

A movie poster for 'The Midnight Games' by David Neil Lee. The background is a dark, stormy night sky over a stadium. A tall stadium light tower stands in the center. On the right, a large, glowing orange and red octopus tentacle reaches across the frame. The title 'THE MIDNIGHT GAMES' is written in large, bold, yellow-to-orange gradient letters at the bottom right. The author's name 'DAVID NEIL LEE' is at the top in yellow serif font.

DAVID NEIL LEE

THE
MIDNIGHT
GAMES

THE MIDNIGHT GAMES

David Neil Lee



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The altered lines of poetry in chapter 20 come from William Blake's "Jerusalem."

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To Malcolm & Simon

The world is what
you imagine it to be.

PART 1 **THE STADIUM**

The world is what
you imagine it to be.
Then, something happens.

PROLOGUE

Looking back at that first night, wiser now (I guess) than I was then, I should have said to Dana, “Turn back – let’s forget about the whole thing. Because if we don’t, terrible things will happen. To you especially.”

This is what they call the wisdom of hindsight. We can construct whole fantasy worlds around how things *might* have been ... if somehow we had made *that* decision instead of *this* decision. Dana would still be with us, and overall there would have been less fear, fuss and collateral damage. Although Dad and I have never had it all that easy, my life would still be going along in a more or less predictable way.

Or everything might be changed, changed horribly, beyond recognition, and we would all be, if not dead, then thoroughly shafted, and this delicate endangered world that supports us would be doomed. So what if I had kept Dana out of the midnight games, what if I had turned him back, what if we had stayed out of Ivor Wynne Stadium that October night?

“Let’s turn back, Dana, because if we don’t, terrible things will happen. To you especially,” I’d have said. He would have looked up at me surprised, his face pale in the distant glare of the street lights.

Dana had led me to a shadowy corner at the stadium’s south end – away from the excited crowd, which I knew from experience was not your standard football crowd, pouring through the front gates: the screaming children and ponytailed women, the men wearing RESURRECTION CHURCH OF THE ANCIENT GODS T-shirts, or baseball caps with the now-familiar logo:



According to Dana, we could break into the stadium by somehow, without hacksaws or bolt cutters, severing the steel anchors of its chain-link fence. Here in the shadow of the bleachers, he bent to this task, but if I could do it all over I would say, “Get out of here, man. Out of this neighbourhood, this city. As far away as possible from Hamilton, especially from here in the east end, where dark things and pissheads and evil powers are gathering and scheming to strike at me and tonight, even more so, to strike at you. We’re both in great danger ...”

And so on. Then, respecting my new powers of prophecy, Dana would shrug: “Hey man, if you say so.” He would fold up his pocket knife and head back to wherever he spent his nights. So even though I will never see him again, even though it means I feel myself missing Dana – who, although technically homeless, had become a part of this beat-up old neighbourhood; I guess I would even call him a friend – for his sake, I’m glad he’s gone.

But who am I kidding? It would never happen that way.

Okay – if through some miracle, I’d had this flash of foresight, I would still have needed a lot more in the way of evidence. Otherwise, Dana would have looked up, he might have paused for a second, but he would have just snickered.

“Come off it, Nate. Terrible stuff has happened to me already. Why do you think I got no fixed address?” He would have returned to his work, his thin blade miraculously slicing through the wire anchors. “Terrible stuff still happens to me,” he’d say over his shoulder, “on a daily basis. No fixed address for eight freakin’ years.”

But hindsight is useless, as my dad has always been fond of pointing out. “If I had known then what I know now...” is one of his favourite precursors to an extended reminiscence that is sure to include his constant striving, occasional triumphs, even months and years of being “on a roll,” but an admission that if

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you stood back and looked at the big picture, what you'd see was, basically, failure. He'd prop it up with a conclusion that up to now, I'd always found depressing. "What the heck, you never know." Dad would shrug, "You just hafta keep on keeping on."

