



The Menace of Leonard

by Kristian Walters

Leonard didn't slow as he approached the stairwell, taking in the teenagers sprawled on the steps, cluttering the walkway like forgotten baggage.

"You're like... furniture, you know. Sitting around like that," he remarked, as though offering a casual observation they might find useful.

The teenagers glanced at each other, one of them stifling a smirk as he was nudged by his friend. Leonard nodded to himself, certain his point had registered. "That's the thing with hanging about," he added, with an instructive tone. "You'll end up as much a fixture as the rest of the trash blowing around this place."

One of them, barely tall enough to meet his shoulder, grumbled something unintelligible, lifting his head only slightly. Typical. But they finally began to move, sluggishly gathering their things, and Leonard allowed himself a thin smile as they walked away.

"This isn't your playground, you know," he called after them, making sure his voice carried. Though as they shuffled off, Leonard's smile faded when their muttered voices rose into sharp, biting laughter that echoed faintly throughout the courtyard.

"Little shits". He grumbled. It was always the same with that sort—lazy, unmotivated—but the way they lingered, as if waiting for him to turn his back, tugged at something inside him.

Surely they'd think twice before lingering here again. He could almost feel their sullen glances, likely passing some remark about him they didn't think he'd catch.

Moving on from the stairwell his shoes clicked against the cracked pavement, each step feeling like an official proclamation, as if his presence alone might convince the broken pavement to pull itself together. Crossing the courtyard, Leonard took in the buildings looming like relics of a better age—back when these blocks might have passed for modern, maybe even refined. Now, they stood like monuments to decay, with peeling paint and windows patched over with cardboard and spit. He sighed at the sight of discarded wrappers

skittering past the empty planters, the refuse of a world that had long since abandoned any sense of pride. A gust of wind stirred the heavy air, carrying the faint, metallic hum that lingered from the city's industrial heart. As Leonard's thoughts drifted, a voice cut sharply through the quiet courtyard.

"Ello there, son—fancy a warm bite? Best I've made all day," the vendor called out, his voice worn and gravelly, louder than necessary, as though he thought everyone was hard of hearing. His hands, rough and a bit unsteady, held out greasy skewers of what looked like fried... bits, perhaps once attached to an animal. There was a faint, tired smile on his face, the kind that seemed to cling more out of habit than genuine warmth.

Leonard kept his stride, eyes fixed ahead as though the vendor didn't exist—until his foot suddenly caught on a crack in the pavement, pitching him forward into the outstretched skewers, leaving an oily streak across his chest. His face tightened, a flicker of horror in his eyes as he looked down. "Are you serious?" he barked, scrubbing at the smear with sharp, angry strokes, as though he could somehow restore his dignity.

"Oh—oh no, I didn't mean to," the vendor stammered, his face paling as he looked at the grease stain on Leonard's shirt. He tried for a weak chuckle, his hands trembling as he pulled the skewer back.

"Bad business, ain't it, when the food's trying to eat the customers? Not what you'd call... five-star service, eh? Maybe if I.."

"Maybe if you kept your food on the plate instead of waving it around, you'd have customers who'd actually stick around." Leonard's words cut through, silencing the vendor mid-sentence. He barely registered the vendor's attempts to apologize.

The vendor's tired smile faltered, his shoulders sagging as he drew the offending skewers close to his chest, still mumbling a response that barely reached Leonard's ears. But Leonard, now continuing his stride backward, was too busy brushing furiously at the smear to catch more than a fragment of the vendor's stammered apologies.

"Honestly..." he muttered, his voice carrying as he stepped away. "What are you even doing? Trying to run a business here of all places."

Leonard suddenly stumbled back, his steps halted by something soft and wagging behind him. A scruffy dog stood there, tail thumping with what Leonard would have called unwarranted enthusiasm. It gazed up at him, tongue lolling, as if expecting a grand greeting. He acknowledged it briefly with a raised hand, a silent signal that it was free to move along.

But the creature didn't take the hint, cocking its head with an insistent and somewhat misplaced cheerfulness. With a sigh of reluctant patience, he scanned the ground, spotting a fallen stick nearby. Perhaps a diversion would do.

“There,” he said, tossing the stick to the side with just enough effort to appease the animal. The dog bounded after it eagerly, seeming to take it as some kind of invitation. Leonard watched it dart off and thought*, at least for the moment, he had managed to preserve some semblance of order*.

Leonard brushed off his hands as if to rid himself of the entire encounter, casting one last glance behind him before heading up the cracked concrete stairs, leaving the courtyard—and everything in it—behind.

