Wet Pain

Terence Taylor

I once saw a sign on a pillar in a New York City subway station, wet pain, written in bright red block letters on glossy white card stock. Back then I thought it was a joke or mistake, meant to read wet pain, but maybe I was wrong; maybe it was a warning of a different kind and I just missed the point because I didn’t know enough to understand what I was reading.

That’s how I feel about what happened to my good buddy, Dean, that I saw the danger signs all along but never realized what they meant, what they really warned me about. Not until he opened my eyes and I saw a side of the world I never wanted to see.

It all started when Dean moved back to New Orleans.

We met almost five years ago, on a job.

Dean was master electrician and I was tech director for a live multimedia press conference announcing the UPN Network’s new fall season. The client reps for the ad agency handling it were assholes, cut corners in all the wrong places, so we had to cover each other to survive. We worked together on floor plans for his lighting and my video equipment to do what they wanted with what they gave us, and made it through a two-week job from hell without killing each other or anyone else.

We stayed in touch. No one expected a white reformed redneck from New Orleans and a black gay geek from Park Slope like me to become best friends, least of all us, but we did. We were opposites in taste, education, upbringing, everything but how we saw the world
and thought it should work; Dean called us "twin brothers of different mothers..."

I made regular treks out to New Jersey for dinner with the family, but didn’t know his wife, Lynn, was a black girl from the Bronx until my first visit almost a year after meeting Dean. I must have looked surprised when a stylish black woman opened the door instead of the suburban southern belle I’d expected. A short Afro crowned a dark pretty face, big gold hoops hung on either side of her broad smile. She feigned shock when she saw me, raised her eyebrows, and widened her eyes as she turned back to yell at her husband.

"Omigod, Dean! You didn’t tell me he was a Negro!"

I loved her immediately.

After dinner we discussed Dean’s colorblindness over beers on the back porch while their three-year-old, Milton, an only child then, ran around the yard in circles. Dean was built like a tractor, six feet tall copped with a military-style crew cut. Lynn was small, compact; she nestled under Dean’s free arm on the couch while we sipped beer and the two of us talked about her husband like he wasn’t there.

“Dean says since he doesn’t care about race he sees no reason to bring it up. I think it’s passive-aggressive. You just know he only married me to see if it would kill his cracker family...”

“Worth it, even if I am stuck with her,” Dean said with a grin. She smacked him lightly. He winked at me, took a deep swig of beer.

“Anyway. I say ignoring color implies something’s wrong, when difference should be recognized and celebrated,” finished Lynn.

“Just sounds like a cheap way for them to get off the hook to me,” I said. “Black people? What black people? Everybody looks the same to me!”

“Yeah, I get it.” Lynn slapped Dean on the thigh with a grin. “No black people, no reparations! ‘Slavery? What slavery? We don’t owe you shit!’” We laughed like coconspirators, while Dean waggled his empty bottle until Lynn passed him another beer.

“Y’all need to keep me on your side,” he said as he twisted off the cap. “We remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends...”

“Smart-ass,” said Lynn. “He quotes King, but doesn’t fool me. Shakespeare said even the Devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.”

“Never marry a teacher,” laughed Dean. Lynn kissed him hard, and he kissed her back; they kissed a lot, had an easy affection for each other I envied.

Between jobs I’d hang with Dean at his place or mine, kick back, knock down tequilas, and take apart the world. Most of the time we talked by telephone. I had a headset that let me chat with both hands free while I drew floor plans at home on my Mac. He’d call on his Bluetooth earpiece from location while his crew set up lights and we’d burn up free long-distance by the hour while we both worked.

Lately more conversations were in person, less about Dean’s dreams than nightmares about the war and a looming recession. A downturn in New York’s economy after the Twin Tower bombings cut back on jobs for both of us; a few years of the Iraq war hadn’t made things any better. I was single with low expenses in a rent-controlled Brooklyn apartment, but Dean had a family to support in Jersey, a wife and two kids.

Debts grew and no work was in sight; his wife’s teaching salary wasn’t enough to pay the bills. They’d already gone through their savings and started cashing out their IRAs, no matter how much they lost in early withdrawal.

“Freelance sucks, bruh. You know what they say,” he said with a sigh. “Sometimes ya gotta chew off a leg to set yourself free.”

Then his mother died.

I heard the phone ring as I walked upstairs with my grocery bags, but couldn’t get inside my third-floor apartment in time to answer before it went to voice mail. There was a short message when I checked, no name, but I knew it was Dean.

“Greg, give me a call on cell, will ya? No big, bruh. Just need an ear, okay?”

He was down in New Orleans with the movers, getting furniture and boxes unloaded and into his mother’s house before the wife and kids arrived from New Jersey to help unpack. I called him back on my headset phone while I put away groceries.

“Dean! How’s life in the Big Easy?”

“Nuthin’ easy ‘bout it, bruh.” He paused. I heard a ring top pop, followed by what sounded like a long swallow from a tall cold beer. “Got everything in, so I’m takin’ time off with my ol’ pal Sam Sixpack. Don’t think he’s long for this world.”
“How’s the place look?”
 “Like hell, but always did. Still can’t believe what this dump is worth. Glad now I didn’t burn it down as a kid. Lord knows I tried.”

He grew up in New Orleans, a short walk from the main tourist drag of the French Quarter. Dean and his generation moved out first chance they got, but his widowed mother stayed in the family house until the end, in a quiet neighborhood called Marigny.

“Named after Bernard Marigny. His only piece of history’s bringing crops to America in the 1800s and sellin’ off the land we live on to pay his debts.”

“From losing at craps?” I asked.

“My roots have cursed me, bruh. It’s why my fortunes rise and fall.” Dean had been out of work for over a year, had a family to support.

