



# The Weekly Man

## These Eyes

I've given myself a week to live. I think that's a reasonable timeframe. One week.

It's going to be tough. I just received another call. From her. Like nothing's happened. Like everything's normal. It shook me the first time she called. It shook me a few minutes ago. Tomorrow at 7:29 PM, it'll shake me again.

She talks about ordinary things: "Did you find that clicking sound in your car?"

I try to keep my answers short. I get a feeling that she only has so long. About ten minutes, including the silences, those wordless seconds when we're likely more connected than when we're talking, when all we can do is feel each other's presence. "Do you still think about me?"

...

"Yeah. I do."

...

"Did you get the new air conditioner installed?"

Deliberately drawing out the silences, savoring the closeness that comes from knowing the other is waiting, as though we become real knowing someone is waiting for us.

I'd like to say I waited my whole life for her, but I didn't. She was sprung on me out of the blue, something I would never have seen coming because I really didn't need—or want—it at the time. But suddenly she was there and going back to the way things used to be was...well, I've given myself a week.

I was on my way to the Cedar Tree Café for a hazelnut coffee, something I'd been thinking about all morning, mentally savoring the sweet nut taste and the hot cream-thick liquid. My agent had just called with great news; my latest book had just been picked up by a publisher of photography books with some of the biggest names in the field on their list. Mine was a book with a hundred and twenty images of shopping carts that had been abandoned around the city, pictures of shopping carts left on curbs, stashed under verandas or pushed over the banks of ravines. I had a picture of a cart that someone had lugged up to the top of a billboard advertising the city transport system.

It was a three-year project with thousands of images pared down to the essential. I used the carts as a metaphor for the sense of abandonment that runs through industrial/digital society, but I won't get into that now. Maybe later.

It was a big step forward. I was excited. I was on top of the world. I was in a hurry. I didn't see her as I rounded the corner. She was right in front of me, standing there with a vacant look in her eyes, something I noticed at just about the same time I walked into her hard enough to knock her off her feet, hard enough so that her ass hit the ground about the same time her head hit the door—the metal rim of the door. I should have turned around and headed back to the studio right then.

But I didn't.

I was stunned motionless. She lay on the sidewalk, slumped against the door, her plaid skirt pushed up revealing slim legs with black leggings. There was a couple on the other side of the door looking through the glass at her. They couldn't open the door with her lying against it and I could see the struggle in their eyes: wait until she's not against the door before opening it, or risk hurting her more by opening the door so they could ask, "Are you hurt?"

And, yeah, I just stood there like a frozen turkey until she lifted her hand up to me. It took a few seconds to sink in: *She wants me to help her get up*. Her eyes were a deep brown that created an earthy aura around her eye lids. She didn't seem angry or hurt, not even flustered. She seemed amused, calm. I thrust my hand out clumsily, missing her hand by a good few inches. She grabbed my wrist and pulled herself up, almost pulling me down in the process. Not that she was heavy, it just took me by surprise. I was suddenly face-to-face with her. She was beautiful, with brassy brunette bangs bouncing off her shoulders and cutting sharply across her forehead. She reminded me of pictures I'd seen of hippy women during the 60s: no lipstick or makeup or other fakery—just natural beauty. A black turtleneck suggested college girl from some other period. I didn't see a purse. She was smiling.

The couple at the door were outside now. The woman asked, "Are you alright?"

She ignored the question, still smiling, looking straight up into my eyes. I think I was blushing as I stammered out a barely coherent apology, gesturing with my hands, lusting for a hazelnut coffee, in a hurry, rounding the corner...but, oh my god, she was beautiful.

"You're Steven Glen, aren't you?"

She knew my name.

This wasn't as much a surprise as it might seem. My work had been exhibited around town for several years and I'd been interviewed by newspapers, television and regional magazines. I wasn't a celebrity, but I wasn't invisible.

I nodded yes.

"I saw your exhibit at Ingrid Mueller's Art + Concepts two months ago."

I nodded yes.

"You're very talented."

I nodded yes.

"You don't talk much do you?"

I nodded..."I'm so sorry. I didn't see you until..."

"It's OK. I'm all right. Back of my head's a bit sore, is all." She rubbed her backside. "Sore butt too."

My god, she was beautiful. I was feeling a bit woozy from just looking at her. "I was in a hurry, not thinking. Just got some good news."

Her smile widened. “And your good news was?” She seemed cheery and relaxed, but for some reason, I couldn’t shake that image of her eyes just before I knocked her down, the vacancy. There was something almost chilling about it.

