

From The Desk of Buster Heywood - Serial Novel Edition

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Chapter One - Part One

Reading had become a futile endeavor. Buster Heywood skimmed over the sentence he'd been reading one more time, just to make sure, then plucked a grocery receipt from the last few pages of the biography so that he could properly mark his place. With a quiet sigh, he set the paperback aside and sat up in his chair, reaching under his glasses to rub at his eyes. It was rapidly approaching the point in Sunday afternoons where he fought the urge to let the rest of the day slip away from him, staring uselessly around his apartment while his mind wandered, simply because it lacked the energy to do much else. The faint hiss of tires over wet pavement washed through the room like ocean waves, and Buster idly turned his gaze outside.

The window beside his chair was raised up sufficiently from the sidewalk, since there were basement apartments below him, and he had an optimal view of the passers-by at any given moment. The street was still wet, even though the downpour that morning had subsided, water still making its way off the edge of the roof and the windowsills across the way. A few people wandered past, hands stuffed in their pockets, scarves wound around their throats. Some were armed with hats, others had umbrellas tucked under their arms, but none were particularly remarkable - all clad in the drab colors that seemed to come with Connecticut winters. Someone had lost a mitten, and it sat

neglected on the sidewalk, marinating quietly in a puddle of slush. A slurry of brown, shining oak leaves lined the rim where concrete met pavement, intermingled with cigarette butts, bits of paper, and a crushed, faded aluminum can that seemed to have held cheap beer in its better days. Somewhere above, there came the heavy sound of footsteps and the drag of furniture across the floor. The boyfriend was back.

Buster had been listening to the drama unfold like the Foley reel of a film for months now: the dialogue low and undistinguishable, the sound effects clear as crystal. Once or twice he was sure he'd heard glass breaking. His television sat, mostly-neglected, in the corner of the living room, and he hadn't paid for anything beyond the barest basic cable since shortly after he'd moved in: between the window and the sounds of the building, living in the North End of Aviario provided its own entertainment.

This afternoon, however, the program from Apartment 29 was brief and inconsequential. There was a muffled conversation that never quite rose to discernable levels, a few drawers slamming open and shut, and more heavy footsteps, keeping mostly to one corner of the ceiling. Then, with one more muted slap of wood against wood, the footsteps thudded their way across the ceiling, and then Buster heard the apartment door slam. Carefully, he leaned forward in his chair, tilted his head, closed his eyes, and listened for the second act.

There was another, softer scrape of furniture, and a quieter, more hesitant set of footsteps across the floor, but nothing else. Buster sighed in relief. Even if he'd never seen her, there had always been something about the sound of a woman crying that made him exceedingly uncomfortable.

Now that the shows had exhausted themselves, Buster glanced back over at his neglected book and debated giving it another try. He'd taken the autobiography out of the library earlier in the week; some account of a man's travels in China. It was interesting enough, but somehow he was finding it difficult to wrap his mind around, and it was troubling. Normally, he had no trouble sinking into someone else's life, nestling himself between the pages of a book. Today, though, he squinted at the glossy, laminated cover, catching a vague reflection of the apartment in the sheen as he tried to figure out what, exactly, was wrong with his attention span. After a moment's deliberation, he realized that in some way, the rice paddies and run-down villages of China were a little too close to that slurry of wet leaves and cigarette butts outside his window. Stretching, he reached out a foot to curl his toes around one dress shoe, lurking beside the chair, and pulled it within reach. Rather than read about someone else walking through the world, he decided, it was time he did a little bit of it himself. Maybe now that the rain had stopped, the fresh air would help clear the Sunday afternoon fog from his mind.

Above him, he could almost feel the collective weight of the building settling around his shoulders as he bent to tie his shoes. Over the course of the weekend it had pressed down on him, compressing him slowly into something quiet and small. There was something both comforting and stifling about knowing that other lives existed, tiered out above his solitary existence. Buster stood, stretching the morning's lethargy from his long legs as he unfolded, and moved for where his wool coat and scarf hung beside the door. First the scarf, draped carefully over his shoulders, and then the coat, buttoned, before his hands dipped into his pockets, searching for wallet and keys. They were, of

course, right where he'd left them. Satisfied, Buster opened his door and stepped out into the hallway, pausing to listen for a moment.

