



“RED SCREEN”

by STEPHEN KING

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RED SCREEN

WILSON is having a bad morning. He cuts himself shaving and is using a Kleenex to clean away a rill of blood on his chin when Sandi pops her head in to admonish him about leaving the toilet seat up and the cap off the toothpaste. He spills juice on his tie and has to change it. Before he can escape to work, there are several more admonishments: she found beer bottles in the trash instead of the recycling, and he forgot to rinse his ice cream bowl before putting it in the dishwasher. There's another one, but it goes in one ear and out the other without catching on anything in between. Kind of a bummer, all in all. Has he become forgetful and a little slipshod lately, or has she changed in the last six or eight months? He doesn't know and it's too early for such questions.

Yet once in the car and backing down the driveway, he has an idea that elevates his mood. If there's such a thing as bad karma, he may have frontloaded his for the day and from here on...

"Clear sailing!" he exclaims, and treats himself a cigarette out of the pack in the glove compartment.

This optimistic idea holds for fifteen minutes. Then he gets a call redirecting him to 34th Avenue in Queens. He is told to see the officers, which is never good karma.



Five hours later, when he should be thinking about lunch, Wilson is instead looking through one-way glass into a small interview room. There's a table and two chairs. In one of the chairs sits a man named Leonard Crocker. He's handcuffed to a ringbolt on his side of the table. He's wearing a strap-style undershirt on top of khaki work pants. His outer shirt is now in a tagged plastic bag and bound for Forensics. When its turn comes (it will be

awhile because there's always a backlog), the bloodstains on it will be typed and DNA-matched. This is a formality. Crocker has already confessed to the murder. Soon his undershirt and khakis will be swapped for jailhouse tans.

Wilson puts on his ID lanyard. When he goes into the room, he also puts on a smile. "Hi, Mr. Crocker. Remember me?"

Leonard Crocker seems perfectly at ease, handcuffs and all. "You're the detective."

"Right!" Wilson sits down. "Do you answer to Len, Lennie, or Leonard?"

"Lennie, mostly. That's what the guys down at the plumbing shop call me."

"Lennie it is, then. What we're having here—if you agree—is just sort of a preliminary conversation. You were given your rights, correct?"

Lennie smiles as a man does when seeing through a trick question. "First by the officers at the scene, then by you. I called them, you know. The officers."

"Great! Just to recap, anything you say—"

"Can be used against me."

Wilson's smile widens into a grin. "Bingo! What about legal representation? How's your memory on that? Because we're being recorded, you know."

"I can have a lawyer at any time. If I can't afford one, you'll get me one. It's the law."

"Correctamundo. So do you want one? Just say the word." And I can get some lunch, Wilson thinks.

"I'm happy to talk to you, Detective, but I'll need a lawyer at the trial, right?"

"Unless you want to defend yourself. But a man who defends himself—"

Lennie raises a finger and cocks his head, more the gesture of a scholar than a plumber. “—has a fool for a client.”

Wilson laughs and nods. “Give the man a kewpie doll.” Then he grows more serious, folding his hands under his chin and looking straight at Lennie. “Why don’t we get right to the point? You killed your wife this morning, didn’t you? Stabbed her three times in the stomach, after which she bled out. That’s what you told the officers, right? And me.”

Lennie shakes his head. “If you’ll recall, what I actually said was *I did it*.”

“Meaning you killed your wife. Arlene Crocker.”

“She wasn’t my wife.”

Wilson takes his notebook from the inside pocket of his jacket and consults it.

“Isn’t your wife Arlene Crocker?”

“Not today. Not for the last year.” He considers. “Maybe longer. It’s hard to tell for sure.”

“Are you saying you killed a stranger? One who just happens to look like your wife of nine years?”

“Yes.” Lennie is looking at Wilson patiently, his face saying *eventually you’ll get to the right questions but I’m not going to help you*.

“So...when we type and DNA-test the blood on your kitchen floor and all over your shirt, it won’t match that of the deceased woman?”

“Oh, it probably will.” Lennie gives a judicious nod. “I’m almost sure it will. Although I hope your science people will look for peculiar...mmm...” He searches for the right word. “Peculiar *components*. I don’t think you’ll find any, but it would be wise to check. I expect to go to jail for killing that thing, but I’d certainly prefer not to.”

Now Wilson understands. Crocker has already got an insanity plea on his radar.

“What are you telling me, Lennie? That your wife was possessed? Help me understand.”

Lennie thinks it over. “I don’t think you could call it that, exactly. When a person is possessed—correct me if I’m wrong, Detective—a spirit, or maybe a demon, comes in and takes over, but that person is still there, inside. Being held prisoner. Is that your understanding?”

Wilson has seen *The Exorcist* and a couple of similar movies, so he nods. “Pretty much. But that isn’t what happened to your wife?”

“No. She died when it came in. They all do.”