The walkway that led to his door overlooked the courtyard below, the open railings allowing him to keep an eye on the comings and goings below—a convenience he appreciated. The faint murmur of a voice drifted from an apartment, one door down from his, low and steady, like someone speaking quietly to themselves.

Outside, a small girl stood at the railing, her hands gripping the bars as she gazed downward. Her eyes tracking something below, though whatever it was seemed to have slipped out of view.

As he passed, she turned her head to him with a vague, almost dreamy expression. “Someone’s following you, you know,” she murmured absently, as though commenting on the weather.

Leonard paused, the odd phrase lingering in his mind as a prickling unease crept over him. He turned back toward her, his gaze narrowing. “What?” he demanded, his tone sharper than intended.

The girl’s eyes widened, and her hands tightened on the railing as she shrank back, casting a quick glance at the open apartment door.

Leonard stepped forward. “What did you say?”

She flinched, backing away without another word, then slipped inside her apartment, leaving the door slightly ajar behind her.

Leonard watched the girl slip inside, leaving him standing alone in the walkway. He huffed, shaking his head, as though clearing away the strange encounter. His attention drifted downward, his irritation flaring anew as he noticed that the grease stain had spread even further across his shirt—a smudged blemish on what he considered his last presentable button-down.

Muttering under his breath, he stepped inside, shrugging off the shirt as he moved toward the small closet in the corner of his apartment. He carefully inspected the other garments hanging there, each neatly pressed and hung with deliberate care. There weren’t many—just enough for a man with standards, he reminded himself, but not enough to risk on careless stains.

Grabbing a fresh shirt, he slipped one arm into the sleeve when a faint rustling sound caught his attention. Startled, he froze, the shirt half-on, half-off, as he listened. The noise stopped, and silence filled the apartment, but the faint shuffling replayed in his mind, as the prickling unease from earlier returned in full force

Had he closed the front door? He couldn't recall, but something was off, and now the quiet felt thick.

Setting the clean shirt aside, he walked back toward the front door and froze. Just inside, lying on the floor, was a dead bird, its feathers ruffled and still.

Leonard stared at the bird. Its body was twisted horribly, with a smear of dried blood across it. He glanced out the open doorway, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the courtyard below.

The teenagers were walking away, their backs to him as they laughed and shoved one another. The vendor, still at his stall, glancing in his direction, his hands busy rearranging skewers that no one seemed interested in buying. The walkway, where the girl had stood only moments before, was still empty.

A flicker of suspicion rose in his mind, unsettling and unwelcome. Had someone left it here, intentionally? His gaze drifted back to the bird, and he clenched his jaw. No, he hadn't given anyone a reason—none at all... had he?



Leonard wandered past the window again, casting a quick, almost casual glance through the blinds at the empty courtyard below. It was hardly out of character - he'd developed a habit of checking the view now and then, as if expecting something other than cracked pavement and neglected flower beds to emerge. After yesterday's... incident, he found himself drawn back to this spot, peering through the blinds a bit longer each time, though he'd insist to anyone listening that it was just another morning routine.

A small, faded sign dangled crookedly from a rusty pole by the entrance, offering "Community Pride" in bold letters that had long since surrendered to peeling paint and grime. Leonard gave it a dry, almost pitying look before his gaze drifted back to the courtyard, as if anything in this place could offer a glimpse of "pride."

Catching his reflection in the window, he straightened his collar and squared his shoulders, feeling a peculiar satisfaction in the gesture. If someone happened to catch a glimpse of him from below—just barely visible through the slats of his half-lowered blinds—they'd see a man of composure, someone who kept standards.

This was his domain, after all - if anything had happened out there, he'd be the first to know. Still, he found himself glancing back over his shoulder before pulling the blinds a fraction lower. It was a perfectly rational habit, he told himself, just a prudent watchfulness - nothing more.

With a self-reminding huff, he forced himself from the blinds, as though he'd nearly merged with them. There was no sense in staying perched there like some sentry, he thought. The apartment itself called for a measure of dignity, and he took quiet pride in keeping his rented space in better order than most.

His apartment was modest - just a single room, really - but unlike many of the government-owned units around him, Leonard's was technically rented rather than assigned. It was a distinction he cherished, one that, in his mind, set him a notch above the rest. In this part of the city, where personal property was a novelty and people were just another unit in the government's grid, Leonard prided himself on maintaining a certain standard. His furniture, though sparse, was arranged with a kind of deliberate symmetry, and he'd found space for a worn but functional armchair near the window, his vantage point on the world below.

