

Glancing Blow

Short Horror Tale No.1

By
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Glancing Blow

My voice was my life.

In the ten years since I graduated from high school and leapt into the ugly real world of job-hunting, bills and rising debts, my voice had become everything. I'd sung as backup in a dozen different, crappy bands. I'd recorded readings for an internet audio-book company. I'd tried a stint as a stand up comedian and died on stage. I'd also done work on radio, and as a DJ, as an emcee, in advertising and in a range of voice-gigs on *Fiverr.com*. Finally, a week ago, I had hit it big. After a year of negotiations and pleadings, I had succeeded in getting a small recording outfit to let me cut an album of my music. It was hip-hop and rap meets opera, mostly vocal with some light backing tracks. Maybe no one would ever buy a copy when it hit the internet, maybe a million people would rush to buy it on day one. But it was my chance to do what I'd always wanted. And you've gotta chase your dreams.

The journey home was a three hundred mile drive and I had utterly enjoyed the first third of it. All I owned was a rust-bucket, four-door saloon that had seen better days five years earlier. With the accelerator pressed into the floor, it managed about fifty-five miles an hour – for short periods, or the engine overheated. As driving entertainment, the car offered a cassette player (*yes, it was that old!*), but this had died months ago, and so I used an MP3 Player with a portable speaker on the front passenger seat.

My album was on the Player, blasting at my eardrums as I rode through the night. High above, the full moon and an array of stars all seemed brighter than ever before. I had left the city behind two hours ago and now the road was flanked by thick forest. *Were those pine trees rearing alongside me?* I wondered. *I dunno. I'm a vocalist, Jim, not a botanist.* They sure smelled sweet and fresh on the air gushing through the partially-open windows. Best of all, the traffic had vanished about an hour ago. I practically owned the two-lane road. It was just me, the road and the forest as far as my eyes could see.

"Good God," I said to myself. "This has been the best week of my life. Everything is so right."

Unfortunately, it wasn't long before my luck changed. And everything went so wrong.

* * *

Around 2 AM, a faint drizzle began. Specs of moisture grew on my windscreen and a faint downward haze was added to my headlights' glare. At first, the rain wasn't enough for me to need the wipers. Ten minutes later, heavier clouds had drifted-in to obscure half the stars above... and these unleashed their water as if I was some despised enemy. Rain came hammering at the car. The roof sounded as if a million tiny fingers were playing upon it. That steady, annoying drip started in the top right-hand corner of the rear window – a leak I had never had a chance to fix. The windscreen was awash and I had to switch the wipers to maximum to maintain any vision at all. I slowed down from fifty to under thirty miles an hour. Even in a car twice as good as mine, driving fast would have been reckless.

The music blaring from my MP3 Player was drowned-out by the percussion from the heavens. I didn't reach over to pause the player – that might have been reckless too.

A number of lousy possibilities entered my mind as I drove carefully. First, wet weather sometimes brought out the gremlins in my car's electrical system. It wasn't difficult to imagine my rust-heap coming to a shuddering halt at any moment. Second, in weather like this, you sometimes got an ass – maybe even a drunken ass – putting his foot down in the hope of "beating the rain" (whatever the hell that might mean). I really wouldn't like to meet one of those guys zooming in the opposite direction. Third, what would I do if I saw a hitchhiker? If I left him to the elements, he could end up with pneumonia. If I picked him up and he was a serial killer—

"Holy shit—"

When people are in an accident, they often use the phrase "appeared out of nowhere". Usually, anyone hearing this thinks: *you'd have seen it if you were paying proper attention*. I swear I was paying attention. My eyes never left the road. My mind may have been wandering, but my focus wasn't...

It *did* appear out of nowhere. In one heartbeat, the road was empty. In the next, a dark, humped shape was darting through my right headlight beam and appearing in the left one.

I reacted faster than thought. What I did was dictated by a piece of advice my father had given me many years earlier.