“They all? Who all?”

“Not many so far, compared to the population of the earth, which is almost eight billion—you can google it—but there’s more of them all the time. They take over, Detective. It’s the perfect disguise. *We’re* the perfect disguise.”

Wilson pretends to think this over. What he’s really thinking is this interview will be useless to the District Attorney. There’s going to be plenty of rigamarole ahead—a couple of prosecution psychiatrists, plus Crocker’s own shrink. Wilson wouldn’t be surprised if Crocker already had one on speed-dial.

“Aliens?”

Crocker’s face says *the penny drops*. “That’s right. Aliens. I don’t know if they come from space or from some parallel world. The websites are pretty much split on that. I think space. It makes sense, because...” He leans forward, earnest. “The speed of light, you know.” “What about it?”

Not that Wilson cares. He's losing interest.

What interests him is a ham and turkey club from the deli down the street. And a Marlboro chaser.

"Spaceships can't exceed it or they go backwards in time or maybe just disintegrate. That's the science. But pure *mind*, Detective...*that* can make the jump. Only once they get here, they need bodies. Would probably die without them. We're in the preliminary stage of the invasion now, but if the world governments don't wise up, they'll be coming in thousands, hundreds of thousands, *millions*."

Crocker has been leaning forward over his cuffed and chained hands, but now he sits back. "It's all on the Internet."

"I bet it is, Lennie. I bet Kamala Harris is one of those invaders, just waiting for Amtrak Joe to croak so she can get her hands on the levers of power." He gets up. "I think you need to go back to your cell and think this over before you get arraigned. And, just my advice, I think you need a good lawyer. Because only a good one could sell that to a jury."

"Sit down," Lennie says quietly. "You'll want to hear this."

Wilson looks at his watch and decides to give Leonard Crocker five more minutes, possibly even ten. Maybe he can decide if the man is really crazy or trying to play him. He should be able to do that; he's a detective, after all.

"Five or six years ago, someone figured out what's going on. It's on the dark web, Detective, and spreading like ink in water."

"I'm sure it is." Wilson is no longer smiling. "Along with blood-drinking Democrats, rough sex hookups, animal crush videos, and kiddie porn. You killed your wife, Lennie. You need to cut the shit and think about that a little. You stabbed her with a butcher knife and watched her die."

"They change. They become short-tempered and critical. They're not

content with just being here, they want to dominate. But we have a chance because some computer wizard figured out a way to detect them. If we survive, there'll be a statue of him in every country, all over the world. The aliens trigger a deep command, okay? Automatic. Foolproof. Only a few people know about it now, but the information is spreading. That's what the Internet's good for, spreading information."

Not to mention mental illness, Wilson thinks.

"It's going to be a race." Lennie's eyes are wide. "A race against time."

"Whoa, rewind, okay? You killed your wife because she got short-tempered and critical?"

Lennie smiles. "Don't be dense, Detective. Many women nag, I know that. It's easy to dismiss the preliminary indications." He spreads his hands as far as the cuffs will allow. Which isn't very far.

Wilson says, "I think that married to you, Arlene had a lot to be short-tempered and critical about."

"She started picking," Lennie says. "Picking and picking and picking. At first I just felt depressed—"

"Old self-image took a hit, did it?"

"Then I became suspicious."

"My own wife does some picking," Wilson says. "Likes to tell me my car's a traveling pigpen, gets pissy if I forget to put down the toilet seat. But I'm a long way from using a butcher knife on her."

"I got the red screen. It's only for a second or two, so *they* won't see. But when I saw it, I knew."

"What I know is this interview is over." Wilson turns to the mirror on the wall to his left and runs the side of his hand across his throat: *cut it*.

“It’s subtle,” Lennie says. He’s giving Wilson a look that’s both pitying and superior. “Like that story about how you boil a frog by turning up the heat very slowly. They take from you. They take your self-respect, and when you’re weak...” He jerks his hands upward to the length of the chain and makes a choking gesture. “...they take your life.”

“Women, right?”

“Women or men. Then the next one moves in.”

“So it’s not *The Exorcist*, it’s *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.”

The wife-killer breaks into a wide grin. “*Exactly!*”

“You stick to that, Lennie. See how it works out for you.”

‡

Wilson gets home at quarter of seven. Sandi’s in the living room, watching the evening news. One place is set at the kitchen table. It looks lonely.

“Hey, babe,” he calls.

“Your dinner’s in the oven. The chicken’s probably dried out. You said you’d be home by five.”

“Things came up.”

“They always do with you.”

Did he tell Sandi he’d be home by five? Wilson honestly can’t remember. But he remembers Crocker—probably now cooling his heels in Metropolitan Detention— saying *It’s subtle*.

He gets chicken and potatoes out of the oven and green beans out of the steamer on the stove. He thinks the potatoes will be okay, but the chicken and beans look elderly and unappetizing.

