

UNKNOWN
Steve Rasnic Tem

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Steve has stories forthcoming in *Albedo One*, *That Mysterious Door* (Fantasy and SF about Maine), *Matter* and *Dark Discoveries*. His new novel, written in collaboration with his wife Melanie Tem, and expanding on their award-winning novella, is *The Man on the Ceiling*, a March 2008 release from Discoveries.

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Not for the first time he decides to go nameless. Moves to a city where they don't know him. Tells no one of his new whereabouts. Chooses a new name using identification documents he's paid a fortune for, then avoids using that expensive new name as much as possible.

"And your name?" they might ask at a bus stop or in the park.

"You can just call me Buddy," he replies. Most do so without blinking an eye.

Then he spends months trying to erase both the new name and the old name from his consciousness.

The process is not particularly difficult for him. He doesn't open his mail—drops it into the trash without a glance. He fills out only those forms he cannot avoid, looking away when he scribbles a bit of graffiti that may or may not be his signature. He answers to "Buddy," but for him "Buddy" is no more identifying than "Hey, you."

He deals with neither banks nor doctors. He isn't naive enough to think that he's achieved total anonymity—no doubt his persona has been digitized in a number of different ways. But he doesn't think much about it. He does not avoid photographs, but always makes sure he is part of a

group, which as far as he is concerned is far more anonymous than never having been photographed at all. Similarly, he rejects the life of the hermit, and wraps himself in crowds. He tries to make himself as frequently seen as lampposts and trees.

You would expect such a man to avoid diaries as if they were forbidden tomes of black lore, but he keeps his religiously, using it to report concise, nonjudgmental observations, the only reporting suitable, he thinks, for an anonymous observer:

Two dogs were run over in the street today. A car avoided the first animal, then plowed into the second. At the same moment the car behind ran over the first dog. The men climbed from their cars and swore at each other. A nearby child was hysterical. No one went to the child, who cried for thirty-six minutes, fifteen seconds. Most would think such lengthy hysteria impossible, but an accurate watch cannot be denied. Eventually a female police officer came and led the child away.

The temperature was forty-five degrees at eight a.m., climbing to seventy-six degrees at noon. At 142 Lincoln Street a dark man in a white T-shirt and green pants sat on the front step and watched the sky. At intervals varying between fifteen seconds and three minutes forty-two seconds the man wiped tears from his eyes. He said nothing when the old woman in the blue dress split her grocery bag. A can of peas rolled under a parked white Oldsmobile. She did not see it and left it behind after she'd gathered the spilled groceries. At five p.m. the man stood up slowly and went inside. His shoulders and knees appeared to struggle with gravity. A man in a brown suit passed him going out the door, walking very fast.

There are eight green bottles and a dead cat in the alley across the street. A man enters the alley and counts them every day. He looks at the cat and tries to determine if it has been moved. A newspaper lies beside the cat but he does not reach down and cover the cat with it. He prefers to remain nameless.

The nameless man wanders down the street with a water bottle in his hand. At every third corner he stops and takes three swallows. At some point in the past he has fainted from dehydration and is determined to avoid such incidents in the future. He continues down the street until he finds a crowd to join. For the rest of the day he moves from crowd to crowd, holding the water bottle, drinking his swallows but trying not to be too obvious about it, trying not to be seen. Both unknown and unknowable, he is

a part of the grand movement of the world, he thinks, and there are others who need the moisture far more than he.

At the end of the day the man strips off his shirt and stares at himself in the mirror. He drips what's left of the water over his head. It is a kind of baptism, he thinks, but will not pursue the idea. He imagines the remaining dust of the day dissolving from him, freeing him from this time and place.

In the morning the traffic noise begins early, at precisely five fifteen a.m. The man without a name dresses in clean gray slacks and a light blue shirt. He puts a newspaper he will not read under his arm and walks out onto the hot concrete. He strolls at a steady pace down the sidewalk with no destination in mind. The man from the day before is again sitting out on the front step crying, silently but unmistakably to those willing to notice. The man with no name walks past the crying man, pretending not to notice.