Nothing seemed out of place: just the usual faint sounds of life from within the other apartments in the hall – the muted babble of televisions, the clang of cookware, and the thump of bass. All was well. Buster extricated his keys and shot home both locks to his door, then pocketed them once more and made his way down the hallway, keeping his gaze forward. The drama of Apartment 29 was but one of many, and he caught glimpses of the others from time to time, but kept himself removed. Everyone had their own little pigeonholes in the building, after all, just as small and cozy as the bank of old brass post office boxes set into the wall next to the front door. Buster glanced at his own empty box out of habit, catching the reflection of one blue eye before heading for the front door. There was a moment's hesitation as he reached for the knob, as he made sure he hadn't forgotten anything vital, and then he stepped out onto the street, immersing himself in the sounds of northern Aviaro.

The swish of tires on damp streets was louder, now, and somehow less soothing. High Street stretched out on either side of him, the apartment buildings and homes sagging slightly, as if the grey weather was pressing down on them, too. A few windows and doorways still bore the glow and flicker of Christmas lights, though the neighborhood was in the midst of a rather wet January thaw. Buster glanced from side to side, considering his possible walking routes, then tucked his hands into his pockets and headed west. The Wandering, as his mother had grudgingly dubbed it several years ago, had begun.

Buster still wasn't always certain what triggered his occasional need to simply walk for long stretches of time, but he remembered the first. It had been close to Halloween, when he was in the third grade, and he had sequestered himself underneath his blankets with a flashlight and a book. Bedtime at the Heywood household was punctual, but he had slowly discovered his own quiet means to resistance.

His sister, Deirdre, was always a bit more blatant about the matter.

"Hey," she'd whispered. "Bookworm. You still awake in there?"

"No."

"Liar!"

At nine years old, Buster had already perfected the art of the slow, *Lord-give-me-strength* sigh. "I am not. Go back to bed before Mom and Dad hear you."

"And they're watching some grown-up scary movie thing. C'mon, put that away." His sister loomed closer, casting a shadow over the sheets.

He shifted a little, so that he could still hold the flashlight while he turned his page. "You're blocking my light."

"Buster," she hissed, "would you get out here already?"

"Just let me finish this chapter, Dee." He squinted harder, trying to make the letters swim up into focus through the dim light – then jumped as the sheets were ripped off his head.

His sister, older by a venerable year and a half, snickered, one hand over her mouth to stifle the sound. The sound and the visual effect were uncannily like one of the characters in their Saturday morning cartoons. "I can't believe it still scares you when I do that."

“You’re gonna get us in trouble,” Buster persisted, marking his spot with the dust jacket of the book and turning out the flashlight. “You’re supposed to be asleep.”

“So are you.” Dee folded her arms over her chest, obscuring the mermaid printed on her pajamas. “Come on, quick. Before it’s over.”

“Before *what’s* over?”

“The scary movie, *duh*. We’re going to go watch it, too. You know.” She smirked, eyes drifting toward their bedroom door. “From the stairs. Like spies. The railing’s behind the couch, Mom and Dad will never see us.”

“Yes, they will. We’ll make shadows.” Buster rubbed at his eyes. “And spies don’t stand on the stairs and watch scary movies. And how are we going to get past the creaky spot in the hall?”

“Wear your slippers.”

The younger Heywood’s jaw hung open for a moment, soundlessly. This wasn’t the first time his sister failed to listen to the sound reason of logic. “...Deirdre, making your footsteps quieter doesn’t make you less heavy.”

Deirdre, undeterred, was already halfway to the door. “Slippers!”

