

# In the Dark

by C. P. Boyko

Here's what happened: I arrived at the Sandstone at about a quarter to seven and, after a quick look around upstairs, settled down to a pint at a table near the entrance. At five to, I experienced the first perfunctory pang of worry that you wouldn't show. Then my imagination, which seems to have something against me, suggested that perhaps you'd thought I meant the Sandstone on Iverness, which is after all just a block and a half off Eighth *Street*—an almost conceivable mistake, given that all I'd asked was whether you knew the Sandstone on Eighth.

So I waited until exactly one minute to seven before slamming down the remains of my beer and dashing out into the street like a drunk fleeing the onset of DTs. By eight minutes past seven I was satisfied that you were not at the other Sandstone either. So I dashed back out into the street. With a little less gusto I returned to the original rendezvous point by about a quarter after seven. There I drank another beer and watched the door, and drank another beer and watched the door. Then I went home.

Did you perhaps turn up at one minute past seven and leave disappointed thirteen or less minutes later?

I'd like to think it was just a misunderstanding.

A few weeks ago I was making french fries. I was cutting potatoes and one of them got away from me, rolled off the table and onto the floor. I finished chopping the others before pushing my chair back and bending over to look for the errant spud. It wasn't under the table. It wasn't under my chair. It was nowhere to be seen. I got down on my hands and knees and searched every square inch of the kitchen floor. The potato had been too big to roll under the stove or the fridge, but I pulled both appliances away from the

wall anyway. I carried all the chairs into the living room. I shifted the table to one side of the kitchen, then the other. I even looked under the sink—as though a potato could, if properly motivated, open a cupboard door and slip inside. But it was not hiding out among the detergent bottles either.

A potato disappeared in my kitchen. But potatoes don't just disappear.

I can't explain it. It still bewilders me. I would probably pay a great price to learn the fate of that vegetable. It's not what I might learn; the explanation would be sure to be mundane. It's just that not-knowing is maddening.

I don't know what to think. Or rather, I don't know what *not* to think. Every possibility, every interpretation, every story I come up with seems utterly plausible at the moment it occurs to me. But they're all built on sand.

Why won't you pick up the phone?

Maybe you thought the more compassionate act was to break it off clean, to amputate the limb at the joint. Or maybe you thought it gentler, less injurious to my fragile self-respect, to permit me to cherish a glimmer of hope that I had not been stood up, had not been rejected.

In fact, I'm perfectly capable of handling rejection. My self-respect is quite robust.

I don't really need or want to know why I'm wrong for you. After all, I could never put words to what I felt was missing in any of my exes (those times when there was something missing) and would hardly have expected them to be any more eloquent about my own flaws and failings. What good would a critique do, anyway? We can change ourselves only superficially, can improve ourselves, I sometimes think, not at all. By my age, and perhaps even your age, each of us has been incarcerated within her personality, has been left to forever pace the narrow cell of his character.

I don't need you to tell me what was lacking. I only need to know that something was.

Maybe you're on holiday. Or maybe there's been an illness. A death.

I don't know what to think. Your phone has been disconnected.

This can't be about me.

Do you know how many used bookstores there are in this city?

Twenty-seven. Four have someone named Angela working for them.

Naturally, you never told me your last name.

To be honest, I'm a little afraid to visit these shops. I'm a little afraid of what expression you might have on your face when you look up from the till or the shelving cart and see me standing there, dipping into Hardy or Bergson, nodding my head appreciatively, pretending to be transported by Hardy's divine prose or humbled by Bergson's perspicacity.

So I walk by, glance in windows, and do not see you.

I'm not pining for you. I liked what we had, I think, what there was of it. But now, to be honest, I hardly recall what you look like.

I am sick of being alone, though that's not what this is about. I don't know you well enough to know if you'd be a cure for solitude.

I'm only curious. I have an inquisitive mind. I am a scientist, after all. Science strives to shed light on those parts of the universe that remain veiled in darkness. Science pursues truth impersonally, dispassionately, disinterestedly.

