FORGOTTEN

My name is Tim Simons, and I am the restaurant manager at the Applebee’s on Veterans Blvd. in Springfield, IL.

My wife’s name is Karen, and we have twin boys -- age 9 -- named Riley and Ryan. The only way to really tell the boys apart is when they smile, because Ryan has deeper dimples.

I wouldn’t have any major complaints about my thirty-eight years so far on this planet, except for one, bizarre, re-occurring nightmare.

I have this same eerie dream about three nights a week, with little variation. Karen and I have discussed it, and I have even read several detailed articles on-line about dream analysis and dream symbolism. They basically pointed to some kind of repressed desire or occurrence in my past. But when I tell you the details of the dream, you’ll see why I reject that theory.

Here’s the dream: I am in a strange city with two men I don’t recognize, but apparently we are friends of some sort. The city has modern skyscrapers, and appears more American than European. There is a huge, old suspension bridge with two tall stone towers holding up blue-painted steel girders and cables. I and the two men roam the city, always looking for homes to gently break into when we notice that the owners are gone. We are in desperate need of somewhere to hide, rather than trying to steal or vandalize anything. We always carefully and quietly leave just as the home owners are returning, so they never suspect a break-in. The three of us are on the run from the law. Why? Because we killed someone. We keep telling each other to be sure and keep our crime a strict secret among ourselves, because nobody else saw us do the murder and hence we will never get caught unless one of us talks.

This dream has disturbed me to such an extent that often I regretfully wake Karen up with my anguished sleep moanings, and sometimes my pajamas are soaked with sweat by morning from panic.

You need to know that by nature I am a peaceful, non-violent, non-aggressive kind of guy. We have no firearms in our home. My wife and I have made sure that our boys are not bullies at school, that they fight only as a last resort in self-defense, and that they play sports fairly. We also restrict violent video games and similar bloody movies in our house.

So why would I have this frightful nightmare again and again about murdering someone? I even thought about seeing a psychiatrist, but I was leery about the cost, and also paranoid that my co-workers and Corporate Applebee’s might somehow find out, and that I would be pressured to quit my manager job on suspicions of mental illness.

One day after work, I was watching the evening news while Karen was getting dinner ready and the boys were setting the table. A story was aired about a terrible school bus crash on a bridge over the Ohio River in Cincinnati. A truck loaded with cinder blocks had lost control and had drifted over into the oncoming lane, striking the school bus head on. Both drivers were killed, and fourteen students were seriously injured, the reporter noted. The video showed the crumpled wrecks and the flashing police car lights and the paramedics loading the injured kids on stretchers into several ambulances.

But then the video switched to aerial footage taken by a local news helicopter. It showed the bridge in its entirety, with the crash scene located close to the Kentucky side of the river.

I was shocked to see that it appeared to be the same bridge from my re-occurring nightmare!

I kept my surprise and bewilderment strictly to myself, however, for the time being, as the family sat down to enjoy Karen’s early autumn meal of chili, cornbread, and fruit salad. But I made a mental note to investigate as much information on the Cincinnati bridge as I could when I went to work the next day.

Using my office computer at Applebee’s, I discovered on the internet that the bridge was called the John A. Roebling Suspension Bridge. At the time it was completed in 1866, it was the world’s longest suspension bridge, with a 1057’ main span. Roebling was best remembered as the designer of the Brooklyn Bridge, which was completed by his son, Washington, in 1883 after John died of an infected foot injury fourteen years earlier.

My next step in hopefully solving my dream mystery was to go to Cincinnati in person. Maybe seeing the bridge up close would provide me with some clues. I was still reluctant to share my theory with Karen, so regretfully I fibbed and told her that I needed to take a three-day weekend and drive the four and a half hours from Springfield to Cincinnati to help train a new Applebee’s manager there. She gave me the green light, so I kissed her and the boys goodbye on the upcoming Friday morning and jumped into my Honda Accord and took off. I stopped for coffee and a needed leg-stretch in Indianapolis, then continued east on I-74.

I got my first look at the massive and imposing bridge structure as I approached the Ohio River from the Covington, KY side. I was certain that it was the same bridge from my dream! Crossing into Cincinnati, I tried to recognize the skyline buildings from my dream, but couldn’t. I drove around the city randomly for about an hour, but nothing looked familiar. Having never been here before, I eventually decided to have lunch at their famous Zoo and think about my next moves. I remembered that “Martha”, the world’s last surviving passenger pigeon, had died at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914, and that they had a special exhibit to her there.