With another sigh, Buster swung his legs over the side of the bed and nudged his feet into his slippers. As much as he wanted to argue, he knew that within moments, his sister would be out in the hall, their bedroom door would be open, and even the slightest noise would carry. So he kept his mouth shut, and followed her.

The end of the hallway was illuminated by the faint, intermittent flicker of the television in the living room downstairs. Buster remembered something he’d read about will o’ the wisps, little lights that led people on through the dark, toward trouble – and the

thought brought on a sudden, very clear image of Deirdre collecting them in a jar, like fireflies. She had already reached the top of the stairs, having somehow circumnavigated that dreaded creaking spot in the floor, and was motioning him forward.

Buster froze. He'd never had any manner of luck with that creaking floorboard. More than once, he'd left a book downstairs on the hall table, and attempted to sneak down to get it. And more than once, his mother had heard him and hustled him back upstairs, one manicured hand secured around the shoulder seam of his pajamas as she led him down the hall. Every time, Tessa Heywood would inform her son that this was *The Last Time He Was Going To Get Away With This*, and Buster, not yet possessing the proper sense of parental awareness, believed her. So, getting caught by not just his mother, but his father as well, and in Deirdre's presence to boot, did not bode well. Especially not so close to Halloween, when there was also the added risk of having trick-or-treating privileges either diminished or, worse, revoked completely. Reading under the covers was stationary, and safe. Sneaking down the stairs to spy on scary movies was another set of risks, entirely. But Dee was getting impatient, and her handwaving was a little more frenzied, now. Her eyes widened, and she jerked her head to one side. It wasn't as motivating as the time she'd dropped an ice cube down his collar, but it still sufficed. Drawing in a deep, slow breath, Buster sucked it up and took a step forward.

Very, very slowly, he brought his foot down on the floor, settling his weight down as he held his breath. Someone on television screamed, just as Buster lifted his other foot, and the effect was twofold: the sound mercifully drowned out the creaking, and the younger Heywood nearly jumped out of his skin, stumbling forward. Wide-eyed, heart pounding, he stared at the stairway, then at Deirdre.

She simply smiled, nodded, and waved him on.

Regaining his breath and forcing his pounding heart back down into its rightful place in his chest, Buster made his way to the sanctuary of the carpet-padded stairs, and together, he and Deirdre crept halfway down, holding onto the bars of the railing and peering through them like anxious prisoners, until they could see the television and the tops of their parents' heads as they sat on the couch.

Whatever the person on TV had been screaming about before was unapparent. The scene had changed to a young boy, wandering alone through an empty home. Daylight streamed in through the windows, which made it look perfectly safe, save for the hesitant look on the boy's face. He was looking for someone, and Buster glanced over at his sister, quizzically.

Deirdre shrugged, then rolled her eyes and mouthed a word that she and the other kids confined to a life in suburban Deptford tended to use often: *bor-ing*. She then crossed her eyes and stuck her tongue out for good measure, before looking back to the movie.

The boy on screen had reached a library of sorts – the kind you expected in scary movies, full of old bookcases, an antique globe, portraits that seemed to follow you everywhere, and a big, wing-back chair in front of a fireplace with its back to the camera. Buster held his breath, as he'd read enough mysteries to have some idea of what to expect: nothing good. As the boy walked up, craning his neck to see around the side of the chair, Buster was of two minds on the subject: he wanted to tell the boy to run away, but at the same time, he was desperately curious to see what he'd find. He didn't have to wait long to know.

The camera panned slowly, mimicking the boy's field of vision, until the occupant of the chair swung into view: the nearly-mummified corpse of an old man. His skin was stretched tight over the bones, his eyes were long-gone, and wisps of yellowed hair scraggled across the cracked remains of his scalp. He was still dressed in an argyle sweater and khakis, an old leather-bound book resting in his lap, cradled by skeletal hands.

