify that. Now, can you describe what you saw when you arrived at the scene?”

“I saw a man leaving the shop, carrying a laptop. He had a tattoo of a spider on his face.”

“Did you see anyone else there? Someone that can back up your story?”

“No,” I say, “there wasn’t anyone else.”

“Now, just for the record, were you and your wife having any problems?”

“Problems?” I ask, “What do you mean?”

“You know, how was your relationship? Are you having financial difficulties? Were you arguing a lot lately? Those type of things.”

“No ... What does that have to do with anything? Wait,” I say, suddenly realizing what he’s getting at, “Are you accusing me of murdering my wife? This is ridiculous! I told you who the murderer is.”

“Right, the man with the spider tattoo. Yeah, I’ve got that. Can you tell me anything else about him?” the officer asks.

“Anything else? Are you kidding me? My wife is dead. I’m covered in her blood. Her murderer has a tattoo of a spider on his face, how much more do you need to know? I can’t believe this. How many people have a tattoo like that? Why aren’t you out looking for him?”

“Sir, we know what we’re doing. I’m just trying to get all of the facts straight. That’s all I need from you right now. Let me know if you think of anything else.”

2. Taking My Life Back

The past few weeks are a blur. I can't believe Diane's gone. How can I possibly go on without her? Why should I? I can't even bring myself to go home; the thought of walking through the door and Diane not being there is too much to handle. I'm living in a cheap motel on the edge of town. I haven't even been back to the store since her murder. I spend most of my time sitting in bars, trying to drown my grief with alcohol. Somehow, the smell of stale beer and the haze of cigarette smoke is comforting. As I sit in the dark bar, staring at the small patch of sunlight on the floor sneaking in through the darkened window, I hear a conversation.

"Did you hear what happened to Bob's wife?" the bartender asks the man sitting at the end of the bar.

"No, you mean Bob the insurance guy?" the man asks. "What happened?"

"She came home from work and found a man sitting at her computer. He attacked her. He stabbed her and left her for dead."

"Jeez, is she okay?"

"Yeah, she's going to be fine. Luckily, Bob came home early and found her. He barely got her to the hospital in time."

"Man, that's terrible. Did she get a good look at the guy?"

"Well, not really, it happened so fast. But I guess she told the police the guy had a tattoo on his face. She said it looked like an insect or spider or something."

Am I dreaming? I can't believe this. It has to be Diane's murderer, and he's still in the area. Why am I sitting here, in this stinking bar? I can't let him get away with this. I don't know how, but I've got to find this guy.

The first thing I have to do is go back to my store, Jim's Got Web. It's a play on my name, Jim Gotweb. It's not a large store; we only sell a few computers a week. I mean, I do; I can't believe she's gone. She was my best friend and the only family I had. I've never been very good with people, probably because I've spent so much time alone, working with computers. She dealt with the customers and ran the store while I worked in the back, installing hardware and troubleshooting. Now, besides dealing with her death, I have to figure out how to keep the business running on my own.

Walking into the store, I immediately walk to the spot behind the front counter where I found Diane. Someone has cleaned up her blood. But it doesn't matter; the sight of her lying there in a pool of blood will always be with me. Walking around the small showroom, looking at the computers lined up on the display shelves by the front window, I think about how her death has shattered our dreams. Diane loved children. We'd planned to start our family once the store was more established. We often talked about our kids running around the shop and laughed about them becoming computer geeks like their dad. It's going to be impossible to spend any time here without thinking of Diane; everything reminds me of her. I find hand-written notes about tasks to complete, newspaper clippings of articles she liked, and a coffee cup with her lipstick on it. The smell of her perfume is still in the air.

It's not as bad in the backroom. Diane didn't spend much time back here so there aren't as many things to remind me of her. There are few computers still sitting on the workbench; I'll have to figure out who they belong to and apologize for not returning them. As I begin working on them, I can feel myself relaxing for the first time in weeks. I've always enjoyed computers;

everything about them makes sense to me. Even when the problem isn't obvious, I know the answer is there; I just have to look at it logically to find it.

I need to get back into programming. Writing code has always helped me think clearly. Before Diane died, I was working on a program to remotely access customer's computers to diagnose their problems. That way, I could repair them without leaving the shop. If I'd had that program working, I'd have been here instead of on a call; maybe Diane would still be alive.

I have a few customers who have given me permission to access their computers to test my program, so I connect to one now. While scanning the files on the remote computer, I accidentally connect to the webcam. I see my customer sitting at her desk, reading. I immediately disconnect. That was weird. She didn't know I was there, watching her, but it sure felt creepy.

I wonder ... The news report says the killer was using the woman's computer when she came home, and he stole a laptop when he killed Diane. I don't know what he's up to, but it seems to be connected with computers. He's probably somewhere nearby, sitting at a computer right now. Theoretically, if I could get access to enough webcams on home computers, it's possible I'd find him.

3. Big Brother's Watching You

I've spent the past few months writing a program I call 'Big Brother.' When it's on someone's computer, I'm able to remotely access it and watch people in their homes through their webcams. Then it notifies me, the computer is added to my network, and the program emails itself to all of the user's contacts. Finding the murderer this way is a long shot, but I don't care; at least I'm doing something. I've installed the program on all of the computers in the shop; the new ones up front and the computers I'm working on. It's amazing how easy it is to access someone's webcam without them knowing it. The difficult part is getting the program installed on their computer.

I've installed Big Brother on flash drives and I plan to scatter them around town. I'm counting on people finding the drives and being curious enough to plug them into their computers to see what's on them. I've also added a few songs; while they're listening to the music, my program installs itself.

I'm sitting at the food court in the mall, looking around to make sure I'm not being watched, and set one of the drives on the table and walk away. Standing near a kiosk, pretending to look at the sunglasses for sale, I watch a group of teenage boys sit at the table.

"Hey, look what I found," one teenager says, while picking up the drive, "I wonder what's on it."

Without any hesitation, he plugs it into the laptop he's carrying and starts playing the music I've installed. This is going to be a lot easier than I thought. I spend the rest of the day dropping the infected drives in public places, and then I go back to my shop and wait.

I know it's pathetic that I'm sitting at my computer in the backroom of my shop, watching people. I feel bad about sneaking into their homes, invading their privacy. I know it's wrong to be spying on people. Everyone has the right to expect privacy in their homes. I try to be discreet and only watch long enough to see if the killer is there and then move on. Sometimes I can't help myself and watch a little longer than necessary. Being able to see what goes on in other people's home is addictive.

I have to admit there are a few homes that I visit regularly. I pretend they're family; I guess it makes me feel as if I'm a part of their lives. That's probably why reality shows are so popular on TV; they help people feel connected to something, when really they live a boring, lonely life. The Harris family's one of my favorites. I like watching them while I'm sitting in my shop, eating my TV dinner.

"How was school today, Johnny?" Mr. Harris asks his son at dinner.

"Fine," Johnny says, "We're going on a field trip to the planetarium tomorrow."

"That sounds like fun, Johnny," I say. They can't hear me, but I join in the conversation anyway.

After dinner, I check in on my other pretend relatives. I see that my "aunt" Lucy isn't doing very well with her Farmville game on Facebook. She's forgotten to harvest her crops again, so I do it for her before they wither and die. Then I drop in on my "cousin" Terry. He's looking at porn sites again instead of doing his homework. I put a temporary block on his internet and send him an official looking message reminding him that there's a math test tomorrow.

After a while, I come across a family in the middle of a big fight. I mean, it's really getting out of hand. The dad is drunk and verbally abusing his wife and son. I look up the home's

address and call the police. I tell them my neighbors are having a fight and to send someone right away.

“Harry, you should go to bed,” the wife says, “You’re drunk and you don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Oh yeah, you think I’m so drunk? Well, can a drunk do this?”

He reaches out, grabs his wife, and throws her into the next room like a rag doll. His son runs over to him and starts hitting him in the stomach, screaming, “I hate you, I hate you!” Then, his dad grabs him and tosses him on top of his mom.

“To hell with the both of you!” he says.

Without thinking, I turn on my microphone, “No, to hell with you!”

He’s the only one in the room and is obviously confused by the voice coming out of his computer speakers.

“Who’s there?” he slurs, as he looks around.

“This is the police,” I say in a deep voice. “We have the house surrounded. Come out with your hands up.”

“How did you get in my computer?”

“We’ve been watching you,” I say, “We know you don’t want to hurt your family. Give yourself up peacefully and we’ll make sure you get help.”

As he stands there thinking, the police arrive and his wife lets them in.

“I do want help!” he cries as he walks towards the police with his hands up.

As I watch the mother hug her son and talk to him about his father’s problem, I realize I don’t have anyone to talk to. Diane and I can’t dream about our future and talk about our plans to have kids. I’ll never be able to watch them grow up and share the experience with the one person in my life who mattered to me. Diane’s killer took all of that away from me. Is that fair? Is it wrong for me to try and find the person who ruined my life, even at the expense of stealing a few moments of someone’s privacy? Where do one person’s rights end and another’s start? If I invade a person’s privacy without them knowing it, what’s the harm?

