



IN THE ELECTRIC MIST WITH DAN SMOOT

I was jolted awake by what sounded like three loud knocks at my front door. The last one resonated for a moment, then it faded and I heard Jan breathing evenly beside me. Otherwise the night was silent. But had someone knocked? It seemed unlikely. I live in the sticks and to get to my house a person would have to force open an electric gate and drive or walk quite a ways. Still, maybe someone was at the door.

I slipped out of bed and stood listening. Light from a half moon oozed through the windows and bathed the room in muted gray. I thought I might need my pistol so I reached for it, but then I decided to leave it on the nightstand. I didn't want bullets flying with Jan in the house.

The bedroom door closed noiselessly behind me and I stood taking things in. Windows glowed here and there, and a weak blue light shone through the gap at the bottom of my study's door. I knew the light was from my computer and figured I'd forgotten to shut it off before bed.

I went to the door and opened it, and I stopped. The ghost of Dan Smoot was at my desk. He sat hunched forward like he was reading something on the computer's monitor. It was definitely Smoot; I'd seen him at the desk once before. His body then and now seemed to be made of water. This time he was lit from the front by the screen's glow, and from behind by moonlight coming through the study's patio doors. The two lights met inside and gave him an eerie radiance.

I cleared my throat and said, "Hello, Mr. Smoot."
He held up a finger indicating I should wait.

I looked out the patio doors. My house sits on a gravel pad, and in back the ground slopes down to a small field with seven young oaks in it. Beyond the field is a snarl of cactus and mesquite that hides a barbwire fence to the south. We'd had a lot of rain lately, and everything was green but looked black and gray in the moonlight. A slight breeze shook the waxy oak leaves and made them glimmer.

Smoot finished reading, and he chuckled as he swiveled to face me in his chair. He was trim and had a strong jaw. Light from the monitor made the features of his face stand out in ridges and dips.

"Hello, Ed. Sorry to keep you waiting but I wanted to finish your story."

I stepped into the room so I could see what was on the screen.

"That's the piece I'm working on now," I said. "It needs a couple more polish readings."

He nodded and then looked at the stack of books on the floor beside the desk. They were his books, or rather, nine hardbound volumes of his weekly newsletters from the 1960s. He'd been a conservative commentator back when it took ink and postage to get your message out. The books sat gathering dust beneath a coffee cup with an old brown apple core in it.

He looked from the floor to the stack of paperbacks beside the computer. They were detective novels by James Lee Burke. Jan had introduced me to his Dave Robicheaux series and I was enjoying it. The book where Robicheaux meets John Bell Hood was splayed open on the desk, to mark the place where I'd left off reading.

"It appears you've forgotten about politics," Smoot said.

"I'm just taking a break for a while, reading for diversion."

He gestured to the computer. “The story you’re working on doesn’t address any of today’s current events.”

“I’m writing for diversion too. Focusing on news all the time was making me sick.”

“Yes, it can be overwhelming. But there are insidious people roaming the land, Ed, venal men and women who would crush your marrow into landfill if they could. Don’t you think it’s time to get back in the fight?”

I started to answer but hesitated. He noticed.

“Ah. You want to extend the break. Maybe write another story about your midget detective. What’s this one called?” He squinted at the monitor and said, “Switcheroo.” He smiled at me. “Well it’s cute. It’s really. . . heartwarming.”

I couldn’t tell if he was being sincere or sarcastic, but I felt defensive.

“Hey, a publisher wanted me to do a series based on that character, so yes, I’m thinking of writing another story. Maybe even a novel.”

I expected him to object, or argue, but instead he leaned back and said, “I never wrote fiction, but I can see the allure. Documenting real-life gloom and doom is depressing. But it’s a shame you’ve given up writing topical stories. Over the past couple years you’ve become quite adept at using fiction to expose the machinations of the people who run the world. I understand though if you feel you can’t go on.”

“It makes me sick, like I said. Physically ill. The people in charge are getting more and more depraved, and I feel nauseous now when I write about them. I don’t know if I can do it anymore.”

“Right. I understand.”

He didn’t understand. As far as I could tell from his writings he’d never backed down from calling out injustice and abuse. For decades he’d worked week in and week out shining light on

corruption. It was because of him and other unbreakables that America wasn't wholly communist yet.

I sighed like I'd sprung a leak. From the rarified height of escapism I began a slow fall back to the smog of current events that was waiting where I'd left it.

