

The Sound of Him Walking

by Michelle Hovet

Claudia looks up from the paper and says, "Good morning Whipples." To her relief the cat yawns as if it were drugged with boredom. The Band-aids ran out last week, and a fight between her and the cat could get messy. The last fight made her legs look as if she shaved them in the dark with a rusty and blunt blade.

After Jackie's murder no one wanted Whipples, and Claudia ended up taking her roommate's cat to the new apartment. On bad cat days Claudia carries a squirt bottle of water with her, to keep the animal from lurching at her and clinging to a dress or exposed piece of flesh. The cat, Claudia explains to visitors, obviously had a bad childhood. Nobody ever laughs at this, but she keeps saying it. She then hands visitors a smaller squirt bottle and says, "Just aim at the cat, and it will stay away from you."

Her mother is perplexed by this. "Claudia," she says, "why don't you just put that cat to sleep?"

Claudia tells her Whipples was Jackie's cat.

She's afraid that one day she'll wake up and not be able to remember Jackie. Jackie was the person who showed that you could ask a friend for everything and get it. Having Whipples around is comforting. It reminds her of what life was like before she came home and found her best friend half naked and dead.

When the police arrived that morning they took Polaroid's of Jackie's body. Out in the hall Claudia could see the lights of the flashbulbs going off. She kept on thinking Jackie would have been embarrassed to be seen that way. Then Claudia watched herself walk out of the apartment to the police car for hours of questioning.

The police said all evidence pointed to the probability that Jackie's killer was a stranger. "Well that's good Captain Knudson," she said, surprising herself with the bitterness of her sarcasm. "At least I don't have to change my Christmas card list."

Who knows where the killer is now? The police certainly don't. But Claudia tells herself she feels better--the grocery store always feels safe. She can't imagine a killer spending time in the produce section. And her new apartment feels good to her. The walls are thin and painted apricot; the floors are old, crooked, and noisy.

Whipples meows, and Claudia stops reading the obituaries to look again at the heavy, pear-shaped cat. The cat almost looks homey in the morning light; its buttermilk coloring goes well with the apricot walls.

A certain type of peace seems to have come over the cat lately, Claudia notes; but immediately she knocks on the small wood table by the side of her bed. She doesn't know what's controlling life these days, and it

is a good thing to protect oneself against jinxes. Knocking on wood seems as logical as anything else to fight off life's evils--like mace, prayer, health insurance, condoms, a college education, NATO. Who knows what could work when?

The phone rings, and Claudia answers it.

"Hello Claudia, this is Elizabeth from Johnson Temporary Service. Get up, get going. We've got an assignment for you. A receptionist thing, 617 17th, downtown. It's an oil company. You just have 67 lines to answer, no messages, just voice mail. Can you handle that?"

"Uh, yeah," says Claudia as she looks at the pictures of the people who have died.

"Now be pretty. Wear a bright color. Sound like you like to answer the phone."

"Okay, Elizabeth," says Claudia, noticing that the obituaries are smaller than usual.

"And Claudia, I've got to tell you," says Elizabeth, "you've got to be perky. They want perky people at the front desk."

"I hear what you're saying, Elizabeth."

"Are you perky, honey?"

"I'm perky," says Claudia.

"Thanks dear, I knew I could count on you."

In the shower she smiles to herself; Jackie always said the best thing about working temporary jobs was that the end of every bad job is in sight. And it's an oil company. Maybe she would meet some big oil and gas man, the machiavellian wheeler-dealer type. He would wear expensive suits and cowboy boots made from an exotic endangered reptile--he would have no morals, and insist on buying her a condo. No, not a condo--a small bungalow house. It was too hard to get the equity out of a condo.

On the bus Claudia reads the morning paper. Earlier in the morning she put on a dress, piled her hair high, applied bright lipstick, and wrapped a gold, flowered chiffon scarf around her neck.

The bus lurches back and forth with each stop. The conversations around her are in several languages. Someone's playing a boom box in the back, and cars are honking.

The paper says a twelve-year-old girl has been raped by seven high school football players. There is a picture of the girl covering her face while sitting on a single bed covered with stuffed animals. In a close-up photo there are severe bruises and cuts on her forehead and arms.

Claudia puts the paper down. The seats are full of men with anonymous faces, and she wonders what each of them is capable of. She hears her name called in the back, and turns around. There is nobody she recognizes, she must be hearing things again.

