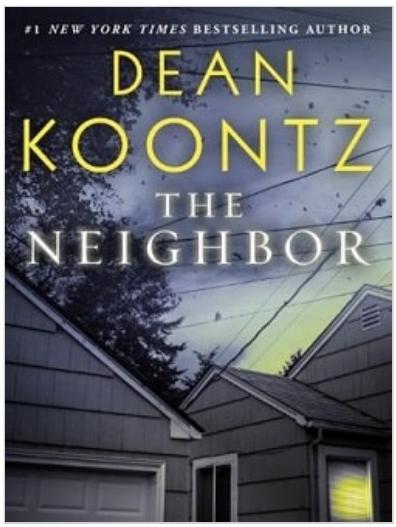

The Neighbor (The City 0.50)

Author: *Dean Koontz*

Category: Thriller, Suspense, Mystery, Horror

Description: A prequel to The City

The year is 1967. Malcolm Pomerantz is twelve, geeky and socially awkward, while his seriously bright sister, Amalia, is spirited and beautiful. Each is the other's best friend, united by a boundless interest in the world beyond their dysfunctional parents' unhappy home. But even the troubled Pomerantz household will seem to be a haven compared to the house next door, after an enigmatic and very secretive new neighbor takes up residence in the darkest hours of the night.

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1

My name is Malcolm Pomerantz, and I'm an axe man, though not like those guys on that reality-TV show about loggers. Had I ever been that kind of axe man, I would long ago have cut off both feet or been crushed by a toppling tree. I've been clumsy all my life. I have managed not to stumble into an accidental death only because my profession—I'm a musician—doesn't require me to deal with power tools or treacherous terrain. Axe is musicians' slang for instrument, and my axe is a saxophone. I have been playing it since I was seven, when the sax and I were nearly the same size.

I'm fifty-nine now, two years older than Jonah, my best friend of half a century. I'm tall, and Jonah's not. I'm white; he's black. When I first met him in the summer of 1967, Jonah was ten and quick and graceful, a piano prodigy, and I was twelve and lumbered around like Lurch, the butler in The Addams Family, which had been big on TV the previous year. When I first heard him playing, he rocked the keyboard with Fats Domino's "I'm Gonna Be a Wheel Someday." In both our lives, 1967 proved to be … unforgettable.

At my insistence, Jonah recently talked his life—or at least a strange and tumultuous portion of it—into a tape recorder, and his story became a book titled The City. There isn't any point in talking my life, because most of the interesting parts are what happened when I was hanging out with Jonah; he's already covered that territory. I do have one little experience to recount, however, a curious series of events that occurred a few weeks before I met him. Like his more engaging story, mine suggests that the world is a more mysterious place than it seems to be most of the time, when we're plodding along from breakfast to bedtime in a reassuringly familiar routine.

In those days, my sister, Amalia, was seventeen, five years older than I was, but we were as close as twins. Not that we looked alike. Blond hair in a ponytail, she was lithe and graceful, full of such enthusiasm for life that both in sunshine and in shadow, she had a glow that I swear was not entirely a figment of her adoring little brother's imagination. On the other hand, I was a loose-limbed twelve-year-old with an Adam's apple that made me look as if I had swallowed a Granny Smith whole and had gotten it stuck in my throat. Although she didn't have much of a wardrobe, Amalia always wore the right thing for the occasion and looked as if she'd stepped out of a Sears catalog. With my round shoulders and arms as disproportionately long as those of an orangutan, I tried to disguise my awkward form by dressing as if I were an adult, though, being blind to fashion, I only called greater attention to my gangly nature: black wing tips but with white socks, dress pants hiked a couple of inches north of my navel, my short-sleeved spread-collar white shirt buttoned all the way to the throat.

At twelve, I didn't yet think much about girls. Considering my long, pale face and hound-dog eyes behind black-rimmed glasses with thick lenses, maybe I already knew that even through adulthood I'd never be a guy who had flocks of pretty girls in flight around him. I had the love of my sister and my saxophone, and that was enough.

It had better be enough, because Amalia and I didn't have a home life that would be suitable for a TV show like Ozzie and Harriet or Leave It to Beaver. Our old man was a machinist, a foreman for an entire shop of lathe operators, most of the time as silent as a rock, a cold man who by his stare alone could convey his disapproval and his ardent wish that he could hold you to his lathe and shape you into someone more appealing. Chesterfield cigarettes were to him what the Eucharist is to devout Catholics. Amalia insisted he wasn't cold, but only wounded by life and emotionally isolated. Our mother liked TV around the clock, interludes of neighborhood gossip with Mrs. Janowski, who lived next door, and Lucky Strike cigarettes, which she burned through as if the fate of the Earth depended on her chain-smoking even

through meals, which she usually took on a TV tray in the living room. She prided herself on being a fine housekeeper, by which she meant that she efficiently delegated all the work to Amalia and me.

The king and queen of our little lower-middle-class castle spoke to each other so seldom, you might well have assumed they primarily communicated telepathically. If that were the case, then judging by their demeanor, they detested virtually every exchange of their psychic conversations. Amalia said that something profound must have happened between our parents long ago, that they had hurt each other, that they'd said all they had to say about it, and that they couldn't bring themselves to forgive each other, and that, therefore, they found it painful to talk to each other about anything. Amalia didn't like to think the worst about anyone until they had proved themselves irredeemably vile.

My sister had played the clarinet since she was eight, when a kid in the next block, having been forced into lessons by his folks, finally rebelled and convincingly threatened to hang himself. She'd been given the instrument for nothing, and she had wanted to learn to play it largely because she knew that it would annoy our parents. She hoped that her playing would get on their nerves so much that they would insist that she practice in the detached one-car garage, where she wouldn't have to see them so determinedly not talking to each other, where the air smelled of grease and tire rubber and mildew instead of Chesterfields and Lucky Strikes. Her hope was fulfilled, and the remaining years that we lived in the house, the words most often spoken by our mother and father were, "Take it to the garage," not only when we practiced the clarinet and saxophone, but also when our mere presence became a distraction from their TV shows, their drinking, and their committed smoking.

