

Umbrella Men

by John G. McDaid

"Tyrants don't respond to any kind of appeasement. Tyrants respond to toughness. And that was true in the 1930s and 1940s, when we failed to respond to tyranny, and it is true today."

—Condolezza Rice, February, 2003

When the first verdict was announced in the Rodney King case out in Simi Valley, the old man wandered the streets of New York with the Umbrella for two days straight. From East Flatbush, out through Bed-Stuy, back across the Queensborough Bridge and up to Harlem, then into the Bronx, always with his umbrella up, despite mild spring sunlight and cautious, curious stares. His feet were blistered and his arm muscles twitched in exhausted agony. But there were no riots in New York.

"There are some shadows that are only developed in darkness," the boy said to his parents. Alonso exchanged a smile with Mimi that the boy did not catch. He surprised them like this so often that it was no longer, well, a surprise. João was preternaturally intelligent for a ten-year-old, and Alonso was sure it was the Umbrella's doing. The three of them sat at a chipped laminate table in the Chinese restaurant on Nostrand Avenue. Behind them, back over the counter in the open kitchen, great hissing clouds of steam and gusts of hot frying smells swirled.

João was playing with the tiny paper parasol that had come on his Shirley Temple, interposing his other hand between various light sources and watching as the shadows grew deeper or shallower. "See, no shadow," he said, holding the tiny umbrella over his rice, then, as he moved his other hand to block the light from outside,

two shadows appeared, mixed, interpenetrated. Beyond the storefront window, the early evening crowd streamed by: churchgoers still dressed up from the five o'clock Mass at St. Jerome's, prim middle-aged Brooklyn women gone shopping, teens from the Vanderveer Estates out to grab a 40, even a few white faces, early outliers of inevitable gentrification. Everyone got along. It was, of course, a peaceful neighborhood.

"How is your broccoli?" said Mimi.

"Good." He took the hint, went back to eating for a minute. Then he looked up, brown eyes sad under his unruly fuzz of hair. "Grandpa doesn't have much longer, does he?"

Didn't need the Umbrella to know that, thought Alonso. Several times a week, after school, he and the boy rode the bus out to Sunrise Senior Living in Sheepshead Bay, and they would sit together. Talk. Watch a little TV. Grandpa João would surreptitiously slide the boy the dessert from his dinner. It seemed they had been doing it forever, which was in some sense true, since the old man had been in the nursing home since before the boy was born. He would wave Medicaid printouts from New York State, which now ran to nearly a million dollars, and laugh. "I live like a millionaire," he would say to the boy. "Have a cookie."

But these days, there was no laughter, little talk. Mostly labored breathing and the sad, significant sighs of someone trapped in his own body, knowing it was past time, wanting only release but unable to let go. And Alonso knew what was holding him: the Umbrella.

He hadn't been much older than Joãozinho when the old man first showed him. He kept it in the closet in his parents' room — his mother was still alive at that time — and Alonso remembered his father parting the rack of dry-cleaned clothes, and there, in the back of the closet, it stood, leaning against the wall. It didn't look powerful; it looked dusty. Dark-blue nylon, steel tip faintly mottled with rust acne, and an ornate handle of turned wood, its lacquer rubbed dull by years of use. It didn't appear to be some mystical object; it looked, well, like an umbrella. He had been disappointed and said so.

His father chuckled and gently slid the Umbrella out and placed it in his hands. Close up, it appeared no more magical, although it seemed to retain the closet's heat, and felt oddly restless in his hands, motionless yet energetic, as if he were holding a live rabbit.

"And this is a magical umbrella that brings peace?" He couldn't contain his thirteen-year-old skepticism. It was 1972, and people were dying on television every night.

But the old man just smiled. "Peace is not something you switch on or off like a light. It falls through space, long and slow, like an eclipse, like a cool shadow moving across a hot world. And around this umbrella's tiny core of shadow, peace spreads."

Alonso looked at his wife and son finishing their dinner, in this restaurant just around the corner from that house he grew up in, the same house where they still lived. The evidence, if one chose to think of it that way, was all around them. Outside the window, an old woman with Key Food grocery bags in both hands fumbled for change and dropped her purse; a kid wearing 2-Train Crew colors hitched up his pants, bent over, retrieved it, nodded to her, and walked off. They lived in a peaceful place, a fuzzy spot on the map of the 67th Precinct

where the crime rate dipped inexplicably. It was all circumstantial, true. But the old man had tried, in his way, to prove it to him.

"The Umbrella senses opportunities, places and times when things can change. It will tell you when its shadow may be cast," the old man had said, explaining why he had taken it from the closet on that long-ago afternoon. "It said to be ready." So it sat in their front hallway when a young attorney named Elizabeth Holtzman rang their doorbell to say she was running for Congress. The old man, who had never before shown any interest in politics, welcomed her delightedly, and when she was about to leave, called Alonso over. "Would you please walk our future Congresswoman over to the next block," he said, looking up at clouds presaging a spring storm. "It's starting to rain."

And so Alonso had slid the Umbrella open, and held it high as he walked alongside the pretty white lady with her serious smile, crossing Avenue D toward the projects. He recalled how dim blue shadows played on her face as she chatted with him, asked about school, thanked him, and shook his hand like a grown-up. He remembered that when his father showed him the polls that gave her no chance to unseat a 50-year incumbent backed by the Brooklyn political machine.

When the primary came, his father didn't even stay up to watch the returns. He *knew*.

