

A SHORT WALK AFTER WORK

By Lewis K. Schrager

Adam waited beneath the red light by the back door, out where the ambulances disgorge the sick and the dying, the broken people picked up from the streets. He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes, as if the rubbing could somehow erase all that he had seen during the long ER shift he'd just finished. He put his glasses back on just before Laura came through door. She seemed surprised to find him there. "I thought you left half an hour ago," she said.

"I thought you might want some company," he said.

Laura smiled. "Actually, company would be nice."

They headed north along the river, the smell of it thick and heavy in the hot August night. A barge passed, a vast, looming shadow gliding on the black water, engines throbbing, red lights blinking a warning. When the sidewalk ended, they crossed under the highway and headed west, stopping when they reached Third Avenue. "Where do you live?" she said.

"I thought I was walking *you* home."

A gust of wind caught her auburn hair and whipped it about her face. She cleared the strands stuck in a corner of her mouth. "Not necessary," she said. "But I'll walk with you if you want. Where are you going?"

"Forty-fourth and Third."

Twelve blocks away, in the opposite direction from her apartment. She hesitated and glanced at her watch—1:15. But she owed him, big time.

It had been a bad shift. Without his help she might still be stuck back there, finishing up with those patients she had to leave when the craziness started. Without him there to help? It was hard to think about—and he was still a medical student. The intern on the shift was fucking worthless. He disappeared as soon as he heard the screaming coming from outside. One of the nurses found him in the medicine supply room, hiding in a corner near the shelves for antibiotics and asthma drugs, his ass stuck to the dirty black tile floor like it was magnetized, his arms hugging his updrawn knees, his head ducked down and pressed against his drawn-in thighs like he was in the middle of an Olympic dive. Laura heard the screams of the girl being wheeled into the trauma slot and told him to get out there because she needed him, but he wouldn't budge, rocking back and forth and moaning “*no, no, no*” almost in time with the screams. Laura finally convinced him to get up and help the nurse in the asthma room. Better that than leave him sitting there, rocking like an egg about to fall off a counter and break.

A car zipped by, engine gunning, speeding uptown beneath yellow-blinking traffic lights. Another wind gust, funneled between the buildings lining the empty avenue, sent a stray piece of newspaper scratching by on the sidewalk. “Feels like rain,” Laura said. “We better move.”

They headed straight into the wind, the gusts shaking the leaves of the maples imprisoned along the avenue within solitary squares of trash-strewn soil. A flash of lightning lit up the sky as they passed a street couple lying side by side up against the granite wall of a Citibank, their things piled into a beat-up Shop Rite shopping cart covered with a sheet of black plastic flapping like a loose sail in a gale. A rumble of thunder followed. Laura tried not to think of what would happen to those people when the

storm hit but trying not to think of something somehow seemed to make her think harder about it, seemed to make it all worse.

The first drops were big and cold. She could tell from this and sudden chill in the stiff wind, the brilliant flashes of lightening and the cracks of thunder coming right behind that they were not going to make it to his apartment. She saw the rain coming at them in the streetlights and then it hit. They ran across Thirty-fifth Street then halfway up the next block and ducked into a covered, sunken stairwell lit by a single lightbulb caged in the concrete ceiling. They stood together at the bottom of the stairs, their backs pressed up against the locked metal door behind them, breathing hard and staring out through the iron railing at the curtain of rain.

“I’m soaked,” Adam said. The blue scrub shirt he wore home from the ER against hospital rules stuck to him like cellophane. An unruly curl of dark hair drooped down over his forehead, dangling down in front of one of his brown, oval eyes. In the glare of the bulb, she could see the water glistening on his smooth, high cheeks. Laura reached out for the escaped curl and gently lifted it, patting it back into place. Adam brushed his hand on hers, she slid her fingers in between his. “Why do you think people do that to each other?” Adam said as they stared out into the rain.

“I don’t know,” Laura said. “Better just forget about it.”

“Like you have?”

