

# THE LATE SOLICITORS

by Kirby J. Hancock

Writers, in general, enjoy the solitude that their profession allows, or more precisely, requires. I consider myself a member of that generalized group, along with a more exclusive club of writers who also tolerate an occasional unexpected visit from an ancient friend. However, this steady stream of solicitors suddenly attacking my door is another matter--a source of great annoyance and one pitfall of working at home, even in this semi-wilderness environment three miles from town. Another pitfall, which must share the blame for putting me in arrears once more, is the ability to avoid work whenever your mind or body votes against it. Beyond that, I have no valid excuse or explanation for my lack of prolificacy other than a particularly strange event--a disturbing variation of the first pitfall--that transpired late last night, which I will attempt to relate in its entirety.

When I first heard the tap-tapping on my front door minutes before midnight, I attributed its source to heavy raindrops hurled by gusty winds, but when the doorbell sent its ding-dong echoing through my cabin I was forced to alter my opinion. A quick look through the peephole revealed only confirmation of what I already knew--that darkness and rainfall continued unabated outside. If I indeed had a visitor on my front porch, his identity remained a mystery. Having no desire to involve myself in a mystery beyond the one I was writing at the time, I returned to my desk.

Before I could resume my work, however, the doorbell rang again, followed by more tap-tapping at the door. Determined to end this nonsense, without hesitation I opened the door wide and discovered a disheveled man wearing a frayed tweed sport coat standing on my porch. He held the last inch of a burning cigarette between two fingers and emitted whisky vapors strong enough to conquer the swirling breeze.

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"Pardon us for disturbing you at this hour," he said. "But it's time."

The us part of his greeting confounded me momentarily, but my impatience quickly took command.

"Time for what?" I asked. "And be quick about it." Even in my finest hour, I do not overflow with hospitality.

The burning end of the cigarette had reached his fingers, but he seemed not to notice. The man simply smiled, displaying a mouthful of teeth that resembled highway caution signs.

I kept a firm grip on the doorknob, ready to slam the door in his face at the first justifiable opportunity. My latest novel was tardy by nearly two months, and I was anxious to complete the uncooperative beast, not only to fulfill my legal obligations but also to comfort my publisher, who had worn out his fingers dialing my phone these past few weeks.

"Time for what?" I asked again, gripping the doorknob as if it was a baseball ready for hurling. Whatever sliver of patience I once possessed that night had slipped to the turf.

He ignored my repeat inquiry, which was just as well, for at that moment a round of superb thunder commandeered my hearing. A sharp bolt of lightning quickly followed, bathing my visitor and surrounding neighborhood in an eerie blue light. It was then I first noticed that he had brought with him sufficient company to form a baseball team. A dozen or so beings were lined up in tight formation behind him, struggling to stay on the sidewalk and out of the muddy trenches lining its sides. The man at the front of this bizarre conga line was apparently their spokesman, but so far he had failed miserably in that capacity. After several heaving breaths, he finally summoned the strength to answer.

"It's time for band practice. That's what time it is. Not time for study hall."

A chilling rush shot through me as his identity emerged: Barney Boatman, my seventh-grade band director, a criminally gruff old man whose teaching methods had included hand-to-hand combat and oral gas attacks. When he tired of that approach, he would leave

us sitting mute while he rooted around inside his cave, which was furnished with overflowing ashtrays and empty whisky bottles, and hum a tune apparently more pleasing to him than the band could produce. The man had been dead for years, compliments of a malfunctioning liver.

"A little late for that, don't ya' think," I replied, after regaining my focus.

Exhaustion overtook him and prevented an immediate response, which gave me time to consider our common histories.

Near the end of seventh grade, I had occasionally sought shelter in the quiet and safety of study hall, but somehow he had always found me out and sent a messenger to summon my talents, which I possessed in natural abundance. Other neophyte musicians of my acquaintance, not so well-endowed, abandoned their careers at the first opening, and Barney always seemed pleased with those results. Somehow, I survived to play another day, although his bizarre behavior had also caused me great trepidation.

But now my curiosity had the better of me. I released the doorknob and ventured a foot outside, and tossed away any chance of writing more of my mystery that night.

The wind smacked me in the face like my first prom date, while the sky recharged and sent fresh lightning streaking between random posts. By this time, the bulk of the group had gathered closer to my door and arranged themselves in choir-like fashion around my rickety wooden porch. With each new flash, their faces developed like film from an old Polaroid camera and slowly formed a vague familiarity. As their identities evolved, I recognized the one trait they all shared. Each had died at some point during my lifetime--not together, nor all at once, but following their own schedule--and, as far as I can recollect, each one had continued to maintain his expired disposition.

A teenaged boy, whom I recalled had fallen through thin ice while skating the bay on a not-cold-enough December day, stepped forward and announced his purpose.