The next thing Buster knew, he was outside, standing at the end of his block, still in his pajamas and slippers. The fall air rustled his hair and brought him back to his senses, and it occurred to him that he'd stumbled straight down the stairs, through the hall, out to the foyer, and out the front door. His parents had probably noticed Deirdre first – that was why he'd managed to get so far. But suddenly, the thing that bothered him the most was not how much trouble he was going to be in ... strangely, it was that he'd run in the first place. He had no earthly idea why. And so, nine-year-old Buster Heywood, rumped and still in his pajamas, decided to take a walk and think it out.

After another block, he realized that it wasn't so much the dead man in the movie that had scared him – it was getting caught. And now that that part of the equation was inevitable, he went back to the movie itself. Three houses down the road, he was thinking about how long someone must have had to have been dead to look like that. It probably had to be an awfully long time. Someone should have noticed that the man's house had been empty, by then. Especially if the door had been open long enough for a little boy to just go wandering wherever he wanted. Briefly, he considered walking up to a house and seeing if the door was open, if it held something equally grisly. But before

he could give the matter any further thought, the family Cadillac pulled up to the curb, and his father leaned out the window.

“Buster. It’s ten p.m, kiddo. What’re you *doing*?” Bill Heywood was smiling, but the expression was strained. It seemed as though he wasn’t sure whether he wanted to hug his son or strangle him.

Buster shrugged, since the initial fear was at least a block behind him.

“Walking.”

“Oh, my god,” his father muttered under his breath. “Would you just get in the car, please? You need to get back to *bed*. You’re lucky you got me, you know. Your sister’s getting the riot act.”

With a yawn, Buster pulled the massive door of the Caddy open and slid into the passenger seat, drawing the seatbelt across his chest before ducking under it so it didn’t sit over his throat. “It was her idea to sneak out. I tried to tell her wearing slippers didn’t make her weigh less.”

“Right.” Bill furrowed his brow as he put the car back into gear and headed for the end of the block. “Listen, what you kids saw ... you know that was –“

“Not really a dead man. Just a movie. I know, Dad. It’s okay. I know I’m never gonna see any *real* dead people. Except maybe at funerals and that doesn’t count.”

“And yet you’re three blocks down the road in the middle of the night.”

His son shrugged. “I was just thinking.”

From that night onward, whenever possible, Buster’s mind tended to associate walking and thinking, particularly when both activities were mostly aimless in nature. He started walking home after school instead of taking the bus, but on days when his

workload was slow, and there wasn't much homework to contemplate, his mind and feet would both wander far off track, and he'd wind up at the gas station three blocks past his house before he realized what he'd been up to. After a few such incidents, he was put back on the bus, and his walks were confined strictly to the weekends, when he didn't have anywhere he needed to be. Eventually, his mother took to filling the pockets of his pants with bus tokens as she folded his laundry, so that he'd have them in case he went for a stroll. In junior high, he discovered the old rail lines that ran through Deptford and criss-crossed New Jersey, leading up into Philadelphia, and New York City, and other, far more interesting points northward. He never went that far, of course, but it seemed that his feet were the driving force behind his brain – and eventually, he came to realize that he'd adjusted one of his mother's traits to suit him. Tessa was almost compulsive about order – their house had been meticulously clean, growing up. But where his mother had been compelled to eradicate outward clutter, Buster was more of an introspective cleaner. Whenever he felt his mind begin to get cluttered, or murky, on went the shoes, and off he went.

When he'd moved to Aviaro, it had taken him a while to get used to. There was no public transportation system, so relying on that to get home when he wandered too far was out of the question. Over the first few months, he'd had to train himself to become aware of just how far he'd gone, and how he'd gotten there, so that he could get back before he tired himself out. It had diminished the quality of his thought process, but had the effect of ingraining the town's geography rather firmly in his mind. After almost a year, he found that he could wander just about anywhere in the northeastern area of the town he pleased, and find his way back without much conscious effort. So, on that

particularly sluggish Sunday afternoon, he let the curve of High Street lead him up to the corner, and back down toward Collane Park.