I guess it all comes down to the question of whether I’m willing to risk the consequence of going to jail if I’m caught. I am. What do I have to lose? My life has come down to sitting here alone, watching others live theirs. What kind of life is this? I hardly leave the backroom anymore. But there are many people out there who need help. I think about all the abused children, the homes getting broken into, and who knows what else that’s going on. I could help a lot of them by contacting the police or sending them information to get help. Maybe that would give me a reason to go on.

4. Meeting Roger

I need to hire someone to help me run the store. Someone to deal with the customers and the phone calls from the bill collectors. I hate it when I have to stop working to answer the phone or talk to someone who walks in the door. I've thought about putting an ad in the paper, but what would it say?

"Wanted: someone to run my computer store while I sit in the back room and watch people on their webcams to try and find my wife's murderer."

That would get some attention. No, I need to find someone who isn't going to ask a lot of questions. It'd probably be best if they knew a little about computers but not enough to figure out what I'm doing. There's a kid who comes into the shop a lot, messing with the computers. He looks to be about sixteen. I decide to talk to him and find out a little about him.

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Hey," he responds without looking at me.

"So, you like computers, huh?" I don't know what else to say.

"Look, mister, if you don't want me messing with the computer, just say so. It's a piece of shit anyway."

Great, I think, he's a smart ass. I can deal with that.

"What do you mean, a piece a shit?" I say. "That baby's got a 2.6 GHz Pentium processor and 1.5 gigabytes of ram. It's a monster."

"A monster? More like a dinosaur. Now if you'd upgrade the processor to a Core i7, add a DDR3 memory module, and a GTX 650 Ti graphics card, it might be able to play some of the older StarCraft games without crashing."

"Are you a gamer?" I ask.

"No, not really. There aren't any games worth spending my time on. I'm a code monkey. I like to program. I hear that you are, too. Or were," he says, finally turning around to look at me.

"Where did you hear that?" I'm surprised he knows anything about me. I've always been kind of a loner, never really had any friends. While all the other kids spent their time playing sports, I was learning to program.

"I go to Lincoln High, same school you went to. Mr. Griffin still teaches computer science. He says I remind him of you. At least, the way you were," he adds with a smirk.

"Hey, I might not be up on all the latest and greatest technology—who has time to keep up with that shit? But, I still know my way around a computer, don't worry about that." Why am I defending myself to this kid?

"So, you still program?" he asks. "What have you been working on, figuring out the odds on the college basketball tournament so you can fill out a winning bracket?"

Wow, I think, that's a good idea! "No, have you?" I ask, and he rolls his eyes and shakes his head. I haven't talked to anyone about programming for a while, and I have to admit I'm a little excited about showing off some of my work. "OK, smart ass," I say, "If I show you what I've been working on can you keep it to yourself?"

"Who am I gonna talk to? I don't know anyone who understands a word I say."

I get the feeling I can trust this kid. He reminds me of myself at that age. "So, what's your name?"

"Roger Sanchez," he says while following me to the back room.

“My name’s Jim Gotweb, by the way.”

“I know. ‘Jim’s Got Web,’” he says, making air quotes. “What a catchy name for a computer store.” Again with the rolling eyes.

“You come up with something better.”

“How about just ‘Got Web?’ You know, like the old ‘Got Milk?’ slogan?”

Damn, that’s good, I think. Oh, well, it’s too late to change it now. I don’t plan to tell him about my program; I’ll just give him a little information to see his reaction. I show him a block of code I’ve been working on and watch as he scans it.

The code I show him isn’t directly related to my network, so I’m shocked when he says, “So how big is this network?”

“What are you talking about?”

“C’mon,” he says. “Why else would you be running a hidden program that allows you to gain remote access? I’m assuming that you’re sending the program to other users through their email. So, what’re you doing, spying on people through their webcams?”

Damn, so much for not telling him about my program. He’s already figured it out.

“It’s not like that at all,” I say, flustered. “Well, I guess it kind of is, but it’s not what you think. I mean, I’m not spying on people. Well, I am, but not the way you think I am.”

“Calm down,” he says, “I’m not going to turn you in. So what are you doing?”

I take a deep breath and say, “My wife was murdered. I’ve seen the killer and I’ve told the police what he looks like. They haven’t been able to find him, so I’m looking for him myself; one computer at a time.”

“Man,” he says, “What are the odds of finding one person by randomly looking at computers? What if he doesn’t use email, how would you get the program installed on his computer? How do you know he even has a webcam?”

“I try not to think about it too much,” I say. “I probably have a better chance of winning the lottery. But I have to do something. In the mean time, I’ve seen child abuse, robberies, and other stuff. I’ve been able to help a few of them, but I need someone to run the shop while I monitor the network.”

“I’m sorry about your wife,” Roger says, “I know what it’s like to lose someone. My mom killed herself last year. I should have helped her. I knew something was wrong but I didn’t realize how bad it was. She needed someone to talk to and I wasn’t there for her. If there’s anything I can do to help, count me in.”

5. The Naked Lady

Roger's been working with me for a couple of weeks, although it hasn't turned out as I'd planned. He spends all of his time in the backroom working with me instead of out front.

While browsing through the new computers on our network, Roger says, "Hey, Mr. Gotweb, take a look at this."

I've been trying to get him to call me Jim, but I think he looks at me as if I'm an old man. I'm only twenty-six, but I guess to a sixteen-year-old, that's ancient.

"What is it?" I ask, while getting up from my computer.

"It's a naked lady, and she's really hot," he says.

I'm shocked when I see the woman on his monitor; she looks a lot like Diane. She has the same short, black hair and the intense green eyes, but I have to admit—Diane didn't have a body like that.

She's completely naked, at least from what I can see, and as I stare at her beautiful breasts she says, "Well, hello boys. I was wondering when you'd stop by to visit me."

"Is she talking to us?" I ask.

Roger says, "I've been warning you about a hole in Big Brother. I think she's found it. She's using the program to watch us."

Sitting at her computer, staring into the camera with a big grin on her face, she says, "Houston, we've got a problem."

"She's hacked Big Brother?" I ask, "That's impossible."

"Oh, yes," she says, "how would some dumb girl be able to do something like that?"

"What the hell's going on? Can you hear us?" I ask, in complete shock.

"Yes, of course I can. Why are you so surprised? As much snooping as you've been doing, it shouldn't seem weird to you at all. Now, I've shown you mine, so show me yours. Take off all your clothes," she says.

Standing there dumbfounded, I notice that Roger has a blank stare on his face and is starting to take off his shirt.

"What are you doing?" I ask, "Have you lost your mind?"

"Oh, I thought we were supposed to do what she says. Sorry."

"Spoil sport," she says. "So what are you guys up to?"

I'm still in a state of shock that someone has broken into our network, and I have to admit, part of that shock is because it's a beautiful, naked woman.

"I'm not going to stand here and justify myself to you. How did you find our program?"

"I saw it attached to an email a client sent me. I knew right away what it was, so I opened it to take a look. It's not bad coding, but it's a little buggy, so it wasn't hard for me to alter it. Then I waited around for you guys to come visit me."

"You sat at your computer naked, waiting for us?" Roger asks.

"No, I have an adult webcam business I run from home. So what're you guys up to?"

"If you want to talk we should meet somewhere," I say.

"Fine, I'll be right there."

"What? You know where we are?"

“C’mon, Jim,” she says, “Get with the program. Now, you guys need to straighten things up a bit. You’re going to have a visitor.”

About an hour later, she walks into the store. I’m completely unprepared for the effect she has on me. I’ve seen her naked, so you’d think I’d know what to expect, but seeing her in person is another thing completely. She must be six feet tall, with long legs and an athletic body. Her short black hair frames a face that could belong to Diane’s twin.

“Hi, Jim, got web?” she says while smiling and looking around the room. “I’m Melanie. So, this is where you keep the junk for the customers—show me the real toys.”

Roger laughs and says to me, “I like her. I told you this stuff was crap.”

Roger leads her into the back room while I try to collect myself. Somehow, this woman whom I’ve seen nude has hacked into my program and now she’s in my store. It doesn’t seem real.

When I walk into the back room, Roger’s showing her our network. “This is Big Brother,” he says proudly.

“What are you doing?” I say, “Don’t show her that.”

“Look, Jim, you need to calm down,” Melanie says while browsing through our database. “You’re going to give yourself a coronary. You guys aren’t what I expected to find; you don’t look like the perverted type. At least, you don’t,” she says, smiling at Roger. “I can tell this code was written in a hurry, as if you’re on some kind of mission.”

“We are,” Roger says. “We’re trying to find out who murdered Mr. Gotweb’s wife. He’s seen her killer’s face; he has a spider tattoo. We’re searching through people on our network to find him. While looking for him we’ve been finding people that need our help, but we’re having trouble keeping track of all the computers.”

I’m shocked that Roger’s telling this stranger everything. “What in the hell are you doing? I’ve told you how important it is to keep this to ourselves.”