"The aim of science," wrote Hegel, "is to divest the objective world of its strangeness and to make us more at home in it."

I'm not really lonely. I'm homesick.

I called one of the stores and asked, "Do you have an Angela who works there?"

"Yes," said the voice on the line, "this is she."

It didn't sound like you but nevertheless I panicked.

“Sorry, I think I must have the wrong number.”

Brilliant.

It’s an unofficial tradition in computer science that the first output of any new program should be the two words: “Hello, world.”

I remember the first program I ever wrote, it must be nearly twenty years ago now, in an antiquated programming language aptly named BASIC. It was two lines long and ran as follows:

```
10 print “Hello, world!”
```

```
20 goto 10
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This innocuous-looking program caused a cataract of “Hello, world!”s to spill down the left edge of the screen, ad infinitum, effectively crashing the computer.

At the time I thought it was funny. Now I think there’s something depressing about a dumb machine stubbornly blurting out an endless stream of cheerful salutations to an oblivious, utterly indifferent world.

There are cafés across the street from two of the bookstores and a little parklet across from another. That left one shop uncongenial to surreptitious surveillance. I finally worked up the courage to go inside.

In an old jean jacket Chuck left behind one Christmas, a baseball cap that I paid too much for at a Sportmart, and with contact lenses on behind cheap aviator sunglasses, I don’t look much like the man you met twice.

I’m incapable of walking out after half an hour of browsing without buying anything. Already I’ve spent almost seventy dollars on books I’ll probably never read. Seventy dollars I can ill afford, now that I’ve used up the last of my paid sick leave for this year.

Christmas gifts. Do you like Thomas Hardy?

This Bergson chap isn’t half bad in spots. My favourite lines so far:

Our freedom, in the very movements by which it is affirmed,  
creates the growing habits that will stifle it if it fails to renew

itself by a constant effort. It is dogged by automatism. The most living thought becomes frigid in the formula that expresses it. The word turns against the idea.

Though it contradicts itself. Here, at least, for once, the word serves the idea.

Besides, what alternative do we have?

I think I found you. Or maybe I should say that you found me.

I was puttering around Bob's Book Nook in my undercover outfit when I received a sharp tap on the shoulder.

"Can I help you with anything?"

The way he (Bob?) asked made it clear that he already knew the answer and could give it to me if I didn't.

"No thanks, just browsing really."

"Are you looking for anyone in particular?"

That "anyone" sent my heart clattering.

"I don't know. I'm really just looking around."

"I noticed. What's your name?"

"Jim," I said, before the strangeness of the question could occur to me. "Say, do you know what time it is?"

He raised the wristwatch arm automatically but overrode the reflex by keeping his eyes fixed on me.

"I have an appointment at two," I said. I could feel my own watch dangling just below the left cuff of my brother's jacket.

"It's well past three," he said, without having to look.

"Oh Christ," I muttered without much feeling, "thanks, sorry, I have to—excuse me."

Why would you tell your boss about me? You should have just talked to *me*.

"Listen, I work at Bob's Book Nook, but please don't come around. I'm sorry I didn't respond, but [circle one] (a) I was called out of town sud-

denly; (b) I've been in the hospital; (c) my computer crashed and I forgot my voice mail password and then the phone company cut off my service; (d) I was trying to let you down gently; (e) I wasn't really attracted to you physically; (f) my ex and I have decided to get back together; (g) aren't I a little too young for you?"

He did say "anyone" and not "anything," didn't he?

I spent most of this weekend sitting in coffee shops or walking along the river. Thinking. Making up stories.

I hate not being master of my own thoughts. There's nowhere I can go to get away from them.

I know that if I were to see you or talk to you it would probably only make matters worse.

But I would make it worse. I don't care. I'd make everything worse if I could.

"Bob's Book Nook," said someone other than Bob.

"Hi, I was wondering if Angela Roberts is working today."

"You mean Angela Hastings?"

"I don't think so. No. It can't be. I have the wrong number."

There's a "HASTINGS, A" in the book. The phone number's not your old disconnected one. There's an address too.

