

They Are Following Me

by H. W. Moss

Warren glanced in the rear view mirror and was certain he was still being followed. The black Chevrolet two cars behind, wasn't that the same one he saw parked at the intersection near his house? He couldn't be absolutely certain, but he wanted to be absolutely certain so he took a right turn at the next light and began to circle the block. The Chevy followed through the first turn. However, when he made a second right at the light, it broke off and continued down Sansome Street.

Instead of denying his suspicions and admitting they were a figment of his imagination, Warren thought, "My move was too obvious. Anyone worth his salt as an undercover op can spot the circling trick by turn two. The fact I shook him means nothing. If not him, someone else will pick up my trail at the grocery store or after work. Or at work. Who knows? It could be anyone on the faculty who makes extra cash moonlighting for Workman's Comp."

Because Warren knew, he was certain, his Workers Compensation disability claim was the basis for the continuing clandestine surveillance even if his attorney swore they were not watching him.

Nearly two years ago Warren broke his ankle quite badly in a fall off a short ladder in the halls at the high school while taking down decorations after Thanksgiving. Warren was not a teacher, had barely managed to receive his own high school diploma, but he was a reliable worker who put in 17 years of service before the accident.

It was a simple chance event that should never have occurred. Warren leaned away from the vertical and the ladder began to tilt on its side. He dropped the construction

paper ringlets and gripped the sides of the ladder firmly in an attempt to straighten.

Trouble was, he was too far over, had little chance at recovering his balance. He clearly remembered thinking he needed to land with both feet firmly planted at exactly the same time if he did not want to get injured.

He leaped away from the falling treads and braced himself. He stayed righted in the air and for an instant it looked as if one leg was going to land safely inside and one outside the V created by the two upright sides. That hope vanished when, just at the last second, the sole of his boot caught the metal center brace which caused the foot to bend slightly. With the full weight of his body to drive the impact, his foot rolled at a terribly wrong angle away from where it met the lower leg bones. He distinctly heard the sickening sound of celery crunching.

The ankle was shattered. After the operation, Dr. Zelcrow succinctly summed up what it looked like inside: “Bummer.” The doctor explained why he had to make two incisions, one on each side of Warren’s leg.

“You broke the medial and lateral malleolus off the fibula and tibia, destroyed the layer of cartilage that separates the top of the foot with both bones and snapped a tendon right in half.”

The doctor went on to describe why and how the ligaments tore the tips off the bones rather than ripping away and leaving the bones intact. “Your job requires you to be physically fit and I bet you ride a bike. Therefore, the ligaments were strongly attached. In most cases the ligament tears away. Not in your case,” Zelcrow said with a beatific, even wistful, smile. Obviously, he did not receive such challenges often. He added how pleased he was with the outcome of the operation, even if it meant altering some of the

original internal construction of Warren's right leg. "Once I got in there I could see the calcaneus was intact, no problem, but the ligaments were still attached and that's what I had to screw back in place." He made a motion with his hand like he was turning a screw driver. "Plus I had to sew the tendon back together and reroute it below the Groove for Peroneus longus. That was a lot of fun."

For him, maybe, Warren thought ruefully as he listened to the litany while lying on his back. His leg rested on a raised bend in the bed and a large pillow.

One week in the hospital, two months of confinement at home all done in a leg cast that rose to his knee and would not be removed until June. And the pain was almost unbearable. He was given a choice of medications when his cousin suggested Talwin. The drug was a flesh colored pink pill and it took a while for its effects to take hold, but when it did it did a nice job of taking the edge off.

He got good at using his crutches. But whenever someone complimented him on his agility and speed, Warren's reply was, "This is not something I want to do well. I intend to walk again."

When that day finally arrived and the cast was removed, his calf muscles had atrophied. There was a noticeable difference in size between the two legs. He required physical therapy to walk, frequent hot tub immersions and massages to break up the scar tissue. He had a minor operation to remove one of the two screws that held the bones in place, but the other screw would remain.

Nearly a year after the accident, he completed the regime and was not limping too badly when he was finally evaluated by a physician for any permanent loss that might have occurred.

“Ninety-five percent,” the doctor said after Warren finished a series of foot bending and leg standing exercises.

“What’s that mean?” he inquired after pulling on his pants.

“Means you may have five percent loss, but that’s about it. Looks real good to me, might eventually turn out to only be three or four percent loss.”

