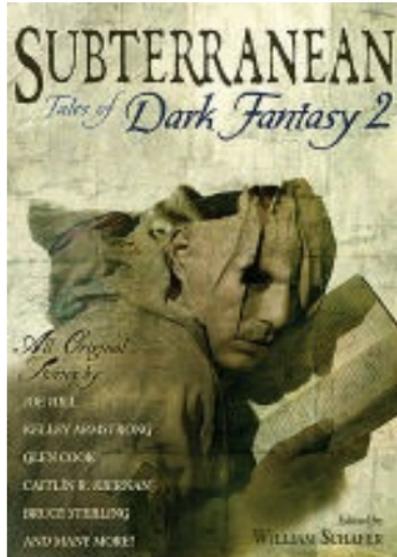


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Not Last Night
but the Night Before
(preview)



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MICHAEL'S DEATH SHOWED UP one rainy Sunday afternoon when the windows were misty and the barometer was high and Michael himself was in bed with a hang-over so bad he could hear his hair growing. At the crack of noon Michael finally exhumed himself to slap together a pot of kona, and as he bumped toward the kitchen he glanced at his frumpy sleeper couch and saw his death sitting there, quietly reading the Sunday paper he'd thoughtfully brought in from the front porch. He was wearing Michael's oatmeal-colored Turkish bathrobe, Michael's only memento of Jillian. The robe was really too small for Michael but his death was fairly swaddled in it.

In the kitchen Michael put six shaky tablespoons of beans into the grinder and leaned on the button and winced as the grinder's whine sawed through his head. He held on like a trooper until the beans were uniformly ground for the Italian coffeemaker Aimy had given him.

Unbleached No. 4 filter into gold mesh basket, ground beans into filter, water into reservoir, lids on all around, press on. While the machine's odd respiratory distress got underway Michael leaned out to peek into the livingroom. His death still sat there on the couch, reading *Doonesbury* without expression. Michael stared. Even over the coffee-maker's monster movie gargle the rustle of the comics pages turning seemed loud.

Michael stumbled into his afterthought of a bathroom and stared down at the toilet and tried to decide if he was going to throw up. A few minutes later and slightly more pale he went into the livingroom carefully bearing two steaming mugs of coffee. He set one on the coffee table and sipped from the other one and stood looking down at his uninvited visitor.

Michael's death folded down a corner of the comics section and stared long and mute at Edie's old Bugs Bunny coffee mug before him. He looked up at Michael and back down at the mug and made no move to pick it up.

Michael frowned. Finally he picked up the Bugs Bunny mug and padded back into the kitchen to add some half and half.

ON MONDAY MICHAEL'S DEATH came with him to work. He sat on the gray carpet near Michael's desk and read a Dan Brown novel like some solemn child accustomed to being left alone to entertain itself. Michael tried to ignore him but it wasn't easy. Having his death so close at hand made it hard to get any real work done.

One of the attorneys brought a deposition summary to be transcribed and grew irritated as Michael's gaze kept straying to an empty corner of his cube while the details were being explained to him. The attorney asked Do you understand the assignment and Michael nodded but still didn't look at him. The attorney scowled and stalked away. Michael's death never even looked up from his book.

The new assignment took top priority but Michael only stared at the triaged stack in his in box. How could you concentrate with your own death staring you right in the face. How were you supposed to pretend your work meant anything while death hovered over your shoulder.

But his death wasn't staring him in the face or hovering over his shoulder at all. He remained absorbed in his book,

occasionally wetting a finger to turn a page with odd earnestness. He didn't seem to read very quickly.

MICHAEL OFTEN ATE LUNCH in the park at the downtown library because it was one of the few patches of green within walking distance of Bunker Hill. The girlwatching was topnotch too.

Today people were enjoying the clear air and odd uplift that follow a good unseasonal Southern California rainstorm. Michael did not share their enjoyment, probably because his death sat right beside him on the side of the wooden bench most encrusted with pigeonshit.

Along the winding pathway came a tall redhead. Black business dress and low heels and black nylon laptop tote. The whole world turning on her hips. Michael's gaze followed her until it included his death sitting there beside him and Michael felt his face go tight. Is it asking too much to look at pretty girls during my lunch hour without my own death breathing down my neck.

But his death wasn't breathing down his neck. Oblivious to Michael's poison glare he was staring at a baglady rooting through a garbage can as he kicked harmlessly at fat insipid pigeons that waddled too close to his skinny legs. Offended pigeons twitched their tails and scattered.

