

And then she was gone

by Stephen Stark

There were days when Robert Grayson would be overtaken by little sensations of terror. These moments tended to be visually imperceptible except perhaps subconsciously. They were sub-moments, fragments of moments. Two or three frames from a horror movie inserted into the romantic comedy that was more the way he imagined his life.

This June day in 2008, when his life was going to change in ways profound and profoundly weird, was no different.

This was in traffic, on the way to his office at The Firm, near the dogleg between Route 50 and I-66, where eastbound 66 feeds into 495, and on the left, a phalanx of semi trucks descended down the ramp toward the highway, which was six lanes here but merging down to four. There was construction, too, and traffic was a creeping glacial mass. And then it happened. Bam. (But of course it was soundless.) A momentary lapse in the seam of reality. Maybe there was a shimmer of light, but it was just too fast to notice that kind of detail. These moments of terror tended to be visually imperceptible except perhaps subconsciously. And they were undefined, nonspecific. A hole opened, its insides black, then closed again. A crystalline image of the world disintegrating around him. All in nanoseconds.

His hypothesis about these incidents was that they were a natural, human sense of doom related to the sense of being alive and the concomitant and really vivid sense of the ever-present possibility that being alive could abruptly end. It seemed to him that if this was the case, he should be looking at life in a more celebratory fashion, like each day was a gift, blah, blah, blah, which each day did not exactly feel like. Each day felt like something that just was. Some background:1

- In August it would be a year since his father, Robert "Duke" Grayson, died. Duke was arguably his best friend, aside from his wife, Ann.
- In September it would be 12 years since his first novel, *The _____*, was published.
- This week was the 13th anniversary of the small bidding war that erupted over *The _____* and supplied Robert with vastly inflated hopes over what was to come of his career as a novelist.
- In August it would be 11 1/2 years since the editor who championed *The _____* (and frankly, paid way too much money for it) left the publishing house on maternity leave, promising to return before publication. She did not, having been utterly seduced by her charming, fragrant young spawn.
- In January it would be 12 years since his second novel was rejected. At around the same time, no one bothered to bid on the paperback rights for the first. Same month. Six months later, his agent and he agreed to take the second novel off the market so that he could revise it.
- In October, he would have his 10th anniversary of working at The Firm, a very large multinational corporation.
- In that same month, it would be 10 years since *The _____* went out of print.

[1] Ann here: Robert, I really question the wisdom of starting a novel with a bulleted list. I know you hate bulleted lists with a passion, so why use one at all? And the other thing is that this is all about you. All of these facts completely elide the fact of your family. You have all these anniversaries, but not ours. Where's Robbie's birthday?

Yes, I hate bullet lists, but this is an ironic bulleted list. It's scene-setting. Robert has been living in the world of PowerPoint for so long that he doesn't recognize its toxicity. It's not all about 'me.' It's all

about the 'Robert persona' in the narrative. His lack of awareness of his self-absorption. It's part of establishing the scales that will have to fall from his eyes.

More facts:

It had taken Robert about a year and a half to write *The _____*, and about the same amount of time to write the rejected draft of the second novel. For much of the last 12 years, Robert had been working on that novel. He had started out with grandiose ideas for the revision, and a timeline that would have had the novel finished within a year, after which he envisioned a similar hubbub of attention and money. But what he now referred to as *The Sprawling Novel* remained (as far as he could tell) unpublishable, and he was not sure that it ever would be, but it was difficult to give up hope on something that you had put so much into.

Other facts:

He was drinking too much. Not like Faulkner or Fitzgerald or Hemingway, not wake-up-in-a-fountain-naked serious drinking—or some actual good literary drunkenness—just lazy Joe Sixpack-type drinking.

In addition, he was eating too much. Paunch had invaded his midsection, an army of fat cells bent on taking that territory and holding it.

