

# DANIEL

*Jeff Gabel*

*For Brit*

## I

The last time I saw Daniel alive, he told me he was tired.

The look he wore when he said this, the weary plea in his eyes, came to me years ago, one night in early autumn. Daniel had been dead for some time, but I was still alive—alive and determined to make sense of his afterlife. Standing at my apartment window, I thought of the downward inflection of his voice as he uttered that phrase: “I’m tired.”

*I’m tired.* The words drummed in my ear, like a distant call to surrender.

Below, the light at Halsey and Nostrand turned red. A car ran through and struck two pedestrians, sending them into the wall of the building across from ours. They looked just like marionettes, yanked from the stage mid-scene. As with Daniel, they had no choice in the matter. As with Daniel, as would soon

be the case for me, the curtain would drop on their stage while twilight eased into night.

The image of them, mid-air, comes to me often. It reminds me of the feeling I now get when I lose track of where I am, when I cannot make sense of things and forget how long it has been since I, myself, passed.

“Leigh!” I shouted to the bedroom. “Call 911.”

Tires screeched as the car sped off. People hurled insults. Others reached for their phones.

I suddenly became hopeful that Daniel might show up. I hadn’t encountered his ghost in over a month and was plagued by the thought that we would never see each other again. Always, I remained alert for signs of his presence. The accident, I thought, the possibility that death was in my vicinity, might attract him. I waited.

§

*“I’m tired,” the living Daniel said.*

*He was entering his twentieth year as artistic director at Uncle Vanya’s Playhouse, a Cleveland repertory theater where I had worked under him for about seven years. Leigh and I had long since moved to Brooklyn. We were home for the holidays.*

*I sat next to him, at one of his favorite dives in Tremont, not far from Uncle Vanya's. Last week, the board of directors had rejected his recent proposal for new LED lights and a projector strong enough to produce holographic images. He had desperately wanted these things for an upcoming production of Macbeth. Now, he found himself stuck, yet again, with his measly budget, skeleton crew, and late nights at the theater. All of this, it seemed, had encouraged a bout of drinking.*

*"I'll be fifty soon," he said. "I haven't had a day off since September." He laughed and spun his glass of rye. I did not understand what he found so funny and decided not to ask. By then, we saw each other rarely. I was two decades younger, and my departure had left a stain on our friendship.*

*"I'm too old for this shit," he went on, laughing. "I need a cabin, a nice patch of woods, and a week to do nothing but read and go out on my kayak."*

§

The bodies down on Halsey Street remained, unmoving. They just lay there, crumpled in a heap of limbs, denim, and a turquoise sweater. One of their shoes was a few feet closer to the intersection. They looked so relaxed; one might think they had been relieved of great burdens. It was as if their stillness were the window to a reprieve I still yearn for. Daniel knows that reprieve.

The plea in his eyes has lifted for good.

I was consumed with envy. Envy because they were on the cusp of learning what Daniel knows, what I am still trying to make sense of. Maybe they were being offered a chance to learn it together. We should all be so lucky. Going at it alone is not easy. Leigh reminds me how clear things became for Daniel, and that it will be the same for me, though I cannot see how.

Eyeing the bodies, I shook my head, ashamed. Reprieve. To this day it feels cruel and unfair to have ascribed this to them.

A crowd gathered. The drug dealer from downstairs was first to arrive. He went to the bodies and lowered himself down, placing his hand on one of their shoulders. His posture as he crouched, that he did not recoil, seemed to imply they were still alive.

The shame I had been struck with waned.

