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**FLASHOVER**

a novel

by Gordon Highland

(two-chapter sample)

*Something's lost and can't be found.*

*Please, St. Anthony, look around.*

**biorhythms | one**

*Bodies languish on racks, carved from the slab that once breathed life into this world. Asian mostly, but a few Americans, and one rare, exotic beauty whose feminine contours and siren song no hands could resist nor silence. She would become his masterpiece once his life's work was exhibited and his name household. All of them with horns smoothed and polished under the shed's clinical fluorescents. Cavities gutted and routed for experimental hardware. Against the other wall, their companion necks suspend from hooks, finger markings evident. Blonde, ebony, rose. Connective tissue sits in queue upon the workbench, ready to be machined to precision tolerances, these straps and nuts and pegs and bridges. Coils of nickel-plated wire,*

*instruments of torture. Evidence everywhere, yet all unfinished. With the luthier's gravel bootsteps approaching, she tugs a chain and the shop goes black.*

Lucidity still eludes, just these used memories, these hand-me-down dreams Sera embeds. Despite awareness that the senses are not his own, he cannot steer them. And Dacey exists nowhere within.

*What he recalls as the sounds of emergency vehicles approach, brakes squealing and strobe lights flashing. Doors slam with urgent chatter while feet shuffle and equipment is gathered. Against his heavy-lidded view of the sky, Sera appears over him in a paramedic's half-zipped jumper with that divine smile. She strokes his hair and brings her electric lips to his.*

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Tobe Mohr's eyelids flicker, resolving their dewy focus upon a popcorn-textured ceiling. Concentric stains of faulty plumbing linger above. His back vibrates in five-pulse bursts synchronized with lightning strikes that flood the walls. Reminiscent of resuscitation, these two senses in such tandem.

He flings a limb in the direction of the bedside alarm clock, but still the silent fire drill persists. 9:57. And five pulses, not three. He slithers off the mattress grumbling consonants, and shuffles across the hardwood into the living room, where the table lamp echoes the bedroom's disco. A figure moves on the porch beyond.

The peephole's fisheye caricatures a thirtysomething bottled blonde sucking lipstick from her teeth and brushing split ends from her forehead with her ring finger. Natalie. A pan of baked goods balances in her other hand. Brownies, most likely, given the domestic mastery required in

blending water and boxed powder. Tobe opens the door as her smile assembles itself then breaks down just as quickly when his eyelids recoil from the radiance of her backlight.

“Looks like I’m Miss Thereafter.” These are the shapes her silhouetted mouth makes as she sizes up his dishevelment.

“What?” Tobe croaks, palm shielding the ultraviolet rays.

She tries again, lips contorting the syllables. Missed a spot of Passion Plum on her incisor. Tobe shakes his head, confused, and taps his temple in explanation while conjuring and redistributing morning phlegm. Now the squint is hers, until she notices he’s not plugged in.

“Oh!” she says. “Wine scotch year on?”

Tobe blinks several times in response. Can’t trust his eyes so early.

“Should we reschedule?” Natalie thumbs down the block with exaggerated motion.

“Nah, nah,” he yawns, catching on. “We said ten, right? S’fine. Just didn’t reckon I’d need the alarm.”

She extends the pan to him in both hands, head sheepishly bowed in a question of offertory worth. The Supplication. He peels a tinfoiled corner, verifies the effortless brown product, and inhales its blandeur with a practiced smile that’s comforted so many widows and thieves alike on this very porch. He disappears back inside. Natalie cranes her neck for a look, but minds the threshold of this holy dwelling. Like a vampire awaiting expressed permission for entry.

Newspaper fragments litter half the room, other exposed surfaces veiled in dust. The lingering musk of Indonesian tobacco. A few stuffed animals and blonde dolls of impossible genetics strewn. Housekeeping services must not be a common bartering chip.

“Pull up in the dining room, Nauti,” his voice calls, “and I’ll put on some coffee.”

As she crosses the room, rendered Jesuses eyeball her path from every wall. In two dimensions or three, ethnicities from Semitic to African. Impostors, all.

