

SEVEN STUD



Edward Drobinski



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Prologue

In "*Strange Awakening*", I, 40 year old Ed Jensen, wake up with a loss of memory. I live in a rural part of New Jersey, in a 200 year old colonial farm house, decorated in an Early American motif, pre-1830. Clinton Township is a very treed hilly area near a reservoir. I reside in the most remote Norton section. My first job is to find out who, where and what I am and hope that the condition is temporary.

My exploration of household papers, notes and newspapers give me clues. I find out that my wife, Diane, also 40, is living and working in Seattle, Washington, primarily because of a fantastic pay raise with the opportunity for more. I learn more from phone conversations with her, notably that my memory loss was probably caused by the successful removal of a benign brain tumor.

I go walking in the rural area to see if other people know me, curious to see how they react. I find the expected tranquility can change to ominous isolation, when I see no people or cars on my walks, especially after witnessing that the closest house, about 1000 feet away, seemed to be host to a child pornography operation. When one of the operators, a large man, sees me staring at the house, he gives strong warnings,

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eventually with a gun, to stay away. Despite my initial reaction of probably trying to comply with the demands, I meet another operator, the Lady in Black, at other walk sites and get more warnings.

My mindset flip-flops from fear for my life to anger at being bothered right where I live. I meet Butch Walker, when he, driving drunk and fast, almost hits me coming out of my driveway and knocks out my mailbox. We get to talking when Butch comes back to fix it and we become friends. Butch is 35, divorced and unemployed, living with his parents a few houses up Baptist Church Road.

I decide to "spy" on the yellow house, trying to get police evidence. Both my current and Butch's formerly filed police reports are looked at askance, possibly because of my brain condition, which seems to be common knowledge and Butch's long term drunkenness. I am noticed by the operators and shot at.

I go to Butch's house to hide and find an ally. Butch agrees to help, after some reservations. As it is not his problem, he doesn't want to get into any possible entanglement with Joe Mason, a local big wig, who owns the house of dubious repute. He also meets Alice, a former girlfriend, now divorced.

We make a few forays into dangerous territory. During a morning of torrential rain I get 12 photos, taken through a screened window, of other pornographic photos which hang on the

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wall. The quality is probably poor. Butch and I are seen and shot at. Butch returns fire and the target hit the ground, seemingly dead. As we are escaping, I fall and lose my camera in the quickly moving stream. We first return to Butch's house and decide that the best thing to do is to file another police report.

A town cop, Sergeant Mobley, doesn't allow us to file a written report, but agrees to do an informal investigation, us in tow. The rain is now subsiding. The investigation turns up no body and no evidence of any child pornography. The house is seemingly vacated by the people we have previously encountered and is now occupied by a hunter from another part of the state. Butch and I meet him and Joe Mason, who happen to be at the site when Mobley does his "investigation." Joe owns three houses, including the one in question, all part of one parcel of land, sitting on the 80 acres down-road from us, bordering the reservoir. Joe gives us what could be possibly interpreted as a veiled threat. The house is often rented to "hunters".

I return to my house near the "crime" scene and Butch remains at his folks' house, a little further up the road. We remain friends and while we think that we're the only ones who know the real story, we usually wonder if it really happened, as no one else seems to think that it did.

Chapter 1

"I'm responding to your last caller. I'd like to say that I'm a builder in the Southwest portion of the state and I can tell you that we builders are not the cause of the problem. Its government regulation, which....." This is the new interesting information I heard belching from the television as I roused from, presumably, a good night's sleep, on my embroidered Chippendale couch. More importantly, I was advised that today was August 25, 1989, nearing the summer's end. From the window behind the television I could see the beginnings of the yellowing, browning and reddening of the leaves on the many trees. I always associated this with the end of another season in the sun and felt melancholy for the time past, never to be seen again.

The next caller to the "news" program articulated further insight into the problem, whatever it was. "I'm a government employee who works in the area of housing and building regulation. And, I can tell you with certainty that over the last ten years, the number of government regulations have been significantly decreased. As a matter of fact....." I considered shutting the information/entertainment box, but also thought of the possibility of calling the number at the bottom of the screen and saying that "You should change your name from

"news" to "same old shit", but decided against it, because they either wouldn't know what I was talking about, or, more significantly, I didn't want to spend my morning "on hold" and eventually be allowed the privilege of saying something that wouldn't make any difference.

I got up, shut off the education module, went into the kitchen and made coffee, sausage and eggs. While things were percolating and heating up, I looked out one of the kitchen windows and saw the same light early fall foliage creeping in. In one sense it was interesting to see the color variation, but it still was a sign of the end of something. I somewhere and sometime learned not to talk about this to anyone, at the severe risk of being reminded what a beautiful day it was and that it was still warm.