The man who will not be named slips into a mass of people on their way to work. Their movements and intentions toward movement make an intricate pattern of gravity and emotional force the nameless man has come to understand and predict. He moves with them as if within a migratory herd of long duration as they pound the pavements, casting off one member after another at bus stops and subway entrances. He is aware of the unhealing carcinoma under one dark man's ear, a young woman's blackened eye, the bleeding forearm of an elderly Jew where the skin has been scrubbed raw. The man without a name smells the stink of fear that leaks from pores swaddled in clothing bought with a great deal of money and very little taste. The nameless man tastes the horror in the mouths of those who cannot speak it, yet speaks none of it himself.

He walks and walks with no destination in mind, with no name and its burden of past association to stop him.

"Bob!" The voice breaks through the back of his head. "Bob, is that you?"

The man who has no name turns and looks at the woman who has stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, her hands thrown up to her face as if in joy or grief.

"I thought I'd never see you again!" she cries, and runs toward him, throws her arms around him. He flinches, but allows her to do what she feels she must do. The woman suddenly removes her arms and steps back. "What's wrong?" she asks.

The nameless man does not think in terms of right or wrong and so says nothing.

“You act like you don’t even know me.”

The man without a name recognizes the fatigue in the woman’s eyes, which had been there every time he saw her. “Mary,” he says, knowing that isn’t the name of her secret heart—it is only the name she shares with others—but she has never shared her secret name with him so Mary is all he can use.

“Bob, you’ve been gone for months—is that all you have to say to me?”

He looks at her, wondering what he can possibly say to her, thinking he’d have to be a genius in order to know the right thing to say. “I wouldn’t want to hurt you,” he finally begins, telling her the truth. “Believe me, I would give anything not to hurt you. We could have been married—I know that’s what you wanted. Maybe I wanted it, too. Maybe I still want it. We could be married and I believe we would have had a successful marriage by the usual standards. No huge betrayals, no precipitous decline in affection, certainly none of the arguing that continues at a low burn for years before finally erupting into something more than painful and possibly dangerous. We would have had children and I’m sure we would have raised those children well.”

Somehow he thinks saying those things will in some small degree be comforting. But he has always been stupid in relationships, and he is being stupid now.

“Then why did you *leave*?” She is screaming at him. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen her screaming before. “You just threw it all away! There’s something *wrong* with you!”

“I’m not going to say that you’re incorrect about that.” He looks down, unable to look directly into those angry eyes. “But if we had married, *whom* would you have married? In our relatively short time together, how much did you really learn about me? How much would you have known after three years? Five years? How much do I even understand myself? I would try to be honest with you, but am I going to tell you things I think will make you dislike me?”

“So how is that different from any other relationship?”

"I don't think it is. I don't know. Is my 'self' anything more than a random accumulation of brain cells? These things that are me, are they anything more than accidental?"

"Bob..."

"You call me that name, but does it identify me any more precisely than any other? It's a label my parents gave me, and the government finds convenient, like a label on a file so that you can find it among all the other files. But you can put anything you want into that file, can't you? If I married you I would have been Bob with wife and kids and a house at a specific address in an all too specific neighborhood, working at any of a number of possible occupations, with benefits. I would have been well-adjusted. I would have been happy. But I'm not at all sure it would have been right."

She stares at him for a long time. When she leaves without saying anything more, he feels embarrassed, but relieved.

The nameless man returns to his hotel room and sits in an overstuffed chair the texture of battered skin. He has moved this chair to face the window so that he might have a fresh breeze on his face. He replays his conversation with Mary. He feels genuinely sorry that he has hurt her but he is anxious about something much more important right now: what if she tells others where to find him?

What if she finds some way to get in touch with his parents?

He has never seriously considered the possibility before. Once she asked to meet his parents and he told her he hadn't spoken to them in years. Which was perfectly true. When she asked him about what had happened he told her it was too painful for him to talk about, but that someday they would. The first part of that statement had been basically true but even then he'd known he wouldn't be around long enough for the second part. He's already made a few too many mistakes with her, giving her his real first name and inadvertently revealing the state where he had been born (and where his parents, as far as he knows, still live). Those two items shouldn't be enough to track down his history but who knew how many other slips he might have made? That's what happened when you got close to someone. Perhaps she had just enough information, and perhaps she was angry enough, to contact his parents.

