

FACE BLIND

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Published in Great Britain by Twenty First Century Publishers Ltd in conjunction with UPSO in December 2003.

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 1-904433-10-3

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**FACE BLIND**

**A Novel**

**by**

**Raymond Benson**

For Randi

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author and publisher wish to acknowledge the help of Cecilia Burman, Jordan Charter, the Fulton County, Ohio Sheriff's Office, and the Fulton County Health Center.

For more information on face blindness, visit [www.prosopagnosia.com](http://www.prosopagnosia.com).

PROSOPAGNOSIA (n.) From Greek [*prosp* = face; *agnosia* = lack of knowledge].

Face-blindness; a neurological condition that renders a person incapable of recognizing faces. It is unrelated to the person's ability to see faces. Someone with perfect vision can suffer from prosopagnosia. It is also unrelated to the person's IQ. In the normal brain there is a center that is dedicated to face recognition. Prosopagnosia arises when that special center becomes damaged or is otherwise unable to perform its function.

## Chapter 1

A small piece appeared in the *New York Daily News* two days after the incident had occurred. It was the first mention of the event but it wouldn't be the last. Before long, it would become one of New York City's great unsolved cases and a mystery that would keep the police scratching their heads for years to come.

### SLAYINGS AT WRITER'S HOME

Police are baffled by the scene of multiple slayings inside the townhouse owned by writer John Cozzone, located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Two men and one woman were found dead in the home. One man and the woman had been shot to death, but the other man had been stabbed. The identities of the victims are being held until further investigation is completed.

Cozzone was not one of the slain individuals. Police are searching for the writer, who had a fleeting taste of fame and success in the mid-70s as the author of two best-selling novels, *The Apples of the Cosmos* and *The Loose Lips of Lucretia Leone*. Police are still trying to discern what relationship the victims had to Cozzone, but preliminary scrutiny indicates that the townhouse was the scene of a drug deal gone bad.

A day after the story appeared, John Cozzone's location was made known to the New York police, and this revelation only made the mystery even more puzzling.

The investigating officer was certain that someone, somewhere, knew what had taken place in that townhouse on a warm June evening at a time when most people in Manhattan were having their dinners, or watching television, or attending the theatre.

The officer was correct, more or less. Indeed, one individual did know what had occurred in John Cozzone's home that evening, for the person in question was present when it happened. The problem was that this witness could no more accurately detail the whos or the whys of the incident than the domestic housecat that was also in the house at the time.

To do so, one would have to possess an omniscient perspective of all the personages involved, travel back in time two weeks before the incident, and start at the beginning.

## Chapter 2

*“Hey, baby, howzit goin’?”*

The words echoed in her brain. The greasy voice with its implied menace resonated through the dream as it had always done, filling her countenance with dread and panic. The familiar pattern repeated itself as she looked back to see where the voice had come from. As usual, there was nothing but the endless avenue stretching off into darkness, completely devoid of pedestrians and traffic. It was as if First Avenue had become part of a gigantic ghost city where no human soul traversed. The silence, as they say, was deafening. The shadows stretched toward her with slow, creeping tentacles, beckoning her to stand still so that they could ensnare her and pull her into the black unknown.

Hannah turned to run – but as is the case in dreams of this ilk, her legs felt heavy and it took a tremendous effort just to raise her foot. More anxiety enveloped her as she struggled to move forward, fighting against an unseen force that rendered the muscles in her legs powerless.

*“Hey, baby, where ya goin’?”*

The baritone male voice was intensely malevolent, infused with the underbelly of lust and perverse desire that women often experienced while walking the streets of Manhattan. Sexist remarks went with the territory if one happened to be female and the sad fact remained that youth and attractiveness made the target stand out even more.

*“Don’t rush off, baby, you wanna party?”*

Hannah strained to move one leg in front of the other and run up the deserted avenue toward her apartment building. It was still several blocks away. Why was it so dark? Even the street lamps were dim and spooky. Why was no one around? There wasn’t a single car, truck, or bus moving uptown, and that was not only unusual – it was simply impossible at eleven o’clock on a weeknight. Manhattan was the city that never slept! Traffic noise was *always* present, even in the middle of the night.

*My God, Hannah thought, she was all alone.*

Of course, in the back of her mind, she knew that it was just the weird dream logic. She hadn’t really been alone when the real incident occurred. There *had* been traffic – lots of it – and there were people on the sidewalks. Still, because of the late hour, the avenue was less populated than it would have been if it were broad daylight. Hannah almost never walked the streets late at night but she had been forced to do so when the Number 1 bus broke down and she had no patience to wait for the next one. She had been tired and was fighting a cold. What she had wanted more than anything was to get home, have some hot tea, crawl into bed, and fall asleep with Panther curled up on top of the blanket.

Instead she got the creep.

