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A Personal Apocalypse

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I was swimming underwater, following her. She was dressed in white, swimming ahead of me. She turned and looked at me. I swam more strenuously to catch up. Suddenly I realized the water was no longer clear, but red...Not water, it was blood. Hot steaming, rich, dark, red. Blood. Whose blood? Whose blood? WHOSE BLOOD!! I started to panic and my mouth opened as the blood ran into my mouth. Suddenly there was a light, bright light, blinding my eyes. I felt hands on me, under me. I was naked. I was cold. Where am I?

I woke with a scream...the phone was ringing, ringing, ringing. I remembered then that I was on call. I fumbled for the phone at the bedside, dropping it in the process.

“Yes?”

“This is Detective Richardson, from the police. Are you with social services? Are you on call tonight?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“We need you to come and get two small children. There’s been an awful accident. We have no one to look after them. You have to come as soon as you can.”

I am a social worker. A Social Worker. What a strange name for a profession. A worker who works in the social world. Am I to fix society? Or fix deviants? Am I supposed to fix anything? If not, then what am I supposed to do? Sometimes I wonder if I do any good at all. Sometimes I think these people, my clients – victims – would be better off if I was not in their lives at all.

I remember the time when I started this work. I believed that I could

really do something worthwhile. Even though I saw the despair and the hopelessness in the children's eyes, I was full of hope, with a strong sense of destiny. Things always seemed to go well. Families got better, if only for a little while, when I was involved with them. Even the setbacks were easily explained away and were not discouraging to me.

The work was exciting and gave me fulfillment. There was the drudgery of paperwork and the necessity of family court. But the direct contact with families made it worthwhile. The actions of doing crisis work at night and on weekends gave me an adrenaline rush that kept me interested and committed. But something had happened recently. I don't know exactly what it was. But I now saw the pain and bitterness more than I saw joy and love. I began to question what I was doing, and who I was. I had hoped that this new job I had started would help. But I wasn't sure anymore.

The clock said 4 am, as I dressed and got into my car. The streets were deserted, no one out. The traffic lights blinked on and off, unceasingly, silently, relentlessly. It did not matter to those lights that there was no one on the streets needing traffic control. On/Off/On/Off.

I had already called the foster home to say I might have to bring a couple of children to them. The foster mother was a quiet-spoken person. Who wouldn't be, at four in the morning? Maybe she should be, but she didn't seem upset that I was coming to their house at that time in the morning. It seemed as though she was expecting my call. Well, she was my contact, so she should be expecting me. Right?

I was not sure where any of these places were. I was new to the city. I had never been to the foster home before. I had my map and I knew the foster home was out Highway 5, about ten miles. But I was not sure I would be able to find them in the middle of the night. The place where I was to pick up the children was in an unfamiliar part of town. The so called inner city. Looked dangerous, even in the daytime, I bet.

"There is the house!" said the voice. "There!!"

It was not hard to find the place. Cop cars, ambulances, everywhere. Flashing lights. Nosy gawkers on the sidewalk. Don't these people have beds to be in?

As I walked up to the house, the taste of the blood came back, filling my mouth, my nose, my eyes. I walked in through the front door, and

stood still. I didn't know where to walk. There was blood everywhere – the walls, the ceiling, the rug, the table, the couch...You could smell the blood, its sweetness, its life as it dripped down the walls. I went around the edges of the room into the kitchen and found the police officer.

There were three adults dead, a woman and two men. They had been stabbed with a knife, a large butcher knife. One must have walked around the house after stabbing himself, so there was blood all over the house. The woman and one man were still in the bedroom. The man in the bed, the woman on the floor. Blood everywhere. The police thought that the man who had walked around and was found near the front door died of a self inflicted wound. The knife was still in his hand when the police arrived. The woman had been stabbed first by this man. Then the other man had been stabbed. Their throats were slashed, which sprayed all the blood around. The woman was apparently the mother of the children. It appeared that all three adults knew each other. The police had covered the bodies with a sheet. The ambulance attendants had tried to do something, but the adults were dead. There was nothing more they could do. They looked upset. Did they care about these people, or were they upset over their inability to do anything?

The children had been in the bedroom. It didn't seem as though they saw anything, although God knows what they heard. The police were desperate that the children get out of the house. They were in a police cruiser outside. There, sitting in the back seat of the police car, were the two children, a girl about three and a boy two years old. But tonight they looked old and tired. I spoke to the children quickly. I was told their names were Star Cloud and Feather. They were a little shocked maybe, a little shy. But the older one, the girl, Star Cloud, came into my arms easily. The other one, a boy, Feather, we had to pick up. We carried them to my car and placed them in the back seat. They were wrapped in a clean blanket. I had a couple of pillows in the back, and a couple of teddy bears. I strapped them in and got behind the wheel and drove away.

It was still dark as I drove out Highway 5. The street lights disappeared as we hit the edge of town. I couldn't see the children except by the light of the dashboard lights. The children were quiet in the back, but they were not sleeping. Eyes wide open. It was quiet. I did not speak to the children.

