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Short Stories by R.J. Green  
DELAYED EFFECT  
THE PROMISED  
DEADMAN'S CHECK

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DEADMAN'S CHECK  
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Published by Zyfex Books

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the wonderful people at Zyfex Books. To my family and friends who encouraged me not to give up on my dreams. Thanks to my current and future fans.

### **Dead Man's Check**

Nothing good comes in the mail. At least for me, it always turns out to be annoying creditors trying different tactics to recoup money for two vehicles the bank had repossessed some ten years ago. This government is something else, why those bastards won't leave me alone, I can't find a job and they expect me to pay back federal loan for this darn worthless psychology degree. "Something good might happen one day," my mother used to encourage. Every time I think about her I get teary eyed. When I came back from Iraq I heard she got ran over by a car whose driver refused to stop. "Perhaps the person could have saved her life before she bled to death" said an officer, as she gave me a copy of the police report. "I'm sorry sir." So I hold on to my mother's words, but nothing good has come in the mail thus far, and I keep fooling myself one day it might. Overtime I began to pull out patches of hair from my head, from expectation that was marked by disappointments. At about four 'o clock yesterday when I yanked my mailbox open and retrieved an envelope marked 'important' across one side I was about to toss it in the garbage, as I normally would. But I didn't.

All my life I had invested in family and friends, old Joe Johnson has nothing to show for all the years of charity giving. As soon as a man is broke the wife up and left with some dude who owned a strip club; the daughter and son of mine, which I later found out after eighteen years of child support weren't really mine, turned out to be worthless like their gold digging remnant of a mother. Karma is a nice lady, excuse my language. Did I mention I served in two wars, Iraq and Afghanistan; while in Afghanistan a car bomb blew off one of my legs and Uncle Sam refused to send me a check, claiming I'm not qualified since I was not medevac. Son of a gun, why did I stay back to save Private Ryan, he ended up committing suicide anyway. In my wildest dream I never saw

this one coming. It pays to take the helicopter to the hospital and not the bus as I did. I never made the rules, the army did, so ask them and get the hell out of my business.

Go ahead, judge me for making sweet love to coke and rum, for kissing Oxycontin and Morphine. Forget about a forty, ten bottles of thirty-six ounces of beer is even better. Some law written by idiots that banned forty ounces of alcohol, who cares if you want to get grown men drunk, the Indians were not that stupid to sell off their land which they deemed free for all to begin with. We took it from them and so what. Buying and stealing feels the same to me, somebody always get cheated. Those damn congress people need to create jobs and cut the bickering about women vaginas and abortion. I stopped watching television the day I got back from the hospital that seemed worse than a war zone, but that's another story. Fifty dollars for a foot of sock, and ten thousand dollars per night for what, a few pain pills and some salt water drip from a bag — ain't that a bitch. There is nothing like the good old victory-punch to hydrate the body. As I said, the news is plastered with lies all over... are people that stupid to fall for the crap they're feeding us. Protect our border; they have a right to, I bet my life on it they're trying to trap cheap laborers from leaving. Canada's border is open and I don't hear anyone crying wolf. Damn stupid news.

Enough with my life, let's get to the matter at hand. I was about to toss the envelope in a garbage bin sitting on top of my kitchen counter, but my instinct told me not to. I ripped the envelope open and with my eyes about to pop from their sockets I stood and stared at what appears to be a check for a million dollars, some sort of life insurance policy if you ask me. Well, I pinched myself to make sure it wasn't a dream as I earlier suspected. But it still feels like a dream, I was so excited I didn't even recall the sensation of being pinched.

The check was made out to Joe Alfonso Johnson— my father who had been missing for more than twenty years, and whom was recently declared legally dead after he went missing in action somewhere in the Columbian jungle. I raced my fingers across the page and was disappointed when they had our names in the wrong order. The insurance policy stated me Joe Junior Johnson as the deceased. I scanned the letter and found a telephone number for customer service I intended to call right away, but only to get a familiar tone saying, "Your number is temporarily disconnected, please speak to your service provider." Since last month I've been trying to pay the bill but nobody seems to listen to me anymore. Even the neighbor refused to talk me, what have I done for this world to further abandon me? To hell with everybody, I'm a millionaire. The check needed to show me as the benefactor of my father's insurance policy. Kind of funny how we think alike, I remembered doing up a policy awhile back with the same exact company, and for the same amount.

"The apples don't fall too far from the tree," I managed to whisper. The sunlight seeping through the kitchen windows almost blinded me, I darted towards a darker section of the house, in the bathroom. I tried to avoid the bedroom; I don't want to ever fall asleep again. Bad things happened whenever I'm asleep. Some of my buddies who died in the war had been roaming my house; I'd been seeing them more frequently for the past few days reaching out to pull me into an abyss. My father and mother had also visited me; they were encouraging me to let go.

We never did find pa's body. Tomorrow is his funeral; he was supposed to be buried at the national cemetery, a privilege for serving this country called United States. Every time I heard someone shout "U.S.A." I had to laugh. Private Ryan once said, "Joe Johnson, U.S.A. means U

STAND ALONE. But we have your back, if you get sloppy Joe.” Ryan was always helping other soldiers on the battlefield. With this million dollars I could have helped his mother pay for the cancer treatment; already too late by many years. I figured Ryan perhaps killed himself when his mother died as a result of not having insurance to cover the cost of her treatments. Pre-existing condition they call it. That’s nothing but a scam to me.

