

Visiting Ray Chapman

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She had always been called Kathryn Blue, never mind that her mother had insisted til her dying day on calling the Blue kids, all of them, by their given names (Carolyn Jane, Kathryn Jane, Theresa Jane, Jay Junior, and the dead baby, Jay Harry Blue.) Her dad had tried to call her Katie Jay for a while, and she herself had tried out Kate. But everybody (except her mother) just naturally said "Kathryn Blue," as if the name itself were a force of some kind. She had decided early on to accept it. She decided to live as if she had her own gravity.

Now. Here, 500 miles north, where no Blues lived (where no Blue, traditionally, could ever live), she worked downtown in a dark suit and minimal jewelry. At night, come summer, she stood in her driveway and, without flinching, watched the star Vega coming straight at her at 8.5 miles per second. On special occasions, she visited the grave of Ray Chapman.

And that was the point. She came here often enough, she should have known the gates closed at 5:30. Now it was 9 or so, just past dark, still and hot. The sky was dirty, the air had a tinge of pink and a buzz you could taste. As a matter of form, she rattled the rusty handle of the tall iron gate, then turned around and stared at the street.

It was lined up and down with parked or abandoned cars but few signs of life, no one looting in the Free Clinic bins, no light escaping Safe Space, nobody hunkered under the portico. Naturally, the moment she thought "no one, nobody," here came the rusty pink pick-up around the corner. This time it rattled to a stop just past the ce-

metery gate and blocked her own car in there. The driver lit a cigarette, the other guy drank from a can, and then they both turned around for a better look at her.

Her nerves tingled and for a single moment she considered standing her ground, letting them look, the hell with them. Instead, caution prevailing, she took off walking in the opposite direction, east along the cemetery wall, head up, shoulders back, as if she knew exactly where she was headed, and she did. She was headed into the neighborhood where response time to 911 calls was almost two hours. Glancing back, she saw the pick-up back up and park at the hydrant just behind her car. She continued walking east.

The cemetery's tall stone wall ran straight into the dark, but at intervals narrow spaces had been left in which to hang a gate, and when she came to the break in the wall just opposite the deserted greenhouse, she side-stepped into the patch of darkness there. The gate here had been chained shut from the beginning, apparently, since the iron bars and iron ivy, chains, and locks all seemed to be rusting at the same rate. She peered into the shadows of the cemetery but could see no farther than the dark border of laurel. When she gave the bars a shake, the gate slipped off its rusty hinges and swung inward, as if "Goddam it" were the magic words after all.

She stepped through, shoved the gate back onto its hinges, and took a few steps into the shadowy laurel. It was darker in here, and she had to stand a moment before she could see. She intended to locate a memorial bench and sit there until she heard the pink pick-up start up and clatter away, then she would run for her car and get out of there, drive back to her house, eat brownies.

Almost as soon as she brushed off a boulder and sat down, she heard sirens approaching--an ambulance, may-

be a squad car--and perversely she glanced at her watch, calculating that it would be past eleven o'clock before she could realistically expect another ambulance to pass by. Before she could even pretend to consider whether or not to jump out and flag this one down, the sirens excited the muggy air in front of her then immediately waned, disappeared, followed by nothing, no significant noise at all, on the street side of the wall. No engine coughing, no can tossed at the gutter, no cry or shuffle out there. In here, she heard a rustle in the leaves. It could have been anything, it could have been air, a crow, a rat.

She stood up, looked around. This cemetery, noted for the enduring wealth, fame, or power of its dead, was vast and whimsical; its patrons had been arranged in neighborhoods along avenues that meandered up daffodil hills, down through bogs with ducks. Still, she knew where she was. She could make out a stand of obelisks she recognized, the profiles of familiar statues. Just up the hill, sitting on a bench atop the Garnets' memorial boulder, a female angel (long bronze hair, muscles in her arms, streaked face, eyes open and strong proud wings) shuddered not quite imperceptibly.

