

Bob slammed his apartment door behind him, frantically throwing the deadbolt, the slide-chain, and even that little twisty-lock-thing down on the doorknob. Giving the door a tug just to be sure, he peered out through the peephole. To the casual observer, Bob's general demeanor might have come across as one of rampant paranoia, coupled with extreme anxiety and/or a sense of taught urgency; in actuality, it wasn't nearly that complex-- he was just scared shitless.

"Nobody there, nobody followed you, nobodynobodynobodynobody...."

He stood there babbling like that for a good forty seconds, leaning up against the door with his face in his hands. His entire body was trembling, which could have been explained by an overwhelming rush of fear and emotion, or simply by the fact that he had just spent the last twenty minutes in 14 degree weather wearing only a t-shirt, blue jeans, and a pair of worn-out work boots. Either way, the effect was quite dramatic.

C'mon, Bob-O, you're losing it.... For some reason, he's always called himself *Bob-O* during these little intra-conversational seizures. You've gotta calm down, Bob-O..., gotta think. You've gotta just relax for a few minutes....

In his defense, Bob did try to relax; he really did. Unfortunately, effort alone doesn't count for spit in this world and he was soon racing around his apartment, making sure that all the windows were locked and that no one was hiding in any of the closets. Finally, he made certain that the sawed-off broom handle was in its proper place, lying in the sliding patio door track so that the door could not be pried open from outside. Bob, like most savvy people, knew full well that no burglar/serial killer would ever think of simply throwing a brick through the huge glass door and of removing the stupid little stick-- that wouldn't be ethical.

His perimeter secured, he thought about fixing some dinner but decided that his stomach was still too jittery for food. Instead he grabbed a bottle of beer from the refrigerator. It was that

brand with the coyote in their commercial; he could never remember what it was called, but he felt certain that it was the absolute newest beer on the market and that made him feel a little better. Ambling over to the couch, he plopped himself down, sinking deep into the squishy bowels of cushiondom.

Things were slowly getting back to normal for Bob. He had a beer in his hand, he had taken a few one-hits of really primo weed that he had pinched from his boss' desk drawer last Saturday, and he was more or less pleasantly trapped inside his supportless, yet comfy sofa. "Retail's for sucks," he always liked to say about his sofa. "...and Garage Sales aren't," he always liked to add.

He sat there looking very much like the willing victim in some low-grade Japanese horror film about a giant brown plaidosaurus, but something still didn't seem right. He still had that feeling of uncertainty, that sensation of doubt nagging at the back of his brain. Smiling, he picked up his universal remote, aimed, and fired. Instantly the room lit up with the reassuring image of a beautiful woman who seemed genuinely elated about her husband's choice in anti-diareah medication. Bob leaned back and waited patiently for the latest reality television show to resume—something about a group of gay cops and a frathouse full of hidden cameras-- all the while clutching the massive infrared controller in his left hand. "Gotta weigh at least three pounds," he said proudly. "...at least."

It's late now, at least by Bob's standards-- almost 11:15. We've skipped the details of Bob's evening at home because no matter how hard you try, you simply can not make five hours of sit-coms, microwave burritos, and video game football seem interesting.

It's later now, at least by Bob's standards-- almost 11:16. Normally he would be fast asleep at this hour, forty-five minutes into one of his favorite dreams; most likely the one about his neighbor, Tina, as the naughty dental hygienist. This evening, however, even Tina's suggestive remarks about proper suction can't coax Bob into letting down his guard. He's done his best to push the day's events far away, to hide them under his proverbial mattress like he used to do with those dirty magazines. But, just as it had happened that fateful day when his mom had decided to change the sheets, Bob was now forced to face the unpleasantness of his situation. Afraid to go

to sleep, even with the lights on, he realized that he would have to think about what had happened; he would have to come to grips with the harsh reality of Death.

Mortality was something new to Bob. Both his parents were still living, all four of his grandparents were alive, and his great-grandparents had died before he was born. Bob had no siblings to lose, his friends were all healthy, his co-workers fit as fiddles-- even the family cat, Yoplait, was about to turn thirty-seven and had already been registered with the Guinness Book as the world's oldest domestic tabby still living in a Mid-western suburb.

