

The Long Dawn



Art by AnnieB
Story by Bluewolf

Blair Sandburg hummed quietly to himself as he drove along. The semester was finished, and the next two weeks were his own, to spend as he would. He had set off early, wanting to lengthen the spring break as much as possible. He would have been welcome on a short expedition to some faraway place, and the previous two years that was what he had done; but this year he had decided to have a proper vacation. Travel around some of the National Parks, do some sight-seeing - something he hadn't done for years.

Hell, something he had never really done. Even as a child travelling around the world with his footloose mother, it hadn't really been a vacation - one of them had to be the responsible one, and that 'responsible one' had inevitably been Blair. Naomi was too inclined to believe that things would never go wrong, would fall into place without any effort on her part. Blair had learned responsibility very young.

And Naomi had been happy to let him take that responsibility.

It had not entirely been love of learning that drove Blair to Rainier when he was just sixteen. Some of it was the... yes, the need to escape from the apparently never-ending task of being responsible for his mother. And if at least part of him hoped that she would learn a measure of maturity through being responsible for her own welfare, it was a part that at heart he felt was futile to acknowledge.

This early in the morning the road was quiet. He had already covered nearly two hundred miles and only seen two other vehicles. As the road rose higher, the headlights showed a thin covering of snow at the side of the road, but there was no snow actually on the road, and it didn't feel slippery; there was no frost - hardly surprising for the beginning of April. To the east he could see the sky lightening with the first sign of dawn.

He had just reached a series of bends when he saw the headlights of another car approaching. Blair dipped his lights - it would be discourteous, at the very least, to blind the other driver as he came around a corner. But the other car came round the corner far too fast, failed to straighten, and crashed into Blair's car. Blair had just enough time to try to swerve out of the way, enough that the impact was primarily on the passenger side of his car, and then everything slammed to a stop.

Blair straightened, rubbing the side of his head where it had hit the side window. He groped for the seatbelt and was happy when it released. He was equally happy when the door opened - he had to push it hard, but it opened. After pausing for a second, fighting a touch of nausea, he got out and walked round the wreckage of what had been two cars a minute earlier - one an elderly Corvair, the other... who knew? - but was now just a tangled mess, and approached the driver's side of the other car.

Blair was glad to see that there were no passengers. The driver's head drooped forward; apart from that, the steering wheel, pressing hard against his chest, held him upright, but it took no imagination at all to realize that the man was dead. And mixed with the smell of gas was the smell of liquor.

This guy had been drunk. He'd probably been to a party somewhere? Odds were he often drove this road, knew it was pretty quiet at this time of day - well, early morning - was in the habit of cutting all the corners, and had seen his lights - especially since Blair had dipped them - far too late to react.

Well, he was dead because of it. Blair could only be grateful that he seemed to be perfectly all right.

He glanced at his car, decided to leave his pack in it - he could retrieve it later.

He had never bothered getting a cell phone - far, far too expensive! especially for something he wasn't sure he really needed. Now, for the first time, he regretted not having one; it would have made reporting the accident much easier.

What was the best thing to do? He could go down the road a little way, round at least that first corner; he could flag down any approaching car so that it didn't go round the bend and the driver suddenly find a serious pile of wreckage in front of him. Anyone driving the way he had come would see it in the distance. But the road was quiet... it might be a while before another car arrived. He had no idea how far it was to the next town, if he went on; but if he went back the way he had come, he had passed through a small town some five miles back.

He could walk that in less than two hours, and if he saw a car approaching, he could wave it down. And if no car showed up, unlikely though that seemed, in two hours he would have reached the town and be able to phone from there.

With a last glance at the eastern sky, Blair started walking. At least it was light enough that he could see where he was going, though he wouldn't have wanted to drive without headlights with the light as faint as it was.

After a while, he paused and glanced behind him. Surely it should be lighter by now? Surely he had been walking long enough that the sun should be close to rising?