She watched, horrified, while the angel shifted the weight of those wings. (She was in here, she might as well make the most of it even though of course she knew that the shiver of movement was that of light trying to flow through hot air; stars twinkled from the same effect, although not tonight; tonight the August haze obscured heaven, except for the sliver of the moon.) But the thing was, she was in here, closed gate notwithstanding. She had come this far, good sense notwithstanding, already. Who would know or care if she wandered around a little? (She could almost hear her baby brother whining, "Mommy'll find out, and then she'll kill us, and then what?

Then what?") Sifting the air in front of her for spiders, she walked in through the laurel til she arrived at an edging of geraniums and stones, and stepped across it onto recently mowed grass.

She pulled a paper towel from her jeans pocket, spiked it onto a dusty laurel leaf to mark her exit, and then set off toward the rise. Unsure which rules of survival applied, she kept to the shadows at first, moving from hedge to hedge like a kid playing ninja, feeling foolish, collecting dust on her face, parched leaves in her hair. After seeing, that is, after imagining more movement among the statuary--but this time it was the dark, not the light, that shuddered--she switched to the paved road and strode straight up the middle of the Section 24 avenue til she came to Ray's plot.

She pulled her ticket stub--July 22, home game, Tribe beats Oakland 1-3 in 11 innings, rookie Joey Matos hits his first major league home run--out of her pocket and placed it at the base of Ray's squat granite marker and then sat down on the iron bench under the locust tree at the foot of the plot. But she felt exposed, as if every dark-adapted eye in the city were watching her, and so she got down on the grave itself, sitting cross-legged in the deepest shadow of the tree.

Ray wouldn't mind, he was dead. "Raymond Johnson Chapman 1891-1920." Short and sweet. No poesy, no RBIs.

Footsteps approached suddenly, stopped abruptly, just short of treading on her. Startled, looking around and up, she witnessed a wavering shadow monster mutate and divide into two thin men--one tall, one short--and her heart sputtered, her brain said "I told you so," and then it misfired; it informed her she was seeing Old Scare Joe.

Old Scare Joe was long dead (both versions of him--the

bogeyman and the actual man, emaciated, syphilitic, with an oozing cavity of a nose, who lurched around corners and dozed under the cannon on the courthouse yard in the deserted county where the Blues lived). But these men here were real. Moreover, they seemed startled, as if they hadn't seen her sitting in the shadow until they were right up on her.

The extra moment or two she had on them, however, didn't alter the situation. They were standing almost on top of her and, if she tried to jump up and run, could easily grab and stop her. ("And then what? Then what?") Until this arrangement shifted, she would have to rely on the most primitive defense tactic of all: she tried to think what she would do if she were, well, who she was.

"I was here first," she said in her downtown voice. She gave them each a courteous yet dismissing glance and returned her gaze to the inscription on Ray's gravestone.

She heard one of them chuckle and the other one say something too hushed, fast, and vowel-ly to understand, to which the first one replied with a grunt, maybe a chuckle, or a sneer, impossible to know without seeing. She didn't look. She ignored them. She reached into her back pocket and slowly, casually, pulled out her car key, then she leaned back on her hands and slowly, casually, straightened out her legs, as if she were relaxing, settling in, as if she considered them gone.

The short one took a beer can from the pocket of his baggy slacks and placed it unopened at the base of Ray's marker next to her ticket stub. When he walked around her to sit down on the bench, she saw that his face, at least the shadows of it, bore the stress and the cut-diamond shape she associated with the Cambodian restaurant where she always got the pink noodles. The other man hunkered beside her in the shadow, close enough to

touch her, if he decided to. Again her brain whispered, "Old Scare Joe."

She couldn't help it, she had to look at him. So she looked, then couldn't breathe. Her gut constricted with the sudden-fright feeling of the known world dropping out from under her, the long black vacuum of eternity rushing in. She'd had the breath scared out of her as a little kid when Old Scare Joe had staggered and nearly fallen on her, his bones, his stink, catching himself at the last minute but not before she had seen into the stinking, oozing abyss where his nose had been. For a while she'd had nightmares about him, but later--she'd never told this to any one, nobody--when she was scared, she would imagine the black-hole face of Old Scare Joe. She'd chant: "Does the New Scare scare more than Old Scare did?" over and over until the new fear waned and Old Scare still scared her the most.

