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She knows too much.  
She has to die.  
She's seen the murder —  
in her mind.

# DEAD VISIONS

MAXINE  
O'CALLAGHAN

author of *The Bogeyman*



# DAEK VISIONS

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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

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## **DARK VISIONS**

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## THE VISION

*Light glinted on something. She couldn't see what it was. He straddled her, holding her down. He brought his hand up slowly and she saw what he held. A knife.*

*Suddenly the wad of cloth in her mouth seemed enormous. I don't like this game anymore. She shook her head and tried to say the words but the gag cut into her tongue and the sides of her lips.*

She hunched forward, gripping the table, her skin the color of ashes. Her eyes were dilated with terror and she moaned, a peculiar muffled sound that made the hair rise on the back of his neck.

“He strangled her and he—cut—her—” Mitch spoke thickly, “around each—nipple. And then he stabbed again and again.”

How could she know, Russ wondered. How could she know?

**THE VISIONS**

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THE BOGEYMAN  
DARK VISIONS

*For my good friend,  
Joan Dial,  
with thanks for all  
her encouragment and enthusiasm.*

## Prologue

*Decatur County, Tennessee, 1962*

“WE’RE ALMOST THERE.” DADDY TURNED OFF THE DIRT road into a narrow lane. “I’ll bet Aunt Jewel will have some lemonade ready. Won’t that be nice?”

The starched blue pinafore stuck to her back. Wisps of hair had escaped the tight braid to fluff around her face. She could feel sweat beads under her eyes. She stood on the floor of the passenger side of the Buick Electra, gripping the dash. Willow limbs brushed the windshield like long green fingers, then slipped into the open window to touch her bare arm. She shivered in the drowsy August heat.

Everything was so familiar but strange too, like the memory of a dream. Two ruts of red earth winding through the summer-green growth of dandelion and burdock; a shack that had collapsed, splintered wood like the bones of some old

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beast, almost buried by kudzu; the gaunt silvery house up ahead, darkly shaded by catalpa trees.

Granny Breen's house.

*Crazy old witch, Mama said. I don't care if she is your family.*

Daddy parked the Buick beside a rusty pickup, a '55 Crown Victoria, a school bus converted to a camper. A skinny toffee-colored hound crawled from under the front porch and strolled over, sniffing Daddy, wagging his tail.

"Hey, Duke, hey, boy." Daddy held her hand tightly. "Careful, honey. He doesn't always get along with strangers."

Stranger? She knew the feel of his short, smooth fur, just the place to scratch behind his left ear. He trotted at her side, right at home.

*You go see that crazy old woman if you want to, Mama said, but you're not taking my baby.*

So Daddy had come here alone once every three months, as long as she could remember. Mama would get out the tarnish cream as soon as he drove off, rubbing every piece of flatwear with fierce concentration. Was she polishing silver today? Or was she still sitting rigidly in the front room pretending to read the *Ladies Home Journal* while Amelia rattled pots in the kitchen?

A woman came out on the porch, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "Why, John Lee Mitchell. Granny said you'd be coming."

"How is she, Aunt Jewel?" Daddy asked.

"Holding on. Said she wasn't about to die until you got here. This must be your little girl. Come on in, darlin'. Your great-grandmaw will be proud to see you."



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So many people stuffed into that small house, most of them eating, plates piled high. She could smell chicken frying, corn boiling. A barefoot woman played "The Great Speckled Bird" on a guitar. A young boy cradled a pale green gosling in his arms.

Would she like some chicken? Lemonade? Iced tea?

She shook her head. Heat filled the house like warm water. Her lungs strained for air. If she lifted her feet, she'd float . . . down the short hall . . . into the dark cave of a bedroom. . . .

An old woman lay on the bed, propped on pillows. Coarse white hair, pale face cobwebbed with wrinkles. Toothless mouth. The room smelled like spoiled milk, unwashed diapers.

"Granny, look who's here." Daddy pulled her along, over to the bed.

*Crazy old woman.* Mama always stood her ground, but this time she'd given in and let Daddy have his way and now . . . and now . . .

Granny Breen reached out. As the gnarled hand closed around her arm, something brushed her mind, a fleeting touch like the willow limbs.

"So you be the one," Granny Breen said.

*Willow limbs in winter, leafless, icy . . .*

The milky eyes closed; the hand released its hold. "God help you, child," Granny Breen said. "God help you."

*Orange County, California, 1986*

WHEN MITCH WAS GROWING UP, BEDTIME FILLED HER with uneasy terror. Death stalked the darkness . . . her cat, the family of rabbits in the backyard discovered by a roving dog, old Mrs. Pusser next door drifting away. Maybe Mitch was just more vulnerable at night. She only knew that falling asleep felt as if she were slipping into a black void. She never gave in without a battle.

