The Window Washer

Roger Zelazny

I

It was when he noted that the window washer was not using a safety belt that he first became suspicious⁠—especially when the man leaned far back to reach after the higher spots.

By then, however, it no longer mattered. It was time to clean up his desk, punch out, and head for The Office, a bar so named to assist the honesty of home-calling husbands replying to the standard question.

He did not require the assistance of nomenclature, since he had never obtained the necessary partner in inquiry. Still, his few friends frequented the establishment, with the periodicity of unstable elements, and so, when he flopped into the booth across from Good Old Charlie, first he sighed, then groped after the conversational ignition.

“Say, that window washer today didn’t have on a safety belt. Pretty dangerous, eh?”

“What window washer?” asked Good Old Charlie.

He scratched a shaggy sideburn.

“You know, the one who washed the window across from me today.”

“I didn’t see no window washer,” said Good Old Charlie.

“Well, he was there.”

“Hmm.”

“ ‘Hmm’ hell! Pretty dangerous, I say!”

“Okay, okay! He was there! I didn’t notice.”

“Always sleeping on the job. Good Old Charlie!”

“Yeah. Let’s get stoned.”

“Good idea.”

\* \* \*

Because of the Good Old Hangover caused by staying late at The Office, he called in sick to the office the next day and, shutting out the bloodshot windows of his soul, rolled over and began to snore.

At two o’clock the telephone rang. He rolled back to his right side and knocked the receiver onto the pillow.

“What do you want, telephone?” he yawned.

“Charlie, here,” it said. “Pretty terrible, huh?”

“Yeah. How do you feel?”

“No, I mean about the office.”

“I forget what happened.”

“The one where we work, I mean. Half an hour ago. Didn’t you hear on the radio?”

He sat up and swallowed cobwebs.

“I don’t know nothin’. Clue me.”

“Gas leak. Thirty-one dead, five hundert thousand dollars damage.”

“Lord!”

“Yeah, that’s what I say. We’re damlucky.”

“Yeah,” he breathed. “Look, I’ll call you back when I’m a little more awake. I gotta take somethin’ to stop the jitters. Thirty-one!”

“Sure, okay, see ya. Everybody in our department got it.”

He reflected over the mahogany mirror in the coffee cup. He was dark and hazy, and something needed clearing inside his head. What was it? He gulped the mirror and it shattered in his stomach.

He washed the cup, but when he got to the bathroom he decided against shaving. He slipped on his loafers and went outside.

Walking, he recalled the evening before. Good Old Charlie was screaming:

“So he’s a genius loci ! So shut up and drink your beer!”

He remembered the small, grinning man with the smooth, deft movements and no safety belt. He recalled the quizzical eyes and the odd ears.

He looked up and around, half-expecting to see him again, perched on some other ledge, drawing a squeegee, swirling his white rag.

He need a drink. No! He’d let things get him before, and had had to spend more than his vacation taking the cure.

It had to be nothing. The headshrinkers knew. When you have paranoid tendencies and premonitions of doom, the spirits in the bottle don’t chase the spirits in your head. They just get together and raise hell, that’s what.

So he pushed through the crowd and stared at the five hundred thousand dollars worth of explosion. The whole face of the building was roped off, and traffic had been diverted a block west.

Windows were broken, all along the street. Powdered brick lay like red snow beneath his shoes. The barred mouth of the building was toothless, and half the face had caved in.

He backed away and, turning, fled into the park.

\* \* \*

Later, much later, when he was feeling better and very lucky, he called Good Old Charlie and they had dinner together.

“Has regional office called you?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “haven’t been home since I got up.”

“Well, they called me and I’m on two weeks’ leave. They’ll find another office by then. So I guess you are, too. Looks like I’m being promoted.”

“Great.”

“I know you were kind of sweet on Dave’s secretary...”

“Shut up! Don’t talk about the dead!”

“I’m sorry, I just wanted to say...”

“Please.”

“...Sorry.”

\* \* \*

It was more than a month before he saw the window washer again. This time he couldn’t be sure. He was standing on the corner waiting for his bus, when he happened to look up.

He spotted him just as the bus hissed to a halt before him.

High, high up over his head, on a ledge of the Board of Education Building, the half-familiar figure bent and wiped. He could not tell for certain, but it seemed that he was wearing no safety belt...

The next day the papers said that the blaze was the result of a short circuit, caused by lightning striking the building during the storm that had raged that night.

But he knew differently. He was sure now. It wasn’t paranoia, he decided, or coincidence either. He did see supernatural phenomena. The window washer was not a washer of windows. He was a⁠—something else. And whatever he did, it was like an undertaker cleaning up a messy cadaver for the funeral.

A shave, a haircut, a clean face, and into the dirt you go...

