

A Story

Randy started having the dream soon after his best friend Brad got killed in a car crash out on highway 89. On the night of the funeral he dreamed he stood in a muted landscape filled with a low intensity hum, with just Brad standing off in a field near the wreckage, looking more confused than usual. Over the next few nights, it was if an invisible hand were designing the dream, elaborating on it. The second night, a deep red blood sky was added. The next night, crows made their appearance over the fields, along with a grain silo and a water tower. On the fourth night there was an owl, some coyotes howling in the distance, and strangely, Randy's third grade teacher, Mrs. Pitt, providing commentary from a dais near the burning car.

"What did she say?" Randy's wife Janice asked over breakfast the next morning.

"I don't know," Randy said. "The coyotes were so loud, I couldn't make it out. I don't know what she was doing there. I ain't seen her in twenty years."

"Maybe you need to see a psychiatrist. There's one at the clinic. They got a sliding scale..."

"I don't need that, Janice. It's just dreams." He glanced up at the clock on the wall.

"Time to get to work soon." He furrowed his brow. "At the..."

"At the factory. You work in the factory. Anyway, you're keeping me up at night."

"It'll get better. I guess old Brad dying shook me up more than I thought."

Janice sipped her coffee thoughtfully. "I know. My friend Clarice went to see this lady in Twin Falls."

"What kind of lady?"

“A psychic.”

“No. Janice...”

“Clarice said she was amazing. She knew things about her...like, she knew her mama was sick. She told Clarice her mother should go to the doctor right away. Said she had cancer.”

“Clarice’s mama smoked three packs a day and drank for fifty years. Didn’t need a psychic to know how that would turn out. Besides, I don’t believe in that bullshit.”

“This lady wouldn’t of known that.”

“She must of told her.”

“She says she didn’t. You’ve been keeping me up every night, hun, yelling in your sleep.”

“You already said that.”

“You know what I think?” she continued, lighting a cigarette. “I think Brad’s trying to communicate with you.”

“Well, he’s doing a hell of a job. He doesn’t say anything. Just stands there in the field, looking stupid. Typical Brad.”

“You ought not to say that.”

“Why? He was my friend, but he didn’t have enough sense to pour piss out of a boot.”

“Enough sense to...is that an expression?”

“I reckon so,” Randy said quietly. He mumbled something and Janice laughed, putting her hand over her mouth. She looked up and made a mock serious face.

“Where was I?” she said dramatically. “Oh, right. He’s trying to tell you something. Or the dream is. All those things are symbols.”

“Oh yeah? What’s Mrs Pitt doing there?”

“I don’t know. Was she a good teacher? Did you like her?”

“Not especially. I don’t remember.”

“Well,” Janice said, stubbing out her cigarette. “I got to go to work at the...place where I work. I’ll call Clarice if you want.”

“That’s silly, Janice. I don’t want to do that. Don’t worry, it’ll get better. I won’t keep waking you up.”

But the dreams didn’t get better. That night, the noise of the coyotes became a cacophony, while Mrs Pitt’s voice sounded like chains dragging across asphalt. In the dream, Randy stood near the smoldering car, calling out to his friend.

“Look here, Brad,” he called against a rising wind. “What’s this about?”

His friend stared at him, attempting to speak, but because of the large gash in his throat, was unable to make a sound. Blood oozed between Brads fingers as he clutched his throat, his eyes glazed and unfocused.

“Jesus, hon,” Janice said, as Randy lay dazed and sweating in their bed.

“I guess the steering column caught him there,” Randy muttered. “In the neck.”

“Good god.”

They were silent for a moment.

“The water towers a nice touch,” Randy mused. “The coyotes seem a bit much though. I mean, what’s the point? Are they supposed to symbolize something?”

“Uh, Randy. Just...uh, take it as it comes.”

“Yeah, all right. Let’s see. I’m getting a beer. You want one? Let’s have a beer.”

“We got to work in the morning.”

“I don’t care. I can’t sleep.”

They sat at the kitchen table and drank and smoked.

“I’m going to be a mess tomorrow.” Janice said. “I’d rather just have water.”

“Some reason, it’s beer. You can go on back to bed.”

“I will in a minute. I’m going to call Clarice tomorrow.”

“Janice.”

