

## *Lights Out*

It was about twenty minutes to eight and Pete Linder was sitting at a red light four blocks from the parking garage behind his office building when he looked to his right and saw the corpse dangling with its right hand somehow grasping the handrail inside the city bus, the thirty-or-so passengers unaware it was even there.

The light turned green and the bus started to pull away, the corpse rocking along with the passengers who were standing, the upraised hands grasping the handrail – their other hands holding newspapers, briefcases, lunch buckets, or just stuffed in a pocket. Pete watched in horror as the corpse rocked and bounced into a man in his early fifties wearing a cheap brown suit from Sears. The man never looked up from his *Times*.

An angry car horn blared behind Pete and he realized he was still stopped at the green light while the bus with its undetected stowaway pulled away. Pete hit the gas and his front tires squealed a little as he tried to catch the bus before it turned right a block up. Pete's lane was pretty much empty in front of him because he had been the first car in line at the light and he had room to speed until a blue Miata cut him off and he had to hit the brakes. He didn't have to hit them hard enough to panic stop; he barely rocked forward as his car slowed, although his seatbelt did briefly lock up.

He was too late, anyway. The bus was turning right and heading toward the freeway onramp. He'd be late for work by at least thirty minutes if he followed it (and he didn't stop to think that maybe notifying the bus driver of his sinister cargo was more important than getting to work on time), but he had time to look into the right-side windows after the bus made its turn and could still see the corpse hanging there. This time it was leaning way to the left as the bus finished making its right-hand turn and the hip of the thing was firmly against the right shoulder of an older woman who looked like an office building housekeeper – probably on her way home from working the night shift.

Then the bus was out of view behind the corner of the Brooker Building and Pete turned his mind to convincing himself that he hadn't really seen what he thought he'd seen.

On his way home, Pete stopped at Albertson's to pick up some hamburger meat. Alice had called him at work. She was planning spaghetti for dinner and didn't realize they were out of meat until she went to the freezer to get some; could he be a dear and bring some home?

Pete walked right past the carts that had been rounded up and corralled for your shopping convenience, right past the little baskets you're expected to use if you only have a few things to pick up (and they're never big enough, while a cart is too big, for most shopping trips, it seems). He only had to pick up one package of ground beef and he'd just hold it in his hand.

He got the meat and paid for it with his Visa Checkcard and thanked the cashier about as sincerely as she wished him a nice day. He jammed the receipt into the plastic bag with the meat without even looking at what he was doing and headed for the door. As is always the case when circumstances force you to stop at

the store for one or two little items, he'd spent more time in the checkout line than he had spent actually shopping for what he had to buy.

Pete passed the Shopping Cart Corral one more time as he left the store, glancing casually to his left as he did so. He stopped dead in his tracks. There was a corpse draped over the top of the carts, its head resting in the child seat of one and its left arm draped over the handle of another, the handle nestled in the pit of its elbow.

Pete watched in horror as a woman with two whiny, dirty little kids in tow went for the cart the corpse's arm was draped over. She grabbed the handle with a hand on either side of the thing's elbow and pulled. The cart moved a little, the corpse's arm lifting a bit as it did so, then stuck fast as gravity and the dead weight of the arm held it back. She gave it another, harder tug as one does when the cart you want is stuck with the cart you don't want. The arm flew up as the cart came free, the bluish-pale fingers missing her nose by no more than an inch.

The corpse's arm had come back down and was now resting on the front of the shopping cart the woman had just freed. She turned the cart towards the produce section and the arm fell, crashing loudly into the back of the cart that was supporting the thing's shoulder. Pete looked around, but no one had turned at the sound.

Pete viewed with slow astonishment the people going about their shopping as if there wasn't a dead man lying on top of the shopping carts. *I've gotta tell somebody.*

The closest two checkout lanes were closed. He decided to tell the cashier operating the third closest.

Pete moved quickly past the closed checkout lanes to tell the cashier to get the manager. He moved right up beside her on her side of the check stand and said, "Did you see-?" He pointed towards the Shopping Cart Corral, turning his head as the cashier turned to follow the direction of his finger. The corpse was no longer there.

