

Missed

By Orson Scott Card

Tim Bushey was no athlete, and if at thirty-one middle age wasn't there yet, it was coming, he could feel its fingers on his spine. So when he did his hour of exercise a day, he didn't push himself, didn't pound his way through the miles, didn't stress his knees.

Often he relaxed into a brisk walk so he could look around and see the neighborhoods he was passing through.

In winter he walked in mid-afternoon, the warmest time of the day.

In summer he was up before dawn, walking before the air got as hot and wet as a crock pot. In winter he saw the school buses deliver children to the street corners. In summer, he saw the papers getting delivered .

So it was five-thirty on a hot summer morning when he saw the paperboy on a bicycle, pedaling over the railroad tracks and up Yanceyville Road toward Glenside. Most of the people delivering papers worked out of cars, pitching the papers out the far window.

But there were a few kids on bikes here and there. So what was so odd about him that Tim couldn't keep his eyes off the kid?

He noticed a couple of things as the kid chugged up the hill. First, he wasn't on a mountain bike or a street racer. It wasn't even one of those banana-seat bikes that were still popular when Tim was a kid . He was riding one of those stodgy old one-speed bikes that were the cycling equivalent of a '55 Buick, rounded and lumpy and heavy as a burden of sin. Yet the bike looked brand-new.

And the boy himself was strange, wearing blue jeans with the cuffs rolled up and a short-sleeved shirt in a print that looked like ... no , it absolutely was. The kid was wearing clothes straight out of "Leave It to Beaver." And his hair had that tapered buzzcut that

left just one little wave to be combed up off the forehead in front.

It was like watching one of those out-of-date educational films in grade school. This kid was clearly caught in a time warp.

Still, it wouldn't have turned Tim out of his planned route -- the circuit of Elm, Pisgah Church, Yanceyville, and Cone -- if it hadn't been for the bag of papers saddled over the rack on the back of the bike. Printed on the canvas it said, "The Greensboro Daily News."

Now, if there was one thing Tim was sure of, it was the fact that Greensboro was a one-newspaper town, unless you counted the weekly "Rhinoceros Times," and sure, maybe somebody had clung to an old canvas paper delivery bag with the "Daily News" logo -- but that bag looked new.

It's not as if Tim had any schedule to keep, any urgent appointments. So he turned around and jogged after the kid, and when the brand-new ancient bicycle turned right on Glenside, Tim was not all that far behind him. He lost sight of him after Glenside made its sweeping left turn to the north, but Tim was still close enough to hear, in the still morning air, the faint sound of a rolled-up newspaper hitting the gravel of a country driveway.

He found the driveway on the inside of a leftward curve. The streetlight showed the paper lying there, but Tim couldn't see the masthead or even the headline without jogging onto the gravel, his shoes making such a racket that he half-expected to see lights go on inside the house.

He bent over and looked. The rubber band had broken and the paper had unrolled itself, so now it lay flat in the driveway. Dominating the front page was a familiar picture. The headline under it said:

Babe Ruth, Baseball's

Home Run King, Dies

Cancer of Throat Claims Life

Of Noted Major League Star

I thought he died years ago, Tim thought.

Then he noticed another headline:

Inflation Curb Signed By Truman

President Says Bill Inadequate

Truman? Tim looked at the masthead. It wasn't the "News and Record," it was the "Greensboro Daily News." And under the masthead it said:

Tuesday Morning, August 17, 1948 ... price: five cents.

What kind of joke was this, and who was it being played on? Not Tim -- nobody could have known he'd come down Yanceyville Road today, or that he'd follow the paperboy to this driveway.

A footstep on gravel. Tim looked up. An old woman stood at the head of the driveway, gazing at him. Tim stood, blushing, caught. She said nothing.

"Sorry," said Tim. "I didn't open it, the rubber band must have broken when it hit the gravel, I --"

He looked down, meant to reach down, pick up the paper, carry it to her. But there was no paper there. Nothing. Right at his feet, where he had just seen the face of George Herman "Babe" Ruth, there was

only gravel and moist dirt and dewy grass.

He looked at the woman again. Still she said nothing.

"I ..." Tim couldn't think of a thing to say. Good morning, ma'am. I've been hallucinating on your driveway. Have a nice day. "Look, I'm sorry."