So Bob sat there in his couch, staring blankly at the TV screen, finally letting the events of his day seep back into his brain. His lower lip began to tremble slightly. With tears welling up in his eyes, Bob took another huge drag from the one-hitter and began to cough and choke his way into a series of flashbacks. If it helps you at all, try to think of these more as *Kung-Fu* sorts of flashbacks-- very surreal and meaningful, and not as the *Brady Bunch* variety-- you know, like when Peter broke that ugly vase: really repetitive and annoying. I still have nightmares about that playing ball in the house line. *Mom always said...*

#1. *The Morning Bus Ride*

Bob was smiling. The day had started off pretty darned well. He had hot water for his entire shower, his hair had dried just as he liked it, and there hadn't been a single one of those greasy brown spots on his breakfast banana. And now, here he was on the bus to work-- running on time for a change-- and toasty warm in his brand new winter coat. Ah, paradise..., he thought as a young boy across the aisle spit a piece of gum onto a businessman's hairpiece. Bob shot the boy a half-hearted scowl, but couldn't help thinking that the wad of green drool was an improvement over the rug's original color.

Laughing to himself, he looked out the window at bustling Main Street. This time of day was always busy with commuters running around like injured calves caught up in the middle of a stampede, and all the shopkeepers hawking their bagels and coffee like con men in a medicine show. Bob laughed to himself again, wondering why he had always had such a huge affinity for simile. It's like a disease, he smirked.

Overdone gags aside, Bob couldn't help noticing a strikingly beautiful young woman down on the sidewalk. The bus had stopped for a red light and so had Bob. He openly stared, marveling at how cute she looked when she picked out a blueberry bagel from the vendor's bin,

and how precious she seemed when she paid for it with exact change. He was entranced by her beauty, impressed by her intelligence-- as she had chosen to wait on the curb rather than darting out in front of oncoming traffic. Ahhhhhh....

Suddenly, though, Bob began to feel uneasy. He wasn't sure what was wrong, but something definitely was-- wrong, that is. Agitated, he looked around the scene, his gaze coming to rest on a tall dark figure walking toward his newfound angel. The lone figure was clothed in some kind of long dark coat, his face obstructed from view, but Bob could still somehow sense the stranger's evil intent.

He looked back at his damsel, who was munching away on her bagel oblivious to danger; so trusting, so naive, so dead. "Noooo!" Bob had screamed. "Look out! Behind you!"

He had yelled and motioned at the woman, but to no avail; the noise of the traffic had been too much to overcome. So Bob had sat helpless as the dark figure walked up behind his tragic princess and kicked her squarely in the ass-- really hard. She never had a chance, flying forward with the cutest little squeak of surprise, landing adorably under the tires of a passing truck. Bob watched in disbelief as the dark assassin threw up his fists like a fieldgoal kicker whose last-minute heroics have just won the Superbowl, and then just strolled away down the street. Nobody seemed to notice him, nobody stopped him; he just walked away and disappeared into the crowd.

Enraged, Bob came extremely close to marching off that bus and telling the police exactly what had happened-- that this was no accident-- that this was cold-blooded murder. Alas, he had already been late to work twice this week and just couldn't afford another tardy notice. As the bus pulled away from the horrifying scene, Bob closed his eyes. It was no use though, no matter how hard he tried he just couldn't shake off the image of her half-eaten bagel hovering in mid-air, while her coffee ran light brown in the gutter....

#2. Lunch in the Park

Bob had almost bolted out the warehouse door when he heard the lunch bell. He had been a basketcase all morning, the tragic events of his bus ride slam-dancing inside his skull. He had tried to forget, tried to relax; even seven cups of black coffee and an entire pack of smokes didn't seem to help. He needed to get outside, out of the stifling work environment. He needed to go someplace where he could feel at ease.

Walking quickly, he headed over to Sturgeon's Park, a pleasant little pond environment

named after Walter F. Sturgeon, the pioneering legislator who had personally converted over 7,000 acres of wasted preserve lands into useable landfill and sewer treatment projects. There was even a bronze plaque with his name on it somewhere, but it was usually covered up by piles of abandoned trash bags and used car batteries. Bob always felt better here, watching the kids skating on the frozen pond and marveling at the fact that geese can apparently survive by eating disposable diapers and cigarette butts. It's good here, Bob-O, he thought.

He leaned back on a bench and began to eat his sack lunch, oblivious to the frigid winter air. He nodded reverently to a small flock of geese, aware of the ultimate sacrifice that many of their noble brethren had made in order to fill the lining of his new down jacket. Munching away on his sandwich, he decided that he did indeed like this new brand of cheese singles. The box had been very colorful and proudly boasted that it was 100% dairy free--containing only genuine synthetic Cheesethrin III, produced entirely in a sanitized lab and not in some disgusting cow's belly. *All the fat, none of the mold!* For a fleeting moment, everything was again right with his world.

