



NEVERMORE

By Rick Townley

Death may not always get it right on the first try, but he rarely gives up.

There was a loud, unmistakable sound of knuckles rapping on the front door. It was urgent. It said “there is trouble here, come quickly.” Five hits in rapid succession startled him awake from an odd dream about being young and trying to start a new job in a strange city where he couldn’t find the office building. He sat up and pushed back the covers, groping in the dark for a pair of sweat pants he remembered leaving at the foot of the bed. The pants were where he expected and he fumbled them on and nearly tripped trying to walk and get dressed at the same time.

He steadied himself against a wall of the bedroom, thankful his hand didn’t hit any of the several dozen picture frames hanging there. He could just barely make out some of the pictures in the dim light filtering through the blinds from a street lamp outside the apartment building. They were all of relatives, past and present, that his wife had hung there when she was still alive. She liked to keep track of everyone in the family despite Walter’s protests that they shouldn’t be in the bedroom. He noticed a zebra-like effect on the wall from the slats as he finally got his legs and passed through the bedroom doorway into a long dark hallway.

It was a two-bedroom apartment on one level that he and Maggie had downsized into a few years earlier. It was comfortable enough with modern amenities they weren’t used to in the old Victorian they’d finally given up, but neither ever really adjusted very well to the lack of space. Both Walter and Maggie were prone to clutter and it was a constant battle to keep the apartment picked up enough to move freely about without tripping over things.

Falling, even onto a well-padded carpet, had become enemy number one for the couple. They had seen friends go down and never fully recover from hip fractures and broken legs. It was something they talked about frequently and became more fearful of with each passing year. Maggie would often complain to Walter that they were pouring millions of dollars into fighting various diseases but didn’t have a good, simple way to help someone recover from a broken hip. Their concern didn’t slow their activities very much, but it definitely made them cautious about where they walked.

Walter was halfway down the hallway now. The master bedroom was at the end of the hall, the furthest room from the front door and a small nightlight on one wall provided just enough illumination to see the floor without offending sleepy eyes. It was heavily carpeted and his footsteps were muffled as he tried to hurry along to

the front door. The hallway emptied into a large living area with an outside door at the far side, an open-style kitchen on the right and the actual living space on the left. As he reached the end of the hallway he paused to listen. A single bird chirped happily in a tree outside the living room window. Walter wondered for a moment why birds never shut up and why they never seemed to sleep.

The only sound inside the apartment was ticking from an ancient anniversary clock that Maggie had dragged home from a flea market one day and set on the mantle. It never kept accurate time but she said it reminded her of a clock her grandmother had with a glass dome and a small carousel of brass orbs that would rotate back and forth every few minutes underneath the clock face. Walter thought it was ugly but said nothing. Maggie was always dragging things into the house. When she passed away he changed nothing. Everything was in exactly the same place she'd put it.

Dim red numbers on a digital clock in the kitchen told him it was two fifty-eight a.m. He expected another bang on the front door but none came. He thought he had gotten up, put on his pants and walked out here pretty quickly, certainly as quickly as anyone knocking could expect at this time of night. Or morning. Actually it was morning wasn't it? Walter hated mornings. He was a late sleeper because he read until late every night. It was the only way he could sleep without taking pills. Tonight he'd dropped off earlier than usual but still had only been asleep about two hours when the rapping came.

He shuffled forward and looked through the peephole in the door, getting a fish-eye view of the outside. Nothing. Just harsh neon lights and his neighbors doors all closed, no one standing around and definitely no one in front of his door. Walter's apartment was one of four that opened to an outer covered hallway, open at either end with stairways leading to the first level. Four more apartments opened onto the first level. Beyond the stairs on one side was a parking lot and a common lawn was on the other side. He unlocked the door and pulled it open quickly, half expecting to find someone standing there despite seeing no one through the peephole.

The hallway was empty. The only sound from the same bird he heard from inside, only the chirping was louder without the windows to muffle it. He stepped out onto the thick wood planks of the outer hallway floor and looked left then right. There was no sign of anyone, or anything, as far as he could see. He listened carefully and couldn't make out sounds of footsteps, talking or any other human activity. Just the bird.

He stepped carefully to the top of the stairs at his left and peered down into the parking lot. There was nothing unusual or out of order there. No stranded motorist needing help, no late reveler trying to figure out where he lived, not even any of the feral cats that stayed close to the cars for warmth on cool evenings. It wasn't that cold out tonight, Walter thought. It was fall and this was what Maggie used to call "sweater weather." She loved the fall and said it used to make her feel completely alive after a long, hot and humid southern summer.

