

STAN

It's a scary dangerous world out there—I know because I'm in it, too, and I'm pretty scary.

It is a world full of deviants and perverts and furniture salesmen. Over the course of my varied careers I've seen a lot of strange and unholy madness firsthand. First when I was a demolitionist in the Seals and then on the targeted assassination strike teams in the Mideast war theaters. I'm not at liberty to discuss any of those careers in much more lavish detail than I already have.

In my latest reincarnation, I'm a hotshot world-traveler security consultant for global corporations and foreign potentates, as far as you know. I play golf with sheiks, who instead of using golf carts, drive the fairways in solid gold limousines.

Now I've been based out of the windy city of Seattle the past six years now, but I'm mostly on the road for work. It has made life sometimes difficult on the domestic front.

I have a wife, Vivian, and kids, Matthew, 6, and Reynold, infant.

If I had to sum up my whole self in a phrase, I'd choose "battle-honed genius-certified situational intelligence master of all things".

My name is Tom McLaughlin and I am the living embodiment of America's global addiction to effectiveness, as far as you know, and this story is 100% real, with that same caveat in place. I am not a liar and I certainly never lie for fun. No details in this terrifying tale have been embellished, redacted or otherwise altered in any way whatsoever. All characters in my story are presumed to be as guilty as I've described them, unless proved otherwise in my very own proprietary and personal court of opinion.

Very well, then I shall begin. Life used to be good. BS. Before Stan, that is.

I miss those so-called "boring" days.

Now I'm no shrinking violet when it comes to "confrontation". However nothing in my training ever prepared me for a man, a being, like Stan.

Recently Stan, rocking out to *Aqualung*, way too late one night, woke our baby, Reynold. I admit I just about went down there to play double-dutch with his Vas deferens but something stopped me, and the noise soon stopped, but that smell lingered, that particular cloyingly sweet cannabis odor seemingly mixed with lavender and possibly sulfur, coming through the ducting, covering me in its hazy blanketing as I dozed on the leather recliner.

Don't get me wrong, I've been know to rock out to a little Tull sometimes too but this was way after happy-time, the witching hour, etc., whatever Beatnik expression you care to employ.

Strange as this was I didn't think much of it, and stranger still I didn't do anything about it. Almost as if I were bewitched or something. What incredible and unwonted restraint I demonstrated.

I just figured Stan's an asshole and always had been.

Stan is our downstairs neighbor. Always dressed in a Nirvana T-shirt and plaid flannel shirt, with a scraggly spider-infested dictator-beard. He also has that murderous mongrel, too, who he calls Seabreeze I believe.

That damn dog barks all night on full moons and Halloween for some reason. The beast has extraordinarily broad muscular shoulders but just the one small head, or so

I thought. How he could get that miniature snout around something larger than a knuckle I have no idea.

Stan and that dog Seabreeze out for a walk down to their accursed acrid-smelling lamppost when it's foggy and windy, as it always is in this windy city, under the pale yellow aura of streetlights, and rain in the mountainous air, is a trip unto itself, worthy of Jefferson Starship, let me tell ya.

Stan sitting there Hoovering on a cigarette as if a stray intake of oxygen would get mixed up in his violent brimstone-sucking and he'd drop dead and die of tar withdrawal on the spot. Seabreeze yapping out of that comically small head, while all the children in the building whimper and cry, and even the frogs cease their evening vespers.

My wife won't even say Stan's name anymore. My uttering it leaves her cold until she shudders—then she acts as if I never said anything. They had an unpleasant run-in some years back while she was schlepping groceries up the stairwell. Our oldest was running up and down the landings, and there Stan was standing on his doorjamb, in his bathrobe, sucking on the end of his cig like it produced milk and he was a baby cigarette or a suckling lamb. "Fine evening," he says, according to her.

"Hello, you must be Stan, my name's Vivian McLaughlin," she says, extending her hand. Stan doesn't take it. Instead he asks about our boy.

"What's his name?" asks Stan.

Vivian involuntarily starts. "Matthew," she says.

"Nice name."

Against her will, Vivian nods.

"How old is he?"