Later on, his attorney explained the meaning of the exam. “The percentage loss has a direct effect on the amount of compensation you may receive,” she said. “The less loss of mobility, the less they have to pay. Your evaluation equals,” the woman paused to check a chart, “about ten thousand dollars. Of which I take a third. How’s that sound?” She asked this brightly, as if it was a wonderful thing that Warren had come into money and that she would be paid well for the two meetings of five minutes duration she had with him in her office.

He did not know quite how to react. He was receiving a disability check equal to 75 percent of his regular pay which meant he and Janine were doing better than just scraping by, what with her check from the orthodontist where she answered phones and set up appointments.

“What about continuing treatment?” he asked shyly.

“Oh, that comes to an end when they pay you off. Doctor says the operation was a success and you won’t have much in the way of any lingering effects.”

“But it doesn’t feel that good,” he complained. “The leg still bothers me. It’s as if I have this weight dragging on it all the time, like I can’t do what I used to do, don’t walk well, certainly can’t run. And I limp.”

The attorney was sympathetic, but stern. “Well, maybe we can get them to continue therapy for another month or two, but that’s about it. I mean, you have been evaluated as nearly fully recovered. Yet you disagree with that analysis?”

Warren felt he was being painted into a corner. His attorney supposedly specialized in Workers Comp cases and knew the law as well as the system. Warren was on uncertain ground, but he maintained his position.

“It still hurts,” he complained. “What do I do if it still hurts? I mean, I can barely swing a mop in my kitchen, it hurts so bad. How they expect me to mop the halls?”

“Oh, I’m sure that will go away, the pain.” She did not sound all that sympathetic as she used her pen to tap the clock prominently displayed on her desk. “Gotta go. Appointment with a new client. Be in touch, okay?”

He shuffled out and gave the male receptionist a nod of farewell, but the man did not respond.

When the notice of final disposition arrived, Warren refused to sign it. He read it so many times he practically memorized the document which said, basically, his disability insurance payments were over, he was being offered a lump sum to settle all and any future claims and he was fit to return to full time work.

He did not believe that. He called his lawyer.

“Look,” he began when she finally picked up the receiver and identified herself. “I need to get an extension on this disability insurance. I can’t go back to work right now. It’s just too painful. Plus I need therapy. I can barely walk without crutches and the ankle is swollen, it hurts all the time and throbs at night. The doctor who said I’m healed is just plain wrong. It’s not ninety-five percent, it’s more like fifty percent healed.”

There was silence on her end when he finished speaking. Then she said with resignation in her voice, “I’ll see what I can do.” The phone went dead.

His disability payments were extended six months and he was not forced to return to work for at least that long. He thought that might be enough time, except that shortly after receiving this extended benefits package he began noticing odd moments of intense scrutiny. He knew the old wives’ tale that if you stared at the back of someone’s head long enough they could feel it and would turn around.

Warren did not believe the tale, but the feeling he was being watched crept up on him. He could not go anywhere outside the condo without being overcome with the anxiety that others, maybe many others, were observing his every move. He could not turn his body fast, so he began turning his head quickly when he thought he was being watched. A week went by before Janine remarked on this.

“Warren, honey, you’ve developed a twitch. Did you know that? Reminds me of the jumps my brother had when he got back from Iraq.”

Warren did not deny the accusation. But what could he tell her by way of explanation?

He was on his way to the supermarket on Geary and Fillmore, but his unease did not abate just because the Chevrolet continued past him. He kept looking over his shoulder at vehicles in the lane next to him, scrutinizing drivers to see if they were taking an exaggerated interest in him. His eyes frequently left the road in front to focus on the rear view mirror as he tried to spot any other clandestine operative.

He did the grocery shopping while Janine was at work. It became his habit to use a single crutch on his right side, but he tried to walk on the foot as much as possible in

order to build up strength. This meant he did not always use the crutch. He often hopped with the foot in the air, hoisted like a puppy with a thorn in its paw.

At the produce section he was certain the woman pushing a shopping cart across the onion and potato stand in the middle of the store was watching his every lurching move.

He attempted to catch her out, but was too slow. He hobbled up to the refrigerator doors, started to take a milk, pretended to change his mind and rapidly swung the door so that he could see her reflection.

She was holding a cell phone to her ear staring straight at him, talking in a voice so quiet he could hear nothing. He was certain the conversation was not about what she was buying for dinner and was equally certain the phone was taking his picture.

His entire body felt violated. He abruptly ended the grocery shopping and went to the check out stand. Sure enough, the same woman was two registers over and turning her head away just as he glanced in her direction.