The Zoo had a replica of Martha in her cage, because the actual now extinct bird was at the Smithsonian in Washington. She was quite beautiful, but the exhibit was also crushingly sad -- as the reality of a permanent species extinction hit the many visitors, mostly families with children.

By now, it was just past one o’clock, and time to find a hot dog stand for a bite to eat. Suddenly, I heard a voice.

“Jesus Christ, Tim, I told you never to come back here,” the man hissed. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Sorry, but are you talking to me?” I replied, startled. “You must have me confused with somebody else.” The man was around my age, with aviator sunglasses, medium-length brown hair, and a drooping mustache. He was wearing a light beige jacket over a navy polo shirt, and appeared to be with his wife and son who were still reading about Martha at the bird’s display a short distance away.

“Look Tim, it’s me, Hank Barnes. We were best friends about fifteen years ago, right here in town. Don’t you remember?”

I looked carefully into his brown eyes after he removed his sunglasses. “Gee, I’m sorry pal, but I don’t know you at all.”

“But I know you, Tim Simons. Maybe you had some kind of amnesia or a nervous breakdown after the incident. Look, we need to talk, but not here with my wife and kid. Can you meet me at the Starbucks at Union Terminal, the old Cincinnati railroad station near the river, tomorrow around 10 a.m.? Do you remember where that is?”

“I’ll find it. Alright, tomorrow then,” I agreed, after a moment’s cautious hesitation.

Hank slipped out with his family. I was surprised and baffled, and sat down to think. Who was this stranger and – more importantly -- how did he know my name?

In a half-daze, I found a hot dog spot and ate mechanically. Then I left the Zoo to find a modest motel and a map to help me locate Union Terminal. I had a free dinner at the Applebee’s on Crookshank Road (one of six in the metro area) and chatted with the manager there for an hour. Later, at the Days Inn, I went to sleep but had my nightmare again. This time, however, the mysterious Hank Barnes was one of the characters!

Union Terminal had been skillfully converted into a well-regarded city museum center. I found the Starbucks with no difficulty, and there sat Hank Barnes, looking uneasy. He got up and we got in line and ordered our drinks and sat down again, this time in a far corner away from everyone else.

“Thanks for coming, Tim. You look great. I can see by your wedding ring that you’re married. Got any kids? Where are you working and living now?” he asked.

Something in his sincere manner made me trust him, so I brought him up to speed on my life.

“Like I said yesterday, I can only guess that you have amnesia or something, triggered by what we did fifteen years ago,” Hank offered, sipping his machiatto.

“Exactly what happened fifteen years ago?” I asked, puzzled. “I still don’t recognize you, or understand what this is all about.”

Hank looked around carefully, then lowered his voice. “Does the name Karl Levin ring a bell? You, me, and Karl were best buddies here in Cincinnati, back then. Something terrible happened, really terrible.” Hank’s eyes got tearful and his facial expression sank. “An illegal from Mexico named Salvador Menendez came up from Louisville and busted into my house when I was working at the tire factory, looking for stuff to steal and hock to get cash and then buy drugs. The burglary went bad when my wife and daughter came home before he was done robbing us. He panicked and killed them both. Switchblade knife. Arlene was only three years old. Carla and I had been married only four years.” Hank paused and looked off into space, averting his eyes from mine. He sighed a long, painful sigh.

“Well, the piece of shit was caught and went to trial. The police told me he had a rap sheet a mile long, and that he was a real bad hombre that they wanted behind bars forever. He had actually even been deported several times back to Mexico, but he kept finding his way back -- you know, different cities, different aliases. But he always managed to skirt justice by accepting only young, liberal, court-appointed lawyers who screamed racial discrimination and the usual bullshit. Bottom line: the motherf\*cker killed my family and got off the double murder charge on a technicality. It was unreal, totally unbelievable! I sat in that courtroom and watched him. He gave me a smirking, ‘screwed you, pal’ look. The judge gave the monster a year for the break-in and his priors, but the dirtbag got out in ten months. The newspapers followed the whole story with outrage and disgust. My life was shattered. I quit my job. That’s where you and Karl came in.”

Needless to say, I sat there stunned. Not knowing what else to say, I told him how sorry I was for his horrifying, tragic loss. I paused for a moment, looking down at my coffee cup. Then I made the snap decision to tell him about my re-occurring dream and why I happened to be in the city.

