

Premonitions of a Janitor

By Josh Ballard

Not many people know when or how they will die. In this instance, David is no different from you or me. He is different, however, in two aspects; first, he is scarred terribly from the waist up, his torso a mess of transplanted skin and black swirls. This damage was done by an exploding fuel tank, brought about by a disgruntled ex-employee at the factory in which he had worked. Two were killed, and David was disfigured for the rest of his life. A pity.

Secondly, David is different from you and I in that he is newly married. Unless you have been married, or are about to, you cannot know the joy it brings. I have not, so I can only imagine. But David, despite the fact that he would die in less than a year, was very happy indeed.

Massachusetts glistened with the first snow of winter, and the sun gleamed behind a mass of pale, white clouds. In the reception hall, David, dressed in a designer suit, was ending a thanks to the guests, and a toast to his marriage.

"...And I thank you for coming, and wish you all an early 'Merry Christmas'!" the guests clapped in a dignified way, smiling gently, some wiping tears, some closer friends giving a simple thumbs up.

David smiled, skin crinkling slightly, and after excusing himself, left down the hall to the restroom. As he walked, a man, wearing grey, leaned against the wall, and reading a magazine, spoke.

"It's a real shame," he said, offhandedly. "All that champagne going to waste."

David was struck odd by this. "What do you mean?"

"I'd go get some if I were you," he muttered, turning a corner. "Before it's too late."

David wanted to inquire this further, but the man was gone from sight. In any case, his bladder was drawing his attention away, and he rushed down the hall to the restroom, skin crinkling as he went.

As David made his way back towards the hall, the grey tiles brought his mind back to the thought of the strange man. What did he mean, he thought, and how was the champagne going to waste? On this thought, he abruptly knocked over a waitress, sending the tray of champagne across the alabaster tiles, crystal goblets shattering in their wake. The music

stopped suddenly, and David quickly helped the girl up, apologizing thoroughly, and promising to go for a janitor.

He found one, tapping him on the shoulder.

“Excuse me, but there's been an accident in the hall, could you-

“Such a shame, really,” the janitor turned, dressed in grey. It was the strange man. His name tag read 'Charlie', and his hair was frizzled and tawny, sticking out all over. David was surprised, to say the least.

“Now wait, how did you know that-

“The champagne was going to fall?”

“Yes, because I don't see any way-

Charlie stopped him. “David, I see things that others don't, let's leave it at that for now. But tell me, are you busy tomorrow?”

“Not really, no. But what-

“I'd like you to stop by my shop tomorrow, I've got a business proposition for you,” he handed him a card. It read 'CHARLIE' in simple, black letters, followed by an address, number, and a single, red asterisk at its center. The place was set in the business section of town, not far from David's office. Charlie was already turning the corner as David looked up from the bit of paper.

“See you soon,” Charlie said, just as he passed out of David's view.

“Now wait just a-

But Charlie had gone again, and was nowhere to be seen.

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The next day, David took the bus to the address on the card.(His car was in the shop.) It was small, rundown, and looked ancient next to the massive, shining pillars of steel, glass, and concrete. Above the door, the name 'CHARLIE' in bright, red letters stood out from the oaken frame, and the doorknob squeaked as it turned.

David stepped into the dusty room, lit dimly by a single bulb on the ceiling, painting the tattered papers and drywall with an artificial glow. Charlie, dressed in a deep grey, sat at an old desk, leaning in a second-hand swivel chair, leather, with gold tassels on the arms. He held out a bottle of root beer. “Thirsty?”

David gladly took the bottle, smiling politely. “Thank you. Root beer’s-

“Your favorite, I know,” Charlie interjected. “Don’t worry, I haven’t been stalking you. I simply see things that most others don’t.”

“Like that champagne fiasco,” noted David, sitting in the dusty chair. “Now, how did you know that was going to happen?”

Charlie smiled, and steepled his fingers, leaning back. “Tell me, David, what would you do different if you knew ten years ago what you know now?”

