HEAVENLY SHADES OF NIGHT ARE FALLING

Stephen King

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1999: Come on, you bastard, come on home.

On an afternoon in the last summer before the year 2000, Bobby Garfield came back to Harwich, Connecticut. He went to West Side Cemetery first, where the actual memorial service took place at the Sullivan family plot. Old Sully-John got a good crowd; the Post story had brought them out in droves. Several small children were startled into tears when the American Legion honor-guard fired their guns. After the graveside service there was a reception at the local Amvets Hall. Bobby made a token appearance—long enough to have a slice of cake and a cup of coffee and say hello to Mr. Oliver—but he saw no one he knew, and there were places he wanted to go while there was still plenty of good daylight. He hadn't been back to Harwich in almost forty years.

The Nutmeg Mall stood where St. Gabriel the Steadfast Upper and Secondary Schools had been. The old post office was now a vacant lot. The railway station continued to overlook the Square, but the stone overpass support-posts were covered with graffiti and Mr. Burton's newsstand kiosk was boarded up. There were still grassy swards between River Avenue and the Housatonic, but the ducks were gone. Bobby remembered throwing one of those ducks at a man in a tan suit—improbable but true. I'll give you two bucks to let me blow you, the man had said, and Bobby had hucked a duck at him. He could grin about it now, but that nimrod had scared the hell out of him, and for all sorts of reasons.

There was a great beige UPS warehouse where the Asher Empire had stood. Farther along toward Bridgeport, where Asher Avenue emptied into Puritan Square, the William Penn Grille was also gone, replaced by a Pizza Uno. Bobby thought about going in there, but not very seriously. His stomach was fifty, just like the rest of him, and it didn't do so well with pizza anymore.

Except that wasn't really the reason. It would be too easy to imagine things, that was the real reason—too easy to envision big vulgar cars out front, the paintjobs so bright they seemed to howl.

So he had driven back to Harwich proper, and damned if the Colony Diner wasn't still where it had always been, and damned if there weren't still grilled hotdogs on the menu. Hotdogs were as bad as fuckin pizza, maybe worse, but what the hell was Prilosec for, if not the occasional gastronomic ramble down memory lane? He had swallowed one, and chased it with two hotdogs. They still came in those little grease-spotted cardboard sleeves, and they still tasted like heaven.

He tamped the hotdogs down with pie a la mode, then went out and stood by his car for a moment. He decided to leave it where it was—there were only two more stops he wanted to make, and both were within walking distance. He took the gym bag off the passenger seat and walked slowly past Spicer's, which had evolved into a 7-Eleven store with gas-pumps out front. Voices came to him as he passed, 1960 ghost-voices, voices of the Sigsby twins.

Mumma-Daddy havin a fight.

Mumma said stay out.

Why'd you do that, stupid old Bobby Garfield?

Stupid old Bobby Garfield, yes, that had been him. He might have gotten a little smarter over the years, but probably not that much.

Halfway up Broad Street Hill he spied a faded hopscotch grid on the sidewalk. He dropped to one knee and looked at it closely in the latening light, brushing at the squares with the tips of his fingers.

"Mister? You all right?" It was a young woman with a 7-Eleven bag in her arms. She was looking at Bobby with equal parts concern and mistrust.

"I'm fine," he said, getting to his feet and dusting off his hands. He was, too. Not a single moon or star beside the grid, let alone a comet. Nor had he seen any lost-pet posters in his rambles around town. "I'm fine."

“Well, good for you,” the young woman said, and hurried on her way. She did not smile. Bobby watched her go and then started walking again himself, wondering what had happened to the Sigsby twins, where they were now. He remembered Ted Brautigan talking about time once, calling it the old bald cheater.

Until he actually saw 149 Broad Street, Bobby hadn’t realized how sure he’d been that it would have become a video-rental store or a sandwich shop or maybe a condominium. Instead it was exactly the same except for the trim, now cream instead of green. There was a bike on the porch, and he thought of how desperately he had wanted a bike that last summer in Harwich. He’d even had a jar to save money in, with a label on it that said Bike Account, or something.