Amalia became pretty darn good on the clarinet, but I proved to be a prodigy on the saxophone, self-taught and self-polishing, always working to get a little better. Playing the sax was the one thing I could do that was graceful.

With a 4.0 grade-point average and considerable writing talent, Amalia was an amateur musician with bigger things than a dance band in her future. Although our distracted mother and father didn't consider it much of an achievement, Amalia received a full scholarship to a major university based on her grades but also based on several cool short stories that she'd written and with which she'd won prizes in various competitions.

I was proud of her, and I wanted her to succeed big-time, and I wanted her to escape the cancer clouds and the gloom and our parents' bitterness that made the Pomerantz place so like Poe's House of Usher just before it sank into the swamp. At the same time, I couldn't imagine what my life would be like when, at the end of that summer, she went far away to school, leaving me as the only member of the family who didn't want to eat dinner off a TV tray.

In early June, nearly a month before I heard Jonah Ki

rk rocking that Fats Domino tune at his grandfather's house, across the street from our place, a weird thing happened next door. The residence in question was not to the east, not the Janowski place, where my mother and Mrs. Janowski regularly shared gossip, most of it delusional fantasy, about the marital relations of other people who lived on our block. It was instead one door west of us, at the former Rupert Clockenwall place, which had been unoccupied ever since old Mr. Clockenwall died of a massive heart attack a month earlier.

The strangeness started at 3:00 one morning, when an unusual sound awakened me. As I sat up in bed, I didn't think the noise had been in my room. I was pretty sure it came from beyond the window, although it might have been the last sound in a dream that, by its very threatening nature, compelled the sleeper to wake. In this case, it called to mind a long sword being drawn from a metal scabbard, the stropping of steel on steel.

Even in an older residential neighborhood like ours, far from the high-rises and the Midtown bustle, the city is never silent, and long before you're twelve years old, you learn to tune out its most familiar rattles, clashes, and percussions to get a good night's rest. What woke me now was alien to the ear. I threw back the top sheet and got out of bed.

Earlier I had raised the lower sash of the window in hope of a draft, but the night air remained warm and still. As I bent to the window, the sound came again and seemed to vibrate in the screen as if the blade of a stiletto had been whisked across that metal mesh, so that I startled backward.

When the stropping came a third time, softer than before, I realized that it originated not inches from my face but from the house next door, and I leaned close to the window screen once more. Between the houses stood an ancient sycamore in full leaf. Perhaps because in its early years it had received too little sunlight or had suffered a bout with disease, the tree had attained a tormented architecture and did not entirely screen my view of the Clockenwall place. Through the twisted branches, I saw lamplight bloom beyond a downstairs window.

The late Rupert Clockenwall's only surviving relative was a brother who lived half a continent away. Until the small estate was settled, the house could not be put on the market for sale, and there had been no activity at the place since the day that Mr. Clockenwall died. Naturally, having the usual fantasy life of a twelve-year-old, I sometimes imagined dramas where none existed, and now I wondered if a burglar might have forced entry.

Lamplight brightened another window on the ground floor and, soon thereafter, also one on the second floor. Through the sheers that hung over that upstairs window, a sinuous dark form whidded past the curtained glass. Although any moving shadow is bent by light and by every surface over which it travels, this one seemed particularly strange, bringing to mind the supple wings of a manta ray swimming the sea with all

the grace of a bird in flight.

Overcome by a sense that someone sinister must be prowling the Clockenwall house, I waited at the open window for a while, breathing the warm night air, hoping to glimpse that lithe and eerie shadow again or something more. Eventually, when I was not rewarded by any phantasmic shape or further peculiar sounds, even my boyish desire for mystery and adventure couldn't sustain my attention. I had to admit that neither a burglar nor a vandal was likely to announce his invasion of the property by switching on nearly every light.

After returning to bed, I soon fell back to sleep. I know that I had a bad dream in which my circumstances were desperate, but when I suddenly sat up in bed at 4:00 A.M., I could recall nothing of that nightmare. Little more than half awake, I went to the window, not to observe the house next door, where lights still glowed, but to close the lower sash. I also locked it, though the night was hot and a draft was much needed. I don't remember why I believed that I should engage the lock, only that I felt the urgent need to do so.

In bed once more, I half slept through the last sweltering hour of the summer night, muttering like a victim of malaria in a fever dream.

2

Most mornings, our old man preferred a sandwich for breakfast, usually bacon and eggs on heavily buttered toast. In bad weather, he stood at the sink to eat, staring out at the small backyard, silent and remote, as though he must be pondering important philosophical issues—or planning a murder. On the nearby cutting board stood a mug of coffee. He held the sandwich in his right hand, a cigarette in his left, alternating between the two. When witness to this, I always hoped that in error he would take a bite of the cigarette or attempt to smoke the sandwich, but he never became confused.

The morning following the activity at the Clockenwall house, he ate instead on the back porch. When he descended the steps and went to work, I retrieved the empty coffee mug and ashtray that were balanced on the flat cap of the porch railing. While I washed them at the kitchen sink, Amalia served breakfast to our mother in the living room, where on the TV some movie star was being interviewed by a morning-show host, the two of them competing to see who had the phoniest laugh. Our mother had ordered fried potatoes, a cheese omelet, and a cup of canned fruit cocktail. She and the old man rarely ate at the same time and never wanted the same thing.

When Amalia returned to the kitchen, she said, “I think someone moved in next door during the night. My window was open, and a voice woke me, and then there were lights in all the rooms over there.”

Her bedroom was on the same side of our house as mine. I said, “I didn’t hear anybody. Saw the lights, someone moving around over there, just a shadow. But no Realtor has put up a sign yet.”

“Maybe they decided to rent the place instead of selling.”

