

Déjà Vu

Dirk Thrasher lay in the fuzzy boundary between sleep and wakefulness, trying to will his body back to sleep. He briefly opened one eye to look at the clock, but he clamped it shut again when the brilliant light of a sunlit morning seared his brain. His brain was already throbbing from an overabundance of gin the night before. Each beat of his heart made his brain pound against his skull, painfully trying to shatter the bone that confined it. His eyeballs felt like they were being forced out of their sockets and his mouth tasted like a dehydrated cesspool. He desperately wanted to return to the numb nothingness of sleep, but his head hurt too much to allow it. His bladder added to his misery, ceaselessly demanding to be relieved. He wasn't certain his churning stomach could stand the turmoil of becoming vertical, but he had to chance it. He slowly eased himself into a sitting position without opening his eyes, then even more slowly he straightened his legs and stood up. Opening his eyes just enough to dimly make out the disarray of his room, he shuffled into the bathroom.

When he stumbled back to his bed he felt slightly better, but not much. He could read the clock now. It was a quarter to eleven in the morning, although he wasn't exactly certain which morning. Was it Tuesday? Maybe it was Wednesday. He was pretty certain it was 1938. The empty gin bottle next to his bed might have something to do with his uncertainty. The fact that it was empty told him there would be no "hair of the dog" relief this morning. In fairness to himself, he had spent most of the previous night tailing a suspect, only to discover he had no connection to his current case. That woman who hired him - what was her name? - Judy Clairmont - had only said she thought the man *might* have been involved in the disappearance of her brother. Well, she was wrong. That man wasn't involved, but Dirk still had no idea where her brother was. The rest of her family and the police were convinced her brother had stolen her diamond brooch and run off. She couldn't accept the idea that her brother had done that, and she hired Dirk to find her brother, prove he was innocent, and find the brooch. He'd blown through most of the \$200 advance she'd given him, only some of it on gin, and he was no closer to solving the mystery now than he was when he started. Maybe he should look for the brooch, instead of the brother. He could hit the pawn shops today, but first he had to get rid of this headache. Maybe coffee would help. . .

The coffee can on the counter was empty. The used grounds in the coffee pot were moldy, as were the few items he found in the refrigerator. He looked at the handful of bills and coins on the dresser and decided he had enough money to go to a diner, so he splashed water on his face and dragged a razor over the stubble. The mirror seemed to highlight the wrinkles in his rumpled suit and he wished he had taken it off last night, before he passed out on the bed. But, when you only have one suit and you've lost the laundry ticket for your spare shirt, your dressing options are limited. He grabbed his hat and headed out the door.

As he was locking the door behind him he had a strange feeling, like he'd done this before. "Déjà vu" the French called it. He chuckled to himself as he realized it shouldn't be strange that he had that feeling. This wasn't the first time he had passed out on his bed and then staggered out for coffee. He had indeed done this before. Many times.

He was ahead of the lunch crowd, so he had no trouble finding a table at the diner. The rich aroma of frying bacon made him realize he was hungry as well as hung over. The waitress tossed a newspaper on the table and poised an expectant pencil over her order pad.

“I’ll have scrambled eggs and bacon with black coffee” he said. “And keep the coffee coming, Sugar.” She acknowledged his order with a slight nod and rushed off. *Why did I call her Sugar?* he wondered. He was not the kind of guy who used terms of affection for women, especially women he didn’t know. Something didn’t ring true. He had the déjà vu feeling again, only it wasn’t quite the feeling that he’d done this before. It was a feeling that he’d done something very similar to this, but in a different place and a different time.

He shook off the feeling and looked at the newspaper. Today *was* a Tuesday. August 16th, 1938 to be exact. Well, at least he had only passed out for the night. There weren’t any “lost days” this time. The waitress brought him coffee which he gratefully sipped while he looked at the paper. He skimmed all the pages, but there wasn’t anything about his client, her brother, or the brooch, and that was all that interested him today. He tossed the paper aside in disgust. Fortunately he didn’t have long to brood before the waitress brought him his eggs and refilled his coffee.

He looked around the diner as he ate his breakfast. Again, he had the uneasy feeling that he’d done this before. He tried to shake it, reminding himself that he’d eaten breakfast here many times before, but something still felt strange. He felt as though, he’d been here before but the place had changed. That was it. This wasn’t supposed to be a diner, it was supposed to be a saloon in the old west. And a cowboy was about to walk through the door, look at the waitress, and say “Howdy, Ma’m. Whatcha got to wash the trail dust outa my throat?”

Just then the door opened and a construction worker strode into the diner. He looked at the waitress and said “Mornin’, beautiful. I need some coffee to wash the cement dust out of my throat.”

Dirk finished his breakfast in a daze as he tried to figure out what was going on. This was more than just déjà vu. With déjà vu you felt as if something you’d just experienced had happened before. You didn’t actually predict what was about to happen. And you certainly didn’t feel that the setting was wrong, that a diner was supposed to be a saloon. He left money for the breakfast beside his plate, picked up his hat, and walked out the door, still trying to understand why things didn’t feel right.