“By tomorrow morning it’ll all be gone from my head,” Laura said, wishing it were true.

“They didn’t teach me about shit like that in medical school.”

“Nobody teaches anybody about shit like that in medical school.”

“Why not?”

Laura laughed in that way that people laugh at questions that are too obvious to answer. “Why not? Because if they did, half the class would probably quit and go to law school or something. There’d be nobody left who’d be willing to deal with shit like that. Nobody sane, anyway.”

“You think so?”

“I don’t know. I suppose there are gluttons for punishment out there who might.”

“Are you?” Adam said.

“Am I what?”

“A glutton for punishment?”

Laura thought about the question for a moment. “I hope not. I try not to be,” she said, thinking all the while that she might be wrong about that. “But by tomorrow the whole thing will be gone from my head. There’s no punishment for shit you don’t remember.”

“Somehow I don’t believe you won’t remember.”

“Believe it.”

A bolt of lightning lit up the street, followed by an explosion of thunder that seemed to fracture the air around them. They pressed together as if they were the last two witnesses to the end of the world.

The rain fell, stronger than before, hissing on the sidewalk and the street. A trickle of water from the sidewalk spilled over the wall in front of them. Soon the trickle became a steady stream, splashing onto the concrete and disappearing down the drain at their feet. The water carried cigarette butts and small leaves, prematurely brown and spotted with

disease. A gum wrapper washed over and stuck to the grate over the drain alongside the paper and the leaves, the water swirling and deepening in an ever-widening pool. “You know what I sometimes wish?” Adam said.

“No. What’s that?”

“Sometimes I wish we’d have a rain so strong that it would wash all the bad stuff away.”

“Like Noah. The Flood.”

“No, not like that. Not with drowning or suffering. Just a rain, a good hard scrubbing.”

Laura squeezed his fingers between hers. “Looks like you’re getting your wish.” She toed aside the garbage clogging the grate. The pool of filthy water swirled and gurgled and disappeared down the drain.

A cab came swishing up the avenue, the rain thick in the glare of the headlights. “Damn, I should have grabbed it,” Adam said as it sped by.

“You really want to run out in that?”

“No, I guess not. I’m sorry I got you stuck here,” he said. “I shouldn’t have asked you to walk with me. I would’ve been fine.”

“Maybe,” Laura said. “Maybe not. Maybe I just wanted to. Sometimes a short walk after work can be good for your head.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Adam said. “Anyway, I’m glad you wanted to.” He fidgeted with her hand then closed his fingers around hers. “Maybe I wouldn’t have been fine,” he said.

“Maybe I wouldn’t have been, either.”

“Are you on tomorrow?” Adam said after a while.

Laura sighed. "Noon to midnight."

"I hope it'll be better than today was."

"Amen to that."

Adam let go of her hand and put his arm around her back. His hand felt warm on her cool damp shirt, better than the cold metal of the door. "Okay?" he said.

She felt herself trembling and fought to stop it. "Yeah, definitely okay. I guess I was getting a little chilled."

"Feels like this rain's knocked the temperature down twenty degrees," Adam said.

"Maybe it'll be cool tomorrow. It's nice when the weather turns cool. Summer's overrated as far as I'm concerned. I'll take the fall any day."

"I know what you mean," Adam said. "You can keep the summer. Too goddamned hot, especially in the city. Get a heat wave going and people do some crazy shit."

They stood there, shivering. Saying nothing.

"You think that's what happened tonight?" Adam said after a while. "You think it was because of the heat?"

The heat. That would be the easy explanation, Laura thought. Four young, healthy people suddenly blinded by some crazy asshole walking down the street with a bag of lye powder? It was bad enough when they brought in the young Chinese woman, the one who was screaming. Then, five minutes later, her tall, blond boyfriend. And then a dark-haired, white-skinned, gay hipster and his African American partner. There was no need for an advanced degree in criminal psychology to figure out that these attacks were not random. Two couples with the audacity to love beyond the rigid boundaries of race and

gender preference, struck down by a gloved hand reaching out in hate from the darkness with a fist full of lye.