A funeral without a body is a painful endeavor, but we had to face the reality, just like what the families of most war veterans faced. My father was a special breed of soldier, a lone warrior, a sniper nicknamed ‘the killing machine.’ As evil as it sounds killing is a game, the winner takes all, and drawing was never an option. I lied about my age when I left high school and joined the army at age seventeen, pa had done the same and warned me not to. “Education is the key to a better life son,” he used to remind me. But after he had gone to war for four years I decided to join the army with hopes of running into him. I missed that bastard so much I became a sniper like he was, but my first kill totally derailed me from my initial mission of tracking him down. I recalled lying in the bush for about four days, peeing and shitting in my pants, and not moving from my hiding spot. I became one with nature as ants and other insects built their nests on me. As my body was about to give in, an enemy soldier stepped in sight of my scope. I inhaled gently and held my breath as I was trained, pressed the trigger of my sniper rifle softly then exhaled. About half a mile away I watched as the man’s head exploded. That was the high point of my life, for all the hundreds of kills I made thereafter, none lived up to the expectation of the first when the warm and wild sensation devoured my body.

In honor of my father the army and air force planned to perform a missing man formation — an aerial maneuver to honor dead or missing members of the military — which I found quite disturbing, a somber reminder of the dead or missing. As I recalled, the origins of the missing man formation can be traced back to the First World War, when Royal Air Force crews got into the habit of performing flyover when they returned to their home airfields. This alerted ground crews that they were coming in, and the ground crews took note of how many men had returned from the mission. Since the layout of a tight flight formation was very rigid, the ground crews figured out who was missing. If my memories served me well, my father once told me the first official missing man formation as a military honor occurred with the death of the Red Baron, a famous flying ace of the First World War. Pilots enacted a spontaneous tribute to him, executing a flyover, in which an aircraft was obviously missing, symbolizing the Red Baron's departure from the world of the living. The United States picked up the practice in 1938, and it has since become common at prominent military funerals.

I pulled on my chin as a thought raced through my brain. Maybe I don’t need to call the insurance company after all. I will just stop by the bank first thing Monday morning and let them sort it out. With this money I plan to get some handy man to fix up the place that had been falling apart for the past few months, the grass need to be cut, the roof fixed, the house could do with a new coat of paint, the leaves to be raked. I used to do these in my spare time, but that time seems to have left me a long time ago. Sometimes I wandered if I still existed; my body now felt as if I was

floating in thin air. On the bright side I no longer needed the Morphine or alcohol to ease the pain usually riddling my body that felt like sulfuric acid being injected into my flesh.

I found my half naked body stuck in the kitchen. I had somewhere to go, I was quite certain, but I just couldn't recall. My military dress uniform that was straightened, brass buttons polished, and all the honors and awards pinned in their respective places, suddenly went missing. "What the heck is going in my house? People entering my place without my permission and stealing my belongings." The cupboard by the kitchen sink had a shotgun I hid in a secret compartment I built awhile back; I bent my knees slowly and lowered my body in an attempt to retrieve the weapon, but it did not budge even after I pulled with all my might. Life after battle is much worse than I had imagined. My body has been deteriorating to the point where I cannot even lift a penny. Then it finally hit me. I needed that uniform to wear to my, to my father's funeral. "Son of a Gun I'm going to be late, think fast. Hurry Joe Johnson!"

If I could cry I would, for in this world of the seemingly uncared there are good folks like you who believe in dreams. The eulogy was all gravy, but I wished I had known earlier the kind of impact I made on peoples' lives; I remembered cutting my neighbors lawn free of charge, in return they got me water and gasoline. Miss Jones was right; I paid to restore her electricity when they cut it off. The poor lady was blind and had no living relative. That's right, I used my last dollar to get her a lotto ticket for her Christmas gift, it was her only gift and she won big. She now has a maid, and a long lost cousin who'd come down from New York to live with her. Several officers folded the American flag and gave it to the two children I raised; can you believe they said they love me. I love them too and it did break my heart when they said goodbye. I never told my ex-wife I couldn't have children, but I was the happiest man alive when she told me she was pregnant. It never bothered me I missed the conception, I got used to it.

"Yes," my ex-wife said. "He was a mean son of bitch!" stop her she's ruining my father's moment. This has nothing to do with me, at least respect my old man. Somebody please, why can't I hold her? Something terrible wrong is happening to me. It's all a dream. "But we love him for he was a good man," she continued. That sounds more like it. Good girl. "He makes people around him better, and he never asks for anything in return. God bless Joe Junior Johnson's soul."

"Finally he has a home, whether hell or heaven, things will change for sure."

Wait a minute what's going? Oh no, isn't this suppose to be my father's ceremony? This is not funny.

"Am I dead?" my whisper followed the wind.

For the first time I missed all the things that made me imperfect. I missed life: the fear of being buried in a foxhole when a twenty tons bomb shook the earth; the aroma of food cuddling the air; the coldness of winter; the warmth of summer; the boss with the bad attitude; women pushing their children in strollers as they walked in the parks; my old man who died without a penny in his name; the drugs and alcohol that poisoned my veins; and most of all the bitter sweet love I had for my country...