But she was so beautiful.

I bought her a coffee—hazelnut, of course. She loved it. I told her about the book, how it was a big step for me. In fact, that’s all we talked about: me—my books, the shopping carts, my exhibitions, my artistic vision. Whenever I asked her about her own life, she turned the talk back to me, and I let her. Ego: that slippery plain of victories leading to ultimate defeat. I should have pressed her but I was on a ME high with a beautiful woman, and less than two hours later we were at my place, in bed, naked.

Yeah, that fast. I should have known something was out of whack. But I was on top of the world. I was invincible. Nothing could bring me down.

Her name was Heather. Heather Smith. Although I’m still not sure if that was her real last name. I’m not even sure if that was her real first name.

While we were drinking the coffee, I asked her, “How would you sum up your life?”

She said, “I’m the seed pod that fell into the river and was carried out to the ocean. How about you?”

And, of course, I blabbed on about myself, never bothering to ask what she meant by the seed pod, and that was the closest she ever came to saying anything really personal about herself other than to talk about her current mood, how things went at work, where she’d like to dine out.

Her moods were always the same: tranquil in a disquieted way, as though something was rumbling under the surface. She was a graphic artist for a company that produced educational software. My sum total knowledge of her work: the graphics have to be meaningful. But I did know if the day went well, fast, slow, or challenging. In the time that we were together, we never dined at the same place twice and in all that time she never failed to take my breath away.

She moved in the day after we met. The last thing in the world I wanted was a roommate; I didn’t even want a relationship, didn’t want the complications. I was so close to having everything I’d always wanted. I needed to focus on the book, on the exhibition for the book launch. Plus, there was the commercial photography—the weddings and portraits—to pay the bills. My life was too busy for a relationship. I thought about this while I was waiting for her to show up with her things and I made up my mind that I was going to tell her that we should wait a bit. This was too sudden. It wasn’t like me. I’m sorry but...

I answered a quiet knock on the door. She stood in the hall wearing blue jeans and a dark gray sweater, a suitcase in each hand. She took my breath away.

“Just two suitcases?” I said.

“I like to keep things simple.”

I kissed her and she walked through the door into the rest of my life.

Two suitcases.

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Living with a woman was something new in my life. I’d had women stay the weekend but this was different. It was an adventure. Physically, she didn’t put much of a dent in my apartment. We shared my dresser, and the closet was less stark. Cosmetics, brushes and hair products appeared in the washroom along with a cherry red bathrobe and matching towel. We moved the couch to the middle of the room, closer to the TV, which I started watching more in the

evenings. Things materialized in the refrigerator: yogurt, tofu, plastic containers of bean sprouts. All-in-all though, she made as much an imprint as a hotel guest.

But she brought a certain color and texture to life in the apartment, as though I'd turned the settings of my life to black and white and she re-set them to color.

My apartment was no longer just a place to eat, sleep, shower and catch the news; it was a place to live and create memories with color and texture. I looked forward to going home and finding her waiting for me. Seeing her on the couch or strolling out of the kitchenette or just hearing her calling out from the washroom: "Be out in a minute." I never tired of her beauty. In fact, I never really got used to it—like it was something I could never define or understand. Like her.

Just like her.

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We ate together, usually in the dining area, with music in the background and candles in the foreground. Sometimes we ate in the living room and watched TV. Conversation was sporadic. We didn't talk much and when we did it wasn't for long. I talked about my book, my exhibitions, plans for my next photo project, problems with my commercial work. She talked about things in the news or asked questions about my work, my artistic vision, my hopes and fears.

Weekends we got out of the apartment, starting with the Farmers' Market early Saturday morning. She loved the Market: the stalls with fresh produce, the crafts (which she adored but never bought, not even letting me buy them for her), the exotic foods (her favorite was mild chicken samosas), the buskers juggling bowling pins or staging puppet shows. She never once became impatient because a line was stalled by people stopping to talk or someone just stopping to take in the movement and noise. She blended well into crowds.

After the market we took to the sidewalks for some window shopping or drove into the country where I'd take pictures of barns and ponds as backdrops to her beauty. Sometimes we'd go to a mall where she'd admire everything and buy nothing. She loved the shopping experience but wasn't into accumulating things, except for the odd piece of clothing.

No matter what we did, though, her conversation focused on what was happening around us: "Oh look! A puppet show!" "Can you get the water lilies in just behind me? What kind of lens do you need for that?" "How do you think I'd look in that red dress?" She lived in the immediate.

