

Fear Nothing

by

Dean Koontz

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By Dean R. Koontz

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First published in Great Britain in 1997 by

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

A HEADLINE FEATURE hardback

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Koontz, Dean R., 1945-

Fear nothing

1. American fiction - 20th century

I. Title

813.5'4[F]

ISBN 0 7472 2055 7 (hardback)

ISBN 0 7472 7668 4 (softback)

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham PLC, Chatham, Kent

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

A division of Hodder Headline PLC

338 Euston Road

London NW1 3BH

To Robert Gottlieb for whose vision, genius, dedication, and friendship I am
daily grateful.

We have a weight to carry
And a distance we must go.
We have a weight to carry,
a destination we can't know.
We have a weight to carry
and can put it down nowhere.
We *are* the weight we carry
from there to here to there.

-The Book of Counted Sorrows

One

TWILIGHT TIME

1

On the desk in my candlelit study, the telephone rang, and I knew that a terrible change was coming.

I am not psychic. I do not see signs and portents in the sky. To my eye, the lines in my palm reveal nothing about my future, and I don't have a Gypsy's ability to discern the patterns of fate in wet tea leaves.

My father had been dying for days, however, and after spending the previous night at his bedside, blotting the sweat from his brow and listening to his labored breathing, I knew that he couldn't hold on much longer. I dreaded losing him and being, for the first time in my twenty-eight years, alone.

I am an only son, an only child, and my mother passed away two years ago. Her death had been a shock, but at least she had not been forced to endure a lingering illness.

Last night just before dawn, exhausted, I had returned home to sleep. But I had not slept much or well.

Now I leaned forward in my chair and willed the phone to fall silent, but it would not.

The dog also knew what the ringing meant. He padded out of the shadows into the candleglow, and stared sorrowfully at me.

Unlike others of his kind, he will hold any man's or woman's gaze as long as he is interested. Animals usually stare directly at us only briefly-then look away as though unnerved by something they see in human eyes. Perhaps Orson sees what other dogs see, and perhaps he, too, is disturbed by it, but he is not intimidated.

He is a strange dog. But he is my dog, my steadfast friend, and I love him.

On the seventh ring, I surrendered to the inevitable and answered the phone.

The caller was a nurse at Mercy Hospital. I spoke to her without looking away from Orson.

My father was quickly fading. The nurse suggested that I come to his bedside without delay.

As I put down the phone, Orson approached my chair and rested his burly

black head in my lap. He whimpered softly and nuzzled my hand. He did not wag his tail.

For a moment I was numb, unable to think or act. The silence of the house, as deep as water in an oceanic abyss, was a crushing, immobilizing pressure. Then I phoned Sasha Goodall to ask her to drive me to the hospital.

Usually she slept from noon until eight o'clock. She spun music in the dark, from midnight until six o'clock in the morning, on KBAY, the only radio station in Moonlight Bay. At a few minutes past five on this March evening, she was most likely sleeping, and I regretted the need to wake her.

Like sad-eyed Orson, however, Sasha was my friend, to whom I could always turn. And she was a far better driver than the dog.

She answered on the second ring, with no trace of sleepiness in her voice. Before I could tell her what had happened, she said, Chris, I'm so sorry, as though she had been waiting for this call and as if in the ringing of her phone she had heard the same ominous note that Orson and I had heard in mine.

I bit my lip and refused to consider what was coming. As long as Dad was alive, hope remained that his doctors were wrong. Even at the eleventh hour, the cancer might go into remission.

I believe in the possibility of miracles.

After all, in spite of my condition, I have lived more than twenty-eight years, which is a miracle of sorts-although some other people, seeing my life from outside, might think it a curse.

I believe in the possibility of miracles, but more to the point, I believe in our *need* for them.

I'll be there in five minutes, Sasha promised.

At night I could walk to the hospital, but at this hour I would be too much of a spectacle and in too great a danger if I tried to make the trip on foot.

No, I said. Drive carefully. I'll probably take ten minutes or more to get ready.

Love you, Snowman.

Love you, I replied.

I replaced the cap on the pen with which I had been writing when the call had come from the hospital, and I put it aside with the yellow legal-size tablet.

