

CRIMEWAVE 3



Suspence

CRIME



BURNING
DOWN THE
HOUSE

Mystery



Good

CRIME WAVE BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE

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ISSN 1463 1350

ISBN 0 9526947 3 5

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Subscriptions

£11 two volumes
(Europe £13/RoW £15/US\$22)
£20 four volumes
(Europe £24/RoW £28/US\$40)

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Burlington Press, Cambridge

EDITORIAL

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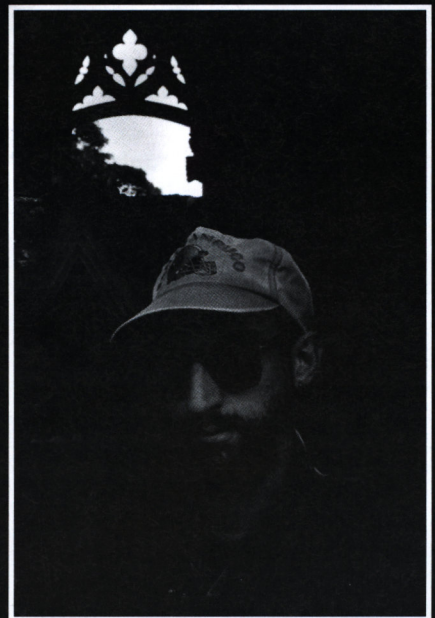
UP THE AIRY MOUNTAIN

Chaz Brenchley is the author of nine thrillers, most recently *Shelter*, and a major new series, *The Books of Outremer*, based on the world of the crusades (volume two, *Feast of the King's Shadow*, is out now from Orbit). He is a prizewinning ex-poet and has also published three fantasy books for children and close to 500 short stories in various genres. His only respectable employment before this year was as Crimewriter-in-Residence at the St Peter's Riverside Sculpture Project in Sunderland, a bizarre experience which led inter alia to the collection *Blood Waters*; he is now writer-in-residence at Northumbria University. His novel *Dead of Light* is currently in development with a film company. Chaz lives in Newcastle, with two cats and a famous teddy bear.

ILLUSTRATED BY RODDY WILLIAMS

Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen,
We daren't go a-hunting,
For fear of little men.

from *The Fairies* by William Allingham



The dead are heavier than they used to be, before they were dead. That's not what the scales say, but it's a fact none the less. Life is anti-gravity; the earth may suck, but we spit back at it and snicker, and walk just a little taller than we ought, step a little further, not float but — well, you get the picture. You live the picture, you should know. Every cell in your body resists that tug a fraction, and that's a lot of resistance.

The dead don't have the same privilege, it's all switched off. Meat, bone, body: heavy stuff. Even blood has weight to it, when the fizz has gone.

And when you're dying, when you're neither hale and whole nor wholly here, when your cells are slowly, slowly shutting down — that's when you start to acquire that extra weight, what can't be measured on the machinery but only on the minds and muscles of those who care for and about you, either or both. The dead are worse, the dead can overtopple a man with sheer mass, but anyone on that journey starts to acquire drag, momentum, matter, call it what you will.

We're all of us dying, of course, from the moment that we cease to grow; only that some of us go faster, and too soon.

As Glen, as he lay upon his bed and turned his head to find me and even his gaze weighed more than it used to, even his lightest thoughts had substance now.

Life is anti-gravity, and so am I; I hated to see him grave, portentous, sinking.

"Who is that," he said in his horsehair voice, a fibrous scratching of it string on string, the only noise he had remaining to him, "who's there?"

Who is that one who always waits beside you? Except, be fair, I thought, it might have been any one of us.

"Glenda honey," *blood brother, lazy angel, open your eyes*, "it's me."

"Daniel?"

"Yes, lover," and the third time that he'd asked today and it was hard to hold my patience except that I would, of course I would, what in God's name was I here for unless to do the hard things?

"Daniel. I want you to do me a favour. Big one..."

What, more than my being here and doing this? I'd fetched him bedpans until he couldn't manage, until so little movement hurt and he hadn't the control in any case. He was in big man's nappies now, and I changed them for him on my turn of duty. And I held buckets that he could gout blood into when that was needful, when he haemorrhaged inside and it had to go somewhere and generally came up; and I endured the hellwatch of his dead eyes, which was worse, and bathed them hourly in glycerine and water. And still turned up on time, on schedule, day or night. I caught a lot of night-time watches, often on my own. And came because he was my friend, or had been, and one of us at least had not forgotten. I couldn't imagine any favour greater than that.

"Daniel?" Seemed he hadn't forgotten either, or not right this minute. Sometimes he had never known me, ever; sometimes we were still bed-bunnies in his head, flashing rumps across a disco floor. Occasionally, rarely, we could be simply what we were in my head: old friends together, patient and nurse, one who claimed and one who paid the debts of long-gone loving. Those times he recognised my voice and called me by my given name, as now.

"Right here." Sitting on the high bed's edge and laying my fingers lightly on his own, as much contact with the world as he could bear.

"Listen."

"I'm listening." Every word cost him pain and effort, precious coin; neither one of us would waste them.

"You remember that dog, where we put it, where we dug it under?"

“Christ, Glenda — !” As often as not he couldn’t remember me, and yet he clung to the death of a dog, a nameless stray...

Well, yes. If I was Daniel, he was still or again my Glen, and he’d always held that animal in mind. Why else would I have remembered it myself?

“Yes, love, I remember the dog, and I know where it’s buried. What of it?”

“Dig it up, Daniel.”

“What? What for?” Old dead bones that he’d broken himself, knocked all out of kilter even before the worms and the weight of soil and rock got to them; what was he going to do, cast an augury?

“There’s a body, a boy underneath.”

“Oh, Christ.” He hissed, as my hand tightened; pressure hurt. How much had this hurt him, how long? “What is this, confession?”

“Absolution.”

Glen, man, don’t be in such a hurry... But he was, he had to be, of course. His time grew shorter, every breath he took; every moment’s struggle wore him down.

“All right, then. Who’s the boy?”

“I can’t remember. You find out, Daniel, give him back to his family, let them bury him for real...”

When we went, we went as a team, as we were nursing Glen: his fairy band reformed, all but silent under the weight of him when we were in the flat together and utterly silent now, crammed into Henry’s 4 x 4, compressed with news.

Henry, Jody, Tim and Blake and me. Tosh had stayed behind, hospital duty, nothing could break that schedule; something of him had come in the car regardless. We carried his curiosity along with his crowbar and shovel, along with our memories of the boy he used to be. We were all of us bonded, beyond the abilities of time or change to part us.

Once we’d been young and foolish, young and rowdy, high on the delights of city life and our own sweet selves, the damage we could do. Once we’d been wild together, following Glen or trying to grab the lead from him and never quite achieving that but loving him regardless.

No longer. Now we were a team again despite him, because of him; we didn’t have a captain.

If we’d been kids still, eighteen, twenty, we’d have been arguing as we drove, wrestling for that elusive leadership: every band of fairies needs its Oberon. Grown men, it seemed, could get along without.

I might have claimed the crown for a while, at least, for a little while. It had been me that Glen had turned to; it was me that knew the way. The others only knew the story. For a wonder, they hadn’t been there when the dog died. Seeking a little transitory independence, perhaps, looking for a new order, or simply sipping city lights on their own to find out how they tasted apart from Glen’s direction, my own more subtle influence. Whatever. They’d been off without us, and they didn’t know what I knew.

“Where now?” Henry demanded, slowing as the headlights showed him how the road divided, left and right.

“Up,” I said unhesitatingly. “Just keep going up. I’ll shout, when we’re near.”

The road climbed the hill, a high moor north and west of the city. It had been a night like this, I thought, when the dog had died: cold and clear, stars and a bright moon, the planet spinning us relentlessly toward a terrible uncertainty. Only difference was, in those days I’d seen hope and wonder in that spinning, in every dawn and sunset. Very heaven, I’d thought the world to be; and myself lieutenant

to a power, a principality who held the keys to every pearly gate. I was young, I was a believer: music, dance, drugs, sex, whatever came along I gave it credence, I had faith. I believed in myself, my body, every way it made me feel. Money was votive, it allowed the opportunity to feel more, or feel differently. Even my hangovers I cherished for their immediacy, their potent seize.

Outside my skin I was less certain, perhaps, but I believed in the band, our brotherhood, its tangibility against an insubstantial world. Above and beyond them all, I believed in Glen. He was that little bit older, that great gulf wiser: wherever we went he'd been there before us and knew his way about, whatever we came up against he could find a route through or over or around.

Even now, I supposed, he was leading the way, going first. Checking out the other side. If death was the last taboo, he meant to break it. He'd said that, more than once, before he got too sick to be clever.

Actually, I thought, he'd broken it already, long ago. Swift and hard and meaning every moment, and I'd watched him do it, I'd been sitting right beside him as he did. For a while, later, I'd thought it was for my benefit, a baptism of blood, a lesson given and learned. Now I wasn't sure.

The night cold and clear, moon and stars overhead but other lights were brighter, nearer, the whole of the city laid out before us like a playground, like a school; just the two of us in Glen's big car, and I felt special, selected, exhilarated. This didn't happen often, and it was treasure to me. Whatever he had in mind, I was up for it.

I thought...

We drove down the hill from his place towards the city centre, going slow; his eyes flickered constantly off to the side, to where long terraces and alleys fell away towards the river. Suddenly he knocked the indicator, spun the wheel, dived across the flow of traffic. Horns blared behind us, but he showed no sign of caring.

We were in one of the alleys: high walls of brick on either side, wooden gates and redundant coal-hatches, black bin-bags spilling garbage under our wheels. Ahead of us, eyes shone briefly pale in the headlights. A stray dog, young and hungry, all legs and ribs as it scavenged in the gutters; good street-sense it showed, cringing back against a wall to let us pass.

Glen steered straight for it.

It turned and trotted into its own long shadow, staring back over its shoulder; its eyes gleamed again, bright and empty. For a moment it reminded me of us, any one of us, skinny and scared and bathed in light, running into the dark.

It was running for real now, senselessly down the middle of the alley, forgetting what wisdom it had learned. Glen grinned, or showed his teeth at least as he stamped on the accelerator.

And me, I just sat and said nothing, did less, didn't even breathe. I was out there with the dog, sharing its thoughtless terror; I was in here with Glen — my friend, my mentor, my idol — and not sure if I were sharing anything with him. Either way I was trapped, inconsequential, the entire victim.

We thought we were the children of the night; looking back, I think perhaps we were all of us victims, all the time.

“There. By that outcrop, there's a place you can pull off to park...”

Probably we weren't meant to park there, it was an overtaking-spot where the single-track lane widened suddenly and briefly between its enclosing dry-stone

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walls; but there was no traffic this time of night, we'd met nothing coming down as we went up. And no wardens, of course, no watching eyes. That was, that had always been the idea.

We climbed out slowly into the road and stood stamping and huffing, swinging our arms the way you're supposed to, the way you learned to do by reading it or seeing it in other, older men. The way we learned most of our adult habits: from books and magazines at first and then from men. It's a boy thing, unless it's just a fairy thing. Perhaps we were enchanted; God knows, we always felt that way.

Blake, Blake the builder reached back into the 4x4, dragged out a canvas bag of tools and passed them round. Pickaxe for Tim, crowbar and sledgehammer for Jody; for me it was three spades and carry-the-bag. Henry got nothing but a heavy torch; Henry had a banker's belly now, was furthest gone from lean and whipcord boy. Besides, it was Henry's car, he'd driven it, he'd done his share. We'd always been more socialist than democratic, dividing up the portions with a grand inequality. From each according to his ability: let him hold the light now, let him act as witness if we need one. Not objective, not neutral, never that — one for all and all for one, we few, we fairy few, immutable and indivisible and us — but he had the status we still lacked, he could speak for us if occasion demanded, and better he didn't have mud beneath his nails at the time. Real mud or figurative. It might not make a difference, but it might.

I led them up to the outcropping rock, to where a buttress thrust suddenly from earth.

"Here?" Henry asked, breathing heavily.

I shook my head. "Not enough soil, it's bedrock six inches down. We tried it. Look, see that solus rock on the skyline there?"

They looked, saw, confirmed it with grunts and nods.

"Twenty paces, on a direct line from here," and my hand slapped the buttress, "to there. That's where we put the dog."

"That's a bit...specific, isn't it?" Tim murmured at my back. "A bit Treasure Island, X marks the spot in crutch-lengths, Long John Silver?" Tim the Crim, he was a lawyer yet, sharp to spot unlikely detail.

I shrugged. "That's how Glen wanted it. He wanted to know, exactly; he said it was important. You couldn't just dump a body and forget it, he said. Even a dog's body mattered..."

I stopped, listening to myself on half a second's lag and shivering suddenly for better reasons than the night could offer me.

"He was setting you up, Dan. Just in case. Christ, he even told you so. Dogsboddy, right?"

Well, at least he said that I mattered...

The dog died in silence, as it had run, pretty much as it had lived, I thought: lurking, sneaking, the opposite of presence. It was the car that made the noise, a thud that shook all the windows and rattled the doors; it was my mind that held it, that has held it ever since, one of those pivots a life can twist around.

Glen had been iconic, up till then. Suddenly he was something more, darker-stained and incomprehensible and human. We understand our idols all too easily, because they're invested with public virtues and public vices and nothing else. Only real people have private lives; Glen had just admitted me to his.