I ate my breakfast standing up looking out the same window and watching the small brown birds scamper about in the gentle easterly breeze. I wondered what I wanted to do today. I went to the bathroom mirror and saw my longish brown hair cascading over my face. I brushed it back and was reminded that I had slept in my blue jeans and light blue, double pocketed work shirt. I showered, shaved and put my uniform back on. My five foot nine, 150 pound frame slouched to get a better look at my clean shaven face.

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Over the last month or so my memory deficit was being relieved by things I found in the house. Photo albums, old legal papers and current financial information were filling in many of the blank spots. I was born in Jersey City, NJ, September 29, 1950 and spent about 22 years working for various New York City banks, until the brain tumor ended life as it was then known. I stared at the floor to ceiling brick cooking fireplace, containing appropriate utensils and reflected on how the original owners of this 200 year old white clapboard colonial survived without access to the information sources available today. I put on the radio in the hope of gleaning some items of current importance. I was delighted to hear that President Bush had a press conference, during which he reminded me of his "kinder, gentler" nature, presumably compared to Reagan, that the state of the economy was healthy and that there would be no new taxes. Feeling assured and confident, I shut the radio before someone could ruin the good news.

I put on Patti Smith's "*Dream of Life*" C/D and was surprised at the overall tone, which was very different than her first four. You can always count on her not to say the same old story and when I heard "Looking for You (I Was)", I forgot about feeling morose.

Actually, the last few weeks were full of good news. After a number of walks and drives past the nefarious yellow house

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about 1,000 wooded feet from me, I saw no further evidence of a child pornography operation, no naked kids and no one threatening or pointing guns at me. When I walked at the reservoir or in town, the mysterious Lady in Black wasn't there to disturb me. I wasn't drinking much at all. I wasn't sure if I ever did, except when Butch and I got together. I spent most of my days walking, talking to Diane, doing household duties, playing C/D's and thinking about the near past events. There was no formal police investigation, no dead body and no evidence of any illegal activity next door. Perhaps, I did imagine the whole thing.

I was seeing Butch about once a week and he seemed to be having his usual problems, plus one and minus one. His re-kindled love affair with his divorced ex-girlfriend, Alice, was already on shaky ground and not because of the earth moving. She was reverting to her prior unreasonable form, insisting on a companion not constantly inebriated and one taking the trouble to hold a steady job. The nerve! Butch was also genuinely disturbed at two aspects of our little adventure. It bothered him to think that he may have killed another human being, albeit a child pornographer who shot at us first. He also didn't like thinking that it had not really happened. Could it be that his drinking was, at age 35, making him delusional? He knows that I

saw the same events he did, but to him, I could be just another delusion, at any rate not the most credible witness.

After breakfast reverie, since it was still warm outside and wanting to enjoy the remaining summer glory, I decided to walk through the woods, over the deer trails, to Butch's house. After a few minutes outside, the gentle but persistent easterly wind made me realize I was underdressed. I hate backtracking, so rather than go back home for appropriate attire, I intrepidly continued on, hoping that the sunny day's rising temperature would soon even things out.

As I approached the back of his house, I saw Butch outside, seemingly talking to someone I couldn't detect. His long, dark, greasy hair flipped around as he spoke. He must have been up for a while, as he was dressed in his customary black denim pants and plain, almost white T-shirt. He was rather animated, using hand gestures and other body language to emphasize his points. When I got close enough I said; "Are you fucked up already?"

He broke away from his other conversation and said; "What do you mean 'already', its 10:30. Nowadays everyone seems to have some advice to give me about the frequency of my intoxications."

"Sorry. I wasn't making any value judgments or giving advice. I merely made an accurate observation."

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"Well, keep your observations to yourself. You know they don't carry a high degree of credibility."

I just stone faced looked at him, not knowing what I could add to that and, at the same time, felt somewhat insulted.

He must have realized that, stumbled over to me, put his arms around my shoulders. "Good to see you, man. Can't you take a joke?" He broke away from me and continued; "Didn't anybody ever teach you not to pay attention to what drunks say?"

"Oh, man. I don't know what to say to you. I just wanted to come over and see how you are doing."

He stumbled as he backed up a few steps, extending his hands; "Well, now you can see for yourself. What do you think?"

"I'm trying not to think."

"Good. That's a start."

"Who were you talking to?"

"My new girlfriend."

"Where is she?"

"Must have left when she saw you."

Again, I really didn't know what to say next, so after a momentary lapse, I changed the subject and said; "I think I need to get to where you are. Do you have any wine in the house?"

"Sure. Follow me."

As we walked the fifty feet to his back door, his gait was cockeyed, swerving from left to right. I "followed" him by

adopting the same pattern, at times colliding with him and vice versa. His lean, 180 pound body knocked me off balance a few times, so I crouched and got some leverage. We were laughing when we reached our destination and he said; "No more fooling around. If we break anything inside, my folks will really give it to me."