More ghost-voices as he stood there with his shadow lengthening into the street.

If we were the Gotrocks, you wouldn’t have to borrow from your bike-jar if you wanted to take your little girlfriend on the Loop-the-Loop.

She’s not my girlfriend! She is not my little girlfriend!

In his memory he had said that out loud to his mother, screamed it at her, in fact … but he doubted the accuracy of that memory. He hadn’t had the kind of mother you could scream at. Not if you wanted to keep your scalp.

And besides. Carol had been his little girlfriend, hadn’t she? She had been.

He had one more stop to make before returning to his car, and after a final long look at the house where he had lived with his mother until August of 1960, Bobby started back down Broad Street Hill, swinging the gym bag in one hand.

There had been magic that summer, even at the age of fifty he did not question that, but he no longer knew of what sort it had been. Perhaps he had experienced only the Ray Bradbury kind of

childhood so many smalltown kids had, or at least remembered having; the kind where the real world and that of dreams sometimes overlapped, creating a kind of magic.

Yes, but … well …

There were the rose petals, of course, the ones which had come by way of Carol … but had they meant anything? Once it had seemed so—to the lonely, almost lost boy he had been, it had seemed so—but the rose petals were long gone. He had lost them right around the time he'd seen the photograph of that burned-out house in Los Angeles and realized that Carol Gerber was dead.

Her death cancelled not only the idea of magic but, it seemed to Bobby, the very purpose of childhood. What good was it if it brought you to such things? Bad eyes and bad blood-pressure were one thing; bad ideas, bad dreams, and bad ends were another. After awhile you wanted to say to God, ah, come on, Big Boy, quit it. You lost your innocence when you grew up, all right, everyone knew that, but did you have to lose your hope, as well? What good was it to kiss a girl on the Ferris wheel when you were eleven if you were to open the paper eleven years later and learn that she had burned to death in a slummy little house on a slummy little dead-end street? What good was it to remember her beautiful alarmed eyes or the way the sun had shone in her hair?

He would have said all of this and more a week ago, but then a tendril of that old magic had reached out and touched him. Come on, it had whispered. Come on, Bobby, come on, you bastard, come home. So here he was, back in Harwich. He had honored his old friend, he had had himself a little sightseeing tour of the old town (and without misting up a single time), and now it was almost time to go. He had, however, one more stop to make before he did.

It was the supper hour and Commonwealth Park was nearly empty. Bobby walked to the wire backstop behind the Field B home plate as three dawdling players went past him in the other direction. Two were carrying equipment in big red duffel bags; the third had a

boombox from which The Offspring blasted at top volume. All three boys gave him mistrustful looks, which Bobby found unsurprising. He was an adult in the land of children, living in a time when all such as he were suspect. He avoided making things worse by giving them a nod or a wave or saying something stupid like How was the game, fellas? They passed on their way.

He stood with his fingers hooked into the wire diamonds of the backstop, watching the late red light slant across the outfield grass, reflecting from the scoreboard and the signs reading STAY IN SCHOOL and WHY DO YOU THINK THEY CALL IT DOPE. And again he felt that breathless sense of magic, that sense of the world as a thin veneer stretched over something else, something both brighter and darker. The voices were everywhere now, spinning like the lines on a top.

Don't you call me stupid, Bobby-O.

You shouldn't hit Bobby, he's not like those men.

A real sweetie, kid, he'd play that song by Jo Stafford.

It's ka … and ka is destiny.

I love you, Ted …

"I love you, Ted." Bobby spoke the words, not declaiming them but not whispering them, either. Trying them on for size. He couldn't even remember what Ted Brautigan had looked like, not with any real clarity (only the Chesterfields, and the endless bottles of rootbeer), but saying it still made him feel warm.

There was another voice here, too. When it spoke, Bobby felt tears sting the corners of his eyes for the first time since coming back.