Though even then it was obvious that this was not habitual, he didn't kill stray dogs for a hobby. He stopped the car, as quietly as the dog had stopped; he got out and paused for a moment, looking at deductible damage — a bend in the bumper, a wet smear and a ripple on the dirty white bonnet — before he moved

back up the alley to look at what was a fixed cost, no deposit and no return.

This was what I was there for, though I couldn't figure why. The sums wouldn't add up. Some kind of initiation, surely: maybe he put every boy through it, before they could melt seamlessly into his little band of brothers...

And swore them to silence after? Well, maybe. I didn't believe it, though. One of them surely would have said. And what was so significant about a dog's death, anyway? To us, who were not dogs — far from it, we were gorgeous, radiant, the height of delight — and dealt in worse fates daily? We knew all about death already, though he hadn't yet plunged among us in red braces, *greed is good*, as he would a few years down the line. The milieu we moved in, of course we knew. We danced on a deliberate edge, for the thrill of it; other boys had fallen off.

Still, I thought this was a message, expressly for me. I went to join Glen, where he stood above the mangled body; he said, "There's a blanket in the boot. Want to fetch it?"

The boot wasn't locked. I found the blanket, ancient and moth-eaten, waiting for me; beneath it, I found a spade. None of this was normal, in Glen's car.

He made me do the messy work, down on my knees in the gutter, getting blood and muck on my dancing-clothes as I wrapped the dog in its ready shroud; he made me carry it back and stow it in the boot. I saw him smile faintly, as I wiped my hands on a corner of the blanket.

"Blood washes off, Daniel," he murmured. "Everything washes off in the end, and there's plenty of water in the world. Come on."

He drove us out into the country, north and west; he parked on a high moor, found a landmark, paced a counted distance before he tossed me the spade and told me to start digging.

He didn't say much else, then or later, after he'd taken me back to his house and washed me thoroughly, teasingly, laughingly, working hard to win a laugh out of me; nor after he'd taken me to his bed, when we lay languid and weary and needing another wash. If any or all of this was a message, I thought it was missing me. If it was an exercise in bonding, bondage, I thought it was unnecessary. He should have known that I was bound already...

These days he didn't say much at all, and less that made sense. If this was an exercise in futility, I thought I might face a little grief from these old fairy friends of mine, here or in the car going home. If they let me get in the car to go home. They might leave me to walk if I'd dragged them up here on a fool's errand, in pursuit of fool's gold, buried treasure, buried bones.

Not my fault, but they'd blame me anyway, I thought. I was catching one or two looks already as we paced and counted, hefted hardware, faced the reality of chill air and frost-hard ground.

It wasn't that hard to dig, once you'd broken the crust of it; I remembered that from last time. And told them so, and caught a glare full-force from Henry. It was only the torchbulb glaring, I couldn't see his face, but it carried intent enough for anyone to read.

"Glen dreams," he said. "Hallucinates. What the fuck are we doing here, anyway?"

"Looking for a body." *You brought us, you know...*

"What body? Anyone here missed a boy? It's just Glen, he's half mad with it, lesions in his brain..."

"Maybe so. He sounded clear to me," and maybe it was my fault after all, maybe I did deserve all the grief I might yet receive, if I couldn't tell when the captain was seeing true and when he was simply babbling. "Let's just dig, shall we? See where we get?"

Tim swung the pickaxe; Jody cracked the ground the way he used to crack doors, safes, whatever, with swift and judicious use of crowbar and sledge. I plied a shovel, as Blake did beside me.

Soon Jody abandoned the crow and grabbed the last of the spades. We built up a quick stack of spoil; I was relieved when Tim yelled out, I'd just been starting to wonder if I'd struck quite the right spot after all, because surely I hadn't buried the dog that deep.

"What?"

"Pick went through something. Not earth, it didn't feel right. Dig here. Henry, give us some light..."

We dug there in the circle of torchlight and scraped soil back off the rotten remnants of a blanket, with the rotten remnants of a dog beneath, snapped bones linked by slimy stringiness. Only the skull seemed whole, and only for a moment; it crumbled as Tim worked the pickaxe blade beneath.

I made some noise, I guess, some protest; he said, "We're not archaeologists,



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Dan. Nor priests. This isn't what we're here for."

No. And it was only a dog, in any case, and never mind that I'd seen it die and thought now that it might have died for this precisely, to be what people found if they should dig here.

Even so, "Treat it gently," I said, "show some respect. We've got to put it back after, whatever else we find."

"It's dead, Dan."

"That's my point." A sacrifice, a victim: we all knew how that felt. I felt understanding settle like the silence, all around me; we shifted that dog in spadeloads — Tim was right, we were not archaeologists — but did it as gentle as we could manage, and laid the bones all together in a separate place. We wouldn't get them back in any order, but at least its ghost could find itself again.

Beneath where the dog had lain, we needed pick and crow once more, to work through hard-impacted earth. A forensics genius, I thought as I hacked uselessly with the spade's edge, an expert with light and time and tender loving care could

say this had been stamped to such solidity. We had none of those advantages, but worked a little slower as it started to make sense. I felt happier, less happy, both at once. No trouble in the car, perhaps, but plenty after.

Even doubting Henry watched us closely now, slipping torchlight under every clod of earth we raised, looking for another gleam of bone.

And spotting it, first among us all, and crying out to warn us; we stepped back in a moment, rested on our tools, rubbed hot sweat from our faces and felt the cold touch of the night come back to claim us.

"There," he said, pointing with the torch, close as a finger, "see it?"

We saw it, just a streak of pale in the dark; and now I did want to play archaeologist, I wanted to get down and grub with my fingers in the dirt.

That was too much respect, we couldn't afford it. More cautious spade-work then, the most care we could manage; in ten minutes we'd laid him bare, we and the years of worms between us. A boy, as Glen had promised: huddled close around his death, laid down with his knees drawn up tight against his chest to make him dog-sized, make him fit the grave. He still had rags of skin and flesh and tendon, as the dog did; he still had rags of clothing also. His trainers had survived the worms, as had his nylon jacket. The rest was shreds and patches.

"There's a tarpaulin in the bag, Dan," Blake said. "Lay that out, and let's see if we can lift him."

"Why bother?" Henry asked. "We've found him, okay; what are we going to do with him now? Cover him up again and leave him, that's my suggestion."

"Henry, we've got to find out who he is. Give him back to his family, Glen said..."

Henry's face suggested that we'd done enough for Glen already, and too much perhaps. "We could give the police a tip, let them come and fetch him."

"And let them find what we can't, some clue to lead them back to Glen? No way. We'll do this ourselves, as anonymous as we can make it..."

I thought we'd end up dumping bones in a box on someone's doorstep. Not pretty, but we'd done ugly things before. I'd do anything, I thought, to make these last days easier for Glen. Never mind how hard they were for the rest of us. There was a debt, our bright and shining tiger-years, we owed them all to him. Now in his grey descent, he could ask more and far more than he had thus far.

When we got back to his place, he wasn't asking anything. Like consciousness, lucidity came and went in tides, as though there really were a lunar link; he could be aware, he could be self-aware, but the rhythms of both were different and they were rarely in sync one with the other.

Tosh didn't want to see what we'd brought back with us, and no blame to him for that. I didn't want to see it myself, in the bright garage-light where Blake was laying it out on a pasting table, like a makeshift morgue. Plenty of space in there, we'd long since got rid of Glen's old car. We had joint power of attorney, all six of us; Tim had fixed that six months before, when we made this pact with Glen. He wasn't dead yet but his estate was ours none the less to keep or sell, to divide up as we chose. I'd thought his car, his house, his books would be the most of our responsibilities; I hadn't thought we might take possession of his history, his skeletons, the bodies he'd left in his burning wake.

I hadn't known there were any literal bodies, though it didn't come as too much of a shock. Thinking about it, looking back, I was only surprised that all six of us survived him in the one sense, as he had been then, and again that we would all survive him in the other sense, that he would be the first of us to die. *The Seven Sisters* they used to call us, we used to call ourselves, but he was

always more than elder sister and guiding light. Devil, tempter, bully, scourge — all of those and more, he whipped us wild and we were too young to do anything but dance manically at his heels, spinning faster, skidding further, desperate to outdo him if only to show that we could do it too. Boys did die, then as now; one of us surely should have died, perhaps we all deserved to. It seemed bizarre sometimes that it was Glen who was dying now, before any of us had had the chance to nip ahead of him. He always used to lead the way, but he'd had intuition or seemed to, he always seemed to know just where to stop...

No great surprise, though, that another boy had died, a greater sacrifice. I was only shocked that I didn't know, that none of us had known. I slid my hand beneath Glen's, and gazed reluctantly into his eyes. When he was truly living, when he was light they were gravity, blue and potent, blinking at nothing; now they glittered dully, crazed and smeared, frantic behind a veil of murk. He was blind, we thought, as near as we could tell; for sure he didn't see us, nor anything we tried to show him. In losing sight or just forgetting how to see, it seemed that he'd forgotten how to blink also, or else just lost sight of the point of it. His tear-ducts were dry, his fund, his reservoir exhausted; we bathed his eyes to keep them moist, to soothe them.

Trying to soothe him if he should need it, if those trapped and frantic eyes weren't doubly deceptive, saying no more than they saw, I gave him senseless words to match his senselessness: "It must be a weight off your mind, my love, that must have been some burden to carry all these years..."

I didn't think Glen had carried it at all except as a fact, one little historical detail, a truth that he remembered: *I killed a boy and buried him in the hills, Daniel knows where*. He'd left it to us to carry, as we carried him now and the ever-increasing weight of him, as we'd carry his coffin between the convenient six of us when he was dead. I thought Glen might even have planned that. Perhaps that was why we none of us had died, he'd known that he would need us at the end.

As it turned out the boy wasn't hard to name, and only a little harder to identify. He'd carried a purse in his jacket, in a zipped inner pocket; it was barely marked, despite the years of rotting. Inside the purse was a cashpoint card.

"Mr DB Tunnickliffe," Henry read out, holding the card between fastidious fingers which had been scrubbed and disinfected like my own, like everyone's; dirty boys once, we'd all learned to be scrupulously clean. "Mean anything to anyone?"

We played with the name, the initials, as we would have done before. DB — Dirty Boy, Dust Bin, Dave Brubeck, Dandelion & Burdock? Dog's Breath, Dog's Breakfast? (*Dog's Body*, but I kept that to myself.) Tunnickliffe — Tunk, Tuna, Tuna Fish? Tinkerbelle, if the kid had been a fairy...?

Nothing tinkled any of our bells, though. Henry slipped the card into a pocket of his suit, and said he'd make enquiries.

Took him less than twenty-four hours. The following evening, we had the lad all lined up, named and tagged and wrapped up, ready to return.

Derek Brian Tunnickliffe, according to his records: seventeen years old when his account fell into disuse, presumably around the same time that he fell into that dark hole on the moor. Not living at home, not officially employed, not in a steady relationship (amazing, the details that banks record), he seemed to have been gone a while, a lag of a few weeks between the last transaction on his account and the police putting him down as a missing person. Even then, they seemed to have done little more than fill in the paperwork. One more gay boy skipping town, and so what? He might have been running from his dealer, his

pimp, one of his clients, anyone. Happened all the time: boys came, boys went, it made no difference. They all looked the same to the law.

Seven years later — exactly on the first day they were allowed to — his parents applied to have him rendered officially dead. More paperwork, no passion, and the account was closed. Records had only been kept this long, Henry said, because of the unusual circumstances, against the remote chance of his returning. Officially dead didn't necessarily mean defunct, and his bank was covering its back as banks do, Henry said, the world over.

He sounded as though he approved. In this case, so did I. We had the parents' last-known address, we could dump the bones in a cardboard box and give them back their boy, however little they wanted him.

Except that I didn't want to. That was what Glen had asked and all that he had asked: a local habitation and a name, find out who he was and give him back. He hadn't suggested going further. Well, he wouldn't, would he? He'd known the truth himself, necessarily; if he'd felt no need to share it over all these years, why should he want it shared around now, even if he could remember? He wanted the ends tied off and tucked away, nothing more than that.

I wanted more, and didn't believe I was alone. I used to follow Glen without question, but no longer. *How?* and *why?* were beacons blazing in my head, and the man who had the answers neither would nor could tell me now. We had a tame GP to supervise our nursing, but he wasn't really one of us. We couldn't take him to the garage, show him bones and ask him to tell us how the kid had died, stabbed or strangled, what; I doubted his ability in any case. I thought a specialist with a lab at his disposal might have thrown his hands up in defeat. There was too little flesh remaining to give any easy reading, and we'd hacked the bones about some despite our care, as we dug them out. Blake and Henry between them had done more, washing the mud away while I'd sat with Glen, likely washing off a putative scientist's last chance.

Why was another matter, and we had perhaps some hope of working that out. Gifted the boy's full name, Tim remembered him, and prompted memories in the rest of us. Glen had loved Python, so we had too; we'd called the kid Brian, with a giggling tag-line, *he's not the messiah, he's a very naughty boy...*

More than naughty, he'd been a sinner by our lights. Good boys steal, of course they do, but never from their mates. Brian had been compulsive, unless he was simply stupid. When he was around — in bars, in clubs, at parties; jealous of our own company, we'd kept him at what distance we could manage — we were always careful to keep a hand on our purses and an eye on our bags. At a gig one time I'd been dancing, I'd stripped off a favourite silk shirt to sweat half-naked under the lights, under the beat; when I went to cool off, the shirt was gone from where I'd left it. Next time I saw Brian, he was wearing it.