Roger’s looking at Melanie like a lovesick puppy. “I know, but I think we can trust her. I think she’s one of us.”

She looks at me for a moment with a compassionate look in her eyes and then turns to Roger, “You should write a program to keep track of all the computers for you. It would look for predefined activities, like certain keywords used in a search or other suspicious activity. Then it would flag the computer and send you a notification.”

Trying to regain my composure in the presence of this incredible woman, I say, “Actually, we’ve been working on a program like that, but we keep hitting a dead end. It’s difficult to monitor so many computers at the same time.”

“You wouldn’t have to monitor all of them at once,” she says, “You could batch them into groups and levels. Whenever a computer starts getting flagged, it’s moved up to a level that gets monitored more often.”

The buzzer sounds, telling us a customer has walked into the store. Right away, Roger and I start arguing.

“It’s your turn,” I say.

“No, I did the last customer, remember? The lady that said her computer’s memory was leaking so she needed more.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t do anything except tell her we were out of memory.”

“Geez, what’s the matter with you guys?” Melanie says, laughing as she leaves the backroom. “What’s so hard about dealing with customers?”

“Hello there,” she says seductively to a man looking at laptops. “What can I do you for?”

“Oh, hi,” he says, obviously surprised to see her standing so close behind him. “I’m looking for a laptop for my son’s birthday, but these seem expensive.”

“They do cost a little more than the ones at the big box stores,” she says. “But you also get the peace of mind of knowing that if anything ever goes wrong with it, we’ll come to your house and fix it.” Then she adds with a wink, “Day or night.”

“That was amazing,” I say when she comes back to the workshop after selling the laptop. “Is there any way I can talk you into working here?”

“You can’t afford me,” she says, “But I do miss writing code. I wouldn’t mind hanging around a couple hours a day, just to sharpen my skills.”

“Great, and if a customer comes in you could take care of them,” I say hopefully.

“I’ll take my turn,” she says, “You guys need to learn how to work with the customers.”

6. Fainting Goat

Melanie and I have developed a good working relationship. It's been difficult sitting next to someone who looks so much like Diane and has such an incredible body. But I think I've been doing a good job of keeping my fantasies under control.

"Is there a problem?" Melanie asks from across the large desk we share while monitoring the network.

"No, why?"

"Because," she says, "every time I look up, you're staring at me. Is there something you wanted?"

Maybe I'm not doing such a good job. "I'm sorry, I'll try to be more careful. It's just that you look so much like Diane."

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry. Would you feel better if I were sitting here naked?"

"Well, yeah, that would be great," I say with more than a little enthusiasm.

"Forget it, I'm not stripping for you. The only reason I'm here is to help with the network."

"I've wanted to ask you something," I say. "It's none of my business, so you can just tell me to go to hell, but I'm curious. Why do you sit naked for all those guys? I mean, you have the skills to get a great job doing anything you want in IT."

Judging by the look on her face, I may have overstepped a boundary. She's quiet for a while then finally says, "I was a software development engineer for seven years. I was the only female working on a team of chauvinist pigs. Against my better judgment, I got involved with one of them. At first, Stan seemed to be a great guy. We had fun and spent a lot of time together away from work. Everything was fine when we were alone, but at work he acted completely different. He was always complaining about my work and trying to make me look bad in front of everyone. I eventually quit the job—and him."

"I decided to use my looks instead of my brains. Men find me attractive, so why not use that as a way to make a living? I make more money sitting at home naked than I can at any IT job, so why shouldn't I? I admit I've missed programming, but now that I've found you guys, I'm doing it again, so I've got the best of both worlds."

"Mr. Gotweb," Roger says from across the room, "we've been getting a lot of hits on 322.203.5.4; I think you should take a look at it."

"What's going on?" I ask.

"There was a sudden spike in volume around midnight last night and someone's on the computer now, googling 'ways to clean up blood.'"

"Bring it up and we'll see what's going on."

Roger connects to the computer and suddenly I'm staring into the eyes of a very haggard looking man, sitting at his monitor. It always surprises me when I see someone on my screen; it looks like they're staring right at me. Of course, they can't tell that I've accessed their camera, but it's still creepy.

"So, what are you up to, Jackson Heller at 2452 West Brighton?" I say aloud, while reading the report. "You don't look like you've gotten any sleep. What happened last night?"

I see something sitting on the floor behind him; it's a bottle of ammonia and a sponge.

"Looks like he got the blood out of the carpet," I say. "What's he looking for now?"

Roger says, "He's searching for 'ways to dispose of a body.' Do you think he's killed his wife?" Roger has a note of excitement in his voice. There hasn't been much action lately and I think he's starting to get a little bored with my project.

"That's what it looks like to me. We better act fast if we want to catch him with the evidence."

"Fainting Goat?" Roger asks hopefully.

Roger has developed a worm that we can activate to make the user's computer start acting up. He's nicknamed it the 'Fainting Goat,' after the domestic goat whose muscles freeze when it panics.

"Good idea," I say, "Go for it."

Roger types in a few keystroke commands, and Jackson's computer freezes.

We laugh when Jackson beats on the monitor screaming, "C'mon, you piece of shit, not now."

He reboots the computer, which has no effect. There's a sticker with the store's phone number conveniently located on the front of every computer that's been in the shop. A few minutes later, I get a phone call.

"Jim's Got Web, If you're up a creek, we'll send a geek." I haven't gone on a call since Diane's death, but the catchy slogan we used back then comes naturally to me.

"Yeah, I've got a problem with my computer. Send someone over right away."

Our plan is for Roger to work on the computer while I pretend to be training him.

"I still don't understand why I can't be training you," Roger says as we walk up to the house.

He's upset about having to pretend he doesn't know what he's doing. "Look, Roger, he probably knows I'm the owner of Jim's Got Web. How would it look if I had a kid showing me how to work on a computer?"

"You mean, how would it look if people knew?"

He had a point. Roger's been teaching me ever since I hired him. How can someone so young know so much?

"I'll make you a deal—next time you get to be the instructor," I say while ringing the doorbell.

When Jackson comes to the door, we both take a step back, surprised by his appearance. He looks like death warmed over. The desperation and panic in his eyes reminds me of a wild animal backed into a corner, planning to fight his way out.

"I'm really sorry that you're having trouble with your computer," I say as he leads us into the living room. "We've had a rash of problems lately that seem to be related to a conflict in the BIOS, caused by an improper installation of the software."

As Roger looks at me, rolling his eyes, I continue, "We should be out of here in less than an hour. Don't let us stop you from whatever you're doing."

He doesn't say a word and stands behind Roger, watching him as he boots up the computer. I was afraid he wouldn't leave us alone long enough to get a look around the house, so I have another plan. Melanie should be coming to the door any minute now. Hearing the doorbell, Jackson mutters, "Now what?" as he goes to answer the door.

After he walks out of the room, Roger says, "Conflict in the BIOS, caused by improper installation? What kind of crap is that?"

"Never mind, smart ass," I say while heading out of the room.

“Hi, I’ve got a flat tire,” Melanie says, “could you help me change it? I don’t know anything about cars.”

“No, I’m busy, you should call a tow truck,” he says and starts to close the door.

Melanie immediately starts crying, “I don’t have time to wait for a tow truck. My mother is dying. I have to get to the hospital. Can’t you please help me?”

She’s good. I can’t imagine anyone refusing to help her. As Jackson follows her to the car, I tell Roger to watch out the window and let me know when he’s coming back. The first place I look for evidence is in the garage. After checking the trunk of the car and not finding anything, I decide to check in the basement. While heading down the stairs, I start worrying that I won’t be able to hear Roger yell, so I call him on his cell phone.

“Did you find something?” he asks excitedly.

“No, I’m going into the basement to look around. Can you see Melanie’s car?”

“Yeah, it’s right out front. It’s not going to take him very long. He already has the spare tire out and is setting up the jack. Melanie’s talking to him non-stop, trying to distract him, but it doesn’t seem to be doing much good. I bet she’s pissed. She’s used to guys paying more attention to her.”

“Just keep watching and let me know when he’s done. I see something that looks suspicious, hold on a second.”

There’s a pile of rugs and towels that seems out of place in the clean, tidy basement. As I get closer, I can see blood seeping out of the rugs. I carefully pull back the top layer. There’s an outline of a body under the pile. I’m not crazy about looking at a dead body, but I’ve gone this far. I remove a blood soaked rug. The dead woman’s eyes are open, staring blankly at me. I remember Diane, dying in my arms.

“I’m sorry,” I say to the dead woman lying there, “I promise he won’t get away with it.”

My doubts about invading people’s privacy are gone; this is my reason for doing it. People have to be held responsible for their actions. I don’t know how long I stood there, staring into those eyes, thinking about Diane, when I suddenly realize Roger’s yelling into the phone.

“What are you doing?” he says. “Can you hear me? He’s coming! Get up here, quick!”

Running to the stairs, I tell Roger, “Try to stall him. Go to the door and keep him from coming into the living room.”