“Moving in at three in the morning is kinda weird. Was it just one person or a family, or what?”

“I didn’t see anybody.”

“What about the voice?”

“Oh, that must have been a dream. There wasn’t anyone standing under my window. I thought someone called out from under my window, a man, but I must have been dreaming and woke up, because when I got out of bed and went to the window, no one was down there.”

I put place mats and flatware on the dinette table. While I made toast, burning the first two slices, Amalia scrambled eggs and fried slices of ham for our breakfast.

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“What did he say—the man under your window?” I asked.

“He called my name. Twice. But I’m sure he was in the dream, not really there.”

“What was the dream about?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Not even a scrap of it?”

“Not even.”

Her eggs, ham, and toast were on the same plate. For me, she served those three items on three small plates, as I preferred. I had trimmed the crusts off my toast, so that I could eat them separately. Even in those days, I had little rituals with which I meant to impose a degree of order on what seemed to me to be a most disordered world.

We had hardly begun to eat when the washing machine in the adjacent laundry alcove buzzed, at the end of its spin cycle.

As I rose, intending to transfer the laundry to the dryer, Amalia said, “It can wait, Malcolm.”

Although I remained at the table, I said, “Before you go away to the university, you’ll have to teach me to iron.”

Her green eyes sparkled, I swear they did, when something moved or amused her.

“Sweetie, I’d no sooner put an iron in your hands than I would a chain saw.”

“Well, he’s never going to iron. And she’d do it only if she could sit down and watch game shows at the same time.”

“She ironed when I was too little to do it. She hasn’t forgotten how.”

“But she won’t. You know she won’t. I’ll be a wrinkled mess.” Although I was only twelve, how my clothes looked was important to me, because I myself looked like such a nerd.

“Malcolm, don’t you dare try to iron when I’m away at school.”

“I don’t know. We’ll see.”

She ate in silence for a while, and then she said, “It’s not right what I’m doing, going to school so far away.”

“Huh? Don’t be nuts. That’s where you got the scholarship.”

“I could get one somewhere close. Stay at home instead of in a dormitory.”

“The university has that special writing program. That’s the whole point of going there. You’re going to be a great writer.”

“I’m not going to be a great anything if I leave you here alone with them and spend the rest of my life regretting it.”

She was the best sister ever, funny and smart and pretty, and she was going to be famous one day. I’d whined at her about teaching me how to iron; I felt selfish, because the truth was that I wanted her to go to the university, which was going to be

so good for her, but at the same time I wanted her to stay.

“I’m not all thumbs, you know. If I can play the saxophone as well as I do, I can iron clothes without burning down the house.”

“Anyway,” she said, “nobody learns to be a novelist from a writing program. It’s a very personal struggle.”

“If you don’t take that scholarship, I’ll blow my brains out.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, sweetie.”

“I will. Why wouldn’t I? How am I supposed to live with having ruined your life?”

“You could never ruin my life, Malcolm. Why, you’re the most important and wonderful thing in it.”

She never lied. She didn’t manipulate people. If she’d been anyone but who she was, I could have looked her in the eye and insisted that I’d commit hara-kiri, even though I knew that I never would. Instead, I stared at the trimmed-off crusts of my toast and tore them into little pieces as I said, “You’ve got to take the scholarship. You’ve just got to. It’s the best thing ever happened to us.”

I heard her put down her fork. After a silence, she said, “I love you, too, Malcolm,” and then for another reason entirely, I couldn’t meet her eyes. Or speak.

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After we cleared the table, after she washed the dishes and I dried them, she said, “Hey, let’s make oatmeal cookies.”

“With chocolate chips and walnuts?”

“For Mom and Dad, we’ll make them with chopped anchovies and lima beans, just to see their expressions when they bite into one. The rest with chocolate chips and walnuts. We’ll take a plate of them to the new neighbors and introduce ourselves.”

She rattled off a list of things she needed: baking sheets, mixing bowls, a spatula, a pair of tablespoons, a measuring cup.… Because I suspected that this might be the first of many tests to determine if I could eventually be entrusted with a steam iron, I remembered every item, collected them in a timely manner, and didn’t drop even one.

The delicious aroma of baking cookies eventually reached the living room, where our mother left the TV long enough to come to the kitchen and say, “Are you making a mess?”

“No, ma’am,” Amalia said.

“It looks like a mess to me.”

“Only while we’re baking. It’ll all be cleaned up after.”

“There’s housework that should come before this kind of thing,” our mother said.

“I’m ahead of schedule on the housework,” Amalia assured her, “now that school is

out.”

Mother stood just inside the door to the hall, an apparition in her quilted pink housecoat and morning hair, looking mildly confused, as though the task upon which we were engaged must be as mystifying to her as any complex voodoo ritual. Then she said, “I like mine with almonds, not walnuts.”

“Sure,” Amalia said, “we’re going to make a batch like that.”

“Your father likes the walnuts but not the chocolate chips.”

“We’re going to make a batch like that, too,” Amalia promised.

To me, my mother said, “Have you dropped and broken anything?”

“No, ma’am. I’ve got it together.”

“I like that glass measuring cup. They don’t make them like that anymore.”

“I’ll be careful,” I said.

“Be careful with it,” she said, as if I’d said nothing, and she went back to the TV in the living room.

Amalia and I baked the cookies. We cleaned up. I didn’t break anything. And then we went next door to meet the new neighbors.

3

When we climbed the steps and set foot on the porch, we saw that the front door stood ajar. The sun remained slightly to the east, hot light slanting under the eaves

and painting a bright rhomboid on the floor. We stood on that illumined patch of gray-painted boards, as if on a trap door, while Amalia held the plate of cookies and I pressed the bell push. No one responded to the chimes, and I rang again.

After I'd rung the bell a third time, when it seemed obvious that no one was home, Amalia said, "So maybe it was a burglar last night. In spite of all the lights. I mean, a burglar wouldn't care about leaving the door open after himself."