I wouldn't mind being a magician when I grow up, Bobby, you know it? Travel around with a carnival or a circus, wear a black suit and a top hat …

“And pull rabbits and shit out of the hat,” Bobby said, turning away from Field B. He laughed, wiped his eyes, then ran one hand over the top of his head. No hair up there; he’d lost the last of it right on schedule, about fifteen years ago. He crossed one of the paths (gravel in 1960, now asphalt and marked with little signs reading BIKES ONLY NO ROLLERBLADES!) and sat down on one of the benches, possibly the same one where he’d sat on the day Sully had asked him to come to the movies and Bobby had turned him down, wanting to finish Lord of the Flies instead. He put his gym bag on the bench next to him.

Directly ahead was a grove of trees. Bobby was pretty sure it was the one where Carol had taken him when he started to cry. She did it so no one would see him bawling like a baby. No one but her. Had she taken him in her arms until it was cried out of him? He wasn’t sure, but he thought she had. What he remembered more clearly was how the three St. Gabe’s boys had almost beaten them up later. Carol’s mother’s friend had saved them. He couldn’t remember her name, but she’d come along just in the nick of time … the way the Navy guy came along just in time to save Ralph’s bacon at the end of Lord of the Flies.

Rionda, that was her name. She told them she’d tell the priest, and the priest would tell their folks.

But Rionda hadn’t been around when those boys found Carol again. Would Carol have burned to death in Los Angeles if Harry Doolin and his friends had left her alone? You couldn’t say for sure, of course, but Bobby thought the answer was probably no. And even now he felt his hands clenching as he thought: But I got you, Harry, didn’t I? Yes indeed.

Too late by then, though. By then everything had changed.

He unzipped the gym bag, rummaged, and brought out a battery radio. It was nowhere as big as the boombox which had just gone past him toward the equipment sheds, but big enough for his purposes. All he had to do was turn it on; it was already tuned to

WKND, Southern Connecticut's Home of the Oldies. Troy Shondell was singing "This Time." That was fine with Bobby.

"Sully," he said, looking into the grove of trees, "you were one cool bastard."

From behind him, very prim, a woman said: "If you swear, I won't walk with you."

Bobby swivelled around so rapidly that the radio fell out of his lap and tumbled into the grass. He couldn't see the woman's face; she was nothing but a silhouette with red sky spread out on either side of her like wings. He tried to speak and couldn't. His breathing had come to a dead stop and his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth. Far back in his brain a voice mused: So this is what seeing a ghost is like.

"Bobby, are you all right?"

She moved fast, coming around the bench, and the red setting sun smacked him full in the eyes when she did. Bobby gasped, raised a hand, shut his eyes. He smelled perfume … or was it summer grass? He didn't know. And when he opened his eyes again, he could still see nothing but the woman's shape; there was a hanging green afterimage of the sun where her face belonged.

"Carol?" he asked. His voice was hoarse and uneven. "Dear God, is it really you?"

"Carol?" the woman asked. "I don't know any Carol. My name is Denise Schoonover."

Yet it was her. She'd only been eleven the last time he had seen her, but he knew. He rubbed his eyes frantically. From the radio on the grass the dj said, "This is WKND, where your past is always present. Here's Clyde McPhatter. He's got 'A Lover's Question.' "

You knew if she was alive she'd come. You knew that.

Of course; wasn't that why he had come himself? Surely not for Sully, or not just for Sully. And yet at the same time he had been so sure she was dead. From the instant he'd seen the picture of that burned-out house in Los Angeles, he had been positive. And how that had hurt his heart, not as if he had last seen her forty years before, running across Commonwealth Avenue, but as if she had always remained his friend, as close as a phone-call or a trip up the street.

While he was still trying to blink away the floating sunspot afterimage hanging before his eyes, the woman kissed him firmly on the mouth, and then whispered in his ear: "I have to go home. I have to make the salad. What's that?"

"The last thing you ever said to me when we were kids," he replied, and turned to her. "You came. You're alive and you came."

