

THE DEAD ZONE

“Shadows”

Revised Story Outline – 3/4/04
Michael Taylor

Thanks to Christopher Wey, Johnny’s seen his face on a magazine cover from the future, along with the unnerving headline, “Will This Man Destroy the World?” It led him to beg Bruce to have the strength to “do whatever it takes” to stop him if Johnny indeed proves to be the ultimate cause of Armageddon. As he explained his own fears: “I don’t know what’s going to happen. What all this is going to do to me.” And, indeed, he doesn’t know. But he does know who he is right now, and so do we. He’s the hero of our story. The good guy, who always does the right thing. His worries, such as they are, are tied to a future that remains shrouded in mystery.

But what if something happened right now that gave credence to those fears by revealing a very different Johnny Smith, a Johnny Smith who – when pushed to his absolute limits – displays a frightening capacity for anger and violence? How would we feel about our hero then? How would Johnny feel about himself?

In this episode, Johnny’s visions give him a frightening glimpse into the recesses of his own soul, and a dark future that is tied to it. A future that is only hours rather than years away.

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It’s a beautiful late summer day. Labor Day, to be exact. And Johnny is enjoying it on the banks of a bucolic pond, soaking up the sun as Bruce helps J.J. rig his fishing line. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, he’s struck by a vision:

It’s night. Through a window, fireworks light up the sky. Then – CRASH! – two men tumble into frame, locked in a fierce fight. We’re in a dark motel room, unable to see anything clearly, including the two combatants, who look like raging shadows as they smash into walls and furniture, then finally fall to the floor. We sense that one man is the aggressor, the other simply trying to defend himself. But when the aggressor pulls out a blood-encrusted knife and stabs it into the other man’s shoulder, then raises the knife to stab him again, his would-be victim crosses a line from determined self-defense to violent rage. Shouting in anger and in pain, he reaches out and grabs the base of a broken lamp, then smashes it into his attacker’s head, stunning him. Then, still driven by that unleashed rage, he hits him again and again, blow succeeding blow with a relentless fury that’s horrifying to witness. Finally it’s over; the bludgeoned man lays still. The victor stands, takes a few wobbly steps into the bathroom, splashes some water on his face while drawing heaving breaths. And there in a mirror, illuminated by the fireworks flashes from outside, we see a bloody haggard face. Johnny’s face. He stares at himself with fatigue, then dawning horror, and then finally with that same awful fury, now directed at himself as he slams his head into the mirror, shattering the reflection, and we SMASH CUT TO:

Johnny in the present, the moment of tranquility similarly shattered by the violent vision. It’s a vision made all the more terrifying because there’s no indication of what caused it; Johnny wasn’t touching anything. Shaken, he cuts the fishing trip short. Bruce sees he’s got that look, and Johnny’s compelled to describe the vision. He doesn’t know whom he was fighting with or

why, only that he appeared to have killed the man. And that apparently it gave him some awful satisfaction, a release, however transitory, from a deeper grief and rage. It's difficult for Johnny to explain, as though he's describing an entirely different person – a self he doesn't recognize. Bruce doesn't recognize that guy either. "It's not you, man," he says. But as Johnny and Bruce drop J.J. back off at Walt and Sarah's, Johnny's hit by another vision, this one showing a scene that happened – or will happen – not long before the first vision:

This time, he's shoving his way through a crowded strip club, asking various patrons and employees whether they've seen a man whom Johnny briefly describes by his clothing, height and hair color. When some of them shrug or try to brush him off, Johnny grabs their arms as though trying to literally squeeze visions out of them. He sounds and acts like a man possessed. Finally, one of the strippers admits seeing the guy earlier. She tried to sell him a lap dance, but he didn't seem to be interested in her or any of the other girls. It was as if he was just waiting there, or maybe hiding out. But before Johnny can find out more, a bouncer throws him out. Johnny comes out of the vision with a start, this time catching Walt's attention. Johnny doesn't know how to explain that at some point in the future he's going to track some stranger down and kill him, so he makes up an innocuous vision to put Walt at ease. But he again tells Bruce what he really saw, and that once more there's no indication of what triggered the vision. Johnny and Bruce go back to his house as they try to sort out what happening with these seemingly "spontaneous visions." Johnny empties his pockets, looking for some object that might be causing them. He may even be so freaked out that he strips down and showers, like a hypochondriac afraid he's been infected with something. But when he gets out of the shower and puts on a new set of clothes, he looks in the mirror – and has a memory flash of his bloody face staring back at him in the motel room mirror. He realizes he's now wearing the same clothes as in the vision. (Moreover, we'll learn that Cleaves Mills is having a Labor Day Heritage Celebration, complete with fireworks – the same fireworks we saw in that first vision – which will help establish a time frame for the story.) The murder Johnny is going to commit is going to happen that night.