I guess at some point or another, terrible things happen to everybody, though some stuff is more terrible than others. Even normal everyday life is often a frightening and dangerous proposition – I'd never thought of it this way before until it was pointed out to me, in person, by the man who claimed to be none other than H. P. Lovecraft himself.

"Nate my boy," he said sombrelly. "As I've written, the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear ..."

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me tell you how all this started.

CHAPTER 1

SOMETHING HAPPENS

Here in the east end, it's nothing new to see a rundown European church – Polish, Ukrainian, Italian – suddenly turn Asian, its faded signs freshly painted over in Korean or Vietnamese. Along Barton Street, everything from Satan to cannabis has its house of worship. In this neighbourhood, churches loudly promise everything from cancer cures to “glorious rapture” (better, I guess, than the regular rapture). They are just a few of the many enterprises that explode into life, like aliens from a more cheerful planet, cleaning and painting the empty storefronts, putting up a brave face for months or years, waiting for their offerings to catch on, their sparkly display windows gradually turning dull and dusty, before eventually turning off the lights for good, covering the windows with a fresh set of newspapers and heading home.

The first I saw of the Resurrection Church was graffiti: a few words hovering around a logo that looked different every time I saw it drawn with magic marker or brush or spray can. Sometimes it looked like a math problem, sometimes like some weird musical notation, sometimes like a single staring eye.



THEY RETURN!

Just this past summer, on a hot day down by the railway tracks, I had been searching for praying mantises with my friend Sam Shirazi. We had gone down to the end of Markle Avenue, just off the rarely used train line that curved through our

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neighbourhood into the north end; a no man's land of belching chimneys (mostly gone cold) and vast catwalked factories and crumbling parking lots. Markle led to an abandoned chain factory in the corner of an empty parking lot ringed by dusty underbrush. Behind it, rusted metal smokestacks from an old incinerator still stood – barely stood, it looked to me, getting rustier every year. But that day, the old brick building was showing some action. There were cars parked there, and a sign over the logo proclaimed this as the Resurrection Church of the Ancient Gods.

“Funny place for a church,” I said.

Sam responded, “There’s a guy in there looking at us.”

“We’re not on their property. We’ve got every right to be here.”

“Now he’s talking to that other guy. Let’s get out of here.”

“Who cares?” I said. “They look like redneck losers.”

“Nate. Yeah,” Sam replied.

Sam knows more than I do about run-ins with rednecks. I conceded and we headed back down the tracks. My dad’s family is Portuguese and my mom, as I recall her, was some kind of blonde, so I look more or less white-bread Canadian. But sometimes Sam gets a hard time from the guys at school who run in gangs and sneer and bully and, when they figure they can get away with it, punch out anyone outside the gang. At first I’d thought it might be both funny and instructive to point out their feeble knowledge of geography, since they call Sam “Paki” even though he and his family are from Iran. In reality, these mini-seminars were never appreciated. Now I simply try to avoid such confrontations, though when they happen, I stand by Sam. Of course, Sam’s full first name is Osama, which doesn’t help.

Anyway, I’d thought no more of the Resurrection Church of the Ancient Gods. Until tonight.

“HOLD THIS...” Dana handed me the flashlight. In its uncertain beam I saw him pull out his pocket knife. It wasn’t

much of a knife, with a rubber handle and a blade about five centimetres long, but this little blade, amazingly, sliced through the solid metal bands that anchored the fence to the fencepost, in this shadowy corner of the chain-link barrier that separated Ivor Wynne Stadium from the city around it.

“Buddy set this up here so he could sneak into Ticats games, he’s a big fan. Then a couple weeks ago he asked me – same as you did, Nate – if I knew anything about these midnight games. I didn’t know what he was talking about. He said he’d go to one of them and tell me what goes down. But I never saw him again.”

“He went into a midnight game, and he didn’t come out?”

“Before the game I’d see him every morning buying his smokes at the Big Bee. Every day, seven a.m. like clockwork. Next thing you know, he’s gone.”

