

The Sixth Sense

I was 19 in 1999 and worked evenings after my college classes at the local Blockbuster. My manager, Ron, had disappeared after being fired for theft and discovered to be a 15-year-old kid with fake ID and gigantism that made him appear to be an adult. I had last seen him passing a brown paper package to a cop on a country backroad.

While my curiosity about Ron was distracting, I had no way of contacting him. Plus, I had a more pressing problem, I needed to find a missing copy of *The Sixth Sense*. (Bruce Willis was in *Mortal Thoughts* with Demi Moore in 1991. Demi Moore starred in *A Few Good Men* with Kevin Bacon- so two degrees. If you avoid *A Few Good Men*, you can still get there as Moore was in *Passion of Mind* with Peter Riegert. Riegert was in *Animal House* with, that's right, Kevin Bacon-in only three degrees.) When I told Debbie, I needed the movie back, she said, as if I were a ridiculous child, "They aren't going to *fire* you over a lost video."

"They most certainly will fire me." I scoffed. "That single tape is worth more to them than I am for sure."

"Ok. I know it's here somewhere." She told me over a week ago. And now she isn't answering her phone. Phones in those days were attached to houses and businesses, so they were almost useless to reach anyone. It was literally easier to open up your window and yell at people than it was to get them on the phone.

Maybe everyone was asleep in Debbie's boyfriend's house. One of my favorite Raymond Chandler books had Philip Marlowe going all over town asking questions of witnesses, and every time he must wake them from a nap or rouse them from a stupor. Halfway through the book you notice this subtle pattern. Everyone else is asleep. The detective is the animating force, the only one awake in slumbering Los Angeles.

When I get over there at 10 pm, the clouds framing the full moon like a designed set-piece, a very sleepy guy reluctantly answers. Shirtless, his pants are hanging so low on his hips a tuft of his pubic hair peeks out from the waistband. He rubs his eyes with his knuckles as he explains to me that Faith and Garrett have moved. He leaves me standing on the porch as he goes to find their new number. Great. I would be back to trying to call them. I peek in the letter box and see that Faith has left a postcard for the mailman with the new address. I'm definitely feeling hardboiled.

"That's a federal crime, you know," says the do-gooder roommate, my nemesis.

"It looks like they just moved next door. You might have mentioned that."

"Your haircut makes you look like a little boy."

He delivered this ad hominem attack as he closed the door softly and incompletely in my face. I imagined him sinking to his knees like an inflatable decoration with the pump turned off as he was no longer needed for the story. I could re-animate him if I had further questions, but I had the information I needed. Sick with my own power and with the confidence of a bald girl positioned at the center of the universe, I crossed the street to recover the Maltese Falcon.

I know that *The Maltese Falcon* was written by Dashiell Hammett and not Raymond Chandler. Even though Humphrey Bogart plays the detective in both adaptations of Hammett's book and *The Big Sleep*. The falcon itself, a small sculpture of a bird, is a famous example of a MacGuffin. Once the statuette is found no one cares about it anymore. I find myself thinking again about the package Ron took from beneath my seat when the cop pulled us over. Why did he want me to go along with him on that ride to meet the police officer?

MacGuffins, related to red herrings, appear in all sorts of stories, especially detective stories. Alfred Hitchcock explained the MacGuffin with a short anecdote, "It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men on a train. One man says, 'What's that package up there in the baggage rack?' And the other answers, 'Oh, that's a MacGuffin'. The first one asks, 'What's a MacGuffin?' 'Well,' the other man says, 'it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.' The first man says, 'But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,' and the other one answers, 'Well then, that's no MacGuffin!' So, you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all." It's like when I finally watched *The Sixth Sense*, I fell asleep in the middle and never saw the big twist. But is it a twist if we see Marky Mark's brother shoot Bruce Willis in the first scene?

There are not supposed to be coincidences in mystery novels. According to mystery writer P.D. James, "What's interesting to me is that coincidence frequently happens in real life. We know in our experience that extraordinary coincidences happen, and they do, I think, very often [happen] in real-life investigations of murder. But somehow it isn't right in the mystery." In the mystery genre, every coincidence is a clue.

I'm also tired of the disparagement of my hair, or lack of hair. I went to see *The Matrix* with a guy named Brian. In the movie there is a bald adolescent child that bends a spoon with his mind. Brian elbows me in the ribs to say, "It's you." I never wanted to go on another date with Brian, (mostly because he didn't like *The Matrix*) but he kept showing up. One day he brought wine and cheese to my dorm and tried to set up a picnic in the courtyard. He could not understand why the RA was kicking him out. She was so incensed, I worried he was going to get me kicked out of school.