Walter rubbed his head with his right hand and put his left on his hip in a classic pose of puzzlement. He wandered to the other stairwell and looked down into the lawn area but there was no activity there either and no lights were on. All his

neighbors were obviously in bed or not at home. The grass was starting to collect the first morning dew and shimmered under the incandescent light of several pole lamps set around the property for safety.

It wasn't a retirement complex, Maggie would never have stood for that, but there were a fair number of retirees here. Walter didn't get along with too many of them and pretty much stayed to himself. He and Maggie both thought their neighbors were far too sedentary for their general age and they would say things to each other like "just shoot me if I ever act like that." To them, age was only something you gave in to when you were dead. "As long as you are still breathing," Maggie would tell him, "I will drag your ass out of the house to do things."

Satisfied that nothing was out of order outside, Walter turned and went back inside. He was certain he'd heard the knocking and that it wasn't from his dream, at least from what he could remember of the dream at this point. Whatever it was sounded real enough to wake him up and had to be real. He felt a little spooked by it as he remembered this was the second time it had happened in the past few weeks. The previous time was just like this. A loud, urgent rapping on the front door woke him up at about the same time of night and, like now, he got up and found no one there.

He wrote it off as possibly some kids playing a prank on all the old people, but none of his neighbors acknowledged having a similar experience. Walter spoke of it to Henry, his retired next door neighbor who walked his wife's yapping little dog several times a day, but Henry just laughed and told Walter to stop staying up so late. Henry and his wife went to bed at a sensible 9:30 p.m. every evening and were up by 4:30 a.m. and put the television on loud enough to be heard through the adjoining wall. Walter was rarely awake at that time to hear it so they got along just fine with their respective hours.

He locked the door behind himself and wandered into the kitchen area for some bottled water from the fridge, navigating by another small nightlight on the stove. He had taken to drinking directly from a bottle now that Maggie was gone. She always insisted he use a glass and scolded him for "backwash." The same rule applied to juice and soda bottles. It was all part of her program to keep him civilized, as she would say, because all men were pigs and he was no exception. She would always add "But you're still nice," after insulting his gender and his habits.

He still felt guilty for doing it, but he only wanted a quick swig and it didn't seem sensible to dirty a whole glass for a few ounces of the clear liquid. He capped the bottle and looked for evidence of "backwash." Finding none he put the bottle back on the top shelf and wandered back to bed. He was thankful that he was able to drop off quickly and went into another dream about being lost in a car on a strange highway.

The next afternoon Walter encountered his downstairs neighbor, Sharon, a widow for just over two years. She took pity on Walter's loss and often had him down for dinner and wine, hinting on more than one occasion that she wouldn't mind it terribly if he decided to stay for the night. He thought she was attractive, actually more attractive than Maggie, but his loyalties still were with his late wife. Perhaps

one day, if he could keep Maggie out of his head, he'd jump on Sharon, tear off her clothes and make passionate love to her. But until he could let Maggie go the fantasy about Sharon would have to stay just that, a fantasy. Besides, he had a feeling he'd need a double dose of Viagra to keep up with Sharon. She was close in age but a lot more energetic than Walter.

He tried not to notice her cleavage as they stood in the parking lot under a hot afternoon sun discussing what it was like to lose someone close. She was about a head shorter than Walter and had thick auburn hair that cascaded down her back. She liked to wear tight clothing and had the shape for it much to the consternation of the other wives. She seemed to think Walter was a nice looking man and often said he was more handsome than her husband had been. Walter still had a thick head of graying hair, stood just over six feet tall and worked diligently at the gym to keep a paunch off. That plus the fact that he hardly ate without Maggie to cook for him made him the slimmest semi-retired guy in the complex. Sharon talked him into moving out of the parking lot into the shade by the outside hallway.

"What time was this knocking, Walter?" asked Sharon.

Without hesitation he replied "It was 2:58. I remember seeing that on the kitchen clock."

"Were you asleep?"

"Yeh, I had been up late reading but I was definitely asleep by then. It woke me up. It seemed so real Sharon, both times. I can't imagine that I dreamed it."

Sharon looked skeptical but tried to be sympathetic. "Poor baby," she said touching his chin. "You just need some company. I think living alone up there is making you a little crazy."

Walter rolled his eyes. "Thank-you Sharon, but I don't need any company. What I need is more sleep. It's really hard to sleep these days. Maybe I should get rid of that big king-sized bed. It seems so empty."

Sharon saw her opening. "Or maybe you just need someone in it with you," she said, raising one eyebrow suggestively.

Walter blushed slightly and withdrew from the conversation, stepping backward and nearly tripping on the bottom step of the outside stairs.

"I gotta go. Thanks Sharon. I'll let you know if it happens again. See ya," he said as he hurried up the stairs.