“You know what houses in the French Quarter sellin’ for now? Shit. Had no choice but to move back, and cash out Ma’s place to stake a new start.”

The move to New Orleans was only temporary. Lynn made that clear. Even in the early twenty-first century she didn’t look forward to being the black half of an interracial couple in what she still considered the Deep South, no matter how “New” everyone said it was.

I finished unpacking groceries and started making lunch, commiserated with Dean about the twin nightmares of a major move and low cash flow. He sounded more down than usual; I wrote it off to the stress of moving. It was only later I’d look back and see it as the start of something more. By the time I made a sandwich and heated a bowl of soup, he’d finished three beers and was opening his fourth. I signed off to eat, but couldn’t get the last thing he said out of my head.

“They say you can’t go home again, bruh, but they’re wrong. It’s not that you can’t, only that you shouldn’t. Sometimes leaving home’s the best thing to do, and you should stay away like you had sense.”

“Too many memories?”

“Too many ghosts.”

I laughed as I sat at the table to eat. “Don’t tell me you believe in ghosts.”

“Don’t matter, bruh,” he said. “They just have to believe in you.”

That was the phrase that struck me.

They just have to believe in you.

* * *

Dean called back a few days later.

His mother had lived on the ground floor of her worn yellow clapboard corner house and kept everything else stored in the small narrow rooms upstairs, packed so full over the years Dean could barely get in to clean. He’d dig in, found things he’d forgotten and others he never knew about. Old family photos, even a few original daguerreotypes, trunks of antique clothes, books, family papers. Some he packed in garbage bags to throw out, some he put aside to be appraised.

“Might be sumpin’ worth a few bucks. Maybe I’ll give it all to some local museum. The Dean Duvall Collection.”

“Yeah, they could name a wing after you.”

“Be some ‘preciation, bruh. More’n I get round here.”

Dean’s speech was slurred, his accent the bad cliché movie redneck he always affected when drunk. It sounded like he’d been sittin’ with Sam Six-pack again, plus a few of his pals. I looked at the clock. It seemed a little early even for Dean to be in the tank.

“What do you mean?”

“Damn wife, f’true. Don’t matter what you do, never enough.”

“It’s just the move. She’ll settle down once you get the place cleared out.”

“That’s what they say.”

I tried to lighten the mood. “Hey, how’s the famous food down there? You have a chance to go out and check some of your old haunts?”

“Only haunts I seen been up here, bruh. No time or money for fun. Wife makes sure of that.”

“You’re upstairs now?” For some reason the news startled me, sent a shudder through my body, like some childhood fear was triggered by the thought of him crouched in a long low dust-filled upper room while we talked, sunlight streaming through small windows to cast long shadows while he labored late into the afternoon, alone with me and the ghosts.

“Where else I gon’ be, bruh? Takin’ care of business while we talk. All I do’s take care of business…. .”

We talked awhile longer, but conversation never strayed far from complaints about his wife and kids weighing him down, giving him a hard time. I wanted to be supportive but felt drowned in his self-pity.
When it was clear I couldn’t pull him out of it I had to escape before I sank, told him I needed to get to a store before it closed, the best excuse I could think of to get off the phone.

“No problem, bruh. Catch ya later. Oh, and keep an eye out. Got a little surprise headed your way...”

He wouldn’t say what it was, no matter how hard I pressed. The way he’d been talking I wasn’t sure what to expect. I hung up and poured a drink, stared at my computer screen instead of working or going out, and wondered what was happening to the man I’d known in New York.

A few days later my present arrived.

The bell rang and the mailman called me downstairs to sign for an oversized delivery sent Priority Mail. It was a long flat package wrapped in taped-together brown paper bags, thickly padded inside with cardboard for protection, DO NOT BEND! and FRAGILE! PLEASE DO NOT FOLD! scrawled all over it in Dean’s blocky print. I carried my gift upstairs and opened it on the dining table where I had room to lay it out flat.

I unwrapped it and carefully removed the packing.

Inside was an old panoramic photograph over three feet long, brittle, cracked, the black and white image gently faded to sepia browns on thick, yellowed paper. It was a huge crowd at the base of the Washington Monument, ghostly pale women and children in the foreground, scattered in a semicircle around the edges of an open clearing.

Outnumbering them many times was a multitude of men that extended back to the horizon as far as the eye could see, dressed in dark street clothes or light robes, with and without hoods, many with left arms outstretched in a salute to the monument, to their fellow Ku Klux Klansmen, to their families, their country, and their God.

In the middle of the photo, Klansmen and their women stood around the edges of a massive American flag, long enough to take twenty to hold aloft at chest level, displayed proudly as if at a patriotic event, and on that day it was. I felt a chill despite Brooklyn’s late summer heat.

The casual audacity of it scared me the most, the easy social exchanges among people in the crowd, that the photographer had snapped the picture and labeled it in precise handwritten text at the bottom, as if it were a quaint scene of any other approved public assembly:

Gathering of the Klans
Virginia Klans arrive at Sylvan Theatre
Potomac Park * Washington, D.C. * August 8, 1925

I went to my computer, did a quick Google, and confirmed that there had been a big meeting in Washington that year and read some history of the first Klan, founded in 1865 by Masons. They donned masks to inspire terror in their enemies; the white robes and masks were either to imitate the Knights Templar who fought in the Crusades or to pose as avenging spirits of Confederate dead come back as ghouls.

One site said by 1925, the Klan numbered four million, its members unlikely to be convicted by local southern juries even if arrested. I stopped reading and called Dean on the phone. He picked up after one ring, knew it was me without asking.

“Bruh! Guess you got my little package.”

“Pretty big package for a white man,” I joked.