§

*Daniel's laughter edged into a firmer sadness. He drained what was left of his rye.*

*I said nothing. He studied me, registering how estranged we had become, how our friendship had slipped into a chronic condition of periodic filling-in.*

*For seven years, I had done graphic design for his marketing campaigns, oversaw his creative team, and worked as his assistant. I was supposed to be his protégé, his successor.*

*“It is what it is,” he said, referring to the LED lights and projector.*

*“Something’s got to give,” I replied, quickly. “It’s not sustainable. Not only for you. They aren’t going to have anybody left if they run you all into the ground.”*

*He gave me a look that said I should know better. It was not that simple.*

## §

Pedestrians heading up Nostrand slowed their pace, abandoned the usual purpose in their step and the New York guardedness coating their eyes, to take a moment and see what happened. Curiosity, distress, horror—all mixed together. Phones were pulled from pockets to snap photos of the shoe and the tire marks. Someone had the audacity to take a picture of the bodies. Others swiveled around, looking for the car that was probably well out of Bed-Stuy.

Leigh was still on the phone when I heard the sirens, which grew louder until the ambulance was just below our window. The drug dealer stood and turned, regarding the vehicle as though it were a harbinger of long-awaited news. Red light swept against the building across from ours. Its glow ended

just above the sidewalk, its swift and steady whirl accentuated the stillness of the bodies.

## §

*I do not remember the rest of my conversation with Daniel.*

*The first time I saw his ghost, I was visiting Cleveland in May. This was five months after our conversation at the dive, a year and a half before the accident on Halsey Street.*

*Later, our friends told me he had just died, and that I was the one who found him. I replied found was not the right word. He was sitting in his arm-chair, nursing a glass of rye—just as he would have on any such night. When I stood in the foyer, he turned to me. His skin was pale and smooth as ivory. Pink bags cradled vacant eyes. A copy of *Orpheus Descending* by Tennessee Williams lay open on the end table. He had been working on a new pitch to the board of directors, who'd already turned it down three times. He was obsessed with that play.*

*He said that he had become confused, though not by any one thing. While he could not articulate his confusion, he was not distressed. In fact, he did not seem capable of comprehending anything beyond the immediate present. It was as if he were looking on the world for the first time.*

*We spoke for several minutes. He did not say my name, nor did he allude to our shared past. After a while, the emptiness in his eyes filled in, and to this day I swear hints of the old familiarity were there. In a way, I felt relief. The last time we sat together, he spun his glass of rye and dissected me with what I can only describe as disappointment paired with contempt. This time, his eyes were soft. He was disoriented, yes, but it was clear that he also desired my company.*

*After the paramedics arrived, he remained silent, watching them. He did not so much as blink when they carted off his own corpse. As soon as they were gone, something in his eyes clicked. It was as if a quiet revelation had passed through him, like when he used to discover a character's motivation in one of his productions.*

*"What do you feel?" I asked.*

*"I'm not sure," he said. "But I think it's time to go." He stood, walked to the door and turned left, down the hallway. I took his copy of Orpheus Descending and followed. When I reached the door, however, he was gone. I panicked, certain that I'd never see him again.*

*We've happened on each other four times since. Each time the pallor of his skin is slightly paler. Each time his gaze is more affirmed.*

## §

The paramedics were slow tending to the bodies. Someone turned off the siren, but the red light kept sweeping.

Leigh went to brew tea in the kitchen. The kettle whistled. I hardly noticed when she was by my side, offering me a cup. If one of the bodies unlatched its ghost, I needed to see it happen. I needed to be ready to run down and talk to it, and to keep an eye out for Daniel.

The crowd soon lost interest, peeling off one by one. Even the drug dealer took up his usual position on our stoop.

Leigh rested her cheek on my shoulder. "Maybe we don't need to keep watching," she said. "Maybe we can go to bed."

"I'll stay here," I replied. "I love you."

She pursed her lips and gazed down at the street. "I don't think he'll be coming tonight. I think maybe that's all over."

I did not reply. Whether she believed in my encounters with Daniel back then, I was always unsure. She does now. The first time we saw each other, after it happened to me, was enough to quell any doubt.

"I'll be in bed," she said, stepping away.