He took out a library card and signed for an extended leave of absence.

II

An encounter among portfolios...

Good Old Charlie was doing his homework for the night school course he was taking.

He took a left instead of a right turn in the stacks because it was the logical thing to do.

But libraries are never arranged logically. So, ...

“Hey there!” He clapped him on the shoulder.

“Good Old Charlie!”

“Right. What have you been up to?”

He glanced at the books.

“Oh, nothing much...”

“The devil, you say? What’s that you’re reading?⁠—The City in History? What’s it about?”

“It’s about the city,” he answered, “in history.”

“You don’t say?”

“Yeah. You know how they started?”

“What?”

“Cities.”

“Oh, no. How?”

“They grew up around the burying places. The city began as an extension of the graveyard.”

A shrug. “So what?”

“So they took form at the hands of the living, but they were founded upon death. All the placid stone and the sleeping ores were cut, heated, and tortured,” he said. “Dragged from their eternal sleep and formed by the will of short-lived man into shapes from his fancy.”

“They were heated, tortured, and made ugly... I don’t dig this torture bit. What are you trying to say?” said Charlie, squinting. “Hold on, a cathedral is beautiful, so is a statue.”

“Yes, but are they happy?”

“How should I know? Are they alive?”

“I think so, yes, but sleeping or half-aware.”

“Bull!” said Good Old Charlie, who was taking a bio course. “No life functions!”

“Don’t be so sure,” he answered. “Perhaps they occur so slowly that we don’t notice them. Supposing a may fly were hatched on a rainy day.”

“Okay, suppose it. What then?”

“He only lives one day, is what. He’d spend his whole life thinking rain was the normal order of things.”

“Is that all in that book?”

“No, it’s an extrapolation from my observations. Mountains change shape, but no one around during the Ice Ages would have noticed anything unusual was occurring.”

“Listen, don’t take this wrong, but maybe you ought to see a doctor. They’re starting to wonder about you at the office...”

He laughed. “So maybe I am a little abnormal. That’s how I caught onto things in the first place.”

“What things? What’s all this relevant to?”

“The window washer I’ve seen. I recognized him when I got half-crocked and something inside me started to think.”

“He was a figment.”

“No,” he tapped a book on mythology, “he is a Spirit of Place. This place. Don’t you see what he’s doing?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“He’s an Earth spirit, and this has been his domain since the beginning of Time. My human senses anthropomorphized him and what he was doing.”

“Listen, why don’t we go and get a good old drink or three, then you go home and get a good night’s sleep, and then tomorrow you get a good checkup, and the next day you put in a good day’s work?”

“Good Old Charlie,” he sighed. “You still don’t see. I didn’t expect you would, but let me try to give you something to think about. Supposing a formless but living thing were given a form? Supposing over the eons, a dull awareness of this imposition entered its slow, non-human mind. Supposing, then, something happened, and it looked about and saw what uses the presumptuous vermin in its innards had put it to?”

“I’ll have to ask you to leave or be quiet,” said a fat little woman with white hair, appearing from behind a pillar.

“Spirit of Place,” chuckled Charlie. “Okay, okay, we’re going. But tell me,” he turned again, “why a window washer?”

“He’s opening the eyes we gave them,” he replied.

“Then we should all return to the caves?”

“Once this thing gets started, it might not be a bad idea.”

“Let’s go get stoned out of our minds.”

“Okay.”

III

The next afternoon he saw the window washer again, on the third floor ledge of the Forum hotel. He asked the cop on the corner whether the man was wearing a safety belt.

The cop looked up.

“What window washer?”

He studied the unsmiling, unshaven face before him. His nostrils dilated as he appraised the atmosphere.

“Go get an Alka-Seltzer,” he told him.

He entered the Forum instead.

The desk clerk was reading the morning paper.

“Everybody must leave this building at once,” he told him.

The man lowered the paper enough so that his eyes appeared above the banner of baseball scores.

“Beat it, bud.”

“This isn’t a joke,” he told him. “This building is going to be destroyed very soon.”

The man lowered the paper all the way.

“Mice or termites?” he asked.

“Neither. Or maybe a mouse will gnaw through the wiring somewhere in the walls. I don’t know how it will happen. But it will.”

“Get out, or I’ll have you run in.”

He turned to the people in the lobby.

“This hotel is going to collapse tomorrow!” he cried. “Or possibly even today! Get out, all of you, while you still have the chance!”

The clerk rounded the counter and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“That does it,” he said. “Leave now. Right now! Or I’ll have you picked up and we will press charges.”

“You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t. But I can’t have you scaring the people away.”

“Okay, I’ll go.”

He walked out onto the sidewalk, slowly, and he looked up.