She smiled faintly. "That's OK. I never get it into the house anymore these days."

Then she walked back onto the porch and into the house, leaving him alone on the driveway.

It was stupid, but Tim couldn't help looking around for a moment just to see where the paper might have gone. It had seemed so real.

But real things don't just disappear.

He couldn't linger in the driveway any longer. An elderly woman might easily get frightened at having a stranger on her property in the wee hours and call the police. Tim walked back to the road and headed back the way he had come. Only he couldn't walk, he had to break into a jog and then into a run, until it was a headlong gallop down the hill and around the curve toward Yanceyville Road.

Why was he so afraid? The only explanation was that he had hallucinated it, and it wasn't as if you could run away from hallucinations. You carried those around in your own head. And they were nothing new to him. He'd been living on the edge of madness every since the accident. That's why he didn't go to work, didn't even have a job anymore -- the compassionate leave had long since expired, replaced by a vague promise of "come back anytime, you know there's always a job here for you."

But he couldn't go back to work, could only leave the house to go jogging or to the grocery store or an occasional visit to Atticus to get something to read, and even then in the back of his mind he didn't really care about his errand, he was only leaving because when he came back, he'd see things.

One of Diana's toys would be in a different place. Not just inches from where it had been, but in a different room. As if she'd picked up her stuffed Elmo in the family room and carried it into the kitchen and dropped it right there on the floor because Selena had picked her up and put her in the high chair for lunch and yes, there were the child-size spoon, the Tupperware glass, the Sesame Street plate, freshly rinsed and set beside the sink and still wet.

Only it wasn't really a hallucination, was it? Because the toy was real enough, and the dishes. He would pick up the toy and put it away. He would slip the dishes into the dishwasher, put in the soap, close the door. He would be very, very certain that he had not set the delay timer on the dishwasher. All he did was close the door, that's all.

And then later in the day he'd go to the bathroom or walk out to get the mail and when he came back in the kitchen the dishwasher would be running. He could open the door and the dishes would be clean, the steam would fog his glasses, the heat would wash over him, and he knew that couldn't be a hallucination. Could it?

Somehow when he loaded the dishwasher he must have turned on the timer even though he thought he was careful not to. Somehow before

his walk or his errand he must have picked up Diana's Elmo and dropped it in the kitchen and taken out the toddler dishes and rinsed them and set them by the sink. Only he hallucinated not doing any such thing.

Tim was no psychologist, but he didn't need to pay a shrink to tell him what was happening. It was his grief at losing both his wife and daughter on the same terrible day, that ordinary drive to the store that put them in the path of the high school kids racing each other in the Weaver 500, two cars jockeying for position, swerving out of their lanes, one of them losing control, Selena trying to dodge, spinning, both of them hitting her, tearing the car apart between them, ripping the life out of mother and daughter in a few terrible seconds. Tim at the office, not even knowing, thinking they'd be there when he came home from work, not guessing his life was over.

And yet he went on living, tricking himself into seeing evidence that they still lived with him. Selena and Baby Di, the Queen Dee, the little D-beast, depending on what mood the two-year-old was in.

They'd just stepped out of the room. They were upstairs, they were in the back yard, if he took just a few steps he'd see them.

When he thought about it, of course, he knew it wasn't true, they were dead, gone, their life together was over before it was half begun. But for that moment when he first walked into the room and saw the evidence with his own eyes, he had that deep contentment of knowing that he had missed them by only a moment.

Now the madness had finally lurched outside of the house, outside of his lost and broken family, and shown him a newspaper from before he was born, delivered by a boy from another time, on the driveway of a stranger's house. It wasn't just grief anymore. He was bonkers.

He went home and stood outside the front door for maybe five minutes, afraid to go in. What was he going to see? Now that he could conjure newspapers and paperboys out of nothing, what would his grief-broken mind show him when he opened the door?

And a worse question was: What if it showed him what he most wanted to see? Selena standing in the kitchen, talking on the phone, smiling to him over the mouthpiece as she cut the crusts off the bread so that Queen Dee would eat her sandwiches. Diana coming to him, reaching up, grabbing his fingers, saying, "Hand, hand!" and dragging him to play with her in the family room.

If madness was so perfect and beautiful as that, could he ever bear to leave it behind and return to the endless ache of sanity? If he opened the door, would he leave the world of the living behind, and dwell forever in the land of the beloved dead?