“It can’t hurt, Randy. Anyway, we’re going to Twin Falls on Saturday. Remember?”

“Ah shit. Yeah.”

Saturday was their monthly visit to Janice’s father in the nursing home. Randy hated the visits. The old man never spoke to him, just stared at him, bleary eyed. Every time, he’d ask Janice who Randy was.

“Dad, you know that’s my husband Randy. You went to our wedding, don’t you remember?”

“He looks like an asshole,” the old man said.

“Don’t take it personally,” Janice would say, as Randy grimly drove them back after these visits.

“He never has liked me,” Randy said now, sipping his third beer. He looked at the label. “Coors light? Jesus.”

“Just drink it,” I said.

“It’s shit,” Randy complained.

“It’s what you would drink,” I said. “It’s actually part of a plot point I’m bringing in later. Please, just drink it.”

Randy drank the beer, and then another. He was developing a drinking problem. At this rate, he would die of a heart attack before he reached sixty.

“Great,” Randy said.

“We’ll go see this lady after we see Dad,” Janice said.

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll make a deal with you,” she said. “We’ll go see that lady, and you don’t have to come in to see Dad. You can go get a coffee or something.”

“Hm. Well, that could work. All right then. But I still think it’s bullshit.”

The next Saturday, they sat together at a large oak table across from a woman named Sarah. She was dressed in various shades of purple. Randy had never cared for that color.

“Don’t tell me anything,” Sarah said. She looked foreign, Randy thought, but the accent seemed fake. The room was lined with thick curtains, and heavy with the smell of incense.

Janice waved her arms and coughed.

“Too much incense. Good lord.”

“Nevermind,” I said. “She’s a psychic, there’s going to be incense. It’s a plot point.”

Janice shrugged.

“You know, I guess I should say, I don’t really buy into this,” Randy said dully, as if reading a line.

“You don’t have to say that,” Janice said.

“Apparently, I do,” Randy muttered.

“Please,” I said. “This draft won’t work if you keep doing that. I’ll have to go back to the motel room draft.”

“I’m sorry, my husband’s such a skeptic,” Janice continued hurriedly. “Clarice said you did her a world of good.”

“Ah, Clarice, yes. I remember. Her mother is fine now, please tell her this.”

“Well, she’ll be happy to hear that, thank you.”

They sat for a moment in silence, unmoving.

Randy coughed.

Sarah looked at him, startled. “Oh, sorry. Uh, give me a second. There’s something very strong here.”

She closed her eyes and grimaced. “I’m seeing someone, a male. He wishes to speak to you.”

Janice looked at Randy.

“He is...damaged. It is hard for him to speak. He...doesn’t realize he is not in his body. His body is...” she made a face. “Badly injured. Here.” she pointed at her throat.

Janice made a little gasp. Randy shook his head at her.

“He is not old. Your age. Not family. A friend. You have known him a long time. You grew up together. I’m getting the letter...B. His name starts with a B.”

I should have mentioned, there were three candles burning in the room. They flickered. The candles flickered.

“He feels foolish. He is ashamed...the way he died. He...has to tell you...he says, tell Randy...”

“Tell me what?” Randy said. “I’m having nightmares every night. I keep waking up Janet.”

“Janice,” I corrected.

“Janice.”

Sarah held up a palm. “Wait. He’s fading. He has to tell you.” She looked confused.

“Something about a briefcase.”

“What?” Randy felt suddenly cold.

“He says...he had it. He says, he had the briefcase.”

“Hm...,” Randy said. He stroked his chin nervously. “A briefcase?”

“He says, he lied. He’s hidden it. Other people...bad people....he’s fading.” She opened her eyes. “I’m sorry, he’s gone.” She rubbed her temples. “That was difficult. He’s...not in a good place.”

“He never was,” Randy said. He wanted to leave. The room was oppressive. The curtains, the incense, the purple, all depressed him.

They were silent for a while driving back. Finally, Randy spoke.

“You know, I don’t have a problem with purple,” he said. “I mean, that’s a strange thing to dislike.”

Janice shook her head at him.

“I don’t get that whole thing with her dad either. It seems kind of extraneous.”

“It’ll make sense later,” I say. “It’s a plot point.”

They were silent again for a moment. Randy gripped the wheel fiercely.