He wasn't doing enough to stay fit. Instead he spent way too much time watching the coverage of the presidential primaries. He was taken by the historic nature of it. He was appalled by the wars and had been even before they started, Iraq in particular. And in a strange way, he was inclined to believe (on bad days, anyway) that the current president and his administration were somehow at least in part responsible for Robert's own inertia—not in any kind of actual paranoid way, mind you. It was like the whole country had been in some state of inertia ever since the 2004 elections, a state of dull disbelief that we could fuck things up so horribly. But also a belief that things were so fucked up, there wasn't actually much you

could do about it until the election, or some kind of intervention by some unknown superpower.

So while Ann graded papers, and after he'd finished what he could accomplish on the novel, he watched CNN and had a glass or two or three of wine and soon enough *The Daily Show* was on ("Clusterfuck to the White House" was priceless), and then Stephen Colbert, and now and then he'd call out to Ann, Come see this. Sometimes she did, others she was already in bed, and he was there, as David Foster Wallace put it, in the dark watching a piece of furniture.

He'd liked Tom Vilsack, but he dropped out. Then he thought John Edwards was the guy (boy was he wrong), but his best friend Leo, the mad coder, was totally hooked on Obama and sent him links to some podcasts of the man speaking, and Robert had been stunned. People hadn't spoken like that in politics in ages. Ann was slower to warm to him. She was pretty certain he couldn't win. But Robert, fortified by too many glasses of wine, would make stupid pronouncements, like: I think there will be a landslide for Obama, frankly. And we'll look back on it afterwards and wonder why we didn't see it coming. You'd have to be an idiot to vote for McCain.

And then he'd wake up before dawn, before Ann—usually at five, and usually after no more than five hours of sleep—and spend an hour or more trying to clear his head, and then try to engage himself in *The Sprawling Novel*. It had been a long time since he'd really been engaged in or with it, but this was not something he admitted to himself. That he was wasting his life. That his talent, as mediocre as it might have been, was either gone or out of reach.

Some days he felt like his life was just an hallucination. Other days, he felt like a hallucinations might be a better thing.

These facts were just facts, and like all 'facts,' there was mediation in their selection and identification as such. To each could have been addended entire algorithms of attendant facts, contingencies. And maybe if you got all of it down you might have the wireframe of a life.

They were history, his history, Robert's, these facts. But, oddly, they did not seem to be his own. This was tricky territory. He couldn't argue that they were not true, only that he felt a kind of disassociation with them. As though he had just been programmed with them yesterday instead of actually having lived them.

Which is to say that his own narrative, the more or less current version of which he had developed and revised beginning in his late teens, and which up until the publication of his first novel, had seemed to keep a fairly linear trajectory with his actual life, but afterwards had taken on a consistently more asymptotic, even divergent quality.

This present narrative, the one in which the balding man in early middle age fights his way through traffic to get to a job that pays his bills but also eats his life, should have been someone else's narrative. In his narrative, that old narrative, every day was cause for celebration almost. His own narrative—the one that had escaped him—was one in which by now he had achieved a tenured position at a university, published two or three or perhaps even four more novels, and had achieved a measure of critical, if not popular, approval. There would have been awards. There should have been a dusty office with walls lined with books, many of them his own. Office hours. Dewy eyed young students hungering for the keys to the kingdom of literature, keys, they would learn at his putative and avuncular knee, that did not exist. A position in a rather more distinctly bucolic setting than the suburbs of Washington, DC. A position in which he had time to think, to write, to counsel hopeful young writers. Every day would be lived in full color, learning, growing, building his craft.

It was as though he had walked through a door in his own house, then come out of it again into an entirely different reality. Same house, different universe. In the alien narrative that had taken over his life, there was very little color, the days stacked up like gray and featureless dominoes, a long parade of them, set up to be knocked down until there were no more.