Compulsive or not, he was definitely stupid. I took the shirt back, left him with bruises for a finder's compensation. Any bright kid would have taken the lesson with the lumps, and been grateful. You needed to be bright, to survive that world we lived in then; when Brian vanished, I guess some of us wondered if maybe he'd been dimmer than we knew, if he'd turn up in the river one night with bad drugs in his blood or worse than bruises on his body. Both had happened before, both would happen again. When you took yourself to market the way we did every night, you needed to be part of a conglomerate, you needed at least one buddy to watch your back. Brian was always peripheral, always alone.

Now we were wondering if maybe it had been a different story, though the ending was the same: if the little toad had wangled his way into Glen's house, and tried to make off with something. Glen had always been protective of his



UP THE AIRY
MOUNTAIN

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BURNING DOWN
THE HOUSE

assets. My shirt had cost Brian a serious beating; it took little imagination to write that just a little larger, to remember Glen's temper and his sheer physicality, the strength those extra years had given him...

"What I don't get, though," I said slowly, "if that's what happened, if he laid into the jerk and Brian died, then okay, he thought he'd bury the body and stick a dog on top of it in case anyone saw the disturbed earth and came to check, fine — but why drag me into it, why make me dig the grave, or start it? Why make such a ritual of it, something I was bound to remember?"

"That's easy," said Henry, as Tim had before him. Smart boys, these professionals. "He was setting you up. Glen could lie for England, but not you. That's why you got a record, Dan, while the rest of us stayed clean; your face is like a signed confession. Anyone came asking questions about a grave on the moor, you'd blush and stammer, give yourself away without saying a word. It'd be clear as day that you knew something, where it was at least. That would've been enough. You remember what the cops were like back then, go for an easy target and fit him up if need be, if they couldn't find the proof. And Glen knew you'd say nothing, he'd be safe..."

I shook my head, more a plea than a refusal. "He wouldn't do that. Not to me."

"Why not? You didn't have fifteen years of history together, not back then. You were the last of us to join up, remember, the last one Glen found. He probably hadn't known you six months, you certainly weren't a fixture yet. Why would he give you a break? He used us all, Dan, you know that."

And was using us still, and we still let it happen. That was the hold he had, the debt we owed. Henry was right, of course, I'd never have grassed him up; I'd have served his time if I had to and thought myself a martyr for the doing of it, thought it a far, far better thing than ever I'd done before...

Even so it was a cold picture that Henry painted, a banker's view of the world, investments and returns and selling short. I didn't want to believe it; neither, I thought, did the others.

Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. Please? Make it flourish, make it strong...?

In pursuit of that, perhaps, I urged them all to do some serious thinking, to drum up whatever memories they could. We'd been living half in that world anyway for months now, back in orbit around Glen again as we had not been for years; we carried it with us daily, and fresher every day. There must be more stories about Brian, someone surely must have spent more time with him than I had; he was a toe-rag, but a persistent toe-rag. A barnacle, even — as witness how he was clinging still, despite being fifteen years dead. Any little thing might help...

Myself, I went to sit with Glen a while, to talk him through this latest revelation. Had nothing back from him besides his nerveless stare — he was failing fast now, the doctor said he'd likely not pull himself back to proper consciousness again — but I didn't mind that. I was scared, I think, of what he might say if he could get a grip on what I was telling him. *Yes, Daniel, it's true, you were my fall-guy if I needed one...* Or worse, perhaps, he might deny it and I'd never believe him now. It was true, he was a born deceiver. His greatest gift was to lie by misdirection, to let drop a word or two and watch how people misconstrued him. I used to envy that so much, trapped as I was in my own directness, where I said *no* and my whole body said *yes, that's right, officer, take me away...*

In the end I took myself away, I left Glen to Blake's more practical care and went home, went to bed. Stayed away all the next day, losing myself in my own memories, rebuilding us in my head the way we used to be, less brightly shining now, more

tawdry in perspective; and was woken the morning after by a phone-call, early.

“Dan, it’s Jody. I’m at Glen’s.” Of course he was at Glen’s; it was his watch. I didn’t need to check the rota, I knew it by heart, and I wasn’t on until that evening. For a moment I thought this was the call we were all waiting for, all dreading, *he’s on his way, come now if you want to say goodbye*. But Jody went on, “Tim’s supposed to take over, I have to be early at work today; and he hasn’t turned up, and his wife doesn’t know where he is, he didn’t come home last night. Can you stand in for him?”

“On my way,” I said wearily. I was the one among us who didn’t work, at least not nine-to-five; hence I was the one among us who got these calls day or night, the permanent standby as well as a regular lead.

Never before for Tim, though. Tim was the guy who lived his life to a metro-nomic standard, who was always where he should be when he said he’d be there. For Tim not to show was disturbing; if his wife Lisa couldn’t find him, that made it serious. I wanted to say *call the hospitals, call his office, call the police*, but she’d have done all that already.

I got to Glen’s sooner than Jody had expected me, largely by virtue of not showering, not cleaning my teeth, forgoing coffee and turning up in yesterday’s clothes, if any of those are virtuous. Virtue must be relative, I guess.

“How is he?”

“Quiet.”

I nodded. That was what they’d told me on the phone yesterday, so I was more or less prepared when I looked into the room we’d set up for him on the ground floor, back in the days when he was still occasionally mobile but couldn’t manage the stairs any more. He lay quite still in his high hospital bed; someone had persuaded his errant eyes to close, and I couldn’t see the least movement in the sheet that covered him, I couldn’t see his breathing.

“Glenda, love...”

I licked my finger and laid it lightly on his upper lip, felt the faintest touch of air. The doctor had warned us about this, had said that he could slip into a coma at any time and linger maybe for days before he died. He hadn’t eaten for a while now; we had a drip going into his arm, enough to keep him comfortable, pain-free, hydrated, not enough to keep him alive. He’d said he didn’t want that. “When the time comes, let me go,” he’d said.

Well, we would. Slowly, reluctantly, but we would.

I sat in the chair beside his bed, put my hand on top of his and found the fluttering pulse that lingered there. Like a bird on a wire, like smoke in a breeze, it gave not the least promise of permanence.

Well, no more could any of us. If the most solid, the most settled, the most reliable of us could fail wife and friends and solemn oath and all — hey, we’re all friable under pressure, it’s the human condition. Glen had his pressures, we had ours. I wondered what Tim’s were, beyond the ticking of a mortal clock: *time presses* was one of his most lawyer-like catchphrases, I’d heard it a hundred times this year and we’d all watched the truth of it being acted out on Glen’s body. I wondered if that were the problem, if he’d suddenly reached his limit, simply couldn’t bear to witness these last days, the end of a long song.

And didn’t believe it, couldn’t make that coalesce with what I knew of Tim. Besides, even if he wanted to run out on us, why would he run out on his wife also? It didn’t add up. So instead, inevitably, I wondered if there might be a connection with what else was new, a boy’s body brought to light and laid out in the garage.

Tim had always been the focused one among us, the one who could party tonight but still keep an eye on tomorrow. For a while all he was looking for tomorrow was another party, but that changed. Quite suddenly he signed up for a college course, and then university after; while we dossed, he studied. He'd still come cheerfully to market with the rest of us, selling himself along with an acid chaser for the extra cash, but renting wasn't a career-choice any longer, it was just a way to supplement his grant and have some fun along the way. Inevitably, he found other ways to have fun, in other company; it wasn't much of a surprise to me when he faded away after he'd qualified, after he'd got his first job. Nor when he turned up again, only to invite us to his wedding.

It was always going to be Henry who missed him most. Those two had been the closest among us, the ones who seemed almost enough for each other until Tim started reaching further, the ones who didn't really need to follow Glen. Once Tim was gone, I watched with a kind of cynical amusement as Henry aped his journey into respectability. Not into marriage, never that: but first he got a daylight job as a bank clerk, then he started taking courses — to improve his prospects, he said, to advance his career — and before long we never saw him except in a suit and tie, even around the clubs.

Those of us who were left had settled slowly into other lives, the way you have to as entropy sets in, as the fire starts to cool. We were all of us cooler now, fallen out of orbit and *fear no more the heat o' the sun*: Glen was a vast red giant, all-engulfing and all but entirely burned out, too close to collapse. Swallowed within his dimness, his gravitational suck, it was hard to remember quite how brightly we'd burned.

One of us, though — I thought one of us must have flared once at least like a sun through a lens, to make a blister-point all unnoticed while the rest of us danced our wild wasteful scatter...

Henry came to relieve me, on time and in character, the button-down banker; half-drowning in *nostalgie de la boue*, I made a mad effort to see him as he used to be, short and skinny and fiery in orange jeans, glitter in his hair and his mascara. Hopeless; only the height remained, or the lack of it. Otherwise he was like the rest of us, a victim of the ever-turning world.

I fetched coffee and whisky and a second chair, so that we could both sit with Glen while we talked.

"I don't think it was Glen killed Brian," I said bluntly.

"No?" His frown made his cheeks pudge out to emphasise the weight he'd accumulated, his hard-won gravitas. "How not? He sent us to the body..."

"Oh, he knew, he must have helped to bury him. After he'd killed the dog for cover — and yes, all right, after he'd set me up. Double indemnity." This might not be the first time Brian had been laid out in his garage; they must have stored the body somewhere until I'd done the spadework, the groundwork, laid the dog down in the first instance for them to slide Brian beneath. "But I think he's doing the same thing again, only setting himself up this time. If the story leaks, it can't hurt him, how could it?" Henry was shaking his head; I said, "Look. If one of us had killed Brian, for whatever reason, skip over that for now — what would he do? Back then? We were kids, remember. When we needed help, where did we run to? Every time?" To the source, inevitably: to the mythmaker, to the guiser, to Glen.

Now he was nodding, not following me, trying to skip ahead. "You think — Tim? You think that's why he's vanished, in case it all came out?"

Oh, he was quick. Quick with his sums, at least, though he had no imagination. I almost smiled, as I said no. "No," I said softly, "not Tim. Think about it. Brian

was a thief; what could he ever have stolen, that Tim would give a fuck about? Tim didn't care. He knew where he was going, and how to get there. Nothing else mattered, not to him. There was only one of us who was desperate to hang on to what he'd got." I gave him a moment, then went on, "What did he steal from you, Henry? What was so important, Brian had to die?" When he didn't answer, I added, "There's only the three of us here, and Glen's not listening. No hidden tapes, I'm not wired for sound. Trust me."

That far, I thought he would. And I was right. He sighed; he sipped in rotation, glass and mug; he looked at me and said, "Brian was stealing my life."

"Explain?"

"It was watching Brian that made Tim think about the way we were, the way we'd end up. Dead or addicted, or scavenging on the margins. The rest of us were too busy to look that far, or too stupid, or else just dazzled by Glen, thinking we could all be like him. Small chance of that, he was the exception; and even then he was only a survivor. Everyone's a survivor, until they lose it." One rapid glance aside, to show me just how badly Glen had lost it in the end. "Tim wanted better than that. It was Brian that drove him, every day; he used to tell me so, *Brian's my criterion*, he'd say, *it's Brian who makes me work to get away. I could be Brian so easily, we all could, we're halfway there already...* And he was right, I knew that, but I didn't care. I was young, I liked what we had and I wanted to keep it, I wanted to keep it all. Tim too, Tim especially. If I lost him, I knew I'd lose you all sooner or later, and likely soon. I wasn't ready for that. So I thought, if I got rid of Brian, Tim might lose his impetus and we could all go on as we were..."

And when it didn't work, when Brian's disappearance was a spur if anything, he cut his losses and went after Tim, rather than cling on to what was already fraying. He didn't need to say that, I understood him all too well.

I sat and watched him drain his glass, put down his mug; I watched him stand and walk away, I listened to the door close behind him and his car start in the street outside.

There were questions I hadn't asked him, but again I didn't need to. *Whose idea was it, to line me up as fall-guy at need?* Glen's, it must have been; Henry didn't have the imagination.

More importantly, *where's Tim?* — but I knew where to find Tim, if I chose to go looking. Again, Henry had no imagination; he'd use Glen's old tricks one more time, double indemnity, once he'd seen the danger. Tim had to go for fear of what he might remember, how many times he'd talked about Brian and what Henry had said in response. He was too lawyerly to let the memory slip, for old times' sake; he might not betray Glen, but no one else was safe. Usefully, he could be set up in his absence, with his absence. And if that pointing finger failed, he could still be hidden where people would stop looking before they got that far. For Glen's sake, *give him back to his family*, I thought I might write a postcard to the police. With gloves on, not to give hostages to fortune. I thought I'd tell them to go dig on the moor — where it was easy, freshly turned, not too hard a labour for an unfit man — and when they turned up a dog's bones they should just keep digging deeper, however hard the soil had been stamped.

It seemed as though I had a night watch now, to follow my long day. I poured myself another slug of whisky, turned to Glen — and found that Henry had turned thief despite Tim's care that he should not. He'd stolen from me the one thing I'd been hoarding, what I'd worked for all these months.