Through the four-inch gap between door and jamb, I could see the shallow, shadowy foyer and the darker living room beyond. "Then why would a burglar bother to turn off the lights? Maybe something's wrong, someone needs help."

"We can't just barge in, Malcolm."

"Then what're we gonna do?"

Leaning close to the door, she called out, "Hello? Anyone home?"

The answering silence was worthy of our father when he stood on our back porch eating his breakfast sandwich.

Amalia called out again, and when no one responded, she pushed the door inward, so that we had a better view of the cramped foyer and the living room, where everything appeared to be furnished as it had been when Mr. Clockenwall had been alive. In the month since his passing, no one had come to dispose of his belongings.

After my sister called out again, louder than before, I said, "Maybe we should go home and call the police and report a burglary."

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“But if there hasn’t been a burglary, can you imagine the hell they’ll put us through for making that call?”

By “they,” she didn’t mean the police. Our mother liked nothing more than having a legitimate reason to criticize us. She’d peck and peck and peck at you for the littlest mistake, until you thought she was going to keep at it until you were nothing but bones. And our old man, who couldn’t stand the sound of our mother’s voice when she was in attack mode, would shout at Amalia and me, as if we were the ones making all the noise: “I’m just tryin’ to watch a little TV here and forget what a shitty day I had at work, okay? Is that okay with you two, is it?”

Repeating her admonition to me, I said, “We can’t barge in.”

“No, we can’t,” she agreed, as she stepped across the threshold with the plate of cookies. “But remember how Mr. Clockenwall wasn’t found for a whole day after he died. Someone might need help.”

I followed her, of course. I would have followed my saintly sister through the gates of Hell; by comparison, the house next door wasn’t particularly forbidding.

Although the sheers hanging over the windows allowed a little daylight to enter, the living room remained cloaked in shadows, a silent solemn chamber in which you might have expected to find a cadaver casketed for viewing.

Amalia flipped a wall switch that turned on a lamp beside an armchair.

A film of dust sheathed the table on which the lamp stood. A pair of reading glasses

lay beside a paperback that Mr. Clockenwall might have meant to read before his day turned as bad as any day could be. There were no signs of vandalism.

“We live next door,” Amalia called out. “We came to say hello.” She waited, listening. Then: “Hello? Is everything all right?”

In the kitchen, the refrigerator hummed. Breakfast dishes were on the table, a smear of egg yolk having turned hard and dark on the plate. Toast crumbs littered the Formica surface. The heart attack had felled Mr. Clockenwall here, perhaps as he’d risen from his meal, and no one had cleaned up after the coroner’s van took the body away.

“It’s terrible to live alone,” Amalia said.

The sadness in her voice seemed genuine, though Clockenwall had not been a man who reached out to his neighbors or sought in any way to alleviate his loneliness, if in fact he was lonely. He had been polite; and if he happened to be in his yard when you were in yours, he would spend a few minutes in agreeable conversation over the fence. No one considered him aloof or cold, only shy and on occasion melancholy. Some felt that perhaps in his past lay a tragedy with which he had never been able to make his peace, that the only companion with which he felt comfortable was sorrow.

Amalia was somewhat distressed. “Somebody should have cleaned up these dishes and emptied the refrigerator before things in it spoiled. Leaving it like this … it’s just wrong.”

I shrugged. “Maybe no one cared about him.”

My sister seemed to care about everyone, even making excuses for our parents at their worst, but now she said nothing.

I sighed. “Tell me you don’t mean we should clean this up.”

As she was about to answer, her attitude abruptly changed. She turned with a start and said, “Who, what?”

Perplexed, I said, “What—who, what?”

She frowned. “You didn’t hear that?”

“No. What didn’t I hear?”

“He said, ‘Melinda. Sweet Melinda.’ ”

“Who said?”

“It sounded like Mr. Clockenwall.”

When I was younger and my sister was not yet perfect, she had enjoyed spooking me by reporting with great conviction things like, Dad didn’t realize I was there, and he took off his face and under it was this lizard face! Or on one occasion, Oh, God, I saw Mom eating live spiders! She was so convincing that I needed about a year to become immune to her bizarre declarations, and for another year I pretended to believe them because it was such fun. Then she became interested in boys and lost interest in scaring me, although I was never so scared by any of her hoaxes as by a couple of the idiot guys she dated; even in those days, however, she was too smart to go out with a psychopathic maniac more than twice.

“Mr. Clockenwall is dead

and buried,” I reminded her.

“I know he’s dead and buried.” Holding the plate of cookies with her left hand, she rubbed the back of her neck with the right, as if smoothing away gooseflesh. “Or at least he’s dead.”

“I’m not nine anymore, sis.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I know Mom eats only dead spiders.”

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“I’m not joking with you, Malcolm.” As before, she startled and turned, as if toward a voice that I couldn’t hear.

“What now?”

“He said it again. ‘Sweet Melinda.’ ”

Suddenly she set out as if in search of the speaker, turning on lights as we entered each new space, and I followed her through the rest of the ground floor, turning off the lights in our wake. When we arrived at the front of the house once more, Amalia peered up the stairs toward the gloomy realm on the higher floor.

After she stood transfixed for a long moment, her face clenched with revulsion, and I asked what was happening now, and she said, “He’s disgusting. Obscene. Sick.”

Suspicious but half believing, I said, “What?”

“I won’t repeat what he said,” she declared, and she hurried out through the open front door.

I stood at the foot of the stairs, gazing up, wondering if she might be yanking my chain or if she might be serious, when I heard heavy footsteps in the upper hallway. And then a creaking arose from the stairs, as though somebody was moving from one tread to the next. The landing at the head of the lower flight creaked, too, and made a cracking noise, as if an old board had splintered a little under a punishing weight. The shadows on the stairs were not so deep that they could have concealed anyone. Whoever descended toward me, if anyone did, was no more apparent to the eye than

Claude Rains in that old movie The Invisible Man.