But that was odd... the sky looked exactly the same as it had done when he began walking away from the crash. Blair frowned, puzzled... then turned and walked on.

And on.

And on...

And still the light stayed as dim as it had been.

Blair looked back again... to see the sky still looking exactly the same as when he started.

Weird. It should certainly be full daylight by now...

Turning his back on the faint light in the east once more, he plodded on.

Jim Ellison hadn't enjoyed his holiday.

Worn out by a case where every suspect had a cast-iron alibi, he had eventually been able to prove that the apparent murder had actually been a well-thought-out suicide. Just why the man had wanted to disguise his suicide was far from clear.

After he broke the case, he had taken a week of his holiday entitlement and gone camping, but despite spending his days hiking and fishing - both pursuits he normally thoroughly enjoyed - he had felt restless; dissatisfied. Bored, even. Five days into his week, he gave up after a sleepless night, packed up and headed for home in the dark hour before dawn, glad that the roads would be quiet. He had a headache, and was afraid that the glare of oncoming headlights would exacerbate it.

So instead of taking the obvious route, he took a back road, one that, although it had some dangerous winding stretches, was really quite a relaxing drive, which, he was fairly certain, would be even quieter at this time than the more direct road.

The sky was lightening when, after negotiating a series of bends and reaching a straight stretch, he saw ahead of him a dejected-looking figure walking along, going west, as he was; a young man who looked quite tired. He pulled up opposite him, unfastened his seat belt, leaned over and wound down the window.

"Need a lift?"

The man looked over at him, suddenly seeming to register his presence. "Hey! How did you get past the wreckage?"

Jim frowned. "Wreckage?"

"Back there, at the first bend." He gestured behind himself.

Jim shook his head. "There wasn't any wreckage," he said, beginning to wonder if this guy was quite all there.

"Of course there is! I was driving along minding my own business when this other car cut the corner and hit me head on. I wasn't hurt - but the other guy, he was killed. I could smell the booze on him... I know there's a town not far from here, so I started walking back to it... but I seem to have been walking for a long time. I should have reached it by now... and it should be daylight now."

Delusional? Jim wondered. But it would be irresponsible for him to leave this guy, who was obviously a little unbalanced, walking along the road. He opened the passenger door. "Come on; you look tired. I'll give you a lift to the town."

"Thanks." He climbed in and pulled the door shut. That was when Jim realized just how young the man was - he was hardly more than a boy!

"Belt up!" Jim said as his passenger made no attempt to do so.

"Oh... yes." He fumbled with the seat belt and fastened it.

Jim refastened his own, and set off again. "What's your name? I'm Jim."

"Blair."

"And you've just been in an accident? A car crash?" Jim wanted to see if Blair would continue with his delusion now that he had a lift.

"Yeah... Like I said, it can't have been long ago, because it was just getting light, and it's not daylight yet. So although I seem to have been walking for a long time, it can't have happened more than ten, fifteen minutes ago. I decided it wouldn't take me longer than two hours to walk to the last town I passed through, and I could report it there. But I could have sworn that the road was completely blocked... "

"Blair... the road was completely clear. There wasn't any sign of an accident."

"There had to be!"

They drove into a small town, through it, and carried on, apparently without Blair's noticing it.

This was beyond weird...

Jim had always prided himself on being reasonably matter-of-fact, though in Peru he had been aware of Incacha sometimes knowing things, things that turned out to have happened... It had taught him that sometimes things weren't exactly what they seemed to be. And now he wondered...

Had there indeed been a fatal accident on this road at some time in the past? Had Blair only thought he had escaped unhurt and gone for help, but it was his ghost that had been walking along, getting nowhere, for... how long?

But why had nobody reported seeing someone walking along this road in the dim light of early morning? Why had nobody else had the humanity to stop and offer the young man a lift?

"Am I the first car that's passed you?" he asked.

"You're the first. There have been a few times I thought I heard a car, but it was just imagination - wishful thinking, I suppose - because I've never seen any."