But now, there was a blot on his otherwise neat sanctuary.

It lay by the door, still and dark, he hadn't yet moved. His eyes found it almost immediately, as if the thing had somehow anchored itself to the spot. The bird lay twisted on the floor, its one open eye dull but fixed, seeming to watch him with an eerie stillness. A slick smear of entrails clung to its broken wing, as if it had tried, and failed, to shield itself. Leonard forced himself to look away, annoyed at the faint chill creeping up his spine. Really, he should have dealt with it yesterday—the bird, and the one who'd left it here in the first place. But...

He glanced at the clock on the wall. The hours were slipping away. The day had blurred, a series of missed opportunities to do anything productive. Under ordinary circumstances, he'd be at work by now. Then again, exceptions were allowed for people who actually took pride in what they did. A small smirk played at the edge of his lips. He was a cut above most of the other people in this place; that much was certain. If anyone here had earned the right to take a day, surely it was him.

With a small, almost absent sigh, Leonard straightened up, glancing again at the bird. The temptation to remove it was there, but something made him pause. Surely it wasn't his responsibility, but rather the twisted sort who'd put it there.

Instead, his attention drifted back to the window. He had to keep watching. It wasn't a choice, really. He'd have to confront the people out there, eventually. If anything were happening, he would be the first to know. That much was certain.

The light was shifting as the afternoon crept on, and a few scattered figures crossed the cracked pavement, none of them familiar. The vendor hadn't returned. The teenagers hadn't shown up either. The girl hadn't even reappeared.

Still, Leonard kept watching. The bird, for the moment, could wait.

As the afternoon deepened, the courtyard began to stir with a few familiar faces drifting back from the day's work, the subtle rhythm of the place shifting with each person who shuffled in. Leonard counted them one by one - A lanky man shuffled past, his hands jammed deep in his pockets, as though he might lose them otherwise. Behind him, a woman clutched a battered purse as she trotted by, followed closely by a boy in mismatched shoes who looked like he'd wandered into the wrong story.

But they didn't matter. Not one of them was the face Leonard was watching for. He tapped his foot and, almost unconsciously, leaned closer to the window. Just a matter of time, he thought. People couldn't hide forever, not here.

Then, as if on cue, the vendor appeared, shuffling toward his stall with his usual sluggish routine. Leonard felt a small jolt of satisfaction. Here was someone he could hold accountable—someone who ought to have answers. Adjusting his collar, he took a steadying breath and stepped out of his apartment, making his way down the cracked concrete stairs, his shoes striking each step with purpose.

The vendor barely looked up as Leonard approached, his hands occupied with adjusting skewers on the grill. "Ah, afternoon... y'know, funny thing, age. Slips up on you," he murmured, almost to himself, his smile faltering just for a moment. "Years start goin' quicker the more you got, till you're left wonderin' if the day's already passed 'fore you even woken up."

Leonard cleared his throat, managing to start, "Look, I was just hoping—"

But the vendor continued as if Leonard hadn't spoken, refocusing on the skewers. "I tell you... these hands..." he muttered, holding up one as it shook faintly in the air. "Don't do what they used to, but it's a steady job, this. Leastwise I got somethin' to keep 'em busy, eh? Not that it's much in the way of—"

"You were watching last night, weren't you? Saw someone near my door?" Leonard's words spilling out in a tone meant to sound controlled but veering unexpectedly.

The vendor blinked, glancing up as if just now noticing Leonard's intensity. His hands paused mid-motion over the skewers, an uncertain look flashing across his face. "Oh... near your door, was it?" he mumbled, still looking slightly bewildered. "Well... people come and go, don't they?"

Leonard's gaze hardened. "And yet, you're always here," he said, his tone cold and calculated. "Surely you'd notice if someone was lurking around."

The vendor's tired smile faltered, his gaze flickering to Leonard with something that might've been wariness before he quickly shifted his attention back to the skewers. His hands moved a bit faster now, turning each one with a deliberate care, as though he'd suddenly found a reason to stay focused. "Can't say as I remember much of the sort," he mumbled, his voice softer, almost careful.

Leonard's voice grew sharper, impatience bleeding through. "That's convenient, isn't it?" he pressed, surely the vendor was holding something back. He felt as though he'd cornered him - it was only a matter of time now. "You're here every day, watching, and yet when something actually happens—suddenly you don't recall?"

The vendor's hands hovered briefly over the skewers, his gaze unfocused, before he continued turning them, slower now, almost deliberately avoiding Leonard's eyes. "Like I said... people come and go," he mumbled, his words sliding into the smoke and sizzle, as though the statement could simply fade away.