"What have you broken already?"

"Don't even ask." He pointed toward the family room and continued; "Have a seat. I'll bring it in a minute."

He first went into the bathroom and from the sounds heard and his "Whooooo" I think he just made it. With mission successfully accomplished, he went to the kitchen and brought back a bottle of beer and a half empty bottle of wine, handing the latter to me. He sat next to me on the couch.

I said; "Who were you talking to outside?"

"The spirit of the beer bottle."

"The spirit of the beer bottle?"

"Yes. She comes over to visit me sometimes."

"What does she look like?"

"You didn't see her?"

"No, I didn't see her."

"She's built well, about 120 pounds, with long wine colored hair." He pointed to a six foot tall undulating wicker basket and said; "She stays in there when people come around."

"Anti-social?"

Butch laughed; "No, exclusive."

"You mean she won't talk to me?"

"She doesn't talk to anyone except me."

"How do you know what she's doing when you can't see her?"

"When I can't see her, she's in the fucking basket, stupid."

"She's in the fucking basket you said. Let's go over there and take a look."

"She won't like that."

"I'd just like to meet one of my friend's friends." I stood up, went back outside and walked over to the basket, followed by Butch. I looked inside and saw nothing. I said; "Where?"

He looked inside and with a straight face said; "She's sleeping, curled up, at the bottom."

"All right. When she wakes up I have to talk to her."

"I'll ask her when she gets up."

"Let's play some cards while I wait."

I followed Butch back into the house and he again led me to the family room. I sat on the couch and he started looking through his drawers for the deck.

I said; "Haven't played lately, huh?"

"No, it's been a long time."

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"Me, too. The good thing with cards is that the game never changes, though."

He found the deck, brought it over to the couch and sat a cushion away from me. "What do you play?"

"Most anything. My favorite is seven stud."

"Then I'll have to find the fucking chips, too. I don't know where the hell they are."

"All right. Let's start off with rummy."

I noticed he had a tendency to pick up cards already known to me, while my tendency is the opposite. It didn't seem to make any difference, as when time passed, we were probably roughly equal in wins. After about ten games and an hour passed, he got up and said; "I'm ready for another drink. How about you?"

"No. I don't drink when I play cards."

"I don't either. I'm tired of playing cards."

"That's a good reason to keep playing cards. Let's keep going. The only reason you've won as much as you have, is you got your genie girlfriend behind me, telling you my cards."

"I don't need any help to beat you and you and Alice ought to fuck off on the drinking comments."

"Do whatever you want. I wanted to play fucking cards. Fine, you don't. And what do you think Alice is doing? Bragging to her girlfriends that she's back with an old

boyfriend, who's drunk, unemployed and lives with his mommy and daddy?"

He just looked at me probably wondering where I got off saying that, but that it also had the ring of truth.

When he didn't object, I said; "Look, I'm just trying to be helpful. You know, if you won a lot of money playing cards and quit drinking, you'll make Alice feel a whole lot better and it won't be too bad for you either."

"When you're right, you're right. I'm glad you had the nerve to say what you did."

"What are friends for?"

Butch got very mellow and said; "I'm going to get something to eat for both of us. I'm going to find the chips and show you what a lousy card player you are."

He went into the kitchen and fixed up some ham sandwiches and brought them over to the family room with a pitcher of ice tea and two glasses. Then he looked virtually all over the house to find a package of chips. I was already eating and drinking when he brought them back, grabbing a sandwich himself. He said; "Whites are one, reds are five and blues are ten. Ten limit per card."

"If you bet ten, can I call you and raise another ten?"

"Yes, sir. I should have added that."

"And can you keep your girlfriend from watching my cards?"

He laughed; "For her to come around, I'd have to get another drink. She disappears when I sober up."

"She just wants a drinking buddy then?"

"Pretty much. She can get playful and argumentative, too."

"What does she argue about?"

"She wants me to drink more. She's got a million good reasons to be inebriated."

I didn't say anything, but thought that there probably were a million good reasons to be inebriated.

He continued; "She always says; 'Have another one. You're drunk already. Get even higher. You can always quit tomorrow.' And, I agree with her, that I can always quit tomorrow."

"What good does she do you?"

"I know she really isn't there. She's some kind of spirit of the alcohol bottle, an evil one. I never used to think of her as real until I shot a person and the rest of the world said I didn't. I figured if a person's not real, the spirits must be. They don't call alcohol 'spirits' on accident."

"Believe it or not, that makes perfect sense to me. I just wouldn't tell anyone else that I was talking to spirits."

"What are friends for?"

I said; "I think I talk to shadows more than spirits, or maybe they talk to me."

"Shadows?"

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