*Naughtily* was the regretful nickname she'd earned in college, and it stuck. Its permanence was such that she now claimed Nautica as her given name whenever eyebrows raised over hearing the naughty endearment, which often appeared spelled *Nadi*, anyway. Corrections were rare, as such protest doth only draw suspicion. She didn't want to know how Tobe picked it up.

Two steaming mugs appear on the table, the gothic script on hers proclaiming that on the eighth day, God created caffeine. Tobe pulls a robe around himself, flips a switch on a palm-sized gadget, and drops it into his velvet pocket. An attached cord scales his neck, where a beige electrode at its end disappears into his scruffy, saltwater-blonde hair an inch above his ear with a satisfying magnetic thud. She'd never seen him without the device before.

"I's just askin why ain't you got your ear on," she gestures, continuing her porch inquiry as he sits down across from her.

"Gotta recharge overnights." He blows across his coffee's surface. "So what was that before about being Imus the Raptor? Or Miss Thereafter, something like that?"

She wrinkles her nose, then makes the connection. "I said, 'Looks like I missed the rapture.' You in your nightie there, all pillow-pleated and bed-headed." He rakes a self-conscious fingers-comb through his coif and she laughs. "Lip readin needs some work, darlin."

It helps when speakers use predictable English sentence structure and don't run all their words together. Or compound these with the impediments of a natural sneer or ceaseless gum chewing.

“So I bet you must sleep like a rum-gummed baby, then, if you’s all unplugged, right?”

Tobe scoffs. “Can’t switch the brain off, Nauti. Got just as much laundry spinnin round up there as anybody. And hearing something – or just *thinking* you hear it – s’all processed the same. It’s probably more akin to ... I dunno, blacking out your windows than anything.”

Her nostrils flare with a tinge of embarrassment. After traversing small talk about bipolar spring weather, Tobe settles in and asks what he can do for her. “Well it ain’t a roofing job,” she chuckles. He doesn’t. “I’m just goin through some ... girl stuff. You know, man problems.” She chews away the silence, one finger entwined in her locks. “But I bet you knew that.”

He shrugs with a modest grin. He knows now, so why spoil her fantasy when given the benefit of the doubt? Such freebies are often the thesis statement that tunnels down a predictable rabbit hole with little variation, upon which the core of his reputation is based.

Natalie catches the glint off a rosary that appears at the base of Tobe’s sleeve and unspools from his wrist. He loops the wooden beads of its other end around her own as a bracelet mirroring him, binding the two, and places her manicured hand palm-up on the table. His warm, deliberate hand grips hers, the silver crucifix charm palmed between them. She looks up, weakened, to meet his eyes, but they’re occupied despite her lingering fascination. He sets her other hand the same way with his atop, naked, its palm calloused and cracked with the pink scar tissue few dare speak about. His first two fingers are extended as if taking her pulse. The accelerated throbbing at her wrist might be a tell if it weren’t so common. “Umm, ohhh-kay,” she says, her quiver evident, “what this got–”

“Shh-shh.” He shakes his head, ears cocked and eyes closed in concentration. But there’s activity there. Like REM sleep while fine-tuning a radio. Measuring her.

“Well, what if I got a itch or somethin?”

“You won’t.” Tobe rotates and shrugs some tightness out of his shoulders. A guttural drone now resonates from his sealed throat like an idling motorcycle, slowly revving as it sweeps frequencies. His eyebrow considers one, just as the unseen Natalie prickles, her downy blonde forearms at attention. He stops and intones it twice again – a singer verifying his baritone pitch pipe. Eyes now refreshed, he’s open for business. “Allrighty. What’d you have for breakfast this morning, Nauti?”

“Well, Ron usually cooks, but he wadn’t there when I got up. So one a them toaster pastries. Why?”

“What color is my robe?”

“Red. Maroon. I dunno, velvet? Ain’t a color, but.” She snaps her gum. “This kinda like a lie-detector setup or something?”

Unblinking focus. “Just getting a baseline.”

“What’s it matter what I say, anyway? I wanna know bout *him*, not me.”

Tobe’s meager, fat-lipped smirk would patronize if she could distinguish such a thing from shame. “So. *Man problems*. Of the Ron variety?”