I sent you a letter.

I regret now the tortuous wording and the overly formal tone. But naturally I wanted to impress you with my calm, my reasonableness, my imperturbable sanity.

I didn't put my name or return address on the envelope. Not that I'm hiding anything. I was afraid you might toss it in the garbage, unopened. Of course I can't think of anything preventing you from tossing the thing after

one quick glance at my name, lying there so vulnerably at the bottom of the third page. I have no way of knowing if you read a single word. You can't make someone listen and you can never know if they hear. All speech is prayer.

I got your machine. Your voice on the outgoing message sounded different. Maybe I just don't remember what you sound like.

I didn't leave a message. I didn't know what, short of everything, to say.

I would like to tell you everything. I would like to open myself up. I would like to show you my organs.

Where should I begin? You didn't read my letter. It's sitting here beside me on my desk, unopened. I can't understand that. The lack of curiosity.

I came by. You weren't home, at first.

I only stepped into the vestibule out of an obscure desire to see your name listed in the directory. There it was, two thirds of the way down the first column, for all the world to see. "Hastings Angela." I found it strangely touching, if also faintly obscene, the unguarded nonchalance of this little exposure, contrasting so strongly with the paranoid secrecy you apparently reserve for me.

Someone else entered the lobby. Reflexively, my fingers flew to the number pad. Because I had just been staring at it, I entered your code in a sort of delirious panic. (What if that was you who had just come in and now stood fumbling with her keys three feet behind me?) The intercom had just begun to ring when the woman behind me pulled open the door unnecessarily wide and, as a common gesture of politeness, held it open for a fraction of a second longer than necessary. Casually I reached out and caught the door before it swung shut. The intercom stopped ringing. I watched the woman, your buildingmate (it is appropriate that we have no word for these strangers, our accidental neighbours), stride purposefully into an elevator, jab a button, then stand glaring out at me. Still holding the door, I entered

your code again, looked at my watch, bounced up and down in place a little, just like a man who'd come to visit someone he would be disappointed to find not at home. The elevator doors slid slowly shut like hands brought together in prayer. The intercom clicked off unapologetically, mid-purr.

I looked outside. The wet sky was fading from weak gold to grey above the leaf-strewn street. I went inside.

I wouldn't have entered if that woman had not, however briefly, held the door open for me. I was only being civil, only acknowledging her courtesy. Don't you feel obliged to put a little extra hurry in your step when someone lingers to hold a door for you, even though it's actually less trouble to pull the door open yourself when, in your own good time, you reach it?

I would never have climbed the stairs to your floor if you had answered the intercom. And I wouldn't have knocked if I'd heard any sound, even that of a television, coming from inside your apartment. And I would never have tried the doorknob if there'd been any response to the knock. In fact, I'd probably have sprinted away down the hall if I'd heard so much as approaching footsteps or the sound of your cat rubbing herself against the door. But there was nothing.

People don't leave their doors unlocked. It was so unexpected, so very odd, that I felt a visceral premonition that something was wrong. The thought occurred to me that you might be hurt. In one suffocatingly vivid flash I even saw you dead inside your apartment. You'd been lying there on the linoleum (I saw you in the bathroom, for some reason), lying there for weeks. Since the night we were supposed to meet, in fact. And wouldn't that have explained everything?

Pushing your door open and stepping inside, I half expected to be repulsed by the nauseating odour of decaying human flesh. Instead, I got roast chicken. I took this to be the memory of a meal, not the promise of one. If I'd turned right, gone into the kitchen first, I might have noticed the light on the stove.

I turned left, into the living room. Your cat was curled up on the sofa. She (to me, all cats are female until proven male; dogs the opposite) began



humming like a radiator when I petted her but didn't crack an eyelid. I took this as a sort of welcome, I guess. I started looking around.