He tries to imagine the resulting conversation, the trading of stories, the bonding of these people who cannot fathom his odd behavior. Contemplating it makes him ill. He thinks about them visiting one another,

trading pictures, hiring professional assistance. He knows he will need to leave this place sooner than planned, but perhaps there is still a way to buy himself more time.

He grabs the disposable cell phone he acquired when he first moved into this city and dials her cell number.

“Yes?”

“Mary, this is ... Robert. Bob.”

“I thought you were done with me.” She’s been crying. She’s resentful. He hears cars, street sounds. She’s obviously outside. He thinks he can detect panting, footsteps. She’s walking somewhere. He thinks he’s in terrible jeopardy here.

“I’m so sorry,” he says to her, pleading. “Obviously I’m not a well-adjusted person. And you’ve been wonderful to me.”

“I don’t ... don’t deserve this,” she says and a sob escapes. “Wait. Wait,” she says. “I’m crossing ... wait.”

A loud car horn. A muffled impact. A rattle, a rattle, distorted voices. The phone goes dead.

He stares at his own phone, drops it onto the bed. Where was he? What was he thinking? He feels light-headed, nauseated. He leans over, stretches out on the bed. Certainly she’s all right. A near-miss. She just dropped the phone.

Suddenly desperate for fresh air, he stumbles from the bed to the window, prying it open with trembling fingers. He sticks his head out into the air of the alley, clutching the sides of the frame, sure that he will fall.

The nameless man looks down and sees the creature feeding off the garbage pile below. Some sort of goat or dog—hard to tell, it is so emaciated, probably ill. Large patches of its coat have fallen out. Something odd about its head. A horn, so it *is* a goat. But only one. And that one distorted, broken, oozing narrow rivulets of pus. It turns its head around and smiles up at him with broken teeth, a piece of a rat wedged in its mouth.

A true unicorn, he thinks, not knowing why, but knowing it is so. *That’s*

what they really look like. And now he knows Mary must certainly be dead. A vagrant wanders past the unicorn, neither apparently noticing the other. Mary is dead and he is at last forgotten, for now he knows his parents are dead, too. Because he is seeing unicorns the way they really are, raw and unglamorized. At last unknown, he has descended into the worlds of myth, of things unnamed and misnamed, of things unseen and things misunderstood. The grand consolation prize, he thinks, for anonymity.

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When the unknown man goes out that evening it is only after reconsidering the events of the day until a certain sanity has been achieved. The delusion he had experienced was the direct result of the shock of Mary's accident, or presumed accident. Presumed death. He could make some calls and find out for sure, but he knows he will not.

An author whose fantasy novels he has been reading for years is giving a signing at a bookstore nearby. The author is there in support of his recent autobiography, which the nameless man has read. He has his copy with him, tucked under his arm. He has a number of questions about the book, most having to do with its authenticity. He isn't sure if he will risk asking them.

A drunk wanders out of a bar onto the sidewalk in front of him. The scruffy fat man turns, his sneer all the more disturbing because it is on a bull's head sitting lop-sided on his shoulders.

Minotaur, the unknown man thinks, throwing up his arms in alarm. The book skids across the sidewalk and rests against the Minotaur's left foot.

The Minotaur stares at the book dumbly, as if it is a category of object he has never seen before. He bends awkwardly, the weight of the great head threatening to pull him over. He clutches the book between his two palms, fingers too short to be of much use—and pulls it up to eye level, where he sniffs it, then licks it. Finally he shoves it into his mouth, apparently tasting it as his eyes roll around and copious amounts of saliva drip onto the sidewalk.

The Minotaur stares at the nameless man again, slack lips drooping into an avalanching frown. With an explosion of wind and saliva the Minotaur spits the book back at him. It slams into the nameless man's chest, and he hugs himself so it won't get away from him again. He examines his catch: the pages and cover are damp, but readable. When he raises his head the Minotaur is gone.

As the nameless man continues to the bookstore he wipes the cover and pages against his shirt until satisfied he can do no more. The book appears to have swollen to twice its original thickness.