“Yeah, well, saw it and thought of you.” He laughed, long and loud. “Not sure how to take that, but thanks. I’m touched. It’s probably a collectible.”

“Don’t say I never give yuh nothin’.”

“Did Lynn see it?” She’d marched in demonstrations against Bush and the Iraq war, organized petitions for feminist and civil rights issues; I could only imagine what she had to say when he brought it downstairs.

Dean laughed. “Yeah, took one look and said if I wanted to live with it, I could move my picture and skinny white ass into the garage.”

“No surprise there.”

“Guess not. Nearly told the bitch where she could put it, but like they say, you gotta pick your battles.”

I paused. Despite their differences, Dean and Lynn were one of the most functional couples I knew. “Since when are you two fighting?”

“Ain’t no fight, bruh. Just me layin’ down law on who’s boss around here. You know what they say, give ’em an inch and they’ll take your balls!” He guffawed.
I tried to laugh it off, but was disturbed by the force of his cracks about Lynn. Dean had made the usual guy jokes about his wife in the past, but never anything this hostile. I asked to speak to her later and he either didn’t hear or ignored me.

“Me, bruh, I think it’s a piece of history. Real Americana.”

“I’m with you. What’s the story? You related to any of these guys?”

“Hell, probably all of ’em. You know how inbred those old bastards were.” He laughed and coughed.

“Did you know you had Klan fans in the family?”

“Bruh, I’m learning more than I need to know. You’d never believe the shit I found. Scrapbooks of lynch photos, newspaper and magazine clippings, pages of hangings and burnings, fuckin’ museum of the misbegotten. My roots. ‘Fraid some’s worth somethin’, or I’d burn it all.” He started to drift. “Need cash now. Never get this place cleared in time...” When I asked to talk to Lynn again, Dean made an excuse and rambled on until he ran down like a spent windup toy. While I considered ways to get past him to talk to her, I got off the phone and rewrapped the photograph.

I took it to a local frame shop in Park Slope. The teenaged white clerk behind the counter did a double take when he realized what it was, smiled shyly while he took my order as if in on some secret joke between us. His manager came in from lunch as we finished up, a professional-looking young woman, styled with current fashion magazine cover perfection. She glanced at the photo with a polite smile of feigned interest that dropped as soon she read the caption.

“Is this for a museum or gallery?” she asked, pushing back frosted blond hair for a better look.

“It was a gift. A friend found it in his mother’s house in New Orleans.”

She arched her eyebrows, as if wondering what kind of friend he really was. “Well, I wouldn’t want to live with it.”

“Sometimes it’s good to remember it wasn’t so long ago.”

“I suppose...” She looked unconvinced. “I know my grandparents don’t keep postcards of Auschwitz.”

“They were there. The rest of us need reminders.”

“I suppose,” she repeated, smiled professionally but failed to conceal a scowl as she turned to walk away. I pictured her coming back that night, turning off the alarm, unlocking the door, and tearing the picture to pieces with her well-manicured nails, savaging it with the sharp stiletto heels of her designer shoes, then dismissed the image. This was the civilized Slope where we publicly aired our differences in the light of day, not Dean’s inscrutable South that sent me souvenirs of a time when they were settled under cover of darkness.

I got busy on location for a job and lost touch with Dean. After a few more calls like the last one I was glad for the break. We traded messages on voice mail, but by the time my job was over, I was too tired to deal with one of his repetitious rants, so I put off calling back until I’d regained my strength. Hopefully by then things would have improved.

The phone rang one night after I fell asleep on the couch watching TV. It woke me enough to fumble for the phone without thinking to check caller ID, and I caught it just before it went to voice mail.

“Yah?” I said.

“Bout time! Who do I kill to hear back from you, bruh?”

“Dean.” I stretched, carried the phone to the kitchen to get coffee and a drink. A double. “Sorry, I got tied up on a gig. Had to spend more time on-site than I thought. You always say beggars can’t be choosy.”

“I ain’t mad at you. Do what you gotta, I’ll do the same.”

He was so drunk I could barely understand him. It was exactly the call I’d been trying to avoid. “How’s Lynn?”

He snorted, blew his nose, and laughed. “You know what they say, the darker the berry, the sweeter the juice... Bitch is fine, boy, why, you want some of that?”

“Boy? Excuse me?” My voice went up like a Richard Pryor routine. “Don’t call me boy, asshole. And stop calling Lynn a bitch. I don’t like it and I doubt she does.” I’d had arguments with Dean over politics and art, but never really been mad at him until now.

His voice came back low and deep, dead serious. “I’ll call you whatever I want to, boy. You ain’t got no right ta tell me what to do, no more’n that black bitch downstairs.”

There was a moment when I was going to respond with an easy retort, tell his cracker ass what I thought as usual, but there was something in his voice that stopped me. When he said those words it hadn’t been the slurred accents of the drunk who called me. It was the voice of authority, clear and decisive, stating a truth. I wouldn’t
be challenging Dean, but everything he thought and believed in. I wasn't sure enough of what that was anymore to start a fight. Not without knowing what I was up against.

"We'll talk later. When you sober up," I said.

"Ain't drunk, boy. I'm high on life." He laughed like that was some kind of joke. "Yeah, that's it. High on..." He started to cough again, from a chest thick with phlegm.

"Enough with this boy shit, okay?"

Dean wheezed as he chuckled into the phone. "High on lives, boy. We high on lives..."

I disconnected and turned up the TV to drown my thoughts.

I'd never been called boy by anyone before, and to have a good friend be first made it all the worse. I felt trapped in the apartment, the scene of the crime, and needed to get out, so I called a nearby friend and asked him to meet me at Excelsior, a local gay bar only a few blocks from us.