So what? he remembered thinking. A coincidence. One coincidence. And hardly peace. In November, Richard Nixon soundly beat the anti-war candidate. "Wait," the old man said, smiling. "Remember the eclipse. The sun does not disappear all at once. It takes time for the shadow to spread."

Alonso watched, and waited. Holtzman was appointed to the House Judiciary Committee. In 1974, they began to investigate Nixon. "Not long now," said the old man. And it wasn't. By August, the crooked warmonger had resigned, and eight months later, the war was over. "Like dominoes," said the old man. "You place one shadow just so..."

□

"Hello, family. Do you want a box for that?"
The Chinese waiter had brought one over for João's broccoli and garlic sauce. They packed up the remains and headed home, stopping on the way for ice cream.

"He's on the porch," said Mimi, peering at their house on the corner, two blocks off.

"Oh, hell," said Alonso. Mimi shot him an eyebrow, and João said, "Dad!" in a tone of faux shock. Alonso sighed. "You two go in, I'll talk to him."

They lived in a semi-detached corner house with a wide concrete stoop leading up to the two doorways. Alonso and Mimi had the street side, and their yard ran from the stoop around the side of the building, with low evergreen shrubs by the house and a narrow lawn; a short stone pine in the corner threw late-afternoon shade on the porch. Their neighbor's house was quite different.

Jurgen Kern had paved over his small front yard and put up 8-foot steel fence around the driveway that led along his side of the house to the garage housing his 1966 Ford Fairlane station wagon. It seemed like everything about Kern was of that same mid-'60s vintage: the aluminum and nylon-mesh patio chair in which he sat, the white cotton T-shirt he wore, the inevitable can of Pabst Blue Ribbon in his hand. And, of course, his repartee. He welcomed them as they came up the walk.

"Well, well, the Caua family returns." He noticed the box João was holding. "Chinese food for dinner? Joe, do you know what time the Chinaman went to the dentist?"

"João," said João, politely. "No, sir. What time?"

"Two-thirty." Kern waited, grinned, issued a verbal nudge. "Tooth-hurty?"

"Hah." João didn't exactly laugh.

"Ya have something good?"

"Broccoli, Mr. Kern."

"Broccoli? That's rabbit food."

Mimi stepped in. "João is thinking about becoming a vegetarian."

Kern made a face. "Growing boy like that a vegetarian? No way." He pointed at his eyes with two fingers. "Joe, eyes on the front of the head. Binocular vision. Predators. That's how we made it to the top of the food chain."

"Yes, sir," said João.

Mimi intervened. "It's a school night."

Alonso picked up his cue. "Why don't you two get ready for bed." Mimi guided João up the steps and mouthed a "thank you" as she unlocked the door. He settled in to listen to whatever talk radio had told Kern to be annoyed about today. Alonso knew he was no replacement for the WWII Navy buddies who had, one by one, died or drifted off; the Italian and German neighbors who had pulled up stakes and fled as the houses turned over to working-class folks from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Jamaica. There were no more co-workers to visit from the defense contractor job he'd retired from somewhere out on Long Island. Wife long dead, son moved to Bay Ridge. No, thought Alonso, he was like some undrained cyst of white 1960s military-industrial America, on a lawn chair with a beer, talking to the one person in the neighborhood who didn't just ignore him completely. Without the Umbrella next door, who knew what the situation would be?

By the time he managed to disengage, João was already in bed, and Alonso crept in to kiss him goodnight.

"Can we go see Avo tomorrow?" said the boy.

"Sure, sure, now hush. Time for sleep."

"Goodnight, Dad," said the boy. Then he added sleepily, "The sun's true shadows are blue, aren't they?"

"Yes, Joãozinho. Yes, blue. Now sleep."

□

He turned and Mimi was at the door, watching. He held a finger up to his lips, and waited until they were in their bedroom.

"I know what you're going to say."

"We need to make a decision on this—" Mimi began.

"I understand. I agree," he said. That stopped her.

"You agree?"

He sighed. "I can see it happening. The way it did to me. He says things that the other kids at school don't understand. They make fun of him. It's changing him."

Mimi glanced involuntarily toward the closet, as if the Umbrella could hear. "Have you had any...uh..."

He didn't know what to call the nearly invisible guidance from the Umbrella either. "No, nothing. I can talk about it with Dad."

"You know what that would mean." She searched his face. "For your father."

"Yeah," said Alonso. "But I think he knows that better than any of us. You've seen. He's so tired. He's ready. Past ready. It's been coming for a long while now. I'm just glad he's had all this time with João."

"We don't have to make a decision right away," she said. He could feel her backpedaling and knew what she was thinking. Every once in a while, they would take the Umbrella into their son's room and open it over him, cast its protective spell. Whether she truly believed or not, she would perform that act, as any parent would. And now. Was he old enough now? Would he still be safe? Would any of them? But neither of them was comfortable with the changes they had seen, his thoughts somehow seeming not fully his own, as if the Umbrella were preparing him.

"No, this is what we need to do. Let's talk with Papa tomorrow. We need to be looking for the right opportunity." They rolled into bed and held each other, drifted off to sleep.

Alonso dreamed he was confessing his sins to a human-sized, sentient ibis. "I have not stopped the water where it should flow," he kept saying, and could not, in the dream, remember if that was a line from the *Book of the Dead* or *Finnegans Wake*.