“I asked you a question first; how did you know?” he pressed calmly, crossing his arms, skin crinkling softly in his suit.

“Very well, I can wait. Do me a favor, look outside and see how many red cars pass before the stop light.”

David reluctantly stood, and peered outside the door. Behind him, he heard a rustling of paper and the quick scribble of a pen. He counted five before the red light.

“Alright, now what was the point of tha-”, he stopped a moment. Charlie was holding up a cue card, and written on it was the number ‘5’ in bright, green ink. David knew Charlie couldn’t see the street from where he was. How odd, he thought.

“Like I said, David, I see things that others don’t. This is what I am offering. My services and advice in exchange for a small fee.”

David was a keen businessman, so he was wary of terms such as ‘small fee’. Quite often those ‘small fees’ turned into very large ones after the first week. He raised an eyebrow.

“Excuse me for being skeptical, but having five friends with red cars drive by does not make a psychic. I think I’ll leave.”

“You think I’m trying to trick you?” asked Charlie.

“In all fairness, yes.”

Charlie closed his eyes. They seemed to roll about beneath his eyelids, searching, writhing, spinning like billiard balls. His eyes shot open suddenly, and settled.

“Tomorrow, you will wake up with a sore leg. When you go to the shower, you will see a grey spider perched above the faucet, and your shampoo will have left a green streak across the side, having fallen over in the night. Your wife will make pancakes, but burn the first batch. Finally, your morning paper will be missing some print on the front page, and as such will read ‘ICE ALL’.” he recited this as if prepared from a script. David scoffed

twice during the list of events. First, the only shampoo I own is blue, he thought. Second, my wife is a practiced chef, and has never burned a crumb of food since college. Charlie smiled, and crossed his arms.

“If I am wrong in the slightest, I will pay you double my weekly fee for your trouble. If I'm right, however, I'll be wearing a red cap and black shoes.”

David smirked, and rolled his eyes. “Alright then, Cleo, I'll see you tomorrow.” he turned to leave.

“I'm sure you will, David.” smiled Charlie, leaning even further back.

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The next morning, David awoke with a terrible stinging in his leg. Upon further inspection, it seemed that a bug of some kind had bitten him in his sleep. David was somewhat disturbed at this, but his pride made him dismiss it as a coincidence.

He pulled the curtain of his shower aside. He couldn't stop himself from gasping. There was a small, grey spider sitting in a web above the faucet, and his blue shampoo had fallen in the night, leaving a thick, green streak, caused by a hardening of the dye. After killing the spider, he quickly showered and dressed himself, edgy despite his best efforts.

Upon combing his hair, he smelled smoke from the kitchen; he blanched. He rushed down the stairs, and he felt his mouth drop as his wife scraped charred batter from a pan.

“Oh, honey, it's the first time I burned something since college!” she exclaimed. “I was talking to Diane, and must have forgotten to put the margarine in. Isn't that funny?”

He mumbled something to her, turning to the front door. He had to see.

With shaking hands, he unfolded the paper. The headline should have read 'PRICES FALL', but the ink on the P, R, S, and F was uneven and faded. It read, clearly, 'ICE ALL' Despite the fact that it was half past nine in the morning, David quickly went to his liquor cabinet.

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He got onto the bus, and sat near the middle (his car would be finished this afternoon). His nerves were still shaky. Charlie had been authentic. He was psychic alright, for there was no practical way he could have rigged all those events. No one would have gone through that much trouble for a few hundred dollars. He sipped his coffee steadily.

“So, David, how were those pancakes?”, Charlie asked, putting his paper down. He wore a

red cap, and a smile.

David snorted his coffee out of shock, right into his nose. For those who haven't had hot coffee in their nasal passages, it is not a pleasant experience. David coughed for several minutes before he caught his breath.

“So, then. What's this 'small fee'?” he asked, once his nose was free of Mocha crème.

“Three hundred a week, 24/7 hotline. First week in advance, if you please.”

David thought it would cost more, but wasn't complaining. In business, knowing what happened next was a priceless commodity. His life could be reasonably simplified with a heads-up every now and then. He quickly agreed, and the accord was struck.

