

CLINT KELLY

THIS PROMISES TO BE A BUMPY RIDE.



The 17

Clint Kelly

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The 17

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Harbourlight Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First Harbourlight Edition, 2016

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-840-2

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Cheryll, sweet girl of my dreams, you give me
strength. Wait for me.

1

The voices began on St. Swithin's Day in the year AR 4.

The Number 17 lurched away from the bus stop, its aging tranny by now reduced to slipping gears and metal filings, and Doomsday Man knocked his head against the window and cursed.

Doomie, our nickname for him, got on the bus in typical fashion by crossing himself and declaring in reedy falsetto, "We're all gonna die!" He shuffled past Bill, the driver, paused at the printed warning sticker affixed to the hard plastic cowling that afforded Bill scant protection from whatever hell boarded the bus that day, and ran a thin, stained finger along the words.

"Don't touch the driver. Any act of violence against a bus driver is a felony."

Doomie's pale lips silently mumbled the words same as every day. The old ladies with canes and the kid in the wheelchair wanting by could just wait.

Twice through the text and Doomie took an empty seat on the right side of the bus, setting a small cardboard box on the floor at his feet.

The box, from brown paper wrapping to binding string to the way Doomie positioned it to the right of his feet each time, screamed "suspicious package." If you found it unattended, you would report this box.

The transit police said it was not a crime to possess such a box, provided that it wasn't wired to blow

everyone to kingdom come, nor was it a criminal act to position it just so at one's feet. Those same police were never around when Doomie, package under arm, crossed himself and declared our grim fate. Following a couple of complaints, they did take Doomie in for an "informational interview" and to X-ray the box. Its contents were judged benign, as was Doomie.

I repeat: the transit police did not ride with Doomie every day.

As noted, it was July 15, St. Swithin's Day. That overcast morning, I had taken community transit thirty miles north to the town of Everett, home of the Boeing assembly plant. Downtown Seattle doesn't have an inexpensive chain store that carries everything, but Everett does, so I used theirs.

I was after cheap cologne. It had been four years since my wife Ruthie passed on—After Ruthie, year four; hence the AR 4—and my natural thriftiness ran unchecked. Have you seen the price of cologne? At the chain store I was rewarded with a quart of body spray for half the price of the real foo-foo. Compared to the other smells of the 17 and its passengers, I was pleased to have marinated in a cloud of Striker 100 before the cashier could wish me a nice day.

I transferred to the 17 Metro at Third and Bell.

Bill recoiled the instant he got a whiff of me. "Whoa, Jim," came the cigarette growl, "ya smell like a cheap date."

"And you'd know?"

Old Bill married younger, but he and Roxanne were coming up on their twelfth anniversary. To me, never having met her, she was as elusive as the mysterious Mrs. Colombo, but to hear him tell it, she was Queen of the Nile.

He harrumphed at me, adjusted the seatbelt around the hip spread of twenty years in the saddle, checked the side-view mirror, and winked. "Plato said, 'Treat your wife like a million bucks and you'll never eat cold soup.'"

I rolled my eyes, settling into our familiar routine. "He did not say that."

"Who did then?"

"Plato's wife."

He didn't laugh so much as bark.

"So, Bill, how is your bride?"

His eyes softened, knowing how much I missed Ruthie. "She's in Arkansas. Another cousin, an eight-pounder this time."

"Who-whee, that's a keeper. Roxie sure is close to her relatives. Isn't this her third or fourth trip out there this year?"

Bill checked the rearview mirror to make sure all his passengers were seated before he pulled into the light afternoon traffic. Then he eyed me to see what I might be implying. My arched eyebrow must have given it away. He snorted. "Her family's a fertile bunch, I'll give ya that. But I got no worries that she's got something on the side. Have you seen those hill boys? Every other tooth missing."

I ignored the *don't touch* sticker and slapped him on the shoulder. Sue me.

~*~

A couple of weeks after Doomsday first started riding the bus every day, I asked Bill if he was afraid of guys like that. "You know, unstable."