□

The next morning was Friday, and for a while Alonso was absorbed in his morning ritual: see-

ing Mimi off to her job at Kings County Hospital, assembling a snack for João before he walked over to PS 361. Then it was his turn to get ready for work. He took a shower, looked at the Umbrella in the closet as he dressed. It had been so long since there had been one of those feelings that he sometimes wondered. Had any of it really happened? Had he imagined it all? Was it all just coincidence and self-deception?

The Umbrella was mute.

He picked it up and looked at it. It was hard to remember exactly, but it seemed subtly different from the last time he'd held it. Had the handle really always been plastic? Had it been wood at one point? And the fabric — was that a slicker, tighter synthetic weave? It was hard to know.

He was about to put the Umbrella back in the closet, but something stopped him. Not a voice, not even a feeling, just a momentary pause, as if somewhere down underneath his conscious mind, a discussion was going on of which he would eventually become aware. He decided to bring it downstairs and leave it in the hall, just in case they wanted to take it along when they visited the old man.

When he had the time, he walked to work, five blocks down Nostrand Avenue to the Clarendon Branch of the public library. He walked today, noticing all the changes in storefronts from his childhood. This had been John's Bargain Store, here, Lenny's Pizzeria, Franklin National Bank, a neighborhood drugstore with a row of sit-down pay phones, a five-and-ten; there, a Dunkin' Donuts, an A&P, a Father & Son shoe store. The only thing that remained now was the pizzeria; the rest, gone downmarket, subdivided. Bodegas with Lexan transaction windows, a "flower shop" where you could buy nickel bags, a liquor store with a lobby that looked like an airlock, and a Pentecostal storefront church. Still working class, but a working class that had taken such a beating in the past twenty years that squeezing the change from their pockets was a tougher proposition.

It was back in the early 1980s, with the nation and the neighborhood deep in another economic downturn, that Alonso had finally taken out the Umbrella on his own.

The old man had felt something coming, checking the closet like a kid peering into the mailbox for a mail-order toy, and one March afternoon in 1983, he called Alonso, now in college, into the room.

"It's ready now," said the old man. "See if you can feel it."

So he pushed his way through the row of clothes, redolent of camphor and dry-cleaning fluid, and into the dry, dusty dark of the closet beyond. He could only barely see the Umbrella, a slightly darker shadow in the dimness, and he reached out, closed his fingers around the handle.

And felt nothing.

"I don't—" he started.

"Wait," said the old man. "It's not a megaphone. It's the needle on a stereo. The planchette on a Ouija board. Don't grab it; let it come to your hand."

But at that moment, he had only one thought: This was just the kind of unhinged craziness that was keeping him, quite effectively, from having any success with the co-eds at Brooklyn College.

And that's when he heard the Umbrella laugh.

Not laugh the way a person would. Not anything that the word "laugh" would point to in any human language, and yet, unmistakably, there was something about the way the handle of the Umbrella thrummed in his hand that made him realize its awareness of his thoughts, its appreciation of his doubt. Its understanding.

The Umbrella was laughing *with* him.

He picked it up, stepped backward from the closet into the light, and looked at the old man's face. He believed.

And that was how he found himself, on a sunny Manhattan afternoon, walking into the Bantry Bar on Eighth Avenue with an umbrella. From the way every head in the room swiveled, it was absolutely clear that this was not a place where he was welcome. Just after lunch, the place was packed. One expected shamrocks and leprechauns in an Irish bar, but there were none here. There were flags. Banners full of Gaelic's

odd diacriticals and consonant pairs. Sepia portraits of people whose names had never been in his history books. There was fresh sawdust on the floor and the bright hoppy smell of beer. A red-faced waiter wearing a dirty white apron whisked past, took a moment to look him up and down, and hissed what was clearly both advice and threat: "Be good or be gone," he said.

Alonso knew — or the Umbrella did — that he needed to go all the way to the back of the bar, and so, with every eye in the room on him, he walked, slowly, holding the umbrella like a staff. The group at that back table spotted him coming and clearly did not like what they saw.

Two burly men, unmistakably bodyguards, rose as he approached, but glanced down to a smiling old man for direction. He was puzzled, but his eyes were calm and the smile never left his face.

"Mr. Flannery?" said Alonso. The man nodded. "My father and I import umbrellas from Brazil. We saw that you're going to be marching in the parade this week, and we thought you might need a good umbrella. One of ours. It would be a great boost for our company. Let me show you."

He unsnapped the umbrella and moved to open it, and the two bodyguards immediately put themselves in front of him.

"Emmett, Peter, stand aside," said Flannery. "If the boy were here for mischief we'd know it by now. Can you not see he has no fear? Show us, lad."

And so he opened the umbrella, and held it over the head of one of the rumored masterminds of the weapons trade into Northern Ireland, two days before he was to be Grand Marshal of the St. Patrick's Day Parade. He hadn't taken the Umbrella, but Alonso hadn't expected him to.

Alonso had been walking as he reminisced, and he was at the library now, opening the steel gates and then the inner doors, flipping on the lights, powering up the air-conditioning. Still musing as he went through the day's startup routine. The spread of that shadow had taken

the Umbrella a lot longer than two years. Was efficacy somehow proportional to exposure?

He was rotating the date stamps at the check-out counter when he noticed the poster taped to the side of the monitor, advertising a weekend event. "Hey, Kids! Learn Sci-Fi! From a pro!" The next afternoon, the library was hosting a free writing workshop with a visiting science fiction writer. Alonso hadn't read any of her work, although he had dipped into the genre, as well as fantasy — and even, yes, horror — looking for ideas or clues.