He'd said: "Son, if a damn deer, cat, dog or whatever jumps in front of your car, you don't panic. If you spin the wheel hard and hit the brakes to avoid the bastard, you'll wind up crashing. Maybe head-on into a tree. You might be dead or paralysed for life. Don't wipe yourself out for an animal: human life matters more. You slow and turn gently away. You might miss it. You might turn it into mincemeat. You might just give it a glancing blow. But both of you will stand a chance of coming out alive. Besides, if it was dumb enough to jump in front of a car, then maybe it's Darwinism in action."

So I took my foot off the accelerator and covered the brake pedal – while angling the steering wheel about twenty degrees, enough to run me against the edge of the tarmac, but not off into the muddy floor of the forest...

I didn't miss or mincemeat the animal. The very edge of the left-hand front bumper made contact with its flank. There was a sharp *click* of bone breaking – and the thing flipped over and spun in the air.

For a moment I thought I saw a whirlwind of flailing limbs. Heavy rain had undoubtedly obscured my vision – for no land animal has so many long, curling appendages...

Then the struck creature blurred past my side-window. A glance in my rear-view mirror showed a dark, twisted mass bounce three times on the road before coming to a halt.

I straightened the steering wheel and braked to a smooth stop. One tap of a finger silenced my MP3 Player.

Another look in my rear-view mirror revealed nothing but rain pouring and rebounding from the tarmac.

Many people would have carried on driving and left the animal to survive or die. I couldn't. Another lesson from my father was a more moral one: *You don't just leave a hurt animal. You make sure it's okay, you take it to help or – if it's suffering – you end its pain.*

As I opened the door and stepped out into the surging rain, I prayed the thing had already run off. Or limped off. Hell, I'd be happy to carry its injured body to my car, let it bleed all over the back seat and get the thing to a vet. One thought which turned my stomach was my having to smash its skull with a rock if I found the thing beyond help and in agony. I'd do it, but I'd hate to have to.

The rainstorm hit me with both its roaring noise and its battering force. Since I was only wearing a T-shirt and jeans – my coat being unwisely stored in the boot – I was instantly soaked to the skin. My slicked-back long hair transformed into a mess of rat-tails; my beard felt like a sodden sponge; and my clothing seemed to become liquid. Frenzied blinking fought to keep the water from obscuring my vision completely. I put my right hand over my eyebrows to shade my eyes from the rain – which did little good.

That big old mechanic's torch I owned would have been pretty useful then. Of course, it was back at my apartment, in the cupboard under the sink.

I leaned against the dripping car with my free hand as I walked alongside the vehicle. The metal was icy-cold – like I was quickly becoming.

I peered along the tarmac. I could see maybe fifteen paces.

Empty. Nothing there.

I smiled as I continued on. *The animal was gone. Probably under a tree, pissing itself laughing at the stupid human getting wet.*

No. When I got parallel with my rear bumper, I was able to make out a black shape on the road. No details could be gauged, but there was movement.

I cocked my head like a dog and tried to listen past the downpour. My mind expected a sobbing sound or maybe a howling... But all I got was a faint drift of another, strange noise. It was weird and oscillating, high-pitched and almost musical. The call resembled a whale's cries... which was damn ridiculous out there in the woods.

It's the rain, I decided, it's playing tricks on my hearing.

Four more nervous steps took me away from the car. I considered with bitter irony that some other vehicle might now come along and run over both me and my victim. Things like that happen every day.

"Be okay, you little critter," I murmured to myself. "Please God, don't be all mangled..."

I still couldn't see the thing properly. I knew it must be less than a dozen paces away now. Rain was distorting my view of the creature. I could determine a large rounded mass on the ground, over twelve feet across. Four or more limbs seemed to be squirming out across the waterlogged ground, like lashing whips. They threw up waves of water. Three more limbs – well, they looked like limbs, but surely couldn't be – were thrashing up into the air, making me think of slender fists shaking angrily at the sky. *Seven limbs? Crazy and wrong.* Besides, limbs have joints, they don't curve and twist

around themselves like these things did. And their apparent size was wrong too – up to five feet long each, and tapering towards the end as if they were fleshy spikes...