He was only a few steps from the diner when he felt someone tap his shoulder from behind. He turned and saw a tall, ugly man wearing a dark overcoat and a fedora. He was big all over, with a face that looked like rough-hewn oak. His nose was bent slightly to one side, and his lips curled in a sneer.

“You’re poking your nose into things that don’t concern you” he said.

“I’ll poke my nose wherever I want” Dirk replied. *Why did I say that?* He wondered. *This guy could easily beat me to a pulp. And he apparently knows something about the case. If I just keep him talking he might let something slip. A name, a place, anything*

that would give me a clue. Or maybe I could tail him and see who he's working for. But I can't do that if I keep mouthing off and he puts me in the hospital.

"I got a message for you" the man said. "Lay off."

Who is sending that message? Dirk's brain screamed. Who are you working for? But even as these words were echoing in his mind, he heard his lips say "I've got a message for you. Drop dead!"

The big man tensed and unbuttoned his overcoat. "That sounds like a threat" he said. Dirk flipped his suit coat behind the .45 he carried at his waist. He wanted to warn the man that he was armed, but more importantly, he wanted to be able to grab it in a hurry.

"He's got a gun!" a lady in a green hat screamed. People scattered and left the two of them alone, on the sidewalk. The big man jerked a gun out of a shoulder holster but Dirk shot him before he could aim. The man doubled over, fired a shot harmlessly into the street, and collapsed on the sidewalk. The lady in the green hat raised her clenched hands to her face and screamed. A man with a doctor bag ran out of the diner and knelt briefly beside the sprawled figure.

"He's dead!" the doctor said. "You killed him."

Dirk's mind was in a turmoil. He wanted to scream *I didn't want to do it! I tried to warn him! It was self-defense!* but his lips wouldn't form the words. Something forced him to simply tuck the gun back into his waistband, turn, and walk away without a word.

People stared at him in disbelief and backed out of his way as he walked. Suddenly, they relaxed, ignored him, and went about their business. A voice behind him said "Well, that didn't work."

Dirk turned and saw the man he had just shot getting up from the sidewalk and brushing off his coat. "It didn't work as a Western" the man said. "And it doesn't work now."

"What are you doing?" Dirk asked. Even as he spoke, it struck him that this was an odd question to ask of a man you had just killed.

"It's OK" the man said. "He's stopped writing and is getting ready for bed."

"Who has stopped writing" Dirk asked in confusion.

"The author" the dead man replied. "The one who's writing this story." He looked at the confusion in Dirk's eyes. "You don't know where you are, do you?" Dirk shook his head no. "You must have gone through a major character change" the man continued. "That wipes out most of your memory. You're a character in a short story. This is about the fifth rewrite, and it's still not right."

"I had the feeling that something wasn't right" Dirk said. "It was like déjà vu, only I had the feeling that things had happened before but under different circumstances."

"That's typical" the dead man said. "When he rewrote your character he kept bits and pieces of the old character, so you remember bits and pieces of the story."

“I hope he publishes the story soon” said the lady in the green hat. “And I hope it will be a classic that will be read by millions of people for hundreds of years. That would be like living forever.”

“But won’t you just be doing the same thing over and over?” Dirk asked.

“Oh, no!” the woman replied. “Because we exist in the minds of the readers, and the story is fresh to each new reader. And every reader visualizes us differently. The author showed this story to his girlfriend last week, and I was ever so much more beautiful in her imagination.” She looked down coyly and brushed a piece of lint off her skirt. “And I was rich” she said. She looked back up with a hint of disapproval. “His girlfriend was the one who suggested he change the story from a Western to a hard-boiled detective story.”

“You’d just better just hope it gets published” the dead man said. “Most stories aren’t.”

The woman in the green hat dissolved into tears. “I don’t want to be an unpublished character” she cried. “I don’t want to spend eternity unknown and unrealized.”

The waitress gently wrapped her arms around the lady and tried to comfort her. “There, there” she said. “It wouldn’t be so bad. If no one’s reading us or thinking about us, we simply don’t exist. I’ve heard it’s just like sleeping without dreaming.”

“If we don’t exist unless someone is thinking about us, then why do we exist now?” Dirk asked.

“The author is thinking about us” the dead man said. “He thinks about us most of the time, even when he’s not writing. Right now he’s brushing his teeth and worrying that the story still isn’t right. In particular, he doesn’t think your part rings true.”

“I felt that way myself” Dirk said. “But if I’m just a figment of his imagination, how can anything I do not seem right?”

“We’re fictional characters” the waitress said. “We’re not mindless robots.”

“The author can force us to do or say anything he wants, just by writing it” the dead man said. “But it won’t ring true. A good writer always listens to his characters and has them do and say things that are believable. If the plot requires them to do something different, he has to revise the character until it makes sense that they’d do that.”

“You mean a writer creates characters, and then the characters tell him what they will and will not do?” Dirk asked incredulously.

“You’ve never written a book or a short story, have you?” asked the dead man. “That’s exactly how it works. The writer creates us, and then we take over.”

“Man, I’m glad I’m not a writer.” Dirk said.

“Uh-oh” the dead man said. “He’s falling asleep now. Good-night.”