Someone in the back of the bus raises his voice and says, "Hey man, you don't mess with me." Several people seem to raise their voice, and the conversations around her get louder. She goes back to reading the article.

Did the young girl think she was going to die? Did Jackie think she was going to die when she woke up and felt a strange man's hand on her back as she was lying face down in her own bed, being tied up and then strangled with a pair of her roommate's turquoise-colored hose? Do you sometimes think it's better to die than to feel the things you should never feel?

She imagines, for what seems like the millionth time, what it feels like to be strangled. She begins to touch the scarf around her neck.

Every seat on the bus is taken, and people are standing in the aisle. The bus comes to a stop and she feels a stranger's thigh brush up against her shoulder.

The gold scarf is long and trails down her back and her chest. She closes her eyes; the screeching and grinding of the brakes become louder than the conversations around her, and she tries to get rid of the vision of someone reaching over and grabbing the scarf with his hands and pulling it tight around her neck. Stop it, she says to herself while taking the scarf off. Try to think of a boy with hands that make you feel like a present will be in the mail.

The bus comes to a stop and it's in front of the skyscraper she's going to work at for the day. Across the street is a bike messenger who delivers to the offices she works at.

As she's pushing open the revolving door of the office building she hears her name yelled. She goes full circle in the door and comes back outside.

"Hey, Claudia. How's it going?" The bike messenger rides his camouflage painted bike onto the sidewalk. He smiles and brushes a long blonde dreadlock out of his face.

"Hi, Ryan."

She feels shy in a wonderful way. He always stays an extra five minutes when he delivers to her office and tells her something funny. The past few weeks they have been talking more and more. Once, when she was the only person in the office, he stayed longer than usual. He asked her who she liked to hang out with, and she told him about missing Jackie.

Like all the dreadlock boys she's met, he's got a very distinct smell from months of not washing his hair. It's a good smell, something someone her mother's age would never understand, a smell that's warm and familiar like wearing a best friend's sweater. He makes her have the type of shyness she gets with someone she feels she has a lot to talk about with, but doesn't know where to begin. Ever since Jackie's murder everything about men has been either good or bad; there's never a feeling in between.

"Did you read that yet?" says Ryan, pointing to her paper.

"Not all of it."

"Check out the metro section. There's a picture of the state park where the Pope is going to speak. The forest service people are in the process of killing all the prairie dogs because some of them have rabies.

They're concerned about the Pope's safety."

Claudia opens the paper to the Metro section. There's a photo exposé showing a field scattered with prairie dog carcasses.

"Oh God this is horrible," says Claudia trying not to giggle. "I really shouldn't laugh."

Ryan smiles a crooked smile. He has a big gap between his front teeth. Claudia wonders what it would be like to sigh slowly into his mouth in between kisses.

"You want to go to dinner tonight?" he says suddenly, turning down the radio on his waist.

She thinks first about what she's going to wear. The dark red velvet dress would be too obvious. It would look like she wanted to get laid. But really, what's wrong with looking like you want to get laid? It didn't mean you were necessarily going to do it that night, or with that person. Besides, he might just be asking her as a friend. Jackie would have said wear the dress, you're not going to look this good forever. Besides, get real, Jackie would have also said, you do want to get laid.

"We could go to Pagliacci's around 8:00," says Ryan.

"Oh Ryan," she says, "I know you can't afford to take us there, and I know I can't afford to take us there."

"Look, I've been winning bike races every weekend," he says, "and my band's been playing a lot of gigs. What else am I going to do with the money besides buy really expensive pasta?"

"It is my very favorite restaurant," says Claudia looking at him and realizing that she is definitely going to wear the velvet dress.

"Is that a yes?" he asks, and hangs his helmet on the handlebars.

"I'll meet you there," says Claudia. "Hey, does that helmet do any good? I mean, do you really need it?" She knows it's a dumb question, but she's starting to feel awkward and self-conscious because that's the way romance works.

"Yeah, it does," he says. "I got hit by a car once."

"Oh my God, what happened?"

Ryan looks embarrassed, like he's about to admit to something wrong. "Well I went into a coma."

"Oh no," says Claudia.

Ryan shrugs, like he can't say anything else about it. This makes her like him more.

"What time is it?" she says suddenly.

"It's 9:10, why?"

"I'm sorry, I'm late for work and the temporary service already has me on triple something probation, whatever that is. I have to go." She walks towards the door and adds, "you were in a coma? That's horrible."