Debbie isn't home when I knock at her door, but her boyfriend lets me in to call her at work.

“Ok. You’re going to be so happy. I know where the tape is...” says Debbie, sounding too chipper.

“That doesn’t sound like you have the tape in your possession,” I interrupt.

“That’s true. It’s stuck in Brock’s VCR that’s built into his huge projection TV which he took with him when we all moved last week.”

“Ok. Where’s the TV? I’m at your new place now. I can get the tape out.”

My second job was as an educational media delivery and maintenance person. It basically meant that I set up TVs in classrooms and showed up to pry tapes out of the VCRs. As an on-campus job, it was one of the better ones. Lots of downtime to do homework and I got to drive a golf cart.

“Oh, Brock didn’t move in with us. He got his own place,” says Debbie breezily.

“How do I locate his VCR, please?”

“I’ll have to call you back.”

Until recently, Debbie had a boa constrictor living in our shared bathroom. It would strike at the glass of its terrarium whenever I walked past it. Her roommate and I joined forces to compel her to take it to her boyfriend’s. She is not a reasonable person.

“Please call me back within the hour. I have to go to sleep soon.”

My roommate unexpectedly had not returned to school in the fall, and I wasn’t immediately given a new one. One problem I have with no longer having a roommate is that I walk in my

sleep, and there's no one else there to keep me from wandering out. I never should have started using the window as a door, because it established a precedent that meant that sometimes I would go out the window at night. I was on the ground floor, but it was disconcerting to say the least to wake up on the tennis courts or in a parking lot. Once I thought for a moment that I had traveled through time, because I woke up in a little wooden hut. I could see the dawn sky through the gaps in what was not especially good shelter construction. I probably had crawled into someone's art project. As I slid out, I saw that I was between the parking lot and the tennis courts. What drew me to this spot night after night?

Of course, I fell asleep without hearing any news from Debbie. I must have been too tired for somnambulation because I woke up (surprise!) in my own bed. She was in my bathroom the next morning. I had no curiosity about why she would come here to shower, though she started to explain it to me regardless as though there could be any reason worth hearing.

"Please. Brock's VCR."

"It's built into this huge projection TV, and it's really useless now that it has a tape stuck in it."

"Not a permanent situation," I reminded her.

"It was too big for him to move it to his new place, so he sold it to a guy. Before you yell at me, I have the guy's number. Brock is not excited for the guy to find out there is a tape stuck in there. He says you need to think of an excuse for why you need to be left alone with the TV and get the tape without him noticing what you're doing."

“Perfect,” I managed to say, even though I dislocated an eyeball rolling them so furiously. As if I needed this Brock person to explain to me how to do crimes. Were people saying “as if” in 1999? Seems right.

Obviously, this guy, Taylor, didn’t answer his phone. I left a message on his answering machine inviting him to leave a message on my answering machine. I explained that projection TVs were my passion and implied that I would pay way more for it than he had paid. In the cafeteria I got a ham sandwich and a cup of coffee, because that is what Philip Marlowe would have while working a case. If I succeeded in locating the tape, I’d reward myself by pouring a scotch and slapping Faith, that unreliable dame, in the mouth.

Meanwhile at Blockbuster, there’s a return in the dropbox in a crumpled paper bag. My co-worker won’t touch it, but I can see the outline of a VHS tape.

“Ew. It looks like someone dropped their lunch in here.”

I think immediately of Ron, my missing manager. The package, the kind of paper bag people use for kids’ school lunches, was identical to the one he dropped off on the night of the rainstorm. I dumped the contents into my hand, and see that it was a VHS tape, but has no label. It was, however, rewound. I scanned the parking lot, stupidly, hoping to catch a glimpse of Ron. I convinced myself that the tape was from him and intended for me.

In *Pulp Fiction* we never learn what is in the briefcase that drives the story forward and precipitates so much bloodshed. We see its glow reflected on the faces of those that witness it. Tim Roth’s character whispers that it’s “beautiful.” The internet speculated that it contained Marsellus Wallace’s soul. It is the perfect MacGuffin, because by the end of the film we are resigned to knowing that we are never going to see the contents and we don’t really care.

Taylor never calls me back. No one has a cell phone, so it's amazing that we ever find each other. I usually yell at people I want to talk to when I see them pass on the sidewalk in front of my window. I've got to stop ever opening the window and just keep it locked at all times!

I got his address from a guy who promises this is the only male Taylor in the area and hope I can catch him at home before my shift at Blockbuster. I conceal a multi-tool in the back pocket of my khaki's.