He hadn't really considered the workshop for João. But as he looked at the poster, something caught his eye. It was a photo of a smiling woman with thick, bookish glasses and braided hair, accompanied by the cover of her novel, *The Phosphorus Highway*. She reminded Alonso of his wife. Could the Umbrella be for her? He tried to relax and listen, but nothing more occurred to him. He waited, staring at the photo, until a co-worker arrived and started banging on the front gate. Moment broken, he went to unlock the doors. At the very least, he mused, he might be able to pick the writer's brain.

Alonso didn't have to close up that afternoon — despite the best efforts of the city's billionaire mayor, the library lacked funding to give anybody a full day — so once his replacement arrived, he caught the bus home. He was looking forward to taking João out to see his dad. But the sight that greeted him when he turned the corner brought him up short.

It was subtle. Lifted windowshades and furtive peeks, the old Almeida sisters down the block sitting on their porch, watching, his neighbor across the street out with his electric edger on an already trimmed lawn, all looking — but not looking — in the same place.

Coming down the sidewalk, a white man with a clipboard, and on his black T-shirt, in white outline, an umbrella. Alonso watched as the man went up the steps, three houses away, and rang the doorbell. His neighbor with the edger caught his eye, smiled wryly, and shook his head. Nothing to be done, Alonso thought.

Inside, Mimi and João were gathering photos to take to grandpa. "Come see what Joãozinho

has done," his wife crowed. The boy fiddled with Mimi's laptop and spun it for them to see. It was home movies from Alonso's childhood; they'd had them digitized, and the boy had cut them together with his best guess at a 1960s soundtrack.

The old Super-8 silent footage was jerky and blurry but it still caught in his throat when Alonso saw his mom, hovering over him at a birthday party in the backyard. Walking with his dad in front of the lion cage at the Prospect Park Zoo. The three of them, camera handed to a stranger and still running, posing for a photo op at the Statue of Liberty.

"This is wonderful," he said to the boy.

For the last few minutes, he'd been aware of loud chatter from the porch next door. He figured the umbrella man had made it as far as Kern's house, so he wasn't surprised when the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," he said. "Why don't you pack this stuff up."

When he swung open the door, the giant fist constricting his heart relaxed. He almost laughed out loud with relief, but politeness restrained him. It was a fat white man with greasy hair who smelled faintly of formaldehyde. He had thick glasses, and the sweat-stained T-shirt that was ominous at a distance had a Web URL — thedarkumbrella.com — in small type under the image.

"Good afternoon." He consulted his clipboard, did not extend his hand. "Alonso Caua?"

"Speaking."

The man slid a card from the clipboard, proffered it. "My name is Lucas McLeod, and I'm an independent researcher. I wonder if I might have a few minutes of your time."

From the corner of his eye, Alonso saw Kern draw back the shade on his porch window, stick out his tongue, and make a circle next to his head with his forefinger.

"What are you researching, Mr. McLeod?" said Alonso calmly.

"What I'm about to say may sound crazy," said McLeod, "but I'm a freelance journalist investi-

gating large-scale conspiracies involving governments and secret societies. I've written several books." At this point, with a practiced move, he slid two trade-paper titles from the messenger bag at his side. To Alonso's eye, the cover graphics and layout said everything: self-published crank. But he had to admit, it was a smooth rap; the man clearly had a lot of practice.

"Could I take a look?" McLeod had been returning them to the bag, and Alonso's question broke the flow of his patter.

"Huh?"

"Your books. I'm a librarian. Always interested in books. Can I take a peek?"

"Ah, sure." He handed them over, and Alonso studied the covers while McLeod continued talking. The top book, *Umbrella Man*, had a crude illustration of a frame from the Zapruder footage of the Kennedy assassination, with a black umbrella poking out from behind the freeway sign as the presidential limousine came into view just beyond. The second, *Into the Black*, showed a ghostly umbrella superimposed on the smoldering ruins of Ground Zero.

"While this might sound bizarre, my extensive research has uncovered what I believe to be a vast interlocking conspiracy of violence and destruction whose symbol is the umbrella." He tucked the clipboard under his arm, unfolded a world map covered with circles and dates and scribbled notes. There was a large ketchup stain on the Azores.

Alonso handed back the books, forcing McLeod to juggle the map. He tried for a tone of calm, good-natured humor. "An umbrella? Really?"

"Yes. And this conspiracy is opposed by a counterforce, an organized resistance, who also use an umbrella as their symbol. This one may be blue. Or a different color. That is not exactly clear."

"Hey, Dad," said João, suddenly appearing at his side. "Looks like it might rain. Should we take our...umbrella?" He thrust it dramatically at his father.

McLeod's eyes bugged.

"Oooh, wait," said João, turning it over in his hands. "Isn't this the one we got from our company picnic at..." He slowly looked up at McLeod, smiling crazily. "...the Umbrella Corporation?"

Alonso took the umbrella and propped it by the door. "Run along, Joãozinho, and stop yanking our visitor's chain." The boy disappeared. "I'm sorry, Mr. McLeod. He's a ten-year-old."

Off inside the house, Alonso heard the boy stomp up the stairs yelling, "Live braaaaaains!"

Alonso sighed. "Apologies. What brings you to this neighborhood?" But McLeod was distracted, focused entirely on the blue umbrella.