Bad things happened to good people when invisible men or their equivalent were around. I quickly left the house, pulled the front door shut behind me, and joined Amalia as she descended the porch steps and hurried along the front walk.

As we passed through the gate, I said, “What was that about?”

“I don’t want to talk about it now.”

“When do you want to talk about it?”

“I’ll let you know,” she assured me as she turned toward home.

I said, “I guess we’ll have to eat those cookies ourselves.”

“Yeah. She doesn’t want them with walnuts.”

“And he doesn’t want them with chocolate chips. And I don’t think the new neighbor has any interest in cookies at all.”

“There isn’t a new neighbor,” Amalia declared as we hurried alongside our house, under the limbs of the twisted sycamore.

“There’s something,” I said, glancing over the fence at the Clockenwall place.

4

Sitting in my room, at the window, watching the house next door through a gap in the otherwise closed draperies, I tried to remember everything I knew about Rupert Clockenwall. He had taught English at Jefferson Middle School for forty years. He

was scheduled to retire at sixty-two, but he died a month before the end of the school year.

During his career, he twice received the city's Best Teacher of the Year award. He had never been married. Some people thought he might be gay, but he had never been seen in the company of a companion of that persuasion. Those were the days when people were ignorant enough to think that all gay men minced or lisped, or both, and had no bones in their wrists. Mr. Clockenwall exhibited none of that behavior. He never went away on vacations. He said that he was a bad traveler and a homebody. He always declined with regrets when he was invited to a neighbor's house, and to express his gratitude for the invitation, he sent flowers. He never spoke an unkind word about anyone. His voice was soft and melodious. He had a warm smile. He liked to putter in the yard, and he grew amazing roses. Around the house, he favored Hush Puppies, khaki slacks, and long-sleeved plaid shirts; cardigans on cooler days. He'd once found an injured bird and nursed it back to health, releasing it when it could fly again. He always bought Girl Scout Cookies, usually ten or twelve boxes. When the local troop sold magazine subscriptions, he bought a lot of those, too, and when once they peddled hand-woven pot holders, he'd taken a dozen. He had a soft spot in his heart for Girl Scouts. He had no pets. He said that he was allergic to cats; dogs frightened him. He stood about five foot nine. He weighed maybe a hundred sixty pounds. Washed-out blue eyes. Pale-blond hair, going white. His face was no more memorable than a blank sheet of typing paper.

Rupert Clockenwall seemed to have been too bland a soul to come back from the grave on a haunt. The more that I thought about what had happened in his house earlier, the more certain I became that I had misunderstood it. After an hour, when I saw nothing of interest through the gap in my bedroom draperies, I went downstairs to help Amalia with her chores.

We worked together for half an hour, making the beds in our parents' room, using the vacuum cleaner, dusting, before I asked if she was ready to talk about what had

happened. She said no.

Forty minutes later, in the kitchen, after we had toted that barge and lifted that bale, as we were peeling carrots and potatoes for dinner, I asked her again, and she said, “Nothing happened.”

“Well, something did.”

Focused intently on the potato that she was skinning, Amalia said, “Something happened only if one or both of us insists it did. If both of us decide nothing happened, then nothing happened. You know what they say—if a tree falls in the forest and there’s no one there to see it, then it didn’t fall. Okay, all right, I know that’s not how it goes. If a tree falls in the forest and there’s no one to hear it, maybe it didn’t make a sound. But my version is a logical corollary. Entirely logical. No tree fell in the Clockenwall house, so there was nothing to hear or see. You’re twelve, so maybe that doesn’t make sense to you, but when you’ve had a few more years of math and a course in logic, you’ll understand. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“If nothing happened, what is it you don’t want to talk about?”

“Exactly,” she said.

“Are you scared or something?”

“There’s nothing to be scared of. Nothing happened.”

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“Well, at least now we’re talking about it,” I said.

She threw a ribbon of potato skin at me, and it stuck to my face, and I said, “Sibling abuse,” and she said, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

5

That evening, after we washed and dried the dinner dishes, but before the old man could tell me to take it to the garage, I went out there with my saxophone, while Amalia sat at the kitchen table, being smoked at by our mother and made to appreciate the reasons for the dreadful inadequacy of the mashed potatoes that she had served with the roast chicken, even though both our parents had taken second helpings.

I didn’t start playing right away, but listened to some cool big-band stuff. We had a cheap stereo in a corner of the garage and some records, including a number of vinyl platters from the 1930s that we’d found for next to nothing in a used-record store. I was in the mood for the band called Andy Kirk and His Clouds of Joy. Several times during the ’30s and early 1940s, they almost got famous, but never quite. Now, some thirty years later, I was a fan of their tenor saxist, Dick Wilson, and of Ted Donnelly, one of the best swing-band trombonists ever, though it was Mary Lou Williams on piano that fully captivated me. I sat on a crate and let “Froggy Bottom” wash over me twice and then “Walkin’ and Swingin’ ” before Amalia arrived.

We listened to “Roll ’Em,” which Mary Lou Williams had written, as good as big-band boogie-woogie gets, and when it was over, my always-energetic sister wasn’t jumping or finger-popping or in any way stoked by the music. She hadn’t brought her

clarinet. We weren't going to play together.

I said, "What's wrong?"

She stepped to the single small window, which faced toward our deceased neighbor's house, and the distilled sunlight of that early June evening gilded her

lovely face. "There was this time I was in the backyard, standing at the picnic table, working on an art project for school. I was really into it, and after a while I looked up and saw Clockenwall just the other side of the fence, staring at me. He was very … intense. I said hi, and he didn't respond, and he had this look, it almost seemed like hatred, but it wasn't just that. The day was warm, I was wearing shorts and a tank top, and suddenly I felt as if … as if I was naked. He wasn't anything like he'd always been before. He wasn't Teacher of the Year, that's for sure. He licked his lips. I mean, he made this huge production of licking them, staring at me so bold, I can't even describe how bold, with this need. Maybe there was hatred on his face, hatred and rage, but not entirely that, if you know what I mean."