The restaurant is in the old Italian section of North Denver full of brick houses with red tile roofs. Across the street is an old Catholic church. In the church's parking lot is a wide screen that has the live

televised speech of the Pope at Mile High Stadium. Members of the parish sit on folding chairs in the parking lot watching.

Inside the restaurant Ryan and Claudia sit in the corner in a green velvet booth. They are the only customers in the place--everybody must be home watching the Pope.

"How come you never told me about being in a coma before?" she says as Ryan pours more chianti into her glass.

"It's not really something you talk about on a first date," he says.

"This is our first date," says Claudia taking a bite of her lasagna in white sauce.

"So we're dating?" he says and gives a crooked smile.

"We'll see," says Claudia taking a drink of wine. They are already on their second bottle of wine. "But what was a coma like?"

"I died," he says sheepishly.

"Ryan, what are you talking about?"

"I was coming down from the mountains after a 100 mile training ride and was two blocks from my house when I decided to take off my helmet. I was on 14th and Champa when a car turned a corner on a red light and hit me. I was in a coma for eight days."

"Eight days? My God," says Claudia. "Do you want some more wine?"

Ryan nods yes and tells about how he was operated on shortly after he came out of the coma. Later, a nurse said he had been dead for almost four minutes while on the table. The nurse said maybe he came back to life because he was in such good physical shape. But really, who knew why? Maybe it was because his lungs were abnormally large. The nurse had only seen lungs like his a few times before when she had professional athletes for patients. At the time he was slotted for the number three pick for the Olympic team; that's how he ended up in Colorado in the first place.

"Well, what was it like?" asks Claudia.

"What, training for the Olympics?"

"No, being dead."

Claudia holds up her glass for some more wine, and Ryan reaches for the bottle.

"It was being in this light. Not as in light coming out a long tunnel like the type you see in movies when they show a person experiencing death. It was more like a texture I felt around me, like walking through mist at dusk. And the thing was that there was a very distinct feeling that I was still there."

"Do you think that's what death is like for everyone?" says Claudia.

Ryan finishes pouring the wine, and puts the bottle back.

"Claudia," he says, "these questions, they're overwhelming. You're asking me what is death like?"

"It's just that sometimes I feel like Jackie is with me, especially in the oddest situations--like when I'm buying shoes." Claudia picks up a piece of bread and butters it. "Jackie had very set opinions about shoes."

"The idea that dead people are still hear, kind of hovering around us . . . there's a lot of implications to that," says Ryan.

"You mean faith-wise, in terms of an afterlife?" says Claudia as she lifts up her glass and takes another drink of wine.

"No, on a more practical level. That would mean my grandma has seen me masturbate hundreds of times."

Claudia chokes on her wine as she starts to laugh. Some of it comes out of her nose.

"Would you stop doing that Ryan," Claudia says, wiping her face with a linen napkin.

"Doing what?" He pours more wine into her glass.

"Making me laugh when I don't want to."

"The first time I saw you laugh I wanted to go out with you. It just took me a while to get the courage up to do it."

"I'm a freak, Ryan. I read the obituaries first thing in the morning. Does that sound normal to you?"

"Well, I've been dead, and I don't have a college degree."

"A college degree means shit. It's the other stuff in life that means anything. Like, can you fix cars?"

"Of course," he says. "My dad is a mechanic. I grew up doing that stuff."

"And you're a good kisser?"

She sees him blush, and this surprises her in a good way.

"Well yes, according to a few people."

"Just a few people?"

"Well, I'm no floozy," he says, smiling and looking at her. It's been a long time since she wanted a man to look at her this way.

The waiter stands by the table acting as if he is not hearing the conversation. Claudia notices her reflection in the mirror across from the booth. Her cheeks have become more red from the wine. Is she going to get her first kiss since Jackie's death on a night she's drunk?

She can faintly hear the Pope's televised speech coming from the church parking lot across the street. The restaurant smells like minestrone, and she can hear the water in the fountain in the middle of the room. The lighting is dark and makes everything look touchable. Across the room the waiter is ready to help them, and the green velvet on the booth feels like something she could wear. Heaven, she thinks, must be a restaurant. Jackie is probably eating sushi right now. Claudia smiles at Ryan and feels pretty for the first time in what seems like years.