We didn't go to church on Sundays. Sunday was our stay-at-home-in-bed-and-make-love-all-day-long day. Conversation was mostly me telling her over and over how beautiful she was, how perfect she was, how much I needed her.

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After a couple of months, I stopped doing portraits. I needed time to work on proofs for the book and re-write captions and the artist statement—a sprawling twenty-page monument to ambiguity, which I eventually pared down to a few pages. I needed time to start my next project: abandoned toys. These were pictures of toys, like play kitchens, play houses and pedal cars left on curbs for trash day, or left at the back door of the Salvation Army store. I had a rough concept about what I was doing, something along the lines of shedding the tools of our youth, learning to let go as part of the growth process. Something like that. I was having a hard time focusing and I can't say that

it was her fault. It was my fault. I couldn't stop thinking about her, day and night, even when I was with her. Yeah, even when I was with her. I think most people think about other things when they're with the ones they love because they're right there with you, where you just feel them and think about other things.

In my case though, she'd be right there, lying beside me or sitting across the table from me, and I'd be wondering about her, wondering about her day, wondering about her past, about who she was and what she was doing when she wasn't with me.

Wondering about why she was with me.

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“So what meaningful graphics did you do today?”

“Mostly boring ones.”

“Boring? How so?”

“Just boring. Visual representations of boring material.”

“What kind of material?”

“Really boring material.”

“You're not going to tell me anything about your job, are you?”

“Did you find out about that clicking noise in your car?”

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We'd been together almost six months when I first noticed it. By that time I'd cut my commercial work down to almost nothing, taking occasional jobs to pay rent on the apartment and studio. She took care of all the other expenses, and the publishers had given me a generous advance—something unheard of for a still not-so-well-known photographer.

I spent my days roaming the city looking for cast-away toys—snooping around alleys, frequenting dumpsters, scouring the early morning streets on trash pick-up days. I'd finished the work on the shopping cart book. My next exhibition was a few months away, in conjunction with the book release.

I was at the studio, going through pictures I'd taken of her over the weekend. On Sunday we'd gone to the college campus, to the geology building, where they'd painted the walls in one of the stairwell alcoves with a lifelike forest motif. The alcove stretched up three stories with towering rainforest trees. The predominant color was deep green. She was wearing blue jeans and a loose red blouse, the first time I'd seen her wearing a bright color other than her bathrobe. It was raining lightly that day and she had a red umbrella. There was a long bench built into the wall at the base of the forest mural. She lay down on the bench with the umbrella open beside her. The contrast of colors was breathtaking. I took almost a hundred pictures.

I'd just deleted the ones that were definitely a no go, leaving me with ten images to process. In three of them, taken in succession, she was looking straight into the lens, smiling seductively. The bright irises spread a light brownish tint over her eyelids and the hollows of her eyes. Even looking at pictures of her caught my breath. I zoomed in on her eyes. The screen turned monochrome brown. My chest began to tighten with excitement as I leaned forward to let myself be lost in those eyes. And that's when I saw it.

I wasn't sure what I was looking at, only that it triggered a cold flash across my back and froze me like in those moments when you wake up feeling threatened by something you can't define

but and you know that if you move, it'll pounce. It was the vacancy I'd seen in her eyes the first time we met, but it was more—like a pit descending into bottomless nothing, a complete absence of...I didn't know what. I jerked back, fearing I'd be sucked into something from which I'd never return.

I sat at my desk, sweating, cold, shaken, fingers trembling. My thoughts tripped over explanations that might make sense of what I'd seen.

After a few moments I calmed enough to lean forward into her eyes and confirm what I'd just seen but it was gone, if it had ever been there. It could have been stress, change of lifestyle, anything.

I spent the next couple of hours working on the remaining pictures. Nothing out of the ordinary happened. In each of the pictures she was beautiful and her eyes took my breath away without swallowing me whole.

I didn't mention any of this to her.

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"As a photographer, there's something I find really odd about you."

"What's that?"

"You don't have any pictures."

"Pictures?"

"Yeah, pictures...family, travel, childhood, school. How come you have no pictures?"

"Well, hun, as a photographer, you weren't around then to take them."

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I started losing it. Whatever I'd seen in her eyes wouldn't let go. I went through hundreds of pictures, burrowing into her eyes as she sat on the edge of the fountain by City Hall, zooming into her eyes as she smiled under a black moustache at the dollar store, digging deep into her eyes as she waved to me high in the air from a swing at the playground across the street—searching her eyes in picture after picture.