Then Dana showed me his secret. Looking around, he pulled two plastic zip ties out of his jacket. He slipped the bands he had just cut – which weren’t metal at all, just zip ties – into a pocket.

“I spray paint ’em silver,” he said proudly.

At that moment a roar blossomed from the crowd and the announcer’s excited voice – “ON THE WAY, THE GREAT ONE HIMSELF” – blasted from the stadium’s sound system. “Go go go quick quick quick,” Dana urged me, pushing the fence’s lower corner inward and following after I scuttled through. From the shelter of a dumpster we could just see the football field’s illuminated east end. Dana gestured at the nearest refreshment booth. “Nate, buy a beer,” he whispered. “So we won’t look like total moochers. Get an extra cup.”

“I can’t buy a beer. I’m underage.”

“The way I hear it, tonight anything goes. This is a *midnight* game. I’ll meet you back here.”

“But ...” I was going to say “... they know me here.” Dana had already faded back into the shadows. I worked the stadium concessions during football games in the summer and fall. I have made a lot of hot dogs and been hissed at by a lot of drunks, but I’d picked up a few cooking skills, and probably social skills too.

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As it happened, I didn't know the bartender, who wasn't much older than me and looked unsurprised when I materialized out of the shadows in the black pants and hoodie that Dana had recommended and which I usually wear anyway. When I held up one finger he poured a Steely Dan into a plastic cup without asking for ID. I pushed the money toward him. I was only sixteen and didn't look a day older, but Dana had said that at midnight games, anything goes. Well, we would see.

"Could I get an extra cup?" I asked. "My buddy's has got a crack in it." He pulled a cup from a stack.

"Good crowd tonight," I observed.

"More all the time, and we got something real good this week," the bartender said. "Yog-Sauces will be smackin' his lips when he lands here." He turned as a new group of customers approached, laughing and slapping and jostling each other excitedly.

I retreated to find Dana had closed up the gap in the fence, and was waving to me from just inside the nearest entrance, looking out at the lights on the field. He pulled a Steely Dan of his own from his pocket and emptied the can into my offered cup.

"No way I'm buyin' it here," he said. "It's five bucks a beer, isn't it?"

"Six." That six bucks had hurt and I was hoping Dana would at least split it. Actually, I had been hoping this evening would be free of charge. At least now we looked like legitimate paying customers. We started up the stairs to the nearest bleacher, the beer sloshing in its plastic cups.

FOR ALL the noise the midnight games made, with their thunderous announcements and heavy metal music pounding through the neighbourhood, tonight there were no more than a few thousand people here, filling the lower rows of the bleachers, watching the bright lights and the figures running and scattering and feverishly prepping the field below. Dana and I had agreed that, to stay inconspicuous, we would head for the empty upper

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tiers where we could look down on the crowd and scope out whatever was going on.

My father and I live two blocks away from the stadium, on the other side of my old school, the boarded-up Prince of Wales Elementary that we preferred to call PoW. This was the house I grew up in, an old three-storey brick house that my mom and dad had bought to raise a family, though they'd only managed to produce me before my mother died ten years ago, when I was six.

Since the summer's end, once every week or ten days, the games had been keeping our neighbourhood awake. Everyone on our street was used to Ticat nights, when the blasts of music, the amplified chanting, the flyovers by jet fighters and antique bombers, the blasts of cheering were all tolerable because they were part of our way of life, and because they finished by ten p.m.

I had inherited my father's lack of interest in football, but since I'd turned fifteen, and began to work in the concessions, I'd welcomed the games and even enjoyed the noise and the drunkenness, the anticipation, the bursts of excitement. Like a lot of kids in the neighbourhood it was my first real job where I made real money. Not only did I make some money, but for a few hours a new world opened up, a world different enough from mine to make me happy to clean up the spilled drinks and grease spatters, fill up on leftover fries and hot dogs, and leave the custodians to dim the lights as I left the stadium and went back to everyday life.

But I didn't know anyone who had ever been called to work the midnight games. I could have used the money, but when I called the concession they had nothing for me. "Those are private contracts."