Glen was gone and I'd missed the moment, the chance to see him off. Only the weight of him remained, star-stuff without a hint of shine. CW

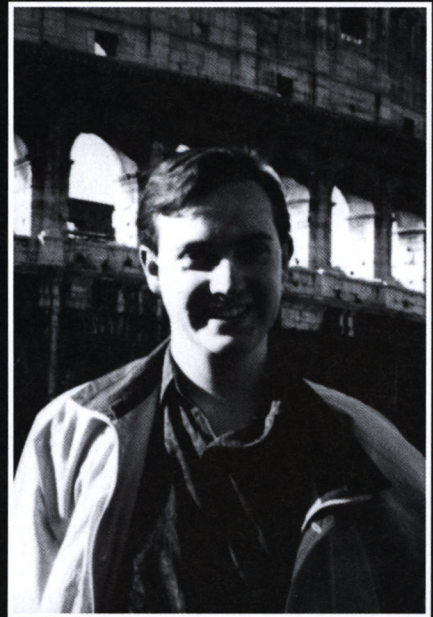


JOHN MORALEE

AFTERBURN

John Moralee's short fiction has appeared in a number of magazines and anthologies in the crime and horror genres. He has recently completed a crime novel set in America that is now with an agent. He is working on several other crime novels while his first novel seeks a publisher, as well as many short stories. He has been shortlisted for the Ian St James Award three times. He was born in Sunderland, 1973.

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID CHECKLEY



She was a beautiful widow. She was wearing a long white dress that made

her look like an angel. Its sheer whiteness radiated the hot Florida sunshine like a lighthouse beam each time Nolan glimpsed her through the gaps in the cherry trees. The cherry trees completely surrounded and blocked off the garden. He could not see the entrance. By the time Nolan found his way into the garden, Judy Mayer was sitting in the shade of a gazebo, drinking fresh lemonade, watching the butterflies and bees dancing around the orchids and bougainvillea. To reach her location, Nolan walked over a small footbridge above a pond, glimpsing silver and orange carp in the deep water. There was a strong Japanese influence to the garden, a country Ken had loved. Ken's first wife, Alice, had lived Guam, where he met her while in the US Navy. Judy was his third wife. She was English. They'd met on a book tour of Britain in 1991. She was twenty years younger than her deceased husband — a fact Nolan found inspiring. There was still some hope he would meet a loving woman just like her; he did not consider himself too old to marry the right person, just too old to marry the wrong one. Nolan had seen Judy only once before, at the NASA reunion celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 landing on the moon. She'd had the air of a society hostess then, but now she looked like a grieving woman pretending everything was fine. Judy was wearing sunglasses that may have been necessary in the sunlight, but not in the shade. Seeing him, she waved him across and tried smiling.

"Geoff! I'm so glad to see you!"

As Nolan climbed up the stone steps into the gazebo, he wished he'd been able to attend the funeral, but he'd been in hospital having a prostate operation. He felt as if he'd betrayed his friend by not attending. Geoff Nolan and Ken Mayer had been astronauts in the Apollo programme during the early 1970s, when everyone's dream was to walk on the moon and look back at Earth in wonder. They had experienced something a mere handful of people had; they had walked on the moon. Few people could comprehend the bond that experience created. Standing on the moon — *the* moon — had been a religious experience. That communal event had made Nolan and Ken the best of friends forever. And now Ken was gone, just like the shattered dreams of generations.

"I'm sorry about missing the..." He could not say the word. "I would have come faster, but..."

"You were ill," Judy said, standing up to kiss his cheek. "There's no need to apologise, Geoff. Ken knows how much you cared for him. Please sit down. Have some lemonade."

Ken *knows* how much you cared for him. Knows. The present tense. Judy still thought of Ken as alive. He did, too, Nolan realised. The shock suddenly hit him, knocking the energy out of him. He sat down on a wicker chair and gladly accepted a glass of lemonade so he wouldn't have to talk. Neither said anything for a long time. Butterflies fluttered around his head like puppets on strings, sudden jerky movements moving them on the cool breeze. In the distance the Gulf was streaked white and blue, rippling with waves the texture of denim. He could hear lawnmowers and sprinklers somewhere far away. It was a gloriously pretty day, so contrasting their sombre moods that he almost felt like laughing or crying or both.

Judy removed her sunglasses, revealing her dark eyes. "Geoff, I don't believe the plane crash was an accident. Ken was too good a pilot. There's no way he would crash into a mountain, even in bad weather, which there wasn't. He renewed his pilot's licence only a month ago. Besides which, he was flying a brand new Gulfstream V. Personally, I think someone killed him."

"Murder?" Nolan could feel the sweat prickling on his neck and spine. "But the investigation stated it was an instrument failure."

“Do you honestly believe that? Ken could land a plane even if there were no wings. He hit a mountain, for Christ’s sake. Even I wouldn’t hit a mountain and I can’t fly, instrument failure or not.”

She had a point. “You wouldn’t be saying that unless you knew something else, Judy. What is it?”

“You know how he was working for Dynamic Aeronautics Research Technologies?”

Nolan nodded. For eight years, DART had employed Ken as an executive — or something. They hadn’t talked about it much, for various reasons. Nolan had detected Ken was embarrassed about the amount of money he earned for basically doing nothing — DART mostly used his name as a PR tool; an astronaut was an excellent weapon to attract new contracts, much like a sports star was good for a fashion label.

“Ken always felt like a fifth wheel around there. You know how he is. Was. So, recently, he started taking an interest in the Research Division with a greater hands-on style that really annoyed some of his employers, especially the CEO Peter Falcon. Falcon was worried Ken would over exert himself and have a heart attack on the premises. Ken ignored him. He always was a stubborn man. He loved engineering so much there wasn’t anyone who could stop him. Anyway, I think DART were developing something groundbreaking, something that would revolutionise space flight. Ken was really excited. Until a couple of days before his so-called accident, that is. Then he started acting strangely.”

“How?”

“He became sentimental, brooding. I saw him staring at the photos of Wayne he normally keeps in his study drawer...” Wayne was Ken’s son. Wayne had died of cerebral palsy fifteen years back. Wayne was Ken’s only son. Ken had been devastated by his death. “Geoff, I heard him weeping in the bathroom. I know he didn’t want me to hear him. But I was concerned. He wasn’t sleeping. He wouldn’t make love. He wouldn’t tell me what was wrong, but I knew it had something to do with his work because everything else hadn’t changed.”

“Money problems?”

“No. Ken was always careful about his finances and insurance. This was something to do with whatever they had him doing at DART. That’s why I need you to look into it for me. DART will be looking for a new person to replace Ken. I even mentioned your name to Peter Falcon. He said he’d like to see you. You’d be perfect.”

“I don’t want another job,” Nolan said. He was quite happy to be semi-retired.

“You don’t have to take it. Just go along with them. See what you can find out. Put my mind at rest one way or the other. I know you can do it.”

It was above and beyond the call of duty, but it was for Ken. Nolan reached over the table and gripped Judy’s small hand. “Okay. I’ll see what I can find out. But promise me that if I don’t learn anything new, you’ll believe it was a genuine, tragic accident.”

Judy whispered, “I promise.”

Peter Falcon was a big, beefy Texan with a firm handshake and a strong jaw line. He wore a Gucci suit and a somewhat incongruous DART cap, like a coach for a minor-league baseball team. He was about forty, but his physical dimensions added ten years. He was sweating profusely in the killer sunlight outside several big hangars and industrial complexes on the DART site. He led Nolan from his rented Jeep towards an office building. Falcon had to shout over the sound of rocket engines being tested half a kilometre away, the sound like thunder. “I’m real sorry we’re meeting in these circumstances, Mr Nolan. Losing Ken was like

losing my goddamn brother. He talked about you a lot. It's a real honour meeting you in the flesh, sir."

"Please call me Geoff," Nolan shouted back, admiring the scale of the operation DART had on this site in the Everglades. The site was fifty square kilometres of well-chosen real estate, a prime site for satellite launching. He could see several airfields and hundreds of planes, helicopters and personnel in smart green overalls. NASA would have been proud to have a site like this, even if the Green lobby groups would have dropped dead at the sight of so much marshland having being drained and built on. "What kind of thing does DART do?"

"DART makes satellite launch systems," Falcon said. They reached the glass doors of the office building, stepping into a soundproofed lobby. Nolan's hearing went funny at the decrease in volume. Falcon said, quietly, "We also develop new technology for the US military and commercial industries. Our engines are in thirty-two per cent of American planes. DART's profit last year was ten billion dollars. We reinvested ninety per cent of the profit into the research, which still leaves our investors with a substantial reward..."

The spiel was boring Nolan, but he didn't show it. He was impressed, he had to admit. He loved NASA, but any federal government funded organisation was limited by the tax dollars it received. That figure was being cut every year, to the shame of Congress. Alas, only private companies could afford to do what he considered essential research, research NASA should have been doing itself, if the penny-pinchers didn't keep hurting the space industry. The irony was, companies like DART were paid billions each year by the US military — with tax dollars — and much of that money went straight into the pockets of people with no interest in space, slimy Wall Street traders with no sense of honour. And when something innovative was created, they slapped patents on it that meant the inventions paid for by NASA were owned by people who could charge NASA for using them. If only the military budget was spent solely on the space industry, he thought, there would be regular flights to the moon and Mars by now. Hell, there would be bases on Pluto. It was an old debate that his NASA buddies tossed back and forth like a live grenade. Nolan asked a few innocuous questions on the way to Falcon's office, meanwhile thinking he could really make a difference if he had this level of financing for NASA. It was depressing.

Falcon's office was on the top floor, in a glass tower that had a panoramic view of the site. The office had a tinted glass ceiling, the effect of which was to make the office look as though the desk and chairs were in the open air. Falcon dropped his weight into his leather chair and got serious. "Geoff, I know it might be kind of creepy to ask you to fill Ken's shoes, but frankly I can't see anyone else doing the same job. You could be a real asset to DART, I'm telling you. DART is where it's at, as they say. There are projects we are working on, you won't believe."

"Was Ken involved?"

"He sure was. I tell you what, I'll get Ed Jensen to show you around. He's head of our research department. He went to Harvard, MIT and Oxford, too. He's got more degrees than a circle. He's brilliant, but don't tell him that! Don't want him asking for a raise!" He laughed at his own joke, the flesh of his double chins quivering. "Then we can talk about some kind of deal, okay?"

"Okay," Nolan said. Anything to get away from Falcon.

Falcon hit the number on his phone, said something to his secretary, then a tall man with a rusty beard and thick glasses came in, looking nervous. "Ed, this is Geoff Nolan. He was an astro, like Ken."

"I-I know that, *Peter*." Jensen stood in the doorway for a second, then realised that he was expected to shake hands and lurched forward. He had a limp, wet

handshake that left Nolan wishing he had a tissue on him to dry his hands. “P-please come with me. I’ll give you the Disney tour.”

By the time they’d got to the research building, Ed Jensen’s stutter had calmed down. Like many scientists, he had trouble communicating with normal people. He only acted comfortably when discussing what he did at DART. Nolan asked him about Ken, but Jensen changed the subject each time. They entered a large hangar filled with dozens of dismantled planes. Jensen asked Nolan to wear a hard hat while inside, for there was always the possibility of a spanner falling from somewhere high above. Jensen showed him the largest turbine Nolan had ever seen — he could not imagine the size of the plane it was intended to be used on. It looked like a perfect conch shell, only huge. There was something amazing about the geometrical perfection, as there was with all good engineering. They walked through the hangar to a different area where a sleek black craft was undergoing electronics tests beyond a glass wall. Security guards stood around the entrance. They weren’t allowed closer than twenty metres unless they had clearance and changed into sterile suits, so they just looked through the glass. “We call this the Phoenix Alpha. Looks like something from *The X-Files*, doesn’t it?”

“I guess,” he said. Nolan didn’t watch *The X-Files*. He didn’t like the pervasive cynicism; it was infectious. He liked being a dreamer. Dreamers still had hope. “I don’t see where the propulsion system is.”

“It doesn’t have one,” Jensen said.

Nolan waited for the punch line. When Jensen said nothing, he realised the man was serious. It had no propulsion system. All vehicles needed some method of propulsion. “How does it take off?”

“That,” Jensen said, “is a trade secret. Maybe if you sign on with the company I can explain it. Suffice to say, it’s top secret. This prototype could be the thing you see everywhere in ten, twenty years, if we get it to work right.”

“You haven’t had it working?”

“Yes and no. I can’t say more. I know it sounds paranoid, but there are industrial spies who would give their teeth to know what we’re doing.”

“What are you doing?”

“I can’t tell you unless you join us,” Jensen said. “I’ll introduce you to my chief engineer, Cordy Harker. Just a sec.” Jensen wandered off to use a telephone, leaving Nolan to gawk at the Phoenix Alpha. The craft appealed to the eye like all good ones did. No pilots liked flying ugly craft. He could see why Ken would want to work here. This cutting edge engineering was where the future lay.

“Uh — this way, please.”

Nolan looked at Jensen and nodded. He was oddly reluctant to leave the Phoenix Alpha alone. He could have stared at it all day. But he followed Jensen out of the hangar and into a little buggy. Jensen drove to another building about a kilometre away. Inside, the building looked like a university. There were dozens of lecture rooms and labs and computer rooms. Jensen knocked on a door marked C. Harker, Chief Eng. “I’m in,” said a low female voice.

Nolan and Jensen went into a large office. It was empty except for a graceful woman, with her long curly dark hair swept back so it would fit into a hard hat if the need arose. She was standing over a table covered with a schematic, studying the small print. She had the whitest complexion of any woman in the world; she reminded Nolan of a marble statue he’d seen once in the White House. Her thin, quizzical eyebrows made her look as though she was concentrating on a game of chess against a grandmaster. She looked like someone who’d beat the grandmaster without breaking into a sweat. She wore an ID badge that had her full name imprinted over a glamorous photograph: Cordelia Belinda Harker.