#

At its start, this particular June day gave no sign of being anything other than another in that long parade of ordinary days. It was June, the sun was shining. School had been out for about a week, and his wife, Ann, a schoolteacher, had gone last night up to the resort in West Virginia—a ski area that offered all sorts of wholesome family-oriented activities in the summertime sure to delight young and old—to meet her parents for a week at their condo—purchased exactly for this purpose. This was something she had done since Robbie was a toddler. And so he had no reason to suspect that this year was going to be as different as it was going to turn out to be. He did not suspect in the least—though in retrospect there would hindsight intimations of unseen machinations.

Nor was he aware—how could he be?—of the truly unprecedented weirdness afoot in what he would later come to think of (thanks to Leo's input) is a temporary adhesion in the multiverse—a concept at this point that would have made no sense to him at all, had it been brought up. At that particular point in time, Robert had no idea at all that there was a such thing as—or even a theory of—the multiverse.

So he was completely unequipped to comprehend on even the most basic level the very weird and multivalent shit hammer that was about to fall on him.

#

Not to get defensive about my ignorance of the clumsily foreshadowed, strange events to ensue, I should say, here, given the unprecedented nature of the events that were to follow—not so much my wife's not unprecedented decision to kick me out of the house, but the other, surreal stuff—I'm pretty sure that no one, or at least no one sane, could actually have been equipped to comprehend, much less deal with, the whole wormhole/adhesion thing any better than I was. As to the business with my wife, Ann, well, I was no better and no less prepared.

I'm not sure I entirely agree with the facts as presented above. And of course since I'm the guy who's doing the presenting of these facts, it seems disingenuous or at least clumsy to disagree with them. This may be splitting hairs, but 'fact' seems like a rather

slippery and nebulous term. Is not untrue that these things happened, or were going to happen. All of it is substantially true. But it paints a picture of a depressed person. And while it is true that I was still to some extent grieving my father's death, I considered myself pretty happy. My wife, Ann, was more beautiful than she was when I first met her, and we had what I can only describe as an outstanding, vigorous and inventive sex life.[3] Our son, Robbie, was a more original character than I ever could possibly have created in any kind of fiction.

As to the job at The Firm, it is true that I never expected to be there for 10 years. It is true that I had taken a job when I had come close to bankruptcy and it was becoming clear that no one was going to buy the Sprawling Novel. We needed the money. We needed the benefits. I figured it would just be a bridge a couple of months, maybe a year. I had already started The Sprawling Novel, but I had no idea that I'd still be working on it now, on that June day.

[3] Charlie Burns here: It may be instructive to note here that Mr. Grayson does not mention any other part of his relationship with his wife aside from their sex life. My clinical observations were that while they did seem to have at times an enviably agreeable sex life, Mr. Grayson indicated that on a number of levels, his relationship with his wife was in very serious trouble. Midlife estrangement, petty disagreements, and more substantial disagreements about finances, common goals, or lack of common goals, and a self absorption on the part of Mr. Grayson that he never seemed to be aware of. All of these things, to me, as a clinician, seemed to point to rocky shoals ahead. —Charles Burns, LCSW, clinical therapist and narrative consultant.

#

And so it was June, and the sun was shining, but after coming into the glass atrium of The Firm and going up to the 13th floor, he would not see it again until evening. Or at least the way it normally went, but today was not going to be normal.

It was safe to say that he wanted too much from *The Sprawling Novel*, which he'd been working on for most of the last twelve years.

In the years that had intervened between now and the time he wrote *The _____*, so much had happened in the world of publishing—ebooks, iPhones, the rise and fall and rise of the Internet, the essential failure of imagination in the publishing industry—and but also in the world of contemporary fiction—*Infinite Jest*, *White Teeth*, *House of Leaves*, *The Corrections*, *The Baroque Cycle*, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, all genre-bending work that left the realism[4] that he'd been working with in *The _____* in the dust—and now he was desperate to catch up, and in his desperation, he seemed to accomplish everything but telling the actual story.

And so on that ordinary morning—in the predawn hours that he reserved for his own work, the house empty—he had sat down with his laptop, his chest clenched in something like desperation, and desperately tried to keep his own imagination from failing (a state of mind, by the way, that at least for Robert was singularly without creative potential).