Winston was tall, dark, and dressed to kill as always, already posed cocktail in hand at the long curved wooden bar when I arrived. He'd just had his shoulder-length dreadlocks done, still moist and glistening with fresh oils, and toyed with them while we talked.

It was a quiet night at the bar, still early, and the jukebox played soft music instead of blasting dance hits. Excelsior was like any neighborhood bar, only gay, one of the few bars I'd ever felt comfortable hanging in. I'd met Winston there when he'd introduced himself to one of my friends who appealed to him. They lasted one night, but Winston and I ended up friends for years.

"What can I say, honey?" he said after I told him about my grim conversations with Dean, raved and ranted the rage out of my system. "I'm from Louisiana. White folk down there can be that way. Friends for years until you hit a rough patch that shows you who they really are. He's just getting back to his racist roots."

"I can't believe that."

"I tell you true. It's back nature. When the choice is between you and their own..." He waved a hand to finish the rest of the thought while he downed the last of his drink.

I told him he was crazy. I told him he was wrong. I told myself to stay calm and give Dean time to redeem himself.

"Sometimes friends need a vacation from each other, boo. Let it go," Winston said as I finished my beer. "Forget it and him."

We walked out the door and hugged as we said good-bye. There was a crash of breaking glass against the sidewalk behind us as we heard voices yell, "Faggots!" from the street, then the roar of an engine.

People ran out of the bar before Winston and I understood what had happened and described it to us. A car full of teenagers was passing when one of the kids threw a bottle while the others jeered and cheered him on; then they took off through a red light. Regulars made sure broken glass hadn't hit us while the owner, ordinarily a quiet gentle man, ran out with a cell phone in his hand, snapped out orders to his burly partner behind him.

"I'm on hold with the local precinct. Did anyone get a plate number?" Someone waved, and he went to talk to her while I checked out Winston. He was furious.

"Goddamn them! How dare they! Goddamn motherfuckers!" He stamped back and forth in front of the bar, cursed while people tried to console him, or encouraged him to let it out. The owner came back over to me.

"Lord, Greg, I am so sorry. The cops are on their way. I don't know what to say. We've been open for years and that's never happened. Never. Come in if you need a drink while you wait. On the house." Winston headed back inside before I could answer for either of us. He turned at the door and gestured to the street, in the direction the car had sped off.

"Pack nature," he said, and disappeared inside.

Over the next week I noticed a rise in news stories about hate crimes: synagogues and cars vandalized with swastikas, fires in Baptist churches, Hassidic Jews attacked by Latin teens, black men beaten with bats by a white gang in Howard Beach, a turbaned Sikh assaulted for the Twin Towers. I was extra watchful on the subway after a news story about an outpatient off his meds who'd pushed a girl onto the tracks, stopped wearing my MP3 player so I could keep my ears open for suspicious sounds behind me on the street. I couldn't tell if the surge was real or if what happened outside the bar made me pay more attention to stories that were always there. It was as if whatever shadow Dean was living under had made its way up here to look for me.

I picked up a voice-mail message that my picture was ready, and
stopped on my way back from the city to pick it up. When I got it home I saw they'd done a great job, despite the manager's reservations. The matte was a narrow strip of ivory with a thin bloodred border on the inside. The frame was rounded, high-gloss bloodred to match the border. The best place to put it seemed to be over my desk, so the long-dead Klansmen could watch over me while I worked at my computer.

When I was done hanging it I sat in my chair with a shot of tequila to take a look. Smoldering eyes stared down in disapproval, an allied assembly of racists who would gladly have lynched me for being the free nigger coxswain I was. I was everything they'd tried to prevent; I thought trapped in framed glass their world was harmless, frozen in the past, too far away to hurt me, but Dean had proved me wrong.

I stared up at the panorama, examined faces and details while I tried to forget my last conversation with him, tried to let the anger die down, but drink only fueled my fury. The rest of the night was spent brooding, as I gulped tequila and smoked weed, tried not to call Dean and start a new fight, used all my years in therapy to try to understand what made him change. I'd picked a bad combination; the tequila broke down my defenses, left me open to paranoid fantasies inspired by the weed. They came all too easily and made sense when I was stoned.

There were only two explanations, internal or external.

If the answer was internal, Dean was having a mental breakdown. The expenses and pressure of the move had been too much, even for him. He was striking out at the only ones in reach, his family and me. If it was external...

All I needed to spur my stoned fantasy was the photograph in front of me. The crowd of Klansmen swarmed in a ring like white blood cells gathered to engulf invaders, a mass of individuals united to think and act as one killing organism. What if evil wasn't born of any single thought but was the product of a group mind, spread through the body of society like a virus that ate into healthy heads and converted them, made them its own?

What if there was an evil infecting America, demons, haunts, call them hungry ghosts? Something that followed us from the old world and made its home in the heartland where it grew and nourished itself on lynchings, serial killings, race riots, and state executions. It could have started in Spain during the Crusades, accidentally unleashed by the same Knights Templar that inspired early Klan leaders, Crusaders foolish enough to test powers they didn't understand and couldn't control.

Maybe alchemy or incantations woke an ancient hunger that followed them to inspire the tortures of the Inquisition, the violence of the French Revolution, sent somber pilgrims across the sea to murder natives for their land, advised judges to hold witch-hunts in Salem, donned hoods of the Ku Klux Klan to spread terror through the South, ordered officials to inter Japanese Americans and drop the atomic bomb, while its forebears in Europe bred the Holocaust, traveled with soldiers to My Lai and Abu Ghraib, pushed misfortune into disaster, whenever wherever it could to make things worse, fed our fear of each other to nourish itself. I didn't know what it was, what form it took; maybe it was hidden in all our hearts, passed down from generation to generation like a congenital disease.