"Help! Somebody help my brother!"

Bob looked up, startled. He had heard the terrified cries of the young girl, but couldn't immediately find her. "Oh no," he mumbled. "Oh God, it can't be!" But if God was to have actually answered him, it would've gone something like this: "Oh yes it can, Bob...."

Bob was paralyzed. He tried to get up off the bench but he was frozen (figuratively speaking, of course; it wasn't that cold out). He saw the little girl kneeling down on the ice, trying to pull her younger brother out of the water. He couldn't believe it, but the girl didn't even seem to notice the dark figure standing next to her. As she pulled her brother up, the murderous bastard stepped on the boy's head and pushed downward. This scene was even more horrifying than that morning's.

The little girl gave a Herculean effort to save her doomed little brother, fighting with all her will to win the struggle. Miraculously, she somehow managed to pull her brother up onto the ice and out of danger, or so it had seemed, until the dark bastard pulled out some sort of long axe-like thing and sent them both careening into the water like Gretzky taking a slap shot.

Bob had screamed out at the stranger, tried to scare him away, but it didn't work. The two children splashed around for a few moments and then they were gone. Bob's brain was shrieking at him, things like: *Get the hell out of here, idiot!* and *Get the hell out of here, moron!* But, despite the sensible pleas of his grey matter, Bob just sat and watched as the pedocidal freak skated away, occasionally reaching out and hacking a goose as he went. Bob wasn't certain, but he thought he could hear the psycho humming.

#3. The Rest of the Day in a Nutshell

Bob was nearing a nervous breakdown at the park. Even after he had finally convinced his ass to get up off the bench and run away, he couldn't stop thinking about what he had witnessed, and what it meant. He was perhaps the only witness to the heinous acts of a serial killer. The vicious murder of an angelic commuter had been bad enough, but now the monster had tortured and drowned two innocent children.

Bob didn't go back to work after the park; he couldn't. He didn't go home either, at least not right away. I'll skip over the rest of his flashbacks because they're all pretty much the same: Bob goes somewhere; Bob sees the dark stranger; the dark stranger kills someone; Bob inches closer and closer to the precipice I like to call "whacked out." To make a long story short, Bob sees an old man smacked in the head with a really big rock; four Cubscouts and a ferret are tossed down an open sewer hole; a family of five drive into a brick wall for no apparent reason; the list goes on-- all in all, twenty-seven people die in front of Bob between the hours of 8:45 A.M. and 3:30 P.M.

For a man who's never even had to flush a goldfish down the toilet, this was no small thing. Bob wandered aimlessly for almost an hour, weaving his way around town, no rhyme or reason to hold him back. As he virtually sleepwalked back across the ice at Sturgeon Park, he absent-mindedly took off his down jacket and covered up one of the fallen geese. It was a solemn and symbolic gesture on Bob's part but he wouldn't remember one bit of it. He was, in layman's terms, way out there at this point.

And now Bob was sitting in his sofa, the tears flowing freely down his cheeks. He felt somehow better, having faced his fears like a man-- albeit, like a slightly inebriated and heavily sedated man, but we each do what we can. He spent the next few moments remembering each of the victims, and trying to get up off his couch.

He still wasn't all that keen on going to bed, though, all that darkness and unawareness still kind of bothering him. And so, after much deliberation, he decided that a bath was exactly what he needed right now. A hot, soothing soak in a well-lit area would fix him right up. Then he could get up early in the morning, march down to the police station like a good citizen, and spill his guts. He felt a great sense of relief just deciding on that last part.

Within a matter of moments, he was lying in a tub of hot, sudsy water. He leaned back and closed his eyes, letting the heat soothe his aching muscles and his even achier brain. He soon began to realize that everything would be all right in the end; it always was. “Things just have a way of working out, Bob-O,” he said aloud.

“I couldn’t agree more..., Bob -O,” answered a gravelly voice.

Bob’s eyes opened just in time to see the tall dark stranger standing menacingly over him. For the first time, he could see the bleached-bone skull of a face, the burning red eyes, the inhuman smile. And he couldn’t help noticing the four-slice toaster in the ghoul’s right hand either-- the one his mom had given him for a housewarming gift.

“Awww, c’mon,” whined Bob. “I’m naked for God’s sake. No one else was naked...”

The stranger laughed a low, rumbling, hideous laugh. Then he dropped the toaster into the tub. Bob shook and spasmed for a moment or two and then was still. He never even noticed that the toaster wasn’t plugged in....