“Makes sense, Tim. The nightmares, the amnesia. Let me continue to refresh your memory,” Hank resumed. “Karl, you, and me decided to settle the score our own way. I could not be directly involved, because the whole town and every cop in the city knew I wanted to kill Menendez, and that I would be the prime suspect. So we came up with a plan. We followed Menendez in secret for several weeks, to see where he went and what he did. We finally narrowed his hang-out to a rural bar called Marcela’s out on Loveland Road near Twightwee, right off the Little Miami River. We picked a moonless night to kill him. We waited until he exited Marcela’s alone, drunk, around 2 a.m. I got his attention and distracted him. I wanted him to see my face before he died. He started laughing when he spied me. “What the f\*ck do you want?” he said, as he staggered. You and Karl came out of the shadows and smashed him in the head as he went for a straight razor in his coat pocket. You had a crowbar, and Karl had an old wooden baseball bat. You both turned his smartass smirk into pulp. We rolled up his body in a ragged blanket and both of you carefully lifted it into the nearby woods by the bar’s gravel parking lot where I stood watch. You quickly covered the body with leaves and brush and quietly returned and we three left without anyone seeing us. We drove to Covington over the Roebling Bridge. Driving slowly, with no other cars around us, we tossed the crowbar and the baseball bat off the bridge -- after wiping any fingerprints off -- into the Ohio. We turned around in Kentucky and went back across the river over a different bridge to Route 50, River Road. We stopped and made a vow that we would completely trust each other as best friends and never to tell anyone what had happened that night. We also decided that you and Karl should quit your jobs by the end of the month and leave town and never come back. We promised never to see each other again. Ever. That’s why I was shocked when I saw you again at the Zoo yesterday.” Hank stopped, then got up to use the restroom. “I’ll be right back.”

Hank returned and continued. “You know that I have since remarried. I learned that our best friend Karl was killed in car accident while driving drunk eight years ago in Toledo. I hadn’t seen him since that night on River Road. I found out too late to go to his funeral. Anyway, Menendez’s body was found by the police about ten days after he was killed in Marcela’s parking lot. Two sets of footprints were detected in the woods leading to and from the body. His wallet was missing, so the cops assumed that he was fatally mugged. Since we never took his wallet, someone else must have secretly taken it for the money and tossed it somewhere before the police found the body. Naturally, I was brought in for questioning as expected, as a prime murder suspect with real motivation. I was even given a lie detector test, but passed. ‘No, I absolutely did not kill Menendez,’ I calmly swore. Plus, I had a plausible alibi on the night of the murder -- which I, of course, carefully concocted. So the case was left officially ‘unsolved’ for these past fifteen years. With Karl gone, only you and I know what really happened.”

To say that this whole story amazed, baffled, and deeply disturbed me would be the understatement of the century. My head was spinning. Was it all true? Could I have done such a drastic deed for a best friend? Did I actually commit murder, the ultimate evil? I was only 23 years old at that time. The entire episode with Hank felt completely unreal, like watching a movie.

Hank and I got up and walked out to our cars in silence after we were done. He walked me to my Honda, then suddenly -- as we were shaking hands -- he pulled me toward him for a long brotherly hug.

“So now you know and now I bet you’ll remember again someday soon. I feel terrible for both of us. I pray every day that our lives haven’t been destroyed by what occurred back then. But we three seriously decided that it had to be done. I believed it then and I still believe it now. You seem to be doing O.K. in Springfield, with a nice job and a good family. I too picked up the pieces and am doing pretty well. I love my second wife and son, and my job pays the bills. But we should never meet again in this world, just in case. Agreed? Like it all never happened. Well, I guess that’s about it…Goodbye, Tim.”

Hank Barnes turned and walked away towards his car. I never saw him again. That night at the Days Inn, my nightmare was missing as I plunged into an unusually dark and deep sleep. On Sunday morning after breakfast, I drove the 322 miles home, my mind spinning. My main concern now focused on just one question: should I tell my wife?

When I told Karen about my lie about training a new Applebee’s manager in Cincinnati and why I had really gone there and what had happened with Hank, she stared at me with stunned disbelief for a moment, then hugged me hard and kissed me and said, “It’s O.K. honey, no one will ever know but us. I think I understand why you had to do it. But promise me one thing: that you’ll never tell the boys. They must never know. I love you, Tim. You are the best husband and father that I could ever wish for. But please, please let’s never bring it up again.”

For the next six months, the dreaded reoccurring dream was forgotten. It had vanished and it never came back. But something else replaced it.

Guilt.

Guilt for helping kill another human being, even one who assuredly deserved it. Karen had forgiven me, but I had not forgiven myself. I was torn. Oddly, I vaguely recalled the theme of the Russian novel “Crime and Punishment,” which I had been forced to read in high school. A criminal secretly desires to confess his crime, after killing his landlady with an ax, to relieve the torturous, agonizing burden on his soul. I finally understood. I shared my thoughts with my wife one night when we were lying in bed.