## II

Our Friends in Cleveland never gave up trying to convince me that I found Daniel. They told me I had made the call. The day after, someone said it was a hemorrhagic stroke that had resulted from a ruptured aneurism in his brain. They said if he was sleeping—unlikely—then he did not suffer. When it became clear to them that I did not remember making the call, and that I was convinced I had spoken to his ghost, they told me repression was nothing to be ashamed of. I should not distress or worry that I was going insane. Later, one of them told me I was probably suffering from PTSD. I told them that didn't make sense. I did not recall anything traumatic. "Well," they replied, "That's where the *post* part comes in."

## §

The day after the accident on Halsey Street, I read through Daniel's margin notes in his copy of *Orpheus Descending*—looking for what, I cannot say. A few hours later, I was in the kitchen cooking dinner, when I dropped a spatula. My fingers had gone numb, my knees about to buckle. Leigh heard the spatula clang against the floor, and came in.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

The sight of her was enough for me to go to pieces. My lower lip trembled,

my face screwed up. My voice rose and fell as I tried to tell her how helpless I felt, the pointlessness I perceived in everything. If Daniel could die from something as inexplicable as an aneurism, if those two bodies had gone to the other side when they were simply trying to cross the street, why should any of us impose reason on our lives? Who were we to presume we had any control over what happened to us?

I wept. Leigh held me.

The next morning, I decided to take a walk. Outside our building, the drug dealer was leaning against our stoop. I asked if he knew anything about the bodies.

“They were alive,” he said, rolling a toothpick from one end of his mouth to the other. “But they were in bad shape.”

He looked across Halsey to the stretch of wall where the bodies made impact.

“Did they say anything to you?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Were they able to speak?”

“One of them, sure.”

“Were they confused? Did it seem—did they know where they were?”

“What kind of a question is that?”

“Did they act like they had a concussion? Were they making sense?”

“Sure, they made sense. At least, they didn’t seem to be in much pain. But I didn’t let them move until the paramedics showed up. One of them was bleeding from their ear. Their limbs weren’t in natural—they were in shock, I guess.”

“Do you know where they were taken?”

“Brooklyn Hospital Center. Can’t swear to it but that’s what it sounded like.”

“Is that—”

“The one next to Fort Greene Park.” He paused. “What’s it to you?”

“I’d just like to know if they’re okay.”

Perplexed, he blew out a pocket of air and ticked his head to the left.

I thanked him.

“All right,” he said, applying his usual drawl.

I walked to a small café in Clinton Hill. Inside, I ordered an espresso and sat at a street-facing table. Part of being on the lookout for Daniel meant that I always liked to have eyes on the street. I opened my laptop and searched online for anything I could find about the accident. There was nothing. I

thought about posting a thread on Nextdoor or Facebook or requesting an incident report from the local police precinct. But as soon as these ideas came to me, I felt foolish.

By the time I finished my espresso, the prospect of spending the afternoon at home, alone while Leigh was at work, sounded unbearable. So, I hopped on an approaching bus and rode it into Fort Greene. I knew the stop to get off at. I often go there still. From there it is only a short walk to the hospital.

### §

*The first time I chanced upon Daniel's ghost was in September of the year after he bowed out. Leigh and I had flown back to Cleveland for the premiere of a play our friend had written and directed. Leigh reminds me time and again that this was the reason for our trip, but I never commit to memory the name of our friend. Soon after the play began, I saw Daniel, sitting alone across the aisle. There was a string of empty seats on either side of him. My breath lifted from me. His skin was paler than the night his aneurism ruptured. His temples and cheeks were hollowed out. The expression he wore was of someone entranced by the action on stage, while not comprehending a bit of the plot. As if he were trying to remember a language he had spoken in a previous life. As with the night he passed, his eyes conveyed an utter lack of orientation. His*

*confusion, however, was gone.*

*I left Leigh and sat next to him, leaned in, and whispered his name. He looked me in the eye and pressed a finger to his lips, then returned his attention to the stage.*

*During intermission, Leigh and I stepped outside. She asked why I had gone and sat across the aisle. I told her and she laughed. But when she saw that I was being earnest, she became confused, distraught. She begged me to speak to a professional. We argued and did not stay for the second act. That night, we sat in her parents' kitchen, and she refused to let either of us go to bed until we found a therapist in Brooklyn.*