From the back seat, I heard this voice, was it the little girl? – but a

strangely deep voice – say, Where are we going? Do you know where we are going? Do you really know? What did you do to my mother? Let me out of the car! Now!

I looked back in alarm. I thought she was too young. The voice seemed too adult-like. But as I looked back over my shoulder, I noticed someone else then, sitting in the front passenger seat. She looked familiar, but I didn't recognize her. I must have been tired because I did not even wonder how she got there. She did not speak. She did not look at me. But she was humming softly to herself. When I looked back at the little girl, I noticed that the children had fallen asleep in the back seat. I was not lonely or tired any longer.

As I pulled into the driveway of the foster home, she left me. I didn't see her go. She was just not there. The children were awake as I stopped the car.

The foster mom came out of the house to help me carry the children into the house. The foster mother was a warm, gentle, tender woman who held the children easily. They seemed to relax in her arms. We bathed the children in warm water in the big bathtub. They were a little grubby looking and for the first time, I noticed blood on their feet. The bath not only cleaned them, but it seemed to relax them. We dressed them in new pyjamas, and put them to bed. We put them both into the same big bed, and I sat on the bed until they fell asleep again. Star Cloud stayed awake a long time, just looking at me, with those big eyes. I found myself humming to her. Eventually she fell asleep. Feather fell asleep immediately. He didn't seem very upset at all.

As I left the foster home, I drove away in the sunshine, bright and hard on my eyes. Then I noticed – my hands were red with blood. This blood was not dried, old blood. It was wet, warm, running down my arm, dripping off my elbow, spurting everywhere. I couldn't stop it. The steering wheel was slippery with blood. My pants were soaked in blood. The smell of blood was pungent, and sickening. What was happening? I started to gasp and yell in panic. I could taste the blood.

I stopped the car somehow. I stumbled out and onto the gravel shoulders and fell to my knees, holding my hands up in the air. The sun shone brightly and harshly down on my upturned face. There was no comfort in this sun, only hot. Then I saw her again with me, on her knees, dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt. I held out my hands to show

her the blood. But the blood had disappeared. My hands were clean again, as though I had just washed them.

She knelt beside me and said, "My name is Sophia. I am here to explain."

"Explain what?"

She said nothing, as my eyes saw something else. I saw walking across the field a man clothed in a butcher's apron. He was a great large man, with long black hair. His mouth was set firm, and hard. His lips were curled back to show the blackness of his teeth, and the repulsiveness of his tongue. His nose breathed steam and fire. He was snorting and puffing like a racehorse. His eyes were black and deep. You could not see anything in the eyes, except death. I shivered with cold. He had huge muscles in his arms and shoulders. His hands were like great claws, dripping with blood. His legs were like great pine trees. He carried a knife in one hand, a piece of delicate lace in the other. He was stonefaced. As he stood there in the middle of the field, he slashed at the air violently. The air was red with the motion of his arm. The wind whistled and sang as his arms slashed again and again.

He said in a booming voice, "Yes, I killed her. But you knew I hated her. Why didn't you tell her? She deserved it. But I loved her. I know it's the end. It has to be. We are all gonna die! They all hate me now..."

He was gone. In his place was a teenage woman. She had no face. But I knew her. It was Star Cloud. She was older. She looked worn out. She was standing in a deep pool of blood. She murmured over and over again, "This is the end. This is the end..."

"Doesn't anyone see," I said calmly. "Who will help? Can anyone help?"

As I looked down, I saw my hands. They were bloody again. What's going on?

"Get back into the car!"

"What?"

"Get back into the car!"

As I sat behind the wheel, my hands were no longer red. There was no blood in the car, or on my clothes. There was no smell of blood.

"Now drive!"

"Where?"

"Just drive!"

As I drove home frantically, I realized that again there was someone sitting in the car. I screeched the car to a halt and screamed, "Get out! I've had enough!!"

"Don't worry," the person said.

He was a well dressed, middle aged man, in a suit, carrying a briefcase.

"It's not your fault. These people are just savages. They kill each other all the time. It's not your business. Your job is to be professional, to do the right thing, and to contain the desires of these people as much as you can. There is no cure. There is really nothing you can do. They are all savages. Treat them that way."

My hands were bleeding again. I could never stop it.

"Get out," I screamed. I put my bloody hands on his nice new suit, as he suddenly vanished, laughing.

I stopped the car again. I was shaking. God, help me. I am going to die here. Please help me. The blood went away again. I fell asleep at the side of the road. The warmth of the sun comforted me. When I awoke, I saw it was only three minutes later. I was sweating, and gasping for air. The window was closed and I couldn't breathe. There was an enormous bear outside the window of my car. It was standing on its hind legs, looking at me. Its head was brown, with ears sticking straight up, like it was listening for new sounds. Its great teeth were dripping with chunks of meat and sinew. Its claws were slashing the air, leaving red streaks in the early morning sunshine. I was afraid to open the window, even though I could not breathe.

She stood beside the bear, and put out her hand to touch it. As she touched the bear, I saw Star Cloud and Feather in its place. Star Cloud was crying, weeping softly. She looked at me with those beautiful eyes. She started to laugh, and as she laughed, she fell to the ground and was silent. Feather stood there, looking down at Star Cloud, then at me. He bent down and picked up a rock and threw it at me. Before the rock hit the car, they vanished.