Oh, she's good, he thought as he placed his purchases on the moving rubber belt. Each item chirped as the clerk held them up to be scanned. Just like me, Warren thought. I'm being scanned.

Ordinarily he would have carried everything in one large double sacked paper bag, but his condition required him to request plastic because they held less and weighed less. He jealously guarded his shopping cart while the groceries were being bagged, aware it could be snatched by some other shopper before he could haltingly push it to the car.

When he finally reached his vehicle, he was slow getting his keys out. In the corner of his eye he saw what looked like a video recorder resting on the roof of an SUV parked

on the opposite side of the lane. It was aimed straight at him. He was sure it was turned on and recording his every move. It was too sunny a day to see the red light that indicated whether it was on or not, but he squinted at it anyway.

Warren was torn between stopping what he was trying to accomplish, getting his groceries into the back seat, and leaping as fast as he could on the one crutch over to the SUV to snatch the device as evidence.

And that was exactly what this was all about: evidence. They were gathering evidence to prove he was fit to return to work and the disability checks could be stopped.

He became infuriated and decided to make a grab for the camera. He straightened his back and took a giant step forgetting the crutch or the cart for support. His ankle hurt like hell, but he managed to make his way toward the SUV. Just as he arrived and before he could reach for the device, a man appeared. He stood up from inside the front seat and plucked the camera off the roof.

“You okay there, pally?” the man asked. “I mean, you look like you might be in pain or something.” The stranger sounded sympathetic.

Warren backed away. He had obviously made a mistake. This was no under cover surveillance operation, merely a family man with his camera. Or was it?

Warren turned to hop back to his car where he finished unloading the cart, managed to get it away from the car into a holding area but only with the greatest difficulty and pain in his ankle. He was aware how much his driving technique had changed as he crawled slowly out of the parking lot. Instead of braking with the left and pushing the gas pedal down with his right, he had learned to use his left foot on both the fuel pedal and the brake. But it was not the safest method, so he was methodically careful.

He drove slowly to be sure he could brake effectively and only put the right foot on the gas when it could remain there for an extended period. Otherwise, it was more a dead weight than a living extension of his body.

All the while he kept a close eye on his rear view mirror.

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“Yes, Mister Winters, it is entirely possible the school district has assigned agents to watch you to try and prove you are physically fit. It’s standard practice in the industry,” his lawyer finished the explanation and folded her fingers on the desk. “You should have expected that when you refused to sign the final disposition and return to work. What would you like me to do? And the clock is ticking. If your case is eventually resolved in their favor, you will undoubtedly be required to repay all extended disability monies you received plus my bill. I charge \$500 an hour.”

Warren wanted the spies to go away and said as much. “I am disabled, my ankle really was broken and I really can’t return to work. So what I want from you is to get them to call off this ridiculous spy versus spy thing and I want peace of mind.”

“I’m afraid only God can give you that. However,” she became resigned to the task, “I shall contact the district and see if I can find out what gives. Okay? Will that be sufficient, Mr. Winters?”

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As he drove he saw snoops spying on him behind the wheel of every vehicle on the road. He feared anything he did would be construed as demonstrating perfect health, even driving his own car. He recalled his attempt to grab the video camera and was chagrined. As he replayed the incident in his mind, he was certain his speed and ability to walk on

the leg had been recorded by a different secret observer with a different camera entirely, and this would be used against him.

When he got home, he found Janine nursing a cup of tea at the kitchen table.

“You’re home early,” he said as he limped into the room.

With two hands wrapped around the cup and her head at a slight angle, she smiled in a manner that was hard for Warren to identify. Was that the wise look of someone who has a secure job and has figured out how to knock off early, or was that the smile of someone who knows your secret, has found you out, but intends to keep that to herself until she can benefit by telling someone else?

“What’s that s’posed to mean?” she replied coolly.

He was taken aback. “Why, I guess it’s supposed to mean what I said. You are home early. But it’s Friday, I guess you can do that. Quit early if you want.”

She sipped, rested the cup, made no further comment.

He said, “Could you help me get the groceries? My leg is killing me.”

“Your leg should have killed you months ago.” Had he heard her correctly? Did she really say that or was his brain interpreting her words, twisting what she said so that it sounded malevolent? Either way, he best not reply. And besides, if she really did say that it was the sort of remark that left him with absolutely no clue as to how to respond. “Oh, all right,” she said with reluctance in her voice. Janine rose, went to the garage to retrieve the plastic sacks.

