

It was a Dark and Stormy Night

by Larry Strattner

It was a dark and stormy night on-line. The Gamer pushed back from his twenty seven inch monitor, shut down the multi-player, single-shooter game and logged off. He always got his ass blasted when the game was played in wet weather. His on-screen vision sucked in nighttime rain. Lights glaring in the game's slick urban streets during rain made it tough to see lurkers. He hated lurkers even when the game was played in clear weather. No matter conditions or time of day, the gutless creeps still hunkered, hiding in blasted building ruins, dark alleys and rubble piles and shot you to pieces as you passed. He didn't consider lurking fair play and in good weather could pick out their likely lairs, letting them chew on a grenade for their trouble. He killed enough other players to always have reward grenades and ammo stockpiled to hose out any suspicious looking spots. This game, and its pile of Bitcoins to the winner, was too important to be reckless. He went to ground in a deserted basement. Got back against the cement wall with some rubble as cover against random incursion. He'd wait out the rain.

He tilted back in his chair. It squealed like a gnarly piece of chalk on a worn out blackboard. He kept forgetting to lube the goddamn swivel. But every time the chair squealed he did not immediately get up, grab some graphite and fix it. One of his big failings was getting pissed off about things behaving badly but not troubling to immediately fix them. He was working on being more prompt with action. In the game, to procrastinate was to be dead.

He took a flat black box labeled 'Walther Arms,' out of a desk drawer and opened it to reveal his PPQ, semi-automatic pistol. Its 15 rounds of 9mm, hollow point ammunition would be just about right for a little single-shooter, tune-up trip. He shoved a magazine into the pistol and put a second in his pocket. The Walther trigger

had a very short reset. If he got excited or twitchy he might fire twice as many rounds as intended. Sufficient reason to carry a second magazine.

He put on his yellow glasses. Good at night, took the glare out of the surroundings. He had tried them at the game console when the game was programmed for rainy weather but they didn't seem to work as well when things weren't real. Nothing works as well if it's not real. He racked the slide on the Walther to chamber a round. Serious shit!

He opened the oak front door of his brownstone house to a beautiful night. A real night, dark but not stormy. Good. He hummed a rock song, "another one bites the dust," as he descended the stairs to the sidewalk

He lived on the edge. A 'transition neighborhood' they called his block. He didn't sit out on the top of his front steps in his neighborhood. He wasn't looking for conversations with people he didn't really want to know. In warmer weather he sat on his little deck in the back. Sipped a drink or two, listening to pops of occasional gunfire off to his left where the neighborhood hadn't transitioned yet. The pops were probably anti-transitional people shooting at developers, or street entrepreneurs, shooting at each other. Who knew, in the fluid world of modern real estate?

New restaurants catering to the fledgling yuppies in his neighborhood had sprung up within a few blocks of his place. He turned right at the bottom of his front steps and walked away from them, into the darker streets, into the genuine night.

The first obstacle, Level One, came at Embert and Doube streets. A few midrange punks beating up on a street bum for no apparent reason. "Get off him," the Gamer yelled. As they turned he saw weapons.

Two raised their arms to fire and he snapped off four rounds from the Walther. The short trigger reset nestled the reports into each other and he walked toward them as two of them fell. The third thug cut sideways and ran. A second round, after he missed with his first, dropped the runner with a bullet to center mass. The hollow points

left all three aggressors either dead or gravely injured. He turned right before he reached them leaving the homeless person to explain to the cops what happened, if any cops ever came.

Level Two came up as a corner-boy cadre, probably serving crack-heads from the project and kilters from the suburbs. The corner operation was only a couple blocks from dumpy Essex Boulevard, a major artery serving as customer mainline, funneling buyers in to the corner boys on side streets, who provided the party poison.

The corner had heard his shots from Level One and the Gamer held his arm out from his side, bent up at the elbow, palm facing them, to give them a side view of the Walther. One prudently stepped back into his doorway. The other three fanned out, one behind cars parked on his left, two crossing the street using parked cars along the other side as a screen.

He stepped between the nose and trunk of two of the parked cars and knelt down, bracing himself on the warm street with his left hand. Five cars up, between the two rows of tires, he saw feet. He squeezed off three rounds, a shrill scream indicating a hit. When the owner of the feet fell into view, one more shot hit him easily and he was still.

The doorway lurker peeked out to spot him and the first bullet from the Walther splattered brick shards in his face. The second bullet caught him full-on, punching his head back into the shadows. From his crouch the Gamer sneaked a look at the doorway and saw a foot flop out on the stoop. The foot didn't look ready to get up and walk any time soon, so he turned his attention to the other side of the street. A figure in a hoodie darted away, around the far corner, maybe to find a quieter place and consider other career options. The runner's buddy, still crouched behind the parked car, was hissing curses after him. He couldn't hear the words clearly and the guy was keeping his head down while he spit his venom like some chickenshit cobra. The snake didn't keep his head down far enough however and the Gamer's second bullet splattered his brains inside his hat after the first skirled away, off the hood of the car. Level Two, complete.

The Gamer turned left at the now empty corner, away from Essex. The neighborhood grew darker, most of its streetlights broken. It was eerily quiet. He changed out his magazine and dropped the used one in his pocket. A couple of rounds remained but maybe not enough to get home. You couldn't be too careful out here. He had been right to allow for the Walther's quick trigger.

Occasional parked cars picked up reflections from distant lights as he walked. Who in his right mind was going to park a car in here? Certainly not anyone with a nice car. He held the Walther loosely at his thigh. His finger rested parallel to the bottom of the slide, ready, but not risking an accidental pull of the super-short trigger.

Something banged metallically in an upcoming alley on his left, maybe a dumpster lid. Probably some scrawny, dirt-ball diver looking for a snack. He moved his head toward the sound, saving his life. Low and behind him, a shot exploded. Shooter in a parked car. Must have been obscured by a headrest, wearing a hoodie. Asshole lurker. The bullet ripped his earlobe. He imagined he heard it tear his skin and whirled in a crouch his first two rounds going through the windshield on the sidewalk side. The trigger of the Walther returned to reset with an audible 'click'. He took four quick steps toward the car, firing as he went. The man in the front seat slumped over. Maybe the corner boy's lookout. Whoever. Three Levels were enough in this neighborhood.

He turned toward the glow of light from Essex and looked down at his chest. A lot of blood from his ear was dribbling down the front of him. He felt the ear, got sticky fingers, lobe felt mushy. He wondered if the hole would be too big for an earring. Guy almost popped him.

Not bad though. Three Levels, including a lurker to cap it off. Time to go home. Clean his face. Change clothes. Put a bandage on his ear. Boot-up. See if the rain had stopped on-line. He felt ready again, after this little tune-up. The Gamer turned back the way he had come, his footsteps silent in the clear dark, under winking stars peeking through breaks in the scudding clouds. He was thinking

about Bitcoins. Empty brass shell cases in streets behind him sparkled in occasional moonlight.

