

The Next Room

~ Robert Thomas ~

“It's hard to put this behind me, doctor. Maybe it's just part of me now. Something I have to carry. I don't want to. It's not my fault.”

“It never was. You should realise this. The experience affected you deeply. It would have affected anyone. I would have been affected just as much. But it's important for you to deal with the experience and live with it, as normally as you can.”

“Do you believe me, doctor?”

“Of course. What exactly happened we don't know. But it had nothing to do with you.”

“It's just such a burden, doctor.”

“It's OK to weep...I would never deny that you have a burden to carry. An emotional burden. Not a burden of responsibility.”

“I'm trying not to cry. I thought I'd get over it. Mostly, I thought something would be discovered. Some explanation found. A *resolution*. It's easy to think you'll get over something you can't understand, once an explanation is found, and that the explanation will come, in time. But it didn't. No resolution. No reason.

Well, now it's just an *episode*. Not part of the unravelling of something that's at first crazy and horrible. Just an *episode*. Something that occurred. A piece of time. Of my life. However small. Static. Immovable. Permanent like a stain. A stain in time that can't be erased. Heavy like a stone. And it's only burdening me. And I still have the dreams. Hellish dreams.”

“You don't have to feel alone. I'm here to help you. So is your family. So are your friends. We all care deeply for you. We want you to heal.”

“I feel like a freak almost. I'm a freak show. A curiosity. The guy who was there. Come and see the guy who was there when-”

“That’s not necessary. You’re not a freak and no one thinks of you as one. You are a human being who has been through a very traumatic experience. And you were not ‘there’. You were not there and you did nothing wrong.”

“I don’t know. I was close enough. I could have done something.”

“And that’s what’s bothering you? You think you could have done something.”

“I don’t know. I didn’t even mean to stop that night. I was just tired after driving for so long. It was getting late.”

“Go on. We can discuss it.”

“I’ve been over it a hundred times. I was driving home from a conference. It was a long drive. I should have flown or taken the train or something. I’d been up late the night before and hadn’t gotten a lot of sleep. I was just tired. So I stopped. At this motel. Just a cheap little motel. I didn’t care I just wanted a bed. Just a little motel in the middle of nowhere. Forest all around. Gas station across the road. Hole in the wall.

It was around eleven o’clock. I went to the office, exchanged pleasantries with the owner. Short guy, slightly grizzled. Wrinkled blue collar shirt and blue jeans. But courteous. Place was dusty, dim. The check-in counter was covered in papers and notes. There was a ceiling fan, as I recall. And a coke machine. And a old leather arm chair. And a short table with some fliers. Told him I had to stop for the night. Couldn’t drive any farther. He agreed. Said that safety was the most important thing.

I still remember the sign by the entrance. It included the words 'Truckers Welcome'. I thought it was quirky. So I checked in and got my key and headed to my room. It was one of those places where all the rooms open to the outside, you know, with the cars parked in front. Mine was at the very end, the corner room, which I appreciated. There was only one other vehicle, I think.”

“Did you like the room?”

“The room was typical for a motel I guess. A double bed, a dresser, a desk, a small closet. Clean too, but all from a couple of decades ago. On a wall there were two pictures of river scenes. The carpet was this olive green. The walls off-white. Just a typical motel room. Quite forgettable. But not this one.

The bed cover was a mottled, rusty red. There were two side tables matching the other furniture and a wall lamp above each. The telephone was on one of the side tables. On the dresser facing the bed was an old television. At the back of the room there was a window facing out onto the forested lot behind, with curtains to match the bed cover. The bathroom was plain, white. Cheep enamel sink, small tub. White shower curtains.

I just settled in. Took my clothes off. Turned the on the TV. Then I realised I was slightly thirsty but I was undressed now. Thought of calling the grizzled guy to bring me a Coke, but didn't bother. Wasn't sure if they had room service. So I sat up in bed and surfed TV. I don't know why. They didn't have cable. There was nothing on. But you can't help turning on the TV when you check into a motel room. And here it was really the only luxury.

Soon I heard a vehicle pull up. Just outside. Not far from my door. Sounded like a larger vehicle. Maybe a four-by-four. Large head lights obviously. It approached quickly and stopped abruptly. I heard a door open and shut. Another customer. Nothing more. But I also heard voices. Muffled voices from inside the vehicle. Two people talking loudly, a man and a woman. The conversation seemed animated. The TV was on but not loud, and I could hear this muffled, upset conversation from within the vehicle.

It went on for several minutes. Some stupid quarrel, I thought. Here I was trying to get some shuteye in this depressing hole and all I needed was some low-class shit kickers pulling up beside me and making a racket all night. But I should have known. What was I expecting, coming to this place.