"You're right," I said. "It's time for me to get back to work."

"Great!" He snapped upright in his chair, sending ripples across his watery body. "The insidious are only in positions of power because their lies go unchallenged. But you have the advantage of truth. Make them fight for the high ground foot by bloody foot. So what are you planning to write next?"

"Next? Well, I haven't really. . ."

I wondered if Jan could hear Smoot's voice. If not she'd be able to hear mine, so I excused myself and went to check on her. I opened the bedroom door a crack and saw that she was still asleep.

Back in the study I sat beside Smoot, in my usual chair. He was in Jan's. We'd put the second one at the desk after she began staying over. When we weren't busy with other things we'd surf the internet together and sometimes stream an old movie. We both like the slick black and white Hollywood productions from the 1930s and 40s. Just that evening we'd watched Greer Garson earn her Academy Award as Mrs. Miniver. Afterwards Jan went around imitating Garson. "Did you know that the twelfth Lord Beldon was hanged?" she asked me, repeating a line from the movie. And then she asked if she should dye her hair to match Garson's. She meant red, but in black and white movies red hair tends to look gray with a luminous sheen. So I told her that her hair already looked like Garson's, but I should have left out the part about the gray. That earned me a punch on

the shoulder.

Anyway, when I returned to my chair in the study I saw that Smoot was on the internet, reading a news story about the rape of an illegal alien by a dozen other illegals. He asked again what I was planning to write.

“Oh, uh, maybe I’ll write about the border crisis.”

He swiveled to face me.

“If there hasn’t been a change of plans,” I said, “then the last of the Trump-era restrictions on immigration will expire next month, in May. The restriction’s called Title 42, and when Biden lets it lapse the number of crossings at the southern border will explode. It will be as if there’s no border at all.”

“I read that ten million people have entered the country illegally in the two and a half years since Biden took office.”

“Ten million or more. No one’s sure how many. But there are some exact numbers on children. The last time I checked just over three hundred and forty-five thousand unaccompanied minors had been taken into custody under Biden. That’s according to the Customs and Border Protection agency. And of the three hundred and forty-five thousand, almost eighty-five thousand have gone missing. That’s from the Department of Health and Human Services. The government turns unaccompanied minors over to sponsors who get paid to take care of them, and eighty-five thousand have disappeared. They could have been sold to pedophiles, or to sweatshops, or they may have had their organs harvested.”

Smoot’s face pinched like he was in pain. He bowed his head and mumbled, saying a prayer for the children. He’d never been especially heavy-handed with Christianity in his newsletters, but his religion was one of the things that had made

him unbreakable.

I heard him murmur an amen, and then he looked up and said, “Why don’t you write a story where your midget detective investigates the disappearance of some children? He could pretend to be a young migrant.”

“No, he’s already been established as a comic character, and there’s nothing funny about what’s happening at the border. Our government’s trafficking children.”

“Then create another character. A child. You have to admit that that type of story would be most effective told from a child’s point of view.”

“Yes, but. . .” My mind drifted, contemplating the dark and evil nature of child abuse. Then suddenly I thought of Frank Capra. Jan and I had watched several of his movies, and I wondered what had happened to the positivity portrayed in them. Capra’s favorite leading man was James Stewart. In movie after movie he had Stewart belt out speeches that left Americans wanting to work hard, obey the rules and live virtuous lives. Where had that attitude gone? What morbid turn of mind had made a meal of it and then shat it out as the modern world?

“So anyway,” I said, “that nauseous feeling I mentioned. . .it’s real and I have to treat it like I would any other sickness. I have to be careful what I read in the news now. The latest fad among leftists is to mutilate children in the name of transgenderism. They call it sexual reassignment surgery, where they castrate boys and cut the breasts off of. . .” I felt my gorge rise and had to stop. When I could speak again I said, “I can barely read about what they’re doing to kids now, and writing stories about it. . . That’d be too demoralizing.”

“Then write a story about Marxists. You’re demoralized because of them. They’ve been attack-

ing America for more than a hundred years, gnawing away at family, church and government institutions, and now they're attacking the fundamentals of science. They tell people to forget biology, that gender can be changed with scalpels and force of will. But that's crazy. It's magical thinking. And people who promote it should be in mental institutions, not running the government and carving on children."

"You're right," I said, feeling a little better. It was like Jimmy Stewart had given me a swift kick in the butt. "Yeah, the mental illness stuff needs to be addressed. And the Marxism. But how can I cover all that? How far back would I have to go?"

