

OLD MAN WAITING

by Robert Reed

Robert Reed tells us that, “for years, I saw a fellow sitting in the public library. He did nothing but sit, seemed to have no interest in books or other people, and his eyes were rather empty. I assumed that he was impaired in some fashion, or he was an alien in disguise. I chose one answer and started a story, and then the story changed on me.” Readers can find out more about the author at www.robertreedwriter.com.

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People say I’m some kind of wild man. They claim I don’t have a Quit button. That once you get me going in any direction, then hold on tight, because it’s going to be the ride of your life.

Now why’s that such a bad thing?

I was downtown with some buddies, hanging out at one of the college bars. At least until one pimply kid said a few words that he shouldn’t have, and the bouncer suggested that I leave. Of course my friends tagged along, since my money was paying for our day. It was late afternoon. We walked up the block, and I spotted this fellow sitting by himself, filling up one end of a long bench, his left leg thrown over the right and his skinny arms crossed and that thin old face wearing an expression that almost fooled me. Almost. But then those big empty eyes glanced my way, just for a second. And I knew. Like that, I could see through him.

We walked past, but I couldn’t let it go. I had to stop and look back, and one of the guys asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Him,” I said.

“That old guy sitting? What about him?”

“He’s not.”

“Not what?”

“What he looks like.”

They’re right, you know. Once I get going, I can’t stop. That’s why I marched up to the bench and sat down, close enough to touch the old boy but careful not to lift a hand. With the others watching, I waited. With me

right next to him, the fellow did nothing. He just pointed his eyes at the side of a bank building, his mouth working now and again, those legs staying crossed and his arms sometimes pulling closer to his chest before relaxing again. He looked like a pile of habits. "But you're not that empty," I said to him when the traffic noise fell off. "I know you're not. I can tell."

My buddies were standing at a safe distance, staring.

"What's going on behind those baby blue eyes?" I asked.

His mouth smacked. His breathing came deep and slow. But he didn't look my way, even on the sly. And I knew for sure that he was playing with me, if you want to know the truth.

One guy called to me. "Benton," he said. "Come on."

None of them would risk coming close.

A cement mixer drove by, neither one of us jumping. Then the roar fell away to a low rumble, and that's when I finally leaned close, saying, "I know what you are. I've got it all figured out."

The fellow didn't blink or change his posture. But he was listening. I could tell that he was waiting for whatever I said next.

"You're an alien," I told him.

Nothing.

"An alien scientist. And this is how you study us. You and your science pals ... you dress up like senile fools and sit in our public places and watch us march past, listening to our talk and smelling our farts too, for all I know."

He breathed again, and his arms tightened.

"Am I right? Huh?" I jumped up and laughed. "If it's not that, it's something else. And I'm going to figure out what."

That's when my buddies had enough. They came over and grabbed me by the arms, pulling me along.

"What'd you say to the poor gent?" somebody asked.

“Something crazy,” another guessed.

“Something stupid,” said a third.

I didn’t answer them. I was too busy watching my newest buddy, and sure enough, all of a sudden those empty eyes turned toward me, something real pushing through the blueness. Behind the eyes, he was intense and very smart, and shrewd too. Maybe even a little angry.

“See?” I said.

But except for me, nobody was paying attention.

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You know how it is? Let somebody inside your head, and suddenly you’re seeing them everywhere.

I know this big blond gal with a dragon tattoo riding her shoulder. She likes to sit at the Zoo Bar, waiting for guys to buy her drinks. And there’s this Hispanic character who’s really thirty but looks like a kid—shaved and barely five feet tall. He’s usually somewhere downtown, riding one of those little bikes that can do tricks. They’re just two of the people that I’ve buddied up with since moving here. But this was the first time I’d put them together. The three of us were standing in the morning shade next to a Greek restaurant. Up the block was an ATM. I was wondering, just to pass the time: How much would it take for me to coax them into a three-way? The blond would want a few bucks, just on principle. But what with that machismo crap, the bike rider would need a pile of bills. How big a pile? I was thinking that through, doing calculations, and that’s when a city bus pulled over and out stepped another one of the familiar downtown faces.

“Either of you know him?” I asked.

“I don’t,” said the blond.

“I see him, sure,” said the biker. “In the afternoons. He likes to sit on the benches.”

“Oh, yeah. That old guy’s a fixture down here,” she added.

“I thought you didn’t know him,” I pointed out.

“I don’t know his name or anything.” She’s big and a little beautiful, but

her brain has been polished smooth by a lot of hard drinking. “But I’ve noticed the guy. That’s all I mean.”

“Where you going, Benton?” the bike rider asked.

“To make a withdrawal,” I announced.