The victims thrashed and screamed as she and Adam forced their eyelids open. They used IV tubes as hoses, directing the water straight onto corneas already gone turbid under the effects of the lye, the cloudy blues and browns and greens strangely reminding Laura of the marbles she used to play with as a little girl, the bizarre, unwelcome association bringing her as close to crying as she had come since receiving her medical degree. Before long the floor of the trauma room was so sloppy with spilled water that it looked like a pipe had burst.

The on-call ophthalmology resident finally arrived and said that despite everything they had done, all four of the patients would be blind forever. If the attacker had used acid it would have been bad enough, she explained, but they would have had a chance. Lye is different, she said. Once it's in the eye for too long it just dissolves the tissue away, there's no stopping it.

“The heat?” Laura said. “I don't know. Who can know?”

“You said to try to forget it,” Adam said. “I'm trying, I'm really trying. You know what I've been trying to think about? The fall. A big field full of orange pumpkins surrounded by a forest of maples with blazing red and orange and yellow leaves drifting down in a chilly afternoon breeze. I'm thinking of it, seeing it right in front of my eyes. And then I think about what just happened, that they'll never be able to see any of that, never be able to see each other—”

From the way his body moved against her Laura knew he was crying. He had been strong, stronger and braver than any student she had worked with before. She

tightened her arm around him. “Adam, listen to me. You did the best you could, we both did, and that’s all we could do. Now it’s over. Now you’ve got to let it go.”

Adam nodded his head. “I know. It’s late. It’s late and I kept you up and you should be in bed.”

“Soon,” Laura said.

Adam wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and sighed. “I’m sorry, I’m a basket case tonight.”

“You’re fine. You’re tired. We’re both tired.”

“Laura?”

“Yeah?”

“Those homeless people, back there on the sidewalk. You saw them, right?”

The thought of them out there as the storm hit make the ache inside her worse.

“Yeah, I saw them.”

“In this storm...you think they’ll be okay?”

“Yeah, they’ll be okay,” she said without conviction. “They found shelter. I’m sure they found shelter.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Probably someplace like this.”

“I hope so.”

From somewhere down the avenue came the sound of an ambulance siren. They pressed themselves up against the door as the siren grew louder, as if prison escapees hiding from their searchers. It sped by, headlights blinking, flashing red and blue lights coloring the falling rain, and disappeared into the city.

The rumbles of thunder softened. After a short while Laura could see in the light of the streetlamp that the rain had nearly stopped. “I think we can go now,” she said.

They climbed out of the stairwell and headed uptown. Runoff from the street streamed down the gutter and cascaded in noisy waterfalls into the sewers. They turned on Forty-fourth street. His was the third building in. Adam pulled his key card from his pocket, inserted it into the slot. The floodlight above the door blazed on, the lock buzzed and clicked. He withdrew the card, pushed against the door and stuck his foot in the opening. His eyes met hers. “If you’d like to come up...”

Laura lowered her head, brushed the rain from her cheeks with her fingers. Behind her closed eyes the images flashed again, the horror of the vision killing any other feeling inside her. She looked up, raised a hand above her eyes to shadow the glare, tried to smile. “Thanks, but I don’t think so.”

In the light she saw his cheeks go red. She brushed back Adam’s unruly curl then embraced him, holding him close amidst the patter of droplets dripping from the buildings and lampposts.

Laura headed back down Third Avenue. Hazy waves of vapor rose up from the shiny wet street; the city giving up its demons, a vast, steaming exorcism. A few blocks further downtown she noticed a shopping cart parked atop a sunken stairwell similar to the one that had protected her and Adam, the basket draped with black plastic, a Shop Rite sign on the exposed handle. It was the couple they had seen before. They had found shelter. Laura whispered a prayer of thanks for at least this small act of mercy and hurried past, toward her apartment and a chance of rest.

THE END