It was rather a neglected little spot, since most of the residents of Aviaro were more fond of Dunwich Park, nestled quite literally in the center of town, inside the wide rotary that formed the hub of the town's roads. While Dunwich Park was larger, and boasted a small pond, a gazebo, and a swath of grass large enough to house the yearly Fourth of July barbecue, Collane Park held claim to the only playground that wasn't in exact proximity to the schools. Even that, however, was a thin boast, as the monkey bars, slide, and other amusements were poorly maintained and rusting over in places. On one of his previous Wanderings, Buster had ventured closer to these childhood artifacts, and stepped on a broken glass vial in the grass near the swings. It hadn't been his first indication that he hadn't chosen the most pleasant part of the neighborhood to live in, but it had certainly provided further evidence for the fact.

Even so, from a distance, the park held plenty to look at. A bank of trees at the north side separated it from the rest of the neighborhood, cutting out the surrounding houses from view. The barest hints of a hopscotch grid remained on the paved section of the park, most of its chalk having been washed away in the earlier rain. Someone had tried to make a skating rink out of the pavement, closer to Christmas, but now it was turning steadily into a slushy lake. Pieces of cardboard lay neglected at the bottom of a hill, makeshift sleds that had been cast away when they grew too wet or ripped to use. Buster briefly remembered the monstrosities Dee had constructed in pursuit of their own sledding adventures, all covered in aerodynamic fins and poster-paint flames, and smiled a little to himself, before forging onward through the park. The wind rattled the leafless

limbs of the trees, and occasionally the caw of a crow broke through, but for the most part, the wanderer was left to his thoughts.

He wasn't entirely sure why he'd been having so much trouble focusing, back at the apartment, or why that particularly strong case of the Sunday blahs had caught up with him. The previous week's work had gone smoothly enough for him. A few of his co-workers were up in arms about a slight glitch in the building's computer networking, but Buster's work had mostly been concerned with tangible paperwork and forms, so their stress had been easily deflected. No problems, there. It was mid-month, which meant his rent had been paid the week before, and he had another week and a half before the rest of his bills were due – his car payment, and the undying scourge of college loans. Insurance had been thankfully omitted from that litany, once he'd gotten his job with the town, and that left a little more wiggle room in his budget. Grocery shopping had been taken care of on Saturday morning, after his trip to the bank, so there were no worries in that department, either – unless, of course, he'd forgotten something. Buster paused, focusing idly on an empty package of cigarettes at his feet. Milk, bread, eggs, bacon, cheese, tomatoes ... once he'd reached a particular point in the list, his short-term memory failed him, and he pulled a small, beat-up notebook from the pocket of his coat, flipping through pages of directions and random notes until he found that week's grocery list. No, everything was neatly crossed off – unless, of course, he'd forgotten to put something on the list in the first place. But that was something that couldn't be helped, so he put the notebook back and pressed on to the southern corner of the green.

Old Cross Road was the only main road that bordered Collane Park, bisecting the North End from the East Side of town in a meandering sort of line. Such a

straightforward path wasn't particularly appealing at the moment, so Buster opted for a narrower side road, its paving quite a bit more neglected, the painted lines long worn away from the asphalt. Satisfied with his projected route, he returned to making his mental checklist. Bills, rent, groceries ... there was plenty of gas in the car ... whatever had triggered his uneasiness was cunningly eluding him, and continued to do so as he reached the end of his detour, and found one of the main roads again.

The sun was slowly beginning its journey westward, pausing to rest just above the tops of the buildings. As he turned the corner onto Arrow Street, Buster squinted as the light caught him squarely in one eye, and a gust of wind buffeted his face. The cold was beginning to make his face and legs itch slightly, and he flexed his fingers carefully in his gloves, to make sure they weren't getting too cold. To one side, vines of bittersweet crept up the line to a telephone pole, to the point where the wire was easily hidden, disguised as a sort of diagonally-growing bush. The reddish vines grew almost everywhere in the North End, creeping around people's porches to help them disguise bowed, slanting front steps and peeling paint. They upheld weathered, graffiti-christened stop signs, and wove in and out of sagging, rusted chain link fences, even more prominent than the barbed wire that ran across some of their tops. As if that weren't enough, in the fall, some of the more country-minded residents fashioned wreaths and stars from the bittersweet, and hung them on their doors or the sides of their homes. Personally, Buster had never seen the point of adorning a house with what was, in essence, a weed – but then again, there weren't many things of that nature he claimed to understand, anyway. His mother and Dee had been the decorative ones of the family, after all.