Bill shook his head. "I'd take a busload of

Doomies. He pretty much keeps to himself, one of the more predictable ones. Every day, same thing. Crosses himself. Says we're all gonna die. Reads the warning sticker. Sits in the same place. Carries the same box."

Bill was too trusting. He was also Operator of the Year two years running. You didn't win that honor by looking down on people. Bill's philosophy said his passengers were his special charge and as long as they were on his bus, they were equals. Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, you respected your bus mates. Off the bus, duke it out if you must. On board Bill's Number 17, the Golden Rule was solid gold.

Doomie wore the same colorless, shabby clothes. Colorless in every way, that is, except for the socks. They were wine-red and appeared clean. One day he came with two new pair of wine-red socks pinned between the twine and the "suspicious" box. Each pair was still attached to its store cardboard and the little black plastic display hook.

Give him the cologne.

~*~

Twelve streets form the heart of Seattle's downtown business district. On this saint's day, I'd been mindlessly staring out the window, reciting the wry mnemonic taught me as a kid:

"Jefferson, James, Cherry, Columbia, Marion, Madison, Spring, Seneca, University, Union, Pike, and Pine. JCMSUP—Jesus Christ Made Seattle Under Protest."

We'd be bussing the streets in reverse order, north to south, but I'd learned them from my mother the way a lot of people had, south to north.

Give him the cologne.

It was more an impression than an audible voice. That it injected itself with such force into my wandering thoughts startled me enough to sit up and glance at Doomie sitting across the aisle from me. He sat there, head pressed against the back of the seat in front of him, as lost in his world as I'd been in mine.

This sort of thing, if it happened at all, would far more likely happen to Ruthie were she alive. Hunch, feminine intuition, psychic prescience, call it what you want, it was her baby. Like that time she told a disgruntled me to drive six lanes out of our way, but closer to a theatre venue so crowded that even the motorcycles were double-parked. There, in that sixth lane over, was the perfect parking spot—no disability restrictions, no risk of dings from neighboring car doors, no alcohol-fueled idiot to steal it. Simply a spacious, beautiful, uncontested parking spot close by a side exit that allowed us to escape the madness five minutes after closing curtain.

Give him the cologne.

Ruthie believed the truth would set you free. I was more inclined to insist it pass a polygraph first. I clutched the chain-store bag to my chest as if it were about to be snatched from me by an unseen hand. Had I been a loner long enough to hear voices, to receive "impressions" from the beyond? Shoot. I turned around.

Rainbow Man, pastel-colored hair, no musical device in sight, bopped to the beat in his head. Guitar Man, instrument case slung on his back, crunched ramen noodles straight from the package. Shy Stella covered her eyes and sank deeper into the seat. Roscoe waved. Virgil nodded. A smart-suited woman in gray

glared.

“Third and Pine.” Bill called the next stop, the last in the mnemonic. “Macy’s. Nordstrom. Westlake Center. Seattle Monorail. Pike Place Market.” The bus snorted to the curb and we lost Roscoe and the woman in gray. We gained Alfred Dreamstone, the Chief, and Tai Chi Lady, who sat, kicked out of black slip-on oxfords, stuck her legs and feet into the aisle, and flexed them, all the while massaging her temples as if still engaged in some ancient purification ritual.

We lurched back into traffic and while the exits and entrances had momentarily diverted me, they had not distracted the thought. *Give him the cologne.*

I was not interested in divine directives, nor was I into crazy. Low profile, keep your head down, make no waves—that was me in the second half of my life.

Buses were breeding grounds for grand and not-so-grand illusions. Many could operate that far more convincingly than me.

My days were more profitably spent as Fade into the Woodwork Guy. Maybe it was the residual effects of the pasta coma I’d purchased at the far end of the chain-store parking lot. The Spaghetti Palace had a “Meatball Express” that was seasoned to perfection by Mama Giuseppe.

“What are you lookin’ at, jerk face?”