[4]“Realism” was too restrictive a word for what Robert had been doing in *The _____*. He had been trying to write a kind of rigorous present tense, “in-the-moment” narrative that unfolded the way a film would have unfolded. There were no sort of neo-Victorian kinds of digressions, or even the kind of teasing elisions that happened in, say, Marquez's magical realism. He was going for cinema verite, and not one of the reviewers noticed.

#

It is true that I was wasting a tremendous amount of time. The Sprawling Novel had gotten so big and so disjointed that I'd thrown out at least three drafts. The tiny spans of time that I had to think about it or to work on it were insufficient to achieve the kind of mastery over it that I had had with a younger and clearer head and The _____, or with it when I first began. And so I would work and

then it was suddenly time to get in the shower, get into traffic, go to work. Robbie and Ann were already off to school by the time I emerged from the basement and my 'own little world' as Ann put it. When I came home, it was often back to the basement and my own little (increasingly desperate) little world, and I'd work on it, trying to work myself into the kind of almost hypnotic state I'd get into when I was writing well. Which didn't necessarily mean that what I was writing was any good.

I'm not sure that I knew consciously that I had spent the last decade on what amounted to a waste of time. I probably knew it subconsciously, hence the feeling of increasing desperation. But it's a difficult thing to admit to yourself. I'm not sure that by this point I had even recognized that about The Sprawling Novel.

#

In traffic, he had another one of those seizing moments of panic, and instantly his heart raced, his chest contracted, and he felt as though he would have a heart attack, lose consciousness and wreck the car, or simply combust spontaneously right there.

But and so it was that he made it safely to work and the sun was shining, although after coming into the glass atrium of The Firm and going up to the 13th floor, he would not see it—the day, the sun—again until evening.

It was midmorning when Ann called.

Robert Grayson, Robert said into the telephone when he answered.

Hi, Ann said, her voice sounding a little odd. Visions of wreckage and gruesome, twisted bodies flashed through his head.

Hi, sweetie, he said. Everything okay? How are things in West Virginia?

Good, she said. Robbie's fine. He's having fun. I just wanted to make sure you're there.

I'm here. Where else would I be? Robert did one of those chuckles that you do when you automatically assume the rationale behind the question but in truth are utterly clueless.

I'm just, you know, she said. He would have said she was nervous had he had any reason to believe that she was.

How's the weather?, he said.

Same as it is here, I mean there.

Robbie having a good time?

You know him. He and Big Jack [her father, Jack Miles, famous trial attorney] went fishing.

Wish I could be there.

Well, so, okay, she said and then there was silence.

Well, so, okay, to you, too, he said. Better get back to work.

Yeah, she said. Well, bye now.

Okay, he said. Have fun. And then she was gone.

At the time, it all seemed very straightforward and more or less normal, but later, when he thought about it, he was amazed at how dim he was, how stupid and completely played.

#

Ann here: Just parenthetically: I know it must have seemed cruel. I didn't intend it that way. Or I didn't intend to intend it that way. There's no gentle way to do it, and when you get lawyers involved, they kind of take ownership of a part of your narrative—our narrative, I guess—and the way the whole thing is set up, the adversarial nature of it, Grayson v. Grayson, and all of that.

#

It wasn't more than about 15 seconds after he hung up that his phone rang again. It was the front desk. The woman said: There's a delivery here for you, Mr. Grayson, and only you can sign for it. Should I send him up?

Sure, Robert said.

The phone rang again. It was Darlene, one of the members of his technical writing project analysis team.[5] She started in before he completely had the phone to his ear. —got a deliverable but I just got a call from the sitter and Elan's sick. I have to go pick him up.

What's the deliverable?, Robert said. Can you work on it from home?

5 You kind of had to be in the contracting/consulting business to understand the complete vacuum of imagination that went into these kinds of designations. "Team" and "analyst" were terms that bore only the vaguest connection to actual teaming or actual analysis.