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“Cordy, this is Geoff Nolan,” Jensen stammered.

“Hi,” she said, straightening up, putting her hands on her hips. “I can’t get over what happened to Ken. I still feel like I expect him to knock on my door at any moment.”

“Yeah, I feel like that,” Nolan said. Even as he talked about Ken, he thought how attractive Cordelia — Cordy — was. They talked about Ken for a few minutes with Jensen hanging around in the doorway, the poor guy looking totally lost out of the conversation. He looked increasingly impatient with the direction of the conversation, too. After all, Nolan was supposed to be asking questions about the position in the company. Nolan switched to the subject. “So you and Ken were working on the Phoenix Alpha?”

“That’s right. Is it okay if I talk about it with Geoff?” she asked Jensen. Before he could say no, she said to Nolan: “Around here, everyone’s being watched by everyone else. Sometimes it’s like Big Brother. They hire us because we’re professionals, but they don’t trust us. Isn’t that right, Ed?”

Ed looked mortified. “I don’t make the rules. I only f-follow them.”

“Ja, mein Fuhrer!” she said, laughing as she raised her hand in a Hitler salute. “G-Geoff, I’ll be waiting in the buggy whenever you’re ready to leave.”

“Okay,” Nolan said. “Thanks. I’ll be a few minutes.”

Jensen left; then Cordy invited him to look at the designs of the Phoenix Alpha. “I can trust you to keep this a secret?”

“Scout’s honour,” he said. She explained the basics. The Phoenix Alpha was powered by an external power source — a laser, a very powerful laser, so powerful it had not been built yet. The laser was fired from the ground to send the craft up into space, like a beach ball on the end of a stream of water. It meant there was no limit — theoretically — to the payload, the amount of material the craft could take into space. The idea of laser launching had been around for decades, but DART was the first company to build a working prototype bigger than a baseball. The craft used some patented and highly confidential materials worth billions to anyone interested in economical space flight.

It was a secret many people would kill for.

“Does it fly?” he asked.

Cordy’s smile gave nothing away. “Until you sign up with the company, I can’t say anything else. I don’t like sounding like Ed, but I do have to live by some of his rules.” Her phone rang. She answered it. “Yes, he’s here, Ed. Okay, I’ll tell him.” She hung up. “Ed’s getting bored. He wants you to see Falcon again.” She paused, looking as if she wanted to add something. What she said seemed hasty, reluctant: “It’s been a pleasure meeting you, Geoff.”

“And you,” he said. He needed to say more. “I’m going to be in town for at least a week, helping out Ken’s wife and things... I was wondering... I have plenty of free time... Maybe you and I could have dinner somewhere? That way, we won’t have anyone timing our conversation?”

“Maybe we could,” Cordy said, thinking about it.

“When?” he asked.

He expected her to come up with an excuse, like her diary was full for the next century. But she surprised him by saying, “Tonight’s fine with me. There’s a lovely restaurant on the coast about twenty miles south. I’d like to show you it. The sunsets are unbelievable and the food is...well, unbelievable. I get off at six, so you could meet me after work around seven.”

Feeling a schoolboy flush of hormones, he made arrangements. He felt guilty for setting up a date, particularly with Judy Mayer still grieving for Ken after she’d asked him to look into her husband’s death, but it just happened. As a

justification, Nolan told himself, he could probe Cordy for more information about Ken's recent behavioural changes. Perhaps she knew more than his wife? Sometimes people confessed things to friends and workmates they wouldn't tell their partners because the level of intimacy wasn't as deep.

It was a legitimate excuse to see her on a date, anyway.

Nolan revisited Falcon and listened to the deal Falcon wanted him to accept. It was quite impressive. Hell, it was *very* impressive. The money on the table was well above what he'd retired on. At 58, he didn't feel old enough to retire, but somehow it had happened for no better reason than he'd grown tired of spending his time on lecture tours. There was only so many times he could tell groups of bored high-school students what it was like on the moon before he and they got bored. These days nobody cared about his Apollo mission. The only moonwalking they were interested in was that done by Michael Jackson. Every student wanted to do business degrees, not astronomy and astrophysics. Business degrees! What kind of future was that leading to? One controlled by Bill Gates clones? Nolan certainly needed something to do with his time.

Therefore, the job was tempting, despite his initial reluctance.

He said he'd seriously consider it.

It was nice and noncommittal.

Falcon accepted his answer with another handshake. "You know we want you, Geoff. Ken would've wanted it that way."

"Hey, Tommy, this is Geoff Nolan. Yeah, long time, no see. How are you, man?"

Nolan was talking on his car phone and driving along a stretch of coastal highway with the top down and the fresh wind invigorating his lungs. The blue sky was streaked with white lines crisscrossing over the DART airfields. Even though Tommy McGuire could not see him, Nolan nodded and smiled as if his old NASA buddy was right in front of him. It was a habit Nolan wasn't aware of — he disliked using phones because it was impersonal; he liked to face people when he talked with them. Tommy worked for the FAA these days. He had connections in the Safety Board responsible for analysing what went wrong whenever a plane crashed. "I need a big favour. It's about Ken Mayer. Yeah. I couldn't believe it either. Uh-huh. No — I don't believe he would make a mistake. Can you fax me the FAA report? Great. Here's the fax number. Fifteen minutes? That's brilliant. Bye." Nolan turned off the highway and entered the beautiful suburb where Judy lived. He parked in the drive and was stepping out of his Jeep when she opened the door. She was holding a glass of lemonade...and swaying slightly. Her eyes had a glassy look that was all too familiar to a man whose brother was an alcoholic. She was drunk, but struggling to appear sober. He realised there had been more than ice in her lemonade that morning.

"What did you find out?" she said.

"Not much — yet. I'm going to dinner tonight with Cordelia Harker. I'm hoping she'll tell me something about what's really going on at DART."

"I don't like her," she said. "Far too beautiful for a scientist."

He decided to say nothing. "Has your fax machine printed anything?"

"Oh, yes. It's spewing crap right now," she said, "as a matter of fact, I had to add some extra paper. Hundreds and hundreds of pages are coming out. Will it explain what killed Ken?"

"I don't know," he answered. He went with her into the lounge. There was a large framed picture of the Earth photographed from space on one wall. Ken's memorabilia was on the shelves and cabinets, including several beautiful samurai swords and Ming vases. There was a photograph of Nolan and Ken in the Oval

Office with President Ford. He looked at it, then looked away. He could feel the pressure of the room upon him. This was Ken's world. But Ken was dead. Dead, like Nolan's dreams of ever going into space again. Dead.

Beside a coffee table, next to a computer, the fax was noiselessly printing out page after page. A whole ream had been used. It stopped as if on cue.

Judy finished her drink and sighed. "You mind if I return to the garden?"

"No, not at all."

He watched her slide the french doors open and walk in the direction of the gazebo. She was surrounded by an aura of butterflies attracted to the colours of her dress. She swatted at them halfheartedly.

Nolan picked up the heavy wad of paper and sat down on a couch. He had plenty of reading to catch up on. The FAA report was thorough. There was a transcript of Ken's last conversation, twelve minutes before the crash. Nolan learned that Ken had reported an engine problem. The tower had instructed him to change course for a local airfield. Ken agreed, then muttered a series of expletives and the words 'fuel leaking' and then the tower lost contact. The plane crashed. A study of the wreckage had revealed a damaged valve in the engine. The piece that had actually failed, causing the plane to crash, was only worth \$1.25. It was smaller than a screw, but somehow it had come loose. The report stated it was an accident. They were not going to investigate further.

Nolan called Tommy again and asked him his opinion. Tommy said, "All the redundant systems built into a plane should've meant he could have handled it. I mean, I never heard of that causing a crash on its own. I'm thinking..."

"What?"

"Well, it's sounds like there was something else. Did they find any cell phones or computers aboard?"

Nolan flipped to the relevant page. "No. Why?"

"There was a case of a 737 in India a couple of months back... Crashed because some idiot left his laptop computer on during landing. It interfered with the flight computer and the pilot thought he was higher than he actually was. The pilot should have known better than to trust his instruments, but sometimes you just don't think there's a problem. You sure they checked for that?"

"It says no, but the crash site was pretty big. Debris spread all over for a half mile."

Nolan could hear Tommy scratching his head. "You want me to call the Safety Board, get them to check?"

"Yeah, that'd be great."

"I'll call you when I get something. Could be a day or two, depending on how fast I can make them move their butts."

After Tommy hung up, Nolan considered the possibilities. If someone had wanted to kill Ken and make it look like an accident, then interfering with the flight computer was a devious and practically untraceable method. If someone had killed Ken, their method showed a sophisticated knowledge of aeronautics and electronics. That limited it to someone working for DART. It wasn't beyond the imagination to see them fixing the engine, then sneaking a computer or gadget aboard the Gulfstream V. They could have made the device switch on after a certain time, when the plane was over the mountains. Then when the plane crashed, the computer would be destroyed, eliminating any evidence. Even if the pieces were found, it was highly unlikely anybody would connect it to the cause of the crash.

It was speculation, Nolan knew, but it worried him to the core. An amateur could not have planned such an 'accident', but there were many DART employees with the skills.

He heard the french doors sliding apart. Judy stood in the sunlight, her skin radiating a golden sheen. As she entered the lounge, the darkness crept over her and she shivered. "You've found something," she said. It wasn't a question. She'd read his face. "What?"

"There's a way of faking an accident," he said. He explained, adding, "But unless the FAA discover electronic components like a transmission device, it's nothing but guesswork. Crazy guesswork at that."

"Only someone very smart could do that," she slurred. "One of those creeps at DART. Never liked them. Especially that woman. Harker."

"Judy, how much have you had to drink?"

Her eyes turned to steel. "I have not been drinking."

"Judy — "

"I'm tired," she said. "I haven't slept since the crash, Geoff. I'd like some sleep now, so can you go?"

She would brook no arguments. He left. He felt like dirt for adding to Judy's pain. Should've kept his theories to himself. He had to redeem himself.

At his hotel, he showered and changed into a casual jacket and slacks for his dinner date. In Florida at this time of year, he had found, nobody dressed formally — it was just too hot. But as he drove towards the address Cordy had given him, he began to feel the chill of evening. Hopefully, they would be inside for most of their date. Cordy's home was a cute ranch-style house in a quiet section of town close to the beach. He rang the doorbell and heard Cordy coming to the door. It sounded like she tripped over something because she muttered a curse. Moments later, she opened the door and laughed nervously, flicking her hair out of her eyes. He liked her navy blue dress, which was cut down the thigh. He forced his eyes upwards and ignored the imperative of his libido.

"I'm not quite ready," she said, looking down at her bare feet. "Please come in while I finish. Don't miss the step there — like I just did."

The house was on various split-levels. The architect had gone all out to make the rooms blend into one another, but still remain separated, so the kitchen was up some steps, the study down some, and the bedroom was up some more steps. She kept her place neat and tidy, Nolan noted. Cordy dashed into the bathroom and left him alone. He waited for her by pacing up and down in the lounge, fidgeting. A couple of black and white cats prowled the carpet, watching him from afar.

"So. How long have you lived here?"

"Three years," she called out.

"I see you like cats."

"Yeah. You're not allergic, are you?"

"No, no. Just saying. I have a few goldfish, that's about all I can manage."

"That's nice," she said.

"Uh-huh."

He didn't know what to say next. He waited for her to return. She had on her shoes now. They matched her dress. He admired her shapely calves, the sleekness of her legs, the curve of her hips... The word 'ravishing' leapt into his head, only to make him wonder if that was politically correct. "You look...good."

"Thanks. So do you."

Awkward, awkward, awkward. "The restaurant..."

"Right."

The restaurant. It was as good as she'd said. They talked a combination of personal and business...more personal than business as the evening progressed.

He learned that Cordy had been something of a nerd in high school, being about the only person in her class good at science. She hadn't dated anyone until college, when she'd lost her puppy fat and suddenly become attractive to the opposite sex. She'd almost got married once, but she found out just in time her husband-to-be was cheating on her with three other women. She'd not had a serious, long-term relationship for years, but she was still cheerful about the prospects. Nolan felt good around her. He could tell she felt the same. They had something. But then he ruined it by returning to the subject of Ken.

"Did you notice any change in Ken's behaviour in the last few weeks?"

She stopped eating, her fork poised at her mouth. She put it down and looked at him. "Can I ask you something and get an honest answer?"

"Yes, sure. Ask."

"Do you think I killed him or something?"

"What? No. Why'd you ask that?"

"Because you clearly have some kind of secret agenda, Geoff. Do you seriously want to work for DART?"

"I — uh —"

"Honestly."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't like the secrecy, Cordy. I personally believe science should be out in the open, where people can access it. The Phoenix Alpha sounds a great project, but I think it would be so much better if the whole world knew about it. I don't like the idea of space being exploited for profit. It kind of gets away from the reasons why we went into space in the first place."

"So why this dinner? Pumping me for information? Want me to confess?"

He shook his head. "That's not it."

"Then what is it?"

"I like you, okay? I like you. You're clever and sexy and funny. Judy thinks some kind of conspiracy is going on, so I agreed to ask some questions for her. It doesn't mean I think you're guilty. Right now, I don't know why Ken died. That bothers me, I won't deny it. But I genuinely wanted to see you tonight because I wanted to know you better, okay?"