“Stall him how? He’s already coming in the door.”

“I don’t know, use your imagination, tell him you’re thirsty or something. You’ve got to give me time to sneak back into the room.”

I make it up the basement stairs before Jackson sees me. “What’s going on?” he says, “What are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for Roger ... Oh, there you are,” I say to Roger standing behind him. “Come on, we’re done here, we should get going.”

Jackson looks at us for a moment and then pulls out a gun, hidden in his waistband. “You’re not going anywhere. Get back down into the basement, both of you—now!”

I’m trying to think of a way out of this when suddenly his gun goes off. A bullet crashes through the window and Jackson falls to the floor. Melanie’s standing behind him holding a tire iron, a big smile on her face.

“Wow,” she says, “That was exciting. I’ve always wanted to do that. You guys really know how to have fun.”

While we're tying Jackson up, I say, "We need to plan our story to tell the cops. We can't let them know how we found out about the murder. I'll tell them we were here working on his computer and I went into the basement to check his internet cable and found the body."

"You can tell them whatever you want," Melanie says. "I'm getting the hell out of here before they arrive. I've got a few skeletons in my closet I haven't told you about."

"That makes it a little difficult," I say. "How are we going to explain him getting hit over the head with a tire iron?"

"I don't know," Melanie says, while heading out the door, "but any story you come up with will be a lot easier for the cops to believe if they don't find me here. I'll meet you back at the shop. This was great; I can't wait to see what else is going on."

7. Finding Spiderman

We've nicknamed the killer Spiderman and have been working on a facial recognition program to find him. The program searches all the computers on our network, looking for the spider tattoo on his face. We know it's working because it's notified us several times. The only problem is that it registers any type of irregularity on a person's face. Most of our hits have been teenagers with bad cases of acne.

"Hey, we've got a hit on someone right in our neighborhood," Roger says while browsing our network stats.

Many of the computers in our network aren't nearby; some are even in different countries. We monitor only the ones that are within a one hundred mile radius and ignore the others.

"Let's bring it up and take a look," I say, expecting to see another teenager surfing the web. I'm shocked—Diane's murderer is staring at me. The memory of her lying on the floor, bleeding to death, comes rushing back to me.

"Mr. Gotweb," Roger says, "Are you okay?"

"It's him," I'm finally able to say, "That's the son-of-a-bitch that killed Diane."

Roger quickly checks the location of the computer.

"2107 Trail Run, that's only a few miles away. What should we do?"

I jump out of my chair and grab the gun I keep in my desk drawer.

Roger says, "Wait, shouldn't we call the police? I'll tell them I live at 2109, and someone has broken into the house next door."

"I don't care what you do," I say as I'm headed out of the shop, "But I'm going to catch this guy."

I key the address into my car's GPS; it's only five minutes away. I can't believe Diane's murderer is so close. I'm hardly aware of the traffic around me; it's amazing I don't have a wreck. I park a few houses away to get a look at the place. As I walk up to the small ranch style house, I notice the front door is open.

"Hello," I call inside, "Is anyone home?"

Entering the house, I find the room where I'd seen Spiderman on the computer. He's gone, I must have just missed him, but the computer is still there. I leave the house so I won't be there when the police arrive. I'm disappointed—I was so close, but now I'm even more determined to find him.

Driving back to the shop, I think about the killer breaking into the home and using the computer, just like the last time he was spotted. What was he doing?

I call Roger to talk to him about it.

"What happened?" he asks when he answers the phone.

"He wasn't there, but can you check to see what he was doing on the computer?"

"I've been thinking about that, too," he replies. "I've checked the logs. He was on the bank account of the home's owner. It looks like he was stealing money and transferring it to another account."

"So that's why he's breaking into homes." That gives me an idea. "See what you can find out about his account. I'll be there in a few minutes."

When I get back to the store, Roger has some news for me.

“He was transferring money to an off-shore account. They’re used to hide money from the government. If they’re set up right, they’re untraceable. Evidently, Spiderman isn’t very smart, he didn’t hide his trail very well.

I ask Roger, “Is there a way to monitor his account to see when he transfers money to it? If the computer he’s using to transfer the money is on our network, we’d know where he is.”

“We could do it, but it might take a while,” he says. “But you have to know the odds are against us finding him again.

“I know,” I say, “All we can do is try. We might get lucky.”

Over the next few weeks, we watch as Spiderman transfers money into his overseas account.

“Man,” Roger says, “He’s averaging about twelve homes a day. Each time he transfers anywhere from \$300 to \$1500. He’s making around ten thousand dollars a day.”

He was in and out of each house in a matter of minutes. Most of his victims probably never even know they were robbed. It’s frustrating to watch and I’m tempted to call the police, but I want to get him for killing Diane, not for theft.

Finally, we get lucky; he’s using a computer on our network.

“There you are,” I say to his face on my monitor, “I’ve found you and you’re not getting away this time.”

Our plan is to get there before he leaves and follow him. We know he won’t be there for long, so we have to hurry. I call Melanie as I head out the door.

“We’ve got him—he’s on the east side near Highway 24, on Radiant Drive. I’m hoping he’ll work that area for a while.”

“Okay,” she says, “I’ll meet you there.”

We know that once Spiderman starts working, he usually break into several homes in the same neighborhood. I’m still a few minutes from his location when Roger calls.

“He’s starting the transaction, are you almost there?”

“You’ve got to give me more time. Can you use the Fainting Goat?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. He’d probably give up and head on to the next place. I’ll try to slow his computer down without making him get too frustrated and leave.”

“I’ll stay on the line, tell me what’s going on.”

Roger begins opening programs on the computer Spiderman’s using, running them in the background.

I’m only two blocks from the house when he says, “It didn’t work. He’s done. He’s already left the house. Do you see him?”

“I’m not there yet,” I tell Roger. “Wait ... There’s a cable van slowly driving down the street, maybe that’s him.”

“It would make sense,” Roger says. “No one would be suspicious of a cable guy working in the neighborhood.”

“I’m going to follow him. Call Melanie and tell her what’s going on. Tell her to park nearby, I’ll call her when I’m ready.”

The cable van drives a few blocks and stops. I drive past him slowly, trying to get a look at him without being too obvious. He’s sitting in the van looking at a clipboard, so I can’t see his face. I park around the corner and walk back towards the house. He’s standing at the back of his van with the door open, and when I get close he shuts it and turns around. I see his face—it’s him. It takes every ounce of self-control I have to stop from grabbing him by the throat. Trying to appear calm, I say good morning and keep walking. I want to turn around to make sure he’s not driving away, but I know he’s watching me, so I walk to the end of the block and turn left. I

wait a few moments, take a deep breath, and peek around the corner. The van is still there. I see him as he goes around the back of a house.

I quickly call Melanie. "I'm at the corner of Elm and Radiant. Come pick me up."

The first thing Melanie asks when I get in the car is, "Are you sure it's him?"

"Yep, it's him. Drive down this street. He's pretending to be a cable man, that's his van. He went into the blue house a few minutes ago. If things go as usual, he should be leaving soon."

Spiderman spends the next two hours breaking into houses in the neighborhood. We follow him as he finally leaves the area. He drives to a part of town that used to be the business district and parks the van inside an old warehouse. We see a light come on in a room on the second floor and suspect we've found where he lives.

As I'm getting out of the car, I tell Melanie, "OK, I'm going in. Wish me luck."

The look of concern on Melanie's face surprises me. She's never given me any reason to think she sees me as anything more than a co-worker. She's serious when she says, "Are you sure you want to do this? What if the plan doesn't work? Maybe we should call the police and let them handle it."

"I know it's dangerous, but I have to do this. If we call the police, you know what'll happen. He might get charged with attempted murder, if his last victim can identify him, but he could get away with only theft. I'm not willing to take that chance. Everything will be fine. Just stick to the plan, and try not to worry."

I walk around the building looking for a way in. It figures that a thief would be paranoid about someone breaking in. On the back of the building, I notice a broken window. After breaking out some of the glass, I'm able to reach inside and unlock it. I slowly open it and climb in, trying to be as quiet as possible.

The inside of the old warehouse is dark, with barely enough light to see by. After stumbling around for a while, I find the van and quickly attach the small magnetic tracker I brought with me. If something goes wrong, at the very least he'll be easy to find. I find my way to a door that leads outside and unlock it. Suddenly I'm grabbed from behind and feel a knife pressed against my back.

"What're you doing in here?" a voice behind me says, "Who are you?"

"I'm looking for somewhere to spend the night. I thought this place was empty. I'm sorry, I was just leaving."

"You're not leaving," he says. "Upstairs—now."

At the top of the stairs, we enter his living area. It doesn't look like anyone lives here. There's very little furniture and empty pizza boxes are scattered everywhere. "Sit down," he says, while shoving me towards the only chair in the room.

While he ties me to the chair, I can't help but stare at him.

"Wait a minute," he says, "didn't I see you walking down the street today?"

"No," I say, "that's impossible. I just got in town an hour ago."