Leonard leaned closer, his voice dropping to a deliberate, measured cadence. "Strange, isn't it?" he said, each word cutting the air like a blade. "A man spends every day watching the same patch of pavement. Sees everything, hears everything... And then, when something important happens—something right outside my door—he suddenly can't say as he remembers much of the sort?" He took a slow step forward, his gaze fixed, unblinking. "Doesn't that seem... peculiar to you?"

The vendor shifted, the skewer slipping awkwardly in his fingers as he fumbled to adjust it. "I... I just do the food, y'know?" His words trailed off, his attention glued to the skewers as though they held all the answers he needed to give.

Leonard tilted his head, his gaze drilling into the vendor. "You just do the..." His words dissolved as sharp, biting laughter rang out, echoing across the courtyard. Leonard's attention snapped toward the sound. There, drifting into view, were the teenagers from the day before, their laughter loud and careless. His jaw tightened. Finally, here was a chance to get to the bottom of things.

Leonard moved across the courtyard with measured strides, the laughter still ringing faintly in his ears. It fueled his momentum, sharpening his focus. This time, they wouldn't slip away so easily.

"Still hanging about, I see," he began, his voice loud enough to cut through their chatter as he approached. The group stilled, their laughter tapering into uneasy silence. The teenagers from the day before stiffened as their gaze flicked toward each other, conspiratorial. They hadn't expected him.

Leonard smirked, "That's right. You lot like to hang about, don't you?" he continued, stepping closer. There were more than before—six, maybe seven. He hadn't noticed at first. But they weren't even responding, were they ignoring him?

The group slowly continued on, the two from earlier urging the rest to move on, their words too quiet to catch. A few of them laughing in response. They were laughing at him.

He drew closer, his voice cutting through the low murmurs and scattered chuckles. "You think this is funny?" he snapped, the edge in his tone sharp enough to catch their attention. "Is this how you lot amuse yourselves?"

His steps quickened, the laughter receding, but Leonard's thoughts rushed forward, filling the void. Their faces—they'd changed somehow. Weren't they laughing just a moment ago? Now there was something else. What was it? He searched their expressions, certain he'd caught a flicker of guilt, an unspoken confession in their glances.

"They think no one sees, but I see." The words tumbled from his mouth, uneven and jagged. "You think you're clever, don't you? Like a pack of shadows, slinking around, leaving no trace. But you've slipped up this time, haven't you? Oh, I know you have."

He was rambling now, but it didn't matter. Let them squirm. He could see it. The truth just beneath the surface, a crack in their facade. He felt the certainty settle over him, solid and undeniable. He'd cornered them.

"Did you think I wouldn't figure it out?". The words spilled out, low and venomous. One of the teenagers froze, his face paling as Leonard suddenly closed the gap. Their laughter had stopped, while Leonard's voice grew louder, spilling over the group like a rising tide. "And this time, it wasn't just trash. Oh, no." His hand shot out, gripping the nearest teenager by the collar, pulling him close. His voice cracked like a whip as his face twisted into something raw.

"A fucking *dead bird*!" Leonard's voice cracked across the group as he shook the teenager's collar. The boy's face was pale, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water, unable to find words. Around him, there was movement—not fast, but deliberate, like a

tide creeping in. Leonard barely registered his grip loosening as he became aware of the shifting shadows surrounding him.

“Don’t touch him!” a voice broke through, high-pitched and taut. Leonard’s breath caught, as his grip faltered. Their faces—he could see them now, clearer than before. They weren’t laughing anymore. No, there was something else there now. They were angry. That much was obvious.

“Back off, man!” one of them snapped, the words quick and sharp. Leonard’s eyes flicking around as his chest tightened.

But as he stared into their eyes, something shifted—a crack at the edge of his certainty. It wasn’t just their faces; it was the way the air felt heavier now, like the world around him was closing in, shrinking. His fingers trembled on the boy’s collar.

“Let him go!” another voice rang out, firmer this time, cutting through the noise. Leonard’s breath caught again as their words swirled around him.

The shadows around him seemed to thicken, and the teenagers leaned forward, their shapes stretching, growing larger, blotting out the courtyard behind them. They were crowding him now, their voices low and urgent, a murmur rising in a way that scraped at his nerves.

The space between them and him had disappeared.

Leonard’s head jerked from face to face, their shifting figures blurring together as his pulse hammered in his ears. They were too close now, all of them, closing in like a living wall. His grip on the teenager slackened completely, but the boy didn’t move away—instead, he stared at Leonard with wide, unblinking eyes, as though expecting something.