“I been gettin a total cheatin vibe offa him lately.”

“And you wanna know if he is.”

“Touchdown.”

“Well, Nauti ... I honestly have no idea. Could maybe ask around if ya want.”

Her jaw disconnects and she tries to pull away with a sigh, but remains locked in his electric grip. She swallows, eyes to her cooling coffee. “My girlfriends all said you could help me.”

“And they’re right.” His soothing tone unmodulated, his hands steady. “You’re just asking the wrong questions. Ones about other people.”

Released by passing clouds, oblique rays once again slice through the bay window at their side, modeling her face with the creases of sun worship and alcoholic dehydration. Little deltas form at the corners of her mouth and eyes, skin stippled where cosmetics fail.

“Ron,” he continues, “Ron’s just a symptom.”

“Of what? Our lousy Missouri public schoolin?”

“How many of your ex-boyfriends cheated on you?”

She sighs, feigning calculation. “Well, I guess if you—”

“All of them,” he summarizes. “Every swingin dick ever shared your bed was gonna pack up his pickup and drive out on you eventually.”

She sneers for truth. “Mm hmm.”

“I mean, is it really askin too much for them to put forth the same effort they did that first date? Pay a little attention? Make a girl feel desired?”

“Certainly shouldn’t be,” she says.

“And if *they* can’t be bothered to, well hey, town’s full of second-stringers.” Closing time at The Well lacked no surrogate chivalry for the unmanned. “In small doses, anyway. Until *they* disappoint as well.”

Natalie nods on wide-eyed autopilot. “Can’t win for losing, Tobe.”

“And let’s face it,” he says, “hurts much less these days to just go on the offensive and do unto others first before they can cheat upon you.”

“Cause they will do it, guaranteed.”

“Except with Ron, you don’t *wanna* have to cheat on him. Treats you like a princess, and better every day. But conditioning and impulses now being what they are, your skeptic meter’s pegging. So you manufacture these scenarios to justify your paranoia, build up defenses, and keep some options in the bullpen – all the while waitin for that other boot to drop.”

She reels at her male reflection, scans him up and down. “English, *por favor*.” Just a reflexive grasp at denial.

That doctoral look again, prognosis: terminal. “I’m saying Ron was doomed before you ever met.”

Denial persists. Then reluctant, scrunched-up contemplation. Finally, the lightbulb.

“Unless I–”

“Right.” He nods.

“But not even–”

“Especially then.”

“So all this, you’re tellin me–”

“I’m only telling you what you already know.” Tobe gives her hands a reassuring pat and lets them go with the finality of benediction delivered and penance decreed. A negative of the crucified savior remains impressed upon her flesh, a reminder of their heretical session, however fleeting.

“And all that junk about,” she searches, brightening at the redefinition, “*my past*, Father Foley don’t need to know, right?”

Tobe taps a clove cigarette against its pack, his finger swishing an x over his heart. The air saturates with those hinted Indonesian notes as the kretek crackles, sending chaff embers near his face that he swats away.

“The hell you smoke them things for, anyway?”

He regards the cigarette wistfully, nostalgia then shattered by gusts of smoke coughing from every orifice. Once lit, they may as well just be trayed as incense. He clears his numbing throat and rubs his lips across each other. “Remind me of Sera.” The yard next door commands his view, where a toddling girl in a dress too untamed to cover her diapers chases the calves of her young mother whose vision is obstructed with grocery bags.

“Yeah, we all miss her. She must have been really special.”

He eyeballs her gaffe. Past perfect. But an apt tense in its own way.

**the glebe | two**

He began seeing Sera about two-and-a-half years ago, while emerging from a phase that found his passions entombed in spite of his body's resilience, when no woman's touch seemed likely to kindle ever again. The healing beneath Tobe's bandages had barely born its first itches when he suspected she'd been watching him for days already.

Now he can hardly recall a time when they didn't live together, so infused is he with her affection for this house. It was her little haven of light in a darkened world. And it was to become his own sanctuary in her absence.

Sera now manifests only in his dreams. Fragmented visions of foreign places and shadowed strangers, like some Ghost of Christmases Future, Present, or Past. But not his own, best he can tell. Projections.