"Bullshit. I don't know why you're following me, but you better start talking or you're not leaving this building alive."

He places the knife against my throat; the sharp blade slices into my skin. I feel warm blood starting to trickle down my neck.

"Why are you following me?" he says.

Trying to remain calm, I say, "I'm not following you. You have to believe me—I didn't know anyone lived here."

“Well, if that’s true, then I guess you’re just unlucky, because you’ve picked the wrong place to break into,” he says, while pressing the knife harder into my neck.

“Wait,” I yell, “You killed my wife! At least tell me why before you kill me.”

He takes a step back and says, “So, you are following me. I killed your wife? You’ll have to give me a little more to go on, I’ve killed a few women.”

The smirk on his face infuriates me. “You son-of-a-bitch, you killed Diane for a damn laptop!”

“Oh, the computer store bitch. Yeah, I remember her. Was that your wife? She was hot. It’s too bad I didn’t have more time with her before I killed her. It was her own fault. All she had to do was give me the laptop. I was just getting my business started back then and I didn’t have the money to buy one. But she had to be a hero and tried to stop me, so I stabbed her.”

Smiling at Diane’s killer, I say, “Thanks, that’s all I needed to hear.”

“Drop the knife, and get on the floor,” Melanie says as she rushes into the room. “Go ahead, scumbag, give me a reason to shoot.”

Seeing the anger on Melanie’s face and the gun pointed at him, Spiderman drops his knife and quickly falls to the floor.

Melanie rushes over and ties his hands behind his back. As she starts untying me, she says, “You really cut it close, but your plan worked. Roger’s downstairs and the police are on their way.”

After I’m untied, I take my cell phone out of my pocket and say to him, “I’ve recorded your confession, but that’s not enough for me.” I tell Melanie, “Give me the gun. You should get out of here before the police arrive. I don’t want any witnesses to this.”

“Jim, listen to me,” Melanie says as I stand over my wife’s killer with the gun pointed at him. “You don’t want to do this. We have his confession. He’ll get what’s coming to him.”

“Turn over,” I say while kicking him, “I want you to see my face when I kill you.”

Refusing to turn over, Spiderman begins to cry, begging for his life, “Don’t kill me, please. I’m sorry. Please don’t shoot.”

Melanie smiles and says, “Satisfied?”

I wasn’t going to shoot him—I just wanted to scare him. I smile back at her and say, “For now, but it sure is tempting.”

“I know,” she says, “he deserves to die. But you’re better than that. Let him have his day in court.”

We plan to tell the police we saw the killer driving down the street and followed him here, then I broke in to let him catch me so I could get him to confess to killing Diane. There’ll be a lot of questions, but we’ve got our stories straight. We aren’t going to tell them anything about our network. It’ll be hard for Melanie, but she’s decided it’s time to deal with her past. She hasn’t told me what she’s done, but she promised me she’d be able to straighten things out. She and Roger are standing with me as the paramedics work on my neck. Melanie is smiling and holding my hand.

“We’re going to be fine,” I tell them, “We’ll meet back at the store after the police are done questioning us.”

“It’ll probably take a while before they’re done with me,” Melanie says. “But, I’ll eventually meet you boys there. I wouldn’t want to miss out on all the fun.”

The Tourist Attraction

“Get the hell out of here, you damn tourists, and leave me alone.”

I’m sick of it. Every day there’s a group of them tourists, standing by my fence watching us, pointing and whispering. I don’t know what started it, but I’ll be damned if I’m gonna put up with it much longer. We’ve become some kind of tourist attraction or somethin’. They park the bus over at the Wal-Marts and then walk to my house to stare at us. I refuse to let them force me to stay inside, dammit! I’m gonna sit out here on the porch in my rocker jest like I been doin’ for as long as I can ’member.

It wasn’t always like this; we used to have two boys. I can still see them boys playin’ in the front yard, chasin’ each other ’round. Me and the wife would sit here and watch them for hours, rockin’ and talkin’ ’bout how much energy they had. They’s always doin’ somethin’; if they weren’t movin’ then they was sleepin’. Hell, sometimes when I looked in on ’em at night, lying there in their beds, they’d be kickin’ their legs in their sleep, runnin’ in their dreams I s’pose. I surely do miss them boys. How long have they been gone? I don’t ’member.

Paula’d ’member. She could recall things from the past a normal person wouldn’t even have noticed, much less ’member. She could tell you the time, day, and year that we planted that tree in the front yard. Sometimes it was kinda spooky. I could always count on her to tell me anything I forgot about the past.

“Paula, what was the name of that fella that told us ’bout this house being for sale when we was jest married?”

She got that funny look on her face and I knew she was ’bout to spout out everythin’ that happened on that day, pert near thirty year ago, with that look in her eyes that I first seen on one of them robots at the state fair, over there in Des Moines.

“It was Harlan Monroe,” she said, “on January thirteenth, at five thirty-six, right before dinner. You were just getting home from work and had put your lunch box on the counter. You was telling me how old Mr. Hayworth was gonna give you a raise, now that you’re married and the adoption was final. Then there was a knock on the door. You said, ‘I wonder who’s comin’ round near supper time,’ and went and let Harlan in. ‘Wilbur,’ Harlan said, ‘there’s a house for sale out on the edge of town that you should go look at.’ You told him, ‘We can’t afford no house now, what with a couple a kids on the way,’ and he said, ‘You can’t afford to miss out on this house. It’d be perfect to raise a family.’ Do you want me to keep going?” Paula asked with her look that told me she could keep on going forever, telling me everything that ever happened right up to this moment.

“No, Paula, that’s fine.” Dagnabbit, there’s another busload of them tourists. Look at ’em, walkin’ up to the fence like they had every right in the world to stand there and stare at us. It’s like we don’t have any reason to complain ’bout being stared at. Damn tourists!

I knew that if I asked Paula, she’d tell me how long these tourists been comin’ round, but somethin’ told me that I didn’t want to ’member what started it. I surely do miss them boys; we didn’t have these damn tourists when they were here. Paula didn’t seem to mind being stared at. She never said anything at all ’bout them parading up to the fence every hour on the hour.

“Paula,” I said, knowin’ that I would regret it, but I couldn’t help myself, “when did we become part of this damn tour from hell?”

“What do you mean, Wilbur?” she asked, in that innocent way she had ’bout her.

“All these damn tourists marching up to our house to stare at us, when did it start?”

“Wilbur, you know I’m not supposed to talk about that. You made me promise not to remind you what happened that day. You don’t want me to break my promise do you?”

Deep in the back of my mind, buried in layers of pain and heartache, I ’member a gory scene. There was blood everywhere; small body parts scattered all over the yard. A truck is sittin’ out front with a sign on the side that says, ‘Roy’s Robot Repair.’ There’s two men takin’ Paula into the truck for some minor repairs. She’s got blood all over her.

I look at Paula sitting next to me with that look she gets on her face, and I knew she had every grisly detail of it in her head, ready to spit it out like the machine she is. “No,” I say, “I wouldn’t want you to break your promise.”

A Novel Murder

“I’m going to kill her today,” he said, “I’ve had her tied up in the basement for three days; it’s time to end it.”

I couldn’t believe the man sitting behind me was talking on the phone so casually about murder.

“No, I haven’t decided how yet, I’m going to do that now.”

When he got up to exit the bus, I decided to follow him. Maybe I could find a way to stop his horrible plan. I studied him carefully so I’d be able to give the police an accurate description. He appeared to be in his mid-fifties, grey hair, casually dressed in jeans and a blue sweatshirt, nothing extraordinary about him at all.

He walked into a pawnshop and I stood outside, looking through the window. As I watched, the clerk took a large machete out of the display case and handed it to him. Watching him swing the deadly weapon through the air, I could just imagine the poor woman in the basement having her head chopped off! He handed the machete back, apparently unsatisfied, and continued looking around the shop. He methodically checked an assortment of items: an ax, a sledgehammer, and a large pry bar, swinging them through the air, seemingly testing their weight. Next, he stood in front of a cabinet filled with knives and had the clerk hand him several of them. I watched in horror as he jabbed and sliced the invisible victim in front of him.

As I watched the scene inside the store, I thought about my options. I knew I would need more proof before the police would be able to help, but I decided to call them anyway.

“Siri, call the police,” I said nervously, as I watched the man who was now looking at guns.

“Calling police,” she responded. I detected a note of concern in her voice and probably shouldn’t have been surprised when she asked, “Is everything all right, Stud?”

“Yes, Siri, I’m fine.” The advances they were making with the voice recognition program were amazing.

“Twenty-third precinct,” said the bored voice of the desk sergeant.

“Yes, I would like to report a potential murder,” I said, and realizing how that sounded, I added, “I mean, you know, it’s going to happen.”

“I don’t understand,” the sergeant replied, seemingly less bored, “Are you planning on killing someone?”

“No, there’s a man in the pawn shop, testing weapons. I heard him talking on the phone. He has someone tied up in his basement, and he’s going to kill her.”

“Oh, I see, and what is the address of this future murder scene?” he asked, obviously amused by my call.