So here was Dean, freshly infected by the Old South he'd fled. Whatever it was had slept buried in boxes of his family's racist memorabilia, waited for the right host, and woke when it found Dean in its reach, weak, afraid, and alone, sank in its fangs, fed on his soul, and regurgitated what was left back into his brain like poison.

That was the hate I heard, not Dean's, but the raw fury of the hungry ghosts of America, speaking through Dean's mouth like ventriloquists through a dummy.

I fell asleep on the couch in front of the photo, sure I had it all figured out, and was going to let Dean know first thing in the morning.

I woke with my worst hangover since high school.

There'd been some major epiphany the night before, but the details escaped me, scraped away with the rest of my memories of the night by pain. I cleaned up as well as I could, put dishes and glasses in the sink before I made coffee. There were scribbles on a pad on the desk, a map or diagram like a family tree with roots in Jerusalem ending in New Orleans, branches through Europe and North America, "Knights Templar" and "Ku Klux Klan" scrawled at either end. I remembered something about evil as organic or viral, that the photo had seemed significant; all that really remained was a churning in my stomach, a sense of foreboding, that there was something very wrong with Dean and not just a drinking problem.
I decided to call Lynn later and ask her how she felt. It was possible I was only overreacting to Dean blowing off more steam than usual. It was a tense time for them; I had to remember that when I brought up the subject with her.

In the living room I turned on the TV. After 9/11 the biggest change in my life was that I turned on local news as soon as I woke up, to see what had happened overnight. It looked like a quiet morning until they got to the weather.

While I sipped coffee and washed down a handful of aspirins for my head, the forecast went from New York’s heat wave to a hurricane off the coast of Florida called Katrina. I didn’t pay attention at first, but when they started talking evacuation and New Orleans I turned it up, heard enough to make me swallow my pride and call Dean.

The phone rang for a while. No machine or voice mail picked up. I imagined the sound ringing through the worn yellow house, echoing off bare cracked walls. I got ready to hang up. Maybe they’d left already. The ringing stopped. There was silence, then Dean’s voice, rough, as if he’d been sleeping. Or drinking.

“Yeah?”

“It’s me. I’ve been hearing bad weather reports…”

“Bruh, wassup?” He dropped the phone. I heard it rattle as he picked it up and put it back in his ear. “I’m busy here.”

“Yeah, look, there’s a class-four hurricane coming in, they’re talking about evacuating New Orleans.”

“S’what damn bitch downstairs says. Not leavin’ my home, boy. Don’t need damn niggers tellin’ me what to do. Niggers and illegals why I ain’t got no work, why decent God-fearin’ white men can’t find jobs no more…” His breathing was heavy, labored. I knew Dean had a temper; I’d seen him reduce teamsters to near tears, but he’d never lashed out at me.

“Slow down. Stop.” I held it together, kept myself from launching into a speech. “This isn’t like you.”

“Maybe you don’t know me good as you thought.”

“No. I know you. Something’s wrong. It’s like something down there…”

Dean laughed it off. “What, boy? Go ahead and say it.”

I couldn’t.

A flash went off in my head and I saw the photograph.

I remembered everything I’d thought sitting in front of it the night before, as insane as it all seemed now. The infectious pack nature of ancient evil accidentally unleashed by the Knights Templar and carried to the new world like a plague. Dean taunted me as if he knew exactly what was in my head, dared me to say the words and hear how ridiculous they sounded out loud.

“Say what’s on your mind, boy.”

It was as impossible for me to believe Dean was possessed by evil spirits that fed on racism and fear, as it was to believe he’d always been like this, that his easy smile and our long hours of conversation had been a mask, a pretense. That was more terrifying than believing in monsters.

“What is it, boy? You think I been bit by a hungry ghost? Superstitious enough to believe in nigger crap like that?” He started humming, some old rock relic I couldn’t quite make out. I heard things move in the background, like he was pushing boxes around, or digging through them like he’d lost something.

“You have to get out of there. Forget this fight. Go downstairs, pack some bags, lock up, and get the family out of town for a few days. Just go to the airport, I’ll charge tickets, you can fly up here…”

“Can’t leave. Got work to do, boy. Maybe your kind don’t get that, but down here we take care of business.”

“Let me talk to Lynn.”

I heard a dial tone and got a busy signal every time I called back. After a few tries I got the message and left for a drink to slow the creeping dread in my gut.

Excelsior was having another quiet night.

There were still enough people for me to blend in and be alone in the crowd. I ordered a beer and before I’d half finished it saw a blond white guy in his late twenties notice me from the end of the bar. I wasn’t in the mood for company, but before I could break eye contact he smiled and wandered my way. He wasn’t my usual type, small, wiry, and a little too friendly, like a terrier, but cute.

“Hey,” he said when he reached my side, and signaled the bartender as if he was just there to order.

I nodded.

“I don’t usually see many black guys here. Too bad.”

“Yeah, well, at these prices, you won’t see many more.”
He pulled out a twenty and slapped it down on the bar. “Next one's on me, then. Gotta keep you coming back.”

“I'm kidding,” I said. “It's an old joke, about a bartender and a horse.” I let him buy my next beer, anyway.

“Yeah? Comparing yourself to a horse?” He swayed a little, rested his hand on my thigh as his smile broadened. I could tell he was more than a few beers ahead of me. “What's funny about that?”

“What? No...” I laughed and started to explain, realized we were past any pretense of intelligent conversation. He leaned closer and I let him kiss me as his fingers explored the front of my pants, found what he was looking for, and squeezed. His mouth tasted of beer and cigarettes, but his tongue was warm and wet in my mouth, and his hand was doing a good job of convincing me to let him go further.

I didn't bring guys home from bars often. The few nights I did were like this one, when all I needed was someone warm beside me to pull my mind from whatever bothered me back to my body and its needs. We left our beers unfinished and walked the few blocks to my place.