A few doors down from the bookstore he pauses in front of a shop specializing in exotic fish and supplies, where a giant aquarium fills the front window. Disobeying the posted sign he taps the glass in an attempt to attract some fish. Almost instantly a cluster of fetus-like creatures swarms out from behind flowering vegetation, propelled by large, powerful tails. They gather in front of him, staring with partially-formed eyes. Their chest cavities are filled by some sort of complex, inefficient breathing organ. Their mouths open and close in painful-looking spasms as they struggle for air. *Mermaids*, he thinks, *poor, pitiful mermaids*. Unable to witness this for long, the unknown man turns away from the colony and heads into the bookstore.

The nameless man is surprised to see that no long lines wait for the fantasy writer's signature. In fact, other than a large man who might be the writer's bodyguard (or younger lover?), and a few bookstore clerk-looking types, the nameless man is the only person in the store. Suddenly anxious to finish his business, he walks up to the small table and plants the bundle of rustling pages in front of the startled writer.

The writer opens the book gingerly and examines a few pages. "You know, I used to *love* reading in the bath," he says, as if that explains everything. He looks up and displays a vaguely bored smile. "Do you just want a signature, or would you like it personalized?"

"How personal could it be? I just met you. You don't even know my name."

The large man steps forward, but an impatient gesture from the writer stops him. He takes a step or two back, but the nameless man can tell he is ready for trouble.

The fantasy writer laughs out loud. "Good point." Then he stops, looking slightly awkward, as if he's left his script in his other jacket. "Do you even want a signature?"

"Actually, I don't care for signatures very much. I do have a question or two, if you don't mind."

"I'll answer what I can."

“This book...” The nameless man touches the sloppy bundle on the table. It makes a soft rattle. “It purports to be your autobiography. Yet it reads just like one of your novels. It has suspense, rising and falling action, complications appearing just at the right points in the narrative. Real life isn’t all that neat.”

“I suppose you would have preferred that I fill it with descriptions of television shows watched, fast foods eaten, frequent trips to the bathroom, and long naps after too much drink?”

“Not really. I just don’t understand how I’m supposed to believe that any of this is true.”

The fantasy writer looks at him, considering. Finally he sighs and says, “I suppose we each have to answer that for ourselves. Writers are there to give experience shape, and that includes their autobiographies. The moment you write something down, you’re changing it.”

“The moment you name it,” the nameless man says.

“Pardon me?”

“The moment you name something you change what it was, what it was becoming. It was a living, evolving thing, and then you killed it by naming it.”

The fantasy writer laughs, then looks at his bodyguard. “Listen to this guy!” Then, turning around he says, “So maybe I shouldn’t have put my name on this book. If I hadn’t put my name on it, people might find it more believable?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But at least they’d be reading it without preconceptions. It might have more of a chance to be ... magical.”

“So, do you write?”

The unknown man feels unaccountably anxious, reluctant to reply. Then he says, “A little. A diary, of sorts.”

The fantasy writer turns the warped book around and offers the unknown man a pen. “Then you sign it. Personalized, please.” He laughs. “Say, ‘To my good friend.’ It’s a lie, but perfect strangers ask me to put that down all the time.”

Without hesitation the nameless man takes the pen, writes 'To my *only* friend,' and signs the complete name he was given at birth.

The fantasy writer turns the book around and puzzles over the scribbled handwriting. "Hey, I can't even read this!" he says, but the unknown man is already going through the door.

Outside it has grown dark, and all over this part of town lights are going on, individually and in groups, with a peculiar kind of rhythm that fascinates the unknown man, who actually begins to smile until his own light explodes inside him, and he feels himself pitching forward, a skyscraper containing thousands of souls in the last throes of demolition.

When he wakes up there are people leaning over him: a woman, the bodyguard, a man in uniform (postman? policeman?), and the fantasy writer, who is scribbling madly in a small bright red notebook. The unknown man wonders if he is about to become a fictional character.

And floating above the heads of these people are the angels: tiny rat-like creatures with oily, burnt leather wings, long square teeth and loopy grins. Several are blind—all have something wrong with their eyes. Now and then they bump into each other, and then punish themselves with their long fingernails, which they scrape against their cheeks over and over making frayed patches of blood.

"Your name," the officer says. "What's your name, sir?"

The nameless man speaks, saying his name over and over again. But he can tell by their faces they do not understand.