Jutting from the left-hand side of the body was a shape that I guessed would turn out to be the head. Except it was too damn long – seven feet from the ‘shoulders’ to the tip of its snout, or whatever there was. I imagined that three quarters of this length was its neck, which was so thick I probably couldn’t have wrapped my arms around it. The head formed a bulbous end upon the neck and tapered away to the front.

I stood there dumbfounded for several seconds. My left hand scratched at my dripping beard and I shook my head.

“What the hell are you..?”

Ridiculously, I smiled as a movie flashback hit me. I’d just quoted Schwarzenegger in Predator. Maybe if I’d been wiser, I would have recognised this as an omen... and run for my life.

Instead, after a deep breath, I took a few more paces.

And I got my answer.

* * *

A new kind of cold seeped into my flesh. It was birthed by disbelief and growing fear.

The thing I had struck with my car was no deer, wild dog, boar or any other normal creature of the forest. Or a normal creature from anywhere else I knew of.

There was no fur, rather a smooth, black hide that glistened beneath the downpour as if heavily oiled. The torso of the thing was a gelatinous sac – the flesh loose and rippling beneath rain-impacts. A spine and any other bones were buried deep in the fatty flesh. Along the sides, top and bottom of the thing there protruded thin, folded-up lengths that reminded me of either fins or bat-wings. I estimated there might be a dozen of these fins/wings and that they might stretch out between ten and fifteen inches if extended fully.

The neck was made of jelly-flesh like the torso, though the skin was heavily wrinkled and this suggested the neck could stretch out to almost double its considerable length. The head looked to be of harder material, and the back of it had a number of bulbous protrusions, evidence of sturdy bone-structure beneath. Either over-lapping folds of flesh or prominent bands of muscle gave the head the appearance of an immense closed flower-head. On top of this texturing, there were formations running from near the neck to the front of the head: each was a crenulated pipe, two inches thick, ending in a bulbous lump that was twice as thick. I could see three of these formations, evenly-spaced, which suggested a fourth out of sight.

Both the body and neck were motionless except for the thrashing impacts of rain and *possibly* some minimal movement due to breathing... So it was the limbs that held my unwilling attention the most. They had no joints – they were snaking, thrashing tentacles. Skin across these things was also black and smooth, however a patterning existed too. What to me looked like hundreds of tiny versions of the fin/wing shapes covered each tentacle – and these flexed horribly as the limbs continued their flailing. The small protrusions flexed in and out non-stop, pulsing faster than even the heightened beating of my heart.

I noticed, being closer now, that there were eight tentacles rather than seven. The eighth lay motionless, stretched out behind the creature like a tail. Clearly, the *crack* I had heard upon impact had been bones breaking in or above this appendage, rendering it useless.

Fear of whatever this thing might be or might be capable of, overrode my instinct to help a creature I had struck with my car. I found myself back-pacing even before I knew I wanted to retreat: my fight-or-flight instinct was saying *get the hell away from this damned thing*.

I had managed three steps in retreat and the horrible mass was beginning to fade towards obscurity behind the rain... When the creature suddenly turned its neck.

It moved so fast that I almost stumbled in reaction. The water covering the head was cast off in an angled spray and the very front of the mass was abruptly facing me. For a moment, there was nothing to see. The folded flesh or muscle of the head merely came to a tapered end – again, very like a closed flower-head. Then the four pipe-like formations set around the head flexed in unison, curving away from the great head – and the skin peeled back from their bulbous ends to reveal hideous eyes.

Each eye was a luminous pale yellow ball. The pupil was a ragged red slash across the centre, ebbing wider and narrower in the manner of a pulsating open wound.

From those grotesque eyes, I felt a sense of anger emanate. It was looking at the being who had dealt it a brutal injury and it was overcome with inhuman loathing.

Beneath the sac-body of the creature, the four able limbs slithered back and then flexed upwards. The body was raised four feet into the air. For a second it looked like a nightmarish oil derrick. Above the beast, the three higher tentacles whipped ever-faster...

I turned and ran with all the speed I was capable of...

And slipped to come crashing down upon my face.

End Of Sample

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