"Contact tracing," he said. "The white umbrella — that's my term for the good one." McLeod missed Alonso's arched eyebrow. "I start with a peculiar, outlier event and trace all the linkages. Right now, I'm working backward from everyone involved in the Nixon resignation. You may remember your Congressman from 1974. Elizabeth Holtzman. She served on the committee that built the case to impeach him. I know you lived in this house then." His eyes never left the Umbrella.

"Hm," said Alonso. "I was very young. And that was a long time ago." There was an awkward silence. "An umbrella," he prompted. "That seems an odd symbol for a conspiracy."

"Two conspiracies," said McLeod, waving his map again. "The dark one can be traced back in the West at least as far as Roderigo Borgia, who made it one of the symbols of his papacy. Although, one of my suspicions is that Plato was hinting at it in his 'Allegory of the Cave.' And the white umbrella appears in Tibetan cards from the *Book of the Dead* nearly a thousand years earlier. Those conspirators have hidden their trail better, but my research suggests that British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain carried one as a symbol of his affiliation."

"And you're looking for it in Flatbush?"

That snapped McLeod back. "Conspiracies always sound crazy, until they become obvious," he said.

Alonso smiled pleasantly and nodded at the Umbrella. "Would you like to touch it?"

"Eh?"

"You seem fascinated by our umbrella," said Alonso, gesturing. "If you want to assure yourself that it's just an ordinary—"

"May I?"

"Satisfy yourself, man, it's just an umbrella."

McLeod reached over, hesitantly picked it up. Alonso tried to maintain a neutral smile. McLeod unsnapped the catch, opened it slightly.

"It's blue," he said.

"Yes," said Alonso. "It does look black at a distance, but the fabric is blue."

McLeod pushed the slider up halfway, keeping the umbrella horizontal, at arm's length, like a loaded weapon, its shadow not falling on any part of his body. Alonso could see the man's lips move as he counted the ribs. Slowly, he refolded it, placed it back in the corner.

"So," said Alonso. "Sorry I can't help you. Don't remember this Horkman."

"Holtzman," said McLeod reflexively. A last spark seemed to jump in his head. "Why do you have it here at the door when there's no rain in the forecast?"

"I've been married for thirty years, Mr. McLeod, and I still carry a Greyhound bus ticket in my wallet in case I need to slip out in the middle of the night and head for Mexico."

"Huh? What? You what?"

"I'm pulling your leg, man." Alonso laughed. "Lighten up." The addled conspiracy buff folded his map, said goodbye, and headed off down East 32nd street.

"Husband," said Mimi.

"It got rid of him."

"Wallet," she said. He turned it over with a smile.

□

The bus ride out to Sunrise took about forty minutes and the going was slow in Friday

620 evening traffic. At every stop, more people got on, the busboys and dishwashers and waitresses of the restaurants down by Sheepshead Bay. Alonso and João gave up their seats to a pair of elderly ladies wearing fast-food uniforms. If crazy Mr. McLeod wanted a conspiracy, he thought, why not look here? An economic system so tilted that senior citizens had to take minimum-wage jobs just to afford medication for diseases caused by a lifetime of forced errors in food and lifestyle. They were all trapped on the same bus, driven by generations of CEOs prohibited from visualizing any social impact beyond the next quarter. He wished it were something as simple as a conspiracy, but it was not. Just the invisible hand in everyone's pocket. Did it take an Umbrella for someone to see this? 670

The old man had a room on the third floor. He had the bed by the window, propped up on his pillows with a hissing oxygen machine at his side. He welcomed Alonso and Mimi and patted the blanket. João climbed up and sat next to him. He made a brave effort, but they could see he weakened quickly. 680

"We brought some pictures," said Mimi, pulling a shoebox out of her grocery bag. They huddled around the head of the old man's bed as he flipped through the photos.

"This was your momma and me when we first moved here," he said to Alonso, holding a cracked black and white snapshot. His father, impossibly young, posed with his mother on a Brooklyn street of brownstones, with the huge, bulbous cars of the 1940s behind them at the curb. "That was on Sterling Place, before we moved to Flatbush. Before the soldier gave me the Umbrella." 690

Alonso shot an instinctive glance at the room's other occupant, who lay motionless with an oxygen mask on his face. 700

"Don't worry about Mr. Sherman," said the old man. "He is, as the nurses whisper, 'gorked.' One day his family will come by and they'll turn off that machine." The old man locked eyes with Alonso. "They just haven't accepted that it's time."

The old man knew.

"Tell me that story about how you got it, Avo," said João.

"He was an American spy on a secret mission in Britain," said the old man, slipping into his storytelling voice. "The American scientists had cracked a Nazi code, and knew the Germans were planning to take the Umbrella from the British Prime Minister when he visited Munich. The war hadn't even started yet, but the Germans feared the blue umbrella. The spy swapped in a duplicate. Kept the original. He was mysteriously transferred to a bureaucratic job Stateside and never saw combat. He lived next to us when we were renting on Sterling Place. His wife was very pretty, a nurse, like Mimi. He died of leukemia."

The old man shook his head. "In those days, it was an awful way to go. I felt so sorry for his young wife. One afternoon, she called me over, said he wanted to see me. The things he said. I thought it was the morphine, at first. Crazy things. Stealing Neville Chamberlain's umbrella. That he'd been stationed in New York by Alger Hiss personally to do the real work of the United Nations. Everyone else in his unit killed by Nazi agents or the OSS. That the doctors didn't know why he was still alive, but he did — it was the Umbrella. He talked like a crazy man, but all he wanted me to do was take the Umbrella. It seemed like a harmless wish from a dying man. So I did. Ten minutes later, he was dead."