Everybody who knows me knows about my withdrawals. The rumor is that I’m sitting on a giant trust fund, or at least a bank account that doesn’t have any bottom. Ask anyone, they’ll tell you: “When Benton gets cash, something fun is sure to happen.”

Three times, I swiped my card, building up a stack of twenties.

My friends were waiting, all smiles now. But I was watching the old guy moving away from us, shuffling down the block and then vanishing inside the downtown library.

I walked on past my buddies.

“Hey,” they complained.

Stopping, I handed each of them a young twenty. “I’ll be back,” I promised. “Do what you want, but nothing too interesting. Understand?”

They didn’t, but that didn’t stop them from smiling.

The library was going to be trouble. Stepping inside, the first thing I did was look at the guard’s desk, finding it empty. Which was good news. The next success was spotting the old man right away. He was sitting behind a little table, facing one of the windows that looked out over the sidewalk. A couple librarians recognized me, but they didn’t matter: As a rule, librarians are about as dangerous as the chairs they sit on.

I pulled up a free chair next to the old man.

Sitting, I plopped down my stack of twenties. “Admit what you are,” I said, “and this money’s yours.”

Weeks had passed since our last meeting, but very little about the fellow had changed, including his clothes. He liked white shirts and dark dress trousers, but no belt. And his white socks were slipped inside old leather shoes that looked too beaten up to be comfortable anymore.

If either eye looked at the money, I didn't see it.

So I lifted the stack, wagging it in front of his face.

Except for closing his eyes and sighing, nothing happened.

"Okay," I said. "You're not an alien scientist. I guessed wrong. Instead, I'm thinking you're from the future. A thousand years from today, and you've come back to watch your ancestors do important, historic deeds."

But then again, the view from the window was pretty boring. An empty bus rolled by. Sparrows pecked at dead crap. Then a couple fat secretaries trudged by, hunting for their morning coffee.

"You're from the future," I pressed. "Am I right?"

The blue eyes were growing wetter, but not enough to tear.

"I'm just curious," I promised. "Really, I just want the truth."

A voice behind me said, "Sir."

I turned, discovering that the library had made at least one recent personnel change. The new security guard was a young guy with short hair and the super-serious manner of a kid who wanted nothing but to grow up to be some kind of cop. He looked powerful, full of importance. Even his uniform, clean and pressed, gave off a loud "don't-shit-with-me" message.

"Sir," he said. "I can call the police, or you can leave right now."

"I know, I'm leaving," I told him.

Then the kid noticed my money. "Who does that belong to?"

Was it mine or the old man's, he meant.

I saw how this would play out. I'd say it was mine, and he wouldn't believe me. And that's when the cops would be called in. This kid was hungry for action, and saving some helpless senior citizen from being robbed seemed like a delicious bit of heroism. So I just handed the stack to the kid. "I found the money sitting on the table," I said, putting an end to his fun. "Maybe it belongs to this gentleman, and maybe not. I guess you'll have to figure that out for yourself."

More than a thousand dollars lay in those big young hands.

Outside again, I stopped next to the window and watched the comedy unfold. The kid was trying to talk to the old man, asking questions that weren't being answered, and all the while he was trying to figure out which pocket could have been a home for that much cash. Then one of the librarians made his appearance, dispensing little nuggets of advice. He pointed to the old guy's skull and offered words that looked sad and sorry. Then the librarian glanced my way, and with a grim sneer, he said a few more words.

The kid nodded while shooting me his best withering stare.

And all that while, the old guy was looking out the window with an expression that never changed. Except no matter how empty they seemed, those eyes always managed to point my way.

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I couldn't give him up. Not for anything.

But I didn't want to just track the old guy around town either. I had a life to enjoy, and I didn't want the aggravation. So what I did ... I put all my friends and their various buddies on the payroll. I was offering tens and twenties for reports about the fellow's wanderings and habits. And over those next weeks, I managed to learn quite a lot about my subject's movements.

Six days a week, he rode the Bleaker Avenue bus to the Thirteenth Street corner.

Every morning, he walked the same route to the library and sat beside the same window for exactly three hours. He never opened a book or magazine or even spoke to anybody. Then he picked himself up and walked two blocks to the old Heartland restaurant where the waitress always brought him the same dish—meatloaf and peas and mashed potatoes—and he ate about half of everything before giving up and walking out again.

"He doesn't pay," the big blond told me. "Doesn't even leave a tip."

"But the people working there ... they don't seem to mind," said her new boyfriend. The little Hispanic guy and the blond had made themselves

some good money working together, and what do you know, they'd discovered that they liked doing it for free too?

"It's mind control," I suggested. "Whatever that creature is, it convinces people that they've been paid, even when they haven't been."