Without realizing, I had let my eyes wander to Doomie and left them there. His socks matched the bloodshot of his eyes and the rising flush of his neck.

I rose, crossed the aisle, and plunked down beside him before I lost the nerve.

He stiffened.

My heartbeat trip-hammered quick, air precious hard to come by.

"I got you something." I reached into the bag and handed him the bottle of Striker 100. My mouth kept moving but no further words came. Then they did and I wished they hadn't. "Not that you smell or anything, because you don't." Like one of those movies where time stops and everything around goes into slow motion, I unfolded to my feet and braced for death.

Doomie's eyes glistened, the thumb of his right hand caressing the plastic bottle as if stroking a cat. His neck returned to normal, the high tide of tension flowing swiftly from the shore.

He returned a sardonic grin. "I got no cash."

"None needed. It's a gift."

The disdain slid away, replaced by flickers of doubt and acceptance and something else. Gratitude? He squeezed the handle, first tentative, then with the strength of a cow-milker. Chin to neck, he glistened with Striker 100.

"Third and University," Bill announced over the scratchy loudspeaker. "US Post Office, Benaroya Hall."

People flowed around and past me, bent on their appointed rounds.

Shy Stella moved up the aisle, eyes furtive as field mice.

I turned sideways so that she could pass, unsure of what I should do next.

Stella stopped, button nose twitching. She tipped forward on sandaled feet into the air space above the seat until Doomie was forced to look at her.

It was the first time I'd seen her make eye contact with anyone. Then she made eye contact with me and smiled.

Her eyes were baby-rabbit brown.

She looked again at Doomie. "You smell nice."

With stunning swiftness, he became pliable as the proverbial putty, transformed at once from alienated bomber boy to love-struck adolescent. He scooted over to make room for Stella and shoved his precious box to a forgotten location beneath the seat.

Did they have a history?

"Wasn't that your stop?" Stella asked with fragile uncertainty.

"Wasn't it yours?" Doomie's words were no less uncertain.

As quickly as Doomie yielded to domestication, Stella found her groove. "Want to walk around Chinatown with me?"

"OK."

"I like your socks."

"Thanks. Red's my favorite."

"Mine too. I saw you at the market. You were juggling Walla Walla sweet onions and English cucumbers. You're good."

"Gets me a little coin. I'm Greg Littleton."

"I know."

"How'd you know?"

"I'm Stella Richards. I'm clairvoyant." She giggled. Was Shy Stella actually flirting with him?

It was a few seconds before I realized that Doomie had spoken to me. "I said thanks, man." He pulled the bell and stood, the suspicious package held beneath one arm.

"Sure, yeah, you bet. I'm Jim."

Awkwardly, I jabbed a hand in his direction.

He slapped it sideways in a street high-five. "I know."

"How'd you know?"

Doomie looked at Stella. "Stella and me, we're

what you call clairvoyant.”

I left them at Third and Main, the last stop in the Ride Free Zone. Before she got off, Stella whispered in my ear, “I’ve been praying for weeks that he’d pay attention to me. Thanks!”

They headed off in the direction of the warren of ethnic restaurants and stores known as the International District, and me to my volunteer job at Kids Safari, a nonprofit collector of clothing for disadvantaged children.

“Well, Ruthie,” I said, sorting shirts and pants to size when I got to work. “That was something.”

Coincidence, that’s all. In thirty years of marriage, my sweet Ruthie and her big heart were bound to rub off on me. Voices! Yeah, right. This was easily explained. After all, I wasn’t without compassion.

A clear-cut case of paying it forward. Call it a random act of kindness. It worked this time, although Doomie could as easily have told me to get out of his face and mind my own business.

I was relieved. Glad for Doomie and Stella, I guess. You had to see the transformation to believe she was safe with him. But more glad for me, really. Glad that it was no wacky visitation from beyond after all, certainly not the voice of God. They could give my spot at the Rubber Room Inn to someone else who heard voices from the TV telling them to set fires or rob banks. I was safe, an ordinary joe who read the signs and connected the dots that helped two painfully shy people find a little common ground. No big deal.