Outside, back in the real world, we looked like a couple of straight buddies barhopping down Fifth Avenue, while he whispered dirty comments under his breath about what he'd do to me once I got him home.

We raced up the stairs and into my hot apartment, tumbled onto my bed, moist shadows in the dark, undressed each other, and twisted on the sheets like snakes tying each other into knots until I heard the words hiss out of his wet lips...

“Yeah, that's it. That's my sweet nigger.”

I shoved him away, rolled out of bed, and turned on the light, stared at him like I'd just walked in on a naked stranger.

“Oh, okay,” I said. “I don't need that right now.”

“Wrong?” He looked sincerely baffled as he stood, his pale boner poked up like a raised eyebrow. “Shit, what I said? Everybody says it. No big deal anymore, right? Hip-hop made it okay, they say it on MTV and BET all the time, know what I mean, mah niggah?” He said the last with a broad urban accent, laughed as if it was funny, then saw I hadn't joined him.

“Do you know how many black parents and grandparents died to keep me from being called that? I don't care how you spell it. You go to go. Now. Get the fuck out of my house, faggot.” I shook my head, pulled on my pants.

“Damn, bro,” he started, but stopped when he caught the new look I gave him and put on his clothes.

“Yeah. Not so funny now, is it, queer? Didn't we make those words okay, too?”

I walked him out, silent, as furious at myself as with him for playing his hot black stud long enough for him to think he could say those words and have them excite me. After he left, I double-looked the door behind him, as if that could keep out what I was trying to escape.

Whatever it was.

The storm was coming.

They were past warning; it was on its way, tore along the Florida coast. I flipped channels to follow the coverage, stayed whenever I saw long lines of cars leaving New Orleans, the mayor and the governor of Louisiana urging citizens to abandon their homes and get to safety.

The hurricane was hyped so hard by the media it was hard to believe they were serious, that it could really be that bad. What they predicted sounded epic, the kind of biblical disaster we were used to seeing in other countries on TV. The idea that New Orleans could be washed out of existence seemed insane despite digital simulations that showed us how and why; how could anyone in power leave levees that unprotected in a city built below sea level? I stopped only to make dinner, watched coverage until I fell asleep on the couch as the sun went down.

The phone rang. I woke in the dark.

“Hey, boy.”

It was Dean. A bad connection or my imagination made his voice sound distorted, off-pitch; it slid in and out of range like a digital movie effect.

“Can you hear it, boy?”

I reached over and turned on the light next to the couch. The room looked the same as always, possessions intact, the clutter I never keep cleared for long still strewn, but it all felt alien, like I woke up in free fall, my apartment inexplicably in outer space. There
was an air of exploration, like I was in a new world where anything could happen, finding my footing for the first time.

“It’ll be here soon.”

“What’s that? The storm?”

He laughed, the same choked chortle I’d heard before, like he was dying of consumption. “Ain’t no storm. It’s the dark that’s comin’. Not dark like you, nigger, but real dark, deep dark, deeper than night, blacker than black, so deep nothing gets out. It’s calling me, boy, like God called to Abraham. It’s awake and hungry and ain’t going back to sleep until it’s been fed.”

I froze; his words echoed the fantasy that haunted me since the night I’d fallen asleep in front of the panorama. I’d never admitted it to him, never spoken the words aloud. There was no way for him to know. “What are you talking about, buddy? Doesn’t sound like you.”

“You sure right there, boy.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re so bright. What do you think?”

I looked up at the sepia-toned Klansmen over my desk. Some looked directly into the camera like they could see me, made me half afraid Dean could see what they saw, that they were all connected across time and space. “Cut it out.”

“Why? Not so sure there’s not somethin’ out there can push people past the limit? Put on in the cake, turn a simple muggin’ into vicious murder, date rape into a weeklong torture session? Not so sure you’re always in control?” His voice was soft, seductive, an old-time movie country lawyer selling his case to the jury, Daniel Webster defending the Devil.

“You’re talking crazy.” I was frozen, unable, unwilling to believe what I feared the most.

“You want to hear crazy? Listen to this, nigger.” He was on his feet, walked downstairs to the tiled kitchen wearing the headset phone.

“Hey,” I started, but he cut me off.

“What?” Dean laughed and coughed at the same time; one rolled into the other, almost a death rattle, dry but filled with mucus. “You ain’t a nigger? Any more’n that nigger bitch asleep in the bedroom?”

“Stop it.”

“Stop what, cocksucker? I’m just getting started.”

He laughed again and I knew this wasn’t some kind of game or sick practical joke. Money stress, the move, something had pushed him too far to come back, over some edge I hadn’t seen coming—that or something else. I heard kitchen drawers open and close, silverware rattle.

A butcher knife clanged as it hit a cutting board.

I recognized the sound because I knew the knife, had used it to help make dinner in their Jersey home, sharpened it myself the last time I was there and chastised Dean for not keeping a better edge on the blade. I wondered if he’d taken my advice, wondered how sharp the knife was now as I listened to his footsteps leave the tiled kitchen and walk into silence on the carpeted hall.

“Hey, what’s up?” I asked, tried to sound casual.

“Just cleaning house, boy. Got work to do. Some folks don’t seem to know their place. But I’ll be taking care of business every day, and every way...”

He started singing the old Bachman Turner Overdrive song aloud. I recognized it when I heard the lyrics; it was what he’d been humming for weeks upstairs while he talked to me on the phone. The way he chanted the words broke the spell that held me frozen. The only place he could be going was to the bedroom.

With a butcher knife.

I stood up with no idea where to go. To the police? The airport? Even the fastest flight would get me there hours too late. I couldn’t hang up as long as I could use the phone to hear what Dean was doing, and I couldn’t call his local precinct on my cell without him hearing me.

