

DARK DREAMS

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DARK DREAMS

A Novella

By NB VanYoos

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Dark Dreams

Jonathon stood on the roof of the Carlton building looking South across the city. The view from his vantage was a spectacular vista of the greater metropolitan area framed by the Kentucky hills across the river. He truly loved Cincinnati, a city built upon hills carved out of the landscape by the mighty Ohio River. Jonathon had lived here all his life and he knew it was where he would eventually die.

He relished the warm spring sun as it basked everything in a late glow. It was moments like these that made city living bearable. He looked at his watch, half past five. It seemed strange he should be on the roof an hour after quitting, but with a view this good, he decided to stay.

A westerly breeze blew gently, warm and inviting. It brought the promise of sticky, hot summer days that would come too soon. Spring was Jonathon's favorite season, fresh, new, and warm after the winter chill. He leaned against the wall, knowing the moment wouldn't last, but content to enjoy it while it did.

As he looked down at the cars passing below, he thought he heard his name being called from somewhere in the distance. He cocked his head into the breeze and strained to listen. All he heard were the sounds of the cars rushing home after a long day's work.

Joohhhnnnaaaathooooon.

There it was again! This time he knew he'd heard it. It was far away, barely audible through the breeze. He looked over the edge thinking someone from work might be checking on him before they left the office. He'd left his coat and laptop in his cubicle, and someone might have noticed on their way out. He

saw several people leaving the building, but no one seemed interested in the roof.

Joohnnnaaathooooon.

That time it was closer. He knew he wasn't crazy, someone was calling him, but where? He looked across the roof wondering if someone else was enjoying the spectacular view. He didn't see anyone, and the access door remained closed.

Joohnnaathoon.

There it was again, even closer. But his ears couldn't focus on the direction it came from. He spun around completely and looked across the street to the parking garage. No one was visible, although they could have been hiding.

Steve, he thought! Probably Steve in the parking garage playing a joke on him. Steve probably saw his car and figured he was checking out the view from the roof. Steve knew he liked to do that and was hoping to convince Jonathon to stop after work for a drink. Steve was a womanizer, and every night was happy hour!

Joohnathoon.

It sounded closer, yet there was no one visible across the street. He was certain it had to be coming from somewhere on the roof. He turned again to only emptiness. He was alone but cupped his hands anyway to yell.

"Hello, anyone there?" Nothing. "This is Jonathon, where are you? Who are you?" Only wind replied.

"Is that you Steve?" He figured it was Steve. He didn't feel like going out drinking but suddenly didn't feel like being on the roof anymore. Seeing Steve would be a relief.

Silence. He grew anxious and looked over the edge one last time. Some of the street lights flickered on, and he decided it was time to head home. The strange feeling in his stomach and the slight chill on his skin soured the earlier appeal.

Jonathon!

He spun around quickly at the sound of his name so close from behind. The sound startled him and he gasped as he spotted the glorious vision standing in front of the access door. He desperately tried to catch his breath and calm his pounding

heart. She was beautiful, tall, slender, and dressed in a long gown that shimmered in the glow of the setting sun.

She wore her hair tied back, hanging past her shoulders in dark, velvety waves. Her eyes, the color of her hair, were dark and penetrating. Her pale face was exquisite, marred only by a sadness creasing her eyes and mouth. He was speechless!

“Uh, hi! Wh-who are you?” he stuttered, his heart beating wildly. Pretty women choked him up, and she was stunning.

Jonathon save yourself. I am lost already, save yourself!

He saw her lips move and heard her voice, but she was distant and insubstantial. It was as though she spoke only in his head. Had he heard her right, save himself? What did she mean?

“What do you mean save myself?” He asked. “From what?”

The look on her face was grave and the chill on his skin crept into his spine. *So much for relaxing after work.*

Jonathon. You must save yourself. Fly away, don't let them get you as they have me!

“Who's got you?” He asked again. “What the hell are you talking about?” She was beginning to freak him out, and pretty woman or not, he wasn't about to put up with it any longer.

“Who's after you?” he continued, “and why are they after me?”

She didn't answer, but stood silently staring at him through dark, sad eyes.

“Look” he began, “I don't know who you are or what you want with me, but I...”

Before he could finish telling her he was leaving, she began to shake violently, agony contorting her face into a mask of pain and fear. At the same time, two dark shapes materialized on either side of her. They were like black clouds reaching out to her with wispy tentacles. The tentacles surrounded her in a dark embrace, causing her horrible pain.

She screamed. ***Fly Jonathon, fly! Fly away! Save yourself! I am lost, fly a....***

The last of her plea was cut off in a scream that sent hairs on end. *Fly?*, he thought, *where? how? What the hell is happening?* He could barely see her writhing in pain inside the

dark masses. They completely surrounded her and were compressing her as if to silence her screams.

The screaming grew faint, and he could no longer see her through the dark, shrinking mass. He watched in horror as they grew smaller and smaller, consuming the stunning vision that had called his name but never said hers. He trembled with fear as the entities obliterated all that beauty.

What should I do? The question felt distant through the numbness covering his body.

The only way off the roof was through the door behind the creatures, or over the edge to certain death. Neither option was appealing, but he had to decide soon. He watched as the dark masses separated, expanding to their original size. The beautiful woman had vanished, her beauty destroyed by the unknown entities.

He was frozen in indecision, watching the them hover beside the only exit to freedom. He knew he had to do something, but he feared moving and drawing their attention. Too late, they started moving towards him!

Think Jonathon! Think! Nothing came. He simply stared at the masses of death slowly drifting towards him. Their movement was mesmerizing as they shifted endlessly. In his mind, he vividly recalled the woman's screams. She'd obviously been in pain, and he suspected the same would be in store for him.

Fly, she had said, fly.

The thought drifted through his awareness but made no sense. He wanted to fly—he didn't look forward to an agonizing death. They were almost on him, as he backed against the edge of the roof. He had nowhere to go despite a body and mind that shrieked for him to flee.

Without conscious thought, Jonathon arched backwards with a powerful thrust of his legs. It carried him over the roof's edge and away from the dark entities threatening him. In that last moment before leaving the roof, he sensed the creatures detected they were losing their prey. Jonathon watched with a smile as they rushed towards him, too late to stop his fall. He carried that smile with him as he descended to the street below.



Jonathon awoke from his nightmare shaking and soaking in sweat. He lay face down on a hard surface and it took a moment before he realized he'd fallen out of bed. His heart pounded heavily, and his breathing was quick and irregular. He'd never had a nightmare so real that it caused him to fall out of bed.

His breathing slowed and the trembling subsided as he rolled onto to his back and stared up at the ceiling. His mind, still dazed from the nightmare, reacted slowly to the vision spread out on his ceiling. He took the sight in with confusion that quickly turned to terror as he stared at what looked like an inverted view of his bedroom.

His mind raced to sort out what he was seeing, struggling to comprehend the impossibilities it represented. Fear rose from the depths of his stomach, and he screamed as the reality sank into his sleep dulled mind. A scream pierced his lips at the same time he began to fall from the hard surface of the ceiling to the bed below.

His body hit the edge of the bed hard and bounced to the floor with a solid thud. The fall knocked the wind out of him, and he struggled to focus through the swirling blackness. Gasping for air, his eyes locked onto the spot of the ceiling where he'd been before he succumbed to the quiet darkness.



The sound of the screeching alarm clock brought Jonathon awake. Aching and dazed, he lay on the floor next to his bed. The alarm clock demanded the start of a new day, and although Jonathon wanted to turn it off, he waited while he tried to sort through the events which left him on the floor. Slowly, the dreams came back. He pictured the woman, the black shapes, falling from the office roof, and finally from his ceiling. He groaned with the memories.

Opening his eyes, he stared at a spot above his bed, remembering the dream where he'd been laying on his ceiling

looking down at his room. *That was a dream, wasn't it?* The thought chilled him. The way his body felt, he wasn't certain.

He groaned with aches and pain from his fall. His bed wasn't more than a couple of feet off the floor, so why was there so much pain? He pushed the thoughts aside, refusing to consider alternative explanations. He glanced at the ceiling once more, shaking his head in disbelief.