"Except he's not a creature." One of the guys with me that first time I saw my nemesis was sitting with us. The four of us were sharing a table in the Zoo Bar, trading notes. "No, Benton, no. The poor guy's exactly what he seems to be. A senile old fart."

"You haven't looked inside him," I pointed out. "Not like I have."

"Hey, dude. I'm the one tracking that bastard around town. Not you. So how come you think you can see things I don't?"

"It's the little things I notice."

"Yeah?"

"And that's true with all kinds of people," I told him, and everybody else too.

Nobody was agreeing with me. Just by looking, I could tell they didn't believe me. So I threw out a challenge. Five twenties set between two empty beer bottles. "Each of you, point to one person. Pick some customer. Make it somebody you don't know and I don't know either, and I'll look them over for five seconds and then tell you something interesting."

The smart-mouthed guy, thinking of himself as being good-looking, pointed to the best-looking woman in the place.

"She's a dyke," I said. Pointblank.

"Well, I know that," he lied. "What else?"

I didn't have to look at her again. "She's been through college. Definitely. And I think she works as a nurse or a paramedic. Something medical, with odd hours."

He started to stand, ready to check out my story.

"And another thing," I added. "There's a gun in her purse."

That made him pause. Then he nodded and took a deep breath and walked up to the bar, buying a round for him and his new lady friend. The two kids chatted amiably for a few minutes, my buddy waiting until the end to ask his big question. I could see her saying the words, "How did you know?" Then he came crawling back to our table, telling me, "Lucky guess about the pistol."

The blond already had her subject picked. "See that sad man in the back ... can you tell me why he's sad...?"

I'd already given the fellow a good study. "Somebody died," I ventured.

"Who?"

"His wife."

"And how would you know that?"

"Watch. He's talking to her every now and then. And he's angry about something." With a shrug, I added, "One spouse usually gets pissed when the mate dies. 'How can you leave me with these bills? With this loneliness? Why did you abandon me like this?'"

The blond shrank down in her chair. "Okay, I believe you. I don't want to bother the gentleman..."

Now it was her boyfriend's turn. The little bike rider gave me a wide smile, and staring over my shoulder, looking at the front door, said, "I have somebody for you. She's walking through the door now."

The others felt encouraged. They sat up straighter, trading little glances.

I glanced back and then stared straight ahead again.

"She's looking for somebody," I reported.

They asked, "Who?"

"Me," I said. "She wants to talk to me."

The skinny middle-aged woman came up from behind, and after a deep breath, she said, "Are you Mr. Benton? We need to talk."

I pocketed my twenties, stood, and showed my guest to a private booth.

* * * *

“Before the Alzheimer’s struck, my father was a genius.”

She had his blue eyes and the same bony long face.

“He was a tenured professor with an international reputation,” she continued. “A scientist who did important work that helped thousands of people. And then a few years ago, his mind started to leave him.”

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“I want you to leave my father alone.”

“I never go near the man,” I replied.

“But your friends do,” she countered. “I’ve heard stories. A librarian who knew Dad when he was well ... he says that two or three of your little helpers are always hanging around the library...”

“If he’s so sick, why’s he go to the library?”

“Because he loves books,” she said. “Even if he can’t read them, he enjoys being surrounded by them.”

“You know this, do you?”

She didn’t answer me. Instead, she said, “Where he eats lunch, I have an account ... the waitress who serves him just told me that one of your people stole his leftovers yesterday...”

“I wanted to see your dad’s bite marks,” I said. “I’m working on a hypothesis.”

Her long face colored.

“If your dad’s so sick, why’s he running free?”

“He does well enough. If people leave him alone, he can fill up his day without harming anyone.”

Unlike you, she meant.

“Here’s the thing, lady.” I made sure her blues were fixed on me. “I can see something inside that old guy. Not always, and it’s hard to spot. But believe me, he’s just pretending to be sick and stupid.”

Her reaction was abrupt, powerful. Despite her suspicions about me, she had to smile. A face that was very much like the old man’s suddenly lit up, and she started asking, “Do you mean that?”

But then she remembered why she was there and closed her mouth.

“Why the smile?” I asked her.

She hadn’t known that she was grinning. But once caught, she admitted, “There’s a special program. A research project. And my father’s part of it.”

Now this was interesting. “What kind of project?”

“An experimental drug that might reverse Alzheimer’s.”

“And your dad’s getting it, is he?”

With a strained hope, she said, “Maybe. But it’s a double-blind study. Half of the participants are getting sugar pills.”

“Now that sounds cruel,” I decided.

After a moment’s reflection, she had to agree with me.