Michael set aside his unfinished McDonald's lunch and rubbed his temples and then glanced at the pocketwatch Corinne had given him some birthday ago that remained a pleasant and impractical affectation. Twelve fiftyfive. He pushed off from the bench and jammed his hands into his front pockets and stalked away and kept his gaze on the sidewalk. People who noticed him thought Now there's an angry young man on such a pretty day. They couldn't see Michael's death of course but still. A pretty day's a pretty day.

Behind him Michael's death retrieved the pack of french fries from the McDonald's bag and took some for himself and left the rest for the baglady and then hurried after Michael.

DRIVING HOME THAT EVENING Michael saw somebody else's death for the first time. He was tracksurfing through his iPod, trying to find a song he liked, but they all sounded like mush and he ended up yanking the cable out of the dash. He glanced in the rearview at his death who sat with thin legs primly crossed as he blankly studied drivers creeping along in traffic. The Honda held but just themselves.

One lane over tires screeched and Michael's death craned forward in sudden brighteyed interest as a Nissan braked to avoid a black BMW that cut in front it. No contact was made and Michael's death leaned back in the seat and resumed his inscrutable survey.

Michael glimpsed an adult sized figure in the backseat of the Nissan, which was odd because the passenger seat was empty. The figure seemed oddly familiar. Then it leaned forward to stare at his own death passing by and Michael realized why. He half expected it to lift a hand and wave indifferently but no.

It was hard to concentrate on driving with his own death sitting right behind him. You couldn't drive a mile in this city without some kind of close call it seemed, and every time there was one Michael wondered Is this it, is this why he's here.

But after each close call he'd glance in the rearview and see his death simply looking out the window like a tourist in a city he hadn't planned to visit. Which perhaps he was.

WHEN MICHAEL LEFT FOR work next morning his

death stayed behind, sitting on the sleeper couch in the livingroom and staring at the wall. Michael should have felt relieved but he didn't. Instead he kept imagining glimpses of his death throughout the day. It made him edgy and irritable and his lack of sleep only made it worse. His coworkers and some of the attorneys noticed but Michael didn't notice that they did.

At lunch all the benches were taken in the little park outside the library and he said hell with it and sat on the grass. It didn't make him feel footloose and fancy free. His pants got damp and his lunch tasted phony. He kept looking at his pastrami sandwich and trying to connect it with any creature that had ever breathed upon the earth. Something that had walked alive beneath the sky was here in his hand between two slices of rye wrapped in paper. How does that happen.

He started to throw the sandwich away but remembered the way his death would always leave unfinished food for others and so left the bag perched on a garbage can. No point in staying out here really. He headed back up the Bunker Hill steps unsatisfied and scowling. His death now a presence in its absence.

AT HOME THAT EVENING he found no evidence of his death at all except for the day's mail neatly sorted on the coffee table. Bills on top and junkmail on the bottom. Still when he made dinner he set two places. He chewed and swallowed and tasted nothing and watched teevee. He'd taken to watching all kinds of reality shows about people's working lives. Cops and fishermen and mechanics. Around midnight he jerked awake and looked from the flatscreen to see his death beside him on the couch, the remains of dinner on the plate on the coffee table.

Michael watched the teevee light moving on his death's flat doll eyes. He sighed theatrically but of course his death

said nothing. He didn't even look away from the show that engrossed him. Michael leaned back on the couch and tried to watch but it was all just moving pictures on a wall now. He caught himself nodding off and dragged himself to bed but left the teevee on. His death still watching blankeyed in the strobing light with the universal remote near one thin hand. Voices and music and explosions and power tools sang Michael to a fitful sleep.

MORNINGS MICHAEL WOULD SLAP the snooze button and stare at the ceiling and dread getting out of bed. Why get up when you know your death is waiting out there somewhere.

Because you have to pay your rent he'd say out loud. Like some mantra. And bearlike he'd get out of bed and sure as shit his death would be there on the couch working a crossword puzzle, or in the kitchen making a botch of obscenely expensive kona coffee, and Michael would dress with little of his former attention to appearance and stumble unshaven into the gray morning blinking like some disgorged thing. Some plane crash survivor stunned and not yet comprehending his terrible good fortune. In traffic he no longer even got upset at the mercenary competition among the rush hour drivers. The passers in the breakdown lane, single drivers in the diamond lane, lefthand turns from righthand lanes. It all just washed right off him now. He drove as if he were part of his own car. He parked and paid and took the Angel's Flight funicular and gave his ticket and a noncommittal wave to Henry the ticket man and he'd show up at the office often late and dreading the vast unpopulated plain of his working day.

TWO WEEKS AFTER MICHAEL'S death arrived he went out on a date. 🍷