Rolling onto his stomach, he pushed himself up and shut off the alarm. The sound had begun to make him feel worse, and he sat on the edge of the bed cradling his head. He desperately tried to ward off the nightmares creeping back into his consciousness.

A part of him wanted to analyze the dreams and find out what they symbolized, but they were too disturbing, and he didn't want to relive them. He knew dreams were typically linked to something in a person's waking world, but his nightmares seemed to lack anything remotely similar to his daily life, other than he'd been at his office.

The dreams continued to drift in and out of his mind, and he felt a strange sensation of familiarity to the woman on the rooftop. He didn't think she looked like anyone he knew, but sometimes faces aren't consciously noticed in passing but come back to haunt us long after the brief encounter.

Probably someone from the elevator at work, he thought, I bumped into her briefly, but her face stuck. He knew this happened a lot, especially with attractive women. He began to feel confident that was it and felt better having worked it out. It still left the dark masses and floating above his bed unanswered, but at this point, he was willing to chalk them up to symbolic manifestations of daily stress. He let them fade from memory.

He stood from the bed but sat down immediately as blackness threatened to engulf him. His head swam lightly and he decided to wait a bit longer before jumping into the shower. The dizziness worried him, and he wondered whether the fall had been more severe than he'd first thought. He probably suffered a concussion and needed to see a doctor. The prospect of the doctor's office didn't appeal to him, but then again, any excuse to avoid work wasn't necessarily all bad.

He stood up slowly this time and despite feeling lightheaded, made his way into the bathroom to start his day.



Jonathon scheduled the doctor's appointment before leaving a message with his manager. Having showered and dressed, he retrieved the morning paper and looked forward to a calming breakfast while reading the headlines. Despite several aspirin, the pain in his arm and head still throbbed. They kept reminding him of the strange and disturbing night, and he hoped food would make him feel better.

He walked into the kitchen just as the toast popped. The smell of it and coffee made him realize how hungry he really was. Considering his night, he wasn't surprised. He put the paper on the table and grabbed his toast. He located his grandmother's strawberry preserves in the refrigerator and applied it liberally to his toast. He grabbed a coffee cup from the cupboard and reached for the pot as it finished brewing. His head still hurt, but the thought of food and coffee cleared his mind.

As he moved the pot towards his cup, it slipped from his hands and bounced off the counter towards him. He jumped out of its way as it fell to the floor with a crash. His body hung motionless in the air, floating above the shattered remains of the coffee pot. He stared down stunned and amazed.

I'm floating in thin air! The thought hung as motionless in his mind as he above the floor. He frantically searched for an explanation, trying to hold back the terror that threatened. He closed his eyes and concentrated on what he'd seen. *Of course,* he thought, *I'm hallucinating! I have a concussion and I'm still in shock—I'm simply hallucinating.*

He prayed silently for hallucinations as he opened his eyes and watched his feet gently descend to the kitchen floor. He laughed inwardly. He knew it had to be a hallucination, but it had seemed so real. His mind struggled with the concept and he couldn't repress the inward laughter masking the rising panic.

He remained frozen, the mania threatening to overtake reason. *Get a grip, John, get a grip!* The thought came slowly at first, but changed to a chant as he fought to keep control. *Get a grip, get a grip!* He took deep breaths and continued to chant. He slowly backed to the kitchen table, grasping for a chair.

His hand locked onto one, freeing it as he fell back into it. He landed hard and stared blankly at the coffee spreading across the kitchen floor like blood from a fresh corpse. He instantly thought about falling in his dream to the street below. The pain in his arm flared as he sat motionless, head throbbing harder than before.

First the nightmares, then falling out of bed, and now a concussion with hallucinations? He was happy he'd decided not to go to work. Something was very wrong with him, and going to the doctor was the only sensible thing to do. He only hoped it wasn't serious.

He left the spilled coffee and broken pot on the floor and called a cab. In his condition, he was certain he shouldn't drive himself. He could only imagine hallucinating at a traffic light. That would make the day far worse than it already was. Fortunately, the doctor's office was only a couple of miles, so the cab ride wouldn't bankrupt him.

He hung up the phone to assurances a cab would be there within fifteen minutes. He grabbed his keys, wallet, and coat before heading downstairs to wait. Because his arm ached and his head felt light, he took the elevator down the two flights. No need risking a plunge down the stairs if he blacked out or hallucinated.

He walked outside, and took a deep, restorative breath. The fresh, crisp air eased his head and did wonders for his failing spirits. Despite everything, outside the apartment made things seem less frightening and more normal. As far as he knew, he hadn't experienced other hallucinations, and the clear spring sky made him feel more positive. People suffered concussions every day—a fall out of bed surely couldn't cause that much damage?



The cab dropped him in front of the Richter Medical Building. It was still two hours before his scheduled appointment, but after the incident in the kitchen, he felt an immediate need to seek medical attention. As he stood looking up at the large office complex, he suddenly felt silly and overly concerned.

He looked around the immediate block, but there was little in that part of town except office buildings and apartments. Even the 7-Eleven on the opposite corner didn't offer much, and the few shops on the adjacent street weren't yet open. Oh, well, surely Doctor Walters would want to squeeze him in early if there were a chance he had a concussion. After all, didn't hospitals make people stay overnight for concussions? At least they did on the television.

He exited the elevator on the fifth floor and went to check in with the receptionist. *Excellent*, he thought, *Charlene*. She knew Jonathon long enough to know he wouldn't lie just to get in earlier.

"Hello, Mister Decker," she said as he walked up to the window, "I thought your appointment was at ten-thirty?"

"Hi, Charlene, it is," he replied, "but I think maybe I hurt myself more than I first realized."

Charlene remained emotionless as she listened.

"I know Doctor Walters is very busy, but I was hoping I could get in earlier?" He knew it was lame, but after the kitchen, he didn't feel like waiting. "I think maybe my fall gave me a concussion and I'm a little afraid to do anything until after I see the doctor."

Charlene absorbed his words calmly, looking Jonathon over as though trying to decide. She came to a decision, and her emotionless expression was replaced with a genuine look of concern.

"Poor, dear, I didn't realize it was so serious," she said in a motherly tone, "I'll get you in earlier, don't you worry!" She started erasing names on the calendar and shifted several patients listed before him. He felt bad for them, but his own concerns replaced the momentary guilt

“There,” she exclaimed after finishing her modifications, “you go sit down Mister Decker and we’ll squeeze you in shortly.” She pointed to the couch in the waiting room.

“Concussion you say? Huh? Well don’t you worry, we can take care of you, just sit down and rest, the doctor’ll fix you up good as new!”

“Thank you, Charlene, I hope you’re right.” He smiled weakly and took a seat on the couch.

His head still hurt and he suddenly felt queasy. He figured the lack of breakfast was partly to blame, but then again, it could be the concussion. He picked up the nearest magazine and leaned back into the soft cushions to wait for the doctor. *People*, not his preferred choice, but at that point, it didn’t matter.



Jonathon buttoned his shirt while Doctor Walters scribbled in his medical file. Jonathon had been coming to Doctor Walters since he was a teenager, but was surprised by how thick his file had become. He’d never thought of himself as a sickly person, but as the years went by, his periodic visits were beginning to add up.

Jonathon had told Doctor Walters about the nightmare of falling off his ceiling. He’d purposefully left out the part before that dream when he’d been on the roof of his office building. The doctor had given him a pretty routine look over without saying much, but made lots of notes in Jonathon’s bulging file.

Finishing his documentation, Doctor Walters pulled up a chair in front of Jonathon.

“Well, I don’t see any major signs of a concussion, but that doesn’t mean you don’t have one.” He smiled broadly, “You do have a nasty bruise on your left arm though, and probably knocked your head as well. However, the rest of you appears to be in pretty good shape.” Doctor Walters crossed his legs and stared directly into Jonathon’s eyes. “You said you had a nightmare which caused you to fall out of bed, right?”

“Yes,” Jonathon began again, “I was dreaming I was lying on my ceiling looking down at my room, and when I realized it, I

fell on the edge of the bed and finally onto the floor. When I woke up this morning, that's where I was, on the floor." After the second time explaining, it even began to sound silly to Jonathon.