I knew what she meant, all right. "What did you do?"

"I picked up my art supplies and took them inside."

"You didn't tell anyone?"

"I was too embarrassed to talk about it. Anyway, who was I going to tell? Dad was at work. When he comes home, he doesn't want anyone to get between him and that first beer. Mom was glued to afternoon game shows. I'd have rather put my hand in an alligator's mouth than distract her from Bill Cullen and The Price Is Right."

"You could have told me," I said.

“This was four years ago. You were eight, sweetie. You didn’t need to hear about something like that when you were only eight.”

“And you were only thirteen,” I said. “Man, what kind of creep was he?”

She turned from the garage window, and that square of golden sunshine backdropped her head. “It happened again, about six months later. I took some trash out to the alleyway to put it in the can. He wasn’t there at first, but when I turned to come back to the house, he was right behind me, like three feet away. I didn’t say anything, and neither did he, but he did that lip-licking thing again. And he … he put one hand on his crotch. I dodged past him. He didn’t reach for me or anything, and after that, nothing ever happened again.”

“I hate him,” I declared. “I’m glad he’s dead.”

She sat on a wheeled stool near the crate on which I perched, and she stared at her hands, which were clenched in her lap. “When we were over there today, I really heard him, Malcolm.”

“All right.”

“I really did. He said ‘Sweet Melinda.’ And then when we were in the foyer, looking up the front stairs, he said my name … my name and something filthy.”

She raised her head and met my eyes. This was no hoax. I didn’t know what to say.

“Stay away from that house, Malcolm.”

“Why would I want to go there again?”

“Stay away.”

“I will. Are you kidding? I’m creeped out. Jeez.”

“I mean it. Stay away.”

“Well, you better stay away, too.”

“I intend to stay away,” she said. “I know what I heard, and I never want to hear it again.”

“I didn’t know you believed in ghosts,” I said.

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“I didn’t. I do now. Stay away.”

We sat in silence for a while. At last I said I needed to listen to something that would soothe away the heebie-jeebies, and instead of one of the old vinyl platters, I put an album on the turntable, a collection of Glenn Miller’s best-known numbers. We liked rock ’n’ roll, but at heart we were throwbacks to another musical era.

Amalia listened to “In the Mood,” but just before the band swung into “Moonlight Serenade,” she said, “This isn’t going to settle my nerves. I’m going to bed and read. I’ve got this novel.” At the side door to the garage, she looked back and said, “Don’t stay out here after dark.”

“I always stay here after dark.”

“But not tonight,” she said. “Not for the next few nights.”

She was clearly frightened. I nodded. “Okay.”

After she had gone, I listened to “Moonlight Serenade” and then to “American Patrol,” after which I lifted the phonograph needle and returned it to the beginning of the album.

As “In the Mood” began, I left the garage and went into the alleyway. About forty minutes of daylight remained. I walked to the back gate of the Clockenwall property.

I was not a particularly brave lad of twelve. I well knew my limitations, and I was aware that if I ever got into a fight with another boy, I was less likely to beat him up than I was to knock myself out. In a confrontation with something supernatural, I would not fare well against an adversary more threatening than Casper the Friendly Ghost.

Nevertheless, I was compelled to cross the backyard of the Clockenwall place and climb the steps to the rear porch, because I loved my sister more than I loved myself, and I felt that it had fallen to me somehow to resolve this bizarre situation. I had never seen Amalia a fraction as disturbed as she had been when telling me about the lecherous teacher. She was fearless and resolute and more competent than anyone else I had ever known. I was loath to see her diminished by fear, and I was angered and depressed when I thought of her retreating to her bedroom and hiding behind a book, because that's what it seemed to me she was doing, although I would never have told her so.

When I crossed the porch of the Clockenwall house, I was not surprised to find the back door ajar, as the front door had been earlier. Stepping into the kitchen, where less sunlight penetrated than previously, I boldly switched on the overhead lights. If the spirit of a dead man had returned home a month after his funeral, there was no way to prowl his house without his knowledge; I mean, surely a ghost is omniscient as concerns what happens in the place that it haunts.

The dish smeared with dry egg yolk and the dirty flatware were on the table, across which toast crumbs were scattered as before. Clockenwall had not returned to clean up after himself.

Switching on lights, I went through the house to the front stairs, where something invisible to the eye had earlier descended. Facing the first flight, I stood listening, but there was only silence so deep that the house might not have been located in the city any longer, might have been enveloped by some bubble in space—time and set adrift

in eternity.

At last I thought to ask myself what I hoped to accomplish in that place. I wasn't an exorcist. My family didn't even attend a church. My parents weren't atheists; they were just indifferent to the issues of God and an afterlife, as they were indifferent to everything except what could be eaten, drunk, smoked, and watched on television without inspiring too much thinking. I had no good answer to the question that I'd asked myself; therefore, with what passed for logic in a twelve-year-old mind, I decided that I had been brought to that place by intuition and that I should trust it as a dog trusted its sense of smell.

When suddenly I heard a rapid pounding, I cringed and retreated from the staircase, but only until I realized that I had become aware of my heart drumming. Disappointed in myself, chagrined, I thrust my shoulders back and lifted my head and, telling myself the incredible lie that the Pomerantz family tree branched broadly with generations of warriors, I ascended to the second floor.

One of the good things about being twelve or younger is that you tend to believe that you'll live forever. Therefore, you take stupid risks with little hesitation, and sometimes the risk pays off. Except when it doesn't.

Upstairs, door by door, room by room, I searched for what I did not know, trusting my intuition to lead me to some revelation, some knowledge or instrument with which Clockenwall's spirit could be sent back where it belonged, if in fact it had returned from the Other Side to leer at my sister. In the Teacher of the Year's bedroom stood a desk where someone else might have put a vanity, and I was drawn toward it as an iron filing to a magnet.