The sunset light fell on her face, and the afterimage had diminished enough for him to see her. She was beautiful in spite of the scar which began at the corner of her right eye and ran down to her chin in a cruel fishhook … or perhaps because of it. There were tiny sprays of crow's-feet beside her eyes, but no lines on her forehead or bracketing her paintless mouth.

Her hair, Bobby saw with wonder, was almost entirely gray.

As if reading his mind, she reached out and touched his head. "I'm so sorry," she said … but he thought he saw her old merriness dancing in her eyes. "You had the most gorgeous hair. Rionda used to say that was half of what I was in love with."

"Carol—"

She reached out and put her fingers over his lips. There were scars on her hand, as well, Bobby saw, and her little finger was misshapen, almost melted. These were burn scars.

“I told you, I don’t know anyone named Carol. My name is Denise. Like in the old Randy and The Rainbows song?” She hummed a snatch of it. Bobby knew it well. He knew all the oldies. “If you were to check my ID, you’d see Denise Schoonover all up and down the line. I saw you at the service.”

“I didn’t see you.”

“I’m good at not being seen,” she said. “It’s a trick someone taught me a long time ago. The trick of being dim.” She shuddered a little. Bobby had read of people shuddering—mostly in bad novels—but had never actually seen it done. “And when it comes to crowd scenes, I’m good at standing all the way at the back. Poor old Sully-John. Do you remember his Bo-lo Bouncer?”

Bobby nodded, starting to smile. “I remember one time when he tried to get extra-cool with it, hit it between his legs as well as between his arms and behind his back? He bopped himself a good one in the balls and we all just about killed ourselves laughing. A bunch of girls ran over—you were one of them, I’m pretty sure—wanting to know what happened, and we wouldn’t tell you. You were pretty mad.”

She smiled, a hand going to her mouth, and in that old gesture Bobby could see the child she had been with complete clarity.

“How did you know he died?” Bobby asked.

“Read it in the New York Post. There was one of those horrible headlines that are their specialty—JAMBO!, it said—and pictures of him. I live in Poughkeepsie, where the Post is regularly available.” She paused. “I teach at Vassar.”

“You teach at Vassar and you read the Post?”

She shrugged, smiling. “Everyone has their vices. How about you, Bobby? Did you read it in the Post?”

“I don’t get the Post. Ted told me. Ted Brautigan.”

She only sat there looking at him, her smile fading.

“You remember Ted?”

“I thought I’d never be able to use my arm again and Ted fixed it like magic. Of course I remember him. But Bobby—”

“He knew you’d be here. I thought that as soon as I opened the package, but I don’t think I believed it until I saw you.” He reached out to her and with the unself-consciousness of a child traced the course of the scar on her face. “You got this in L.A., didn’t you? What happened? How did you get out?”

She shook her head. “I don’t talk about any of that. I’ve never talked about what went on in that house. I never will. That was a different life. That was a different girl. That girl died. She was very young, very idealistic, and she was tricked. Do you remember the Monte Man at Savin Rock?”

He nodded, smiling a little. He took her hand and she gripped his own tightly. “Now they go, now they slow, now they rest, here’s the test. His name was McCann or McCausland or something like that.”

“The name doesn’t matter. What matters is that he always let you think you knew where the queen was. He always let you think you could win. Right?”

“Right.”

“This girl got involved with a man like that. A man who could always move the cards just a little faster than you thought he could. He was looking for some confused, angry kids, and he found them.”

“Did he have a yellow coat?” Bobby asked. He didn’t know if he was joking or not.

She looked at him, frowning a little, and he understood she didn’t remember that part. Had he even told her about the low men? He

thought so, he thought he had told her just about everything, but she didn't remember. Perhaps what had happened to her in L.A. had burned a few holes in her memory. Bobby could see how a thing like that might happen. And it wouldn't exactly make her unique, would it? A lot of people their age had worked very hard to forget who they had been and what they had believed during those years between the murder of John Kennedy in Dallas and the murder of John Lennon in New York City.