The light is blinking on her answering machine when they go back to her apartment. She plugs in the white Christmas lights she keeps up year-round at her windows. Ryan sits in the overstuffed gold brocade chair by her desk.

They have decided to keep drinking. In the small kitchen she hits the play button on the answering machine. While the tape rewinds she finds a bottle of cheap burgundy wine and begins to open and shut drawers looking

for a corkscrew. Tomorrow is Saturday; she is not going to read the obituaries. As she finds the corkscrew, she hears a familiar voice.

"Uh, Claudia," the voice says awkwardly, as if the person has never talked to an answering machine. "This is Sergeant Knudson from the Denver City & County Homicide Department."

Claudia slams the drawer shut, and turns the machine off. "How many god damn useless conversations have I had with this man?"

"You know," she continued yelling while walking into the main room, "this man is a complete idiot. Every time I talk to him I have to hold the receiver away from my head because he speaks so loud. And he's always asking me about Jackie's sexual history. Last time I said what I always said--she didn't have a sexual history. She was a virgin. Do you know what a fink I felt like telling someone that my best friend was a virgin? Jackie would have killed me if she heard me saying this. Nobody in this day and age wants anyone to know if they're a virgin."

Ryan starts to say, "Claudia, I think—"

Claudia continues to yell. "And do you know why she was a virgin, Ryan? Because she was smart. Because she had high self-esteem. Because she was waiting for Mr. Right. Because she didn't accept mediocrity like it was fate. This whole world would be better off if more women waited for Mr. Right instead of screwing Mr. He'll-Do."

"Claudia, I think we should listen to the message."

"But you know what Sergeant Knudson said? He said, 'well, she's a true victim then.' He said that they would definitely find the killer because she was a true victim." Claudia stabs the corkscrew in the air for emphasis. "Now, what does that mean? Does that mean if I had been killed by a rapist in my own bedroom I would be only a partial victim? Because God knows I'm far from a virgin."

The people in the apartment upstairs start pounding on their floor. A man yells, "Shut up down there! Some of us have to work in the morning!"

"Fuck you," yells Claudia, "some of us are dead."

Claudia pauses for a moment, leaning her head back and staring at the ceiling. Then she looks at Ryan, and holds up the wine bottle and corkscrew.

"Will you open this for me?" she says in a normal voice while trying to ignore the tears on her cheeks. "God knows I could use some, and now I've gone and ruined a perfect, lovely night."

"It's okay, Claudia," he says, wiping some tears off her cheek with his shirt sleeve.

"No, I'm sorry," she says, sniffing. "I never used to be like this."

"It's okay-really, you should see my family, and they never had anything this bad happen to them. I'm used to this type of stuff," he says. "But are you sure you want some more wine?"

"Maybe I shouldn't. Go ahead and play the message. My best

friend is dead. If they find the killer, big fucking deal. She's still dead. Period. It's been a year. I'm just so sick of this I don't care if I sit next to the guy on the bus tomorrow. They're never going to find him."

Claudia leans back against the wall and feels dizzy. Her face is hot and flushed. She walks over to the bed pulled out from the wall and falls into it still holding the wine and corkscrew.

"I think I drank too much," she says, covering her eyes with her hand. "Ryan, will you get me some aspirin? Please jut play the rest of the messge, and then get me some aspirin in the medicine cabinet."

Ryan goes into the kitchen, and hits the play button.

"Do you think I should bake some bread tomorrow to apologize to the neighbors?" asks Claudia.

The voice on the machine begins again.

"Uh, Claudia...this is Sergeant Knudson from the Denver City and County Homicide Department...we found Jackie Taylor's killer today."

"Oh, my God," whispers Claudia. She sits up in bed and stares at Ryan walking back into the room.

"He was arrested for breaking and entering in Capitol Hill, and his DNA matched up with what we found on Jackie," the voice on the machine says. "He's a transient, with three sexual assault convictions. We'll get him in court for sure. Call me in the morning. You know the number."

He hangs up and a dial tone comes on.

"Oh, my God," Claudia whispers while hugging her pillow and looking at Ryan.

All Claudia can think about is how vulnerable she felt after the murder. She stayed with her parents just after Jackie had died. She borrowed a flannel nightgown from her mother and slept in a single daybed in her old bedroom. The bedroom was still decorated the way she had left it when she went to college. There were dried roses and corsages from her high school boyfriends in a memory box on the wall. On the back of the door was a 1982 record release poster of the British band The Clash. Her mother watched the 10:00 news downstairs, and Claudia could hear the weather forecast.