The continuing visions quickly confirm this. In the next one, Johnny is arguing with Walt at the sheriff's station. Walt has arrested two skinhead suspects for a murder that happened that afternoon, but Johnny doesn't believe they're the killers. He tells Walt that his visions have suggested it's another man, though he can't describe the man well. Walt, however, says the evidence clearly indicts the suspects he has in custody. For once, he's not ready to take a flyer on a Johnny vision, especially given Johnny's attitude – he's way too emotional right now to be objective, even about his own visions. And he's right. Johnny is incredibly emotional; he vows to track the man down on his own if he has to. We're beginning to understand that Johnny's on some kind of mission of vengeance.

Moreover, we're also realizing that each new vision chronologically precedes the one that came before it. Indeed, as Johnny and Bruce begin to actively investigate, following up on clues in the visions to find out more about both the crime and the man who will apparently commit it, we sense that the two halves of the story – the backwards-stepping visions of the night to come and the forward-moving reality of the day – are moving toward each other, heading toward some moment of convergence: presumably the crime itself.

Their investigation may take them to the sleazy motel where Johnny has seen he will fight and kill the other man. He may even know the room number. Only the manager tells them that no

one's checked into it yet. Bruce convinces the manager to let them inside the room, but Johnny can't seem to get any visions off the sterile surroundings. He finds himself staring into the same mirror from his harrowing initial vision. In the even light of day, it seems impossible to Johnny that he will become the stranger he glimpsed in that mirror – covered with the blood of a man he just savagely beat to death. He's like Tom Cruise in *Minority Report*, learning that he's going to commit a murder in the future, but unable to believe that sort of violence is within him. That is, until he's faced with the circumstances that will invoke those violent emotions, emotions that make murder seem not only possible, but even inevitable.

In our story, that revelation is the climax of Act Two, the result of another seemingly unprompted vision. In this one, Johnny is waiting anxiously outside a hospital O.R. when a surgeon comes out and sadly shakes his head. The patient's injuries were too severe; he couldn't be saved. The future Johnny is distraught, refusing to accept the awful truth. He tries to force his way inside the O.R., and has to be restrained. But not before we've seen the dead patient. It's Bruce.

It's a terrifying realization that sends the story hurtling into overdrive. Suddenly, there's a logic to the seemingly spontaneous visions. Johnny may not have been touching anything directly, but Bruce has been with him all along, sharing the same space, or even touching an object – a door or a table – just before Johnny does. In a *Sixth Sense*-like montage of shots, we see how each of these indirect contacts prompted each of the visions.

Naturally, Bruce is stunned and shaken; he's just learned that he may be murdered in a matter of hours. The only thing that keeps him from losing it entirely is his faith in Johnny, and in Johnny's visions. They've shown murders before, and in almost every case Johnny, often with Bruce's help, was able to prevent them from happening (though the exceptions, as in "Playing God" and "Looking Glass," may give both men pause). Johnny wants Bruce to lock himself in his apartment, or even have Walt lock him in a cell. But Bruce says the visions haven't shown them that this is a sure way for him to protect himself. He could be killed by an intruder at home, or shanked in jail. He'll take his chances sticking with Johnny, just like always. They'll solve this thing together.

We'll soon realize, however, that Bruce isn't just worried about his own safety. He's also worried about Johnny, about what may happen to him if Bruce is indeed killed. He tries to get Johnny to promise that he won't damn himself by seeking vengeance – a promise *not* to kill that contrasts with the pledge Johnny tried to extract from Bruce in the season opener. But this is a promise Johnny also can't bring himself to make, though he appears to merely brush it off. He's already begun demonizing the man he believes may kill his best friend. Johnny's visions – which will continue to take us backwards through the night to come – are filling in enough details for Johnny, in his increasingly emotional state, to paint a very unflattering mental picture of this man. A man who frequents strip clubs and sleazy motels. A man who sports what looks like a jailhouse tattoo. A career criminal and lowlife scumbag, no doubt. Someone whose life isn't worth a fraction of the one he's threatening to take.

Soon, Johnny's visions have progressed – or rather "regressed" – from late night to early evening. The day, meanwhile, is approaching late afternoon. In other words, the moment of convergence between reality and visions – the moment of Bruce's murder – is close at hand. Like some sort of paranormal CSI technician, Johnny has finally been able to reconstruct the

details of the crime to come. He believes that Bruce will be killed trying to defend himself from three men: the two skinheads Johnny saw in custody in an earlier vision, and a third man, the one he's been seeking. And indeed it's the third man who will murder Bruce, stabbing him multiple times in an apparent fit of psychotic rage.

Johnny grows increasingly desperate, looking for this vicious killer around every corner, terrified that the crime could happen at any moment. But when the moment does come, it manages to catch him off-guard.