But it was gone. I tried to chalk it off to imagination. Stress. A disagreeable lunch. I tried to doubt what I'd seen, distrust my eyes, but that look in her eyes when we met hovered over me. I remembered the chill I'd felt.

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I started an obsessive campaign of picture-taking, catching her while she ate, watched TV, slept, showered, dressed and undressed.

"Steven?"

"Yes?"

"I'm undressing."

"I know. And I'm taking pictures."

"Steven?"

"Yes?"

"Why are you taking pictures of my eyes while I'm undressing?"

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I put over a thousand images through every Photoshop routine I could think of, including a barrage of special effects like fish eye, sepia, duo tone, HDR, everything I could think of. I varied the resolutions, hues, temperatures, white balances, color saturations, brightness, sharpness, densities.

Did I mention I was obsessed?

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I decided it was time to talk to her about it. We were eating authentic Mexican food in an authentic Mexican restaurant with authentic Mariachi music in the background.

“I know I’ve been acting weird lately.” I was on my fourth Corona

“Oh, you noticed?” Sometimes she could be a bit of a shithead.

“Yes, I did.”

“Steven.” She leaned forward, looking me straight in the eyes. “There’s something wrong.”

“Yes?”

She reached over the table and took both my hands. “When you’re not taking pictures of my eyes, or working on my eyes on your computer...”

“Yes?”

“You stare.”

“I stare?”

“Into my eyes, constantly. Like you’re looking for something.”

“You have beautiful eyes. I...”

“Steven. This is a nice restaurant. Don’t make me pour a bottle of beer over your head.” She squeezed my hands tightly as she talked. “I want it to stop...the whole eye thing. It stops.”

I nodded yes.

“Give me your word.”

“I promise. I’ll stop. No more eye fixation.”

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For a while, I managed to reign in the eye fetish and pay more attention to her as in: “Nice to see a man who appreciates his woman undressing for the camera.” I immersed myself in my abandoned toy project and scoured the streets looking for toys left on the curbs for trash day or tossed beside dumpsters. Gray drizzly days were my favorite, with the rain adding a bit of the old sparkle to the colors of the toys, now contrasted so vividly with their drab surroundings and suggesting the magic they once cast on the children who owned them.

I was picking up more commercial work. My book release was a month away, and I was almost ready for the exhibition and launch.

She seemed to be more excited about the exhibit than me, talking about it incessantly, asking me if I was excited, telling me how beautiful the prints were. Her favorite was of a cart sitting in snow up to its lower tray. Behind it, a field stretched into a narrow line of trees. Behind that, a black storm-filled sky stretched across the horizon moving with a precision edge into a sunny cloudless sky. The play of light between the storm and the clear sky was surreal and foreboding.

The cart was about thirty feet into the snow and, strangely, there were no footsteps leading out to it, as though it had just appeared there.

Things were looking good.

For the time being.

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“I know hardly anything about you.”

“What’s my favorite pizza?”

“Sausage.”

“What’s my favorite color?”

“Brown. Chocolate brown.”

“What’s my favorite food?”

“When you want a break from health food...steak, medium rare, baked potato with sour cream, and broccoli with cheese sauce.”

“What’s my favorite song?”

“But, what’s this...?”

“Indulge me. What’s my favorite song?”

“These Eyes.”

“Most men wouldn’t be able to answer those questions.”

“So?”

“So, you know me better than most men know their women.”

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There’re two schools of thought about balance. One claims that the purpose of our lives is to attain a state in which everything is completely in balance and then keep things that way until we die. This is a kind of spiritual approach. The other claims that it’s just fine to work towards a state of balance, but then we need to find ways to throw everything into chaos again so that we can start over trying to achieve balance. This would be an evolutionary approach with the rationale being: if things are always in balance, nothing happens—nothing goes forward, nothing goes backward. We have stasis. No progress. No evolution.

I guess I’m one of those people who need to evolve.

Things were too good between us. It was driving me nuts. Who was I to have this perfect relationship with this breathtakingly beautiful woman who never complained, who wanted the same things I wanted, who treated me like everything I did and thought was essential, who never told me how to live my life and who arrived on my doorstep devoid of historical baggage?

These were the kinds of crazy thoughts I was beginning to have. On the one hand, I was afraid to push things; on the other, I couldn’t resist the urge to push.

I started investigating. Google, LinkedIn, MySpace (after all, she was a graphic artist), Facebook, Twitter, online directories and dozens of other cyber ways to stalk a person were all dead ends. I couldn’t find a single pixel of her on the Internet.