“I don’t know the address yet,” I said sarcastically. “I’ll do your job for you and keep following him.”

“Sir, I don’t recommend that you follow—” I heard him say before I quickly disconnected the call.

The man was leaving the pawnshop and I was relieved to see that he hadn’t purchased anything. I tried to appear focused on the display in the window, but I needn’t have bothered. He

was apparently deep in thought and didn't notice me as he walked by. I continued following him, and I could hear bits and pieces of his one-sided conversation as he talked to himself.

"Her screams are muffled by the gag ... The terror in her eyes is sexually arousing ... I'm covered in her blood ..."

What kind of monster was this? I became more determined to stop this madness and help the poor woman gagged and tied in his basement. After walking several blocks, he arrived at his destination. I watched as he entered a small, nondescript house. Noting the address, I again called the police.

"Siri, call the police."

"Again? Stud, you're really starting to worry me," my overprotective companion replied.

"Twenty-third precinct," said the familiar voice.

"I've got an address now," I said quickly, "2210 Elm, send someone right away."

"Oh, it's you again. Sir, we need more evidence that a crime is being committed than just hearing a phone conversation. I recommend that you stop following this man and come down to the precinct and file a report."

"File a report?" I screamed into the phone. "Don't you understand? A woman is about to be murdered!"

"Sir, don't hang up—"

"Damn police, never one around when you need them," I muttered, placing the phone in my pocket.

I made my way to the back of the house and looked through a window into the kitchen. I caught a glimpse of the killer as he headed down the basement stairs. I had to act quickly; he could be preparing to kill her at this very moment. I went to the back door, found it unlocked, and without any hesitation I entered the killer's home. Grabbing a large knife sitting on the counter, I made my way to the basement door.

I stood there a moment at the top of the stairs and listened. I couldn't hear anything, so I slowly made my way down the wooden basement stairs as quietly as possible. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I looked around the nicely finished basement. I heard an evil laugh, coming from behind a closed door at the far end of the room.

Standing near the door, I heard the killer say, "It's time for you to get what you deserve, you no good, cheating—"

Imagining the scene of a woman bound and gagged, about to be brutally murdered, I burst through the door, brandishing the knife and yelled, "Not if I can help it!"

To say the man was surprised would be an understatement. He literally fell to the floor screaming. I stood there dumbfounded as he got up from behind the desk where he had been sitting, working on his novel.

The Doctor's Pet Fly

"Mrs. Gaylon, I'm afraid that I have some bad news for you."

Does he know that there's a fly on his glasses? It's just sitting there, even when he moves his head around.

"The cancer has spread into the lymph nodes."

Maybe it's his pet. Why couldn't you train a fly to sit on your glasses? I remember seeing trained fleas in a circus when I was a little girl. I wanted to have my own circus and tried to find some fleas to train, then I found out the truth. The 'trainers' would make a harness out of a thin gold wire and wrap it around the necks of the fleas and then attach them to props. The fleas used their strong legs to try and escape, moving the objects around.

"We need to be aggressive and stop it from spreading."

Most fleas only live a few months. After spending their lives tied in a harness moving a cart around or kicking a ball, they die. I wonder if they got any satisfaction out of 'performing,' or would have preferred to live an ordinary life.

"It's possible that with chemotherapy, we could slow the progression of the cancer."

A fly only lives for about a month. It seems like a waste of time to train a fly and then have it die after only a month. Maybe he's found a way to keep them alive longer. He is a doctor, after all. Now it's on top of his bald head. That proves that it's his pet; he has to feel it walking around up there.

"Worst case scenario, if you choose not to do anything, you'll only have a few months to live."

There are probably worse ways to waste your time. Like spending thirteen years in a bad marriage, telling yourself that it's for the kids, or that things will eventually get better. But it's really because you don't deserve to be happy.

"I recommend that you take some time to think about it, talk to your husband, and then call the office and set up an appointment. We should begin the treatment as soon as possible. Do you have any questions for me?"

What other tricks can your pet fly do? Have you always had pet flies, or is this your first one? Have you ever tried training fleas? Will you be sad when it dies?

"I know that this is a lot to deal with, I want you to stay positive, there are support groups that will help you get through this."

It flew away when he stood up. Maybe it's not his pet. I need to get going; I've got a lot of things to do before the kids get out of school. Did I grab the grocery list off of the counter? Oh, there it is. Okay, I've got my keys, now where did I park? Did I drive the van here or the car? That's right, Roger needed the van to pick up some plywood after work. I should call Susan and see if she will go to lunch with me today. We haven't talked in a while; I need to see how her new job is going. I've wanted to try that new restaurant that opened last week. I've got so much to do. There's never enough time.

The Show

“Hurry up, Rita, or we’ll miss the show.”

Sammy was so excited this morning that he’d woken up at sunrise and was in his sister’s room trying to get her up. They had a long walk into town and he wanted to get an early start.

“Sammy, the show isn’t until noon, we have all morning to get there,” Rita said as she pulled the covers over her head.

“But there’ll be a lot to see before the show starts. C’mon, everyone’s going to be there. I bet Ted will get there early.”

That woke her up. She’d been trying to get Ted’s attention since they started seventh grade.

“Well,” she said while getting out of bed, “I don’t care whether he’s there or not, but I guess it won’t hurt to get there a little early.”

Sammy might have been two years younger than his thirteen-year-old sister, but he knew how to get her to do what he wanted. Their father had told them last night that he would have to leave before sunrise to work on the show, so they would have to walk into town. Their father was a carpenter, and a fair amount of work was required for the show to be ready on time.

After a quick breakfast, the kids headed out the door and began their two-hour walk into town. It was going to be an amazing day. As they walked down the country lane, they could see other families starting their day. Soon, other children joined them. They were too excited to wait for their parents and were told to walk into town but to stay out of the way.

“My mother said that there hasn’t been a show in town since she was my age,” said a girl about ten. “She said she still remembers every detail about that day.”

Rita looked around at the fields and watched the corn as it gently swayed in the breeze, wanting to remember everything so that someday she would be able to tell her children. She watched as her brother stopped to pick up rocks to throw at the crows sitting along the tops of the fences and listened to the excited chatter of the group of kids as they walked into town.

“My father said that they’ll let us kids get right in front, so that we’re sure to see everything,” Sammy said as he just missed hitting a crow.

When they finally arrived in town, they were met with a carnival-like atmosphere. Children were running around chasing each other while their parents stood in groups, talking to neighbors they hadn’t seen in weeks. Rita spotted Ted with a group of boys watching her father and the other men as they finished building the stage. She walked over near the group of boys and said hi to her father, who smiled and waved back.

“Hi, Rita,” Ted said as the other boys poked him and snickered.

“Oh, hi, Ted. I didn’t see you standing there.”

“Are you excited about the show?” he asked as he walked over and stood next to her.

Excited about what show? she thought, as the excitement of having him stand so near made her dizzy. “Sure,” she said, regaining her composure, “It should be a lot of fun.”

Rita and Ted ended up spending the rest of the morning together, talking and walking around watching the ‘kids’ play. The day seemed magical to her; she didn’t want it to end.

Eventually it was time for the show to start, and as they found their way to the front of the stage, Rita was delighted when Ted held her hand. She looked around at the crowd of smiling, excited faces, concentrating on every detail to commit it to memory; she didn’t want to forget

any of it. She shouldn't have worried; when she looked into the eyes of the man before they placed the hood over his head, and then put the rope around his neck, she would remember this for the rest of her life.

Carl and Tabitha

Carl hated his boss. Everything about him drove Carl crazy. Carl had just graduated from high school, and this was his first full-time job. He tried hard to be a good employee, but Mr. Harris was impossible to please and seemed to take every opportunity to make sure that Carl knew he was lucky to have a job. He seemed to make an example of Carl, complaining about the quality of his work and even making fun of Carl's occasional stuttering, which always got worse when Mr. Harris was around.

Carl was determined to find a way to get even with Mr. Harris. The thought was the only thing that kept him going; it was on his mind day and night. He didn't know much about Mr. Harris's private life, except he was married and had a daughter about Carl's age—he couldn't imagine how miserable her life must be. He would have to find out more about her.

Tabitha hated her stepfather. Everything about him drove Tabitha crazy. Tabitha had just graduated from high school and was trying to find a full-time job. She tried hard to be a good daughter, but he was impossible to please and seemed to take every opportunity to make sure that Tabitha knew she was lucky to have a house to live in. He was always telling Tabitha that she was just like her mother and would never amount to anything. He even made fun of her occasional stuttering, which always got worse when he was around.

Tabitha was determined to find a way to get even with her stepfather. The thought was the only thing that kept her going; it was on her mind day and night. She didn't know much about her stepfather's work life, except that he owned a small printing business nearby and had an employee about her age—she couldn't imagine how miserable his life must be. She would have to find out more about him.