The window washer was gone. Perhaps he could talk to him, and explain things. Maybe he would understand. Maybe he would stop...

A block up the street! Fourth floor! This was going to be a big one!

He ran.

Uptown Medical Building, said the plaque. The directory listed three dentists and an optometrist on the fourth floor. He took the elevator.

He paced up the hall, looking for the right office. When he found it, he walked into the reception room.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“Uh, no, but is the dentist busy right now?”

“Yes, he is.”

“Well, I’d like to speak with him. I’ll wait.”

“Perhaps I can help you.”

“I’d rather wait and talk to him.”

She shrugged her crinkly white and answered the telephone.

He rushed to the window.

“Listen,” he said, “I know what you are and I know what you’re doing! You must stop!”

Squish! Squish!

The window washer continued with his washing.

So he leaned forward and threw the window upward.

“You must not do that! You must let us live!” he screamed.

The window washer stared at him, his shaggy brows drawn together into a sharp frown, almost touching his dusky widow’s peak. He vanished.

“What are you doing?” said the nurse, moving to his side.

“Nothing. I felt dizzy. I wanted some air.”

“You weren’t thinking of jumping, were you?”

“From the fourth floor?” he laughed. “If I were going to do it, I’d do it right.”

She still looked unconvinced.

So he made an appointment for the following Tuesday, to have some nonexistent bridgework taken care of, confident that it could not be kept.

When he got home he wrote a letter to each newspaper, asking that they print a warning to the residents of the Uptown Medical Building and the Forum Hotel. Then he went to The Office.

IV

They were staggering through the park. He would call cadence, and Good Old Charlie would respond with verses from the endless marching song of their kind.

Which is why they were arrested for disturbing the peace. Or a part of why.

They might not have been booked, except that he began throwing stones through windows when he heard the patrol car coming, instead of running, as Good Old Charlie wisely proposed.

\* \* \*

“Okay, buster.” The door clanged open. “You’ve got a lot of explaining to do.”

He rose slowly.

“About the windows?” he asked. “I said I’d pay...”

“Windows, hell!”

He was escorted into the office and seated in a stiff-backed chair, so that the sunlight streamed over the Chief Inspector’s shoulder and hit him in the face.

“You are the mad bomber,” he said. “Aren’t you?”

A man off to his left was writing on a notepad.

“I’m not mad, and I’m not a bomber,” he told them.

“You wrote letters to the papers, warning them which buildings you’d blow up next. Didn’t you?”

“Yes⁠—I mean, no. I wrote letters warning them, but I didn’t blow up any building.”

“But you knew about them. Didn’t you?”

“Yes, yes I did. I tried to warn them.”

His eyes relaxed as the sun was obscured. He lowered his head and contorted his face. A hand pushed him gently.

“Sit up straight!”

“You knew about them,” repeated the man at the desk. “If you didn’t plant the bombs, who did?”

“There were no bombs!” he cried, trying to rise.

The hands gripped him firmly, and pushed him back into his seat.

“There were no bombs. There was no bomber.”

“I suppose the buildings blew themselves up?”

“You might say that, yes. That’s very nearly correct. They did it themselves.”

The hand pushed him on the side of the head.

“Don’t try to be funny! We’re taking all of this down. It’s serious.”

“Who did it?” asked the Inspector.

“Everybody did it,” he laughed. “We built them. The buildings did it themselves⁠—they didn’t like being built. And he did it!”

He pointed.

They all turned and stared outside.

“The window washer,” he giggled. “He opened their eyes, he showed them how we had violated their substance! They,” he choked as the hand shoved him back into the chair, “they rebelled!

“They’re all going to return to rock and dirt! They are being shown,” he babbled, “and they do not like what they see! We are⁠—”

The hand slapped him lightly before he grew hysterical. He collapsed and sat with his head in his lap, sobbing loudly.

“History of alcoholism,” said the Inspector. “He’s a nut, but he’s always been harmless. ⁠—Finally went off the deep end.”

He glanced at the window again, shaking his head.

“A real nut. Set up an appointment with the psychiatrist for tomorrow, before the hearing.”

“Right.”

“There won’t be any hearing, or any appointments,” he whispered through his fingers. “We won’t be here tomorrow.”

The window washer, slowly polishing, grinned at him through bars like teeth.

Notes

Zelazny retells the myth of the Spirit of Place (the Roman term for it was Genius loci). The Spirit of Place has been historically depicted as a guardian animal or minor supernatural being (puck, fairy, elf, ghost, etc.). In Zelazny’s vision, the genius loci is something else.

The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects was a 1961 book by Lewis Mumford, an American theorist about society and technology. Reading that book inspired Zelazny to write this tale and likely also “The Hounds of Sorrow.”