I didn't mind too much; there was something weird about these games, not advertised online or on the radio, unreported on TV or in the sports pages. They started up at midnight, when the streets filled with families and couples and crowds, hollow eyed and obsessed, bickering and swearing and trading lines from

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songs I'd never heard, as they came from all over the city to converge on the latest Midnight Game.

"The guy at the bar mentioned something called Yog-Sauce," I said, "or Yog-Sauces." I fought for balance as I skidded on a wet spot.

This was another reason to keep going up, and up; the occupied seats were awash in Steely Dan. It turned out I had been alone in my pathetic purchase of a single beer with extra cup. The customers who were arriving as I left had taken trays to handle all the beer they needed, and among the crowd plastic cups slobbered Steely Dan across plastic seats. People were noisy and excited: "Get this show on the road," someone yelled.

We passed a baby in its stroller, shrieking and ignored while its mother, a ponytailed woman spilling out of her shirt, screeched at the man in the baseball cap next to her. "I wanna be a cougar. Why? Because cougars are awesome. Because I wanna find a loser like you and chew his leg off!"

"I haddit with you!" he shouted. The baby kept crying. Dana and I, keeping our heads down, trudged up the steps to the upper tiers, our shadowed feet crunching through discarded empties and splashing through puddles. Halfway up the section we started to find empty rows; and finally we sat down on benches above the crowd. I sipped my beer. The benches were damp with dew, or what I hoped was dew, drawn out of the air as the autumn night cooled.

"This beer tastes funny," I observed. Dana was squinting out at the field.

"They done something with the team colours."

"Not that I'm an expert. My dad says that Steely Dan is made from diet ginger ale and rubbing alcohol."

Dana wasn't listening. As music boomed from the speakers I looked down into the glare on the field. Sure enough whoever was playing wasn't wearing the Ticat black and gold. At the west end of the field the team was dressed all in black and at the opposite end, the team was in white. White, I wondered, how do

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they do it? The grass stains must be hell to get out. I pulled out my phone and clicked a few photos.

Different music started playing, some big booming orchestra thing. A whistle blew, the teams started to run. They weren't wearing helmets or any other gear or padding. I blinked hard against the field lights. What kind of moves were these? Precise and practised, but bizarre. The black and white ranks moved together, then shifted to make points and angles and corners, forming strange, unreadable patterns. It was not football at all, but some kind of weird flash mob or performance art, sending messages best seen from above, messages not to the crowd in the bleachers but to the night sky itself.

Once again I tried to tackle my beer like a man. I didn't want to give up, especially having invested six bucks. But the next time I took a sip, I spit it out. "I can't drink this beer," I told Dana.

Dana ignored me, his gaze on the field below. "There's no ball," he said.

I shoved my almost-full cup under the bench. The period, or dance, or ceremony, whatever it was ended and cheerleaders poured out onto the field. Instead of cheering and chanting, the crowd fell dead silent and, as one body, rose to their feet. Dana and I looked at each other. We stood up too.

Now the competing teams merged in the middle of the field, and through their ranks came four players, carrying between them a long, wrapped bundle on a kind of stretcher. By the time they reached the centre, a huge square of black tarp had been laid out on the turf. From our seats in the upper tiers I could barely make out the network of lines and angles that decorated the black square. But when I squinted at those lines, trying to see them better, my vision seemed to blur. I blinked: what was going on?

Someone in the crowd began to sing, and gradually more voices joined in.

"I'm a worker and I wonder
When I'm gonna hear that call of old

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My old hometown's goin' under
All the furnaces gone cold

"I'll be reachin' out to heaven
Where cuhthooloo reigns supreme
When his ancient city's risen
I'll be livin' in a dream."