Dacey, her precocious five-year-old daughter, never makes such appearances. She inhabits his thoughts always, just in the usual memory replays. Crayon strokes everywhere but inside the lines while she colored books on the floor, legs scissoring the air behind her. Pigtails swaying as she bounced to the endless music loop that exasperated her mother, but that he'd never discerned. Tobe came to love Dacey as his own, and had hoped to be called Dad soon.

*Hopes.*

Still, Sara's physical presence is everywhere imprinted upon the dwelling. In a wisp of smoke or perfumed closet. Each creak of hardwood flooring would bolt Tobe upright if only he possessed such perception anymore. Every draft, every door swung ajar – maybe she just doesn't want to startle him upon her return. Backyard shadows cannot only be branches in the breeze; she probably just fears a neighbor glimpsing her from the street.

The wafting applewood bacon that lures Tobe from bed to kitchen leads only to his own two-days-crusting cold skillet. A solitary place setting remains at the dining-room table. The dripping tap of their claw-foot tub is now from his own soaks, showers foregone to immerse himself in tranquility as she so often would. He longs for some aquatic osmosis, some living communion – any sign during his waking hours to confirm her safety. A new happiness. Or beyond the most dreadful scenario, a soul's peace.

The turbulence of his dreams infects such optimism.

Three hundred thirty-three red Xs blot the calendar, the most recent ones in layered scratches to fight the drying marker. Each commemorates one day since Sera last came home. Or Tobe's survival of it. Four seasons, April to March. All the cycles of life, death, and rebirth.

Her rosary rarely uncoils from his wrist. It's less an article of faith than an affirmation – a reminder that they'll be together again. She once told him the hand-carved totem had been blessed by the Pope.

#

Saint Anthony of Padua offers his bronze reassurance in a sculpted relief at the church entrance. This friar with the inverse bowl cut cradles a young Jesus, lilies tucked under one arm of his habit. Patron saint of the missing.

The wooden door opens with a reverential silence despite heft that might deter the infirm faithful. Tobe's pupils dilate to normalize the eternal twilight of stained glass within. He skips the community finger bowl of so-called holy water, as he does also the long-dry fonts in his own home next to each light switch. (Whenever questioned, he charms with a prepared riff about evaporation creating "holy air" that bests any commercial aerosol product.) These pews of this empty sanctuary could easily seat half the population of Barroe, and he's been told they once did, but even the obligatory holidays rarely find the room at capacity these days. Tobe walks up the main aisle of the cross-shaped floorplan and almost reaches the head-altar before catching an eclipsed twinkle in the left arm-wing. Shaggy, dark hair atop a black shirt and pale, muscled arms, kneeling before a bank of devotional candles at Mary's statued feet. "Father Oblivion," Tobe calls.

Father Vivian Foley crosses himself hastily and rises to offer a buddy's handshake and one-armed hug. "Tobe-Wan Kenobi!" What he lacks in height is offset at the gym, veins straining his collar. Mid-thirties, like Tobe, and another rare unmarried Barroe resident, though so bound by vow. The *Oblivion* endearment is a Tobe exclusive, from the Frank Zappa song about a priest serving DNA-tainted pancake batter at a church breakfast. Van, as he prefers to be called, had always just figured it for a rhyming Irish slur. Vivian Oblivion.

"Don't forget to drop a buck in the lockbox there, padre. Hate to see your prayer come back for insufficient postage."

"Prayer? Oh, I was just replacing some of these." A dozen small flames bathe the men in amber, while a box of new votives waits upon the kneeler. Any residual brogue from his Emerald Isle childhood in Limerick has all but dissolved.

"All those hopes, snuffed out.... Anyway, I got a couple tubs of old kids clothes over at the house collecting dust, and was wondering if you guys could use them. If you still did those drives or adopted families or whatever. Shoeing the shoeless, that kind of thing."

Life drains from the pastor's face as he turns away from the matter with pursed lips. "Of course. Bring them on by and we'll see to it." He occupies himself with retrieving the spent candles, exhaling through his nose and suppressing the quease.