After a while I heard one of the doors open again and a third voice, another guy. He'd probably gone to check them in. Poor guy. Having to put up with some bickering, low-class couple. I couldn't make out

exactly what he said but he was telling them to get into the room right away. The other door opened and closed, and then I believe a trunk or a hatch, opening and shutting very quickly.

I heard them enter the room next to mine. Seemed chaotic. The door to the room opening and then slamming. There was loud conversation but it was confused. Why would all three stay in the same room anyway. The place wasn't full and rooms were only 60 bucks. Were they poor? Or kinky? But anyway I wasn't interested and as I told you, I was a bit annoyed. I turned the TV off and went to the bathroom to piss and wash up. All I was thinking was that I should have packed ear plugs.

I hit the sack and the voices continued. They were talking. Three voices. Two men and a woman, as I said. It continued to be, I don't know, animated. Couldn't really make out what they were saying mostly, and the conversation seemed to heat up, becoming slightly louder and more audible, and then dying down almost deliberately, as if they knew they shouldn't be making a lot of noise, or shouldn't be talking loudly about something. I don't think it was out of politeness."

"Can you tell me what you heard them saying when you could make out the conversation?"

"I could hear some questions. 'Where did you go? What happened?' or 'Why are you talking like this?' and also 'We love you.'

It was one of the guys, the one who I think checked them in, and the girl who were asking the questions. The third voice was low, hard to understand. I would say distinctive."

"Distinctive in what sense?"

"Fast. That's all I can say. Fast. Feverish maybe, you know?"

"What did you think was going on?"

"The guy being interrogated was obviously drunk or dizzy or injured or sick or something. I thought he was sick. Maybe he'd been in a fight and got hit in the head. They should do something, I thought.

Call an ambulance or get him to a hospital or do something. But eventually I dozed off.”

“How long do you think?”

“I don’t know. It was a sound sleep. But not too long. Maybe two or three hours.”

“What woke you up?”

“They did.”

“How?”

“With more conversation.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“The guy was angry now. The one asking questions. His voice was louder.”

“What was he saying?”

“‘I told you not to go over there, fuck head!’ That was one of the things he said. ‘Now look at you. What the fuck did you get into? What’s wrong with you?’

The girl was trying to calm him down. She spoke angrily. ‘Calm down. Shut up,’ that sort of thing. But on the whole I couldn’t make out a lot. In the confusion I did hear her say ‘hospital’. The guy said something about not having any idea where they could find one. Just go ask the grizzled guy, I thought.

Then the other one, the one they were talking about, broke in. He spoke quickly, and his voice was slightly more distinctive than before. More earthy, I would say. Deeper. But still fast. He kept going for a while. He seemed upset, agitated. I had no idea what he was saying. At some point the other two interrupted him. They seemed to be trying to soothe him, calm him down. Couldn’t make out the words, though.

I began to worry. That low, earthy rapid voice. The questions. The whole thing. What the fuck was going on. If it's an emergency they should get help."

"Were you able to sleep again?"

"It was hard. I wanted to. I turned on my side. Pulled the blanket over my other ear. But I couldn't shut out the noise entirely. My bed was against the shared wall. And the wall seemed thin. I dozed off again, but not until after I heard more stuff."

"What?"

"I heard something about eyes. Hair. At one point I think I heard something like 'Take his shoes off.'"

"What else?"

"Not much came through. Just words. Some intelligible, but scattered in this continuous stream of anxious, muffled, talk. 'Jaw'. I heard 'His jaw.' Even I think something about hands and fingers. And definitely something about getting a blanket, and 'Lie him down'. Seemed like he was injured. The guy must have been injured somehow. Pretty badly it seemed."

"And then?"

"And then I dozed off again."

"How was it?"

"Have you ever hovered between sleep and waking? You're asleep but aware of what's happening. Like falling asleep in front of a television. You dream what you hear, and what you are hearing becomes part of the dream, only the images are still disconnected. As if, as it dreams the mind is trying to make sense of these strange noises it keeps hearing and to incorporate them somehow into the dream."

"I know what you mean. Go on."

I'm driving on the highway at night. Beside me is the grizzled guy, the owner of the motel. We're talking about the conference I just attended. Very serious talk about the different workshops. He says he enjoyed it. Then he starts talking about driving safely and getting some rest, and then about food, specifically breakfast, bacon and eggs and toast and coffee from Paraguay. I agree that breakfast is good.