"Hey, buddy! Wait yer turn," a fat man in an open flannel shirt said. He was the customer currently getting his things rung up. He had a huge, hairy belly hanging out from beneath a grayish-white T-shirt that probably hadn't seen the inside of a washing machine in a couple of weeks and blue jeans that were caked with grease and dirt. The flannel shirt he wore over the dirty T was probably the cleanest thing about him.

"Sir?" The cashier, speaking to him. "Sir, are you alright?"

Pete was still pointing at the Shopping Cart Corral. He dropped his arm and looked around at the cashier and past. *Now* something had everyone's attention – at least in this and the next two checkout lanes. *He* had everyone's attention.

He looked back at the carts again. The corpse was still gone. "Nothing," he said. "I'm sorry, it must have been..." He looked back at the cashier again.

"I'm sorry," he said again and left quickly.

When he got home, he gave his wife the meat he had gotten at the store, brushed her lips with a passionless kiss and sat staring at the TV until dinner was ready. He didn't see anything that appeared on the screen in front of him.

The next morning in the shower, Pete tried to wash off the horror of what he'd seen the previous day – or what he hadn't seen. As he soaked his head under the hot spray, his eyes closed in his upturned face, it began to wash off him along with the soap. He stood that way for some time, just letting the hot water run over his body. Then he heard a thump and a soft, sloughing, sliding sound in the shower directly behind him as if someone had just sat down heavily in the tub and was sliding further down.

He turned quickly, wiping the dripping water from his eyes and there in the shower with him he saw a corpse slumped in the shower spray that went past Pete's own body to the back of the tub.

He let out a shriek and stumbled out of the tub, spraying water across the floor to mix with the urine that spilled out as his horrified bladder let go. He pulled the shower curtain most of the way off of its rungs and it lay in a huddled lime-green lump on the side of the tub and on the floor, water running down it in rivulets to further wet the floor of the upstairs bathroom. The small matching green rug was getting very wet very fast.

Alice ran to the bathroom door and found it locked. "Pete!" she yelled, half panicked. "Pete! For God's sake unlock the door! *Pete!*" But Pete could only lay curled up on the floor in front of the vanity on Alice's side of the master bath, looking in terror at the thing that lay in his bathtub, using the last of the hot water that was supposed to be for his morning shower.

Alice felt along the top of the bathroom doorframe and came up with the flat key that undid the simple privacy lock on the bathroom door. She missed the first two times but finally jammed it into the little slot beside the doorknob and opened the door. She saw her husband on the floor, naked and wet, looking as terrified as a young child when faced while awake with the beast from its worst nightmare.

She followed his terrified gaze to the empty bathtub and the water spraying out all over the floor. She went to him, then, and made sure he wasn't physically hurt in any immediate way. Finding no blood or limb pointing in a direction it shouldn't be, Alice left Pete and went to the tub, turning off the shower. She left the shower curtain where it was, her bare feet sloshing on the waterlogged rug, and went back to her husband.

Alice didn't need to push too hard to convince Pete to stay home from work that day, but he shut out what he'd been experiencing and returned to work on Thursday. He had a meeting with a potential new client and didn't want to blow the possibility of grabbing the huge retainer this one would be willing to pay the firm. Also, Trudeau had hinted that if Pete landed this client, he'd make partner by the end of the year.

On his drive in to work he saw:

A corpse stuffed butt-first into someone's garbage can; its arms, legs and head dangling in all directions over the rim.

The hand of a corpse spilling out of the drop slot on one of those big blue mailboxes by the road in front of the Canned Food Warehouse on Parker St.

A corpse sitting slumped on the merry-go-round in the children's play area at Merriman Park while a young girl pushed it around and around with her little brother riding on it, only one rail separating him from his unseen companion.

He didn't stop at any of these. He didn't attempt to alert anyone. He just tried to ignore them.