"You don't remember any other dreams before that?" The doctor asked, probing.

"No, not really." Jonathon lied. He knew where this was leading.

"Jonathon, I prescribed your medication to help alleviate these types of problems, but if you don't take it, it won't help. Sleep disorders can be serious, and although this particular incident is unusual, physically acting out dreams or nightmares can lead to serious problems. Have you been taking your medication regularly?"

"Yes." he lied again. He felt guilty for being lax, but since he hadn't had nightmares in several weeks, he'd sort of forgotten about the medication. He knew the doctor would make a big deal out of it and was glad he hadn't told him about the earlier dream. "This is the first nightmare I've had in some time, and I figured the medication was beginning to help."

The doctor looked concerned, but didn't press him. "Well, you must continue taking it to help avoid this type of accident. I believe your prescription is almost up, so I'll call down the hall to get you a new one. You can pick it up on your way out."

Doctor Walters got up and moved the chair back against the wall.

"I wouldn't worry too much about a concussion. Take some aspirin and a couple of the pills I'm going to prescribe and go home and get some rest. If you feel better tomorrow, you can go back to work."

Jonathon kept thinking back to the incident in his kitchen and decided to find out if it was related to his concussion.

"Doctor Walters, are there any side effects associated with a concussion that I should be worried about?" He wanted to know if hallucinations could be brought on by a concussion, but was afraid to admit what had happened.

"What kind of effects are you worried about?"

“Well,” he started, “I seemed pretty dizzy before coming here and a bit nauseous while I was waiting to see you. I also had difficulty with my vision, seeing black dots and blurring.” He lied although not entirely.

“It’s not uncommon for people with concussions to have problems with their sight or dizziness,” the doctor replied, “but if it continues throughout the day, call me so I can check you over again. At this point, rest is the best medicine I can prescribe. If you feel like something is too much, then don’t do it. Don’t worry about side effects, most people recover from mild concussions quickly. Eat some food, rest on the couch, watch some television, and take the rest of the day off. If you have any problems, just give us a call, and we’ll see you again.” The doctor closed Jonathon’s file and headed towards the door. “Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll feel better after some rest.”

The doctor’s words helped Jonathon relax, but he was still concerned about the hallucinations. He figured if it didn’t occur again, he’d write it off as a combination of overworking and a mild concussion. He thanked Doctor Walters and walked back to the reception, feeling better than when he’d first arrived.

He figured he would take the doctor’s advice and spend the day resting. He would get videos on his way home, and order some pizza before sacking out on the couch. Considering how stressful work had been lately, he figured the day off would do him good.



Jonathon was dropped at the video store a couple of blocks from his apartment. He figured walking a couple of blocks might help and it certainly couldn’t get him into serious trouble. It was a gorgeous day, and since he was going to be spending it on his couch, he wanted to soak in some sunshine before heading inside.

This time of the day made the video selection better than normal. Because of this, he picked out two new videos and a couple of old time favorites. If he was going to spend the day on the couch, he wanted something better than daytime television.

Videos in hand, he began walking the two blocks to his apartment. By now, the streets and sidewalks were bustling with people enjoying the warm day. Many waited for buses or headed across the street to the city park. The sun felt good, and the crowds and cars couldn't dampen the joy out of his brief walk.

He passed Luigi's Pizza and noted they weren't open yet. He made a mental note to call from his apartment as soon as they did. The lunch time crowds at Luigi's were large, and he didn't want to suffer a late, cold pizza because of it.

Luigi's delivery area was small, so it was usually Luigi's grandson making the deliveries to the local neighborhood. Considering the pizza chains that seemed to be taking over the country, Jonathon felt fortunate he lived near a small, family run operation.

He stopped at the corner across from his apartment and waited for the light to change. He scanned the people across the street standing or sitting at the bus stop. He was looking for anyone he might know, but didn't recognize anybody. Most read papers while others stared sleepily at the passing cars.

Everyone's moods was light and pleasant. No doubt the sunshine and warm weather were to blame. He smiled at the thought and wished he could do something outside rather than spending the day on his couch. The thought was appealing, but after all, he'd have been at work if he hadn't been ill.

The light turned yellow and he inched closer in anticipation of the signal. A woman and her baby caught his eye from across the street. The woman sat on the bus bench reading a paperback with the baby carriage beside her. She was enthralled with her reading but managed to gently rock the carriage at the same time.

As the traffic slowed to a stop, the woman looked up from her book scanning for the city bus. Suddenly, she dropped her book as her face contorted into a grimace of fear. Jonathon stared puzzled as she began to convulse and twitch on the bench. Her hand still gripped the baby carriage and with every violent move of her body, the carriage rocked dangerously close to the edge of the curb.

Jonathon yelled to the people around her as two dark shapes materialized on either side of her. His jaw dropped as he stared in disbelief at his nightmare materializing in broad daylight. They were the same creatures from his dream.

The dark masses reached out with tentacles, encircling the woman as she writhed and contorted in pain. Her mouth opened to scream, but no sound emanated above the din of the traffic. Her hand still clutched desperately to the baby carriage, rhythmically jerking it in a dizzying dance closer towards the curb.

Jonathon yelled once again to the other people near her who appeared oblivious to the woman's plight. A few heard him and looked up, following his pointing finger with their heads, trying to find the cause of his distress. He frantically waved his arms and continued pointing to the bus bench where the woman was nearly consumed by the dark entities.

Most looked back quizzically, unable to locate the problem he was indicating. Many simply shrugged their shoulders and went back to their papers, waiting for the bus.

Jonathon missed the light, and traffic started flowing again, blocking him from crossing over to the helpless woman. *Why don't they see it?* He saw it clearly as the baby carriage toppled over backwards onto the sidewalk once released from its mother's grip. She was completely covered by the dark, swirling shapes, and Jonathon stood helpless as the black figures collapsed on the vanishing woman.

His heart raced at twice the normal rate and his head throbbed with the sudden adrenaline rush. He wanted to help, wanted someone else to see, anything but stand by and watch as the woman was consumed by these horrors.

The figures collapsed to the size of a basketball, and the air around Jonathon began to waver and shift, like the surface of a pond. The shimmering intensified and Jonathon found himself huddling down, holding his head between his hands to fight off the blackness which threatened.

Everything seemed insubstantial and ethereal. Colors blended and swirled as the world around him melted and moved

like the ocean. He lifted his head briefly and barely made out the bus across the street blocking his view of the poor woman.

The shimmering began to subside, and Jonathon leaned heavily against the light post. He watched the people get on the bus, unaware of the event which had just overwhelmed him. He tried to stand up but his head swam dizzily and he couldn't maintain his balance.

"Are you all right, buddy?" someone asked from behind, "You don't look so well."

He turned his head and stared blankly at the older man behind him who was picking up Jonathon's videos.

"Yes", Jonathon replied blankly, "I'm okay, just a little dizzy."

"I saw you bending over and thought you might need some help," the stranger said, "do you live around here?"

Jonathon nodded and pointed to the building across the street.

"Would you like some help getting across?" the man asked, sincere concern on his face.

"No, I'm all right," Jonathon lied, "just need to wait for it to pass. I can manage myself, thanks."

The stranger looked dubious. "Okay then, but you might want to see a doctor. You look like you've seen a ghost."

Jonathon took back his videos and thanked the gentleman for his assistance. He turned back to the street as the bus pulled away from the curb. He looked at the bus bench but saw no evidence of the woman or her baby carriage. People on the sidewalk walked past without so much as a glance at the scene of the violent attack.

He felt sick and yearned for the comfort and solitude of his apartment. He knew something was wrong, and was beginning to think it might be him. Lacking evidence or witnesses, he had no way to explain it other than hallucinations. It seemed hard to believe but was the only rational explanation.

The crossing signal turned green and Jonathon hurried across the street to the safety of his apartment. Halfway across, something about the crossing signal made him uneasy. He stared at it as he walked up onto the curb and underneath it. It

was an old crossing signal, needing a paint job and flashing “Don’t Walk” to signal stop.