She said "Why do you worry? What are you afraid of?"

I arrived home finally. It seemed a relief to be there. As I stepped out of the car, I heard a loud, skin-crawling screech and looked up. I saw a great black raven, with its angry eyes flashing, and there was hatred in them now. It was almost as though energy and electricity were shooting

out of its eyes. Its mouth was open, showing its many teeth. Its wings were about six feet across, and its feet were long, sharp talons, going straight for my face. I fell to the ground in terror, and felt the slap of a heavy black feather at the back of my head. The bird disappeared up over the roof of the house. Slowly I looked up and came to my knees. I picked up the feather to look at it. It was black with a red tip. The red tip was dripping wet. I was shaking. I looked around to see if any of my neighbours had seen this. There was no one around. Maybe they were trying to get away too.

I went into the house. Phoned in to say that I was not coming in today. Maybe not ever. I cannot take any more of this. Who am I to be so involved in the key decisions of people's lives? Who am I to have to be there when such violence happens? Why is it always me?

My boss said it's okay, we know you have been under stress. Take some time. We would like you to see a doctor. It's obvious you are burnt out. It's obvious you cannot handle the pressure.

I called James, told him I needed to see him. James is a good friend, sometime confidant, sometime adviser. He is often a centre of calm in this tempest we live in. He said, come over here. In no time at all, I was walking up the back steps to his house. He opened the door and held me tightly. You look like hell, he said.

As we sat in James' kitchen, drinking coffee, I saw her again, standing there beside the refrigerator. James had stopped talking and was peering intently into his coffee cup.

I said, "I thought you were going to explain."

"You never asked," she said. "You left. What do you want to know about?"

"What was going on out there. I seemed to be seeing things all day and night. I was always rightened. Am I crazy? Are you real?"

"You have been searching. You want to know some truth. But you have been avoiding the truth. The truth about the world. The truth about yourself."

"Will I know the truth?"

"Depends. There is a truth you need to know about some things. The killing is real. It really happened. It is part of your world, the world of you humans. People kill each other for love, for money, for pride, for many things. The blood shows you how fleeting it is. The blood never

stays because we pass from a bloody situation to a new life. From the violence comes something new. They killed me, but my blood became a symbol of hope. The blood is a sense of new hope for you."

"Hope for what?"

"That's up to you. But there will be many challenges on the way. Challenges like the stabbing man, who only sees the need to kill those in his way. Hope is not his mission yet. He will make you feel guilty, that his evil is your fault, but you need to resist. You bring hope to others. You bring hope to yourself."

"What about the little guy in the suit? Who is he?"

"Evil comes in many shapes. The evil of racism and hatred is seen in civilized rationalizations. The institutions and governments can make you feel proper while they take your dignity. Not all governments, of course, and not all the time. But you are wise. You need to resist the evil of civilized complacency."

"The bear? And the raven?"

The Bear is power. Power which is to be used for love. It is not power over, but power with. You need to teach the others to love one another."

"The raven really scared me."

"He is the messenger. He is a jokester, and likes to play games. Sometimes we are more frightened of the messenger, than we are of the message."

"What was the message?"

"It was about the children."

"What will happen to the children? Star Cloud and Feather."

"They will grow up. They were always in places where there was no one to look after them since that night. No family around. Star Cloud is doing well now. She has finally found someone who loves her. She has stopped using drugs. You saw her today."

"But she was grown up. She is just a little girl. How can that be?"

"Yes, she is a little girl. But she died as a little girl that night. She became grown-up too quickly."

"Will she be all right?"

"We hope so."

"What about the boy?"

"Feather is dead. He was shot by a policeman in a holdup last night."

"That's the bloody feather the raven dropped!"

Silence.

“Was I there when he died?”

“No, but you have known him a long time. You tried very hard. He was lost that night you took him out of that house, from that bloody house.”

“Who’s to blame? Me? The parents? Society?”

“Is that what you want to hear? Why do you want to know?”

“I need to understand.”

“It is not understandable.”

“You have to do better than that. I cannot live like this. I need to know what is happening.”

“Maybe you can never know.”

“Hey!” James shakes my arm. “You seemed lost.”

“I need to go home. I’m exhausted. I need to sleep.”

“No. Sleep here today. You can have the second bedroom.”

She was standing at the foot of the bed. As I drifted off on a cloud, she said, “It’s not about you. You know you are not the one who changes life. You can only care for life. You cared for them. They live on. This is about them. They are the ones who have to cope, and get on with it. You must love them. Only then will they survive. You must love yourself. You must be open to love. Only then will you survive”

As I lay in my bed, I felt her body warm and close. Her breath was cool on my cheek. I felt her tears strike my face. She said, “You knew where you were going. You just didn’t know you knew.”

A prayer ran through my sleepy mind ...

The breath of God
As lover to me,
Is on my body,
is on my face.

The breath of God
as lover to me,
gives me life,
gives me hope,
gives me passion.

AMEN AMEN AMEN