I started to panic, then stopped. There was still one thing I could do. I went to my computer and searched for the police station nearest the house in Marigny, found the precinct closest to them and an e-mail address, sent a short but explicit note that explained what was happening, where, and that I was on the phone with him now. Then I sent it again a hundred times.

“Dean? What’s going on, there, buddy?”

“Gonna put her down, bruh, put the black bitch down like a rabid dog, and take care of her little black bastards. Then we’re comin’ fer you, boy, every last one of you, until every nigger knows their place.”

He kept humming the song, moving to the back of the house a step at a time with a little laugh every now and then. To be sure the police
got my message I found their fax number and computer-faxed fifty copies of the note in large type so someone would be sure to notice it pouring out of the machine. For once I was glad to be a geek.

"Listen to me, Dean—"

"Shhh... Bitch is still asleep."

In my earpiece I heard the bedroom door creak open, Lynn's sleepy voice in the background, too slurred to make out what she said.

"Hey, baby," whispered Dean. I heard Lynn gasp and try to scream; instead there was the sound of struggle, a punch, and I heard the breath go out of her with a dull thump. I remembered how much bigger Dean was, imagined him throwing Lynn to the bed like a rag doll.

"Damn it! What the fuck are you doing?" I shouted into the phone, helpless to stop him any other way.

"Quiet, boy, got my hands full right now." His voice was strained, breathless. Lynn screamed for the children to run, until he gagged her. I heard sheets rip; Dean's breath came in short bursts as they struggled.

"Jesus Christ!"

"Don't you take the name of our Lord in vain, motherfucker," he snarled. "God don't care what happens to this nigga bitch any more'n he cares about your black ass."

I listened to him hum that damned song as he went about his work. "Still there? What do you think, bruh? Is Dean at work here? Or somethin' else?"

He headed down the hall to the kids' room. I heard them weep as he entered, pictured Dean shoving seven-year-old Milton back down the hall to the master bedroom by the neck, two-year-old Shana tucked under his other arm like a football. Dean wouldn't need the knife to handle the kids. I heard him throw them to the floor, slap them to shut them up while he bound them.

A new e-mail came in from the police that my messages had been received. "Is this for real? We're in the middle of a citywide evacuation... ."

I typed a fast reply, "I swear to God, I have him on the phone now trying to slow him down, you have my permission to tap into my line if you have to verify," and hit Send, waiting until they confirmed to relax. I just had to keep him talking until they got there. I tried to keep the excitement out of my voice.

"Dean? You still there?"

"Yeah, boy."

The children's panicked howls had subsided to sobs; all I could hear from Lynn were moans and muffled cries through her gag as Dean snickered.

"They say beauty's skin deep, don't they, bruh? That true, nigga? Let's take a look."

There was a wet rip and new shrieks from Lynn; then she must have passed out from the pain; when I didn't hear her anymore I couldn't hold back tears. I felt helpless, even knowing help was on the way. The only question was if it would be in time.

"In the name of God," I said. "If there's anything of you left in there, stop this before it's too late."

"You started this, boy. You needed proof. Satisfied? Believe in us now, nigga?"

I must have screamed, and it all poured out, the rage, the fear and pain, and I denied him at the top of my lungs; I didn't believe, it wasn't anything but Dean at work and he was going to burn in hell if there was one, and if there wasn't I would build one to hold him... . I don't know what else I said; it was drowned out by the sound of sirens in the background as the police finally came, close enough that he knew he could either finish his task or flee. I prayed Dean was still sane enough to run.

He hissed into the phone, "You did this, boy. Don't know how, but it was you, you nigga bastard. We comin' fer you, boy. Comin' fer you... ."

And the line went dead.

Someone from the precinct had the mercy to call an hour later to let me know Lynn and the kids were safe, the longest hour of my life. They found Lynn tied spread-eagle, tortured, bleeding, the kids hog-tied on the floor, forced to face the bed. They couldn't find Dean. He got away before they could get inside.

I lost contact with Lynn and the kids until friends told me they'd been safely evacuated after the rescue to her mother's house in the Bronx.
“The kids are fine as they can be,” she said. “The house sounds like it’s in one piece. Our street wasn’t hit bad, no flooding, just lost a few windows and shingles. Neighbors next door rode out the storm, they’re keeping me posted when they can.” There was a brief almost unnoticeable pause. “Still no word about Dean,” she added, as if he’d wandered off at the mall.

“How are you?”

“Oh, well. Everything works. Thank you for that. If he’d had more time …” She sighed, tried to laugh it off. “I won’t be wearing shorts or sleeveless tops for a while, but didn’t much anyway.”

I never asked what Dean did to her in the bedroom that night, what the children were forced to watch. All I knew was what I heard; that was bad enough. I was afraid to know any more. Facing what Dean was capable of meant either admitting I hadn’t known him at all, or that something else wore my friend like a Halloween costume and tried to destroy everything he loved.

I watched CNN news coverage of the hurricane aftermath with the same mute disbelief I felt witnessing the fall of the Twin Towers. It was hard to believe it was real, happening to us as we’d seen it happen to so many others in the last few years of earthquakes and tsunamis.

As days went by I couldn’t tell if the crisis was under control as the government claimed or if the city had descended into the surreal hell described on the news. Official reports tried to play down the crime, TV showed waterlogged devastation and hinted at unspeakable acts committed in the stadium, while online blogs painted a worse picture of the troops’ behavior. Poor black residents were made to look like animals, patrolling soldiers portrayed as storm troopers; if Dean was host to something that fed on fear, it was feast ing now.

I went to a party planned before the hurricane that became a benefit for Katrina victims. I’d planned to skip it, but Winston talked me into it.