Then a disturbing thing happened. With no memory of having sat down or of having opened any of the drawers, I was in the desk chair and had before me a scrapbook containing newspaper articles about a girl named Melinda Lee Harmony. Sweet

Melinda. She'd been a middle-school student who, three months before her thirteenth birthday, disappeared while walking home after classes. Some of the clippings were dated—all from 1949, eighteen years earlier. I pored through them with growing dread, but I couldn't stop turning pages, as though I had forfeited control of my body. The police, assisted by a large contingent of citizen volunteers, had searched the school grounds, surrounding neighborhoods, and Balfour Park, which lay along the route that the girl usually took from school to home. They found no trace of her. A reward was offered, never claimed. Members of her anguished family, her pastor, and a few teachers at her school spoke highly of her, this gentle and intelligent and charming child of great promise. One of the teachers was Rupert Clockenwall. Three photographs had been provided to the newspapers, all taken soon before she had gone missing. She had been a pretty girl, blond and slim, with a gamine smile, and as I stared at her, I heard myself say, "Such a delectable little tease."

7

I had no recollection of having put aside the scrapbook or of taking a thick diary from another desk drawer. As I paged through this new volume, in an almost dreamlike state, in the grip of cold fear but unable to act upon it, I saw that in handwriting of almost machinelike neatness and consistency, Clockenwall had recorded the events of Melinda Lee Harmony's captivity, beginning on the day he'd offered her a ride home until—I was compelled to page forward—the day that he killed her, seventeen months later. This was a journal that celebrated depravity, and in the entries that passed before my eyes, he regretted nothing except killing her, lamenting the sudden loss of control during which lust and violence had become for him one and the same thing.

I heard myself say, "Such a waste, such a pity, she was still so useful."

Again, I had no awareness of putting that volume aside or of retrieving from the desk another scrapbook, this one of more recent vintage. In it were articles clipped from

the student newspaper at the middle school that Amalia had attended, the school where Rupert Clockenwall had taught English. They were poems and little stories that she had wri

tten for that publication. He had somehow obtained her seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade class photos. I noticed the silver cross on a chain around her neck, which she had taken to wearing in those days but no longer wore. There were as well photos taken with a telephoto lens: a younger Amalia sitting on the front porch, standing in the backyard, going to and from the garage that was her safe harbor and mine. Clockenwall seemed to have stopped adding to the scrapbook when my sister was fifteen, and as I came to the blank pages that he had never used, I heard myself say, without intention or control, “A tasty little piece of tail, but too close to home. Too risky. Didn’t dare. Didn’t dare. Wish I had.”

With no recollection of getting up from the desk, leaving the bedroom, and descending the front stairs, I found myself in the kitchen. I was holding a filleting knife.

8

I tried to throw down the knife, but instead gripped it more tightly than ever. If I was in terror of leaving that house and going home with some unthinkable purpose, I don’t recall. I remained in a dreamlike state as I crossed the kitchen to an inner door, opened it, switched on the cellar lights, and went down the steep stairs to that lower realm.

In that windowless place, entirely below ground, with its block walls and earthen floor, I found a small wooden table and two chairs, as well as a bookcase containing volumes suitable for a girl twelve-going-on-thirteen, stories of horses and romance and adventure. On the floor lay a stained and moldering mattress, and in the concrete-block wall above it was fixed a ringbolt from which trailed a chain and manacle.

In the corner near the furnace, I stood swaying, gazing down at the hard-packed earth, from which had over time fluoresced both bright white and yellowish crystals finer than salt in patterns that were vaguely reminiscent of voodoo veves. Now Clockenwall shared with me his images—memories—of burying the murdered girl in a deep bed of powdered lime to facilitate decomposition and to control the odor. In my mind's eye, I saw him tamping a layer of soil atop the lime, weeping as he worked, weeping not for the girl but for the loss of his toy. Melinda had been in her grave for so many years that no foul odor lingered.

I looked up from the floor and stared at the knife, wondering for what purpose he had made me take it from a kitchen drawer.

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Upstairs, Amalia called my name.

9

Wide-eyed, wondering, Amalia came down the cellar stairs, her footfalls echoing hollowly off the plank treads. The novel that she had been reading failed to engage her, and she couldn't be distracted from thinking about the voice that had spoken to her in this house earlier. As twilight approached, she had looked out of her window and had seen the Clockenwall house filled with light once more.

"I went to the garage," she said, "you weren't there, but an album was playing, and I just knew where I'd find you. It's my fault you came here. I mean, what're you going to do when I tell you to stay away from this place, you being twelve and a boy and careening toward puberty? You're brave—okay?—but we should get out of here."

She had glanced at the mattress as she came off the stairs, but the horror of it registered with her only on second glance, when she seemed to see the ringbolt, the chain, and the manacle for the first time.

Yet surely she couldn't fully understand what had happened here. Maybe she'd never heard of Melinda Harmony, who had been kidnapped a year before Amalia was born. Remembering Mr. Clockenwall's creepy interest in her, however, my very bright sister seemed to deduce that the chain and the manacle were evidence of imprisonment and that the filthy mattress had served not merely as a place of rest. The color drained from her face, although when she turned her attention to me once more, she seemed perplexed but not afraid.

Desperate, suddenly breaking into a sweat, I tried to tell her to run—run!—but I was denied my voice.

“Malcolm? What have you found? What’s happened here?”

“Delicious memories,” I said, and though the voice I heard was mine, I was not the one who had spoken.

I had been standing with the knife held down at my side, against my leg. Now she saw it. “Sweetie, what’re you doing with a knife?” She looked toward the furnace, into darker corners of the cellar. “Is someone here, are you in danger?”

Moving toward her, I heard my voice declare, “If I’d seen you first, I never would have bothered with the other girl.”

Amalia’s eyes widened further, and she backed away from me.