He looked down at João and ruffled his hair. "And here we are."

"I made something for you, Avo," said the boy. Mimi slid her laptop onto the old man's tray table. "Just press the space bar."

The three of them hugged the old man as they watched the video. He gave whispered cries of delight watching Alonso's First Communion, a Little League game, a school bus trip to a state park in Valley Stream. There were some images of the Umbrella, but not as many as he'd expected; it mostly stayed in the closet. So when they were watching clips of the family's one weekend as tourists in Manhattan sometime in late 1975, there was no Umbrella in sight. Alonso and his mom outside a restaurant in Chinatown where they stopped for dim sum, the three of them on

the Staten Island ferry, and then, there they were, on the roof of the recently opened World Trade Center — outside, on the outdoor observation deck — and the camera panned jerkily up across the bridges of the East River, the far-off spires of midtown, the hazy Hudson River and New Jersey, finally coming to rest on Alonso and his dad, with the other tower behind them. The boy had applied a slo-mo effect and held the shot, each frame doubled, tripled, as they stood there, trapped in individual shutter-falls of high-angle sunlight, smiling.

Behind them, in the crowd, an indistinct figure slowly raised a black umbrella.

They all saw it, but only the old man dared to name it. "I never noticed that before," he said. "Pretty breezy up there. Too bad the son of a bitch didn't blow away."

They packed up, kissed goodbye, and Mimi and the boy were on their way to the elevator. Alonso stayed behind for a moment with the old man.

"You took it out of the closet," he said. It was not a question.

"Yes. Don't know yet what I'm doing with it."

The old man smiled. "You will."

"This might not be the time—" he began.

"It is," his father said. "I'm tired. They're trying to talk me into going back to the hospital so they can put me on a ventilator." He looked over at gorked Sherman. "You know I don't want that."

"I know, Papa."

"You know what I want."

"I do."

"Give us a kiss, then you go take care of your family."

He kissed his father's forehead; it was cool and dry. "Goodbye, Dad."

At the door, he turned to wave and his father gave him a thumbs-up and, for only the second time in his life that Alonso could recall, winked.

He walked to the elevator in tears.

□

The next morning was clear and bright, already up to 80 degrees by nine am when Alonso 800 roused the boy out of bed to go to the workshop at the library. Although they had talked about it the night before, João was having second thoughts and wondered aloud if he might not just stay home and watch cartoons. "Get your butt in the shower," said Alonso, and headed out to pick up the paper.

One of their few extravagances was daily delivery of the *New York Times*. However, when Alonso opened his door, it was not sitting neatly 810 folded on the steps; Kern had it scattered by his chair, and was reading the op-eds.

"Just taking a peek," he said. "Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," said Alonso, gathering up pages.

"Still can't believe you read this liberal rag. You seem like a right guy," said Kern.

"I think you need to listen to all sides."

Kern folded the paper. "I hope you don't listen to crackpots like that guy yesterday. What a load. Crazy paranoid nonsense." 820

"Yes, really." He held out his hand, hoping Kern would fold up the paper.

"Mystical order of the umbrella? Hell. I wish there were such a thing. I know whose head I'd hold it over — that Kenyan socialist and his Trotskyite gang who want to flood the country with illegal immigrants. I'm glad we only have to put up with another two years of that no good n—" He paused, actually seemed to think 830 for a second. "No offense, of course."

"None taken." He motioned for the paper and Kern handed it over.

They were running late, so Alonso and his son took the bus.

"What story are you going to share?" said Alonso.

"I was going to bring one of my Dragon Island stories, but I figured I might do better with my family narrative about Granddad and the Umbrella," said the boy casually, checking for his father's reaction. 840

"Sounds good," he said. Their real life sounded about right for a science fiction workshop.

"Dad?" The bus was bouncing across Foster Avenue, the projects visible past his son's head. "Why do you put up with Jurgen von Strangle?"

"You know the four vows I have over my desk —" he began.

"Yeah, yeah, 'Sentient beings are innumerable, 850 I vow to illuminate them all.'" The boy rolled it off in a sing-song tone. "But really, Dad, Jurgen?"

"I would tell you that you'll understand when you're older, but you wouldn't believe that, would you?"

"Nope." Alonso didn't think so. Nor, he thought, would his son understand the mental no-man's-land Kern inhabited. Before João was born, when his wife had died, Kern had spun 860 out completely. Spending nights in some cop bar out in Marine Park, coming home at two am, drunk, banging on the door for his wife to let him in, crying on the steps, until Alonso would call his son to come over and take care of him. People like Kern were shattered in ways more complex than even this precocious ten-year-old could fathom.

"Let's talk about it later," said Alonso. "This is our stop." 870

The workshop started out looking like a disappointment. Not the instructor, a Jamaican woman named Saquina who had a delightful way with the kids. She smiled the entire time, and her eyes gleamed like her sea-glass necklace as she listened to them all read and coaxed them to offer each other feedback.