Wait a minute, his mind raced, *they replaced these signals last summer!* He stared at it moving briefly as someone rushed by him to cross the street before the traffic started again.

He clearly remembered all the signals had been replaced the previous summer. He remembered because of the inconvenience it had caused during the two weeks they took to replace them. Something else bothered him and he turned to look down the street at the dwindling bus.

That bus is blue! He knew the city busses were yellow since they’d upgraded the transit a year ago. Before that, they’d been two-tone white on green. He looked around wildly, feeling more than a little scared and desperately searching for anything else that might have changed.

Everything seemed normal, but then he’d never paid that much attention to his surrounding block, so he wasn’t entirely sure he’d recognize it if it had. He shook his head and looked down at his watch, nearly one. How could that be? He’d left the video store just past ten.

The pain in his head thrummed, and he felt dizzy and sick. Too much was happening and he couldn’t handle it in his current state. He stumbled to the entrance of his apartment and practically fell through the door. The foyer was blessedly empty and the elevator stood waiting for a passenger. He leapt onboard and pushed the button for the second floor. No way was he going to attempt stairs after that.

As the doors slowly shut, he leaned back against the wall trying to sort it out. It didn’t make sense and it scared him to think something so severe could be caused by a mild concussion. The elevator door opened and he stumbled into the corridor, feeling worse than when he’d left hours earlier.



Jonathon spent the remainder of the afternoon trying to understand everything that happened. He’d ordered pizza from Luigi’s and was grateful for the nourishment. However, rather

than clear his head and bring understanding, the pizza only gave him additional strength to worry.

He'd finally cleaned up the coffee in the kitchen and had listened to his answering machine play a message from his manager pleading with him to be well enough to come in the following day. Another message was from his friend Steve wishing him a good round of golf and assuring him he'd call later. Jonathon listened to both messages, wishing he were well enough to work or play golf.

Sometime during the afternoon, he had tried watching one of the movies he'd rented, but the mysterious black masses continued to haunt his thoughts. The movies hadn't given him pleasure, so he gave up part way through. He had turned it off and paced the room confused and scared.

He sat at the living room window, waiting to spot another city bus as it stopped at his corner. After thirty minutes, his waiting paid off as another blue bus pulled up. He'd been certain the buses were yellow, but after seeing another blue one, he began to worry he'd been wrong. Was all he thought now suspect? The thought chilled him and the vision of the dark shapes consuming the poor woman filled his mind.

He moved to the couch contemplating what he'd experienced. Surely these creatures weren't real, were they? He thought about how they'd appeared to feed on the poor woman they attacked. It had been a dream last night, but today it seemed so real. Maybe they were real?

If they were, what were they? Where did they come from? Why did they kill people? What happened after they did? Had they somehow changed reality? The questions kept coming but with no answers to any of them.

Maybe they were figments of his imagination? He couldn't deny he was the only one who appeared to have seen them. He'd dreamt about them the night before, and maybe his dreams were simply spilling over into his waking consciousness. The doctor had said he might have a mild concussion, and side effects were not uncommon. He had to admit, it was more than coincidental that both of the earlier events were related to last night's dreams.

He wanted to believe that was all it was, but he couldn't. The change in the bus color and the old crossing lights rendered the theory useless. Or did it? Perhaps it was also a case of amnesia related to the concussion. Selective memory loss? He was sure he'd heard about it before but couldn't think where.

Like a never ending rewind, the two incidents played through his mind. He couldn't relax or rest, although he was certain he needed it. He thought briefly about calling the doctor and telling him what had happened, but that would probably lead to a hospital overnight with extensive and expensive tests. It seemed prudent to wait and see if anything else happened.

He rubbed his temples when the sound of the phone made his heart jump. He was getting skittish, expecting the dark creatures to appear in his living room. He got up from the couch to answer the phone.

"Hello?"

"Johnny-boy, how's it going? I expected to get the answering machine, you know, figuring you tried to get eighteen holes in."

"Hi, Steve," Jonathon answered gloomily, "I wish I had, but unfortunately, I'm really sick."

"Whoa, sorry to hear that. Case of the flu?"

"No, a mild concussion or so the doctor thinks. The way I'm feeling, I'm inclined to agree."

"Concussion, huh? How'd you manage that? Tough date?"

Jonathon laughed at the jibe—it felt good to hear someone's voice, even if it was Steve.

"No, but I did fall out of bed," Jonathon answered, "I was alone though."

"Bummer! Sounds bizarre," Steve was less than concerned, "look, I was just getting ready to take off from work and thought I might swing by and take you out for a drink?"

Now there's a surprise. A part of him wanted to go, but he was afraid of what the alcohol might do. He wanted to get out of the house, and a drink sounded good after everything that had happened.

“I’d love to, Steve, but I’m not sure that’s a good idea. The doctor said to rest and I’m not sure alcohol would help my situation.” He didn’t convince himself.

“Nonsense!” Steve exclaimed, “a couple of brews is always good for you! Hell, what better way to relax than to throw back a couple of cold ones?”

Jonathon wavered in indecision while Steve continued the onslaught.

“Come on! I’ll buy, and you can tell me all about your concussion and the woman you were dreaming about when you fell out of bed.”

Steve laughed but the comment about the woman brought back Jonathon’s nightmare. In his mind, he saw her vividly and it left him hollow inside. She’d been beautiful, but the dark shapes had consumed that beauty, and now they haunted Jonathon. Fear rose to the surface, and Jonathon quickly made up his mind.

“All right, I’ll go, but you’re driving as well as buying!”

“No problemo, I’ll meet you in front in twenty minutes. Cheer up! Who knows, we might get lucky and score some babes!”

Jonathon hung up feeling guilty but relieved to be getting out of the apartment and with other people. Suddenly he didn’t want to be alone and drinks would help him relax. Otherwise, it would be a long night.



When Jonathon made it down to the street, Steve was already waiting. After a few jibes about wet dreams and mental health days, they finally pulled away towards their usual watering hole.

As always, the bar was crowded with people on their way home from work, but Steve managed to wrangle seats at the bar next to a couple attractive ladies. After hurried introductions by Steve, he ordered drinks for himself, Jonathon, and the ladies. He winked at Jonathon with a wolfish grin.

Jonathon sat on the stool staring blankly at the mirror behind the organized array of bottles and glassware. The bar was loud,

but the seats they'd found were out of the main flow. Despite the noise, Jonathon was glad to be out. He grabbed the beer in front of him and downed half of it in a single gulp.

It tasted good, and Jonathon hoped it would help him relax and forget the day's events. He turned towards Steve who was still talking to the ladies next to them. Some things never changed, Steve was the ultimate *schmooser*, and ordinarily, Jonathon was happy to have him around. Unfortunately, Jonathon didn't feel like socializing. He took another drink and thought maybe a few more beers might change his mind.

He overheard Steve say his name and looked over as the man toasted a drink with the ladies before sitting down.

"What do think, Johnny-boy? Pretty nice aren't they? I told them you weren't feeling good and that we had some things to discuss before we *socialized*." He leaned closer to Jonathon and began to whisper, "They must be interested, they said to join them when we're through!"

The mischievous smile on Steve's face was contagious. Jonathon grinned and drank from his beer.

"Look," Jonathon began, "I'm not sure that I'm up for socializing tonight, the noise is starting to make my head pound."

"Hey! Don't worry, if you don't want to socialize, we won't. I'll let them know later and get their numbers. If they are interested, they'll understand. Maybe this weekend, huh?"

Steve signaled two more to the bartender and fished out his wallet for cash. Jonathon finished his first beer and felt the calming effects. The alcohol took the edge off his nerves and he started to relax for the first time all day.

"Yeah, maybe this weekend." He replied. "Look, I'm sorry Steve, it's just been a bad day, and I'm trying to get past it."

"Like I said before, partner, no problemo. It's a big sea out there and plenty of fish to catch later!"

The bartender put down two more beers and picked up Steve's money to make change. Jonathon took a swig of the fresh beer, rushing to get the numbing effects.

Steve grabbed his own glass and stared as Jonathon gulped down a third of his.