And as those lines were repeated, other voices sang against them: "Yog-Sauces Yog-Sauces Yog-Sauces." I didn't know what the heck the song was about, but the crowd had sung this before. Whatever you call it, the effect when you sing different musical parts against each other like that, it was eerie, but beautiful. "Yog-Sauces Yog-Sauces ..." I started joining in; Dana looked surprised but soon, to keep up appearances, he started moving his mouth in time with the others. I kept repeating my part; it needed work; *Yog* was no problem, but there was something funny about the way they were pronouncing *Sauces*. I wasn't quite getting it right. Did everybody here have a lisp but me?

"All these years I've kept on hopin'
That a change is in the wind
And someday soon the sky will open
To let the old gods rule again."

I felt a tingling like an electric shock. I looked around. Where was it coming from? There were no hidden wires. Low clouds, thick and slithery as smoke from an oil fire, roiled around the upper reaches of the stadium and I wondered about lightning.

Suddenly I heard someone speak into my ear; a voice deep, vibrant and reassuring: *I can help you.*

I looked around – there was no one was except Dana. I shivered. Was I having a psychic experience? Was this literally the excitement of the crowd, somehow transmitted through the thickening atmosphere around me, filling me with notions? What

was going on? From school assemblies, sporting events and fairs I knew that a crowd was a place where a lot of people get excited over stuff that any one of them, if left on their own, would see as hopelessly dumb. Was that what was happening to me?

The shrouded stretcher was carried out onto the black square and laid pointing east to west; the performers stepping back so we could all have a good look. Then the cover was whipped off and I gasped.

On the stretcher lay a naked man. He was one hundred per cent ordinary looking, a pudgy guy in his forties with dark hair and short legs. Blindfolded, his hands and feet bound with duct tape, he shivered and tried to rise, but fell back. I wondered if he had been drugged with something. Numbly I raised my phone and took a few more pictures.

“What the hell is going on here?” asked Dana. Everyone else just kept on singing. As the chant thundered over the public address system I felt the structure under me shudder as if, in the depths of the stadium, something huge was rising to the music.

Now a line of men in overalls came shambling out onto the field. Shambling and awkward, because each of them had a heavy barbecue-style propane tank on his back, with a long hose and a nozzle.

They were carrying tiger torches. I was familiar with these, in a way, because for three or four birthdays, when I was a kid, I had asked my dad for one. Watching road crews softening asphalt, I'd decided that a tiger torch was the closest thing I'd seen to a flame-thrower – which, as I'd learned from watching *Them!* with my dad, was the best weapon to have in case giant ants appeared. But Dad never got me one.

Someone on the field was gesturing at them to hurry, and they lit their torches and lined up on either side of the stadium entrance directly below Dana and me. Raising the nozzles before them like heraldic trumpets, they formed an avenue of flame leading to the man on the tarp.

Above the chant of the audience I could hear a roaring and humming in the air, as if the sleeping sky itself was waking up,

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rumbling and hungry. The noise grew in volume and when it swelled, the concrete stadium itself began to vibrate. I could still pick out a few of the announcer's words. "HE'S COMING... HE'S COMING... HE'S COMING... HE'S COMING."

I wondered if the Steely Dan I'd sipped had not just been a crummy beer, or skunky, but if there was something seriously wrong with it. I couldn't focus my eyes on the glare above that square of black tarp. The air above the spiky symbols and the naked man seemed to glow, like gasses in a fluorescent tube coming alive with an invisible charge. And I could feel an excitement myself, something I'd never felt before, like a voice inside me saying, *I can help you, I can save you, and the hell with everyone else, you are a winner. You are a winner and you will overcome. You will overcome and there is a god that will lead you. A god will lead you, and I am that god, and the name of that god...*

On the field below, the line of flames wavered, and suddenly something enormous clattered and shook its way out of the entrance beneath us and moved into the field; something as long as a bus, with bony limbs and feelers waving and shuddering. I blinked to see better, but the light over the stadium was strobing and flickering. The people around us waved and danced like cut-up movie frames, and I could see the shape move toward the man on the tarp, lunging and fainting at the line of flames that held it back.

