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January 1994
Friday 9.55 p.m.

THE MOMENT THAT JACK BRISCOE became impotent was also the very moment that images began to haunt him. His life would never be the same again.

It began with a casual encounter (not in itself unusual for Briscoe): a woman pupil from his Monday evening's woodworking class. Not his usual choice, but this one had been giving him signs since the beginning of term: watching him (rather too closely), asking a lot of irrelevant questions, constantly needing hands-on assistance (hands-on being the operative term). She'd pointedly told him that she was living alone and needed to learn some practical skills. In his not inconsiderable experience, she promised to be bossy and controlling, and when she'd had her fill of him he would be summarily dumped. Maybe that was just his bad luck.

So far he had chosen not to respond to any of the signs, preferring the challenge of one of the smarter, quieter women hidden away at the back of the room—the ones with whom he might have a discussion, be able to reason with, rather than those who wanted to be talked to, or those who only wanted to talk themselves. Of all the women he'd known (or "been with"), only two were memorable, and, somewhere deep down, he realised that perhaps this was for the wrong reasons.

The evening-class woman tried harder, dispensing with the subtleties; some dozy men were like that, when they couldn't believe what was on offer, or they were married. It was obvious she was lonely. But so was Briscoe; he just didn't realise it, but his way of dealing with it was like putting a sticking plaster on a crocodile bite.

One night he gave in. He always did. She bundled him into her tiny car. He didn't see the street lights saturated in the wet tarmac; only his eager anticipation. Then there was the sticking front door. The smell of damp wallpaper. Yellowed decorations. A reeking tray of cat litter. The loose stairs carpet. The bedroom door with a kicked-in panel. The bed's imposing carved headboard—he couldn't fail to notice such workmanship, even in a sexual frenzy. It had been over a week since the last woman, unusual for him. It was only lust. Shuffling, forced, unfamiliar embraces, her hair in his mouth, clashing of limbs. His hand brushed across her bare buttocks. Cold air on his naked back. At least the sheets felt clean enough. Warm hands took hold of him, guided him ... He reached out to steady himself.

That was when he began to fall, and knew instantly that he'd left his body. His stomach would have churned if he'd still been connected with it. This must be what

it was like to die—he was dying!

This is it, I'm going, I'm going ...

But how do you feel sensations when you've no body to feel them with? There was no time to think. In the next instant he seemed to slow down, then stopped. Lights came on.

Trapped, he couldn't see himself, desperate to breathe quickly, but there was no outlet, nothing he could do to vent his anguish, his terror, his feeling of being totally cast adrift from life. He needed to panic, to physically express how he felt, to scream! But he could make no sound. He told himself to calm down, *Calm down!*, try to make some sense of what was happening, take in as much information as he could, and then work out what to do next. Good advice. That's what he'd been doing for years, whenever a customer dumped the shattered remains of period antique furniture with him: eaten by the dog, slammed by the husband, dropped by the removal men. His heart rate would quicken, he would fear not being able to fix whatever it was, that was the worst part: the unknown, not knowing if he would be able to put it back together. Sometimes it was unrecognizable, fit only for the bonfire, and sensing panic, like now, he would fill his lungs, stand back and take in all the information. He'd never been beaten, he'd always worked out how to rebuild, reassemble, restore, work magic. And right now he must do the same. There was always a way out, whatever the problem. Perhaps. He hoped. But he so desperately wanted that deep breath, so vital to the functioning of his mind. He forced calm. It wasn't easy.

So where was he? This was the same room—or was it? The door was different, no longer panelled, and was now flushed with a single sheet of hardboard and painted bright blue, typical 1960s' vandalism. And the wallpaper: hideously-patterned with a multi-coloured mix of geometric shapes and swirling flowers. A reading lamp on a table: converted from a fancy bottle of plonk, the sort with a basket wrapped around the bottom. And the window looked about right, maybe, it was in the right place, roughly, so far as he could remember, but he couldn't be certain, couldn't move, needed to get his bearings, see more of where he was ... And his next thought: *when* he was. He was no longer in his own *now*; of that there was no doubt.