Walter's door was just a couple of feet from the edge of the top step. He saw Sharon still leaning against the railing at the bottom of the stairs, watching him with a big grin. A nasty thought occurred to him. Could it be possible...no, no...that's crazy. He looked at her again and she was still there, apparently waiting for him to go inside first. From this distance he thought it wouldn't be so noticeable for him to take a quick gawk at her cleavage again, and noticed that she seemed to not be wearing a bra. She was incredibly firm for a woman her age and

while full, her breasts showed no sign of wear and tear under her white cotton tank-top shirt. She looked like a much older version of “Sharona” from that old album he had long ago that Maggie made him get rid of. He struggled with the name of the group that sang the song as he unlocked the door and headed inside.

Later that night Walter let himself think about Sharon as he devoured a microwave dinner in front of the TV. She was well tanned although he never saw her at the outdoor pool when he went to the gym. Also, it was pretty well past season for pool or beach, so maybe she uses a tanning salon, he thought. Regardless, she really looked good for a woman her age. Then it hit him that he didn’t really know how old she was. He knew that he and Sharon’s late husband Greg were about the same age, but Sharon never discussed age with him or with Maggie.

He always assumed Maggie and Sharon were contemporaries, but maybe not. He tried to recall details of anything Greg had mentioned, but all he could remember was that Sharon was Greg’s third wife. He had divorced the first and lost the second in a car accident. He had met Sharon...well actually Walter didn’t know where the two of them met. It didn’t matter. He allowed himself one last imaginary look at her breasts trying to escape a tight, thin tank top then put it all out of his mind. He fell asleep watching the news about an hour later.

Things were quiet for the next week or so. Walter didn’t see Sharon again though he had tried to be around when she might be coming or going. Her car was always there and he wondered how she got food or whether she ever left home. Her blinds were always drawn, day or night, and there was very little evidence she was even there. After a few days he gave up trying to run into her and went about his normal business. He considered himself retired but he still made a modest income from some day trading. Maggie had encouraged it because it kept him busy and out of her way, but if he indulged too much she would get stern and insist he step away from the computer.

He wasn’t all that thrilled with trading anymore, but it gave him a sense of purpose and helped him adhere to some kind of routine now that Maggie was gone. In his former, pre-retired life, he had been a claims adjuster for a large insurance company. He hated it and found it incredibly boring, but he wasn’t able to switch jobs or careers due to his age. By the time he figured out what he really wanted to be when he grew up it was way too late to start again.

A week and a half after the last knocking incident it happened again at the same time of the night and with the same number of raps. Like previous times, he woke up and bolted out of bed while trying to put on sweat pants, found his way down the dark hallway and made it to the door in what he thought was record time. Without hesitating he undid the locks and swung the door wide open into the room, keeping his hand on the knob to prevent it from flying back and hitting the wall. Again there was no one there, just the sound of a lonely bird chirping in a nearby tree.

He checked outside in either direction but saw no evidence anyone had been there. He slowly moved back inside, closed and locked the door and went for water in the kitchen. He had a short drink then went back down the hall and for some unknown reason stopped at the door to his bedroom. He thought he heard a sound from

inside the room. His pulse quickened and he felt lightheaded. He grabbed the door frame to steady himself and turned his head, right ear toward the room to hear better.

There it was again. It was a subtle swishing sound, like someone shifting legs or moving around on fresh sheets. He leaned into the room but held fast to the door frame for support. There was nothing more, it was all silent again. He shook his head in disbelief at his own imagination then realized how silly he was being and let out a short, soft laugh. Just then a voice came from inside the room and he froze in fear, his fingers gripping the door jamb as if he would fall into some dark abyss by letting go.

“Walter? Is that you?”

He didn't respond. The voice was familiar, real familiar, but that was impossible because it belonged to someone who shouldn't be there. Suddenly, the small lamp by the side of his bed switched on and revealed Sharon, lying on her side fully naked, arm extended, hand still on the light switch. He stood transfixed as she dropped her arm and fell back on the bed showing firm, round breasts with dark red nipples the size of quarters. Her hair was longer than he thought and flowed in all directions, messy from sleeping. Her slender body was taut and well-toned, skin smooth and unwrinkled, and tan lines from what must have been a very small swimsuit. This is a young woman in her twenties, thought Walter, not a woman of almost sixty. His stare made her self-conscious and she pulled the sheets up to cover herself almost to her neck. Walter finally let go of the door jam, tested his balance and shuffled slowly toward the bed.

“Wha, what are you doing here?” he stuttered.

Sharon looked surprised. “What's wrong with you? Why were you up out of bed?”

Walter kept staring at her in disbelief and spoke softly, almost in a whisper. “I thought I heard something.”