The City on the Bus. It’s what I call the misfit irregulars who use transit to do the few errands required of their threadbare existence, but mostly to have something to do, somewhere to go, a few other

misfits to gossip with. It helps pass the time, gives their lives a little meaning. It is a rolling community afforded some dignity by tax dollars and a metropolitan transit authority that believes in providing a way to get around even for the least of these.

It helps give my life meaning.

I'm glad I learned Doomie's real name. Maybe something would come of it and two of the most unlikely candidates on the 17 would, in street parlance, "hook up" for time and eternity.

Ruthie had made a romantic out of me.

Nope, I did not want or need voices.

A couple of things still nagged at me. What made me, no Marine commando, get out of that seat and speak to Greg Littleton, alias Doomsday? Why had Stella, the mousiest girl on the planet, made a beeline for Dangerous Doomie, the "we're all gonna die" guy?

Bill saw it all happen in his rearview mirror and once I was back in my seat gave me a "what the blazes?" stare.

Truth be told, there was no way that on my own I'd shell out ten bucks plus tax for cologne I traveled sixty miles and two hours roundtrip to purchase and then on some whim hand it over to a red-sock-wearing, freaky guy who was on everybody's watchlist. Nope. No way. Nothing good ever happened to people who heard voices. It was the meatballs talking. Chalk the whole thing up to a freaky St. Swithin's Day. The good bishop of Winchester rolled over in his grave and we felt the bump.

Of course, had I known then what was coming down the street straight for me, I might have come to a very different conclusion.

2

Things got weird again today.

Two days post–St. Swithin’s, the rain came in fits and starts and up went my tan pocket umbrella. We’d had our seventy-two hours of summer sometime in late June and July, and the Northwest was at its unpredictable best.

I’m a burly guy and could have used a bit more covering. Still, a bargain’s a bargain. The little umbrella, purchased at a sidewalk discount, gamely, and barely, kept the drops off me as I waited for the 17.

An older blue-and-white GMC pickup pulled to the curb and out stepped a pretty young woman in a Siberian-tiger-print coat, tailored pantsuit the color of green tea, long black hair, straight and damp from the shower. She shut the passenger door, waving to the young man behind the wheel. He flipped her a wave, checked his side-view mirror, gunned the motor, and whipped a U-turn into the northbound lanes of Third Street.

“Care to share the umbrella?”

She reminded me a little of Ruthie back in the day —bright, direct eyes, sure of herself. I shifted to accommodate.

“Thanks.” She joined me under the umbrella. “When I told my boyfriend I’d forgotten mine, he said maybe that older guy will be nice and share his. He had you pegged.”

“Old?”

"Nice." The word shot back the way Ruthie would have done it, without hesitation, sassy with humor.

"You're not from around here?"

"I've been in school in France for two years. Graphic fashion design. Finishing up here. How'd you know?"

"Locals don't forget their umbrellas. If they're caught out without one, it's because they chose to leave it home. We're a defiant bunch, especially when it comes to our weather."

Ruthie would have given the girl the umbrella to keep. I wasn't Ruthie.

The 17 snorted to the curb, lowering hydraulically to a more convenient boarding height. A kneeling bus, they call it. Today it reminds me of an elephant curtseying. Yesterday it settled with a groan that put me in mind of Sister Sanchez kneeling for Mass at the mission.

The girl sat in the front side-facing bench seats, and I took a spot in a front-facing seat across the aisle.

Knitting Needles Lady was in the seat ahead, calm as moss, clicking away on a lime-green sweater.

Adjacent to the girl were two older security guards coming off night shift. They leaned into one another like two old tugboats knocking the barnacles from one another's hulls. Without transition, they went from talking about the rising incidence of suicide among New York City cops to quitting smoking.

"The patch, that's how I'm going to quit," said the tall, bent one. 'And a glass of orange juice every day."

"What's the juice for? You don't swallow the dang thing," said the shorter, squinty-eyed one.