Now. She looked into this guy's thin, craggy face--indistinct in the shadow of the locust, then etched in fire, then obscure again, as he lit a cigarette with a paper match--and she recognized it as Old Scare Joe's face, with nose. Despite the paralyzing horror, she was almost glad to see him--which meant she must be dreaming. In fact, yes, she must be dreaming because despite safety classes, habitual paranoia, all those locks on her doors, here she was visiting with the bogeyman and his Cambodian accomplice on the grave of a Cleveland Indians shortstop, and she would not be this stupid in real life, she would be this stupid only in a dream, thank god.

"I seen you out at the gate," he said in a voice so still, calm, that it scarcely disturbed the hot heavy air. "From the tears on your cheeks, I figured you had somebody dead in here."

"My mother died this morning." God knows why she

said this, though it was true, but so what? She followed it with a shrug and returned her gaze deliberately to the inscription on Ray's marker, "Raymond Johnson Chapman 1891-1920." If he so much as flinched in her direction, she'd jam the key into his eye, swivel on her butt to kick upward into his accomplice's groin, then jump up and run.

In the hedge to her left, a shadow moved. Old Scare didn't notice, or didn't seem to.

"What'd she die of?" he said.

"Lung cancer."

The other man spoke, over on the bench, but she couldn't make out what he was saying. Besides being very soft and very fast, there was something dizzying about his accent.

"He says did she smoke," Old Scare said.

"Well, yes."

The man on the bench flipped a twig toward the hedge. But Old Scare didn't move, didn't draw on his cigarette. He just sat there, calm, still, ten seconds, thirty seconds. Finally she had to say something.

"But the thing is, she lived her whole life next door to a smoldering slag heap. Every breath she ever breathed was full of sulphur and smoke. Nobody can tell me it wasn't a factor."

He didn't say anything.

"Clay County, on Uncle Charlie Creek, in deepest darkest Appalachia. It's got postcard scenery, and the air tastes like hell. Literally like hell, like fire and brimstone." She made herself quit. She'd made herself quit delivering this speech to strangers five, six years ago. The rest of it went: "It started as a coal town. The mine closed and the company abandoned the place to the natives almost two generations ago, but they left the slag heap smoldering."

So now we've got nineteen shacks plus the community hall, all rotting, at the foot of a smoldering slag heap, and forty-two hillbillies, all related, who dream of damnation every night and die early and don't care because they think it's normal. It'd be pathetic if it weren't so metaphorical."

Something in the dark of the hedge moved, and Old Scare glanced over there.

"Anyway, she died," she said. "Everything she cooked tasted like rotten eggs. She wouldn't let you eat til you said grace. Say grace, pass the ketchup."

The short man said something she didn't understand, and suddenly, finally, Old Scare lunged at her. He clasped his hand over her mouth, knocking her backwards flat across the grave, pinning her down. The other man dove off the bench to land stretched out taut alongside her, not touching, but so close she could smell his beer breath, his greasy shirt. One of them said something, but all she could hear was her heart thumping. She could see lights approaching, and if they were real they were probably headlights, but she couldn't move, couldn't scream. She was about to die, maybe; she was a little bit glad.

("In an ironic turn of events in Lake View Cemetery last Friday night, Kathryn Blue was murdered--death instantaneous, suspects in custody--atop the grave of Ray Chapman, after going there to mourn her mother who had died in another state earlier that day. Baseball fans will recall that Chapman, popular Tribe shortstop, was struck in the head by Yankee pitcher Carl Mays' fast ball on August 16, 1920, and died the next day. According to Blue's employer, 'She admired Chapman's timing. She said there were worse things than getting hit in the head with a fast ball while you're still batting .300. Of course,

she was from West Virginia. Not that that means anything. But you really couldn't tell, I mean, you really wouldn't know it to talk to her.""