She wanted the lights on, piles of teddy bears. Most of all, she wanted her father to sit with her. "I won't have you encouraging this nonsense," Mama would say when Daddy tried to explain Mitch's fears. "She's just a silly little girl and I won't stand for you spoiling her, do you hear?"

Daddy came in when he could. When he couldn't, he'd whisper, "I'll always be here, sweet-

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heart. All you have to do is just reach out.”

And he always was, until that bright spring morning when the Buick ran head-on into a hay truck and Mitch was left to face the night alone.

She learned to cope, after a fashion. Amelia understood, and that helped. But even now, years later, she still resisted sleep and as a result always faced the day groggy and disoriented. Opening her eyes in the strange, barren room, she had to concentrate to remember where she was.

Her apartment, one half of it anyway. A monk's cell with a single bed, a four-drawer chest, a few packing boxes stacked along the wall. California, two months after that night when she'd simply gone to the Memphis airport and boarded the next plane headed west. Los Angeles instead of San Francisco only because the departure time was half an hour earlier. She had wandered up and down the coast for three weeks never straying far from the ocean. In sight of the Pacific she felt somehow anchored. Venturing too far inland she lost her bearings, intimidated by the enormous, endless sprawl.

Even crowded with summer tourists, Laguna appealed to her. Steep hills, oddly shaped houses, little nooks and crannies filled with interesting shops.

*So here I am.*

The digital clock said it was 7:35. Sunlight glowed through the thin slits of the Levelors. No time to waste in bed. She had appointments to keep, routines to maintain. The apartment, a job at Book Ends, computer classes two nights a week,

aerobics on her two mornings off. She'd been busy, a little beaver frantically rebuilding, shoring up after the flood.

Slipping on a flannel robe, she went to the bathroom and then out to the small combination living/kitchen. Austerity ruled here as well. A couch. Two more packing boxes. One end table, one lamp. A tiny drop-leaf table with two Breuer chairs. Plain white drapes to shut out the setting sun.

Overpriced and underfurnished, Mitch's apartment was the upper floor of an old house that clung to the side of a hill in South Laguna. Whatever the drawbacks, the view was worth it. Houses crowded down to the shoreline, but beyond, over the rooftops, lay the Pacific, filling the window like a living mural. Today the water looked flat and glassy. Fog smudged the horizon, kept off shore by desert winds the weatherman called the Santa Anas.

As she measured water into the percolator, the phone rang. She didn't always know who was calling before she picked up the receiver, but this time she did. She could let it go unanswered, but it would do no good. He would only keep calling back.

After the fifth ring she picked up the phone and said, resigned, "Hello, Bo."

"Lily? I was about ready to give up."

Only her mother and her soon to be ex-husband called her Lily. Lily Anne Mitchell. Her father had always called her Mitch. *But that's a boy's name, Mama said, horrified. Why would you want to be*

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*called an ugly old name like that?*

"I didn't wake you up, did I?" Bo asked. "It's almost ten o'clock."

No use pointing out that there was a two-hour difference between Memphis, Tennessee, and Laguna Beach, California. Bo knew there were such things as time zones. He just never considered that they applied to him.

"I'm up. Only not awake yet." You'd think he would know that after living with her for four years.

"I got a letter from your lawyer," he said. "You really are going through with the divorce."

"I told you I was."

"Yeah, I guess I just kept thinking that you'd—you know—come back and everything'd be the way it was before."

He sounded wistful, forlorn. Poor Bo. Every woman in town would be flocking to offer comfort and understanding. Not that his misery was an act. Bo was always sincere. Sincerity was part of his charm. He was also easily comforted, naturally happy.

"But I guess you're bound and determined to go through with this," he said. "So I'm not going to put up a fuss. Are you all right, Lily? You've got the money from your daddy's trust fund. Don't you think it'd be a good idea to take it easy for a while? I worry about you, trying to hold down a job after everything that happened."

"Bo, I'm not sick. I want to work." She could feel the tension build, constricting her chest, tightening the muscles across her shoulders.

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"Are you sure? Because if you need anything—"

"Oh, Bo, for God's sake! I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself." *I've always done such a wonderful job of it.* "Look, I appreciate your concern, I really do, but I'm fine, Bo. I'm making a whole new life."

"Well, okay." He paused, then added awkwardly, "Lily? I did love you, honey. You know that."