No, it was the stories. These were all neighborhood kids, brought by their parents, most of whom were clearly out of place, not knowing 880 what to do in a library. And the kids had not fallen far from those trees, he thought, as he listened to their stories. They were all about vampires, magic schools, and zombies, or pallid knockoffs of TV shows he had heard of but never watched. It was as if the military-entertainment complex had set up a branch office in their heads. Only one young teenage girl, wearing a scarf, surprised him with a story about a robot

rebellion whose leaders were conflicted about overthrowing the people who wrote their code. If she were a little older, he would have suggested Harold Bloom.

Then João began to read his story about the time Grandpa had prevented the Rodney King riots.

"When the first verdict was announced in the Rodney King case out in Simi Valley, the old man wandered the streets of New York with the Umbrella for two days straight," he read, "but there were no riots in New York.

"Los Angeles was ablaze; the intersection of Florence and Normandie had become the ultimate reality show. Figures jiggling in underslung helicopter telephoto flung stones; guns soundlessly fired, people fell, buildings burned, all in brilliant shadowless light."

Saquina clapped delightedly when the boy was done. "That is a wonderful story," she said. "I love the richness of your imagery, and the telling details. I'd like to hear what everyone else has to say — and let's see if there are some suggestions to make this even better."

Alonso was not surprised that some of the kids didn't really get his son's story. A few parroted the instructor's praise, but the kid with the scarf was clearly unhappy.

"It blurs genres," she complained. "You start out writing like it's hard SF," she looked at the other kids, "like it's set in our everyday world, and then you break the contract by grafting on this bizarre magical element. You're bringing a unicorn to a knife fight. And really," she snorted, "an umbrella?"

João shot her a dark look, but Saquina stepped in. "It's an unusual choice," she said, "but far from unique. There's a whole genre called 'magical realism' where conceits like this are common. Are you concerned that it's not explained?" She turned the question back on scarf girl. "Suppose you wanted to make this hard SF. How would you do it?"

She thought for a minute. "Higher-dimensional alien photovores," she said finally. "The Umbrellas are not objects, they are entities, and what the narrator is seeing is only one tiny part of

890 how they manifest in this particular slice of spacetime. Their appearance, and the whole good-and-evil thing, they don't even notice it. It's like iron filings around poles on a magnet. That's all epiphenomenal." She looked at the other kids. "Accidental." She flicked her scarf back over her shoulder. 940

"Before we read the next story," said Saquina, "we'll take a five-minute break." She pointed to João and the girl. "I think you two should go talk."

After the workshop, Alonso went up to thank the instructor as she was gathering her materials. 950

"Your son has quite a talent," she said, looking over at where he was talking with the scarf girl, whose name turned out to be Ayana, and her mother. "It's clear that you've nurtured it well."

"Thanks," he said. Paused. "I can't take credit for that imagination, though. You know, sometimes I think he believes the stories he makes up."

"No harm in that." She slid her laptop into a woven fabric shoulderbag. 960

"Sometimes I even almost believe them," said Alonso.

She stopped packing, regarded him evenly. "You have a blue umbrella around the house?" She smiled. "No, wait, don't answer. The world is more magical than any words we can possibly summon to capture it."

"But if you believed—"

"If you believed you were the One," she said with a twinkle in her eye, "you would never really tell people, now would you? We all know how *that* story ends." 970

□

Lying in bed that night, as Alonso recounted the story for Mimi, they laughed.

"It's nice to feel we're not completely alone," she said. "And as cool as Joãozinho acts, he's already looking forward to hanging out with Ayana. She sounds like someone he could be good friends with." 980

There was a pause.

"Was it hard for you to believe?" he asked.

"At first?" She laughed. "I thought you were crazy." Light from cars passing by outside moved across the ceiling, throwing shadows on her eyes. "It's like falling in love. That's an act of final belief too, isn't it? Despite everything the world and our genes tell us. Is it hard to fall in love?"

"I didn't find it hard."

"Oh, you are sweet," she said. She reached for him.

For a while, they forgot about the Umbrella, by the front door, waiting.

□

Alonso was grateful that Pabst reliably produced the desired effect on Kern most Saturday nights, so that when he would tiptoe out in the morning to grab the *Sunday Times*, it was usually unmolested.

It was a reassuring ritual, spreading the paper out on the dining-room table before anyone else woke up, having a cup of strong coffee, and taking it all in, pages and stories like chips of stone in a grayscale mosaic, jigsaw puzzle pieces without the image on the box to force premature coherence. Shadows did not resolve well under the sharp precision of the fovea and its single-vision cones; they lurked, out in the perimeter, immaculate. You spotted them through motion.

And it was, of course, not a front-page story, but a tiny squib buried deep inside the Metro section that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

"Dr. Hadia Daoud, member of the Palestinian Legislative Council and one of the leaders of the Third Way Party, will be speaking at the New School for Social Research on Monday evening, July 26, at 6pm. Tickets are free, but reservations are required."

He didn't have to think about it. He knew.

After he showed it to Mimi, he put the paper away and the family spent the rest of the day like any ordinary Sunday. He and João went across to the park to play catch for a while, they all had tofu hotdogs and potato salad for lunch,

then they took the bus down to the Junction to go shopping at Target and bought a new racing game for the PS3. Alonso and the boy played until it was almost time for bed, then João went off to take a bath. Alonso called the old man, who also knew.

"It's soon, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes."

"Do me one favor," said the old man.

"Anything."

"Don't tell me when, okay?"

"Okay. I love you, Dad. Goodbye." He hung up. Went upstairs and tucked in his son.