Where I grew up, we had one movie theatre. They screened exactly two movies a month. One show on a Friday, the same show the following Saturday, then a different flick the next Friday, and so on. There was no money in it. Everything was run by volunteers. Half a dozen men took turns threading scuffed-up reels into the projector and half a dozen women took turns watching the cashbox and supervising the couple dozen kids who took turns running the concession stand. My parents, I guess, were among the civic-minded. My dad was among the half-dozen men, my mom among the half-dozen women. And I, despite my limp protestations, was among the couple dozen kids. That meant we had a key to the theatre.

I borrowed it a few times. Mostly I just sat in the darkened theatre (I didn't know how to turn on the lights) and dreamed up my own movies. Sometimes I helped myself to stale popcorn. A couple of times I relieved the concession stand's change-drawer of its dimes. Once I filled my coat with Snickers, Oh Henry's, wine gums, jawbreakers, and chocolate-covered cherries (which I didn't even like, and threw away rather than give them to my brother).

These little misdeeds gave me a thrill of a particular kind. When I unlocked the theatre door, after glancing casually up and down the street, I always felt a warm tingling in my belly that at first I confused with fear. Later, however, when I dumped my loot onto my bed and sat down to admire it, the pleasurable twinge I'd felt revealed its true nature. I discovered I had an erection.

I felt the same dimly erotic tug when I started looking around your apartment. Not an erection or the prelude to one, but a brief, not unpleasant prickly feeling in the gonads.

Why should going where one's not supposed to go be so exciting?

You scared the living hell out of me when you came back. And you can be sure the *frisson* vanished, just as it would have if my mom had walked in on me revelling in my plunder all those years ago. There's nothing sexy about getting caught.

My reconnaissance hadn't progressed beyond the living room. I'd only had time to stroke your cat, dreamily admire your furnishings, and discover my letter on the back of your sofa. Face up, unopened, like a piece of evidence being preserved for trial.

Then the sound of the doorknob turning, the hinges creaking, brought a scream up my throat like a bubble of blood. I must have swallowed it.

I ducked into a room, what turned out to be your bedroom, and, with all the inspired resourcefulness of the mortally petrified, hid myself behind the door. My lungs were labouring loudly in their effort to bring extra oxygen to my thundering heart. I battled with them and won, but only ended up more out of breath. For what felt like an hour, I could hear nothing but the thudding and wheezing of my own body. I was self-deafened and self-blinded. You could have walked in on me at any moment.

Slowly the clangour subsided, slowly the innocent domestic sounds of you preparing a meal—tap tap tap, clink clink, chop chop chop, snick snick—began to reach me through the fog of terror in my brain. You were whistling. The tune, which I've still got in my head, was maddeningly familiar. The odd thing about recognition is that it's felt most acutely when incomplete. No sense of familiarity, no *déjà vu* washes over me at the sight of my mother. But that woman on the bus . . . *Where* have I seen her? It's enough to drive a person crazy. I've spent hours trying to recall names or bring to mind specific words. It seems appropriate that it is the *tip of the tongue* that burrows so compulsively into all the unfamiliar nooks and grottoes of the mouth, no matter how tender those pockets, no matter how painful the probing. What were you whistling? Mozart, maybe, or one of Mendelssohn's string symphonies. Maybe this will be the first thing I ask you. The second.

I didn't know what to do. I couldn't stand there all night, but neither could I slip out unnoticed. Unless you took a shower . . . But your bathrobe was hanging on the back of the bedroom door, three inches from my face.

As for the blue bottle, the vase, the one on top of your armoire, the one filled with the pink plastic flowers and the unplastic pussy willows (my mother used to pick those too; I can still see them in their jam jar, on the ta-

ble between us as we ate)—I can only plead fear, fuzzy thinking, self-defence. At the time, it seemed prudent and rational to arm myself. What if you came at me with a knife? I didn't know what you might be capable of. After all, I hardly know you.

I thought you were still in the kitchen. You surprised me. There you were, there we both were, facing each other in the doorway.