“Slow down, Johnny-boy! I may be paying, but I won’t cheat you. You can have as many as you want, just slow down a bit, I gotta catch up!” He took a drink and set the glass back down. “Now, tell me, Johnny, what the hell happened?”

Jonathon wanted to tell him everything, but he knew Steve would think he was crazy. He wasn’t sure that he wasn’t. Steve was a good friend, and although he could be a good listener, he wasn’t the type to unload bizarre stories on. Steve enjoyed life a lot, maybe too much, and anything Jonathon told him would be reconciled with proverbs about not getting out enough, working too hard, or not getting laid.

He took another drink before beginning.

“Well,” he started, “I had this dream last night that I was floating above my bed on my ceiling. When I screamed from the shock, I fell onto the bed and bounced off onto the floor. When I woke up this morning, I was on the floor.”

He took another drink and continued.

“The fall bruised my arm pretty good, and I must of hit my head on the floor. Basically, a mild concussion and a bad bruise.” He concluded.

Steve listened patiently with a straight face, and after Jonathon finished, Steve only lifted his eyebrows before reaching for his beer and taking a long drink.

“Bad nightmare, huh? And here I thought you’d been dreaming about some wild Karma Sutra position with some fine lady.” Steve took another drink of his beer. “Well, these things happen, my friend—drink more beer and put it behind you. How do you feel now?” He asked.

“I’m all right...I think the beer is helping.”

Jonathon finished his second glass and signaled for two more. Steve wasn’t quite finished, but Jonathon knew he would be by the time the new ones arrived.

“Look, Steve, I know it sounds silly, but it kind of freaked me out. I guess I’ve been working too hard. You know, stressing. Anyway, I couldn’t get any rest today, and I suppose I’ve let the whole thing worry me way too much. I’ve never had a concussion before, and I it sort of makes me...edgy.”

“Don’t worry about it, it’s cool.” Steve looked unsure, “You look fine now, but if it keeps happening, you can always put a rail on your bed!”

Leave it to Steve to find humor to lighten the moment. Jonathon laughed and relaxed a bit more.

“And what would I tell the *ladies* if I had a rail on my bed?”

“Buy some hand-cuffs,” Steve jibed, “they’d figure it out!”

They both laughed and grabbed fresh beers. Despite his lightening mood, Jonathon kept thinking about what had happened. He didn’t want to tell Steve anything else, but he was still concerned.

“Hey, Steve,” he began, “you seen the new buses around town? You know the blue ones?”

Steve set his glass down and gave Jonathon a strange look. “The blue ones?” He asked. “Boy, you must have hit your head good, Johnny, those buses have been around for over two years. Don’t you remember? They upgraded the whole transit system.”

Jonathon stared dumbly into his beer. It was not the answer he’d hoped for.

“Oh yeah, I remember. For some reason I was thinking they had painted them yellow last year. Guess the concussion has got me scrambled a bit.”

“It’s cool man. Don’t worry about it,” Steve assured him, “who the hell rides the bus anyway, huh? Look, I’ve got to squeeze the weasel, so relax and watch my seat while I’m gone. If you finish your beer, go ahead and order another. Sounds like you could use it!”

Jonathon shook his head and drank his beer as Steve got up to go. He watched Steve say something to the girls next to them before he took off across the bar. One of the women looked over at Jonathon and winked before turning back to her friend.

Jonathon stared into his beer, searching for answers to the lost memories, or wrong memories he seemed to have. His world had changed and he was the only one who recognized it. That probably said something about him, and he felt ill with the thought. How serious was his fall? It was starting to appear very serious, but the doctor had said he was okay.

He drained the last of his beer and signaled for another. He watched the bartender grab a clean glass and begin filling it from the tap. As he watched the glass fill, he noticed a shimmering and blurring of his vision. At first he thought it was the beer until the effect became more pronounced and the world itself shifted and wavered.

He realized it was the same thing he'd experienced earlier when the black masses had consumed the poor woman. He turned to look around the bar, but couldn't focus through the constantly shifting air. Everything around him compressed upon itself, making movement difficult and his breathing labored.

He stared across the room unable to focus. He felt like he was caught in a press and his life was being squeezed out. He began to rise above his stool. Startled, he quickly grabbed for the edge of the bar, forcing himself back into his seat. *Fly Jonathon, fly!* The thought came unbidden as he struggled to keep from floating to the ceiling.

He desperately clung to the edge of the bar, barely maintaining his balance. His mind reeled and threatened to blackout. He twisted just enough to slump against the bar before he lost consciousness.

He didn't know how long he'd been out as he slowly recovered. He lifted his head and stared up at the bartender who was holding a beer and looking at him with a quizzical look.

"Are you okay?" He heard the bartender say in the distance, "I'll cut you off if you've had too much!"

Jonathon's vision cleared, but his head pounded from the ordeal.

"N-no, I'm okay," he replied, "just felt a little lightheaded all of the sudden."

"Look," the bartender started, "you've been throwing 'em back pretty hard since you got here. Why don't you take a little breather and I'll get you one later. Sound good?"

Jonathon nodded in agreement and watched as the bartender took the beer over to another patron who gladly accepted it. The way he felt, another beer was probably not a good idea. He turned around on his stool and stared across the bar trying to

determine if anything was different. He couldn't tell. He turned back and stared at himself in the mirror behind the bar.

"Okay, buddy, I'm back. Did I miss anything?"

Jonathon turned towards the voice as a stranger sat down on the stool next to him. He stared at them trying to figure out who they were. He looked back across the bar figuring he'd see Steve across the room. Steve was a great practical joker! No Steve.

"Man I feel better!" the person next to him was saying, "Did you order another beer, John?"

"Uh-no, I was waiting for Steve to come back." He replied.

"Oh yeah? Steve who?" The stranger asked casually.

"Steve from my office," he said, "he was sitting here before you sat down."

"Steve from the office, huh?" The stranger responded, "Can't says that I know him. Does he work on our floor or a different one?"

This was getting weird. Not only did Jonathon not recognize the guy, but apparently he worked with him. He watched a little stunned as the guy picked up Steve's beer and began drinking.

"Hey, that's Steve's beer!" He heard himself telling the stranger.

The guy put the beer down and turned slowly towards Jonathon. He had a strange look on his face and seemed puzzled by Jonathon's outburst.

"Okay, Jonathon, what the hell are you talking about? This is my beer, remember? I was drinking it before I went to the head! And who the hell is this Steve guy anyway? I wasn't gone that long, did he just get here?"

The stranger looked around the bar, trying to locate the Steve Jonathon was talking about. Jonathon felt strange and his face turned blank and white. What the hell was happening? Who was this guy and where the hell was Steve?

The guy turned back to Jonathon, waiting for an answer. Jonathon only stared back, searching for some recognition, anything that would bring sense to what he feared was happening.

The guy looked concerned and waved a hand in front of Jonathon's face. "Hello? Anyone home?" The stranger smiled weakly. "Jonathon? Hello? It's me Paul, the friend who drove you here and is buying your drinks?" He paused and stopped waving. "This isn't very funny, John, what the hell is wrong with you? I know you said you had a concussion, but now your kind of weird'in out. What's going on? Should I take you to a hospital? What? Talk to me!"

Jonathon was stunned by what he heard. It had happened again. This time it was more serious. He looked down at his watch and noticed it indicated more time than they'd been there. Jonathon figured they arrived about thirty minutes earlier, but his clock said three hours. Time had shifted and the reality he knew had changed. He focused on the stranger, what was his name, Paul? He decided he better respond.

"I'm fine, Paul, just a dizzy spell," he lied, "I don't need to go to the hospital or anything. Sorry, I guess I just kind of blanked out or something."

"Well don't let it happen again—you freaked me out. Look, if this is the after effects of falling out of your bed, you'd better get those rails I joked about. Another fall like that, and you'll be gone for sure."

Jonathon smiled, laughing weakly at the joke.

"Yeah, your right, I'll look into them tomorrow." He said weakly.

Jonathon watched Paul drain Steve's beer and signal for two more. The bartender gave Jonathon a dubious look, but seemed to think it was okay with Paul sitting next to him.