“Seriously, a briefcase?”

“Randy,” Janice said. “Hush.”

“No. I won’t hush. C’mon, does it glow when you open it? Is there microfilm in it?”

“It’s just a device, goddamnit,” I said. “You know, something to carry the plot along.”

“But a briefcase seems a bit trite.”

“It’s been done,” Janice agreed.

“All right,” I said. “It’s a box. With symbols on the outside.”

“What kind of symbols?”

“I don’t know. Egyptian symbols. I’ll have to change the plot some, but that can work.”

“Say, you got plans for Mrs Pitt? What’s the deal there?”

“I don’t know yet. Right now, you need to explain the briefcase to Janet.”

“My name’s Janice,” Janice said irritably.

“You changed it to a box,” Randy said.

“Okay, fine. Janice, ask him about the box.”

She sighed, taking her time. Finally:

“What’s she talking about? What box?”

Randy spoke slowly, remembering the strange day years before when he and Brad found the box, a box of heavy oak and rusty metal with strange symbols and inscriptions on the lid. He and Brad swore each other to secrecy. And that’s when the trouble began.

“How big a box are we talking about?” Janice asked.

“Uh...I don’t know,” Randy said. “Reckon it’s about three feet by four feet..not sure.”

“And what do you mean, you found it? Found it where?”

“It was...in an old house. Old man Peterson’s house.”

Old man Peterson, the crazy old man who lived in the sprawling Victorian mansion on the outskirts of town. All the children were scared of him because...of some reason. Some crazy shit.

“So you stole it.”

“No,” I said. “It was in the shed in back.”

“So they stole it from the shed.”

“No, damn it. The old man was throwing it out. He said to take it,” I said impatiently.

“So, we took the box back to Brad’s place,” Randy continued.

“And?” Janice asked.

“And what?”

“What was in the box?”

“Uh...gold. Bunch of gold coins.”

“Gold coins?”

“Yeah. Shitload of gold coins.”

The boys couldn’t believe it! It was a fortune. But they had to be careful. It was a small town, and you never knew who you could trust. But the boys trusted each other. Brad was Randy’s best friend.

“We already got that,” Janice said. “But you’re saying the old man said you could have it?”

“Yes,” I said. “I guess he didn’t know what was in it.”

“Well, you should have told him. I mean, that’s just stealing.”

“Yeah,” Randy said thoughtfully. “You know, you’re right. What kind of asshole am I?”

“You’re not an asshole,” I explained. “You were young. The temptation got to you. You come from a poor background. Suddenly, all this wealth...you couldn’t resist. But you had to wait. You couldn’t spend it.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know. You...I’ll fix that later. Brad kept the box. And then, he said he got robbed. Some guys broke in his house and stole it. At gunpoint.”

“And I believed him?”

I sighed. “Sure. You’re old friends. You go way back...yes, you believed him.”

Brad and Randy had been best buddies ever since they’d met in Mrs. Pitts third grade class. Randy trusted Brad completely.

Randy scratched his neck. “Well, I don’t know about that.”

“I don’t either,” Janice said.

“All right, fuck this,” I said.

The two drove the rest of the way in silence. They had a lot to think about, and it was important that they concentrate on the matter at hand. Where was the box? Brad was trying to tell them something. They needed to focus on that, and not get distracted. Otherwise, they might end up in the motel room.

They sat back at the kitchen table in their mobile home, drinking beer and smoking.

Randy made a face. “Coors light again.”

“You’re poor. It comes in later...”

“We both work, don’t we?” Janice complained. “Can’t we at least get Coronas? With some lime slices?”

“It’s part of the plot,” I yelled. “I can’t get bogged down in those details. I still have to write more about Brad. And old man Peterson. Also, about your father. Why does he think Randy’s an asshole?”

“Maybe I am an asshole,” Randy suggested. “I robbed old man Peterson.”

“You were young,” I said. “The temptation....it got the better of you. I’ve explained this.”

“I don’t know why I’m here at all,” Janice said bitterly. “I’m just a sounding board.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ve got big plans for you. Turns out, you and Clarice are having an affair. And you end up betraying Randy.”

“An affair?” Randy said. “Can I get in on that?”

“No. Clarice is full on lesbian, she wouldn’t go for that.”

“Can I at least watch?” he said hopefully.