"To the beginning if you want to present the full picture. Go back to the 1840s, when the British banking elites realized they were losing their empire to the merchant class. Businessmen had become incredibly strong, both financially and morally. They worked hard and read the Bible. So to reassert themselves the elites funded a sort of competition. They paid academics to come up with new ways of looking at things. Darwin and Marx were the big winners, and the elites began pushing their work on the public. Darwin's theories were used to attack faith in religion, and Marx was used to attack the financial system. But Marxism threatened to catch on too quickly, so the elites switched to socialism. It steals from people the same as Marxism, but because it's slower it's less painful to the person being robbed."

"The elites set up the socialist Fabian Society," I said. "I've read some of your writing on that."

"Yes, I used to go into quite a bit of detail about the Fabians in my newsletters. Let me see if I can pull some of that up." He closed his eyes and said, "From report number forty-six, 1963. Quote, 'A small group of socialists formed the Fabian Society at London in 1883, for the announced purpose of

converting the British economy from capitalism to socialism. Writer George Bernard Shaw, a leading member of the Fabians, said the Society made it possible for respectable citizens to support socialism without any suspicion of lawless desire to overturn the existing order. The Fabian artifice of feigning respectability while subverting society for revolutionary purposes gave socialists easy entry into government, banks, stock exchanges, universities, and all other respected centers of power and influence.' End quote."

"That's impressive," I said when he opened his eyes again. "I mean, not only is what you said impressive, but also the fact that you're able to quote something you wrote sixty years ago."

"For all the good it did to write it. The Fabians succeeded with their plan, and the Anglo-American system of free enterprise was gradually converted to socialism. And now it's morphing into Marxism. Or worse. Marx was a Satanist, and this sexual mutilation of children..." He shook his head. "It's diabolical."

"Well, Satan may be behind it, but he's got a lot of help. There are thousands of politicians, lawyers and judges working to keep American conservatives from stopping the mutilation. In some places you can actually be arrested for not supporting it."

Smoot shook his head again and said, "It's amazing how many people have lost their sense of right and wrong. I blame Sigmund Freud. He was another of those academics I mentioned, the ones the people in charge used in their assault on society. They were having success against religion with Darwin, and against the merchant and working classes with the Fabians, but the family unit remained an impediment to total control. So the elites began pushing Freud's sick teachings. Did you know that his father molested him?"

“Yes. And Freud carried on the tradition. Then in order to justify his depravity he came up with a pseudoscience that says kids want to have sex with their parents. As if that makes pedophilia okay. Psychiatry couldn’t help but grow into an abomination after a start like that. Shrinks today support the surgical mutilation of children’s sex organs and call it ‘gender affirming care,’ the opposite of what it really is. The whole thing is so far beyond monstrous that I . . .”

Jan asked what I was doing.

Her voice startled me and I spun toward it in my chair. She was standing in the study’s doorway, yawning and tying her robe closed.

I turned back to Smoot and he was gone. In his place a patch of air seemed to shimmy in the half-light of the room’s moon and monitor glow. Jan came over and sat in the empty chair. As she rubbed her eyes I looked at the computer’s monitor. The story that Smoot had been reading was still there, the one about the gang rape. I closed it and saw that he’d left “Switcheroo” open as well. Jan looked and said, “Has your detective solved the case yet?”

“Yes. And I’ve made a decision. I’m going back to the kind of stuff I was writing before, the political stories. So I might get kind of grumpy.”

Jan considered, then yawned and said, “That’s okay. I’ll still come visit when you want me to, and we can watch comedies if you need cheering up. Maybe Lubitsch, or Preston Sturges.”

She swiveled her chair so that she was facing the patio doors. I turned too, and we sat side by side looking out at the yard. There was the moonlight, a breeze, and the glint of trembling leaves.

Jan said, “I think it’s lovely having a tree named after you.”

It took me a moment to realize that she was alluding to what Mrs. Miniver had said in the

movie earlier. A man named a rose after her, and she said the gesture was lovely. I'd named an oak after Jan.

"I can change the tree's name to Mrs. Miniver if you want."

"Don't you dare," she said sleepily. She rolled her chair sideways so it was touching mine, and she rested her head on my shoulder. We sat with our backs to my desk and looked out the patio doors, from the high ground down to the field of trees and the chaos of thorns beyond.

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