While she was out, the land line telephone rang. It was within easy reach on the wall in the kitchen, so Warren hopped over and picked up the receiver. He said, “Hello,”

and heard only silence. Not a word, not a whisper, not a reply in response to his salutation. Merely silence and then the line clicked once and he had dial tone.

He looked out the kitchen window as he set the receiver down and saw what he thought was the tail end of someone climbing over the backyard fence. He was leaning far over the kitchen sink peering into the neighbor's yard below when Janine returned, her arms laden with sacks hanging from her wrists and clutched to her chest.

"Thought I saw someone in the yard," he said defensively when he realized she was looking at him with a quizzical expression. Then he asked if she had received any crank calls.

"You mean like dirty words or kids playing games or what?" She set the groceries down.

"I mean silence, I guess. Phone calls and hang ups, things like that."

"Happens all the time. Wrong number. They realize your voice isn't who they were calling, they hang up."

His mind raced. "Really? All the time? How often? Daily, hourly, what?" Janine could confirm his absolute belief the phone was tapped. They were checking to make sure their system worked. They called to harass him, to make him run out and try and catch them so they could prove he was fit for work.

Janine was not pleased with his response and showed how testy she was by saying, "Aw, c'mon, Warren. It's nothing. 'Happens all the time' is a figure of speech. Nothing happens all the time, it just happens a lot is all. All the time. Weekly maybe. What's gotten into you?"

"They haven't called it off, I'm telling you!"

“Warren, we’ve been through this. Your attorney checked it out. She followed up and told you the district is not doing that any more. They swore.”

He was struck with an idea. He would prove to her he was not imagining things, that his every move was still being watched. He picked up the phone and heard a clicking sound as if a recording device were being turned on. He closed the hook switch with his hand, pressed the handset to her ear and said, “Listen!” He removed his hand and the hook switch sprang up.

After a few seconds she shrugged and said, “Dial tone. All I hear is dial tone. Normal old dial tone.”

His bad leg went out from under him and he sank into the nearest bar stool kitchen chair. Janine began putting the groceries away, but he did not have the heart to assist. He realized this was not a reaction she appreciated, her doing all the work, and slammed cupboards loud and hard as she put away the canned goods and boxes of dry foods. He was sure she made so much noise on purpose.

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“The bad news, Mr. Winters, is you were quite right, the district was having you followed. The good news: they have put an end to it. I have been assured your case will be given special consideration by the review council and they have all the evidence they need. You are not under any suspicion. They have assured me you will no longer be scrutinized or tricked into performing activities which obviously have hurt the leg even more. In fact, I threatened them on your behalf saying, in effect, we will sue if they provoke you into injuring yourself because of their determination to catch you acting normally, er, uh, their attempts to catch you doing things that would disallow your claim

of continuing injury. So, they have called off the surveillance and have extended your benefits a further six months. How's that feel? Oops. Sorry. Poor choice of words. I meant, do you think an additional six months will do the trick? And I hope you approve of my work so far."

Warren thought as he sat opposite and took in what he heard, maybe she'll earn her keep after all. "What about after that?" he asked.

"After what?"

"After the next six months are up? What do I do then?"

The question seemed to confuse the woman. "Well, that would be your second extension. By then you should be completely healed and ready and able to return to work. Is that what you mean?"

He sat there thinking this over for a moment. "What if I'm not? I mean, what if I have a permanent disability out of this? Worse than that quack I saw said, ninety-five percent?"

"I could have you reevaluated, if you wish, Mr. Winters. Would that satisfy you? I could arrange a new examination. Would that be a good idea?"

Was she being condescending? Was she really working for him? He could not be certain.

"I suppose so. But what's been buggin' me is why the district is so hungry to catch me gold bricking? I mean, I paid into Worker's Comp as part of my deductions for years, decades even. Don't they pay back sometimes? Don't they have claims to pay they don't harass the injured party sometimes?"

“I’m glad you asked that, Mr. Winters, because ordinarily you would be correct.” She seemed genuinely interested in explaining the situation to Warren who sat attentive. “If you were in any other profession, if you worked for a contractor or even if you worked for a private company and did janitorial work, you are right, a third party payer would be responsible for seeing to it you are made whole again and, frankly, your boss would in all likelihood be on your side. But the one big exception is the California school districts which are self insured.”

The look on his face must have told her further explanation was necessary.