*The second time, we were home for the Holidays. I'd had at least a dozen sessions with that therapist, and still hadn't made much sense of the void Daniel's exit left in me, nor how the night at the theater in Cleveland pried that void open. The morning was quiet and still. We were staying with Leigh's parents, and no one in the house had risen from bed. Embracing the silence, I went out to grab an espresso at a nearby café and strolled down to Edgewater Park. Sitting alone on a bench was Daniel. He was gazing out over the water, toward Canada.*

*"How does that speech go?" he asked. "The one at the end of Orpheus*

Descending? *Something to do with the fugitive kind. 'Wild things leave' something or other behind.*"

"Skins," *I said. Daniel had scribbled notes all over this passage when he was alive. I memorized it soon after our first encounter.*

*"What's that?"*

"Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean skins and teeth and white bones behind them, and these are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind."

*"Leaves you feeling a little distraught, doesn't it," Daniel said.*

*"I always thought it was a comfort," I replied.*

*Not until the third encounter would I discover that he was not tethered to Uncle Vanya's, Tremont, Cleveland, or the expanse of Lake Erie. Or maybe he had been tethered but was somehow set free. I still don't know how that works. I, for one, cannot comprehend leaving Brooklyn.*

*Leigh and I were in Fort Greene Park on a Saturday morning, picking up groceries at the weekly farmer's market. We strolled up the winding paths to the terrace at the top of the hill. Daniel stood at the far end, looking toward Manhattan.*

*"I never could think clearly there," he said. "It had such a way of bogging*

*me down.”*

*“Cleveland?”*

*Daniel nodded. I shot a glance back at Leigh. She had her hands planted in the pouch of her sweater. She looked at me and flapped her elbows in a gesture that said, what gives? It was the strangest thing. Not only did I feel no reason to justify my lapse in awareness of her, but it also seemed as if her image, and everything around her, existed on another plane entirely.*

*“They never understood, never saw what we could’ve done with Orpheus.” Daniel paused. He turned to look at me. “You did though. Leigh too. I resented you for leaving. I always said we could’ve pulled it off if you stayed. I needed an ally. And you both had so much potential. I said to everyone, I said, ‘They’re just a cliché.’” He looked away from me, back toward Manhattan. “Maybe I understand now.”*

*That was a month before the accident on Halsey Street. That he spoke with such clarity, that he referred to Leigh and lamented the board’s refusal to approve Orpheus Descending was proof. Proof that, as time distanced his ghost from the moment of passing, he was making sense of things. He was remembering and expressing sentiments as though he were still alive. I swore to help him exact that clarity, to orient his new self and help him discover a purpose*

*in his afterlife.*

*With each week, I became more and more distressed that I was not encountering him. So, I prepared for whenever that encounter might be. I jotted down any remembrance that came to mind. I compiled the playbills and postcards and fliers I'd kept from my years at Uncle Vanya's. I wrote down the streets Daniel lived on and the names of his former girlfriends. I listed the restaurants where we used to eat. I stowed these documents in my backpack and brought them with me wherever I went. I bought his favorite brand of rye and memorized other passages from Orpheus Descending. I went to Fort Greene Park and hiked up to the terrace every day.*

§

I do not know what I thought I'd accomplish by going to the E.R. The accident was nearly two days behind me. If the bodies had survived the night, surely, they had been moved to another part of the hospital.

In the waiting room, a man near the door lurched in his seat, holding both hands to his stomach. A daytime soap opera played on a small television set mounted on the wall. Lagging closed captions trailed the images, redacting the eyes and mouths of the actors. Only a few people stood ahead of me in the check-in line. When it was my turn, the clerk beckoned me over and asked



for my insurance card.

“I’m fine, actually. I wanted to check on two patients that came in night before last.”

“Their names?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know.”

“I’m not next of kin or anything. It was a car accident—outside my apartment. I saw it happen. I wanted to know if they’re okay.”