"Wait, doesn't Ignacio take care of this stuff?"

"The arch made us cut the sexton's hours back."

"I really wish you'd stop calling him that."

"Speaking of, been meanin to talk to you," Father perks up and pokes him in the chest.

"Thought since you live right next door, maybe...." That expert Catholic guilt. There was

something about church folk, Tobe had always noticed, that like charity workers, they had a certain shameless empowerment when it came to their ability to ask favors.

“My drums? Cause I try not to play whenever I see cars in the lot.”

“No, I mean, with me having to pick up the slack on some of Ignacio’s tasks, and my dad on top of everything else ... there’s still quite a bit to delegate.” The elder Foley had been suffering a long-term illness that required Van’s live-in care, which was ultimately St. Anthony’s excuse for selling off its alleged-vacant rectory to Tobe over a year ago.

Tobe puts his hands up as stop signs, their puffy, gnarled shine a stagy reminder. “I’m just ... not quite ready to—”

“To what?” Van challenges. “Get off your candy ass and start livin again?”

Tobe can’t hold his intended glare. Everyone knows the pastor trades the cloth for sparring gloves at least once a week at the club over in Gladstone. Tobe swallows. “To ... work on these grounds again.”

“It’s time.” Father puts his hands on Tobe’s shoulders. “You know what they say about idle hands.”

“Who’s *they*?”

“Couldn’t tell ya. Quotesmiths.”

“Oh, come on. Since when you ever been stumped for scripture?”

“Ain’t the word of God, T. Closest thing on record’s something about how the idle soul will suffer hunger.” Van neatens his friend’s shirt, Tobe’s favored western style with pearl buttons, and lingers upon what most would consider a flat stomach. “In your case, I’m guessing that’s a metaphor. But no, no such playthings or workshop for the devil, I’m afraid.”

Tobe sets his gaze upon the floor. Forever indentured. “Guess I could bring the mower by.”

“Fridays would be best.”

#

That thrilling *crack* of drumstick against mylar head may be but a distant memory on file, yet the resonance of the snare’s birch wood against Tobe’s thighs still brings a smile. The stick’s precision bounce, honed through years of regiments. Vibrations shimmer up his arm off the ride cymbal. Pedal choking the hi-hat. His spine shudders with each bass kick thanks to a subwoofer mounted under his throne. Just a plug shy of a prostate massage, Sera used to tease.

Old bottom-heavy P.A. systems reverberate in his mind. Those sweaty seas of flannel from his first winter in Kansas City’s nightclubs behind the kit with Sludgebucket. Sizzling copper eighth notes swallowed by the mix’s vocal angst. A wall of sonic mud between the rhythm section and frontmen, rearranging molecules within the first ten rows of teeming bodies. Regulating their breathing.

It hadn’t always been heavy artillery. While touring as a drum tech for The Kettle Black – prior to trading his cargo shorts for leathers, backstage for onstage – every night he assembled and tested the boss’s electric kit, and he grew to love its utility. This was before his silent rebirth on the charred lawn, before the bilateral sensorineural deafness that now governed him. Back when a little high-frequency tinnitus was easily cured with a few snorts of whiskey.

These days, the tactile feedback of acoustic hardware is Tobe’s only connection to the music. It grounds him. Just as Kettle’s drummer’s rubberized pads had triggered prerecorded samples through a piece of rackmounted gear, now Tobe’s brain has become the sampler and

memory replaces the timbres of the tom-toms. He finds his mouth moving in sync the same way guitarists are compelled to make wah-wah faces, or children trill their toy machine guns.

The acute, distorted peaks of percussion sound like trash can lids no matter how he twists the knobs on his belt-pack processor, so Tobe never bothers putting his ear on down here in the basement. He doesn't miss the squeaking chain of his pedal. Or the phantom plumbing rushing overhead. But rumbling strains of hip-hop from passing cars still rattle his fillings. Eight-hundred-dollar Hondas with thousand-watt sewage systems polluting the air. Just because he can't know for sure that it's hip-hop doesn't mean it isn't.