"I'm your news carrier, and the paper's running this amazing promotion. If you sign up now for the evening edition, you can get half off for an additional six months."

"Your paper never had an evening edition. And, outside of the comics, the morning edition was a waste of newsprint and ink. Now get away from my door."

He returned to his position amongst the choir, leaving space for a middle-aged woman to approach the pulpit. I recognized her at once as the sister of my ex-wife, which made her my ex-sister-in-law, a title most fitting considering her demised situation, and one I hoped she would strive to retain. Her death in an automobile accident some years ago had briefly put me under suspicion of vehicular manslaughter, though I had been ten miles from the scene at the time of its occurrence. No doubt my ex-wife had a hand in that accusation, and her sister would have concurred had she been in suitable condition. Nevertheless, she stood before me now and attempted to influence my spiritual leanings.

"I am here to share the glory of God, and set you upon a righteous path. Jehovah's Witnesses will be your salvation."

"Sure as I stand here, I will be going to hell, and if you stand here any longer I'll make certain to drag you along with me when I go."

She shuffled off and took a spot in the second row. In an effort, perhaps, to regain their original alignment, the choir shifted about for a time until a ten-year-old girl stepped forward. I remembered her as a fanatical Girl Scout from my pubescent years. Her death, under suspicious circumstances, caused me some discomfort at the time--she was, after all, cute enough--but I didn't recall being accused of complicity in her case.

"Would you like to buy some Girl Scout cookies?" was her sales pitch. I had expected a more robust presentation, but considering her fatal condition, I suppose that was the best she could supply.

"You've done away with my favorite, and now you want me to purchase an inferior substitute." I spoke in earnest regarding the demise of "Scotties" and its lackluster replacement--whose name

escaped me. And the remaining selections I considered inedible. While she consulted her sales brochure for guidance, I instructed: "Go sell your overpriced cookies to someone who likes eating cardboard."

She wandered back into formation as a strapping young man of twelve or so marched forward. He was outfitted in the complete Boy Scout uniform of his day, which ended some thirty-five years ago. The poorly sewn merit badges dangling from his shirt sparked remembrance of an unattended campfire, which, not being content with bonfire status, had achieved forest-fire distinction partly by using Boy Scouts as kindling, this young man included. Good chance I would have gone up in smoke myself and turned to ash had I not gotten lost during an afternoon hike and hitched a ride back into town.

"I'm selling tickets to the annual Scout-O-Rama, a fun-filled day where you can watch scouts in action," he announced. He clutched a fistful of tickets in one hand, some chocolate bars in the other, and bounced them both before my face like marionettes dancing the jig. "Well, actually, I'm selling the candy," he confessed, "because the Scout-O-Rama is free to get in."

"I have already witnessed Scouts in action, and have no desire to repeat the viewing. Instead of selling candy, you should be handing out fire suits to anyone who might attend."

He slunk away much like his predecessors, and barged his way into formation. I scanned the remaining players, ready to pounce on the next one who twitched and throttle his performance before it got rolling.

I spotted a fellow Ohio State alumnus who had sold apples on High Street until a homosexual customer stabbed him with a butcher knife and took off with the fruit. Since he had no apples left to sell, and apparently no other commodities to unload, I checked him off. The gentleman next to him had simultaneously run afoul of drug users and the police--a precarious predicament for anyone, but especially one who looks like Hitler and doesn't mind assuming the role--and his life ended without a mention in the papers. I was only

aware of his final chapter thanks to two police officers who were kind enough to invite me in for questioning. If his original intent was to sell me drugs, he had decided against it, for he made no motion in my direction.

Before I had a chance to study the others, a beautiful young lady wearing a pink hospital gown with matching ribbons in her hair stepped up to the plate. I had considered her attendance a possibility right off the bat, due to her consummate qualifications for membership, but hadn't detected her presence earlier.

Now, here she was before me; Debbie Liberace, the girl I had loved when love carried a freshness worthy of refrigeration; the girl who had ended our two-year romance when she discovered the pleasures of variety; the girl who died during childbirth shortly thereafter. Not my child, I swear.

With great uneasiness, I extended my hand to hers. She curled her entire body away as if I held a rattlesnake.

"Excuse me sir," she said, with the impudence of an overworked customer service agent. "I'm collecting contributions for the Orphan Children's Cancer Health Food Foundation Services Association, and if you don't divvy up I'll spread the word that you're just another cheapskate, self-centered, elitist liberal artist.

I must say, I found her attitude most confounding. True, at one time, I had wished her a long and painful death--a lingering illness perhaps, or a tragic accident that would leave her hospitalized for months before finally claiming her life. However, my plans to facilitate her demise were never finalized, much less acted upon.