The clerk gave an exaggerated sigh.

“My partner was the one who called it in, if that makes any difference.”

“It doesn’t.”

I stood firm, glaring down at her.

“Look it here,” she said. “This is the E.R. People are hurting. People are waiting. I’m not the person to talk to. Even if I was—I can’t let anyone off the street in to see a patient. It doesn’t work like that. Maybe you haven’t been to a lot of hospitals, but this is kind of common knowledge. Now, please.” She gestured to the door.

Her words were like a prolonged slap in the face. When she was finished, I stood there, stunned—a fool on an errand doomed from the start.

My cheeks flushed and my wrists stiffened as I went for the exit. At the edge of Fort Greene Park, I made my way up to the terrace. I sat down in the spot where Daniel had appeared and recited the speech at the end of *Orpheus Descending*.

*“The fugitive kind can always follow their kind. The fugitive kind can always follow their kind. The fugitive kind can always follow their kind.”*

§

*“I’ve got it.” The living Daniel slapped an old playbill down on my desk. His cheeks were flush from the cold, his eyes fixed on mine.*

*“You’ve got what?” I was putting some last-minute touches on our poster art for the next season of student one-acts. The night before, Leigh and I confessed to each other that we both felt stifled. We spent the night looking at apartment listings in Brooklyn.*

*“Orpheus Descending. That’s what we’ll slot for next September.”*

*I’d never heard of it and said as much. He told me it was one of Tennessee Williams’ stronger, albeit less famous plays. “It’s a reimagining of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. It’s about anguish and pity and violence. It’s about alienation and how a person—how we are all victimized by our environment. It’s perfect.” I remember how his eyes lost focus. He spoke in such a fever, I*

*thought he might break into a fit of madness.*

*“Sounds like a real audience pleaser,” I said, cautiously.*

*Daniel waved his hand in the air, as if to wipe the conversation clean of my remark. “You’re not with me. People will flock to it. It taps into something universal, a fundamental quality in all of us. We’ve got the budget and the perfect cast for the leads. Glass Menagerie is almost done with its run on Broadway. People are talking and thinking about Williams’ work.” Seeing my face, he added, “It’s about death. It’s about the artist’s fate.”*

*“Which is—”*

*“To be destroyed, of course. Oh, and it’s so urgent you can practically feel the magnitude of Williams’ lines as you read it.”*

*Daniel stared at me. I held his gaze. I wanted to tell him that doing the play would be for him, not for Tremont. Not for Cleveland or to invoke that fundamental quality of which he spoke. I wanted to tell him that this was his way of lashing out. For a reason I can no longer determine, though I am sure it was clear to me at the time, I said nothing.*

*“Don’t worry,” he said, tapping the playbill on my desk. “You’ll see. I’ve got to draft my pitch to the board.” With that he was gone.*

I lingered for a while in Fort Greene before heading back to Halsey Street, where I skipped dinner and drank five glasses of rye. After the second glass it all made sense. Tennessee Williams was trying to tell us that we were all victims of an inferno. Whether it was a place or a job or a person, we were each tethered to a thing that would be our ruin. Tremont was Daniel's. For someone like him, afflicted with the artist's sensibility, that inferno had no trouble swallowing him up.

By the fourth glass, my excitement collapsed. I fell into dismay. What hope were we to have, trudging through our day-to-day, if our fate was to lift from our bodies and walk the earth, disoriented and confused, only to commune with those who were near when we passed? That had to explain why I could see Daniel while others could not. It is the same reason Leigh is the only person I speak to now. I never encounter the others, the pedestrians who were there when it happened to me. Or maybe I do, and I just don't recognize them. Maybe they were so absorbed in the scuffle they didn't take note of my face and, when they see me now, have no idea they're looking upon someone deceased.

Yesterday—I think it was—I asked Leigh to jog my memory of that night. She said she came home late. When she found me, I was dead drunk, muttering

incoherently about something Daniel told me years ago, and the “artist’s sensibility.” Sidney Lumet’s film adaptation of *Orpheus Descending* was streaming on our television—Marlon Brando and Joanne Woodward in the corner store. She said it took some convincing to get me undressed and into bed.