“There is no third party payer for school districts in the state. Instead, every penny you receive, every benefit, doctor’s bill, extended therapy session you have is paid for by the school district with funds which otherwise would be earmarked for the school, for the children, Mr. Winters, which is why they don’t want to pay you any more than they must.”

He hobbled out of the law office with a larger question mark in his mind than that raised by the self insuring issue. Was his own attorney trying to shame him into quitting his claim and returning to work? She made him feel like a turd, stealing from grade school kids. Did the woman not believe him? Was she really on their side, whoever “they” were, and not on his? Who could he trust?

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The relationship between Warren and Janine became quite strained.

He was jumpy and nervous and whenever they went out he saw detectives peering at him wearing every type of disguise. He pointed out spies who were dressed as shop keepers and waitresses; some wore their hair long to avoid suspicion and others cut it

short to be sure they would blend in. That baby carriage held a tape recording device and the little old lady over there was really a high paid undercover investigator.

He was not sleeping at night which made him more irritable and on several occasions Janine awoke to find him shaking with fear or sobbing inconsolably. One night she rose when she heard noises downstairs in the living room and the bed was empty beside her.

Janine slowly peered around the corner in the hallway at the base of the stairs and could not believe what she saw. All the furniture in the living room had been rearranged: the couch had traded places with the commode she inherited from her mother and the glass cabinet which displayed their rarely used fine china was over by the book case. Half the texts on the book case shelves were strewn in piles on the floor and Warren was busily picking up arms full to lay on the floor in an apparent attempt to empty the ledges so the entire case might be moved as well.

She said nothing as she approached with her eyes focused on him wondering if he would attempt to flee or fight. She had no way of anticipating what reaction he might have, was not even certain he was awake, when it became clear he realized she was in the room and walking towards him.

He jumped back on his haunches and cowered in fear, whipped his arms over his head like a little boy trying to defend himself against a beating He began to weep. She put an arm around his shoulders and tried to gently lower his hands from his face.

“There, there, Warren. It’s okay, Warren, I’m not going to let anyone hurt you,” she said soothingly. Eventually, he allowed her to walk him back to their bed, but she decided

it would be prudent to sleep on the couch. Next morning Janine made the first of many appointments with a psychiatrist.

“Let me know if you want to talk. I’ll just wait until you want to tell me.” The doctor sat in a reclining chair identical to Warren’s. It was as if his clinical specialty employed a method of finding parity before seeking solutions.

It did not take long for this strategy to work and when Warren opened up, he held nothing back. He started by explaining how he broke his leg, the operation, his recuperation. Then he said he started feeling like he was being watched and when his lawyer finally, after Warren made numerous pleading phone calls and suffered weeks of surveillance, admitted that Workers Comp told her they were behind the whole thing, he said this knowledge did not give him any relief.

“But, you see, I’m not paranoid if they really are following me, am I?”

The doctor used a number of props. One was a pipe he never lit, but kept in his mouth to prove to his patients he was waiting for them to make the first move. He removed the pipe, looked at Warren and said, “But you told me they stopped. Four or five months ago your attorney said you had found them out and she assured you they stopped following you, spying on you. Therefore, it seems to me you really do not think you are being watched any longer, yet you persist in this belief in order to explain your anxiety to yourself.”

Warren was too emotionally drained to ask the doctor to rephrase this even if it did not make very much sense to him.

“I am going to propose a mild sedative. Uh, you’re no longer on Talwin are you?”

Warren shook his head no.

“Good. I don’t like mixing medicines.” He finished signing his name, handed the script to Warren. “In the mean time, I prescribe a good dose of work ethic. By that I mean you might consider negotiating a lighter schedule and returning to the job. I’m sure your shop foreman can arrange fewer hours or less duty if you simply ask. So, what do you say? As for us, what about meeting again next week? Same time convenient for you? Good. We can go into the background of the furniture message at that time, yes? Would you like that? Because there is a message in what you did with the living room furniture, you know.”

Near the end of the last month of his twice extended convalescence, Warren agreed to return to work, but only if his duties were much reduced. He told the arbitrator he was unable to do any heavy lifting and asked for half time, a 20 hour work week with 40 hour pay. The arbitrator gave in to the 20 hours but cut his pay to a 33-hour work week and told Warren to get authorization from his doctor for almost every job except the most mundane tasks.