She was 23 and felt like she would never be able to leave her parent's home again. One night her father walked into the room, tired from driving a truck across the country. He sat down on the bed. His flannel shirt sleeves were rolled up, and his arms were dark brown from a life of working outside. The countryside was pretty on his last trip, he said, and told her about a piece of pie he had in Iowa. He said he wanted to help her buy a new dress, and that her mom said they saw a nice one at the mall. Then he told her that she was safe, and Jackie would want her life to go on, and nobody could get her here. He then kissed her on the forehead, told her goodnight, and shut off her light. She listened to the sound of him walking in his cowboy boots. She counted the steps like she did as a kid. One, two, three, eight, twelve, sixteen.... The sounds of her father's footsteps added

up to year after year he had been there, and she knew she could go to sleep.

"Claudia," says Ryan, "are you okay? Do you still want some aspirin? Do you want me to go?"

"No, please stay here."

"I want to stay."

"Do you think they really caught him?" she says staring at the wine and corkscrew on the bed.

"They caught him Claudia."

It's 2:00 in the morning and Claudia is in her Murphy bed with Ryan, listening to him sleep.

She thinks about being old and wonders how significant Ryan will have been in her life by the time she's 88. Will he be the summer boyfriend she had at 24? When they finally make love, will it make her feel as safe as he did tonight just holding her? Will he be the husband that she loves? Or the ex-husband she hates? Will he be the new, but different type of best friend she met when the first one died?

Once in a while a car with a loud bass box drives by--the rap music going in and out of her apartment quickly. An army helicopter, one of many brought in for the Pope's visit, flies overhead. The helicopter's light comes through the French glass door, briefly putting the spotlight on Whipples asleep in the corner.

Claudia thinks about the thing she and Jackie shared: sweaters, makeup, dishes, books, records, secrets, nights walking home drunk from the nightclub Seven South, slipping on the ice every two blocks from laughing so hard. Shopping for furniture for their first apartment, driving to a Nebraska farm to pick out Whipples from a litter. Dancing in the dorm halls while the Replacements blared from somebody's stereo. The morning she watched Jackie's kind face as they sat on the bathroom floor doing Claudia's home pregnancy test. Now the only thing she shares with Jackie is Whipples.

Whipples meows in the corner of the room, and Claudia finds herself giving the cat a look of mutual understanding, one she used to only give to Jackie. Maybe she should get Whipples another cat to play with. Maybe Whipples has single-cat syndrome.

Claudia gets out of bed and walks barefoot across the beat-up hardwood floors to the bathroom. Just admit it to yourself, she thinks. For over a year she's thought about the man out there who could do to her what he did to Jackie. She was terrified, but in a fucked-up way it helped. Because as long as there was danger she didn't have to breathe a sigh of relief. She didn't have to say, I'm glad it was her, and not me.

She didn't have to say, I wish it had been me.

In the bathroom she pulls a string hanging from the ceiling to turn on a light. She opens one of the built-in drawers above the toilet, and starts to rummage through her underwear, socks, and hose. Claudia makes a mental note, like every time she opens the drawer, that the turquoise hose

are missing.

Claudia takes out a pair of pumpkin-colored hose, feeling the texture of them in her hand. They're thick, stretchy, and impossible to tear or snag. She puts the hose around her neck, and pulls them tight. She wonders, how long did he do this to her?

Why wasn't she there that night?

How could she get to be with a beautiful and funny man all night?

Claudia looks in the mirror and pulls the hose tight enough to feel where they would leave marks like rope burns.

Tomorrow, she thinks, I'll sit on the balcony watching the sun set behind the mountains, and I'll turn up the boom box and feel the feeling I get when Paul Westerberg sings--a feeling that makes me glad to be alive.

She knows in many ways this doesn't have anything to do with Jackie, or with the man who killed her. She knows the only thing it has to do with anymore is her, her life.

She can see Jackie sitting in Boulder, on the lawn of the C.U. campus where they met as young women with bare feet and bright red lipstick. Jackie's eating onion rings. In between bites she says, just because it was one of us it doesn't mean it needs to be both.

Claudia looks at the mirror and takes the hose off. She walks back to the bed. The floors squeak with every step. For the rest of her life she knows where she will live. A place with thin walls, and old floors that make a noise with every move. Someplace where she can hear anyone coming, or going.