When at last he went inside there was no one in the house and nothing had moved. He was still a little bit sane and he was still alone, trapped in the world he and Selena had so carefully designed: Insurance enough to pay off the mortgage. Insurance enough that if either parent died, the other could afford to stay home with Diana until she was old enough for school, so she didn't have to be raised by strangers in daycare. Insurance that provided for every

possibility except one: That Diana would die right along with one of her parents, leaving the other parent with a mortgage-free house, money enough to live for years and years without a job. Without a life .

Twice he had gone through the house, picking up all of Diana's toys and boxing them, taking Selena's clothes out of the closet to give away to Goodwill. Twice the boxes had sat there, the piles of clothes , for days and days. As one by one the toys reappeared in their places in the family room or Diana's bedroom. As Selena's dresser drawers filled up again, her hangers once again held dresses , blouses, pants, and the closet floor again was covered with a jumble of shoes. He didn't remember putting them back, though he knew he must have done it. He didn't even remember deciding not to take the boxes and piles out of the house. He just never got around to it.

He stood in the entryway of his empty house and wanted to die.

And then he remembered what the old woman had said.

"That's OK. I never get it into the house anymore these days."

He had never said the word "newspaper," had he? So if he hallucinated it and she saw nothing there in the driveway, what was it that she never got into the house?

He was back out the door in a moment, car keys in hand. It was barely dawn as he pulled back into that gravel driveway and walked to the front door and knocked.

She came to the door at once, as if she had been waiting for him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's so early."

"I was up," she said. "I thought you might come back."

"You just have to tell me one thing."

She laughed faintly. "Yes. I saw it, too. I always see it. I used to pick it up from the driveway, carry it into the house, lay it out on the table for him. Only it's fading now. After all these years. I never quite get to touch it anymore. That's all right." She laughed again . "I'm fading too."

She stepped back, beckoned him inside.

"I'm Tim Bushey ," he said.

"Orange juice?" she said. "V-8? I don't keep coffee in the house, because I love it but it takes away what little sleep I have left.

Being old is a pain in the neck, I'll tell you that, Mr. Bushey ."

"Tim."

"Oh my manners. If you're Tim, then I'm Wanda. Wanda Silva."

"Orange juice sounds fine, Wanda."

They sat at her kitchen table. Whatever time warp the newspaper came from , it didn't affect Wanda's house. The kitchen was new, or at least newer than the 1940s. The little Hitachi TV on the counter and the microwave on a rolling cart were proof enough of that.

She noticed what he was looking at. "My boys take care of me," she said . "Good jobs, all three of them, and even though not a one still lives in North Carolina, they all visit, they call, they write. I get along great with their wives. The grandkids are brilliant and cute and healthy. I couldn't be happier, really." She laughed. "So why does Tonio Silva haunt my house?"

He made a guess. "Your late husband?"

"It's more complicated than that. Tonio was my first husband. Met him in a war materials factory in Huntsville and married him and after the war we came home to Greensboro because I didn't want to leave my roots and he didn't have any back in Philly, or so he said.

But Tonio and I didn't have any children. He couldn't. Died of testicular cancer right after the election of '48. I married again about three years later. Barry Lear. A sweet, dull man. Father of my three boys. Account executive who traveled all the time and even when he was home he was barely here."

She sighed. "Oh, why am I telling you this?"

"Because I saw the newspaper."

"Because when you saw the newspaper, you were embarrassed but you were not surprised, not shocked when it disappeared. You've been seeing things yourself lately, haven't you?"

So he told her what he'd told no other person, about Selena and Baby Di, about how he kept just missing them. By the end she was nodding.

"Oh, I knew it," she said. "That's why you could see the paper. Because the wall between worlds is as thin for you as it is for me."

"I'm not crazy?" he asked, laughing nervously.

"How should I know?" she said. "But we both saw that paper. And it's not just us. My kids, too. See, the -- what do we call it? Haunting? Evidences? --it didn't start till they were grown up and gone.

Barry Lear was busy having his stroke and getting downright eager to shed his old body, and I was taking care of him best I could, and all of a sudden I start hearing the radio playing music that my first husband and I used to dance to, big band sounds. And those newspapers, that paperboy, just like it was 1948, the year we were happiest, the summer when I got pregnant, before the baby miscarried and our hearts broke and just before Christmas he found out about the cancer. As if he could feel Barry getting set to leave my life, and Tonio was coming back."