"Six," she says, wondering why the words are coming out of her mouth exactly.

Stan nods.

"Nice age, isn't it?"

Vivian has gathered herself by this point. She continues to walk up the stairs without saying goodbye or evening or anything back at all. When she gets to the door, Matthew is completely still. Vivian hugs him and he's cold to the touch. For hours he doesn't say a word, but then the spell passes and he's fine again like nothing ever happened.

My wife said the whole ordeal gave her the eeriest feeling she'd ever experienced. Since then, she's wanted to move.

Now I've never met Stan, per se, which is strange since I've met all the other neighbors dozens of times, and

seen them around, down at the pool, the grocery store, whatever. I don't think Stan has a job. I've never seen a woman go into that apartment. I've never seen dog food or jack squat go into that apartment, really, besides Stan and that dog. Not so much as a truckload of cigarette cartons. I've asked the other neighbors about him, but they're equally as clueless.

They think Stan's a Section 8 who was grandfathered into the building back when this was all officer housing for the nearby military base. He'd been disabled, most likely mentally, in some training exercise, and had compulsively hoarded dry goods to eat and was living off of those.

It's an interesting theory but he doesn't seem handicapped to me, nor does he have the military air, and I should know, I've been around every type of military personnel, even the generals—and some of the real spooky people—and Stan doesn't fit into that mold at all. His creepiness is quite hard to place.

Anyways, the whole Stan situation has been fairly tolerable until recently. Vivian looked him up on the list of local Chester's and he's not registered at any rate. Part of me wants to say he's just an old misunderstood

crank, but there's just something not quite right about the guy.

Now I'd normally never consider violating a fellow citizen's God-given right to privacy but I've gotten to the point where I need to know more. The man seems full of mystery and secrets, and if it's one instinct I'm loyal to, it's suspicion.

I can't let my wife and kids be subject to the uncomfortably close domestic offshoot of terror-neighborhood weirdo guy.

What follows next is a log of sorts, to chronicle my pursuit of Stan's strange patterns—dates and times escape me, so please forgive.

Today [May?] Stan went out for his walk down to the lamppost and came back with Seabreeze around 6:30. He smokes unfiltered long-cut Winston-Salems which is strange because that's what my old man smoked.

I went down to the army surplus store today [June?] and purchased high-powered binoculars and night-vision goggles. They remind me of my duty-issued equipment from my seven tours in Iraq. Part of me really missed this mission-oriented facet of my identity. It's rarely so reifiable in the corporate sector.

Called in sick for a Brussels trip today [June].
Probably stupid because Stan didn't even come out today.
6:30 came, then 7, then the sun set and I whipped out old
night-vision but nothing, at least until after I went to
bed at 3am.

Kids were scared. Vivian thinks I'm experiencing
PTSD.

Stan waved at me today [July] while I watched him
smoke four cigarettes end to end and Seabreeze sprayed the
base of the lamppost and also returned my enhanced gaze
with his artificially zoomed-in beady eyes. Even through
binoculars, his stupid head is pathetically small.

Took a break from surveillance today [?], starting to
affect my mental state, and besides I haven't really
learned anything in weeks.

Reminds me of those heady days when we caught Hussein
in that spider-hole. Hollowness, rather than elation, at
the discovery.

Stan's wacky terbacky fills the living room late at
night [???] with vegetable slackerdom while I'm watching
King of Queens. Vivian and the kids have long since gone
to bed.

I wonder how many bricks of old Vietnam schwag he has
down there in his rucksacks. One thing I am sure of, I'm

getting tired of Stan living in my head rent-free. It is time to return to my life, my concerns, my job, my family. [August?]

Finally, a breakthrough! Stan receives a lot of mail but it's all marked undeliverable and returned to sender because the postman can't get the damn metal door of his mailbox to open. It's painted black and sealed by magic I swear, so while the postman was fiddling with his key in the lock, I took a look at some of the envelopes and I found a last name.

Last night, I called an old buddy from the academy, who now works at the Pentagon and I had him run the name, but nothing came back on him being a vet, so I assume it's an alias. S. Harvester.