Johnny and Bruce are driving downtown when they hear people shouting. A man's been mugged – beat up and robbed in an alley. Johnny sees the attacker sprinting away, and from behind it looks like his man. Pushing aside the pain from his bad leg, he races after him. But Bruce's instinct is to help the injured victim, who's still groggy from the attack. As he bends to check his condition, we catch a glimpse of something alarming: a “jailhouse tattoo” on the man's arm. Meanwhile, across the street, we see two skinheads alerted by the ruckus. They see Bruce, a black man, and immediately peg him for the attacker instead of a rescuer. As they rush across the street, we cut to...

...Johnny, who's by now caught up with the mugger and subdued him, only to realize he's not the man he's seeking. And now he's hit by a final vision, a vision of what's seems to be happening right now around the corner. The two skinheads are attacking Bruce, who defends himself, knocking a knife from one guy's hand. But now the injured man rises and, also mistaking Bruce for his attacker, picks up the knife. Suddenly, Bruce is shoved into him, and in a moment of extraordinary fear and anger the man loses it and stabs him repeatedly. Even the skinheads are freaked and run off as, within the vision, Johnny watches from the sidelines, helpless to intercede.

Johnny comes out of the vision and rushes back to the site of the mugging – only to find that he's too late. All three men are gone. Bruce is on the ground, bleeding badly and barely clinging to consciousness. Beside himself with anguish and rage, Johnny cradles his friend's shoulders. “Remember who you are,” Bruce says weakly. “Just... step back.” And then his eyes close, he slips into unconsciousness – and Johnny screams. And in that moment, we do a traditional Dead Zone flash and a 360 degree spin around Johnny and Bruce, and suddenly time itself begins to run in reverse: Johnny releases Bruce and backs away; the murder and then the attack by the skinheads *un*-happen; then the entire sequence rewinds to the moment when Johnny and Bruce first came upon the mugging. It's all been a vision, the final vision in the extended backwards march orchestrated by Johnny's Dead Zone. And realizing this, Johnny also realizes that he's been given a second chance to stop two murders from occurring this day.

Telling Bruce to hang back (or even cuffing him to the steering wheel of his Jeep, with a pair of cuffs he swiped from Walt as a last resort to keep Bruce out of harm's way), he goes to help the muggee. But now the confused and injured man now mistakes Johnny for his attacker, and begins fighting with him. They both trip and fall to the ground. As in his vision of the fight in the motel room, Johnny begins by defending himself, but as the fight grows more desperate, he becomes increasingly violent himself. Flashback fragments of his visions start assaulting him, this time in normal chronological, starting with Bruce's murder, then Johnny's search for the mysterious assailant, right up to beginning of the fight in the motel room. And then one of the skinheads, who have gathered round like a bloodthirsty audience at a prize fight, tosses a knife

on the ground, the same knife used to kill Bruce and stab Johnny in the alternate future that Johnny envisioned. The mugger grabs for it – and it’s as if the motel room fight is happening again, right now, a feeling reinforced by the flashes of that desperate fight now assailing Johnny. Once again, his life is on the line. Once again, he feels himself crossing a line, adrenaline pumping through his veins, triggering a rage that is empowering. And overwhelming. Johnny knocks the knife aside, his hands find the man’s neck and begin squeeze.

But as he chokes the life out of the man, while the skinheads egg him on, another vision fragment – Bruce’s dying words, pleading with him to remember who he is, and especially to “step back” – echoes through Johnny’s head, the phrase resonating with the entire backward march of his visions, until it becomes a powerful directive. A *corrective* to his violent natural instincts, which right now are running wild. He hesitates on the brink of murder – and then steps back. First, through a series of visions that shows him moments from earlier in the mugger’s day – a hellish, filled with painful losses and indignities, the mugging being the last straw that pushed him over the edge. And now Johnny sees his adversary in a new light, sees his eyes bulging with fear as a mirror of his own, and he steps back again, this time from his own fear and anger, and remembers who he is. He releases his grip and sits back on the concrete, pale and spent.

Cut to the Sheriff’s station, where, in the aftermath of the incident, Johnny learns that the mugger was never a violence-prone ex-con but a fairly ordinary guy who was pushed too far, and snapped. Just like Johnny almost did. And while Bruce reminds him that if this weird day proves anything, it’s that anyone can lose it when pushed to an absolute extreme, Johnny is left wondering at the depths of anger in himself. As he tells his friend, it’s as if he’s just had a glimpse of how he could “turn into the guy in that magazine.” Another step, and he would’ve crossed that line – the line that separates us from our worst selves. From a beast within us that, once uncaged, can’t easily be restrained.

It’s a scary realization. And perhaps a preview of what’s to come. As we head into our final two episodes of the season, and the culmination of our drama with Stillson and Rebecca, we may have a sense, just as in this story, that the present and the future are rushing to meet each other. And God help the world, and Johnny Smith, when they do.