Jim nodded, wondering... Why had *he* seen Blair?

It was full light now as the sun rose above the eastern horizon, but Blair didn't seem to notice. As Jim switched off his headlights, he realized that his headache had completely gone. "Blair, I've been thinking. Where do you live?"

Blair gave an address in the dock area of Cascade. Jim was almost certain that there was nothing in that area but old warehouses, but he decided not to say so.

"So what do you do, Blair?" They couldn't drive for the best part of four hours in silence!

"Oh - I'm a student. Third year at Rainier."

"You look very young to be in your third year."

Blair grinned. "I am. I started when I was sixteen. I'll be nineteen next month."

"What's your major?"

"Anthropology. I got a flying start - my Mom took me all over the world when I was just a kid, so I saw a lot of cultures back then, including the way a lot of the poor in third world countries lived... "

Once started, it seemed that he didn't have an 'off' switch. But Jim found that listening to Blair's first-hand knowledge of other countries was surprisingly interesting, and he was almost surprised at how quickly the time passed; it seemed like no time at all until they reached the outskirts of Cascade.

Jim swung his truck down the road that led to the docks, then turned into the street Blair had named. Yes - all warehouses, all looking pretty derelict. He said so.

"Yeah, but it was cheap. The owner - " He broke off as Jim stopped the truck, staring at the empty lot.

The building that had once stood there had been demolished.

"That... that's impossible!" he whispered. "I just left there early this morning! Well, the middle of the night, really. Even if Mr. Baker meant to have it demolished he'd have let me know... but he couldn't have got it demolished and everything cleared away in just a few hours!"

Jim nodded. "Blair, I think... "

"Yes?"

"What year is it?" Why hadn't he thought to ask that earlier?

"1988, of course. April."

Jim shook his head. "Blair, it's 1996."

"What?"

Jim could hear the 'You're putting me on' in the kid's voice, but there was no way Blair could dismiss the total disappearance of the warehouse he'd been living in.

"Blair... I think you were killed in that accident you mentioned. You just thought you were okay. But you were caught in some sort of eternal 'now'. When you thought you heard cars - I think you probably did, but for some reason you couldn't see them, their drivers didn't see you. Why I saw you, I don't know, but there has to be a reason."

Blair was silent for a moment, then said, "And if I get out of this truck, will I end up back walking and walking on that road in the quarter light?"

"Somehow, I don't think so. I think when I saw you, when you got into the truck, it broke whatever compulsion was keeping you there.

"Come home with me. Hey - " as he saw the doubtful look on Blair's face - "what can I do that'll harm a ghost? Anyway, I'm a cop. I'm thinking I can probably check back to April 1988 and dig up the report on that accident. That'll tell us something. And then we'll have to work out why it was that I could see you when - in eight years - nobody else did. Okay?"

"Okay."

Once they were in Jim's loft apartment, Jim showed Blair the small spare room. "I don't know if ghosts need to sleep, but you can count on this as your room. Now. Hungry? Or do you want something to drink?"

Blair shook his head. "No... I don't think I need anything."

"You don't mind if I have something?"

"Why should I? No reason for you to go hungry just because I don't want to eat... maybe don't need to eat." *If what he says is right, I haven't eaten for eight years.*

So Jim prepared himself a meal. As he served it, Blair said, "That does smell good... Jim, I think that just smelling food 'feeds' me."

"You do believe me, then? That you're a ghost?"

"I think I have to," Blair admitted.

As he ate, Jim gave some thought to Blair's situation. Somehow he felt responsible for the kid. Although walking and walking and getting nowhere wasn't much of an existence, it was what Blair had known, all Blair had known for eight years, even though it had just seemed like a relatively short while to him. Jim had taken him away from that, and felt it was up to him to replace that with something... but what?

He finished his meal, washed the dishes and, carrying a beer, rejoined Blair, who had moved into the living area.