Off to Buster's right, the road rose up a high hill. A few miles north, the highway curved up around the northeast corner of Aviaro, but he was hardly close enough to hear the faint whoosh of traffic. The hill led to what he'd been told was the more dangerous corner of town, and he had never once taken the northern stretch of Arrow Street, preferring to stick to the end that dipped briefly into the East Side and back up into his familiar territory. A few apartment buildings dotted the side of the hill in a stark contrast, the grey houses sandwiched between vibrant fallen leaves and a twilight sky held in place by the stretching black fingers of trees. He stopped a moment to etch the play of sunlight on the sides of the buildings onto his mind, and then forged back ahead, his mind setting off on a different branch of thought, properly distracted from whatever worry had eluded him.

The scenery here in Connecticut, he had long decided, was a far cry from the paths he'd walked in Deptford. True, the neighborhood was only marginally better, but there was something else here, something about Aviaro he couldn't quite put his finger on. *A life*, he thought, briefly, and then pushed it aside. From a rational standpoint, it was impossible for one town to be any more *alive* than another. Perhaps it was simply the relative newness of it, and the fact that it was the first place he'd truly lived on his own, after leaving college and the strange, patchwork two years that had followed. Certainly, that made a difference – he was free to form his own opinions of things, without having them clouded by the constant input of family, faculty, classmates, or ill-matched roommates.

A faint rumbling sound cut through his train of thought, and Buster glanced around, startled. After a few seconds, he realized that the foreign noise was part of

something else he'd realized over the years: living on his own, there was no real barometer that told him when, exactly, it was time to eat. Casting back through his memory, he realized that he hadn't put anything in his stomach since the half-hearted, lazy attempt he'd made at a bowl of cereal and half a grapefruit, that morning.

"Heh. That'd do it," he mumbled to himself, a smile creeping across one corner of his mouth. He didn't talk to himself too often; it tended to happen the most when he felt he needed someone to tell him what to do. Thankfully, the solution to his problem sat not too far away, nestled comfortably up at the corner where the Arrow he'd been following found its mark in April Street.

A man scraping the slush off his front steps looked up and gave Buster a friendly little wave. Not knowing him from Adam, Buster blinked a little, then nodded in acknowledgement. Up the road, he heard shouts, and turned his attention to see a group of teenagers playing basketball in a parking lot. From what Buster knew, the building they were rebounding their shots off of was a sort of halfway house called Journey, apportioned by the town for foster children, or families in need of a place to stay.

At the mere thought of a town resource, the facts and figures involved came instantly to the front of Buster's mind. He didn't even make a conscious effort to call forth the knowledge – it was simply there. The Journey had been in the pile of forms Buster he'd processed earlier in the week, in fact, asking for an increase in funding. He'd processed it, worked its numbers against the scenarios the selectboard had asked for, and passed the whole thing on accordingly. For a place that needed more funding, the accountant thought, the kids playing in the back lot seemed happy enough – though he did have to wonder about the one still in his pajama pants. One of the players delegated

to the sidelines waved at him, and he nodded back before following the Arrow's path to where it met its mark on April Street.

On the other side of April Street, early evening traffic edged in and out of Aviario Regional. Buster kept his place on the sidewalk next to Journey as one of the hospital's shuttle buses ambled past on its short trip to the employee parking lot across the street. Once the shuttle passed, Buster hustled across with a few strides of his long legs, and tucked his hands in his pockets, striding right for the glass-walled entryway to one of his favorite last-minute dining establishments.