Using a long-handled brass snuffer, I extinguished the three fat candles. Thin, sinuous ghosts of smoke writhed in the shadows.

Now, an hour before twilight, the sun was low in the sky but still

dangerous. It glimmered threateningly at the edges of the pleated shades that covered all the windows.

Anticipating my intentions, as usual, Orson was already out of the room, padding across the upstairs hall.

He is a ninety-pound Labrador mix, as black as a witch's cat. Through the layered shadows of our house, he roams all but invisibly, his presence betrayed only by the thump of his big paws on the area rugs and by the click of his claws on the hardwood floors.

In my bedroom, across the hall from the study, I didn't bother to switch on the dimmer-controlled, frosted-glass ceiling fixture. The indirect, sour-yellow light of the westering sun, pressing at the edges of the window shades, was sufficient for me.

My eyes are better adapted to gloom than are those of most people. Although I am, figuratively speaking, a brother to the owl, I don't have a special gift of nocturnal sight, nothing as romantic or as thrilling as a paranormal talent. Simply this: Lifelong habituation to darkness has sharpened my night vision.

Orson leaped onto the footstool and then curled on the armchair to watch me as I girded myself for the sunlit world.

From a pullman drawer in the adjoining bathroom, I withdrew a squeeze bottle of lotion that included a sunscreen with a rating of fifty. I applied it generously to my face, ears, and neck.

The lotion had a faint coconut scent, an aroma that I associate with palm trees in sunshine, tropical skies, ocean vistas spangled with noontime light, and other things that will be forever beyond my experience. This, for me, is the fragrance of desire and denial and hopeless yearning, the succulent perfume of the unattainable.

Sometimes I dream that I am walking on a Caribbean beach in a rain of sunshine, and the white sand under my feet seems to be a cushion of pure radiance. The warmth of the sun on my skin is more erotic than a lover's touch. In the dream, I am not merely bathed in the light but pierced by it. When I wake, I am bereft.

Now the lotion, although smelling of the tropical sun, was cool on my face and neck. I also worked it into my hands and wrists.

The bathroom featured a single window at which the shade was currently raised, but the space remained meagerly illuminated because the glass was frosted and because the incoming sunlight was filtered through the graceful

limbs of a metrosideros. The silhouettes of leaves fluttered on the pane.

In the mirror above the sink, my reflection was little more than a shadow. Even if I switched on the light, I would not have had a clear look at myself, because the single bulb in the overhead fixture was of low wattage and had a peach tint.

Only rarely have I seen my face in full light.

Sasha says that I remind her of James Dean, more as he was in *East of Eden* than in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

I myself don't perceive the resemblance. The hair is the same, yes, and the pale blue eyes. But he looked so wounded, and I do not see myself that way.

I am not James Dean. I am no one but me, Christopher Snow, and I can live with that.

Finished with the lotion, I returned to the bedroom. Orson raised his head from the armchair to savor the coconut scent.

I was already wearing athletic socks, Nikes, blue 'cans, and a black T-shirt. I quickly pulled on a black denim shirt with long sleeves and buttoned it at the neck.

Orson trailed me downstairs to the foyer. Because the porch was deep with a low ceiling, and because two massive California live oaks stood in the yard, no direct sun could reach the sidelights flanking the front door; consequently, they were not covered with curtains or blinds. The leaded panes-geometric mosaics of clear, green, red, and amber glass-glowed softly like jewels.

I took a zippered, black leather jacket from the coat closet. I would be out after dark, and even following a mild March day, the central coast of California can turn chilly when the sun goes down.

From the closet shelf, I snatched a navy-blue, billed cap and pulled it on, tugging it low on my head. Across the front, above the visor, in ruby-red embroidered letters, were the words *Mystery Train*.

One night during the previous autumn, I had found the cap in Fort Wyvern, the abandoned military base inland from Moonlight Bay. It had been the only object in a cool, dry, concrete-walled room three stories underground.

Although I had no idea to what the embroidered words might refer, I had kept the cap because it intrigued me.

As I turned toward the front door, Orson whined beseechingly.

I stooped and petted him. I'm sure Dad would like to see you one last time, fella. I know he would. But there's no place for you in a hospital.

His direct, coal-black eyes glimmered. I could have sworn that his gaze