“It’s a healing thing, baby. Not just for you, but all of us, so you’re going. Meet you at your place at seven.”

It was at a loft in DUMBO, high under the Brooklyn Bridge, with a view of Manhattan outside factory-sized windows. I saw faces I hadn’t seen in ages, heard stories about friends and family in affected areas who were struggling to recover or helping others. The events of the last week started to blur with more drinks, passed joints, and mellow music, lulled by human voices exchanging soft consolation.

My cell phone rang, and I opened it. The signal was weak, so I stepped out onto the fire escape to get better reception. The number was blocked; the screen said Unknown Caller. I slipped the earpiece on and pushed the Talk button.

“Yes?”

“Hey, bru.”

“Dean.” It wasn’t a question. I had no doubt it was Dean’s voice, weak as the signal was, even if I knew it couldn’t be him.

“Oh, my nig,” the thing that spoke like Dean breathed into my ear, from a place no calls could come from, would not come for days. “Oh, nig, the things we have seen. You would tear your eyes from their sockets to forget them.” Then it laughed, a thick sound still filled with phlegm. “But not us, bru. Not us. We like to watch.”

I shivered even though the air outside was warm as I listened to the impossible voice, looked back through the window to watch the party still going on; music played, couples swayed on the dance floor, a distant world flickering light-years away, one I could see but never reach again in my lifetime.

“Where are you?”

“Like to know that, wouldn’t you, nig? Like to know we’re not waitin’ downstairs for you, in your closet or under your bed. Never know for sure, will yuh, bru?”

I didn’t want to hear the answer but had to ask. “Who are you?”

“Call us Legion, for we are many.”

“You lie,” I said. “There are no demons. Just excuses.”

“Come on, boy,” it said. “All people really want is a way to blame bad on someone else, God or the Devil. An easy explanation for why yall take an eye for an eye instead of turnin’ the other cheek, why niggers get dragged to death behind trucks and fags tied up to freeze to death, even now. . . .

“So it ain’t your fault. It’s ours. Don’t say we never give yuh nothin’.” I could hear the sounds of female shrieks and deep male laughter in the background. It chuckled again, just like Dean. “Gotta run. Got a date with an angel.”

The screams grew louder as the phone approached them and disconnected, after one last laugh from my dead good buddy.
They found me asleep on the fire escape, phone still in my ear, said I told them I dreamed I was on the phone with a long-lost friend, and then was in New Orleans looking for him.

I said I stood on dry land under a full moon at night, looked east at a flooded road ahead, water as far as the eye could see. The flood whispered to me like sirens of old; I felt a pull, looked down, and saw water rise over my feet and up my shins before I could back out.

Hushed voices rose with the waters as they covered my waist, my shoulders and head. Fully submerged I could hear them clearly as I watched my last breath bubble up out of my mouth to the surface, now yards away. My ears filled with an infernal chorus of ‘Dixie’ as I struggled to ascend...

I looked down and saw the singers drift up from the depths in tattered Confederate gray, white hooded robes, sheriff uniforms, army fatigues, anonymous black suits, faceless men bound only by hate and fear. They sang as one, swung swords, sticks, billy clubs, pistols, rifles from muskets to AK-47s in rhythm to the steady beat of an unseen drum, like the inhuman sound of a giant heart.

Dean rose to the head of the hellish choir, a noose in one hand; his other gripped my ankle and pulled me back down as I fought my way up toward the sky...

They found Dean a few weeks later—what was left—wedged between a Dumpster and the side of a truck someone had loaded with the last of their worldly goods or loot, too late to get out of town. Dean’s death went unnoticed in the torrent of news from Katrina, the far greater losses and atrocities; it was a small story worthy of note to only a few, but it was our story and we took it hard.

Life quieted down after that; Dean’s recovery led to our own.

I went to New Orleans a few months after the waters receded to help Lynn sell the house. The city was like an invalid who’d nearly died, still unsure of its chances for full recovery. It was stronger, saner, had regained some of its old fire, but there was a haunted look behind the eyes, the look of one who’d seen how close the end could be and would never be the same again. It was the same look I saw in Lynn’s eyes when she thought no one was looking.

Except for missing roof tiles and broken windows, Dean’s old family home was intact and ironically worth even more as survivors who’d lost homes looked for replacements. It sold for more than enough to move Lynn and the kids back North near her family. I flew back to Brooklyn where I felt at ease, if not entirely safe; it would be hard to feel safe anywhere for a long time.

When I got home, I took down the panorama of the Klan.

I was tempted to burn it, but that would mean I believed it was part of something supernatural, that it held contaminating magic of its own that could somehow influence others or even me. I was too civilized for that. Then I remembered what Dean had said; it doesn’t matter whether you believe in ghosts if they believe in you. The rational part of me wrapped the photograph and donated it to the Museum of Intolerance in Dean’s name before I called in the villagers with torches.

No one could tell me if Dean was dead or alive the night of the party. Water and weather conditions made it impossible. He was dead, case closed; they told Lynn she was lucky to get a body, much less an autopsy. She was still in shock over losing him, too distraught to remember or discuss changes in Dean before the end. I was left to find my own answers. There were none.

I don’t know what’s harder to live with, that Dean went off the deep end and fell back on the only solid ground he could find or that he confessed to being consumed by an ancient hunger. I’ll never know which was true, whether he needed a shrink or an exorcist, and I’m not sure I want to know.

I once saw a sign on a pillar in a New York City subway station, WET PAINT, written in bright red block letters on glossy white card stock. Back then I thought it was a joke or mistake, meant to read WET PAINT, but I could be wrong; as much as I don’t want to believe it, maybe sometimes a sign that says WET PAINT means exactly that.