The meeting with the Connelly & Associates boys didn't go so well. It went fine at first, sure, until Pete saw the corpse stuffed in the tasteful trophy case that stood in one corner of the conference room, the firm's advertising awards and photos of the partners with various corporate big-wigs and some of the celebrities who'd been in their ads adorning every shelf. That's when Pete lost what little control he'd been holding onto that day. He made a loud, nonsensical, single-syllable noise and backed suddenly away from the big mahogany table, hitting the edge painfully with his thighs and spilling the pitcher of ice water and glasses that Ricky, the intern, had supplied at the beginning of the meeting. Everyone's presentation packets were soaked, but everybody pulled back before any of them got wet.

"Pete, what the hell?" Trudeau demanded. But Pete was in no mood to answer. Trudeau hustled the men from Connelly & Associates out of the conference room, heatedly glaring at Pete before he closed the door behind him, leaving Pete alone with the corpse in the trophy case.

Pete sat down hard on the floor and put his hands to his face, clenching his eyes tightly closed. Ricky came into the room and began cleaning up the mess Pete had made. He glanced at Pete nervously from time to time as he went about his business and left the room quickly without doing a very good job.

Pete dropped his hands slowly and opened his eyes. The fear scrawled on his face turned to the slightest hint of relief. The corpse was gone.

Trudeau came back into the room.

"What the hell was that, Linder?" he asked. "You've been a wreck the last three days, except yesterday when you weren't even here. I thought you might feel this was important enough to pull your act together long enough to get Connelly, but I guess not." He squatted next to Pete and looked directly into his face. "Even if we can salvage this deal, Linder, you won't get a partnership this year. If you blew it for us, you'll never make partner. You get that?"

He stood up. "Get out, Pete. Go home. I don't want to see you in this office until Monday at the earliest. Get yourself straight and we'll talk when you get back. I want to know you're a hundred percent before I let you get on the same *floor* with another client."

Trudeau left. After a few minutes, Pete stood up and walked quietly out of the conference room. A few drops of water still fell from the edge of the table; the trophy case still held only awards and photos.

Pete grabbed nothing but his jacket from his office and ignored the looks he got as he made his way to the elevators.

He paused halfway across the sky bridge that connected his office building to the parking garage behind it at the third floor and looked down the alley to the cars passing by on Fourth Avenue. It was a perfect day, not a cloud in the sky, and

Pete took a few minutes to just enjoy it. He didn't know if he would see any more corpses on the drive home, but he didn't see any now and liked it that way just fine. He knew he couldn't stay here all day so eventually he made his way wearily to his car and started his drive home.

Pete drove home slowly, watching for signs of any more mysterious corpses. He saw none but still wouldn't let himself relax. Instead, he went over what he'd been seeing and tried to make some sense of it. What reason could there possibly be for him to see these dead things? And why him, alone?

He was starting to creep himself out all over again. This wasn't doing much good. Thinking about it was pretty unproductive and would likely remain that way until he'd gone a good long time without seeing any corpses.

Pete was approaching the traffic light at South 230<sup>th</sup> and Roanoke, the last light he had to turn at before reaching home. He could see the 7-11 on the east side and the sign for the 76 Station on the right. He was just starting to feel normal again when the heebie-jeebies came on all of a sudden and stronger than they'd been save for the times when he had actually seen the corpses. He could almost feel dead fingers brushing playfully at the nape of his neck. His skin jumped up into instant goose bumps, despite the warmth of the day.

Feeling more freaked out than ever, he looked into the rearview mirror and saw the corpse sitting in his backseat. His heart jumped and his breathing became rapid and shallow. For the first time he could see the thing's face clearly and a sudden crushing realization fell on him.

The corpse had his face. It was him.

Gruesome comprehension came to Pete. The corpse on the bus was him. The corpse on top of the carts at Albertson's: him. In the shower, on the playground, in the trophy case: all of them were him.

As he stared at the thing in the back seat it lifted its grotesque head to meet his gaze and he looked into his own dead, grinning face in the rearview.

"Time to go, buddy," the thing said, and chuckled. It turned its glossy, black eyes towards the windshield. Pete followed suit and watching in horror as a 76 gas truck pulled out of the gas station lot and directly into his path, giving him no time to stop.