"I still have the weekend off," he said as he opened the beer. "When I go to the station on Monday, though, I'll see what I can find out about the accident, and about when your warehouse was demolished."

"Thanks. How will you explain wanting to know?"

"Not sure about the warehouse... but the accident? I know we didn't stop at the town you were trying to reach, but it's easy enough to say I did and heard an assistant in one of the shops warning someone about a dangerous corner on that road, and I'm curious enough to want to know if it is as dangerous as she claimed." He thought for a moment. "The warehouse... I happened to be driving that way and wondered why one had been demolished when none of the others were." He took a long slug of beer. As he did, he heard a faint scratching noise; he put the beer down and listened...

"Jim? *Jim!* Wake up!"

"What... ?"

"You went... you went totally blank. You didn't seem to hear me at first."

"Oh, God!"

"What?"

"I sometimes... I sometimes seem to lose track of my surroundings if something catches my attention. I could hear something... I was trying to make out what it was... "

"I didn't hear anything," Blair said.

"It wasn't very loud."

Blair looked at him. "You heard something very quiet. You can see me when nobody else did. Can you smell things easily? Taste what goes into your food?"

"Yes."

"And do you often get those blank spells?"

"Not often, but often enough to be a nuisance. I've never had one when I was driving, thank goodness, but when I'm driving I'm not concentrating on just one thing."

"Is it possible?" Blair whispered, almost to himself.

"Possible?"

"Jim - I think you could be a sentinel."

"A what?"

"Sentinel. Goodness knows what happened to it - it was in my car when I crashed - but I had this book, *The Sentinels of Paraguay*. It was written last century by an explorer called Richard Burton, and it was all about these men - occasionally women - who had heightened senses. Burton called them sentinels. Pretty well every village in remote areas had one. They guarded their village, led the hunts, warned of approaching bad weather, helped the village shaman diagnose illness... There weren't any in the big cities, and nowadays - almost none, anywhere. Civilization seems to mean they're not really needed, but I've never believed that they just died out. I think the potential is still there and given the right trigger it'll surface."

"This past week... Blair, this past week I've been camping, on my own, and I've been more aware of things - sounds, for example - than I've ever been before."

"And you saw me, where nobody else did."

"If you come in to the station with me on Monday, we can test that. I won't try to introduce you, and we can see if anyone notices you, tries to speak to you, asks me who you are. If they don't - "

"If they don't then I really am a ghost," Blair murmured. Then he suddenly looked more cheerful. "Jim, according to Burton, every sentinel had a companion, someone who worked with him, kept him centered. Maybe I'm your companion! Maybe that's why you could see me when nobody else did! Maybe - " his voice became more serious. "Maybe that's why I became a ghost, tied to Earth, when the other driver didn't. Because I'm your companion, so there was still something for me to do, here."

"Could be," Jim agreed, "but it's going to feel really odd working with someone invisible to everyone else who's stuck permanently just short of nineteen!"

"The one thing you'll need to watch is that you don't actually speak to me when there's anyone else around."

So how will we communicate? Jim thought even as he nodded agreement. *You'll be able to speak to me, but how will I -*

"That's it!" Blair exclaimed. "You're thinking what you would like to say. If you think at me, I'll 'hear' you."

"Does that mean you'll always know my thoughts?" Jim sounded uneasy.

"I don't think so," Blair replied. "Just anything you think *at* me. Oh, this is going to be great! Think of all the places I can go that you can't, the evidence I might pick up for you!"

"Blair, I'd still have to find some way to prove it, some way to get evidence that will hold up in court."

"Oh. Yes, you can't exactly say 'my partner heard that' can you."

"No. But you know, Chief, I think this could work. Just be careful - "

"Jim, realistically, what could happen to me? I'm already dead!"

"Someone could exorcise you?"

Blair grinned. "I don't think good spirits can be exorcised." He stretched. "I think - no, I know - that I'm going to enjoy this."

Jim grinned back at him. "I think I am, too."