"Never mind," he said. "Go on."

She shook her head. "I've said all I'm going to about that part. All I can. Carol Gerber died on Benefit Street in Los Angeles. Denise Schoonover lives in Poughkeepsie. Carol hated math, couldn't even get fractions, but Denise teaches math. How could they be the same person? It's a ridiculous idea. Case closed. I want to know what you mean about Ted. He can't still be alive, Bobby. He'd be over a hundred. Well over."

"I don't think time means much if you're a Breaker," Bobby said. Nor did it mean much on WKND, where Jimmy Gilmer was now singing about the Sugar Shack to the tooting accompaniment of what sounded like a sweet potato.

"A Breaker? What's—"

"I don't know and it doesn't matter," Bobby said. "This part might, so listen closely. Okay?"

"Okay."

"I live in Philadelphia. I've got a lovely wife who's a professional photographer, three lovely grown children, a lovely old dog with bad hips and a good disposition, and an old house which is always in desperate need of repairs. My wife says that's because the shoemaker's kids always go barefoot and the carpenter's house always has a leaky roof."

“Is that what you are? A carpenter?”

He nodded. “I live in Redmont Hills, and when I remember to get a paper, the Philly Inquirer is the one I buy.”

“A carpenter,” she mused. “I always thought you’d wind up a writer, or something.”

“I did, too. But I also went through a period when I thought I’d wind up in Connecticut State Prison and that never happened, so I guess things have a way of balancing out.”

“What was in the package you mentioned? And what does it have to do with Ted?”

“The package came FedEx, from a guy named Norman Oliver. A banker. He was Sully-John’s executor. This was inside.”

He reached into the gym bag again and brought out a battered old baseball glove. He laid it in the lap of the woman sitting next to him on the bench. She tipped it at once and looked at the name inked on the side.

“My God,” she said. Her voice was flat, shocked.

“I haven’t seen this baby since the day I found you over there in those trees with your arm dislocated. I suppose some kid came along, saw it lying on the grass, and just gleeped it. Although it wasn’t in very good shape, even then.”

“Willie stole it,” she said, almost inaudibly. “Willie Shearman. I thought he was nice. You see what a fool I was about people? Even back then.”

He looked at her in silent surprise, but she didn’t see his look; she was gazing down at the old Alvin Dark-model glove, plucking at the tangle of rawhide strings somehow still holding the webbing in place. And then she delighted and touched him by doing what he had done

as soon as he opened the box and saw what was there: she lifted the baseball glove to her face and smelled the sweet oil-and-leather aroma of the pocket. Only he had slipped it on his hand first, without even thinking about it. It was a baseball-player thing to do, a kid-thing, automatic as breathing. Norman Oliver must have been a kid at some point, but he'd apparently never been a ballplayer, because he hadn't found the piece of paper poked deep into the last finger of the glove—the finger with the deep scratch in the old cowhide. Bobby was the one who found the paper. The nail of his little finger poked against it and made it crackle.

Carol put the glove down again. Gray hair or no gray hair, she looked young again, and fully alive. "Tell me."

"It was on Sully's hand when they found him sitting dead in his car."

Her eyes went huge and round. In that instant she did not just look like the little girl who had ridden the Ferris wheel with him at Savin Rock; she was that little girl.

"Look on the heel of the glove, there by Alvin Dark's signature. Do you see?"

The light was fading fast now, but she saw, all right.

B.G.

1464 Dupont Circle Road

Redmont Hills, Pennsylvania

Zone 11

“Your address,” she murmured. “Your address now.”

“Yes, but look at this.” He tapped the words Zone 11. “The post office quit zoning mail in the sixties. I checked. Ted either didn’t know or forgot.”

“Maybe he put it that way on purpose.”