“Well, enough noise. I don't feel too good, just let me sleep, okay?”

Sharon took a deep sigh and rolled over in the opposite direction, pulling covers tight over her head as if going into a cocoon. Walter made it to the edge of the bed and sat down where Sharon had been just seconds before. He looked over his shoulder at her but couldn't even see her hair, just her shape under the sheets. He leaned back, slid his feet under the sheets and turned off the lamp before putting his head back on the pillow. Something was wrong, very, very wrong, but he couldn't cope with it at the moment. He felt utterly drained and his brain was shutting down. All he could do was close his eyes and pray that this was a dream and that he had never even gotten out of bed.

The alarm made its usual irritating, computer beeping sound at 9:00 a.m. the next morning. Walter reached over and turned it off then suddenly remembered the events of the previous night. He felt panic and his instincts were to jump out of bed and run to the other room without looking back, but he fought it back, then drew a deep breath and turned to check the other side of the bed. There was no one there.

The covers were neatly drawn up the same as they had been when he went to bed the night before.

There was no evidence that anyone, Sharon or anyone else, had been there. The book he had been reading before going to sleep was still there, laying face down and open to the page where he left off, in exactly the same spot where he had left it. If Sharon had been there, she had been careful to make everything look exactly the same as before her visit. He turned and patted the covers. There was nothing underneath them. That side of his raft-like, king-sized bed was empty.

Still groggy and in need of coffee, Walter swung out of bed, went to the bedroom window and opened the blinds. It was actually a double window with two sets of blinds and overlooked a small lawn below and a parking lot beyond that. In front of the walkway leading to his building was an ambulance, a large white van with the orange letters EMS printed boldly on the side. In front of the van was a police car, both doors open, and two officers were talking with the driver of the ambulance. No lights were flashing and it was eerily quiet.

Walter stared with morbid curiosity to see who the ambulance was for, nervously wrapping and unwrapping the cord from the blinds around his index finger. After several minutes of no activity he became impatient and decided to dress and go outside to get a closer look. He made it out the front door just in time to see two EMS workers wheeling a gurney out the front door of Sharon's apartment. It carried a body completely covered with a white sheet. The emergency workers deftly maneuvered the gurney away from the door and down the walkway to the waiting EMS truck where it loaded it into the back. Walter walked downstairs and approached one of the cops.

"Excuse me, officer, could you tell me what happened here? I live upstairs," he said.

The cop looked apologetic but seemed hesitant to give much detail.

"Are you a neighbor of," he paused to look at a pad he was holding then continued, "Mrs. Sharon Reston? Apartment number 334?"

Walter just nodded his head "yes."

"I'm afraid your neighbor died during the night, causes unknown but most likely a heart attack. Were you aware of any medical conditions she had?" asked the cop.

He was a nice looking young man, Walter thought. He didn't look like he was enjoying this. Walter shook his head "no."

"And what is your name sir?"

"I'm, uh, I'm Walter. Walter Edwards. I live upstairs, there," he said, pointing to his apartment.

The officer wrote down his name and address, asked a few more general questions then thanked Walter for his time and help. Walter continued to stand there like a

statue and just before the cop started to walk off he asked him, "Excuse me again. Do you know when Sharon, I mean Mrs. Reston, died last night?"

The cop stopped walking and turned around. "Why? Did you hear or see something last night?"

Walter thought better of telling him about his experience and said he hadn't seen or heard anything, but was just curious. The cop thought for a second then referred to his pad again.

"Her cleaning lady said she found Mrs. Reston this morning at 8:30. EMS thinks she died about 5 hours earlier, probably around 3 AM or so. You sure you didn't hear anything?"

"No! I mean, no...I was sound asleep at that time."

The cop thanked him again and joined his partner in the squad car. Within a few minutes both the EMS truck and the police car were gone from the parking lot and everything looked perfectly normal as if nothing had ever happened. Walter was stunned and tried to digest everything as he walked back upstairs. Nothing made any sense. He had a dream, he thought it was a dream, about someone rapping on his door, went back to bed and found Sharon there as if she slept there every night. It had to be a dream, the whole thing had to be a dream. It was the only explanation he could come up with.

He closed the front door behind him and walked into the living room. Everything was quiet except, there was no ticking sound from the old clock on the mantle. He walked over and examined it more closely. It was still plugged in but it wasn't working. It looked like it had just...he held the thought as he noticed the hands on the clock face said the time was just a few minutes before three o'clock.

Later that day Walter went to the management office and broke his lease. He moved two weeks later and didn't leave a forwarding address. When the painters went into the apartment they found an old electric clock on the mantle that was still plugged in and seemed to keep accurate time. One of the men was quite amused by the little carousel mechanism and took it home to his wife.