He knew the others in janitorial talked about him behind his back. He was made to do primarily light weight work, emptying waste baskets and riding the floor waxing machine which meant buffing the unending black and white checked linoleum floors that he blamed for his extreme condition. If he had landed on plush carpet, none of this would have happened, he was certain.

But things were not better at home and that evening when he told Janine he suspected the food she was preparing was poisoned, she reacted strongly.

“That’s the last straw!” Janine dropped the salad mixing tongs in the bowl and took a steady hold on the kitchen counter top. “Honestly, I can’t take it any more.” She was on

a slow burn when she apparently came to a decision. “Warren, you are making me crazy with your paranoia and you’re seeing people hiding behind every tree and following you around when there’s nobody! Do you understand? Nobody is following you! I can’t take it any more! I’m leaving you!”

He sat dumbfounded but certain he was right all along and she was one of those who were not on his side. It was as if a light of insight was turned on inside his head when he realized that Janine had been talking behind his back to the investigators for months, probably from the very beginning of his recovery. That was why she reacted to such a simple observation, that he was being forced to eat and drink arsenic. Why, it was just a matter of time before he was admitted to the hospital with a crippling disease brought on by the perpetual, never ending, ongoing, forever undercover wise guys and private investigators tricking him into running without crutches, hired by that goddamned self-serving cheap skate school district whom he had given his best years to only to find they didn’t trust him, did not believe he was worth the money they paid him and all he could do was sit there and watch as Janine came downstairs carrying a suitcase, her best coat wrapped over an arm, and said, “I can’t stay here any longer. Warren, you’re not well. I’ll call and tell you where I am when I’m settled.”

He found himself following her to the front door with a vague notion he should say or do something to prevent her from leaving. He was behind her and through the door, had just stepped onto the porch of their second floor unit when he was blinded by a powerful light which burst directly into his eyes. Some incredibly powerful instantaneous blaze was aimed directly at their property. The flash lasted a split second but it totally disoriented him. He stood immobilized while his eyes adjusted. He called out her name in

anguish and said with vindication in his voice, “They’re taking more pictures of me. See what I mean, Janine?”

Janine turned around when she reached the lower landing. “Don’t tell me you think that was a camera, Warren. Because it wasn’t. That was just sun light reflecting off the windshield of a moving car. Warren, I saw the car start to turn and shielded my eyes. You got it full in the face. I can’t help that. If you see hobgoblins behind everything that happens to you, you really are nuts. And I can’t stand being around you any longer. You hear me? Warren! Do you hear me?”

In response he became supplicant, fell to his knees and raised his hands open toward the sky as if appealing to a higher power. “Oh, God, can’t you see what they’re doing to me? I’ve been tortured by these prying eyes. They won’t let me alone. Please, help me.”

Janine would have none of it. She retrieved her suitcase from the sidewalk where she had set it when she turned to excoriate him, and said, “Warren, you drove me away. You did it. Nobody else. It’s your responsibility to fix that. If you can get yourself healed or cured or whatever the psychological term is for coming to grips with your paranoia, maybe I can come home. Until then, I’ll call you when I get settled.”

She walked away.

Warren was left in the fast approaching sunset with a terrible fear and no companion to ease his suffering. He crawled on his belly back into the condo and all the while was sure the neighbor who recently bought the place next door was following his every move with a video camera or a web camera. He was going to be broadcast on the web. He knew this with certainty. His defeated crawl back into the confines of the two

bedroom condo were being captured in digital format and everyone would soon know how ill he was, how bad off he was, how lonely and hurt and invalidated he was.

Warren did not report to work the next day, or the following. When the paramedics arrived they found him naked inside the refrigerator the contents of which had been emptied onto the kitchen floor to make room for him. He had been dead at least three days, but the carcass did not have a bad odor, unlike so many other bodies they picked up, because he was nicely chilled.

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“Mrs. Winters, yes, this is Grace Hadlock, your former husband’s, er, Warren’s attorney. I need to speak with you. In person if that is possible. Yes. My office.”

Janine was surprised to learn what Hadlock so carefully refused to discuss over the telephone. Seated in the office, the attorney made sure the door was firmly closed behind them before she leaned forward and told her Warren had been correct.

“Right up until the time he took his own life, Mrs. Winters, your husband was under constant scrutiny. I had to subpoena the records because no one at the school district would provide them without a court order. And I want you to know you can’t be too careful, Mrs. Winters. They are probably watching me now and they will surely begin to watch you, Mrs. Winters, if you decide to let me work for you and bring a wrongful death suit against them. I believe you have a strong case.”

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