Carl was spending his time after work at a small cafe near Mr. Harris's home where he hoped to meet the daughter and start a relationship with her. He could just imagine the look on Mr. Harris's face when she would bring him home and introduce him as her new boyfriend. Of course, Carl would act surprised to find out that her father was his boss, but he would get a lot of satisfaction out of Mr. Harris's reaction.

Tabitha was spending her time after school at a small cafe near her stepfather's business where she hoped to meet his employee and start a relationship with him. She could just imagine the look on her stepfather's face when she would bring him home and introduce him as her new boyfriend. Of course, Tabitha would act surprised to find out that her stepfather was his boss, but she would get a lot of satisfaction out of her stepfather's reaction.

Carl looked around the cafe and wondered if Mr. Harris's daughter could be sitting here right now. It was possible since it was so close to her home. He noticed a girl nearby, also looking around the room. He wondered if that was her. *Wouldn't that be quite a coincidence?* he thought.

Tabitha looked around the cafe and wondered if her stepfather's employee was sitting here now. It was possible, since it was so close to his work. She noticed a boy nearby, also looking around the room. She wondered if that was him. *Wouldn't that be quite a coincidence?* she thought.

Carl decided to go over and introduce himself, knowing it was a long shot, but you never know, stranger things have happened. She was about his age and very pretty. Even if she weren't Mr. Harris's daughter, it would be nice to have a new friend.

Tabitha was pleased to see that he was getting up from his table. *I hope he's coming over here*, she thought, *this could be interesting*. It could be him, stranger things have happened. He was about her age and cute. Even if he wasn't her stepfather's employee, it would be nice to have a new friend.

After introducing himself and asking if she would like some company, Carl sat down, wondering how to find out if this was Mr. Harris's daughter, without letting on that he worked for him. He started out with small talk and found that she lived nearby and had just graduated. They talked for a while and, agreeing to get together again, exchanged email addresses. Carl didn't ask for her last name, he was confident this was Mr. Harris's daughter. His plan was starting to fall together. He was elated as he left the cafe.

Tabitha watched as the boy walked out of the restaurant. *I wonder if he's my stepfather's employee*, she thought. Oh, well, she'd probably never know. But he sure seemed happy after talking to the girl at the table behind her.

Tag, You're It!

Walking in the yard behind my house, I saw something glowing; it was green and about the size of a baseball. It looked as if it was made of glass, but when I tried to touch it, it wasn't there. My eyes told me that I had my hand around it, but I couldn't feel it. I carefully rolled the object onto my open palm and lifted it up to get a better look. Bringing it closer, I heard a noise that sounded like the beating of hummingbird's wings. As I gazed into the glowing orb, it became clear, and I could see inside.

At first, I could only make out colors and shapes, but I was slowly able to see mountains covered with a thick, bright white substance that at first looked like snow. As my eyes focused, I could see that it was millions of pulsing organisms. Each of these plant-like creatures appeared to be an exact duplicate, but on closer inspection, I could see that they had distinct differences. Whereas one would have a short, slender protrusion that opened and closed repeatedly, the next would appear to have a rounded hole that was flat and remained open.

I felt like I was in a dream. I closed my eyes and shook my head. When I opened my eyes and looked around, I was standing on the mountain, surrounded by the white creatures. Shocked, I dropped the orb and I was back in my yard. I ran into my house and stood at the window, shaking and gasping for air, looking at the object still glowing in the grass.

"What in the hell was that?" I said aloud, "I must be losing my mind." I went to the refrigerator and grabbed a beer. I sat in a chair and stared out the window.

"Okay, just calm down and think; it had to be my imagination." Even while I was saying it, I could recall the smell of the place; it was a strange mixture of sulfur and cherries. "You can't make that up, nothing smells like that."

I knew that I would go back to pick up the orb again, but first I had to think. I began pacing the room, trying to gather my thoughts. The object fell from space and is able to transport anyone that holds it to another planet. "That's insane!" I tried to think of another explanation. It's a crystal ball that puts a spell on anyone who holds it and makes you see into another world. "Oh, that makes more sense," I said to myself sarcastically. There wasn't any way to make sense out of what happened, so I decided to go back outside to have another look.

Stepping out into the cool spring morning, I looked around and had the feeling of seeing things for the first time. I saw the gentle swaying of the trees as they danced in the breeze and heard the chirping of the birds as they called out to each other, expressing their joy of the arrival of spring. Maybe I shouldn't mess with something that I didn't understand. What if I left this world and couldn't come back? But when I knelt by the glowing orb and heard its gentle hum, I felt drawn to it and without any hesitation, carefully scooped it up and sat in the grass, gazing into it.

I was standing on the mountain again, and I somehow knew that the creatures were called Prantholimins. The smell of sulfur and cherries was their scent. As I slowly moved through the field, they made a chattering sound, and they parted to allow me to pass. Looking up, I saw a large bird circling above me, seeming to watch me as I moved through the field. The bird was easily twice my size and was getting closer with each pass. As I watched in awe that something so big was able to move so effortlessly through the air, it landed near me. My first instinct was to run but instead I stood perfectly still as the large creature walked slowly towards me. As it

approached, I was utterly amazed to see that with each step its features were transforming. In the time it took to reach me, it had turned from what was once a bird, into a man. No, not a man—it had turned into me!

It was standing about three feet in front of me, just staring, not making a sound. Finally, unable to stand the silence any longer, I said, “Who are you?”

“Who are you?” it repeated, with what was probably my exact voice.

“Where am I?” I tried again, noticing that it was now copying the movements I made. Turning its head when I did, gesturing with its hands, as I opened and closed mine nervously.

“Where am I?” it responded, mimicking me like a parrot.

This was getting frustrating! “Do you understand me, or are you just copying what I say?”

“I’m learning you. Speak more,” it jerkily replied.

“You mean you’re learning my language as I speak to you? That’s amazing! So you do understand me. Can you tell me who you are, and where this place is?”

“Who you are, where this place is?” it replied. “I are... Trabtoly. This place is... Newgti. Talk more.”

“I’m Randy, I’m from Earth, and I don’t really know how I got here. I found this green orb and when I held it, I was transported here. I don’t know if this is just a dream, or if I’m under some kind of spell and I don’t know how, or if I can get back.” I was beginning to ramble on, but I could tell by the look in Trabtoly’s eyes that with each word, its intelligence was increasing.

“Good.” Trabtoly seemed satisfied. With a familiar grin that I’d seen a million times in the mirror, he said, “Welcome Randy, I’m very pleased to meet you. Come with me, I show to you, Newgti.”

We walked to the edge of the mountain and looked across the valley at a breathtaking scene of red lakes and forests of blue and orange that were alive with activity. “The joy of flying above this valley cannot be expressed. Would you like to feel the wind as it flows around you, and hear the sounds of the valley as they rise up to you on a golden sphere of warm air?”

“Do you mean that you could take me flying with you? That would be amazing! I’ve always wanted to know what it felt like to fly like a bird, soaring through the air.”

“Not take you with me. I mean for you to fly, on your own, without any fear of falling, in complete control. Just let me hold the orb and say, ‘Yes, I’ll trade,’ and all of the necessary skills and ... tools, will be yours.”

Flying! What person hasn’t dreamed of it! I’d love to experience the feeling of drifting on the breeze, rising on the warm currents to dizzying heights and soaring across the colorful valley below. Without a moment’s hesitation, I handed him the orb and replied, “Yes, of course I’ll trade.”

As soon as my mouth uttered the words, it was replaced with a beak. Looking down at my body, I watched in fascination as my skin sprouted feathers. My arms were expanding into a large pair of wings, and when I opened them, I felt my body rise off the ground. What an amazing feeling. I was soaring across the valley, floating on the wind currents as easily as if I’d done it all my life.

After a while, I landed near Trabtoly to thank him for the wonderful experience.

“I’m glad you are happy,” he said. “I hope you are able to maintain that feeling for many years. I will be leaving now, thank you for releasing me. I promise to place the orb where others will see it. Maybe you won’t have to wait as long I did for it to return.”

The last thing I heard him say as he slowly disappeared was, “Tag, you’re it!”

Before They Come Back

“Excuse me, sir.”

Here it comes; I hate it when people ask me for money. I pay my taxes so there are places they can go to eat when they need help. I’ll just keep walking, ignore him, shake my head, and say, “Sorry.”

“Do you have an extra pencil I can borrow?”

Did he say pencil? Surprised, I stop to look at the man sitting on the park bench, for the first time. He’s wearing what were probably nice clothes once but which are now torn and dirty. In his hand, he’s holding a stub of a pencil, about one inch long.

“I’ve got to finish writing this,” he says while patting a pile of paper next to him on the bench. “People have to know what happened before they come back.”

He’s staring at me through a pair of thick glasses and has the look of someone on their last leg of a long journey.

I walk over to him and ask, “What do you mean, before they come back? Before who comes back?”

“Oh, they’ll be back, don’t you worry about that, it won’t be long either. What was it they said...? ‘Before your moon is big again.’ So, it won’t be long now. Do you have a pencil?”