"So who is this Steve you keep talking about?" Paul asked, "I've worked there longer than you I and I don't know any Steve."

"Uh-no you probably don't know him. I believe he's new, a temp, or contractor, or something. He works on another floor."

"Huh. Is he still here?"

"I don't know, he walked off and I don't see him. Maybe he went to the bathroom. Look, I'm still not feeling well, I'm going to go home and try to get some sleep. I'd rather not miss work tomorrow."

“Leave? Come on, stay for your beer, I’ll take you back home.” Paul promised.

“No, that’s all right, I’ll grab a cab, you stay and finish the beers. Don’t want to waste them.” Jonathon smiled, “Besides, you can always move over and talk to the two women your hot on.”

“Women? What women?” Paul turned left and right searching.

“The ladies next to you.” Jonathon discreetly pointed.

Paul turned towards the two women and looked back with a quizzical expression.

“I only asked them if we could have these seats. Did they say something to you while I was gone?”

“No, I just thought you wanted to socialize with them.”

Jonathon got up to leave, but had to steady himself on his stool. He was weak from the latest incident and felt the effects of the beers. Paul turned back towards him and moved to get up as well.

“Although those women look great,” Paul began, “I don’t think their interested in me. I’ll take you home—I’ve had my fill anyway.”

Jonathon didn’t want to argue, so he conceded. He didn’t really want the stranger to take him home, but since the guy appeared to really know him, he decided it was a cheaper alternative to a cab. Paul settled their tab, and both headed for the door.

On the way home, they didn’t say much to each other. Jonathon was glad for the solitude. He was now certain the incident earlier in the day hadn’t been a fluke. It had happened at the bar and now his world was either falling apart or being radically changed.

Paul dropped Jonathon in front of his apartment and said something about seeing him at work in the morning. Jonathon thanked him and said good-bye before making his way upstairs. All the way back, Jonathon had scanned the roadside and buildings, looking for anything else that had changed. However, in the dark of night, he couldn’t see anything unusual. He feared what daylight would uncover.

With an aching body and pounding head, he wasn't strong enough to fight the inevitable conclusions. He was scared and more than a little shaky. Maybe if he just went with the flow he could somehow figure out what was happening.

It was clear that the black shapes were at the root of his problems, but without knowledge of what they were or what they were doing, it seemed hopeless to stop them. He sat quietly on the couch, thinking about what tomorrow would bring. He thought about Steve, and wondered if he had been the latest victim, or merely a casualty from the effects of the attacks.

He'd known Steve a long time, but it seemed pretty clear the friendship was lost forever. He mourned the loss and the destruction of the reality he'd once known. Whatever the creatures were doing, their effects on his world were devastating.

He was the only person who appeared to be aware of their existence, and their effects. Not only did they consume their victims in those awful, tortuous attacks, but they were altering time and reality. It sounded unreal—like something from a sci-fi movie. But it appeared to be happening. He could no longer believe it was only hallucinations from a mild concussion! *Brain damage, perhaps?* From a two foot fall out of bed? Not likely.

He thought about the attacks and how they'd altered his reality. Both times, or so he assumed, the black masses attacked and consumed a person. While the attack took place, everyone was unaware it was happening. That meant he was either crazy or he had some unknown ability to see them. He didn't feel crazy.

When the attacks were over, the person was gone and reality was changed. Maybe that was it! The missing person affected the reality or time around them. He contemplated that for a moment.

What would happen if someone's existence were completely erased? During a person's life, they interact with and affect many people and things? If that person were totally destroyed, as if they hadn't been born, what would happen to all those interactions and effects they'd had on the world?

He began to think he was on to something. Everything a person had done, created, or affected would be changed if their existence were removed. That would explain why the baby and its carriage disappeared even though the attack had only been on the woman.

If the mother's existence were completely removed, then the existence of her child would be removed as well. What about her husband? What effects would that have on him? He wouldn't have married her, wouldn't have had a child by her, and he would have a very different life. He quickly saw the monstrous effects this would have on the world.

Every person who had known and interacted with the victim would have their reality radically changed with the loss. And their changes would change others that they had interacted with. He knew that for all its size, the world could be a small place. Any change in the reality of one person would have a domino effect rippling across many people and many things.

The thought staggered him. What else had changed in his world with the loss of strangers? What if it were someone he knew, like a relative, a professor from college, a friend from childhood? What effects would that have? It could remove him from existence! He could wake up tomorrow with a wife, or kids or merely find himself in some other place or some other time.

The thought frightened him and he began to realize the danger which he alone saw. They could kill him without ever attacking. He thought back to his dream and the woman who'd been attacked. Who was she? She was obviously aware of what was going to happen and seemed to have been trying to warn him. She'd said it was too late for her, but that he should save himself. How?

Had she been real or another part of his subconscious trying to warn him of the battle he would soon wage? Was he the only one who could see the danger or were there others like him? He didn't know and assumed there was no way to find out.

Why did he alone see it? What made him so special? He yearned to be oblivious to the danger like everyone else. What were these creatures and where did they come from. They

weren't visible to the real world and must somehow exist outside normal reality. But he could see them! Why? How?

Nothing sprang forth.

Obviously, he had special powers or abilities which allowed him to see through the alterations without changes to himself. He could see the creatures and their effects, but after they left, he could not follow.

His head throbbed with pain. He thought back to the incident in the kitchen and at the bar. He had been flying or defying gravity in some way. Was this another effect of the creatures or did the same ability which enabled him to see them also enable him to fly?

Again, no answers.

He felt foolish but wanted desperately to understand what was going on. He closed his eyes and imagined himself floating above the couch. He was tired and with his eyes closed, he almost began falling to sleep. He felt silly but opened his eyes. To his surprise, he was floating above the couch light as a feather. When he looked down, he fell gently onto the couch. He was startled and scared, but fascinated by the prospects.

Did he really have an ability to fly? Could he actually defy gravity? But how? He'd never experienced it before, so why now? It had to be related to the creatures or their effects on his world. Maybe the reality he was now in had different laws of physics or maybe he was different because he was not from this reality. Ideas and theories raced through his head, each sounding ridiculous, yet more plausible than a concussion.

Things had changed, and him with it. He left his eyes opened this time and once again imagined himself floating. He felt himself lift off the couch, hovering silently. His heart pounded with excitement and he wanted to see how much control he had. He focused and slowly moved higher until his head bumped the ceiling.

Keeping his concentration, he pictured himself lowering to the couch. As if by command, he slowly descended back down. He settled softly on the cushions and remained seated, the effects of gravity back to normal. In fact, even while he was floating, he felt as though he were not. It was not so much that

he was defying gravity but that he was merely seeing a different viewpoint with respect to gravity. Like walking across the room, except vertically.

It blew him away. He didn't know what allowed him to do it or what value it had, but he felt a surge of excitement anyway. He knew it was related to the appearance of the black creatures, but couldn't figure out why. He didn't know if it could help him, but the relationship between flying and the creatures gave him hope.

Fly Jonathon! Fly! He thought. That was what the woman in his dream had said. *Save yourself.* Maybe this was his escape from the peril that threatened him? Maybe he could flee the creatures and fly his way back to the reality he knew? Maybe it was a way to undo what had been done? Perhaps he was simply lost in a time and reality similar to his own but totally separate. He hoped it was true and he hoped he could find a way back to the world he'd known—the world he belonged to.

Maybe he was simply caught in the after effects from the creatures. Ripped from his world and thrown into a parallel one. Like a different dimension! During each attack, he had felt like he had been shifted, compressed, or moved from his world into another. He had watched as his reality had been bent and distorted, waving in some mystical wind. Maybe he had simply been blown away from his own world.

He sat quietly, thinking about all the theories he'd come up with. He wasn't convinced any were true, but nothing else made sense or explained what happened. Either way, thinking about it made him feel better. Any explanation other than being ill made him feel better.

Somehow he would solve the riddle and find his way back to his world. He knew his newfound ability to fly had to be the key to his freedom, but he lacked the knowledge of how to use it. He would find that knowledge somehow.