But what about the bed—ah, the bed was immediately in front of him, so he couldn't check to see if was the same headboard, with the carved fruits around the edges, a relic from the 1930s. Not that it mattered. Not now. Perhaps nothing did.

Briscoe knew—just knew—that he'd died, passed on, crossed over, or whatever happens when you've dropped off your twig. It could only have been a heart attack.

Shit! It was the orgasm—and I can't even remember it.

But what about someone coming for you—someone you've known, someone you've loved, or someone who's loved you? Surely there should be someone to guide you, show you what to do, where to go? Why wasn't there anyone for *him*? What had gone wrong? Ha! The so-called experts, that's what. Maybe no one came. Ever. So you live, you die, you're alone for the rest of eternity. He wanted to shiver, couldn't do that, but felt that somehow, somewhere, he could still feel a little sick, if

he really tried.

Then he realised: the truth could be that there was no one person on the other side who had ever really loved him. There was, he reasoned, if reluctantly, not one person willing to come out and get him, lead him to the next life. Yeah, that would explain it. He'd been an unloved child, and though his parents were still alive, it was apparent that none of his grandparents and aunts and uncles could be bothered to turn out for him. Unless it was all a load of rubbish: going towards the light, the loved ones collecting you, life after death. It was utter crap.

But it couldn't all be rubbish, could it?—because he *was* dead, and yet his conscious spirit was still, well, *living*. He would have sighed as he decided, with cutting-edge cynicism, on the good news: *there is life after death*. The bad news? You're alone, just as he was right now. Apart, that was, from the breathing! Someone right there, right then, was breathing.

Outside on the landing a floorboard creaked. He tried to freeze. Couldn't. A pause. Then the door scraped over the carpet. Suddenly a woman was already in the room, almost as if the picture had jumped. She'd be about 40—no, make that 30; judging by her clothes this must have been sometime in the '60s, when people looked older than they really were. Distressed, trembling, she was holding a pillow in both hands. Briscoe hadn't seen the bed's occupant; he'd been too preoccupied. And now the pillow was being pressed down on someone's face. At first there was no resistance. And as she pressed, making a hissing noise, screwing up her face in agony, there began a faint movement of a hand trapped beneath the blankets, almost as if the person were trying to make a signal. She kept mumbling how sorry she was, how much she loved this person, how she would never forget the good times ...

This went on. The longer she pressed, the longer the hand moved. Then she stopped, hurriedly backed away. The hand was still moving, accompanied by an agonised, elongated, low-pitched screeching sound. Now Briscoe saw the face: a man's, skin like white tissue paper stretched over a forbidding landscape of bone. He seemed to be pleading with her.

A girl, maybe 15, another image from the past, watched from the doorway. The woman turned to her, shocked that she'd been caught. Then her pitiful wail, yet nothing about it was vulgar; this was from the heart. She begged for forgiveness, for understanding. Briscoe didn't remember the last time he had cried, but, whatever was happening in this room, he so wanted to be free of his restriction, the unyielding coat that bound all his senses, making him want to scream, to burst out and join this woman, put his arm around her, tell her that everything was going to be okay, yes, that she was not alone. This was a stranger, and he was so helpless, so unknown, so insignificant, he wanted to give her love. And yet giving love to another person was such an alien concept for him, he realised. Such a wasted life he had led. So much time gone, opportunities ignored, with only a true appreciation for his beloved oak, the one thing which would never let you down. In that moment, for the first time, it crossed his mind that some aspect of him was missing—then the thought was gone.

The girl came in, looked at the discarded pillow, then at the flailing hand. And

she went to the bed, knelt astride the man, putting her weight against the pillow.

Another jump in time. The hand was now still. The woman cried. The girl hurried off the bed, as if it were hot coals, and in almost falling to the floor she dislodged the pillow. They turned away, hugged each other. Briscoe looked down to the face, its eyelids not quite closed, the mouth open, perfectly still. He needed to shudder, to call out, relieve the pressure, the unseen restraint on his soul. He felt fingernails digging into his shoulder.

"Wake up! Come on, hey! Wake up!"

