

# Fear Days

*Chris Daniels*

A knock on the door this morning at ten. Two men standing there with questions for Benjamin. They asked for him by name, then asked for an explanation. Why was he not dead?

“Why didn’t you go to work today? Why weren’t you on the train that blew up, the train that you take to work every day?”

They both wore navy blue peacoats and khaki pants. Their shoulders were raised to just below their ears. The one who spoke was the shorter of the two. He had glasses and a beard and was wearing a black skullcap. He’d placed his foot on the base of the doorjamb and was holding the door open with his gloved right hand. The man to his right, the taller man, was bald and clean shaven. He stood next to his partner with his hands in his pockets, licking his chapped red lips. The skin on his forehead was dry and cracked; its many wrinkles formed an angry face that looked like it was screaming.

Benjamin thought of saying that he was sick, but that was a lie, and these men looked like they’d been trained very well to detect one of those.

“Because I was scared,” he said, looking to the ground, ashamed at the truth of his statement, guilty for having released it to them; ashamed of having revealed so much, so early in the morning, to two complete strangers who by asking a simple question had made him a coward.

“May we come in?” said the shorter man.

And so now he was a coward, so early in the morning.

He showed them into his home, which must have seemed more like a hiding place to them.

“What were you scared of, Mr. Gum?”

“They raised the alert level. I was frightened by that.”

“What makes you think the raising of the alert level had anything to do with your city, and more importantly, your train?”

“It was understood. Ask anyone on the street.”

"It's curious, don't you think, that you should be alive right now, standing here speaking with us? Strange, no, that we're having this conversation? Doesn't it seem that way to you, Mr. Gum?"

"Yes. No. I mean, of course I feel lucky."

"Lucky?"

"You feel lucky?"

"Luck is such a flimsy thing, Mr. Gum. I don't know how good you should feel about having that feeling."

"Of course I don't feel good. How could anyone feel good about this? I didn't mean that."

"What did you mean, Mr. Gum? We're here this morning because we are interested."

"Interested in what you mean."

"How, that is, you continue meaning."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Why are you still alive, Mr. Gum?"

"Do you understand now?"

"No. I understand nothing. I'm alive because I didn't go to work this morning."

"Do you do that often?"

"What?"

"Not go to work."

"No."

"Then why today? What was it about today that made you stay at home?"

"I told you."

"Yes?"

"I was scared."

"Oh yes, you were scared."

"This guy's confusing me."

"It's OK, Roger. Mr. Gum may still be scared."

"Are you still scared? Is that right?"

"Mr. Gum, do you still feel afraid?"

"Yes. I've felt afraid all morning. Even before I turned on the television and heard the news. I mean, that's why I called in sick today."

"You mean *scared*."

"What?"

"You called in scared, not sick."

"Well I called in sick. That's what I told them. That I was sick."

"So you lied?"

“Well, they don’t give us *fear* days.”  
“You shouldn’t lie, Mr. Gum.”  
“I didn’t lie. I was sick.... Ah.... Sick with fear.”  
“Even before you heard what happened?”  
“Before I turned on the television. Yes.”  
“So you were watching the news?”  
“I saw the news this morning. Yes.”  
“So you saw everything?”  
“You saw it all unfold?”  
“Only the aftermath. I tuned in late.”  
“Then you know why we’re here?”  
“You understand now?”  
“No. I don’t. I don’t understand your interest in me.”  
“We’ve explained that already, Mr. Gum.”  
“He’s trying to go in circles again. He’s trying to confuse us, Jim.”  
“I don’t think he intends to mislead us, Roger. He merely feels a bit uneasy. Isn’t that right, Mr. Gum? You feel a bit uneasy?”  
“Yes, I do, but—”  
“See? There he goes again.”  
“No, Roger. Give Mr. Gum a chance. Perhaps he’d like a cup of tea. Why don’t you make us all a nice cup of tea, Roger. I imagine you have tea in the house, Mr. Gum?”  
“Decaffeinated. It’s herbal.”  
“Herbal tea. It has a soothing effect, am I right?”  
“People say.”  
“Roger will make us all some herbal tea.”  
“Am I in some kind of trouble?”  
“Now we all know the answer to that, don’t we Mr. Gum?”