Bobby nodded. “It’s possible. In any case, Oliver read the address and sent me the glove—said he saw no need to put an old fielder’s mitt through probate. He mostly wanted me to know that Sully had died, if I didn’t know already, and that there was going to be a memorial service in Harwich. I believe he wanted me to come so he could hear the story of the glove. I couldn’t help him much with that, though. Carol, are you sure Willie—”

“I saw him wearing it. I told him to give it back so I could send it to you, but he wouldn’t.”

“Do you suppose he gave it to Sully-John later?”

“He must have.” Yet it did not ring true to her, somehow; she felt the truth must be stranger than that. Willie’s attitude to the glove itself had been strange, although she could no longer exactly remember how.

“Anyway,” he said, tapping the address on the heel of the glove, “that’s Ted’s printing. I’m sure it is. Then I put my hand up inside the glove, and I found something. It’s really why I came.”

He reached into the gym bag a third time. The redness was going out of the light now; the remains of the day were a fading pink, the color of wild roses. The radio, still lying in the grass, played “Don’tcha Just Know It,” by Huey “Piano” Smith and The Clowns.

Bobby brought out a crumpled piece of paper. It had been stained in a couple of places by the glove’s sweaty innards, but otherwise it looked remarkably white and fresh. He handed it to Carol.

She held it up to the light and slightly away from her face—her eyes, Bobby saw, were not as good as they once had been. “It’s the title-page from a book,” she said, and then laughed. “Lord of the Flies, Bobby! Your favorite!”

“Look at the bottom,” he said. “Read what’s there.”

“Faber and Faber, Limited … 24 Russell Square … London.” She looked at him questioningly.

“It’s from the Faber paperback edition published in 1960,” Bobby said. “That’s on the back. But look at it, Carol! It looks brand-new. I think the book this page came from might have been in 1960 only weeks ago. Not the glove, that’s a lot more beat-up than when I found it, but the title-page.”

“Bobby, not all old books turn yellow if they’re kept well. Even an old paperback might—”

“Turn it over,” he said. “Take a look at the other side.”

Carol did. Printed below the line reading All rights reserved was this: Tell her she was as brave as a lion.

“That’s when I knew I had to come because he thought you’d be here, that you were still alive. I couldn’t believe that, it was easier to believe in him than it was to believe—Carol? What’s wrong? Is it the thing at the very bottom? What is that thing at the very bottom?”

She was crying now, and crying hard, holding the torn-out title-page in her hand and looking at what had been placed there on the back, squeezed into the scant white space below the conditions of sale:

“What does it mean? Do you know? You do, don’t you?”

Carol shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. It’s special to me, that’s all. Special to me the way the glove is special to you. For an old guy, he sure knows how to push the right buttons, doesn’t he?”

“I guess so. Maybe that’s what a Breaker does.”

She looked at him. She was still weeping but was not, Bobby thought, truly unhappy. “Bobby, why would he do this? And how did he know we’d come? Forty years is a long time. People grow up, they grow up and leave the kids they were behind.”

“Do they?”

She continued to look at him in the darkening day. Beyond them, the shadows of the grove deepened. In there—in the trees where he had wept on one day and found her, hurt and alone, the next—dark had almost come.

“Sometimes a little of the magic sticks around,” Bobby said. “That’s what I think. We came because we still hear some of the right voices. Do you hear them? The voices?”

“Sometimes,” she said, almost reluctantly. “Sometimes I do.”

Bobby took the glove from her. “Will you excuse me for a second?”

“Sure.”

Bobby went to the grove of trees, dropped down on one knee to get beneath a low-hanging branch, and placed his old baseball glove on the grass with the pocket up to the darkening sky. Then he came back to the bench and sat down beside Carol again. “That’s where it belongs,” he said.

“Some kid’ll just come along tomorrow and pick it up, you know that, don’t you?” She laughed and wiped her eyes.

“Maybe,” he agreed. “Or maybe it’ll be gone. Back to wherever it came from.”

As the day’s last pink faded to ash, Carol put her head on Bobby’s shoulder and he put an arm around her. They sat that way without speaking, and from the radio at their feet, The Platters began to sing.