Reaching into my shirt pocket, I pull out a pencil and hand it to him. He takes it and immediately starts writing again, seeming to forget I’m there. I walk behind the bench to read what he’s writing.

‘Running his claw-like hand along my spine while making an odd whistling noise that I surmised to be their way of communicating, I began to realize they were preparing to cut me open.’

“What in the world?” I jump back from the bench feeling as if I’d been shocked by a jolt of electricity. He’s just writing a fiction story about aliens, why am I standing here shaking as if I’ve just seen a ghost?

Turning his head to face me, I see an emptiness in his eyes of the kind that would only be seen in someone who’s been through a traumatic event. I’ve seen the same look in the eyes of soldiers returning from war. This man is either crazy or he has been through something terrible that has taken the life out of him. But there is something in his writing that rings true to me, like a long forgotten memory.

Looking into my eyes the strange man said, “You’ve seen them too, haven’t you? You know what I’m saying is true. You have to help me. Help me tell people they’re coming back, and it will be for the final time.”

“No!” I say, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re crazy. Only crazy people see aliens!”

I run away from him, running from ... the truth. Suddenly I stop, and as I look back at the man sitting on the bench, head bowed and writing furiously, I remember.

I am nine years old, lying in bed listening to the sounds of the night through the screen of an open window. The whistle of a distant train. The shifting of a motorcycle’s gears as it makes its way through the city. I’m trying to hear which sound is the farthest away. I distinctly hear an odd whistling sound, unlike anything I’ve heard before. It isn’t a tune; it’s more like a strange

birdcall, but coming from something larger than a bird. Getting out of my bed and going to the window, I see something in the shadows outside. Hiding beside the curtains as much as possible while still being able to see, I catch a glimpse of something as it walks by. It's the size of a small boy with a body shaped like a large slug. It has long arms hanging almost to the ground, and on the end of each arm was a claw.

Running back to the man I say, "I have seen them. How did you know?"

"I can see it in your eyes. Will you help me?"

How could I not help him?

That was twenty-two days ago; we think there are only five more days before their return. We have been going to all of the newspaper offices, radio stations, and have started a blog, 'TheyAreComing.com.' We don't know what else we can do. Many people have contacted us to share their stories. Some are clearly made up, but enough people have real stories that we are slowly gaining credibility. There isn't much time left; I only hope we'll be ready before they come back.

Justin's Love

Justin decided it was time for her to go. They'd been together for a long time; it wasn't going to be easy, but he knew it was the right thing to do. She used to be so dependable; now he never knew what to expect from her. Lately, there had been times when she didn't even make it home.

When he first saw Lucille, it was love at first sight. He knew that she was perfect for him. It took a lot of planning and effort, but eventually she became an important part of his life. All of his friends and co-workers were envious; she was beautiful. When Justin recalled the first time they were together, it still made him smile. It was a warm summer morning when he and Lucille went on a long drive in the country. He had planned the whole day, and all of his dreams were fulfilled. He couldn't believe how comfortable she made him feel. They spent the whole day together, and Justin was happier than he'd ever been before. He couldn't imagine getting by without her.

Things were great for the first few years, but then something seemed to go wrong. Lucille started getting needy, and Justin was tired of always having to alter his plans because of her problems. Time had taken its toll on Lucille. She wasn't able to satisfy Justin's needs, and he'd noticed that Lucille wasn't getting the looks she used to. It wasn't that Justin was shallow, but he enjoyed the attention he used to get when he was with her. There were other fish in the sea, as the saying goes, and Justin found Lucille's replacement. She was stunning, and he knew he was going to be happy again.

Today was the day he would start a new life without Lucille. He didn't say a word to her: he didn't have to; he could tell she knew it was over. He took her downtown, to the place where they first met. With tears in his eyes, he took her keys and handed them to the salesman.

Ronnie and the Smoke Bomb

When I heard the news about Ronnie Bork, I had my editor arrange for me to interview him at the St. Clair County Jail. I met Ronnie in 1969; we were in the eighth grade together. He was easily the biggest kid in school; in fact, he was bigger than most of the teachers. That was the first year kids were bused to our school, and Ronnie was glad to have some “fresh meat.” None of the new kids would fight him so he tried to pick a fight with the bus driver. I can still see him, rocking the bus full of scared kids and yelling at the driver to “come out and fight!” The driver didn’t get off the bus, and I can’t say for sure, but I bet he wasn’t the same driver who came to our school the next day.

Ronnie wasn’t very smart. I’m sure that he only made it to the eighth grade because of his age; the teachers passed him just to get him out of their classes. He was fun to watch in class. I remember one time he decided he wanted to go home so he took a key and split the bottom out of his pants. Everyone could hear the ripping sound in the quiet classroom. He raised his hand and said, “I’ve got to go home. My pants are torn.” At the time, we all thought it was a great idea, but most of our parents would’ve killed us if we came home with the ass ripped out of our jeans.

Ronnie’s dad owned a bar in the neighborhood. My dad used to work with Mr. Bork as a truck driver before he bought the bar. He told my dad that a semi-truck driving down Broadway once hit Ronnie. He got up and walked away. Knowing Ronnie, he probably walked in front of the truck on purpose.

I noticed Ronnie always smelled like paint. I never asked him why, but I figured it out years later. I hitched a ride to a concert downtown one night and Ronnie was in the back seat of the car. He didn’t recognize me and I didn’t say anything to him. He was preoccupied. I’d heard about ‘huffing,’ but I’d never seen anyone do it before. He had a small paper bag with a rag in it that was soaked with toluol, a solvent. He had the opening of the bag pressed to his face and was breathing the fumes. He must have been inhaling that stuff since grade school. That sure would explain why he seemed so dumb; most of his brain cells were fried!

When I met Ronnie in the jail’s interview room, I wasn’t sure if he would remember me, so I introduced myself to him.

“Oh yeah,” he said, “I remember you. We used to fight all the time. C’mon, let’s fight, like the good ole days.”

He got up from the table. Unable to raise his chained hands, he sat back down.

“No, Ronnie,” I said, “you’re thinking of someone else. We never fought, we were friends, remember?”

“Right, you were one of the smart kids.”

No one had ever considered me one of the smart kids in school, but I figured to Ronnie, we all seemed smart.

“What happened to you?” I asked. “Why are you in jail?”

I was aware of the reason for his arrest, but I wanted to hear his side of it.

“I got mixed up with some bad people,” he said.

I always thought of Ronnie as one of those bad people. I couldn’t imagine what this crowd must be like.

“They paid me to do odd jobs for ’em, like beatin’ up people that owed ’em money. I never really hurt no one real bad, just enough to scare ’em. Then there was this guy they wanted to teach a lesson. He was a big shot in the government, like a mayor or somethin’. Well, I guess he was causing a lot of trouble for ’em by movin’ in on their business. They said that beatin’ this guy up wouldn’t work, ’cause he had a couple of bodyguards. Hey, is this gonna be in the paper?”

“It probably will, Ronnie,” I said. “Is that okay with you?”

“Yeah, what the hell, I always wanted to be famous. But I’m not gonna give you any names or nothin’, ’cause these guys are crazy, you know? I’m not worried ’bout goin’ to prison. They told me I’d be treated good since I worked for ’em. Do you ’member that time that you and me and Larry Gilbret broke into school? What the hell were we thinkin’, all we got was a bunch of pencils and staplers and shit. Man, that’s funny. You ever see Gilbret or Donnie anymore?”

I tried to tell him that he had me mistaken with someone else, but he just sat there staring at the wall with a blank look on his face.

“Ronnie,” I said, “what did they want you to do to the big shot?”

I watched him as he struggled to come back from wherever he was and eventually he looked at me and continued.

“He rode around in the backseat of a big limo like he was a king or somethin’. Can you imagine livin’ like that? Someone drivin’ you around, doin’ whatever you told ’em to? Anyway, they gave me a little box, said it was a smoke bomb. Told me to tape it to the bottom of his car. They said that when it went off, it would scare the shit out of him. It would be a warning to quit messin’ with ’em. I thought it was kinda funny, you know? I don’t know how they did it, but they had a way of controllin’ when the thing would go off. I stood behind a tree and watched him get in the car. I was laughing when they drove off, thinkin’ how funny it was gonna be. Then the car exploded. I mean, it just blew up! You know, like in the movies? I was only a few yards away and stuff went flying everywhere. I ran over to the car, but I couldn’t even get close to it. It was on fire. It didn’t matter, though, there’s no way anybody lived through that. I don’t ’member what happened after that. Sometimes I lose track of time.”

I didn’t tell Ronnie the police had found him sitting on the curb near the car, crying. They said he was mumbling, “It’s only a smoke bomb.”

Ronnie never went to trial; he pleaded guilty and will spend the rest of his life in prison. He never gave up the names of the people he was working for, even though he would’ve gotten a lighter sentence. I’ve gone to see him a few times. He’s seems to be getting along fine. He still has me confused with someone else and always wants to talk about the fun times we had growing up together. I go along with it; it seems to make him happy.

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[About the Author](#)

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Thanks,
Jim Liston