"Okay," she said, quietly. "You realise Falcon's gonna be extremely angry when you turn him down?"

"I know," he said. "But let's not talk about that. Let's just enjoy a meal together. Deal?"

"Deal." Cordy paused. "About Ken. I did notice a change. I didn't think it was about the project, though."

"Why not?"

"There was a day when he went out for lunch on his own. Monday, I think. That was pretty unusual because most of the guys on the team eat in the canteen, then get back to work as fast as they can. But he went out. Didn't say where he was going, just he had something to do. He came back looking shell-shocked."

"Shell-shocked?"

"Like he'd seen a ghost. I'm not kidding you. He was as white as a sheet. He said nothing was wrong, but he nearly got into a fight with Ed."

"When was this?"

"An hour after he returned. He and Ed were arguing about the statistics from the last test run. It was nothing, really. But Ken lost his temper. Something was definitely bothering him. I assumed he'd had an argument with his wife. That was what usually put him in a bad mood."



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“Did he often argue with Judy?”

“I don’t know. She was a subject we didn’t talk about. Judy has never liked me, Geoff. I guess she thought I would try to steal her husband, considering the time we spent working together...” Cordy fell silent.

They ended the meal, then went outside. It was a cool, starry night. Romantic couples were walking hand in hand on the lantern-lit path on the cliff’s side. Nolan and Cordy walked down it, too, talking in hushed voices about their hopes and dreams. They stopped at a stone bench and sat close to each other. Cordy was just a shadow next to him, a lovely shadow. They looked up at the stars and moon and Nolan tried to convey the emotions that he’d felt visiting it. On the moon he had felt at peace with the universe. In touch with creation. It was such a lonely place, but it was such a fulfilling place. In his opinion, everyone should visit the moon once in their life, just so they could truly understand their role in the universe, their purpose for being.

“I felt like I’d achieved something special, something wonderful,” he told her. “There aren’t many things you can do that make you feel so damn good about yourself. When I see what’s going on in America these days, I wish we could get that innocent optimism back. If only the money spent making movies was spent on exploring space, we would be on Mars by now. It’s so sad. No wonder people crave TV like *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5*. We as a species need to explore space. Pretending we don’t is lying to ourselves.”

He felt her hand in his. “You’re a dreamer, aren’t you? I admire that. You could make a difference at DART, Geoff. This isn’t a sales pitch. I mean it. I’ve been urging Falcon to go public with the Phoenix for ages. Maybe he’d listen to you.”

“Did he listen to Ken?”

A sigh: “No.”

“Could he have killed Ken?”

She pulled her hand away and jumped up. “I don’t want to talk about that. It’s late. I think I’ll go home now. I’m sure I can still get a taxi.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“No. Forget it.”

“Cordy, please.”

She relented. Feeling extraordinary relief, he walked back to his car and drove her home, by which time he’d patched up the damage done. The house was in darkness, surrounded by midnight blue sky. Cordy opened her car door a crack, but didn’t get out. She looked at him. Her face was barely lit by the orange glow of the dashboard. He could see her teeth as a white line. They were perfect. She wanted to say something... He wanted her to say it, whatever it was...in her own time. In the gloomy interior, the heat flooding out of the car from the open door, Nolan’s mood was somewhere between melancholia, excitement and dread. Dread in case she didn’t want to see him again. Excitement in case she did.

“Well...” Cordy said. The thought was left uncompleted.

“Can I — ” he said, before the sentence faded. “Can I see you again?”

“I would...like that.”

She would? Yes. He grinned. He leant forward, and she leant forward, the leather seats creaking, creaking, until their lips joined. It was a sweet, gentle kiss. Not too fast, not too slow. He looked at her eyes, so close, so deep. Her pupils looked like eclipses, with a slight orange corona. Soul to soul contact... He didn’t want it to end. But it did. She detached slowly, her lips slipping away, leaving his tingling with the memory. Flustered, she said goodnight and hurried to her door, waving as she went inside. He waved back.

*

Tommy called the next morning. Nolan was in bed, having a lie in. It was nearly noon. Tommy woke him up. "They've checked the crash site."

"And?"

"And nothing."

"You're sure?"

"Those boys and gals are pros."

"Right. Thanks. I owe you one, buddy."

No sooner had he put down the phone, it rang again.

"Hi."

"Cordy, how are you?"

"I've been thinking about that kiss."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah... What are you doing today?"

He hadn't thought about it. "Nothing yet. You have any ideas?"

"I have," she said coyly. "Alas, I'm working. Why don't we do something tonight? I know a place we could shoot some pool, talk."

They arranged it. He was awake by then, which was when Judy phoned. Her first question was abrupt. "What's the situation?"

"The crash theory is a dead end."

A pause. "I see. This would have nothing to do with the persuasive powers of Cordelia Harker, would it?" Icy.

"No, Judy."

"So what can we do next?"

Nolan squeezed his brow. "Did Ken keep an appointments diary?"

"Yes," she said. "It's in his desk. You want it?"

"I'll come and get it right after I wake up, Judy."

"Is she there with you?"

"Who?" he said. But he knew whom.

"Cordelia Harker."

"I'm alone, Judy." Not that it's any of your business, he thought. "I swear I'll be right over."

"Good." She hung up.

Like a vulture perched on his shoulder, Judy watched him reading the diary. Ken's almost photographic recall had been an asset during his NASA training, but it meant he didn't keep detailed notes. Nolan could see that Ken's schedule had been frantic. One day he had been in New York at a trade conference; another, Paris; the next, London. Ken was more like an ambassador than a glorified sales rep. But on the Monday that had changed his behaviour, the page contained just one entry, unusually circled in red ink: 13:00 Hrs — H.

That was it. Brief. "What do you know that starts with a H that would mean anything to Ken?"

Judy shrugged. "I can't think of...well, there's Harry Gallani, Hugh Jones, Mitch Harrison...that's it, I think." They were NASA guys, nothing to do with what Ken was doing, Nolan didn't think. He would check, though. "Oh, Cordelia Harker, of course. But why would he have an appointment with her?"

Nolan's throat was dry. Cordy didn't have an affair with Ken, did she? The H could have been anything. Anything. H for Howdie Doody. H for Cordelia Harker.

To get his mind off it, he asked Judy for Ken's phone records. Maybe the numbers called on the Monday would give a clue. Judy handed him the records, then she excused herself. He heard her in the kitchen, clanking bottles, starting early with the booze. He'd seen her refrigerator — it was like a bar for Oliver Reed.

Earlier, he had been in the bathroom and noticed several bottles of Listerine on the shelves next to the Nurofen and Paracetamols. He had heard how some alcoholics resorted to drinking Listerine. He hoped Judy hadn't descended that far.

Ken had made dozens of long-distance calls that, starting with one at 7AM. Nolan would have to go through them one by one. He didn't look forward to the task.

Judy returned with two orange juices with crushed ice. He accepted his warily. "Don't worry," she said. "Yours isn't spiked."

"And yours?"

"Let's just say Mr Smirnhoff is swimming in it." She laughed a cold, bitter laugh. It was the kind of laugh faded movie starlets made when thinking about their loss of beauty.

He was afraid she was trying to drink herself to death. "Oh, Judy, you need to see someone. A counsellor. A therapist. Someone."

"I hate trick cyclists. Besides, if I want to drink, who has the right — the qualifications — to judge what I can and can't do?" She gulped the drink, her mouth twisting as the vodka went down. "I'm going out to the shops. Shopping therapy. I'll see you later, Moonwalker. Bye." She put down her drained glass and strode away, shaking off his attempts to stop her. He didn't want her driving in her condition. But then she elbowed him in the solar plexus — knocking the wind right out of him. She burst into tears. "Sorry, sorry, sorry!" But she hurried out anyway. She was in her car accelerating away before he could catch up. In the blinding sunshine, staring at the receding vehicle, Nolan was left clutching the phone records, possibly the only solution to the entire mess that he'd somehow embroiled himself in.

Feeling hungry — remembering he'd not had breakfast or lunch — he locked up Judy's house and went to a McDonald's. He sat at the window and called telephone numbers while eating lunch. Vapour trails crossed the sky throughout his meal. He thought about flying. At home he had a humble Cessna, but he hadn't flown the baby for six months. He would like to take Cordy up; he was sure she'd love it. The cockpit of the Cessna provided an awesome view. Cordy... Why was he thinking about her when he should have been thinking about Ken? He pictured Ken and Cordy together. He didn't like the image. Ken was charming. Cordy was beautiful. H for Cordelia Harker... He focused on the calls. Time after time, he got nowhere. It was routine stuff. Work related. Innocent. But then —

The ten-fifteen call.

When Nolan hung up, he knew who Ken's killer was and the reason why.

He pushed his plate aside, feeling ill. He was in his car before he had formed the conscious decision to leave the diner — as if in his haste to move he'd transported himself directly behind the wheel. The engine was running. It was strange how he could do something like that and not remember doing it. He pulled out of the parking lot and froze, not knowing which direction he wanted to go. The front of his car was sticking out over the line. A passing driver in a rust-bucket Ford had to swerve around him. Nolan picked left just for the sake of it. On the highway, he gathered his thoughts into something approaching sense. One more call confirmed everything. He called Judy's number. There was no answer. The answering machine switched on. He told her to call him back ASAP. Next, he called Cordy's work number. Her secretary Phyllis answered. "I'm sorry, sir, but she's not here. I think she's at home."

Nolan looked at where he was. He was near her home, so he turned off the highway. He stopped at her house and approached the door. He rang the bell, but noticed the door wasn't fully shut. "Cordy?" he called out. His voice sounded hollow, scared. He pushed the door with his foot. And a cat hissed and dashed

between his legs...fleeing. He could see the other cat lapping at a red pool on the carpet. The blood was near some stairs going downwards. The cat stopped licking, ears bristling. Its eyes fixed on Nolan. Its fur was splashed with red. Its paws were soaked. It had left a trail of blood prints wherever it walked. Nolan walked over. The cat didn't flinch. Nolan saw the body lying on the floor, its face turned away. There was a rock — no, a piece of coral used as a paperweight — beside her. Her hair was matted with blood. Her skull was too dented for there to be any doubt about her condition. He had to look. He had to confirm the worst.

Dear Cordy...

She was dead. And he'd never had time to say he loved her.

There was something stuck to her blood. Something moving. Fluttering.

It was a butterfly.

Nolan found Judy in the gazebo. Her eyes were half shut until she saw his shadow fall upon her, then she looked up. He could see the dark stains on her hands. Her hands clutched desperately to a Southern Comfort bottle. She tipped more whiskey into a glass, filling it to the brim and letting some spill onto the table. She was so drunk she was verging on catatonic. "Are the cops with you?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "But I asked them to wait for a few minutes." He wanted to hate her, but seeing her suffering with her guilt and loss, he couldn't do it. "I wanted to talk to you first. I want you to tell me why you killed her."

"The little tramp seduced my husband. Then she tried to fool you into believing her lies. I couldn't let her get away with it. So I asked her to see me at her home and when her back was turned, I killed her. I made sure it was quick. Quick and painless... But it didn't make me feel better. I just want to feel better, Geoff. I loved Ken so much..."

"Judy, you made a mistake."

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I found out what the H stood for."

"Yes, I know. Cordelia Harker."

"No."

"No?"

"It was short for 'hospital'. Specifically, the oncology department at the John Hopkins. Ken had been getting bad headaches for weeks, Judy. I've seen the painkillers in your bathroom. Ken was taking them for his migraines. He made an appointment with a specialist. I called the number and his doctor told me that Ken had an inoperable brain tumour. He had less than three months to live. Three months of pain and suffering and madness. He didn't want anyone to know or worry — especially you. That was why he kept it a secret. The knowledge must have been eating him up. He knew that if he killed himself then you wouldn't be able to claim on his life insurance. I know that because I called the company. Suicide invalidates any claim. So Ken decided to make his suicide look like an accident. He knew exactly how to do it. There was nothing wrong with the plane that Ken didn't make wrong. He deliberately crashed it so nobody else would suffer because of his illness."

"She had nothing to do with it..."

"No," he said. "She was innocent."

Judy put a hand to her mouth. She winced, making a whimper. "I'm sorry, Geoff. I'm sorry."

Nolan barely heard.

"One last drink?" she said, pleading.

"One last drink," he murmured. "Make it a big one." CW

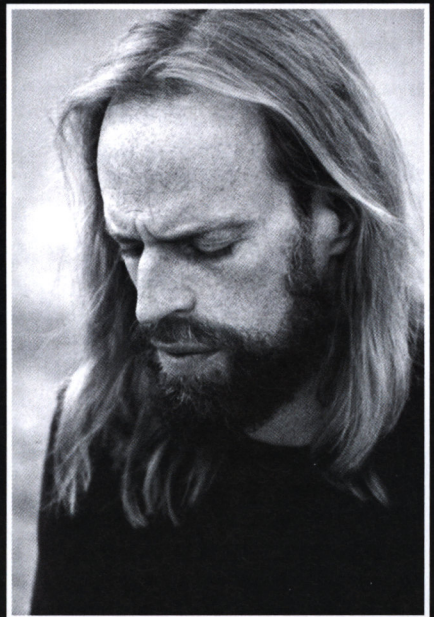


LEV RAPHAEL

FREE MAN IN PARIS

Lev Raphael writes the 'Mysteries' review column for the *Detroit Free Press*, is the book critic for National Public Radio's 'The Todd Mundt Show', and reviews for *Jerusalem Report* and *The Washington Post*. Having escaped academia over a decade ago, Lev is the author of the mysteries *Let's Get Criminal*, *The Edith Wharton Murders*, and *The Death of a Constant Lover*. He has won prizes for his fiction and non-fiction, been widely anthologized in the US and England, and seen his work discussed at literary conferences and in academic journals. Lev's writing is taught in graduate and undergraduate classes around the US. Years ago he hoped to earn a certain small fame as a writer, but he never expected to wind up as anybody's homework.