Briscoe opened his eyes and peered through the hardened crud that abraded them like sandpaper dust. He was on his back, arms outstretched, the sheet cold and wet beneath him. A cool draught swept over his naked body. Then realization, followed by relief. The evening-class woman—was her name Wendy?—leaned over him. There was little light, but he could see enough of her unpleasant expression.

"So you're back, then." She sat up. If there was any concern in her voice it was only for herself. Was she wearing anything? For some reason he didn't feel comfortable moving his head to see.

He moistened his lips. "I need a drink."

"You can drink all you want when you get home."

As soon as he began to sit up, she quickly got off the bed.

"Don't come near me or I'll scream."

It didn't sound like she was afraid; it was just a threat. He saw that she was wearing a silk *négligée*, and didn't seem bothered that it was open at the front. She gave a single pained laugh that made him think of skin being dragged over shards of glass.

"You can ogle me all you want but you'll not get off on it."

She made a defiant show of tying the cord around her waist, then stared at him with bitterness.

"Nobody's ever done that to me before. I've never been so insulted. Shit—that's what you made me feel like. Shit! You shouldn't go out with women if you can't manage it. That's an old man's trick. They told me you were good, that you were special, you knew stuff. What I want to know is what the bloody hell's gone wrong. Why tonight? Why me?"

He sat on the edge of the bed, feeling like a small boy who'd been caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, without any clue as to how he'd disgraced himself.

"What have I done wrong?"

"You should've told me you had summat wrong with you. I thought you were dying. I bet you've had a fit—in fact I'm sure you have. I couldn't wake you up. And then when you screamed—ugh! There on my bed, loud enough to bring all t' bloody neighbours running to see what were up. I thought one on 'em might phone the police—couldn't do with them buggers round." She shivered.

"Screamed?"

"And you puked all over me pillow. Filthy bugger! First you couldn't get it up and then you messed all over me clean sheets."

He turned around, felt the froth, wished he'd just taken her word for it, didn't know where to wipe his fingers. So that's what he could feel sagging down his back.

"You were on your front. Wouldn't let go of the headboard. Couldn't get your fingers off, like they were nailed on. I'd all on getting meself out from under—"

"Headboard?"

"And you've wet the bed."

He turned to feel the sheets.

"With sweat—it were proper pouring off you. Like a pig you were."

"I'll clean it up."

"You won't! You'll get out of my house and piss off home. Such as you shouldn't be out."

Staggering, he felt his way on to the landing, found the bathroom, pulled the light cord. A low-wattage bulb seemed to cast more shadows than the darkness, but he found the sink. Typically, there was no plug on the end of the chain. His feet felt uncomfortable on the sticky, carpeted floor.

Back in the bedroom he gave the woman a quick glance. She stood in the corner by the window, arms folded, determined to put a safe distance between him and her. He began to get dressed.

"You need to get that sorted, whatever you've got up with you." She watched him struggle his feet into his trousers. He almost fell over. "I'll have to change them sheets, now. Filthy bastard!"

"I'll help."

"I'll manage! You're all the same. Just get out."

"I need a lift back to my van."

"Well don't look at me."

"Look, can't we just—"

"What do you want—us to be friends? I don't make a habit of this, you know—bringing odd men back here. I'm not like that."

Uncomfortable, he stood by the door, glancing down at where it had been kicked in. He could see the two women in his dream, watching him fail miserably in what should be the simple act of fornication.

"You've not put your socks on." she said. "Don't leave them behind. You'll not be coming back."

"I didn't have any on."

"Oh, you are so weird. What man goes round with no socks?"

"They wore out. Been meaning to get some."

When I next get paid.

In the gloom he found his way to the house door, accidentally kicking the cat litter tray. When he turned to Wendy he could see the bitchiness had gone, but not what it had been replaced with.

"Just one thing—nice house. Been here long?"

"Since me and Mom moved in with Granddad when I were ten. Why?"

He faced the emptiness of the cold, wet evening, the sizzling street lamps,

pavements stinking of urine, littered with discarded fag packets.

"You don't have to leave," she said, reaching out for his arm, but pausing. He nodded a kind of thanks to her, and set off walking.

END OF EXTRACT

Oak Seer: A supernatural mystery

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