The next day, she said that she understood my grief, but she was at her limit. “I can’t go on like this. It’s been over a year. I know it was traumatic finding Daniel. Really, I do. But there has to be a way for you to move on.”

### III

Daniel never came to me that week. Maybe Leigh was right, and it was all over. Maybe he had ascended to another stratum of his afterlife, a place I could not access. Maybe I had no role to play in orienting his ghost, in helping him find a new purpose.

Hoping to dig up information about the accident and the two bodies, I continued my searches online. If Daniel refused to present himself, I would discover another channel into the afterlife. I would seek him out. I stood at our window for long stretches of time, hoping to catch sight of someone walking around in one shoe or a turquoise sweater. I lingered in the deli across the street from the E.R. I returned to the terrace at Fort Greene Park a dozen times.

In bed, when Leigh was asleep, I would quietly recite the speech at the end of *Orpheus Descending*.

*“The fugitive kind can always follow their kind. The fugitive kind can always follow their kind. The fugitive kind can always follow their kind.”*

On a Thursday, two weeks after the accident, we’d run out of groceries and decided to order pizza. Leigh suggested a place in Fort Greene near the hospital. We ordered from there all the time, but I do not remember the name. Our apartment was barely out of their delivery range, so I always ordered take-out.

When I got there, hordes of commuters flooded the sidewalk. Pie in hand, I stepped outside and craned my neck toward Downtown Brooklyn, hoping to see a bus approaching. That’s when I saw him—a man in a turquoise sweater. He was standing alone in front of a bookstore, working on a cigarette.

My heart leapt to my throat.

“The accident,” I was saying under my breath. “That was the sweater. That was the sweater—the accident.” A little louder: “Don’t move, don’t go anywhere.” I sprinted to the intersection. The light turned green, and I ran across, skipping up to the opposite sidewalk.

“Hey,” I called. “The accident.”

The man shot me a quick, sideways glance. His expression suggested that he would have done anything not to be the target of my frenzy.

“Excuse me, sir.” No other choice, he looked at me. “You’re the man from the accident. Do you remember it? Do you know where you are? Do you know your name? What day is it?”

“*What?* My name? What the fuck are you talking about? What accident? It’s Thursday, motherfucker.”

“In Bed-Stuy,” I replied, panting. “Two weeks ago. Your sweater—you and your friend were hit by a car on Halsey. It was you—*that sweater.*” I pointed to his chest. He appeared threatened and took a step back.

“I have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about. Do I look like I was hit by a car? Why would I be in Bed-Stuy? *This* sweater? I bought this at the Gap. Down the street? There are whole racks of them. Go figure.” He shook his head and, walking away, announced, “It is too late in the week for this bullshit.”

Pie in hand, I stood alone and watched him go.

## §

The next day, Leigh and I left our apartment at sunset. Our intention was to have a drink in Brooklyn Heights and walk to the Promenade. The clouds were coalescing over New Jersey, and Leigh did not want to miss their colors as the

sun eased itself down.

On Nostrand, we passed the drug dealer, who was not in the mood for small talk. Evening r0ush hour was at its height and, being a Friday, the expected chaos had taken over the sidewalk—a collected panic brought on by everyone’s eagerness to be done with the workweek. Like one last fit of restlessness before going to sleep, Friday evenings on Nostrand and Halsey were always this way.

We navigated the flow of bothered commuters, weaving in and out of bodies in motion, dodging elbows and shoulders that refused to tuck in. When the stream of pedestrians ebbed, Leigh jogged ahead to toss her gum in a trashcan. A man in full sprint shot out from behind the Senegalese café on the corner. He was heavy set, his belly protruding from under the hem of his shirt. His eyes were those of a frightened animal. He moved nimbly, his step light for such a big guy. Somehow, Leigh did not notice him. Were he less aware, he might have knocked her into the street. He pulled a phone out of his pocket and wedged it beneath a pile of trash bags, then sprung into the lanes of oncoming traffic. A car horn blared. Tires screeched. Muffled expletives issued from behind a windshield. It happened so fast I do not know what compelled me to look back to the sidewalk. Probably to make sure Leigh was okay, but I



cannot swear that was why. For this I am still ashamed.