Above his son's bed was a narrow shelf with a row of stuffed animals, mostly outgrown now, but still standing their dusty guard. A sunglasses-and-leather-jacket Build-A-Bear, a wolf with a maple leaf bandanna brought back from an ALA conference in Toronto, a bobble-head Mr. Met, quivering faintly from the traffic passing by on Avenue D, a horned Bernard from *Where the Wild Things Are*.

João, already nodding off, accepted his kiss on the forehead. Muttered, "G'night, Dad." Then added, "Shadows exist in a slightly different spacetime from the object that casts them. They propagate, don't they?"

"Yes, Joãozinho. Of course. At the speed of light in the medium. Now sleep."

Tomorrow, thought Alonso, could not come soon enough.

□

The auditorium had been packed and the crowd was slow to disperse, buttonholing each other in the hallway outside, talking heatedly in small clots in the lobby, meandering toward the street.

Alonso and João waited at the overhang outside the main entrance on Fifth Avenue. The boy had insisted on coming along, and while the subject had not completely held his attention, the occasion seemed to have inspired enough focus to keep him from fidgeting and asking for Alonso's iPhone.

Fortunately, it was raining. Not a downpour, but hard enough to keep people beneath the overhang as they tried to spot cabs. It was crowded under there, and it clearly made Daoud's security detail nervous when they muscled open the doors and escorted her out.

She was a sharp-eyed woman in her sixties, graying, but solid. She looked like she could still climb K2 or bring a disorderly roomful of ministers to heel. Alonso had found her talk sensible, even if there were a handful of protesters (kept at a discreet distance by the NYPD cordon) who did not.

One bodyguard stood with her while the other wandered out to the street, talking on his cell, wondering aloud where her car was. Alonso and João worked their way around the edge of the crowd, umbrella up, half under the canopy and half in the rain.

"Assalamu Alaikum," he said, and continued in Arabic, "Thank you for your talk tonight, and your work on behalf of oppressed peoples."

"Thank you for your kind words," she said. Her bodyguard muttered to her; Alonso caught something about getting out of the crowd.

"It's a rainy evening," said Alonso. "Here, please, take my umbrella."

"You are too kind," she said. "I couldn't."

At that moment, the front doors disgorged another bolus of attendees, forcing them even closer to the edge of the canopy.

"I insist." He waved at the rain. "I can wait it out. You clearly need this more than I."

"No, thank you." There it was: that note of steel. Alonso could feel the dismissal in that tone, even before she turned away. But then João spoke up.

"Ms. Daoud," he said, taking the Umbrella from his father's hands and holding it toward her. "You don't understand. This is a magical umbrella."

Alonso heard a hipster couple nearby giggle, and the guy lifted his cell phone to capture a YouTube moment. A loud throat-clearing from the bodyguard, however, changed his mind, and suddenly everyone nearby found extremely in-

teresting things to examine out in the Fifth Avenue streetscape.

João whispered, "Who could have known, when the founder of the U.N. stole this very umbrella from Neville Chamberlain in 1938, that the main front in the war with its dark counterpart would move south and east, back to the cradle of civilization." He took half a step closer. "No human did. But the Umbrella knows where it needs to be, and whose hands need to hold it now."

João looked down, and she followed the boy's gaze. The streetlight-thrown shadow of the umbrella had just kissed her foot. A drop of water ran off a rib, dropped through space, hit the toe of her shoe with a soundless impact, threw up a tiny spatter ring, and disappeared. She and the boy stared at it for a moment.

"My son is a great storyteller," said Alonso, chuckling loudly, then added softly in Arabic, "If a wind blows, ride it."

"You may come to believe, or not," said the boy. "But please, take it."

She looked from the boy's face to Alonso's, and something shifted in her expression; for a split second, there was a glimmer of curiosity, then the neutral gray business mask re-descended. But still, there was a tiny note of warmth now as she looked at João.

"Thank you very much." She nodded, and the bodyguard took the umbrella, looked at it, felt it carefully, and eased out into the rain, raising it over his own head. He looked up, and Alonso saw the blue light filtered down into his eyes. He motioned for Daoud to join him.

"Thank you again." Daoud smiled at Alonso, touched his hand, a politician's haptic thank-you, then stepped under the blue shadow. He watched the two of them, walking off into the misty evening toward 14th Street, as the other bodyguard plodded alongside, still calling for their car.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. The number was the front desk at the nursing home. He didn't answer it.

He looked out at the dim, drizzly streets of Manhattan and felt, for the first time he could recall, nothing. No sense of portent. No meaning. No overspill of destiny. He was just a working-class man with a beautiful wife and a wonderful son, and the rest of the world, well, it could take care of itself.

João looked up at him, and he reached out to hug the boy. "Thanks. If I had said that, they would have wrestled me to the ground." 1170

"Don't thank me," João said. "Thank Ayana. She made it rain with her magic weather-control scarf."

"What?"

"Kidding, kidding." The boy smiled at him. "Hey, Dad."

"Yes?"

"Let's go home and kick Jurgen's ass."

1180

Acknowledgements: Terry Bisson taught a science fiction workshop at the New School for Social Research in 1994, and one of his throwaway writing prompts was "a story where giving someone an umbrella at the door of the New School leads to world peace." He may not remember the idea, or the assignment, but here it is, just, uh, sixteen years late. Thanks to the folks at the Gibraltar Point SF Workshop — Becky, David, Janis, Lis, Mike, Peter, Rob, and Steve — for invaluable help with the first draft. 1190