At the head of the stairs, the door slammed shut. I figured that if she could get to the top of the steps ahead of me, the door would prove to be locked.

She was my sister, beloved, who had stayed in my room around the clock when I’d been eight and suffered with a case of the flu that nearly killed me. She was my sister, whose clarinet playing inspired me to find the music in me, to settle on the saxophone, which had fast become the key to my identity. I loved her as I loved no one else, as no others had allowed me to love them, and if I were to kill her under the influence of some malign spirit, I might as well then kill myself.

I was the one who lumbered and stumbled through life, who lacked physical grace, but in this case, Amalia was the one who misstepped, fell backward, and sat hard on the third step as I raised the knife. Her green eyes were as deep as an arctic sea, shining with cold fear, sudden terror.

As the knife reached the apex of its arc, I saw around her neck the silver cross that she had worn in middle school but never since. She must have put it on before leaving our house, as if she'd known that she would not find me in the garage, that once again she would have to enter this hateful place.

As the knife came down, I realized that she had bought the tiny silver cross on the silver chain and had begun wearing it when she'd been thirteen, after the first time she'd caught Rupert Clockenwall staring at her, the day that she'd been in our backyard working on the art project. She must have wanted to ward off his evil, to feel protected in this world where none of us is ever truly safe.

Down came the knife, with less force than Clockenwall wanted, with a different target than he intended. When the blade thrust deep into my thigh, I screamed, and with the scream, I cast him out.

A shriek ricocheted from wall to wall, issuing neither from me nor from Amalia, and in that windowless room, where a mere draft could have had no source, there sprang up not just a draft but a wind, cold on that summer night, churning around the cellar, spinning up dust and the soft white and yellow crystals that marked the grave, a wind that was the embodiment of inhuman rage.

I tore the knife from my thigh, threw it down, dropped to one knee, bleeding but not yet in pain, clamping one hand over the wound.

Amalia came to her feet as the wind seemed to gather itself into a battering ram, whereupon it slammed into her with such velocity, such force, that the rubber band holding her ponytail snapped, and her blond tresses stood on end as if she were a candle and her hair the flame. I thought that she would be lifted off her feet, and the pendant stood straight out from her, to the length of the chain, as though it would be torn from her and blown away. She seized it with one hand and held it to her throat.

Then I heard again the sound that had awakened me and drawn me to my window the previous night, when all this began, a sound like steel stropping steel. As before, it came three times, but now it sounded less like a sword drawn from a scabbard than like some great metal door scraping open across a threshold. The roaring, whistling wind seemed to blow away through that unseen door, and the cellar fell quiet, still, all dust drifting toward the floor.

Because Amalia always was as resilient as she was strong, as strong as she was smart, she knelt beside me, and wasting no time exclaiming about what we had just witnessed, she said, “Your leg, the wound, let me see.”

Blood had streamed between my fingers, darkened the leg of my slacks, spattered the floor, but when I took my hand away from the wound, my trousers were not ripped. In wonder, I raised my hand and saw that the blood dripping from it a moment earlier was nowhe

re to be seen. The pants were no longer stained, the floor without a single crimson spatter. The blade of the knife gleamed, as clean as if it had just been washed.

I got to my feet, physically as whole as I had been before I entered that house. Amalia rose, too, and met my eyes, and neither of us could speak. She put her arms around me, and I hugged her, and after a while we went up the stairs to the kitchen.

Together, we went through the quiet house, turning out the lights that I had left on. Before we departed, I showed her the scrapbook about Melinda Lee Harmony, the diary, and the scrapbook to the pages of which her own middle-school class photos had been fixed with Scotch tape.

Still, neither of us spoke. We had no need to put our recent experience into words, for we understood the meaning of it in our hearts.

We closed the door, descended the porch steps. Night took the last purple from the sky as we crossed Clockenwall's backyard.

At the rear gate, Amalia said, "So the Glenn Miller stuff didn't soothe your nerves."

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I said, “I should have played a Guy Lombardo album.”

10

We didn’t want to go back into that house ever again. We didn’t want to talk about what had happened there or be questioned about it.

Using a typewriter in a research room at the public library, my sister wrote a letter to the police, reporting in some detail what they would find in the Clockenwall residence. She made sure that she wiped all fingerprints from the paper and envelope before mailing it at a post office twelve blocks from our house.

Maybe they thought the letter was a hoax. But they had to check it out. The story was a sensation for a week, which was a long time in a year when the news was full of big stories about war in Vietnam and race riots in America’s cities.

Having found the scrapbook devoted to Amalia, the police came by to speak to her, and she told them how Mr. Clockenwall had spooked her on those two occasions when she was thirteen. But she said not a word regarding our adventure. Perhaps because she never lied and had about her a palpable air of truthfulness, they never thought to ask if she had recently been inside the house of murder or if she might be the one who had written the letter. I do not believe the cops were careless or incompetent in their investigation; what I think is, because of Amalia’s great good heart and the purity of her gentle soul, some Power that watches over us ensured that she would be spared the ordeal of being the object of a media frenzy.

She and I never again spoke of those events. There was nothing that needed to be

said, for we understood and accepted. Occasionally, however, my sister came to me and hugged me tightly for the longest time, and although she seemed to have no reason for doing so, we both knew the reason.

As I said, that was the summer when I met Jonah Kirk, who became my best friend for life, who loved Amalia as if she were his sister, too, and who has written so well of her in his book, The City. During the months thereafter, far more happened to us than we, at our most imaginative, could have foreseen, all of it different in character from what I've just told you here, with more wonder and delight, with no evil spirits but with worse.

For years, the Clockenwall house remained for sale, but no one would purchase it. When eventually it sold, the buyer tore it down and, with the city's permission, converted the property into a pocket park with a fountain where birds bathe and with benches where people sit to watch them and to rest from the stresses of the day. On the granite base of the fountain, a plaque bears only the name MELINDA LEE HARMONY, which means to say that she didn't truly die on that ground but lives there forever.