I don't think I would have done it if you hadn't screamed like that.

I can understand it, of course. Suddenly face to face, in your own home, with . . . who? A thief? Stalker? Abductor?

Tell me—*this* will be the first thing I ask—did you recognize me? Did you have time to, before you screamed? Because I don't think so. I don't think you could have. I hardly recognized *you*. We'd met in dark bars, weeks ago. You'd done something to your hair.

I think I can understand how you must have felt. But that scream! To scream like that—what good does it do? What does it *say*?

Was it a cry for help? A cry for help is something, at least. An attempt at communication of a sort. At the time, though, it sounded less like language than a yelp of pain. As though I'd already hit you.

As a cry for help it wasn't wasted. Almost immediately there was a knock at the door. This time it was perhaps good that I wasn't thinking straight, that I called out: "Come in, come in, the door's not locked," because your neighbour helped me carry you down to my car. I couldn't have done it alone. I wouldn't have tried.

I told him, your buildingmate, that you'd tripped over the cat, hit your head, smashed the vase, screamed and passed out when you saw the blood. I don't think he completely believed me. But I was obviously distressed, lunging about your apartment like a lunatic. I kept insisting that we had to do something, had to get you help, take you to a hospital. So don't blame him. What would you have done in his shoes, ask to see my ID?

None of this was an act. I really did, at that moment, have every intention of rushing you to the hospital. In fact, it was the only thought in my head. I'd checked that you were breathing, that your heart was beating, but I

had no idea what kind of damage I might have done. What if I'd cracked your skull or something?

What if I hadn't?

The only thing that terrified me more than the thought that you might not come to was the thought that you would, there in the back seat of my car, while I was driving.

When you started mumbling I almost veered off the road. I was relieved, of course, that you were okay or were going to be. But I was soon overwhelmed by alarm. You were about to wake up. What if you started screaming again? Hurt, bleeding, in the back of some strange car. How you would have screamed!

I'd never given much thought to how difficult it is to make someone who doesn't want to be unconscious unconscious. There had been times when I'd been ill and exhausted and wanted nothing more than to be nothing for a few hours. And I'd been unable to knock myself out. The body fails us, hurts us, falls apart on us. But when we want it to just go to sleep, the body has ideas of its own.

Pretty soon you were forming words and half sentences. Then, quite clearly, you asked, "Where are we going?"

I didn't know what else to do.

I would have cleaned you up a bit and brought something down for you to eat if you'd only stayed blacked out a little longer. If you hadn't started trying to stand up. If you hadn't given me that sad, hateful, bewildered look and asked, "Why are you doing this?"

I'm sorry about the rope and the gag. It seems cartoonish, I know—something out of a gangster movie. But I didn't know what else to do. I needed time. Time to explain myself.

I just looked at the clock. Almost eleven. You really will be hungry by now. I could order something. I'm not much of a cook. I guess I don't understand what people see in food. Eating bores me. I make whatever's fast and easy. Bacon and eggs, grilled cheese, soup, french fries. I take a lot of empty cans to the recycling depot.

"Why are you doing this?" That's what you asked me.

Why am I doing this? Why am I doing what? What am I doing?

I'm trying to explain. Trying to tell you everything. Trying to make you understand.

Haven't you been paying attention?

Maybe it's my fault. Maybe I should start again. From the beginning. Tell you everything. I'll be clear. I'll choose my words with care. I'll get it right. The word shall not turn against the idea.

But where do I start? How far back should I go? This morning? That day in Bob's Book Nook? The night you stood me up? (*Did you stand me up?* I still don't know. After all this, I'm still in the dark.) The night we met?

The last time I was really drawn to a woman? The last time I was on a date?

The day I met my wife? The day I proposed to her? The day she left?

The delirious afternoon I lost my virginity to Eloise Parker, who was supposed to be my brother's girl?

The moment I discovered that there was, after all, nothing wrong with me—that I too was capable of loving and of being loved?