A second man came into view. The way he carried himself was eerily calm, despite that he too was moving fast. His intention was clear: to run down the big man. Leigh turned to face me, still unaware of the chase happening around her. The pursuer stopped at the curb and, reaching down the front of his pants, he pulled out a gun. A collective gasp arose from the sidewalk. Leigh's eyes were on me, oblivious, stepping into the pursuer's line of fire as he aimed his gun at the big man.

That's when it happened: a sudden lapse in the commotion. Beyond Leigh, Daniel stood on the far corner, hands planted in the pockets of his coat. This time, he appeared as the specter I would have expected a ghost to look like, not the confused, malnourished shell of a person that became increasingly malnourished and less confused as time went on. His expression was neutral, his posture better than in life. His skin was so pale I could almost see through it. Warmness reached out from him, across the intersection, gently pressing itself onto me. Then he was gone.

I sprung forward. At least, that's what Leigh tells me. Even though I do not recall doing anything, it's nice to know that I did.

"Stop—Leigh," is what I supposedly yelled. "He has a gun. Get down."

I like that—how assertive she portrays me.

“You made like you were about to lunge toward that guy,” she said, that night. No, that remark came much later. I have no idea what we talked about that night.

The man must have heard me. He must have been so homed in on his prey that he hadn't until that instant realized he might injure or kill someone else. According to Leigh, he recoiled but kept the gun pointing forward. She said she would never forget the look of the barrel, the black hole of which she only caught a glimpse.

“It's the strangest thing,” she said. “Right then I saw Daniel. He was looking at me, affectionately.” She paused, before adding, “He was so real. But the guy with the gun—it's difficult to describe. He looked as if he were standing behind a backlit scrim.”

If the pursuer had committed to pulling the trigger, I don't believe he wanted to harm anyone other than the big man. If my intention had been to tackle him, I'm glad it did not come to that. If it had, the gun might have gone off in any direction. Its bullet might have pierced Leigh instead of me. But that's not worth thinking about. Leigh is fine. Though I do miss her. It's not like there's any one reason we don't live together anymore, just that she says

she needs space.

When I do see her, she acts surprised, as if I hadn't reached out to set a time and place. As for Daniel, I haven't laid eyes on him since he appeared on the corner, calm and serene.

Whether my aggression prompted the pursuer to pull back, or he was merely reacting to the outcry around us, there was an earsplitting *crack*. He paused, tucked in his lips, and delivered a look that was both wounded and perplexed. As if I had wronged him in some way.

§

There was something else I wanted to add, I just can't think of what it was. That's the problem these days. A thought comes to me and then it's gone. If I replay certain events, and consider the impressions they made on me, like affirmations repeated over and over, only then am I able to arrange my thoughts. Only then do I hear the timbre of Daniel's laughter, do I catch the scent of Leigh's hair in the morning. Only then do I see the earnest look in her eye. Even if I had it in me to keep track, I'd be too embarrassed to admit how many times I've recited all of this, just to piece it together for you. Remembrances of the time after Daniel's death anchor me. And Leigh has been a big help. Whatever it was—oh yes:

The man buried his gun in his jeans and sprinted off. I swiveled around. My eyes found Leigh. The expression she wore was one of shock. Sadly, that look I will never forget. I much prefer what her eyes do to me now. In that moment, it was as if she thought she had lost me for good.

---

JEFF GABEL is a writer from Denver, Colorado. His fiction has appeared in *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, *Aji Magazine*, *Litro Magazine (Online)*, and elsewhere. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and is currently a candidate at the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. You can find more of his stories at [jeffgabelwrites.com](http://jeffgabelwrites.com).