“No. Idiot, they’re conspiring against you. They probably end up killing you. They might torture you too, I haven’t decided.”

“Great.” Randy muttered.

They were silent for a moment.

“The box,” I said impatiently.

“Right. Well, how am I going to find this here box?” Randy said.

“We need to use the Ouija board,” Janice said decisively.

They had a Ouija board they’d gotten at a garage sale a few years back and had never gotten around to using. This was when their relationship was still young and playful, before the

years piled up and sapped the energy from them, turning everyday life into a dull meaningless routine. It was hard to believe now that they'd ever felt that kind of love...

"Jesus Christ, can we just get the board?" Randy yelled.

They brought out the Ouija board and lit candles and held hands in the eerie light.

"How much do you think a box of gold coins would weigh," Janice mused. "Do you really think two people could carry that?"

"Sure." I said.

"I don't know," she said skeptically.

"Is that all you're going to do with Mrs. Pitt?" Randy asked. "I mean, so what if she was my third grade..."

"Pay attention to the board," I said. "Please. I'm starting to get depressed. This could end up in the stories to finish file. Which means, years will pass. It's hard for me to stay motivated. I'm very lonely. Do you understand? Can we just keep going?"

They waited, their hands on the planchette. Slowly, it started to move. It began spelling out words. A "B". "O" "X" It was working!

"What the hell's a planchette?" Janice asked

"That's the thing you're touching," I explained. "It spells out the letters. I just looked it up."

The planchette continued to move. "I" "S" "U" "N" The words came.

"The box is under the..." Janice spelled.

The planchette moved a little more, wavered, then stopped. There was a snoring sound in the darkness.

“Jesus Christ,” I said. “Wake up, Randy.”

Randy stirred.

“Is it over?” he muttered. “Did we find the box? I’m tired of this.”

“Yes,” I said. “So am I.”

“I don’t see the point,” Randy said. “I mean, a box, a crazy old man, a psychic. Or maybe it was all a dream. Not to mention talking to your characters. Why even bother with it?”

“Maybe you’re right,” I sighed. “What’s the point? I can’t remember the faces of people I used to love. Everything crumbles into oblivion sooner or later. You think, by writing something down, it’s somehow a bulwark against that naked fact. You try to write a story with a richly detailed plot, a forward momentum, interesting twists and turns. But of course, our life is choking with stories of all kinds, entertaining stories, funny stories, sad stories. Millions of stories. Plot lines. Twists. Betrayals. Resolutions. Just repeats, over and over. Maybe that’s all our lives are. I don’t know. Meanwhile, the world burns and cities slide into the sea. The waters are rising. Our leaders are thieves and frauds. What difference does it make? Even that’s just another story. It’s all just stories. I think we’re all doomed. But a person has to do something. Right?”

They said nothing, having no reason to.

“I can’t remember their faces,” I said. “It’s like they’re being erased. I’m going to get old and die. And it won’t have meant anything. There’s a story. Should I write about that?”

They were silent. Then Randy said:

“Do we have a TV? I want to watch TV.”

“That sounds good,” said Janice.

“Maybe that one show’s on.”

“Oh yeah. I like that one. Where’s the remote?”

“Goddamnit,” I yelled.

Randy woke with a start and bolted upright. It was dark, save for the faint bluish light coming from the motel sign outside. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. We can’t keep living this way, he thought grimly. He felt underneath the bed, reassured by the touch of the briefcase. He lit a cigarette as his wife stirred beside him.

“Jesus, Janet. I just had a crazy ass dream!”

Janet mumbled into her pillow.

“I dreamed we were characters in a story,” Randy said. “Something to do with a psychic with a box. We were living in a trailer near Twin Falls. Some long winded fella kept talking to us.” He puffed on his cigarette, took a swig of the half empty Coors light on the nightstand. “Oh well. At least, I wasn’t dreaming about Brad again.”

Janet opened an eye and looked at him.

“Who’s Brad?” she said.

Randy scowled. “I don’t know. Why did I say that?”

Randy thought about that for a long time. Who was Brad? Somehow, this seemed like something he should know.

Suddenly, the door burst open. Two large bald men in black entered the room. They carried shotguns.

Randy sighed and stubbed out his cigarette.

“Great,” he said.