Beneath fingerless leather gloves, the pads of his chafed palms throb, and his conditioned nostrils recoil at memories of the minty funk of silvadene ointment.

#

“Are you still having trouble with new voices?” Dr. Neumann (Au.D.) is a tornado of stubby hands and fingers as he consults his clipboard. He removes his glasses for concerned effect like so much television had taught him.

With a couple years of books and videos, Tobe has become semi-fluent in the literal translations of Signed English. American Sign Language still eludes him because of its shorthand pantomimes and warped grammar. It's impossible to advance without real-world practice, and the doctor is the only one who engages him as such. Annually, and needlessly. “Some, yeah,” Tobe says. “I understand their words for the most part. Just some character around the edges gets lost.”

“Is the sound getting clipped? When the volume falls below a certain level?”

“Sure. But not when people talk. Usually just some background noise that drops out. Like with a noise gate.”

“Yes, the gate threshold.” The audiologist bares a mouthful of porcelain veneers at this kindred knowledge, involuntary hands still flapping about. “Been reading your owner’s manual?”

“Used to engineer at Sine Studios a few years after I moved here.” Tobe’s eyes roam over the lab’s equipment: medical-grade versions of many familiar instruments of his own past-life trade. Oscilloscopes and laptops and synthesizers and headphones.

Neumann tucks back his teeth and clears his throat. “That’s just ... wow, I’m so sorry. Had no idea.” Rare empathy from a clinician untrained in bedside manner. Mourning the surgeon afflicted with Parkinson’s. The tragedy of the paralyzed athlete.

Tobe waves him off, ever cautious about cashing in karmic pity. “Oh, I been outta that game almost ten years now, way before I died. Not a career ender.” He shrugs. “Not that career, anyway.”

A slow-motion skeptic’s nod. “So, about these toneless voices.” Virtual faders and knobs animate on a computer screen as the doctor swivels to faux-adjust them before returning them to their original detents.

“It’s the same with music. Only melodies I can make out are ones I already knew from before the accident.”

“That’s because you have no frames of reference, Tobe. No auditory memories to fill in those missing frequencies like they do for the old ones. Remember, that implant’s only got

sixteen electrodes doing the job of sixteen thousand hairs to stimulate the nerve inside your cochlea. What can I say? Hi-fi it isn't."

Engineer no more, much of Tobe's current livelihood *is* staked on being able to read people through multiple senses, and their scratchy voices distract him with imaginary scenarios involving afflictions of Vegas throat.

"Kind of laryngitic-sounding, right?" the doctor says.

"Or constipated, yeah. Reminds me of the earliest digital audio I ever heard over the internet." He asks Neumann about upgrading his processor or the magnetic microphone, but any future advances would likely require a new implant and the requisite surgery his settlement won't cover. And making his right ear bionic as well cannot be advised at this point because of the imbalance with the two-plus years of rehab invested in his left one. Assuming the grey matter in his madcap brain didn't liquefy in the process.

Tobe complains about sarcastic lilt that goes undetected. Voices nasal from colds. The inability to have slurry barroom debates. Speech in arenas, or even St. Anthony's, still renders as bursts of gated static because he can't distinguish where a word ends and its reverb begins. The first time they ever plugged him in and switched his ear on, this same cacophony made his entire face hum like a massage pad, a face that spent the next twenty minutes hovering the toilet, both hands gripping the bowl for dear equilibrium life.

Neumann called these little broadcasts "hearing sensations" that they'd train his mind to reinterpret over time.

"People still say I go mousey sometimes. That I don't project."

“Well, that makes sense, because you’re hearing yourself so much louder than everything else.”

“There any way to turn me down? Some phase cancellation or something?”

“Nope, only by modulating it yourself like you’re already doing.” They mapped out the frequencies and amplitudes during his initial sessions, first scientifically, and later through conversations and preferences, tweaking the settings monthly thereafter, and now yearly. “It’s calibrated about as close as we can get it.” His veneers return as he attempts a Scottish accent. “I’m givin her all she’s got, cap’n.”

Tobe feigns an itch and switches off his belt pack, nodding intermittently. Meters collapse on the screen behind the doctor, who continues his alien gestures in oblivious silence.