*“Hey, baby! I’m comin’ after ya!”*

That’s when she knew he was behind her in the dream. Hannah looked back again, just as she had done in real life, but she didn’t see anyone. She *felt* him, though. The creep was back there, just a few feet away, sneaking up with claws outstretched. Hannah faced forward once again and ran, but the rules of the dream world prohibited her from making much progress. Even when it had happened on that fateful night in May, Hannah had felt as if she couldn’t move quickly enough.

Nevertheless, she pressed forward. Only two blocks to go. She passed Wong’s Laundry and the Love drug store and skirted across the street against the red light. It didn’t matter, as there was no crosstown traffic. Even on the Upper East Side near her building the city was eerily empty.

As she passed the little pizza joint where she often picked up slices, Hannah heard the running steps on the pavement behind her. That was the cue to scream for help, but nothing came out. Her throat was twisted and dry. The dream logic made it worse, for her scream came out as a mere whisper. Of course, no one heard her. There was no one *to* hear her.

*“Come ‘ere, baby! I’m right behind ya!”*

Terror gripped her heart as she pushed her small frame forward with all her might. She made it across the last street and was steps away from the five-floor brownstone where she lived with her cat. She knew that the creep was still back there, though, just seconds away. Timing was crucial.

She pushed the glass door open and burst into the small inner foyer, where the metal mailboxes lined the wall and a locked security door prevented visitors from entering the building without first using the intercom to communicate with tenants. Normally she would have stopped to open her mailbox and collect what bills had come that day – she never got letters – but that thought didn't cross her mind. Her goal was to simply get the key into the security door and get inside before the creep was upon her.

She had always berated herself for carrying too many keys. She had four keys just to get into her apartment – one for the security door and three for her own door. There was a mailbox key and several others that opened various things at the bank where she worked.

Her hands shook as she pulled out the bundle of keys and fumbled for the right one. She plunged it into the lock on the door, but the dream wouldn't let her do it. The key turned to rubber and bent grotesquely. Wrong key. She tried the other one that looked identical to the security door key and found that it went into the lock easily, but then she was unable to turn it. Something was wrong.

*Please, oh God, please!*

She felt the outer door swing open behind her and the rush of cold air as the creep made his presence known.

*“Hey, baby. This where you live? You gonna invite me inside?”*

Hannah tried to scream again, then started to turn and defend herself. She wanted to beat the creep senseless, but she was a petite woman weighing all of one hundred and five pounds. Before she could spin around, however, the blow sent her crashing into the security door. She would never forget the pain and shock of that moment's violence, the sensation that a hole had been gorged into the back of her head.

As she fell to the tiled floor in the small cubicle, she gazed at the intruder to get a good look at him before she passed out. But the dream had its own script and the ending never changed.

The creep had no face.

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Hannah awoke with a start, jerking her body in a defensive reaction to the nightmare. When she realized that she was safe, in bed in her apartment, she sighed loudly and fell back into her pillow. Her heart was pounding and the sheets were damp.

It had happened again.

“Damn,” she muttered. The awful dreams occurred so frequently that one would think she'd be used to them by now.

A mournful “meow” forced her to open her eyes again. Panther was standing at the foot of the bed, eyeing her with concern. A black shorthaired domestic, the cat had been her constant companion for seven years.

“Sorry, Panther,” she said. “Did I scare you?”

The cat meowed again and began to rub his head and body against the bulge beneath the sheets that was her leg.

Hannah looked at the alarm clock by the bed and saw that it was nearly time to get up anyway. She reached over, switched the alarm over to radio, and slowly sat up on the bed.

The sunlight streamed through the blinds at the other end of her railroad efficiency. It wasn't large by any means, really just one big room that had three sections – a living area, a kitchen, and a bedroom space – and an attached bathroom. The rent was miraculously inexpensive for Manhattan, it was close enough to her job that she could walk, and it provided plenty of room for a thirty-four-year-old single woman and her cat. She didn't need a fancy apartment. She never entertained, she never had guests, and she didn't date. Hannah liked it that way.

She stood, walked into the kitchen, grabbed the kettle, filled it with water from the faucet, and placed the kettle on the stove. She turned on the burner, then went to the bathroom. When she was done, Hannah went back to the kitchen, opened the pantry, and retrieved Panther's food from the shelf. The cat maneuvered between and around her legs, meowing in his predictable, needy fashion.

“Hold your horses, Panther,” she mumbled. She poured the food into his bowl and then gave him fresh water. By now the water in the kettle was boiling. Hannah took her favorite coffee cup from the

drainboard, placed the filter holder on top of the cup, pulled a fresh filter from the package in the cupboard, then got the packet of Starbucks' ground coffee from the fridge. She dumped a couple of measured spoonfuls into the filter, then poured the hot water on top. As it seeped through into the cup, she removed the knee-length maroon T-shirt that she had slept in for three years, and got into the shower.