I'm standing in the parking lot of his motel, looking at all the doors. A big vehicle pulls into the parking lot and stops abruptly. Black. Really big. Large wheels. I'm in my room and the truck is in there with me. I'm asking questions. My suitcase is on top of the vehicle and I can't reach it.

I'm in the grizzled guy's office. He's standing across the counter and writing frantically on a piece of paper, talking quickly. Talking fast in a deep, earthy tone. Not like before. Don't know what he's saying. There's a plate of breakfast on the counter and a large coffee urn.

I'm in the wooded area behind the motel. People all around. I'm trying to look into one of the rooms, where I hear crying sounds. I'm worried and ask for help to get through the window.

I'm on the floor of my room trying to get to my bathroom. Hard to move. Something holding me back. I claw my way along the green carpet and reach the linoleum floor. It feels cold. I reach up for the sink, hauling myself upwards. I look at myself in the mirror. My jaw is flapping quickly, uncontrollably. I'm spitting out gibberish. My eyes are red. I turn in repulsion and run toward the bed. Hanging on the wall above is a hand, fingers facing downward. A normal human hand, hanging like a picture. But the index finger is grotesquely long. And then longer again. In flashes. Longer still. Then it's almost touching my pillow...

“Was that it?”

“I woke up, numb. And damp. And stiff. At first unable to move. My jaw clenched and my tongue was pressing against the roof of my mouth. Ever had that experience? My teeth were grinding slightly. Alone. In this dark hole. Frightened.”

“And the noises? What about the noises?”

“Crying. The girl was crying. She cried and muttered unintelligibly. I could hear sniffing and sobbing.”

“And the gentleman?”

“He kept repeating one thing distinctively: ‘What the fuck. What the fuck. What the fuck.’”

“And that rapid earthy voice you talked about?”

“It was even deeper now. Very deep and hoarse, almost raspy. And still fast. Audible but unintelligible. Raspy and hoarse. And the way it came out - it seemed laboured, as if he was breathing hard.

And I heard the girl say, finally, ‘We must get him out of here.’”

“And then?”

“And then. And then the other guy, the other gentleman said ‘I’m not touching him. I’m not touching him. Call an ambulance. I don’t know what the fuck we should do’ And he said...”

“What else did he say?”

“And he said to her, ‘Don’t sit so close. Get back.’ She burst out crying again, more loudly.”

“And what did you think of doing at that point?”

“I was sitting on the side of my bed. The wall light was on. It was a dim light, barely fighting off the lonely darkness. I was sitting perfectly still, in a dimly lit bubble of confusion. Hey, I’m getting good at this, doc.”

“You express your thoughts most elegantly. Continue.”

“I was sweating. I could feel my heart pounding. The hair standing on my neck. Groggy. Slightly disoriented. Staring at the telephone on the bedside table. Just staring at it.”

“And?”

“And I stretched out my right arm to pick up the receiver. My arm was stiff. My palm damp. But I picked up the receiver and held it. Just held it.”

“Did you make the call?”

“I held the receiver in my hand. The dial tone was loud and unexpected. It boomed in my ears. Taunting me. Shattering the stillness. I held the receiver out in front of me. And then put it down. I don’t know why. Have you ever thought you must do something but were not sure of yourself? Didn’t really know what was the right thing to do? I put it down again.”

“Did the voices continue?”

“The crying did. The low raspy voice came in and out. At one point the girl said she couldn’t understand anymore. Then she said something about the face and...”

“Yes, go on.”

“Something about hands, and about legs. ‘Weird.’ I heard. And something about colour. Something more about eyes. And the jaw. And then this one word...”

“What word?”

“Sharp. Sharp. ‘Sharp’ was the word.

And the crying continued. Eventually she said ‘Get another blanket and pillow.’

He replied ‘What we need is an ambulance.’ And the girl said ‘OK’.

And then there was a pause. Then she said ‘What will they think? What will they do?’ And she started crying again.

It was reassuring, though. The ambulance would come and they

would deal with it. Whatever it was. So I turned off the light and rolled back into bed. The crying continued in spurts. And talking. Low and inaudible. The rapid, deep, hoarse, laboured voice still came in and out, still not really understandable, but I think increasingly agitated.

But I assumed that somewhere in the crazy conversation was a telephone call. I was relieved. Relieved that I didn't have to have any part of it. Funny, I thought I had to get some sleep before the noisy ambulance arrived."

"And you slept some more."

"Yes. I was terrified. I didn't want to sleep. Afraid I would dream again. But I was so tired. I curled up on my side, bunching the blankets around my head, trying to enclose myself. And I fell asleep."

"And how did you sleep?"