Elan's vomiting. I mean maybe. Greg said he's got no bandwidth. I tried to ask Damon and he's not answering his phone. (Greg Sharpe and Damon Wesel [pronounced 'weasel'] were the two other members of his 'team'.)

He could be on another line.

He's not at his desk, and he's not answering his cell, and Elan's vomiting.

Darlene. Please just do what you need to do.

As soon as Robert put the phone down, it rang again. This time there was no one there, and the weird silence unsettled him, but then there was a man—a kid, really—at the door of his office, knocking gingerly.

He wore a visitor badge. He said, You Robert Grayson?

Robert nodded.

Please sign for this, he said and handed Robert a large manila envelope. Robert looked at it, then took the pen that the man offered him and signed a piece of paper on a clipboard.

Thank you, the man said, and then was gone, but he was quickly replaced by Greg, who appeared to be vastly annoyed. Greg was a former marine and a hopeful fashion designer, in the same way that Robert was a hopeful novelist. Which was to say that he designed and built clothing (this was the way he referred to it, 'built' clothing. Greg wore a skirt, but Greg was the kind of guy who could wear a skirt and look like it was just exactly the right thing to wear. It was his legs, his narrow waist, and improbably broad shoulders. His height didn't hurt, either. At six-foot-three and (as he put it) totally ripped, he would have been an imposing presence no matter what he wore. His legs, mainly, which Robert was pretty sure he waxed, but had never asked.

As Greg's supervisor, Robert more than once had had his attention drawn to Greg's wearing of skirts. This was something, most of the time, that Robert found enormously entertaining. He'd point out that if it was perfectly legitimate for a woman to wear a skirt, there was little reason that a man—especially a man with legs like that—shouldn't wear one himself.

What is it, Greg?

Darlene left.

I know. She said Elan's sick. She had to pick him up.

I know that, but she said you told her to dump her deliverable on me.

No, Robert said, and shook his head. I told her to do what she needed to do. Robert looked at the envelope that weighed in his hand. It had on the corner the return address of a law firm he had never heard of. It wasn't that unusual for him to get packages delivered, but usually it was the mail kid, a twenty-something woman of indeterminate racial origins who always seemed to Robert to be way too smart to be delivering mail.

So what's the deliverable?, Robert said.

Section 12 of the VISTAFF manual.

Maybe you can rouse Damon from whatever stupor he happens to be in.

Robert was absently aware of himself opening the envelope, aware that Greg was watching him.

Is it on the server?, Robert said, not really fully engaged with Greg, but pulling out the stack of papers in the envelope. There was a letter on top. Beneath it was a stack of paper that had an alarmingly legal look to it.

I'll call her in a little bit and see if she can work on it from home. Once she gets—

He stopped because his eyes had focused on the stack of legal papers beneath the letter. These words jumped out at him: Grayson vs. Grayson. The matter of the divorce. Complainant. Defendant.

He felt his stomach constrict. He remembered the call from Ann. He was dervishly dizzy, suddenly.

Greg said: What?

Robert said, his hands trembling. I've got a bit of a problem here.

Robert, listen, I try to be patient with Darlene, but nobody put a gun to her head to have those kids—

No. Robert cut him off. I mean I have a *real* problem here, Greg. Can't talk.

#

I couldn't talk because I could already taste bile in my throat. The sensation of needing to vomit wasn't just imagined this time, not some moment of imagined and irrational fear. I was pretty sure I was going to retch right there.

#

Robert wasn't sure how he got back into his office chair, but there he was. Greg was standing at the door, and could clearly see Robert's distress.

Robert stood, then sat again. He was sweating and he was cold.

Can we, um, continue this conversation at a later date? Robert croaked. I just had a family emergency crop up.

Sure, Greg said. Sure. If I can help....

Can you close that? I don't mean to be rude, but can you close that?

Robert was trembling all over.

As soon as the door closed, he grabbed his trash can and vomited into it. When that was over he wiped his mouth and picked up the phone.