Of course, it didn’t take long before she noticed that I was acting crazy again.

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“My brother and I used to love toasted peanut butter sandwiches dipped in tea with lots of milk and sugar for breakfast.”

“Peanut butter is good for growing bodies.”

“Mom used to pack salmon sandwiches for lunch. Every day. And a banana. And Kool-Aid.”

“The salmon would explain why you have such a strong heart.”

“What was your favorite breakfast when you were a kid? Let me guess...bran flakes.”

“Why would you say bran flakes?”

“Um...I don't know. Just a wild guess.”

“Did you get around to taking the car in about that clicking noise?”

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“You look tense tonight, Steven.”

“Got something on my mind.”

“Sounds serious.”

“It is.”

“How serious?”

“Really serious.”

“You just put half an inch of salt on your baked potato.”

“I like salt.”

“With a bit of potato on the side?”

“Who are you?”

“Who do you think I am?”

“I don't know.”

“Is this why you were taking all the pictures, tracking me all over the internet?”

“Tracking you? What...”

“Browsers have this thing called histories. You were searching for information on me day after day. You even searched for things like demonic eyes. I'm guessing in relation to me.”

“You knew all this? Why didn't you say anything?”

“I was hoping you would either find whatever it was you were looking for, or come to your senses.”

“I need to know about your past.”

“You need to get over this obsession.”

“But why can't you just tell me...”

“OK. I was raised on a farm. I came to the city. I met you. Happy?”

“Is that true?”

“No.”

“Then...?”

“Do you love me?”

“Yes. Of course I...”

“Then just love me.”

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But I couldn't just love her. I pushed it like picking a scab trying to heal over a major artery.

We were home, drinking wine, watching a Seinfeld re-run, eating homemade guacamole. I felt like I was sitting beside myself, watching myself reach for the remote and turning the TV off, watching as I turned to her.

“Tell me about your past.”

“You don’t want to know about it.”

“I have to know about it.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Where did you come from?”

“I told you...a farm.”

“You told me that wasn’t true.”

“Maybe I lied about it not being true.”

“What was it I saw in your eyes?”

“Probably your imagination.”

“What are you hiding from me?”

“Nothing that should mean anything to you—to keeping us together.”

“But I have to know.”

“Maybe I don’t want to know.”

“But you do know.”

“I just want things to stay the way they are.”

“Things will stay the way they are, but I’ll know. I have to know what you know.”

“What I know—and all I have to know—is that I love you and I want things to stay as they are.” She stood up and walked slowly to the window. She stared towards the park but her eyes seemed focused on something far away, lifetimes away. It was a sad stare that flushed me with guilt. I should have backed off then. I should have put my love before my curiosity and gone to her and held her and told her everything would be all right. Just like in the movies. But I didn’t. She stood by the window for a few minutes before turning to me. Tears glistened on her cheeks. “The truth is, Steven, I don’t know. I remember my job and the people I work with, but that’s all. I went home after I met you and packed some things. As soon as I arrived at your door, I forgot where I’d come from. At work, I sort of floated through each day listening to people talking about things I should have known about but didn’t. I played along with them. It happens less often now. But, Steven, I can’t even remember the things they used to talk about. All I remember is you. And what we have. And I don’t want to lose it.”

“But you have to remember.”

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Finally, she remembered.

I came home late one night. She was sitting on the couch. I said something about being sorry for missing supper but she ignored me. The hair running over her shoulders was like a chocolate waterfall. Even the back of her head thrilled me. I walked quickly to the kitchen to see what I’d missed eating by candlelight.

There was nothing. Not even the smell of cooking. Evening sun cast a surreal aura over the kitchen. There was a note on the breakfast table. I picked it up and read.

Steven dearest,

I remembered. Thanks, Steven. We should have left it alone like I wanted. Just left it alone.

As for what it is: no, you don't get to know that. At least not yet. I'll be in touch. Oh, and sorry for the blood stains on your couch.

Love always,  
Heather

The calls started a week later.

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When I think of it now, I got home at around close to eight that night. The blood on the couch was still slightly warm. Maybe it was 7:29 when she pushed the butcher knife into her stomach, maybe that exact moment when her soul fled her body. Maybe that's why she calls every night at that time. I'll ask her about that next week. It's the kind of thing I should ask face-to-face.

One week.

I think that's a reasonable amount of time to talk myself out of this. Though I can't see that happening, and it's going to be tough waiting through those seven days. But like I said, I have a solid objective within a reasonable time frame. She's waiting for me. She knows.

And I need to know.