"I know. I'm sorry—about everything—"

After she hung up, she stood beside the table, a big lump swelling in her throat. Her marriage had been a fairy tale she'd invented day by day. She'd almost convinced herself it was real, she'd wanted it so badly. Mrs. James Beauregard Tilford. A big wedding, a beautiful old house to redecorate, thanks to Bo's parents, lots of entertaining to do—friends, family, customers being wooed by Tilford and Son Plumbing Supplies. Safe, comfortable, and oh, so normal.

*Why did you go and ruin it all? Mama said. Why do you always have to ruin things?*

*I couldn't help it, Mama, she thought.*

All the barriers, all the pretending—none of it had helped. Cats and rabbits and old ladies dying quietly—she'd learned to deal with that. But how could she cope with the disappearance of a little boy she knew and loved? How could she see him lying in that cold black water and not beg somebody please to find him and bring him home?

After twenty minutes at a furious pace the music slowed. Exhausted, Mitch forced her legs to keep moving, knowing the cool-down was next. An

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overhead fan kept the air circulating. She could smell the salty odor of sweat and the ripe sweetness of an apple, the instructor's lunch in a paper sack a few feet away next to a speaker. A mirror covered the front wall of the big room. She could see herself in the back row, drab in washed-out black among the bright parrot colors. Located near Saddleback Junior College, the aerobics studio attracted a young crowd, most of them with the kind of bodies that turned leotards into high fashion.

The woman to Mitch's left, dressed in shiny hot pink, moved effortlessly, not even breathing hard. At sign-in Mitch had caught her first name: Lisa. About twenty, with long honey-blond hair and a bored, slightly amused expression, one of those people who glide through life hitting all the high spots.

She reminded Mitch of Bo—no, don't think about Bo. That was over and done with. She was making a whole new life here. . . .

The music ended and she joined the other women, walking around in a circle behind Lisa to let her heartbeat settle back to normal.

Suddenly she remembered that after the last class she'd seen Lisa thumbing a ride along Marguerite Parkway. Recognizing her, Mitch had taken her foot off the gas, ready to pull over, but a Volkswagen had already stopped.

Dumb, really dumb. Somebody should warn her. *Water . . . no—curtain . . . slick, glistening . . . and behind it . . .*

Mitch stumbled, her heart rate climbing. For an

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instant she felt as though the top layer of her skin had been peeled away. *Oh, God, not again.*

"You okay?" somebody asked.

Mitch mumbled that she was fine. On the floor, stretching, she told herself she really was fine. The feeling was gone, that random, fleeting something.

Maybe it was just the winds, those desert blasts that scoured the sky to brilliant blue and left everything charged with static electricity. Breathing that hot dry air this morning, she thought she should've waited for the flight to San Francisco. A fire already burned in the mountains, sending an ominous yellow plume of smoke aloft. The radio predicted more blazes.

Nobody else seemed to notice. Fire was a fact of life, she supposed, a given like the early morning fog or the jams on the freeways. Heading for a shower, she promised herself some distraction. Her one full day off from the bookstore—but to heck with structure and routine. The laundry could wait, and how long did it take to clean an apartment that looked as though nobody lived in it? She'd have lunch at the mall, go to a movie, goof off.

She unpinned her key from her shoulder, opened the locker, and took out a towel. Somebody banged on a stubborn metal door. A small group made plans for a Wham concert. *You got tickets? Oh, I could just die. I've already got a date. Well, fuck it, he's a dork anyway.*

Something about their offhanded profanity made Mitch feel old, out of it. She was only twenty-six, but she'd had Mama and Amelia to



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answer to when she was growing up. While Mama relied on a bar of Fels Naphtha, all Amelia needed was that terrible look of disappointment on her gaunt black face.

A few women had already showered, Lisa one of them. Casually naked, smelling of soap and shampoo, she took clothes from a gym bag a few feet away.

*Behind a . . . curtain—no—something slippery, transparent . . . cold . . .*

Mitch leaned against the metal lockers, the tiny jolt of static charge racing along her vulnerable nerve endings.

“Hey, you sick or something?” Lisa, watching her. “Maybe you ought to sit down.”

“I think you’re right.” Mitch backed up and sat on the bench that ran down the middle of the room.

“I noticed you really go all out.” Lisa slipped on panties, fastened the front closure of a lacy bra. “Maybe you ought to slow down a little—till you get into it, you know?”

Mitch nodded dumbly. That glimpse into God knows where.

If she was going to have these flashes, why the bloody hell couldn’t they make sense? But then, of course, they did—sometimes—and that was even worse.

“Listen,” Mitch said. “I saw you the other day hitching a ride, and I’m really afraid—I mean—” *Something awful might happen to you, don’t ask me how I know, but I do, I get these—feelings . . . just like Granny Breen.* “I thought if you needed a ride,