Feeling better than he had all day, he made his way to bed, hoping nothing would happen during the night. He thought he'd find it hard to sleep, but total exhaustion from the stress of the day sent him into a deep and dreamless sleep.



Jonathon woke to the sound of his alarm blaring in his ear. He felt better than the previous day, but found it difficult to wake. Thankfully, sleep had been uneventful. He couldn't remember nightmares, and in fact, couldn't remember dreaming at all.

A part of him wanted to believe the previous day had only been a dream or hallucination, but he knew the events were real and that he was still caught in them. To test this, he imagined himself floating above his bed, and after rising several feet into the air, he knew his own reality had been lost.

He thought about the night before and the different theories he'd created to explain it. They gave him glimmers of hope, but he felt caught up in something far beyond his control. He wanted to believe his ability to fly would help him, but he couldn't think how.

As he drove into work, he consciously tried spotting anything out of the ordinary. Other than blue city buses, he couldn't see additional changes. It didn't mean they didn't exist only that he was unable to see them.

He stepped off the elevator of the Carlton building, not ready for work, but willing to drown himself in what had piled up during his lost day. He was both curious and scared at what changes he might find. Did he still work here? Who was his boss? Only one way to find out!

Half of the eighth floor was taken up by a large room split into two halves by a row of offices and filled with cubicles. As Jonathon entered from one of the side entrances, he quickly scanned the expanse of cubicles searching for anything different. Everything appeared the same, but his eyes wandered toward the cube that Steve had sat in two days earlier.

The cube was at the opposite end of the room from where Jonathon sat, but since aisles ran between every two cubes, he decided to take the long way to see who currently sat where Steve had. He assumed he'd see Paul sitting there, but as he passed by, he read the name Peter Hollinsworth on the name tag.

Peter was not a name he was familiar with, so Jonathon steeled himself for a long day of strange interactions.

He passed by Sandy Layton's office, but her name tag read Kirk Bennet. He'd dealt with Sandy on a regular basis, but if she no longer existed, he could find himself in some awkward situations.

Peter wasn't in yet either, and Jonathon thought it was just as well. Meeting someone for the first time when you were supposed to know them, filled him with unease. He turned down another aisle and headed across to his own cube, or so he hoped. His was next to a window near a break table. He'd never cared for the distractions of the coffee machines, but he was glad to have a cube next to a window.

He turned another corner and walked down to his cube. The name tag still read Jonathon Decker. He was instantly relieved and moved quickly in hoping to avoid anyone until he was more prepared. He figured he should probably walk around checking all the cubes. Better to try to recognize either the person or their location before everyone came in for the day.

He noticed the coffee pots were full, and figured Susan, his manager's assistant had started them as normal. She was always the first one in the office and never failed to make fresh coffee. He hoped it was still Susan since he often consulted her on various things his manager wouldn't. He wasn't even sure if his manager was the same.

He unpacked his briefcase and docked his laptop. After logging into the system and checking e-mail, he quickly scanned the pile of folders and papers neatly stacked on the corner of his desk. *Susan*, he thought. She was everybody's assistant and went above and beyond her real responsibilities. She probably had come by before leaving and neatly stacked the unruly pile which had surely accumulated. He reminded himself to thank her later.

"Hey, John, glad to see you made it in today!"

The voice startled him and he jumped slightly as he turned towards Paul standing at the opening of his cube. Paul held a Starbucks cup in his hand and had a look of concern on his face.

Jonathon tried to look normal, “Uh...hi, Paul,” he stuttered, “yes, I felt better this morning and decided I better come in to catch up on work.” He pointed to the neat pile.

“Plenty of it, huh?” Paul asked, “I’m sure Frank thought of you immediately when something came across his desk!”

“Yeah, I’m sure he did. Is Frank in yet?” Jonathon asked, glad Frank was still his manager. He didn’t care for Frank, but at least he was someone he knew. The thought of having a stranger as his manager scared him.

“Frank!” Paul replied, “You’re kidding, right? I’ve never seen that man come in earlier than nine-thirty or stay later than four! It must be nice being a relative of the owner and setting your own hours plus get the big bucks! Hell, you probably won’t see him until lunch.”

“Just as well,” Jonathon said, “I really don’t feel like talking to him this morning. After yesterday, I could use a little peace!”

“Still don’t feel great, huh? Well, don’t bust your ass if you don’t have to. That’s my motto!” Paul looked at his watch and walked back into the aisle. “Well, gotta head to a meeting, so I will talk with you later. Hope you feel better.”

Jonathon said good-bye and stood to watch Paul walk down to the entrance to their floor. He noticed Paul didn’t stop at any cube, so Jonathon was still not certain where the man sat. He felt guilty that he knew nothing about him, but then he couldn’t blame himself for something that was out of his control.

He grabbed a cup of coffee and noticed more people trickling into their cubes. Some of the faces he recognized while others were strange. He casually walked around the room peering at name tags as he passed cubes. He greeted those he knew and responded to greetings from strangers he didn’t.

After making his way around the floor, he figured twenty-five percent of the workers he’d known were gone or replaced by strangers. He had noticed, however, one name that he recognized from the mailroom. She’d never been particularly bright, but in this new reality, she seemed to have been promoted from her previous position.

As he casually walked past the managers offices, he noted Frank’s and two others whom he’d known. The other two

offices had names on them he hadn't heard of, although one of the last names was identical to Frank's. *Another relative of the owner's no doubt.*

From the outside, nothing appeared to have changed. But from the inside, most of the office personnel were changed. He knew the day would be tough, and if any other attacks occurred, he realized he might find himself in an environment where he didn't know anyone.

He filled his coffee cup and went back in his cube to work. His job didn't fill him with excitement, but at the moment, it was more appealing than thinking about everything else. He still had no answers and the brief distraction work provided was sorely welcomed.



The morning passed without incident, and Jonathon had nearly cleared the pile of work off his desk. Other than a strange face stopping by for consultation, he'd managed to avoid awkward situations.

It was going on noon and he was just finishing a memo before lunch when he thought he heard someone calling out his name. He turned around but no one was standing at his cube. He turned back to his typing when he heard it again.

Joohhhnnnaathoon.

There was no mistaking, it was someone calling his name. It sounded familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. It sounded like a woman's voice. Suddenly, he froze as he recognized where he had heard it before. It was the same, gentle voice of the woman from his dream.

Joohhnaathon.

His heart pounded and sweat beaded on his forehead. *How could that be?*, he thought, *How can she be here? This can't be happening!* His mind whirled with the implications.

Save yourself, Jonathon! Save yourself!

He stood up and scanned the room, seeking the beautiful woman from his dreams. He saw no one except Frank and a

stranger talking outside Frank's office. He stood up on his chair and kept looking. Nothing, but he could still hear her voice!

Fly, Jonathon! Fly! Save yourself! Fly!

He was shaking now and had trouble keeping his balance on the chair. He swung around back to Frank and saw Frank was now staring across the room at him, a quizzical expression on his face. He looked past Frank to the other side of the room and still saw no traces of the woman.

"Hey, Decker! What the hell are you doing?" Frank was yelling across the room.

He turned back towards Frank and noticed two dark masses forming around him and the stranger he'd been talking to. Jonathon's heart skipped a beat and he stuttered something like watch out, but wasn't sure he actually said it.

Save yourself, Jonathon! Fly!

"Decker! I said what the hell are you..."

The dark shapes encircled Frank and the stranger, cutting off the question Frank had started. By now, heads were popping up from cubes, staring around curiously, wondering what the excitement was about. Many stared at Jonathon standing on his chair waving his arms furiously. Most looked puzzled but none appeared to see the dark shapes consuming Frank and his companion.

Jonathon could hear their screams as both were being consumed by the dark shapes. The sound was horrible and drowned out the questions of co-workers. Jonathon stared in horror as the air around him shimmered and melted, compressing on him as the creatures continued their relentless attack.

Jonathon sank to his knees, barely staying on the chair. *Save yourself, Jonathon! Fly away!* The woman's voice cut through the sound of the screaming at the other end of the room. Jonathon closed his eyes, trying to maintain his balance as the world twisted around him.