Work called today again when I overslept. Vivian was at an orthodontist appointment, but I can't keep holding out on her. She's going to find out what I'm doing and think I've gone crazy, so I gotta get ahead of the curve and bring her into the fold.

I swear Stan looked a little sad yesterday [definitely August] as I gazed at him through binoculars while Vivian trucked her little boxes of belongings up the back of that moving truck ramp, seemingly oblivious to our subplot of committed communion.

Alone at night in the apartment with only the tendrils of Stan's syrupy smoke creeping up through the vents to keep me company, I try to pinpoint exactly where it all went wrong for me.

Was it the binoculars, the night-vision goggles, the Ouija board I bought to try to engage in a séance with Stan, despite him living in the apartment directly below mine?

Was it the reading I've been doing? Dostoyevski, Poe, Cayce, Crowley? The bath salts I've snorted? The education I've given myself on unwholesome topics? Was it becoming an extension of the military mold, the disciplined mindset, the official narrative? Guilt from taking out dictators and other CIA stooges? Fallout from my lifelong patriotic addiction to effectiveness? Did I fit the mold too well, have too much of the proscribed whatever thing, live life too much by the book, do everything too much the right way, the way it ought to be done, and in the end find it all to be a terrible betrayal?

I really have no idea. I just know I've lost a ton as a result of these idle wandering ruminations lately. Perhaps irretrievably.

The sun shone in the windows of my empty and desolate apartment this morning. I morbidly chose to look in the

mirror for some reason. I look terrible. Cell chic. Bags under my eyes, hair unruly and threadbare. I look crazy and unhealthy and I'm stone-broke and headed for divorce court.

It's starting to look like Hussein or Osama's last days in this old head, and all that, as far as you know. Four days until I'm evicted, and then suddenly, at my absolute lowest point in this whole unholy ordeal, there's a knock at the door.

It's Stan. He introduces himself, apologizes sincerely for everything that's happened to me, shakes my hand then presents me with a curious gift.

It's an ashtray.

It's made of crystal and I think I behold the slightest flaw in it. A fleck of red fire, which I peer into and as if through binoculars, I see it's not a flaw. It's a vision. I can see my family who left me in miniature and they're moving around inside the crystal facets. My wife and children laughing happily and me in there, too, amongst them. It is very tempting and I almost reach out to grasp the gift.

I'm wondering to myself, how did we all become captured in crystal, and I start to think that they might be real in that strange cosmically isolated encasement, and

my current situation the illusion. Perhaps everything is not nearly as it purports to me.

But the Seals training and the flair for reason gnaws at me. I realize that I've been hunting the devil for months and cornered him in his lair, but now I know for sure that he's no pussy-cat. But more than that I know that by all rights, he can't offer me what he doesn't have in the first place.

I'm overcome in a spontaneous chill and cold sweat, but I see a glimmer of hope. That mongrel Seabreeze, old Huckleberry Hound himself, peers out at me from behind Stan's legs, and my nerve returns. I refuse the curious ashtray.

"I don't smoke," I say lamely.

"Good for you," says Stan, laughing, a little shocked I think. "I wish I'd never started," he says and there is patent honesty in his voice, swear to God.

The dog with his small head whimpers. I look closer at him, and notice for the first time, the faint blue outlines of ghostly invisible heads on either side of his primary dwarf-head. Each about the size of a softball and originating from the sheer surface of the broad and elongated scapula. The heads are staring at me fiercely,

fangs bared, but Seabreeze's one visible head and Stan's grungy face are calm and placid as can be.

I let them know kindly I'd like to be alone, and they graciously but reluctantly leave.

The next day I call Vivian. I'm really surprised she takes my call.

She is crying and soon so am I. I tell her how sorry I am for everything that has happened.

I talk to my kids then and I assure them that everything is going to be all right.

That night I leave that old apartment and never look back. Now, looking back on all of it, all what happened was really a blessing in disguise.

That whole fucking apartment building burnt down a week later, and the fire investigator traced it all back to that stupid ashtray in Stan's apartment. It was the only thing from that apartment which survived the blaze. Damned if I or anybody else know how. And that's it, as far as you know. I swear.

END.