"And your kids know?"

"You have to understand, Barry provided for us, he never hit anybody or yelled. But he was a completely absent father, even when he was home. The kids were so hungry for a dad, even grown up and moved away they still wanted one, so when they came home for their father's funeral, all three of them saw the same things I was seeing. And when I told them it was happening before Barry died, that it was Tonio, the man who wasn't their father but wanted so badly to be, the man who would have been there for them no matter what, if God hadn't taken him so young -- well, they adopted him.

They call him their ghost."

She smiled but tears ran down her cheeks. "That's what he came home for, Tonio, I mean. For my boys. He couldn't do it while Barry was here, but as Barry faded, he could come. And now the boys return, they see his coffee cup in the dish drain, they smell his hair oil

in the bathroom, they see the newspapers, hear the radio. And they sit there in the living room and they talk. To me, yes, of course, but also to him, telling him about their lives, believing -- knowing -- that he's listening to them. That he really cares, he loves them, and the only reason they can't see him is because he just stepped out, they only just missed him, he's bound to be in the next room, he can hear every word they say."

Tim nodded. Yes, that's how it was. Just how it was.

"But he's fading now." She nodded. "They don't need him so much. The hole in their lives is filled now." She nodded again. "And in mine. The love of my life. We had unfinished business, you see. Things not done."

"So why did I see it? The paperboy, the newspaper -- I never knew Tonio, I'm not one of your sons."

"Because you live like I do, on the edge of the other side, seeing in. Because you have unfinished business, too."

"But I can never finish it now," he said.

"Can't you?" she answered. "I married Barry. I had my boys. Then Tonio came back and gave them the last thing they needed. You, now. You could marry, you know. Have more children. Fill that house with life and love again. Your wife and baby, they'll step back, like Tonio did. But they won't be gone. Someday maybe you'll be alone again. Big empty house. And they'll come back. Don't you think? Selena -- such a lovely name -- and your baby Diana. Just in the next room. Around you all the time. Reminding you when you were young. Only by then Diana might not need to be a baby anymore. It won't be toys she leaves around, it'll be schoolbooks. Hairbrushes. And the long hairs you find on your pillow won't be Selena's color anymore. It'll be grey. Or white."

He hadn't told her about still finding Selena's hair. She simply knew.

"You can go on with your life without letting go," said Wanda.

"Because you don't really lose them. They're just out of reach. I look around Greensboro and I wonder, how many other houses are like mine? Haunted by love, by unfinished love. And sometimes I think, Tonio isn't haunting us, we're the ones who are haunting him. Calling him back. And because he loves us, he comes. Until we don't really need him anymore."

They talked a little more, and Tim went home, and everything was different, and everything was gloriously the same. It wasn't madness anymore. They really were just out of reach, he really had just missed them. They were still in the house with him, still in his life.

And, knowing that, believing it now, he could go on. He visited Wanda a couple of times a week. Got to know each of her sons on their visits. Became friends with them. When Wanda passed away, he sat with the family at the funeral.

Tim went back to work, not at the company where he and Selena had met, but in a new place, with new people. Eventually he married,

they had children, and just as Wanda had said, Selena and Diana faded , but never completely. There would be a book left open somewhere , one that nobody in the house was reading. There would be a whiff of a strange perfume, the sound of someone humming a tune that hadn't been current for years.

Right along with his new family, he knew that Diana was growing up, in a house full of siblings who knew about her, loved the stories of her childhood that he told, and who came to him, one by one, as the years passed, to tell him privately that once or twice in their childhood , they had seen her, the older sister who came to them during a nightmare and comforted them, who whispered love to them when friends at school had broken their hearts, whose gentle hand on their shoulder had calmed them and given them courage.

And the smiling mother who wasn't their mother but there she was in the doorway, just once, just a fleeting glimpse. Selena, looking at the children she had never given birth to but who were still hers, partly hers, because they were his, and he would always be a part of her even though he loved another woman now and shared his life with her .

Sometime, somewhere down the road, his life would draw to a close and he would see them again, face to face, his family, his first family , waiting for him as Tonio had waited for Wanda all those years . He could wait. There was no hurry. They were only moments out of reach.