“Here’s what I think,” I continued. “My present theory is that this thing you call your father isn’t. What it is ... it’s a projection from a higher dimension, sent into our little three-D world on some kind of field trip...”

If she’d had a pistol in her purse, she would have shot me. But instead of bullets, she used her angriest, most dangerous voice. “You are very ill,” she informed me. “I don’t know what kind of sickness it is, and frankly, I can’t make myself care. But from this minute on, Mr. Benton, you and your tag-along friends are going to stay away from my father!”

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A month passed, then another.

The old man halfway wandered out of my crosshairs. But that wasn't because of anybody's screaming threats. Other subjects had taken over my head, that's all. I got interested in a pack of little people, plus some very big ones. Preparations had to be made, personalities mixed and matched. And then came the kinds of fun that everybody else in the world sees as nothing but wild-ass mayhem.

When I happened to notice the old man, it was just in passing. Our paths would intersect, and there he would be—keeping to his schedule, always wearing the white shirt and dark trousers. I might give him a hard look or two before walking away, and when he didn't think I was watching, he'd turn, throwing those vacant eyes in my general direction. I could feel the eyes, just for a second, just taking his measure of me.

I always intended to return to him, but didn't.

Then came a rainy fall morning. I was walking alone, passing the library on my way to the ATM, and this face that I'd never seen before suddenly appeared next to me. The face belonged to a man in his middle forties—a prosperous soul wearing a good suit and polished shoes and the grimmest little mouth. “Do you know who I am?” he asked.

I didn't.

“My wife didn't mention me?”

That whittled the list of candidates down to four, maybe five.

The angry husband glared at me. Then he let his eyes lift, giving a nod to people standing behind me.

Too late, I tried to run.

A couple big boys grabbed me up and dragged me into the alley. I recognized one of them, although I couldn't tell you how that kid and the fellow in the suit got together. Really, if you think about it, nothing's more amazing than the ways lives cross over with each other, tying the world into one fat knot.

The kid that I knew started to cuss me out.

His buddy was even bigger and maybe twice as strong, and he didn't

talk much. Judging by my experience, I'd guess that I wasn't the first person that he'd beaten senseless, either.

When the pummeling quit, the angry husband got down low. "Leave my wife alone," he told me. "Understand?"

Spitting blood, I asked, "Which wife is yours?"

He heard that as an insult, even when it wasn't. Really, I was just curious, that's all. But he pulled a tire iron out from behind a dumpster, holding it in both hands. Unlike the hired muscle, the suit-man didn't have experience in measured brutality. He stood over me for a long moment, trying to figure what he could break without actually killing me.

Then the bigger kid suddenly turned and ran off.

And the smaller one grabbed at the tire iron, saying, "Stop, somebody's coming...!"

Steel fell on old bricks, and the ringing sound lasted for what felt like days inside my soggy head. Twice I tried to stand, and couldn't. Then I noticed a pair of worn-out loafers and white socks and good trousers worn thin at the cuffs. The old man was standing in the alley, in the cold rain. His face looked as lost as ever, but somebody—himself or maybe his daughter—had taken the trouble to dress him up in an old yellow raincoat.

After a couple minutes, he sat on the bricks beside me.

Busted ribs made breathing tough work. And I had to fight just to find enough air to say, "Hello."

Now those baby blue eyes changed. And with them, a face that had never shown any trace of emotion suddenly broke into a wide bright smile.

People's voices usually match their faces and their souls. Suddenly I heard a professor's clear voice, smooth and practiced, every word seemingly thought out ahead of time.

"I have been gone for a very long while," he told me. "But the wait is over now."

"Is it?" I managed.

The eyes, like polished gems, casually studied the gore on my face.

“You’re mistaken, of course. I’m not an alien researcher, or a time traveler, or any of these other exotic entities that you have suggested.”

“No?”

“But I have watched you, sir. And I have listened carefully to everything that my daughter says about you. I have considered your oddness, and your endless money, and how easily you seem able to manipulate others. And from everything that I have learned, I have decided that you might well be.”

“Might be what?”

“Something more than a simple, unalloyed human.” The laugh was boyish, loud and joyful. “Perhaps you are an extraterrestrial researcher or some higher-dimensional agent. Honestly, your precise origin doesn’t particularly matter to me. What counts is your conduct during your existence on my world. An existence that from my point of view looks unprofessional and rather sad, too. Honestly, sir, you injure every serious researcher with this childish, unfocused chaos of yours...”

For the first time in my life, I was speechless.

“Rest,” the old man advised. “Let your body heal. And when you are whole, come find me.” The bony face had a lovely smile. “Think of the studies we could design, my friend ... if your talents and my experimental proficiency can work together ... plying the depths of the human animal...”