ILLUSTRATED BY WENDY DOWN



“It’s like a Picasso or a Braque,” Bobby murmured, his green eyes wide as they took in Paris from the narrow parapet between Notre Dame’s towers, surrounded by weathered gargoyles and sunburnt German tourists.

Irene squinted against the sunshine. “What?”

“Like one of the collages from when their work was so similar. Remember we looked at that book in the Museum of Modern Art gift shop?”

Irene considered. “Oh. You mean the browns and grays mixed together?”

Bobby grinned. “Exactly! Maybe this was what they saw.” He stretched out his hands like a welcoming host.

“Well, I hope their feet hurt.” Irene cursed the perky, seductive travel catalogue description of her new walking shoes which she was sure had not been designed for the twisting, uneven, vertiginous stairs of Notre Dame. Bobby was standing near her, but further back from the edge than she was since he said he didn’t like heights. His cool hand clutched hers as if he were afraid some sudden jostling from the crowd could send him down onto the tourist-packed plaza below.

Cameras around them clicked and flashed or noisily rewound, people squeezing by on the sunny spring day, staring, pointing with grim nods as if verifying that their tour books were accurate each time they recognized a building or a view or bridge.

Listening to clotted German conversations around her, Irene wanted to cheerfully say aloud, “Isn’t it great that Hitler didn’t blow all this up?”

She watched Bobby, who breathed in deeply as if he could possess the view, the sunshine, Paris spreading west and south and north, the low old roofs broken by enormous monuments that seemed so familiar to her from films and photographs that they were a little unreal and almost boring: the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre, the historic and chic Place Vendome where they were staying.

Their long climb up the endless spiraling stairs had left her sweaty, disgruntled. For all that effort there should have been much more than a view. A snack bar at the very least. Something to make up for feeling lonely. Because even though Bobby was holding her hand, he seemed distant.

He was suddenly the little boy he’d described to her only once, poring over a picture book about Paris he’d saved his pitiful allowances for. Stroking those glossy pages, he must have been like a fairytale miser lasciviously caressing his coins to become part of them, to *be* them, all gold, all gleam and mystery.

After just a few minutes up here, Irene wanted to be done with this newest phase of Bobby’s ecstasy. She wanted to sit down, in the shade, indoors, to withdraw from the blinding loveliness of Paris that hit her like a reproach.

But how could she? The trip had been her idea because she was so grateful for finding Bobby after being divorced for ten years and having given up on remarrying. Bobby had liberated her, and taking him to Paris for their honeymoon had seemed as natural a step as buying him clothes at Barney’s or getting him the red Mustang.

Now, though, she felt trapped. Not just at Notre Dame, and not just in Paris, but in Bobby’s fantasy come true.

Stuck up here, dreading another encounter with those treacherous stairs (even though gravity would be on her side and it wouldn’t be so tiring), Irene wanted to climb down from Notre Dame, to be done with all the orderliness below — the city laid out like some toy village — nauseatingly picturesque — the Mansard roofs — the spires — the graceful bridges — the endless neat array of windows.

No wonder the pitted gray-beige gargoyles around her were leering down at this city. It inspired resistance, contempt.

Their first night, standing on the Pont Neuf near the statue of Henry of Navarre, arm-in-arm, watching the building lights reflected in the Seine, Irene had felt shoved away, rejected by everything Bobby loved. She was as miserable as she'd been in high school jealously watching one of the prettiest girls fish for compliments that always came. Paris was too gorgeous and too damned pleased with itself.

But she couldn't say any of this because Bobby was entranced.

"It's so amazing," he'd said on the Pont Neuf while a tickling light rain fell on them like a benison. And the strange new look in his eyes had reminded her of the Joni Mitchell song about being a free man in Paris, feeling unfettered and alive.

They'd eaten dinner that night on the Rue de Varenne at the exclusive, tiny L'Arpege, which Bobby had assured her would offer exotic haute cuisine as quietly splendid as the pear wood walls set with glass Lalique panels. He was right, she'd thought, savoring the cumin-rubbed lamb with its puree of dates and onions, while Bobby delighted in squab crusted with candy-coated almonds.

"Wow. This is like my birthday," Bobby had said as they sat down, and ordering a \$300 bottle of Haut-Brion seemed the least they could do to celebrate.

Bobby repeated his amazement softly now, here at the top of Notre Dame, shaking his head, breathing as evenly as if he'd ascended to the top of the cathedral with the heavenly host in a Baroque painter's cloud of angels, rather than climbed all those hideous stairs. He didn't even look to her for confirmation, not at all interested in sharing his joy. Or maybe he simply assumed she felt the same way.

They'd only been married a week and already she felt he was cheating on her. With Paris! Bobby didn't need another woman, it was enough for him to sigh and drift through the city like Cinderella swept up in a lush embracing waltz by The Prince. Bobby was smitten by Paris.

It had started four days before, when his face took on an unfamiliar stunned look at Orly. As soon as Bobby had stumbled into that frantic dingy airport, he began repeating, "*Je suis en France*" under his breath as if it were a spell. By the time they got their luggage and were in a cab, he was already tearful (but he'd stopped chanting).

In misshapen English, the gap-toothed cabby had asked if it was their first time in Paris. His accent was so thick, Irene half-expected accordion music to burst from his car radio like the corny soundtrack of a TV movie making sure its viewers knew where the scene was set.

Bobby had said yes, adding that even though he'd been born in the US, France was "*le pays de mon coeur*."

The country of his heart! How corny could you get?

But the cabby grinned wildly and after Bobby mentioned they were on their honeymoon and the cabby congratulated them in more mangled English, he and Bobby raced off together in French like speed skaters. To her, Bobby's French sounded as fluent as the cabby's. And he *looked* French when he spoke, twisting his hands, his shoulders, even his face.

She almost felt nauseous, abandoned, as if she were drowning and he were swimming away from her. No, surely her reaction was jet lag, or instant culture shock, or PMS. Maybe it wasn't so dramatic, so dire.

Unless she was seeing the real Bobby and had married some kind of imposter. What if bringing him to the Paris he had always dreamed of and never been able to afford exploring had been a terrible mistake? What if she were to lose him somehow?

By the time they got to the Hotel Vendome, the grizzled cabby was as jubilant and surprised as a lottery winner by Bobby's command of French. Helping her out, the cabby said in his painful, lumbering English, "Madame, your husband is — " Groping for a word, he burst back into French, "*Epoustouflant!*"

"What the hell does that mean?" Irene asked as a trim, dark-eyed bellman took in their bags.

Blushing, Bobby said, "Impressive. Well, more like...staggering."

"Did you tip him extra?"

The hotel, not far from the Ritz, was in a quiet, graceful square of buildings dating back to the early 1700s, windows decorated with ornate grills bearing golden suns representing Louis XIV. Inside the Hotel Vendome, all the was quietly, gleamingly elegant in the way that only the French could manage, she thought, eyeing the curving marble stairway that was as wide and welcoming as a lover's embrace.

At the front desk, Bobby got another glorious reception from an unlikely source. The frigid-looking slim blonde wrapped in a black sweater dress and hung about with gold jewelry like an icon, well, she positively melted after Bobby rattled on about how happy he was to be in Paris and how he'd loved it from afar all his life.

Irene could follow, but not contribute. It was twenty years since she'd taken a French class, and her once-solid reading skills in French seemed as useful now as decoupage. French had always tormented her in high school and college. Whenever she tried to answer a question, she felt like she was a clumsy little girl again, anxiously trying to jump rope with friends and bound to get tangled. Despite following the language reasonably well on the page, her vocabulary and grammar were spotty, but worse, she had always been hopeless at the accent, the intonations, the rhythm — everything that made a language *live*. She had never been able to bear listening to herself try to speak French.

"It's not true what you hear about them," Bobby was raving upstairs, after they'd ascended in the tiny two-person elevator. "The French are *wonderful* people," he sighed, sprawling on one of the satin-covered brass beds that had been pushed together to make a double bed.

"Right. You've met two of them. Both of whom complimented your French. Both of whom are taking your money."

"Our money," Bobby corrected.

My money, Irene thought, as she paced around the exquisite large room with its two banks of windows and enormous double shutters; marquetry chests, writing table and highboy; suite of Louis Something chairs and settee covered in gold and apricot embroidery. An elaborately-framed mirror glowed over the black slate fireplace inset with bronze panels of annoyingly unfamiliar classical scenes. Plaster moldings of garlands, urns and wreaths were picked out against the glowing ivory walls and ceiling in gold, apple green, pink.

"This place needs a shepherdess," she said. The room was *so* lovely, *so* charming, Irene wanted to deface it.

"I'll be your lost sheep," Bobby said, trying to baa.

Sex would do.

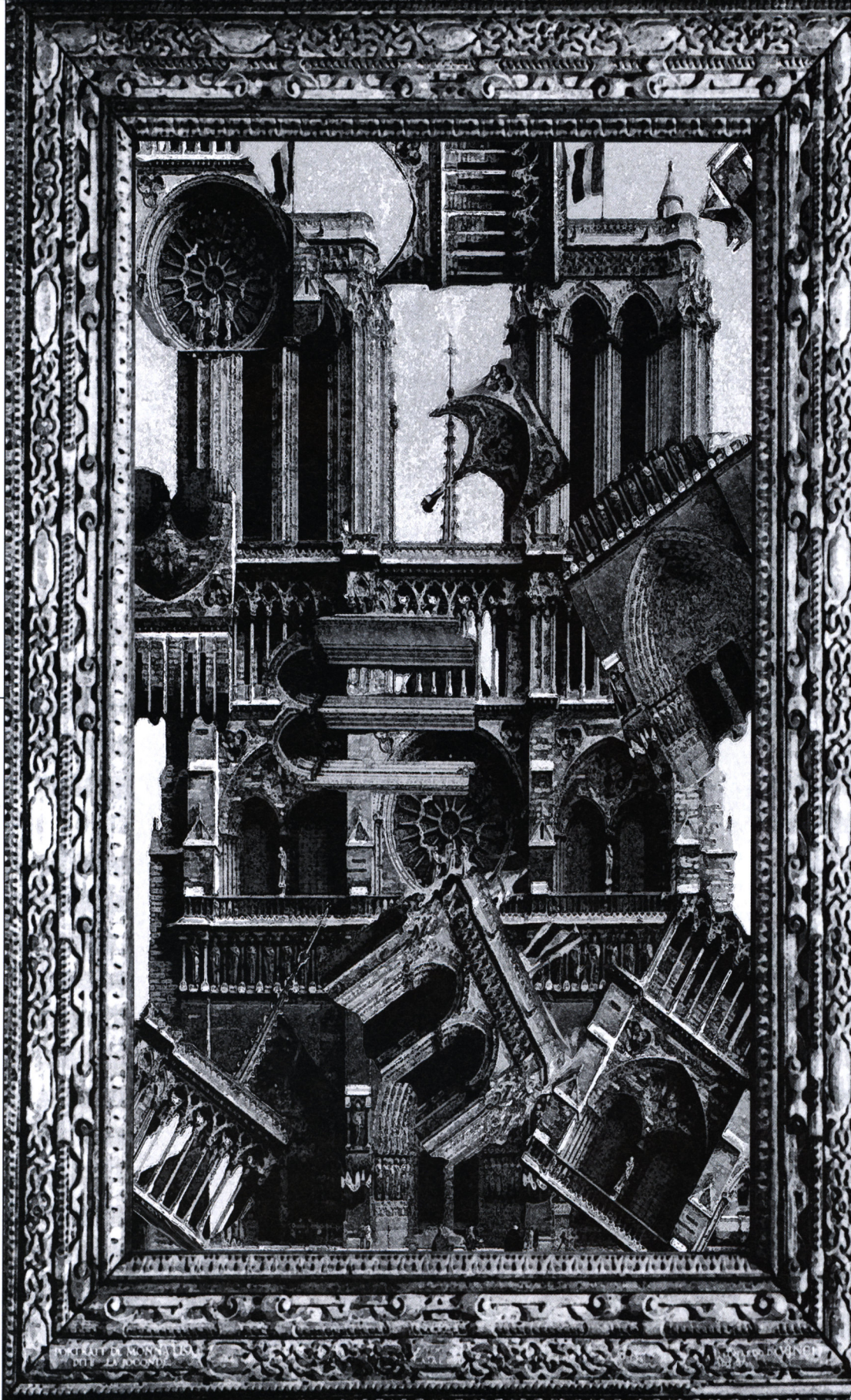
In bed she often imagined they were making love under water. Whirling, curvetting around each other like dolphins, completely free.

But when Bobby was in the shower and she drifted back up to consciousness, she realized that even losing herself in him, with him, wasn't enough to blot out the siren song of Paris.