Finally, the screaming stopped. Jonathon stood up and nearly toppled over when his head began going dark. He stared at where Frank and the stranger had been but saw only two dark entities expanding after their grizzly feast. The air stopped

shimmering and Jonathon could clearly see a dozen faces staring at him from the tops of their cubes. All looked puzzled, and many were beginning to converge in the aisles, uncertain what to do.

The dark creatures were completely expanded and hovered menacingly in front of the offices. Slowly, they drifted towards Jonathon, unseen by all but him.

Fly! Fly, Jonathon!

The woman's voiced shrieked in his mind. He shook himself clear and began to think this was going to be the end.

Fly!

Again the voice urged, persistent and terrified.

Fly, he thought. *That's it, I can fly! That's my escape—my way back to my own world!*

He imagined himself floating above the chair and as before, he lifted towards the ceiling. He stared at the people who appeared unmoved by his newfound ability. He didn't care, the creatures were moving toward him, splitting apart as though to corner him.

He must escape, but how? He turned toward the window and reached down to grab his chair. He willed himself higher in the air, bringing the chair up with him. The creatures continued their slow advance, slowing only slightly as if contemplating the actions of their quarry.

It was the hesitation he needed. He swung back towards the window and surged forward, swinging the chair into the pane of glass. The window shattered and fresh air poured into the office as Jonathon pushed towards the opening and the freedom he hoped he'd find. He flew through the broken window, exhilaration overcoming him. He left behind the creatures who stalked him and the stunned faces of the people from a reality that was not his!



Lieutenant Dan Walker and Sergeant Tom McKinney cruised the North side of town in their unmarked, blue Ford sedan when they heard the call come over the radio. Although it wasn't

typically a call Lieutenant Walker would take, they were not far from the scene and a death had been involved.

They'd been following up a case of murders in the Kensington area, hoping to get better statements from the neighbors of the victims. The case had been going nowhere, and Lieutenant Walker was beginning to feel they would have to put it into the unsolved files. When he heard the call on the radio, he gladly responded. After all, it wasn't out of their way.

They pulled in front of the Carlton building to a mob of spectators ringing the entrance. It was difficult to see over the crowd, but Lieutenant Walker already knew what to expect. Several squad cars were already on the scene, and he watched as several policeman tried to clear the spectators.

Lieutenant Walker and Sergeant McKinney of the Greater Metropolitan Homicide Division got out of their blue Ford sedan and made their way through the crowd toward the center of interest. Sergeant McKinney took charge and had the patrolmen continue crowd control. Lieutenant Walker made his way to the center and surveyed the wrecked car, a limp body sprawled across the top.

The call had come in on a jumper, and sure enough, the Lieutenant saw yet another person who had lost their way in life. He hated to see suicides, but big city life wasn't for everyone. As a homicide detective, he often saw the deaths of ordinary people. They'd only wanted what everyone else did, a long and happy life. Unfortunately, they'd been cheated out of that dream by some other person's greed, hatred, or frustration. It was a crying shame when someone took their own life while others had it taken from them.

Lieutenant Walker noticed Sergeant McKinney was helping the patrolmen with the crowd control. Finally, one of the patrol cars produced a roll of police tape, and they quickly strung it up around the scene. The Lieutenant looked up at the tall building. He could see the window the jumper had broken and figured it to be about the tenth floor. He looked back at the car and the broken body and shook his head. *Damn waste of a good Mercedes.*

Sergeant McKinney finished helping and walked over to Lieutenant Walker.

“Well, Dan,” the Sergeant said, “looks like this guy had too much coffee today! Awful shame. Such a nice car. Mercedes I believe.”

The Lieutenant smiled briefly at the comment. He and Sergeant McKinney had worked together for many years, and he understood the Sergeant’s dry humor. It only masked the pain they actually felt. Death was too common these days.

“Come on, Tom,” he headed for the entrance, “let’s find out if anyone pushed him.”

Both entered the building and were met by the security guards on duty. They seemed overly concerned about the safety of the building with the crowd out front, but Sergeant McKinney calmed them with assurances the police had everything under control.

Lieutenant Walker noticed one of the security guards sitting behind a large desk in the lobby. The man appeared distressed, and another guard told him how the man had actually been standing at the window when the body came down.

The Lieutenant took one last peak at the poor man, and shook his head before heading to the elevators. It was a hard moment the first time you had to come face to face with death. Most people were lucky enough to avoid it throughout much of their lifetime. Lieutenant Walker and Sergeant McKinney dealt with it constantly, some uglier than this.

They took the elevator to the tenth floor hoping to talk to the deceased’s co-workers. The deceased was one Jonathon Decker, twenty-eight or twenty-nine years of age, employed at the offices of McMann Financial Services, Inc. The receptionist had known him for several years and seemed nonchalant about the end of what seemed to be a rather successful career for the young man.

The Lieutenant shook his head. Sometimes people could be so cruel. He knew working in a cube day after day could take its toll, but a man so young, it seemed hard to swallow. Embezzlement maybe? A torrid office affair gone bad? Maybe just overworked and underpaid. Either way, he hated to see it.

He could agree with anyone that life often sucked, but Lieutenant Walker was a strong believer that everyone should persevere. Whatever trials and tribulations were thrown at you, you kept on going, coming out the other side a better and more complete person.

He himself looked forward to his eventual retirement, hoping one day to write about his experiences with death. As a cop, some days were real hard, but you always kept going.

Inside the office, they were met by what the Lieutenant could only describe as an *arrogant asshole*. He quickly took them inside the deceased's cubicle and began to recount a rather strange tale. The man's name was Harold McMann, the manager of the now deceased Jonathon Decker. The Lieutenant and Sergeant listened patiently to a bizarre tale of the man's last moments before his fatal plunge. The asshole had some interesting things to say about his late employee, and the Lieutenant got the distinct impression that maybe the man was happy about the whole affair.

The Sergeant took notes while the Lieutenant asked questions. After the man was through recounting his tale, they asked if they could borrow his office to speak with the rest of the co-workers. The asshole agreed, and left to fetch those who had witnessed the event.

One by one, they talked with perhaps ten different people including a Paul Landis, who admitted to being a close friend of the deceased. They listened carefully to all the accounts and began to get a picture of a rather disturbed individual. After a quick call to one Doctor Walters, it appeared Jonathon Decker may not have been playing with a full deck.

Assuming the information they obtained was accurate, Mister Decker had unknowingly killed his parents as a small child in an accidental house fire. Years of psychiatric treatment while living with his paternal grandparents had finally helped Mister Decker lead a normal life within the community.

To compound this childhood trauma, Mister Decker had apparently been diagnosed with schizophrenia during college and had been taking medication to control it. The weird part

was, he had been completely unaware of his own condition and had blocked out the memory of the death of his parents.

The Lieutenant shook his head. He'd had it all wrong. Instead of some poor bastard who had felt life was too hard to live, he had discovered a poor soul who had probably been unaware he was committing suicide. From all accounts, Mister Decker had spent his last moments screaming at imaginary attackers before plunging through the window. *Probably trying to escape*. It was a shame, but if the poor bastard had been that sick, perhaps death was a good thing. They'd never know.

Lieutenant Walker and the Sergeant McKinney completed their inquiries, satisfied that the death was a suicide. Despite the manager's obvious, and disturbing, elation at the event, they concluded Mister Decker took his own life during a mental episode they'd never understand. From that point on, they were no longer interested.

They turned it over to the other detectives and had them re-interview the witnesses. The Sergeant put his notebook away, and both headed downstairs. It was a sad tale, but it wasn't a homicide. They would return to their original investigation.

They passed through the police line and into the street towards their car. The Lieutenant looked back at the car the man had landed on and wondered if he'd felt any pain. The crowd had thinned, replaced now by the press hurrying to get the story for the six o'clock news. He waved off several reporters who followed them back to their car. As the reporters turned back to the scene, the Lieutenant got in the car.

Lieutenant Dan Walker and Sergeant Amelia Sanchez pulled away from the scene already thinking about the case they seemed unable to solve. The Lieutenant buckled his seat belt and commented once again how he wished the department had gone with the Ford sedans rather than the green Chevy they drove. The *Fords* had a nicer ride!