"I know that, genius. Somehow the nicotine from the patch works with the orange juice and the craving

dies.”

“Yeah.” Shorty nodded sagely, practically knocking heads with his seatmate. “The day I die is the day I quit smoking for good!”

The girl, who had been checking her yellow-and-white-checked pocketbook, stood and walked to the front to speak to Bill.

The two old rental guards surveyed her every move, the topics of suicide and smoking cessation on hold.

When she returned to her seat, she tore open a Band-Aid strip and wrapped it around a slightly bloodied right index finger.

She smiled at the rent-a-cops. “Cut my finger on a new dollar bill.”

Shorty slapped Tall Guard’s knee. “Glad it weren’t no twenty or we’d be lookin’ at amputation!” He wheezed a chuckle, which Tall Guard leaned in and shared, knocking a few more barnacles loose.

I’m guessing they were processing a few pints of McGinty’s Finest with which they’d celebrated end of shift.

The girl looked right past them at me. “It would have been especially ironic since the driver tells me that this is the Ride Free Zone and fare is not required.”

I smiled but said nothing.

G’s up. C’s up. B’s down below. What did that even mean?

Three stops later, I might have ignored the graffiti on the *Welcome to Seattle* sign affixed to the seat ahead of me but for the fact that it glowed. I mean glowed like neon, like reflective paint, like white moon in black velvet sky.

Get off the bus at the next stop.

Not knowing how I knew the two “signs” were connected, as sure as Lewis needs Clark, my heart, no matter how riddled with holes, knew with zero margin for error that “the voices” had returned, and that I wanted no part of them, especially in twos. My palms sweated, my chest thudded. Air was again in short supply.

I sat on my hands so that I would not be even remotely tempted to pull the stop cord. Schizophrenically, I prayed to the same God who I suspected knew where the messages were coming from. I was expected at the mission. Breakfast didn’t serve itself. *Leave me alone.*

From the corner of my eye, I watched the right arm of the Siberian-tiger-print coat rise into the air and a bandaged index finger pull the cord. I sensed her staring at me and glanced in her direction.

“My stop.” She said it apologetically, as if somehow responsible for my discomfort. “The Fashion Design School.”

Why did I nod? We had just met and were not accountable to one another.

I stood and followed her off the bus.

“Thank you again for sharing your umbrella. Do you work around here?”

“I, um, volunteer at the Gospel Mission twice a week. Serve breakfast. Clean up. Serve lunch. Clean up. Help with chapel.” I sounded like an idiot.

She smiled and nodded. *And waited.* “That must be a lot of work.”

I nodded. “Hundreds of meals a day.”

We waited.

“Street folks need a little hope and comfort each

day," I said as if it needed to be said.

Walk west on Seneca.

Frantically, I searched for a coffee shop. To hide. To disappear. In a city of ten thousand Starbucks, not a hint of java anywhere.

"Well, you probably have to get to class and I need to brown the sausages. I'm Jim, by the way, and I wish you all success." I stuck out my hand.

She took my cold, clammy paw into her smooth, gentle touch and made eye contact. "I'm Greta. Listen to your heart, Jim." She turned to go.

"Walk with me?" I blurted. In for a penny of madness, in for a pound.

She looked to be searching for the right way to shut me down.

Hurry!

"Well, I guess I could, as far as my school anyway. It's just down Seneca a couple of blocks towards the water."

West on Seneca.

We walked in silence, hands in pockets, listening to a city come alive. Delivery trucks, their warning backup beepers echoing among the tall buildings, brought the day's produce and office supplies. Jets from nearby Sea-Tac International Airport glided overhead, the Sounder commuter train clanged through a nearby intersection, and gulls wheeled on the breeze and cried their business.

The stylish exterior of the multi-storied Seattle Fashion Design School rose from the corner in pale pink and blue pastel. I felt foolish for having walked her to school and angry at irrational impressions.

I have lived alone too long. I am cracking up.

Turn in here. Hurry!