“Karen, I’m really sorry, but have to go back and confess to the Cincinnati police,” I said with finality.

“Oh God, Tim, are you positive? What will happen to me and the twins if you have to go to prison?” she pleaded in shock.

“I’m sure it has to be done, sweetheart. There is nowhere else to go and nothing else to do. I can’t run from this anymore. Forgive me, my love. I’m so sorry. Please pray for me,” I begged, and started crying.

I took a few days off of work, putting my assistant manager, Zoe, in charge of the restaurant. I decided that I would go to the police and confess, but leave Hank completely out of the narrative. I owed it to him, just like I did fifteen years ago.

I met homicide detective Frank Tanner in his office at police headquarters in downtown Cincinnati on a Tuesday morning. He rose from his desk when we shook hands across it. He was not particularly tall, and he had thinning brown hair combed straight back. He was also about thirty pounds overweight but seemed solid rather than flabby, and I noticed that he was an unfiltered Camel cigarette smoker by the rumpled pack on his desk. His shirt collar and tie were loosed, and his brown suit jacket was hanging on a coat rack in the corner. I noted that he wore dark suspenders and had a wedding ring. He had me close his office door behind me for added privacy, then buzzed his secretary, instructing her to hold all calls.

“I’ve been doing this crazy job for over thirty-seven years, Mr. Simons, and I’ve never heard a story like what you just told me. Never,” Tanner said after I selectively poured out my soul’s confession for about a half-hour, my heart pounding. He coughed, then reached for his pack of Camels, knocked one out, and lit it. “Let me get the Menendez file. I’ll be right back. Can I get you some water, or a Pepsi?” I declined, even though my mouth was bone dry. I felt increasingly nervous and disoriented, having never been in a police headquarters before. I stared out the office window after he left the room.

When Tanner returned, he sat back down in his worn office chair. “Jesus, this Salvador guy was a real piece of work. Look at this file, for Christ’s sake!” He opened the file and glanced at the first few pages. “The son of a bitch ditched a double murder rap. I remember that case too. It was a big story all over Cincy. And this is the one you are telling me about now? Detective Alvarez investigated that one. Yeah… Menendez killed that poor Barnes mother and daughter over basically nothing.” Tanner flipped through more of the file’s pages. “In and out of prison. In and out of the country. Drug dealing. Narcotics possession. Stabbed a man to death during a bar fight. Armed robbery of a gas station. Breaking and entering. Assault and battery. Two charges of rape. Grand theft auto. Receiving stolen property. It just keeps going…”

I sat there silently, looking down at the floor. I heard the wall clock ticking, it was so quiet in the room. Then the detective coughed again.

“So you’re telling me that you killed Menendez fifteen years ago with another guy who died eight years ago? And that your motive was universal justice for a criminal who killed two people and got off scott-free? Look, Mr. Simons, I just don’t believe you are the kind of man to do such a thing. I know the type, and you simply don’t fit the bill. I think you either imagined it or dreamed it up with those weird nightmares of yours.” Tanner took a swig of cold coffee from his desk mug, then leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Look, my friend…I’m headed for retirement from this crazy job in less than four months. December 31 and it’s adios amigos. My advice to you is: forget what you just told me. Our discussion or your confession or whatever you want to call it never happened. You did what you had to do, you claim. Fine. Now I’m doing what I have to do. This Menendez murder case still stands officially unsolved.” Tanner slammed the file shut. “Frankly, I don’t think it ever WILL be solved. But that’s alright, because the world is a better place without the likes of him and a lot of others like him. He gave the good Hispanics in this town a bad name. But I’m speaking off the record, you understand.” He put down his coffee mug and lit yet another Camel. His ashtray was overflowing with butts. “Mr. Simons, I think we are done here, so, um, thanks for stopping by, and I wish you well. Take it easy and have a safe drive back to Springfield.”

Detective Tanner rose from his chair with some effort and walked around his desk to meet me and offered his hand for a second time. I shook it and turned towards his office door, but he held on to my hand a moment longer and then tugged me unexpectedly towards him.

Looking me directly in the eye, our faces close enough for me to smell his tobacco breath, he said with chilling seriousness, “Oh, one last thing, Tim. You know it’s wrong to take the law into one’s own hands, right? Just sayin.’ It ain’t the Wild West anymore, ya know? It sets a bad precedent for the community. Opens up a whole new can of worms. You know what I mean.” Then he slightly grunted and released my hand and slightly squeezed my shoulder -- all in one swift motion. “So long, Mr. Simons…”

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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