There is a television sized hole in the front porch of Taylor's house. The college is surrounded by hundred-year-old wood frame houses that have suffered from years of housing too many college students and frat parties. This hole, clearly caused by rot from a broken gutter, made reaching the front door a harrowing experience, as would a moat. I worry that if I do manage to speak to Taylor, and he doesn't like what I have to say, a light shove will send me careening to the mud under the house.

"Are you here about the tape?" A guy with a wrench in his hand has materialized at waist-height. I hadn't noticed him working on a car in the driveway. He looks too old to be a college student. And I don't think any of my peers at this liberal arts school know anything about fixing cars.

"I'm here to purchase a projection TV," I say, standing up a little straighter, wondering what he knew.

"My guess is that you want the copy of *Sixth Sense* stuck inside. Your Blockbuster uniform gives away your true intention. We can cut the charade." He, too, seems to be role-playing in a detective novel. We're both trying to be the good guy with the tough exterior. Maybe I'll need to exercise my femme fatale.

I descended to ground level, avoiding the pit in reverse. “Are you Taylor? I do, actually, really need to get that tape back.” My voice sounds desperate and whiny, not vampy.

He gestured to the trunk of the car he was repairing. “It’s in there. I popped it out of the machine, but I’m not giving it to you until you get my money back from Brock. I’m displeased that he sold me a tape-eating hunk of junk.”

“Did it eat the tape?” I asked in a tone more perturbed than mantrap or temptress. I could have extracted the tape without destroying it. It’s one of the few things I had learned since high school in my many VCR-related work experiences. Not that it made much difference to Blockbuster. The sad, anti-climactic fact of my mission was that I could return an empty husk of a video tape to my work-place, and as long as the barcode is intact, it can be scanned in, accounted for as damaged, and I’m cleared of all legal responsibility. Tapes are eaten all the time.

“Your precious tape is just fine.” Taylor gestures with the wrench to the sealed trunk in a way that is far from reassuring. “I’m not paying for this busted player, so you can tell Brock I want my money back.”

I try to explain to him that I’ve never even met Brock (though I think I did talk to him once at a house party. He’s into Jean-Paul Sartre in a way that I first mistook for a lame attempt to flirt with/impress me, but I walked away when I realized he was sincere. I have no wish to add tracking him down and robbing him to my list of things to do.) A ringing telephone interrupted my rebuttal. Taylor vaulted onto the porch to answer, and I seized the opportunity. The keys were in the ignition, and I grabbed them to unlock the trunk. As I lifted the heavy hood, I gave a passing thought to the news Taylor may be receiving via the phone call. Someone may be warning him that a bald girl is on her way over to rob his projection TV. I smiled as I hope he’s too late to stop me.

Speaking of femme fatale, you want to look the part. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice* Cora's lips stick out in a way that makes Frank want to "mash them for her." Your face should inspire violence. Cora's voice held her back, like mine, but she is the quintessential femme fatale, conspiring with her lover to kill her husband. "They gave me a test. It was all right in the face. But they talk, now. The pictures, I mean. And when I began to talk, up there on the screen, they knew me for what I was, and so did I." Alas, Cora never made it into the pictures, so she had to fall back on a murder plot.

The tape lay at a pitiful angle, its guts spilled out over and around the TV, eviscerated. The scene is straight from a mob movie. The gory victim fails to evoke a sympathetic response. We are complicit in the gratuity. I shake my head at the pointlessness of the violence, letting the bits of tape fall through my fingers listlessly.

"Hey!" Taylor interrupted my burglary just as I'm composing myself enough to start winding the tape back into its shell, my index finger inserted in the (what is it?- a gear?) I did have the presence of mind to take a step back, lifting out the bulk of the innards, in case Taylor slams the trunk closed, but he must have exhausted himself murdering the tape. He doesn't have much fight left. I glare a warning at him as I back away, winding furiously. The crunched up, partially digested tape snaps, making Taylor wince in a way that makes me think for just a moment that we could have become friends, but I don't stick around to find out. I feel real elation as I pedal away into the literal sunset sensing my trial has come to an end.

The MacGuffin awaited when I arrive for my shift. Free of my debt to Blockbuster after returning *The Sixth Sense*, I still wanted to know what message Ron was trying to send on the tape in the crumpled lunch bag. I took advantage of my break to preview the tape on one of the TVs mounted to a cart in the corner. I pretended to adjust the color settings and turned the screen away from the room, not that anyone was paying attention to me. The

playback begins with handheld camcorder footage...of me. Seen from across the street, I ride past on my bike.