After the ritual cleansing, Hannah dressed for work in blue jeans and a New York Marathon T-shirt. Every day was "Casual Day" at her office. She was lucky.

She sat at the little dining table with her cup of coffee and sipped it slowly while listening to the news on the radio, peeling and eating a banana from the fruit basket, and watching Panther eat. She hadn't quite shaken off the dregs of the nightmare and she knew it would linger for hours. Hannah was used to it. For five years she had dreamt the same thing, over and over...

When she was done, Hannah returned to the bathroom and brushed her teeth. Then she looked into the mirror and studied what she saw.

It was always the same. The blonde hair looked all right – straight and thin, shoulder-length, not needing much styling. The rest was blank as usual. She knew that it was her face she was looking at, but every day she felt as if she were peering at a stranger. Hannah refused to put on make-up and hadn't done so since the incident. Besides, she would only make a mess of it if she tried.

She had been told throughout her life that she was naturally pretty. Perhaps she had been... before. She certainly didn't think of herself in those terms now. It didn't matter to her. She simply didn't care anymore if she were pretty or not.

Proceeding to the final part of the morning ritual, Hannah opened the mirror to reveal the medicine cabinet. She took the small container of one hundred-milligram Zoloft tablets, shook out one and a half, and swallowed them with water from the tap.

Hannah took a look at the litter box under the sink and made sure that it was full and needed no cleaning, then went out to the living area to gather her purse and keys. In her free hand she picked up a duffel bag full of dirty laundry. She shut off the light, gave Panther a stroke or two, then opened the door.

She lived on the third floor of the brownstone walkup. Most of her neighbors kept to themselves, just as she did, but as she went down to the second floor, Liz opened her door and stuck her head out.

"Oh, hi Hannah," the woman said. "I thought I heard your feet on the stairs."

Hannah wasn't sure what that was supposed to mean. She had tiny feet and always trod lightly. Any amount of noise in the stairwell echoed throughout the building and she was usually careful not to create any.

"Hi, Liz."

"You wanna come in for some coffee?" Liz asked. She opened the door wider to reveal that she was wearing a stained, pink terrycloth robe that barely contained her large bust. Liz Rosenthal was a big woman with a weight problem and brown hair cut like the Beatles circa 1964. Brightly displayed on the top of her bulbous right breast was a tattoo of a heart with a nail through it. Around her neck she wore a gold *chai*.

"No, thanks, I just had some." Hannah stopped in front of Liz's door long enough to be polite. "I have to get to work."

Liz was in her early forties, or so Hannah guessed. The woman was a lesbian and made no attempts to hide it. Hannah had seen Liz with other women over the years, but lately she had been alone. Liz was probably the closest thing to a friend that Hannah had, but the relationship was not entirely comfortable. Hannah felt that Liz wanted to make something more of it, since Hannah was always by herself, too. Nevertheless, she had given Liz a set of her apartment keys, just in case something happened to her. That way Liz could get in to feed Panther if she had to.

"I thought you set your own hours," Liz said in her thick New Jersey accent.

"I do. But I also have deadlines."

"Mmmm. So how *is* your famous cousin?"

"Okay, I guess. He's not really that famous."

Liz shrugged. "If you say so."

"You're up early," Hannah said. "Did you work last night?"

"Yeah, I got in around four. Couldn't sleep much. The usual."

Hannah nodded and then shuffled her feet. "Well, I gotta go. See you later."

“Have a good day, honey,” Liz said. She smiled and shut the door.

Hannah descended the steps to the ground floor and left the building. As she passed through the inner foyer, the nightmare came back to her and she felt a sudden chill. She told herself that she should have moved after the incident, but finding a place as good as this one for the price was practically impossible. It was out of the question. Still, it was rare that she didn't feel uneasy entering or exiting her own apartment building.

It was a beautiful Thursday in June. First Avenue was bustling with activity. Rush hour traffic was in full force, the sidewalk was littered with people dashing off to work, and shop owners were opening their places of business. Hannah walked south two blocks to Wong's Laundry, where old Mr. Wong greeted her warmly.

“Good morning, Miss McCleary,” he said, pronouncing it “McCreary,” as he always did.

“Good morning, Mister Wong,” she said. “I'll pick these up this afternoon, okay?”

“Okay.” He wrote out a ticket and gave her the stub. “See you later.”

“Thank you.”

She walked back outside and continued her path south. Before the incident, she would have walked over to Second Avenue and caught the bus to go downtown to the bank where she used to work. Now all she had to do was walk nine blocks and over one avenue to John's townhouse. She had been fortunate in finding a job where she could walk to work, stay out of the public eye, and deal with as few people as possible.

This was important to Hannah, for her cousin John, Mr. Wong, and Liz were probably the three or four people – maximum – that she would recognize that day.

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