Over the next three months, Charlie gave David privileged information. He predicted that the plane to Brazil, where they'd planned the honeymoon, would crash halfway if he went. Thankfully, he transferred to a Maui flight, and instead, endured a week-long monsoon on the small island. When he checked the news, the plane had crashed, apparently, near the shores of the Bahamas. The greatest injury suffered was a broken leg. The resorts supplied 5-star room service to the passengers, the news time providing some of the best publicity for most.

“You'd have likely died, though,” Charlie would say in his defense, whenever David would bring it up.

Upon returning to work, Charlie predicted that David's boss was looking to promote someone to president of development at his company, which made nutritional snack bars. David was advised to focus on the Eilse report, and finish it within three days. After putting off all other assignments, he finished, and the president, not aware of David's current lack of other finished work, offered him the job. With the choice of promotion or being fired, David took the job immediately. Afterwards, he discovered that this involved being transferred to Nebraska. With no other choice, he left Massachusetts, and all of his friends, behind.

Despite the often double-bladed nature of Charlie's predictions, they attained a strange level of friendship over the phone. Charlie discussed his life; realizing his powers, the minor facial surgery he had gotten done a few years back, and David talked of his life and the accident which scarred him. Two months passed after the move to Massachusetts. The

necklace Charlie told him to buy his sister-in-law for her birthday caused a horrible allergic reaction (While at the same, it let her meet a handsome allergenist, whom she married the following year.). David did not blame Charlie for the accident, which he apparently did not see coming. Even he had limits, it seemed.

Soon thereafter, he went to his mother-in-law's anniversary, against his better judgment. Charlie, however, saw that it would bring him and his wife closer together in more ways than one. He actually enjoyed himself there, until, of course, the shrimp he had bought gave the mother and several guests virulent food poisoning. She then died three days later. His wife's mourning did, in fact, bring him and his wife closer together, in Charlie's defense. David never liked the old woman anyway.

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David drove down the road in his wife's new car. He had gotten it for her birthday, and was taking it home, wanting to surprise her. He was on the phone with Charlie at the moment, who had just gotten a job as a sports writer. He had also moved into a new apartment, thanks in part to the steady flow of David's money into his account.

"I think you should get off the highway about now. There's going to be an accident up ahead."

"I'm sorry, Charlie," David started. "But I want to get home as soon as I can. I think I'll take my chances."

Charlie attempted no protest, and instead turned the discussion toward the past. "Now, how did you get those scars again?"

David thought a moment. It had been a long time since the accident.

"It was back when I worked in the granola mill, I kept these big, vats of syrup just warm enough so that they mixed with the oats. I'd just proposed to Gina the other day, actually, at the company banquet. So, I'm near the vat, and this one man comes up, worked with the wrappers, I think, starts calling me a dirty thief or something like that. He says I'm not good enough for Gina, and that he was going to propose to her, but I'd beaten him to it.. I say 'tough luck', he just takes out a gun, shoots the tank, ducks, and my crew and I get blasted with the explosion."

"He ducked?"

"Yes, it's strange, but he went right under where the explosion was, took off, police never

found him.”

David passed under a large overpass as Charlie spoke.

“What was his name?” he asked.

David remembered for the first time in a year. “Yes, he was friends with Gina. We called him Chuck, but she always called him Charlie.”

And it hit him like a ton of bricks. The semi above him swerved over the edge, and sent a wall of propane and metal crashing down on him. He and everyone within 200 meters were smithereens in an instant. A pity..

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Gina moved back to Massachusetts soon after. A week since David's death, she sat in a bar, sipping a strawberry daiquiri. A man came up, and sat near her.

“Another drink for the lady, Ted.” he gestured to Gina, laying a ten on the bar. She smiled.

“Thanks. Don't I know you?” she asked. His face looked very familiar for some reason.

He shrugged. “I don't think so, no.”

“What's your name?”

The man wore grey slacks and a black blazer. He smiled.

“Call me Charles.”