“Did you pick up the dry cleaning?”

He pauses, a slice of chicken breast half-cut. Half-*sawn*, actually. “What dry cleaning?”

She gets up and stands in the doorway. “*Our* dry cleaning. I told you last night, Frank. Jesus!”

“I—” His phone rings. He pulls it off his belt and looks at the screen. If the call was from his partner, he would decline. But it’s not. It’s from Captain Alvarez. “I have to take this.”

“Of course you do,” she says and turns back to the living room so as not to miss the latest coronavirus death count. “Honest to *God*.”

He thinks of going after her, trying to smooth this over, but it’s his boss, so he pushes accept. He listens to what Alvarez has to say, then sits down. “Are you *shitting* me? *How*?”

His voice brings Sandi back into the doorway. His slumped posture—phone to ear, head bent, one forearm resting on his thigh—brings her to the table.

Wilson listens some more, then hangs up. He takes his plate to the sink and dumps everything into the garbage disposal. “The perfect fucking end to a perfect fucking day.”

“What happened?” Sandi puts a hand on his arm. Her touch is light but very welcome to him.

“We had a guy in custody who killed his wife. I was at the scene, a real mess. Blood all over the kitchen, her lying in it. Back at the station, I did the preliminary interrogation. The doer was crazy as a loon. He claimed she was an alien, part of an invasion force.”

“Oh my God.”

“He killed himself. They were doing intake at MetDet. He picked up a

pencil, snapped the chain it was on, and stabbed himself in the jugular vein. Alvarez says maybe it was dumb luck, but the intake sergeant says it looked like he knew right where to put it.”

“Maybe he had medical training.”

“Sandi, he was a *plumber*.”

That makes her laugh, and that makes Wilson laugh. He puts his forehead against hers.

“It’s not funny,” Sandi says, “but the way you said it was. *Plumber*.” She laughs again.

“He fought them, Alvarez said. All the time the blood was pumping out—*spurting* out—he fought them. When he passed out they got him to Presbyterian, but it was too late. He’d lost too much blood.”

“Turn off the TV for me,” Sandi says. “I’ll scramble you some eggs.”

“And bacon?”

“Bad for your cholesterol, but tonight...okay.”

‡

They make love that night for the first time in...weeks? No, longer. A month at least. It’s good. When it’s over, Sandi says, “Are you still smoking?”

He thinks about lying. He thinks about the now-deceased plumber saying *She started picking. Picking and picking and picking*. He thinks about how nice this evening was. How different from the last six or eight months.

They change, Lennie said. *They become short-tempered and critical*.

He doesn’t lie. He says he still smokes, but not much. Half a pack a day at most, expecting her to say *Even that can kill you*.

She doesn’t. She says, “Have you got any handy? If you do, give me one,

please.”

“You haven’t smoked in—”

“There’s something I need to tell you. I’ve been putting it off.”

Oh God, Wilson thinks.

He turns on his bedside lamp. His keys, wallet, phone, and a little change are scattered across the top of the table. He’s put his service weapon in the drawer. He always does. Behind it is a pack of Marlboros and a Bic lighter. He gives her one, thinking *After all these years without, a single puff will probably knock her flat.*

“Take one for yourself.”

“I don’t have an ashtray. When I want one, I usually go in the guest bathroom.”

“We’ll use my water glass.”

He lights her up, then his own. Smoking in bed, like when they were first married and thought they’d have a couple of kids and live happily ever after. Twelve years later, there are no kids and Wilson is feeling mighty mortal.

“You’re not going to tell me you want a divorce, are you?” He’s joking. He’s not joking.

“No. I want to tell you why I’ve been so fucking grumpy and hard to live with since this spring.”

“Okay...”

She puffs her cigarette but doesn’t inhale. “I’ve been wobbling.”

“I don’t know what that means, Sandi.”

“It means I’m in menopause, Frank. Do you know what *that* means?”

“Are you sure?”

She gives him a sour look, but then snorts a laugh. "I think I'd know, don't you?"

"Babe...you're only thirty-nine."

"In my family we start early and end early. My sister Pat went into the change when she was thirty-six. My emotions have been all over the place. As you may have noticed."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because then I'd have to admit it to myself." She sighs. "My last period was four months ago, and that was just spotting. Since then...dry." A tear rolls down her cheek, just the one. She drops the half-smoked cigarette into the waterglass and covers her eyes with one hand. "I feel dry, Frankie. Old and used up and unlovable. I've been a bitch to you, and I'm sorry."

He douses his own cigarette. He puts the glass on his night table and takes her in his arms. "I love you, Sandi. Always have, always will."

"Thank you, sweetheart."

She reaches past him, her breast pressing his cheek, and turns out the light. For a moment, no more than a second, the screen of his cell phone flashes red.

In the dark, Sandi Wilson smiles.