The headlights passed on without disturbing the darkness the three of them lay in. She watched the tail-lights glow red in Old Scare's eyes and then blink out. He took his hand away from her mouth, though she still had the taste of his sweat on her lips. Nicotine. Dust.

"Security," he said. "He sees us here, he calls the cops."

"Mm," she replied as if she agreed--as he seemed to think she would--that calling the cops was a bad idea. She sat up, shook grass out of her hair, pretended to care for a moment that it was tangled. The other man got up and returned to the bench. She came slowly to her feet, casually stretching her legs, brushing dirt off her jeans. (She was on the downhill side of the grave now; it was time to act, time to run after the security car, she'd always been fast.) Her heart thudded again when Old Scare also stood up, but he didn't move toward her. He placed something on the base of the marker then, standing up straight, looked at her. He just looked at her.

"I'm going now," she said, adding, like an idiot, "It's late."

He nodded. He patted his shirt pocket twice as if feeling for cigarettes, then glanced off into the dark. The other man said something, and Old Scare started to translate for her.

"He said we ought to--."

"He said I look like . . . what? The green what?" She had finally comprehended that the Cambodian man was speaking English with the cheek-full-of-tobacco Spanish accents of West 25th.

"He said we could call you Garnet," Old Scare said. "Since you resemble that angel over on the Garnet plot."

What with them streaks on your face."

"Fine, but why would you call me anything?" Turn and run, her nerves and bones were telling her, turn and run now or forever hold your peace.

"For respect. We have names for when we come here. I'm Nobody. He's the Dia de los Muertos. That guy over there, we call him Specter." He indicated, with a nod, the darkness behind her. "He's what you might call shy. Lives down behind the Scofield mausoleum just about year round."

Forcing herself to look, she peered into the bank of hedge and shadow--her exit route--until she thought she saw some part of the darkness draw back, thought she heard an intake of breath in there. Her skin crawled. The sweat all over her body went cold.

"I'm leaving," she said to Old Scare.

He nodded. His stillness (like gun oil, twilight, old cold water), his calm and stillness could hypnotize you, if you consented. A monstrous shadow passed overhead with a rattle and shush, momentarily blocking the scant moonlight that hung now like dust in the air. But she knew it wasn't spooks, she knew it was only a crow. She took a couple steps backwards and turned her back on him to walk away.

She walked off the grave, out of the plot. Without turning, as if she believed herself alone, she walked along the hedge where she sensed, maybe smelled the third man, maybe. Maybe no. If there was danger in there, her senses weren't dealing with it. So, rather than high-tailing it in the direction the security car had taken, she decided to continue walking straight down the hill toward the laurel thicket, opting for the quickest way out, hoping, hoping-to-god, her gall ("It was your mother's last wish, it was her last wish, goddam you, for you to be at her

grave") would last til she located the paper towel. Hoping-to-god she could find the paper towel that marked her exit because she had to get herself out of here. Because what she felt, instead of menace or good old fear, was another round of sorrow coming on ("Her last wish, doesn't that mean anything to you, goddam you, don't any of us mean anything to you?"), like it or not.

She walked head up and held her breath, listening for movement behind or ahead. Listening for footsteps, whispers, any kind of change in the silence behind her.

When she heard his voice, though, it was so quiet, it was not so much sound as charged air, and she didn't so much hear as breathe it in.

"They clear off the graves every Thursday to mow, so we're here most Friday nights putting stuff back on," he said.

He paused a moment, looking down toward the Garnets' green angel's streaked face in front of the moon. She looked that way too, saw it shiver, and shivered herself. She had recognized herself in the angel in broad daylight, the very first time she'd seen it, but she had never told a soul. ("Just who do you think you are, is what I'd like to know, goddam you, who do you think you are?")

"Garnet don't seem quite right, though. I reckon we'll call you Blue. Or maybe Kathryn Blue," he said. His buddy on the bench shrugged but said nothing. In the shadow, a bit of darkness went still, for just a moment.

She wiped her streaming tears and nodded, consenting to it, the solace and stillness, for a moment, for just a moment.