A low raspy sound. Rapid. Hoarse. Grunting. Rapid, hoarse grunts. Crying. I'm standing in front of the door. Trying to reach for it. Wanting to go find the grizzled guy. Stretching out for the door knob, but unable to reach it.

I'm walking around the parking lot, looking for the grizzled guy. He comes up to me with a plate of breakfast. Pancakes. I tell him to come with me to see what I found, and bring him to the big black truck. I tell him to open the hatch because someone is crying inside. We can't open it. But I look in and see a hand with a grotesquely long index finger. He puts the pancakes on the roof of the truck and goes off to find some keys, asking me to check the tires.

I'm back in my room trying to rearrange the furniture. I want the bed against the back wall. That way I can sleep without being disturbed. More crying. More grunting. A male voice sounding alarmed. I think it's the grizzled guy. The black truck crashes through the front wall of my room. Smashed furniture. Thumping sounds. Now I'm beside the truck and jump on. The grizzled guy is in the passenger seat. He yells out like a woman and we continue through the rear wall, crashing and banging.

“I woke up. It was morning. I could see sunlight streaming through the windows, in dusty beams. There was silence.”

“How did you feel.”

“Good I guess. At first I didn’t even remember. But then sitting on the side of my bed, I noticed the telephone and it all came back suddenly. That final dream as well. I just sat there thinking for a while, slightly alarmed. I thought it was all so bizarre, almost unbelievable. I almost felt it had been one long dream, but I knew it wasn’t that. Anyway, at least the ambulance must have come, quietly I guess since I didn’t hear any sirens, or slept through them.

But someone was still there. I began to hear footsteps back and forth. Heavy footsteps. A maid or the grizzled guy cleaning up, or more likely the guy or the girl had stayed behind, or come back to pick things up...”

“And what did you do next?”

“I got into the shower, still thinking about it all. You know just like when you have a particularly strange or scary dream and that’s all you can think about in the shower. Ever experienced that? I thought about the strange dreams and the weird conversations and the, I don’t know, surreal links between them, and I stood there in the shower, the hot water running over me, the gleaming white bathroom filling with steam, still tired and groggy. It was almost like being in a dream again. Between reality and the beyond. Unable to distinguish them...”

I dried off and brushed my teeth. I could still hear the footsteps next door. Heavy falling footsteps. I went back into my room, and as I got dressed, the footsteps continued. Rapidly. Back and forth. Back and forth. Nearer and farther. Busy. Incessant. Annoying. Strange.”

“And?”

“And I just wanted to get the fuck out of there. Back on the road. I was tired of trying to figure out these things I couldn’t see. And I’d packed my bags and threw a dollar on the bed and grabbed my coat and was just about to leave...”

“Go on.”

“And I heard a window being smashed. The smashing of a window. Next door. Fuck. I stood motionless. Stopped in my tracks.”

“And what did you do?”

“I dropped everything and went straight to the bedside table where the phone was. Just dropped my bag and threw my coat on top of it and grabbed the phone.”

“And you called the grizzled guy?”

“The grizzled guy. He came right away and we met out in front and he knocked. There was no answer. The front drapes were drawn. He fumbled for his master key, and as he did, I asked him if the ambulance had come. He looked at me perplexed and opened the door...”

“And what did you see?”

“You know what we saw.”

“The bodies.”

“The body parts. Just body parts. Limbs. A man and a woman. Blood everywhere. Everywhere! The carpet red. The furniture red. The blanket and pillows completely stained red. The walls...”

“They were -”

“The stench of raw flesh and blood, doctor. I could almost taste it. I can almost taste it.”

“They were dismembered?”

“They were eaten. Claw marks. Signs of gnawing and chewing. Torn, putrid flesh and shredded organs. Gnawed and chewed flesh! Clumps of half-eaten flesh.”

“How did you react?”

“And the footprints, doctor. Those heavy footprints. Grotesque and unnatural. They were everywhere. In red. Carpet. Bathroom. Tub. Bed. Furniture. Up the wall to the broken window. Unknown. Never identified! They continued from the window into the forest and disappeared.”

“And how did you react?”

“The grizzled guy stood there for several seconds, stunned. His colour drained away. He doubled over and ran to the bathroom and puked. He puked.”

“And you?”

“I cried, doctor. I cried. I stood there and cried like a baby. Amidst the carnage and the stench and the pools of blood. I cried. And I cry still. After five long years I still cry and dream. Hellish dreams. And that grotesquely long index finger is pointing at me now, it won't stop pointing at me, because it is still out there, and no one knows what happened, and I was in the next room.”

Finis.