The performers moved back, and the shape paused. It reared up over the naked man, who was trying frantically to break his bonds and get away, sensing the danger nearby. He began to shout, words I couldn't make out in the racket around me.

"... POWER SOURCE," the voice boomed over the sound system. "AND IF WE JUST TRY A LITTLE BIT HARDER... C'MON, JUST A LITTLE MORE! ... THIS TIME HE'LL COME. THE ENERGIES ARE HERE ... WHEN THE EXANIMATOR FEASTS ON THE ENERGY FROM THIS TWO-FACED COWARD WHO TRIED TO STOP US, THIS TRAITOR, THIS TERRORIST ..."

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The creature pounced and snapped the naked man into its jaws, effortlessly lifting him from the stretcher. He screamed, and for a moment the crowd fell silent, then burst into cheers as the creature turned, carrying its victim – I could now see it had long prickly feelers, or antennae, and two compound eyes like an insect – and surged back through the line of torches and disappeared under the stadium.

“... IS GONE !!!” The crowd cheered. “AND HIS SUFFERING, HIS SACRIFICE, WILL GIVE US THE ENERGY WE NEED, THE PUSH TO PROSPER, THE WILL TO WIN ...”

The darkness snarled and rumbled like an earthquake shaking heaven itself. There was a spark of lightning, and like fog before a storm a wall of blue smoke blew across the field. High above us, something black and red and monstrous tore through the gathering clouds and thrust its way into the halo of spotlights. A cry went up from the crowd, a cry of ecstasy, and shooting from my toes to the crown of my head I felt a shock of fear as if I was teetering on a high roof, at the edge of a deadly fall. I cried out and then reeled back as a vast presence – outlined with luminous globes, writhing against the field’s glow and with the glint of a gleaming hungry eye – took shape before me. I was panting from the excitement, from the thrill of that voice, from the strange urge for glory and triumph that had run through me like a shock, and I shook my head to clear it.

Then the darkness sparked brilliantly again, before the glow began to diffuse and fade into the night. The tarp on the turf lay in a heap, crumpled and stained with blood.

CHAPTER 2

SOMETHING FOLLOWING

You would probably think Dana was a pathetic character unless you shared a neighbourhood with him. But after he'd been on the street a while, people noticed that he didn't harass anybody for spare change, that he wasn't scoping out porch furniture or lawn tools to steal and that he would pay attention if you spoke to him. As my dad liked to say, if you have no money, people don't respect you, but as the years go by and you still have no money, you get credit just for still being around. Dad was talking about himself, but the same thing applied to Dana.

Every week, we would see Dana cruising down the street on garbage day, starting in the afternoon when some of our neighbours first put out their trash, then again after supper, when more blue boxes were put out. Finally, he'd go by late in the evening, to catch those people who put out their trash just before bed. Each time, he'd rifle through the blue boxes for bottles and cans, and throw them into a big duffle bag he had slung across his back. He didn't talk to anyone unless they said, "How ya doin'," or insisted on cornering him in conversation, so he was pretty much accepted. Although Mrs. Smot, the lady Dad called "Betty Bylaw," always squinted at him suspiciously, and the odd guy who'd had a bad day would toss an insult.

I got to know Dana a couple of years ago, when I decided to start running. A few times a week I would get up early – I was self-conscious and didn't want anyone to see me, so I only did this before the sun was up – and run for a few shadowy kilometres. I would cut through the Prince of Wales' schoolyard and run around the stadium a few times, or cross Cannon to do laps on the grass around Scott Park if the ground wasn't all mucky, or even run all the way down to Gage Park and back.

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One morning, in March, still dark, I opened the door and jumped when I saw a shadow move on our front step. It was Dana, with a pocket flashlight hanging around his neck. Our *Hamilton Spectator* was unfolded on his lap and he was doing the crossword.

“Jeez.” He started frantically erasing.

I was still woozy from sleep. Before this, I’d not taken much notice of Dana when I’d see him on the street and, with his scraggly hair and his old clothes, I had simply figured him for one of the street people who are always coming and going. But for a street person, if that’s what he was, he looked pretty clean and he didn’t have that glassy-eyed crackhead look. I stood staring for a minute. Then, since it was my front porch after all, I did my best to take charge.