The murmurs grew louder, cutting at the edges of his focus. He couldn’t make out the words, couldn’t tell if they were arguing with him or each other. A sudden movement at the corner of his vision made him flinch.

“Step back!” he barked, his voice cracking under the strain. But they didn’t. Why weren’t they moving? They were frozen—no, not frozen. Watching. Waiting.

The tension snapped with a single bark, sharp and guttural, cutting through the din like a whip. Leonard spun toward the sound, his stomach lurching as the scruffy dog charged into view, teeth bared and snarling, its hackles raised. The teenagers recoiled, stumbling back as the animal lunged forward, forcing them apart.

It all happened in a blur—one of the boys shouted, and the others scattered like leaves in a storm, their retreat so sudden it made Leonard stumble. The dog advanced again, its

barking echoing off the walls, and Leonard's feet moved instinctively, carrying him backward, away from the chaos.

The distance between him and the group widened. The open air around him felt like a gasp of relief. He didn't look back as he turned and strode toward the stairwell, his breath coming in shallow gasps. Behind him, the barking continued, a relentless punctuation to his retreat.

Leonard approached the walkway, his thoughts still spinning as if caught in the chaos he'd just left. The familiar figure of the little girl came into view, this time with her mother, a worn-looking woman juggling a bag of groceries as she worked a set of keys out of her pocket. The girl glanced up in his direction, her eyes growing wide as they met his, before darting away again.

He was almost at his door when he saw it, right in front of his door. A bone, large and angular. It looked like it belonged to an animal, though it was clean, the surface gleaming faintly in the dim light of the walkway.

A fresh surge of fury rose within him, reigniting the anger he felt under his encounter with the teenagers. His breath came faster, and his vision seemed to narrow as he turned back toward the girl and her mother. The mother had just stepped inside, her voice soft and indistinct as she called for her daughter.

"You," Leonard snapped, his voice cracking like a whip. The mother turned, startled, her hand frozen on the doorframe. The mother froze, her keys dangling in her hand. "Excuse me?"

Leonard didn't spare the mother a glance. His focus locked onto the girl, her small frame stiffening under his glare. *She knows something*. Did.. Did *she* do this?

Leonard gestured sharply toward the bone. "This. This sick game of yours."

Her brows knitted in confusion, her mouth opening to respond, but Leonard was already bearing down on them. His attention shifted to the little girl, her small frame stiffening under his glare. Her brows knitted in confusion, her mouth opening to respond, but Leonard was already bearing down on them. His attention shifted to the little girl, her small frame stiffening under his glare.

"Don't lie to me!" Leonard's voice rose to a fever pitch. He grabbed the girl's arm, his grip unsteady but firm. The child whimpered, her eyes wide with fear.

The mother's hand shot out, grasping Leonard's wrist. "Let her go!" she hissed, her voice low and fierce. The intensity of it cut through Leonard's haze, and he released the girl as if burned.

For a moment, there was silence. The mother's eyes bored into him, her lips pressed into a thin line. The girl sobbed quietly, clutching her mother's leg.

Leonard took a step back, his chest heaving. They were all against him—every one of them. He could feel it now, closing in like a tightening noose.

Without another word, he turned and retreated to his apartment, slamming the door shut behind him. The sound echoed in the silence of the hallway, but inside, Leonard could only hear his own ragged breathing.



Leonard stood motionless, just inside the door, as though the act of closing it could seal him away from the outside world. His breath was shallow, his fingers still trembling from where they'd clutched the girl's arm—maybe too hard- though only to stop her from wriggling away. She needed to understand, to explain—if anything, it was her fault for squirming so much. Children these days didn't know when to listen.

He blinked hard, trying to push the image of her wide, tear-filled eyes from his mind. It wasn't his fault, not really. He'd let go, hadn't he? Even though he hadn't gotten an explanation out of her.

The dead bird still lay twisted just inside the apartment, its feathers stiff and disheveled, while the bone—large and jagged—remained outside his door, like matching pieces in a puzzle he didn't ask for. How had they gotten there? It was deliberate—he was sure of it. The bird, the bone—they weren't accidents. They'd been mocking him, they'd set him up for this - all of them.

Suddenly he heard footsteps, heavy and deliberate, right behind him. Leonard stiffened, his breath catching in his throat. The sound was impossibly close, as if whoever it was had stopped just inches away from his door. For a moment, all he could hear was the faint creak of the floorboards outside and the pounding of his own heartbeat.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