"I gave at the office," I replied. And with that, she crept away. She had crushed my heart beyond mending years ago, though I suffered the pain without admitting its source until tonight. I begged her return to my threshold, but I was too late. She had disappeared behind the crowd and left me once again longing for her companionship in the early morning quiet.

The wind had blown the lightning and thunder to the hills east of my cabin, and mist had replaced the raindrops. It seemed like the correct time to rid myself of these uninvited guests.

"Now be gone, all of you. The county coroner lives nearby, and the county sheriff, and others in official capacities who would take offense to your congregation at this hour."

I doubted that threat of incarceration or possible probing by another coroner would influence their thinking, and they proved me right on that point by holding their positions and looking upon me with a collective disappointed countenance.

"Besides, it's time for me to get back to work," I said, another fabrication that had worked well with past solicitors, but I expected failure with this group. Instead, my pronouncement seemed to cheer them up, almost as if it had signaled the successful completion of their mission, whatever that was. In total silence they marched, synchronized like dolls connected by invisible threads, off the porch and onto the sidewalk, and quickly attained their original rank in reverse.

I was beyond relieved; I was elated. After conversing with a collection of corpses, I held no desire to work, but only to relax for a time in front of the fireplace with a tall glass of Cabernet. If they wanted to accept my ruse, I would allow them the pleasure. My elation, however, was squelched in short order.

Barney Boatman remained on the far edge of my porch, barely visible in the pale moonlight that had arrived when the storm moved out. He stood stiff as a plaster statue of a general gazing over his troops. I would have been content to leave him undisturbed in that position 'till daylight, provided the troops were through with him and could find their own way out. Unfortunately, there was no getting anything past Barney, even in his over-ripe state.

He broke free from his pose and advanced in my direction. His eyes widened and his smile returned once he got on top of me, and he began to speak in a manner one would only expect from a learned professor.

"Your lack of living has affected your writing," he said. "It has become tedious, a chore you seek to avoid you with lame excuses."

I had no quarrel with that assessment, and wouldn't have publicized it if I did. My aim was to hasten the retreat of Barney and

his army, and would have agreed to any theory he might put forward just to urge him along. But he wasn't through with me.

"It shows in your most recent work," he continued. "On the other hand, your early writing was a delight to read, entertaining and musical."

I never suspected Barney of being a literary critic, much less possessing a familiarity with my work, especially since the majority of it had been published post his mortem, but he seemed to know me intimately.

"I'm having the time of my death," he said, with the smugness of a man who has inside connections in abundance. "I never cared for the living, but you were different."

His stated position towards the living I accepted without question, but his belief in my distinction had me flummoxed. I wasn't sure whether to feel proud or insulted.

"And now, you're becoming me," he added.

With that, insulted took a commanding lead.

"It wouldn't do to have death pay me a permanent visit just now," I said. "I have work to finish."

"Of course you do. That's why we stopped by."

A more contradictory statement I couldn't imagine.

"Would you care to expound upon that?" I asked, despite my mind's protests.

"Death has been near all your life, only a minute or two away, within ten miles, and often much closer," he explained. "Were it not for those short minutes and miles, you would be a member of my marching band here. Although they don't play instruments, they all march to the beat of the same drummer. While you, in spite of your immense good fortune, have chosen a beatless existence."

A nauseous feeling had settled upon me, and I would have preferred Barney to tramp down the road with his horde rather than continue his analysis of my psyche. But his lecture held plenty in reserve.

"Furthermore, you shun the living by acting as one who is already dead, then turn around and ignore the dead by claiming that

life is calling. Yet you disrespect them both by failing to join either the living or the dead. You must choose."

He had reached his terminus at last. Barney exuded a confidence of success as he assumed his position of drum major, bandleader, spiritual organizer, or pied piper--all of these, I suspect--and led the throng down the muddy road. I expected a feeling of jubilation to overtake me. Instead, their departure left me with a hollow disposition.

Barney's final admonition had nailed me, and the points stung me with a complete understanding of his mission. By displaying death's proximity via visitors from the grave--assorted acquaintances from my past whose lives had touched me in heretofore unrecognized ways--he had exorcised my mind and allowed me to refill it with a determined direction.

At once, I resumed my position at the typewriter, and found any semblance of writer's block had left me. The words flowed like money from a lobbyist. The final chapters wrote themselves and brought with them a pleasure I have not enjoyed for thirty years.

Still, I was not satisfied. I decided to rewrite the whole thing, and pitched the original manuscript into the fire. If my readers and publisher were willing to accept tardy trash, they would surely welcome, at a later date, a masterpiece that had been missing in action for years and presumed dead. For now, only one change to my environment seems necessary. I will add bold signs to my cabin's frontal exterior: NO SOLICITORS.

THE END