“Do you do this every morning?”

“Sorry, man.” He’d finished erasing. “Yeah, I just do them lightly, with this.” He held up a mechanical pencil. “Then I erase ’em good.”

“What a weird thing to do.”

He scooped up his duffle bag from the porch. “You surprised me today.” And then our paper was back sitting on the porch, neatly folded with the elastic band around it, the same way I always found it, and Dana was gone.

“Now that I think about it,” I told my dad later, “sometimes I’ve wondered why there are eraser shavings in the GO section.”

“Who does this guy think he is?” Dad asked.

“Dad, it’s not as if you or I even do the crossword.”

“We pay for that darn paper.”

Shortly afterwards I started taking the crosswords page of the GO section, once I’d finished reading the comics, and leaving it under the green box on the porch. After that, every morning when I opened the front door, the page from the previous day was gone. From that point on, Dana and I were in some way friends.

He told me a little bit about life on the streets. “It’s been getting stranger the last couple of years.”

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To me, it seemed like a life of adventure: Dana lived from hand to mouth, carrying all his possessions in a leather satchel and a big old canvas backpack, yet for all that he was a free man. In the warm weather he could sleep anywhere, having become highly skilled, so he told me, at making shelters from a plastic tarp strung over branches or old lumber. In the winter he prowled the old industrial district at the north end of the city. He liked it, he said, because so much of it was empty. But it wasn't as empty as it used to be.

"Maybe the steelmaking is picking up?" I said. "More traffic?"

"It's not that," Dana said. "At night, up in those territories, you'd swear the world had ended. Nothing but weeds and rust and broken windows. Except for me, even street people don't go up there; it's too far away from everything. But it's not deserted like it used to be. I get a funny feeling, and I hear things. I go there at night, and sometimes I get a glimpse ..." He paused.

"Glimpse of what?"

"Nothing I guess, just shadows, and movement out of the corner of your eye. And I hear things. Last winter, walking along a railroad track I'd walked on a hundred times before, something followed me."

"Something?"

"I dunno, but I could hear it in the bush, just behind me, moving when I moved, stopping when I stopped. Freaked me out."

"Maybe just a raccoon or a coyote," I said. "Anyway, you're still here." But now Dana was off in his own world, this other Hamilton I knew nothing about.

"There's an old freighter down there – the *Sandoval* – I've been using it for years, off and on, climbing up onto the deck and pulling up my gear with a rope. It's been sitting there in the harbour so long even the rats have moved out, but I get my candles going and make it snug..."

"It sounds pretty sweet," I said. "Maybe some night I could ..."

"... but then again ... last winter, with the ice thick around the ship, at night I heard something ..."

“Out on the ice?”

“No – *under* the ship. Something that came out of the lake, something big. I could hear its back rubbing against the hull, and all night I could hear water surging, and the ice cracking, with whatever it was doing down there.”

“So ... what could that be?” I asked. “A carp, or ...?”

“Nate, I mean *huge*. When it bobbed against the hull, the whole ship rocked. In the morning I saw where, under the ice, it had come and gone. There was a bloom of mud spreading out into the bay. Something big comes out of the deep part of the lake to tunnel under the city, and it comes at night, and it uses the old freighter for cover.”

“Jeez ...” I didn’t know what to say, except that Dana, already an unusual friend as friends go, was starting to sound a bit nuts.

“Something is happening, Nate,” Dana said, and he blinked and was back in the city, the sunlight, the traffic, the present moment. “Things are changing.”

“Maybe it’s a change for the better,” I said. I know, a lame thing to say. To be honest, I was starting to change my mind about joining Dana, even temporarily, in his vagabond life of freedom and adventure.

“Whatever it is, I gotta stay out of its way,” Dana said. “Otherwise, one way or another, I know I’m gonna get screwed.”