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THE HOUSE



They'd met at her gym on the Upper East side in the pool, or actually she was in the pool doing her hour's worth of laps when she saw him approach. It was mid-morning, but there were people in each of the six lanes — mostly retirees — and he crouched down when she reached the end of hers to ask if she minded sharing. Bobby was slim and sleek in his sky blue Speedo, his thick center-parted ash blond hair falling over his sweet face like twin wings. She'd been intimidated by his youth — he couldn't be past 25 — and his looks, but she said okay.

He'd introduced himself and said softly, "We can swim traffic pattern."

"What?"

"I'll swim down on the right and back on the left — you'll follow." He was trying to make it sound like fun, or maybe he didn't want her to feel bad about her space being invaded.

Well, she followed him that day for a while, feeling as goofy in his steady wake as a lolling dog. Then she gave up, sat on the cool tiled edge and watched him swim back and forth, lap after lap, his flip turns a marvel of speed and deftness, unlike other people at the pool who seemed to think that splashing at the end was a sign of triumph and strength.

"I can help you with your stroke," he said afterwards, when they shared a little wrought-iron table in the black-on-black cafe that throbbed with techno music which she supposed was meant to egg you on to ever more intense workouts. It just made her feel old most of the time, as did the hordes of aerobics junkies with their maniacally-thin bodies, but sitting across Bobby that first day the music seemed to form a sort of halo of possibility.

And so she and Bobby started swimming together every day and having a protein shake or fruit smoothie afterwards. Irene was an awkward swimmer — head up out of the water, legs and arms uncertain. Bobby tried to teach her to lengthen her stroke, to *reach*: "Whoosh!" he would call, encouraging her. "Whoosh!" Even standing at the side of the pool, demonstrating, his lean shoulders pivoting, arms wheeling and driving through the air, shoulders moving like pistons, high-arched feet mimicking kicks, he was natural, confident, relaxed.

But out of the water he was endearingly reticent and shy. So much so that he blushed whenever he laughed, not only covering his mouth but his whole face, unable to turn away as if he were some strange figure in Greek myth, doomed to paralytic embarrassment.

How could she not fall in love with him when he was so gentle, so undemanding, so kind? When he gave up his dreary coffin-like studio apartment and moved in with her a month after they met, and she had a party, all her friends eyed him like haughty dowagers in a 1930s film comedy peering at a sniveling waif through lorgnettes held with cool and distancing contempt. So what if Bobby was just a waiter with only vague ideas about the law or police work, she said defensively over endless lunches. So what if he was almost 20 years younger than she was? Men dated younger women all the time — and the movies were full of such pairs: Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt, Paul Newman and Susan Sarandon.

Unlike her friends, however, Irene's hair stylist, her manicurist, her massage therapist and her acupuncturist all cheered her on in a chorus of "You go, girl!" that made her feel like an athlete training to break a world record. Talking to them about Bobby exhilarated her.

When they got married a month after that in a civil ceremony, there was no criticism at all to dim her enthusiasm, because it was clear that her friends had already given her up as hopelessly misguided. How strange, considering that she felt blessed. All Irene wanted to do was spend the rest of her life watching Bobby sleep. Those moments she woke up in the middle of the night were

unbearably precious to her. She stared in wonder at him: he was so beautiful, so young — and so devoted to her.

Which was why she'd suggested Paris for their honeymoon, because she knew he would love it. She'd worried that the language problem would upset her. But what she hadn't expected, even though Bobby said he'd double majored in French and Criminal Justice at NYU, was that he spoke French the way he swam — buoyed by an unpunishing medium through which he moved as if by right.

Paris, which she only knew from movies, from fashion and travel magazines, and from Bobby's rhapsodies, was alien to her and the reverse was painfully true. Bobby delighted in her being zaftig, in her gypsyish thick curls of black hair, and in New York she was considered passably attractive and felt it. In Paris she seemed to herself ungainly, even fat, as the flawlessly-dressed women strode by her like dancers in a graceful, mocking pavane.

"Too skinny," Bobby kept saying, when she'd point someone out, almost testing him. He passed every time.

Sightseeing was okay, perhaps because she could look at her oblong green Michelin guide written in English, but despite the succulent food, meals were awful, since she felt cornered and exposed. At the Picasso museum, at the Cluny, Irene could imagine herself back in New York at the Metropolitan or MOMA. Well, why not? You often heard foreigners there. Even at the cavernous and exhausting Louvre, she could keep up this internal fantasy defense. But at meals it was impossible. The food was too good and Bobby too delighted in ordering, debating selections with the waiters, chatting amiably, winning them over every time, and even apologizing in general for how rude Americans were.

"Well they are, Irene, admit it. They act like this is some Disney attraction. Frenchy Land, and everyone's going to speak cute English with a French accent."

"What was that word you said to the waiter, the one that made him laugh? You know — when you were talking about American tourists."

Eyes down, Bobby said, "*Debectant*. It means pukey, gross."

She should have been outraged, but Bobby was right. The Americans they passed, at the Louvre, on the Champs Elysee, in the Tuileries, all seemed to be complaining, and loudly, about something — and they insisted on speaking English. She felt implicated in their vulgarity, stained, and had hoped to cut herself off from them.

Trying to do so on their first day, Irene had stumblingly ordered herself *the avec des glacons* at a sidewalk cafe near the Samaritaine department store while Bobby was off in the men's room. She thought she had asked for iced tea. The waiter dutifully brought her what she had in fact requested: hot tea, with ice cubes, separately delivered in a small earthenware bowl. She blundered further a bit later after Bobby had returned, when the waiter asked in French if he could clear their plates. Irene bravely responded with, "*Oui, nous sommes finis*."

In smiling and precise English, the tall, black-vested waiter replied, "Madame, if you *are* finished, I cannot help you. But, if you *have* finished — " He shrugged.

She wanted to throw herself into the Seine. Bobby stifled a laugh, one hand covering his full-lipped mouth. God, each time she watched those lips say "*Oui*" and pronounce it something like "Way" she felt older and uglier and out of place.

And now! He was clearly embarrassed at her having made the most basic mistake: using the wrong helping verb. She glared at him, and he glanced away, but as soon as he had a chance, he was talking a blue streak with the waiter.

For Bobby, speaking French seemed like some kind of drug. He was completely unlike his English-speaking self back in New York. He was garrulous in French

and convivial. To her, his French sounded brilliant. It wasn't just his accent, it was the rhythms and intonations, his gestures and the way his face changed. His French seemed smooth, facile, sensuous. It was a performance. Bobby wasn't just speaking French, French was speaking him. He had become something else with a kind of flamboyant authenticity. Helplessly, Irene watched him seduce people with his fawning eagerness, his joy.

It had been giving her one enormous headache.

She rubbed her temples now and sighed, gazing down at Bobby's beloved Paris.

"Hungry?" he asked. "Ready for lunch?"

They had talked about lunch at the Place Dauphine's Taverne Henri IV, a wine bar near the Pont Neuf they'd seen written up in the *New York Times*.

"Sure," she said, and they made their way through the crowd to the eerie, cool stairs going down that sliced through the dark and time-worn stones. The air felt clammy inside and they didn't talk as they descended alone. Watching her footing carefully, she was relieved that she was spared having to look at any more spectacular, demanding scenes for at least a few minutes.

Then she felt Bobby's hands on either side of the back of her neck as if he were steadying himself, but the stairs suddenly disappeared from under her feet and she was sliding, falling. Dizzy, terrified, she realized with outrage that he must have pushed her, and she could barely breathe. Her back and head slammed against the ancient stones and she began to tumble raggedly away from Bobby, the stones clutching her all over, slicing, biting. Everything swam in front of her eyes. As she started to lose consciousness, one thought came to her with chilly regret: she simply could not remember the French word for 'Help!'. CW

FREE MAN
IN PARIS

THE TTA LITERARY PRIZES

LAUNCH OF PRESTIGIOUS ANNUAL COMPETITION FOR SHORT FICTION

The publishers of *Crimewave*, *The Third Alternative* and *Zene* announce the first TTA Literary Prizes, with a total of £2,000 in prizes for short stories in the categories of science fiction, fantasy, horror, slipstream and crossgenre fiction. First prize is £1,000, the runner-up prize is £500, and there are five second runner-up prizes of £100 each.

Entries must be original and previously unpublished in any form, no longer than 6,000 words, and accompanied by an entry fee of £5/US\$8, made payable to 'The TTA Literary Prizes'. They should be sent to the Prizes Administrator, 9 Henry Cross Close, Shipdham, Thetford, Norfolk IP25 7LQ, Great Britain, and must be received by the closing date of 31 December 2000.

A shortlist of stories will be forwarded by the Prize Administrator to an independent panel of judges who will make the final decision. The judging panel will consist of a professional author, a publisher's representative and a literary agent. The TTA editorial staff will take no part in the judging procedure.

Details of the winning entries will be announced in the March 2001 issue of *The Third Alternative* magazine, published on the TTA Press website and elsewhere. A full list of winners can also be obtained by sending a stamped self-addressed envelope to the TTA Press address, as listed here in *Crimewave*.

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PATRICIA TYRRELL

TWO LEGS OR A PIECE OF AN EAR

Patricia Tyrrell worked at various jobs in England and in the USA (nurse, fleamarket stallholder, cook etc), then got bored with real life and started to write. She has since been widely published and has won many prizes including an Ian St James Award and shortlisted for another. She was also joint second in the *Sunday Times/CWA* Crime-writing competition in 1998. A novel, *Into the Promised Land*, is due for release later this year.

ILLUSTRATED BY ANDY COX



The shepherd rescues from the
mouth of the lion two legs,
or a piece of an ear – Amos 3

The two of them stumbled into the courtyard and she said in her high-pitched penetrating voice, as she had said several times on the way up from the quay, “I’ve certainly never done anything like *that* before.” Which didn’t seem an adequate explanation of murder.

The courtyard smelled of old plaster and dead leaves. In the dark he put a hand over her mouth while the police scooter zipped along the alley; basically she’d done the murder and was the fugitive, but she was so erratic he could imagine her — in that high voice and with a bright smile — telling some policeman how the death was mostly accidental but yes, he’d been involved in it with her.

When the scooter faded into the distance she spat his fingers out and said, “Really!” She gave her breathless little giggle; the previous night she’d stood, giggling and shivering, beside the ship’s rail, trying to heave her drunken husband overboard. “We must rush,” she said now, “or we’ll be late.” She started toward the alley, clutching his sleeve.

“Late?” He’d meant to jump ship here anyway; all ships bored him after a few days, and one engine-room was much like another. Sunny Italy had seemed a damn good idea. But not like this.

“For the boat, silly.” In their fright at glimpsing the police scooter they’d run through the villa’s shallow outer courtyard into a small inner one; his fingertips touched the marble carving of a seat (grape bunches and a miniature face all leer and eyebrows). She said, tugging him, “Don’t you see — if we miss the boat, that’ll be a dead giveaway?” She didn’t seem to notice the unfortunate phrase.

“The boat’s gone.” You grew to hate the shriek of whichever ship you worked on, it summoned you back to hard work and an oil-stinking room. And during the past hour that shriek — as individual as her voice, with its own pitch and duration — had, he was sure, sounded twice: once in warning and the second time in farewell. Had sounded while she wandered, exclaiming like a kid, from shop to shop in the hot alleys and from trashy merchant to merchant, and while he, dubiously obeying the clutch of her hand, relived the exact feel of that sagging weight balanced on the pivot of the rail — waiting for the extra ounce of shove which she couldn’t quite find... Or was she the one who’d finally found it? Surely she was.

“The Serena? But she can’t have gone!” That was how he’d first noticed her — the high insistent voice from the middle of a chic group who were making the optional guided tour below decks. She wasn’t interested in marine engineering, and in her giggling nervous way was making that clear. Along with the voice he’d noticed the rocks on her fingers and throat, her cream silk shirt and trousers; if she was unhappy with her husband there might be pickings. Payment for services discreetly rendered at night in a changing-room of the gym or some vacant cabin. And her taut giggle did suggest that the bulky scowling man beside her wasn’t her ideal choice.

“Pickings,” he said disgusted to the dark courtyard, then, “I tell you the damn ship’s sailed. Think I can’t recognise her siren?” Probably she’d never been left behind by a ship before, just as she’d never killed a husband. He didn’t even know her name, first or last; there hadn’t been time. Only enough time, during his nightly prospecting around ‘A’ deck, to catch her in action and to connect the rumours he’d heard: husband always sozzled, poor girl, she claims he’s violent and she... Not long married, a pathetic story. Their cabin steward had or hadn’t seen bruises; had or hadn’t, it didn’t matter which now.

“We’re both in this,” she said, acrid as the plaster dust. “And they wouldn’t sail without us. Come on, you fool.” He thought, one bloody moment of unselfish-

ness, of genuine concern because she seemed trapped and was edgy and a girlish blonde, and I get deep into involvement with her? He wrenched his arm free.

Under a breeze dust skittered in the corners of the courtyard; there must be a house surrounding them — and they were arguing loudly about a murder? He strained his eyes; a double set of shallow steps rose from the back of the courtyard, but in the dark the villa's façade was nearly invisible. Mightn't there be balustrades and spiky statues? He wasn't sure.

"They can't have gone!" she said with a sob which sounded artificial; his moment of unselfishness had long fled and her monied glitter wouldn't compensate for her going into hysterics here. He put a finger brusquely to her lips and she whispered around it, like some grotesque kiss, "My whole idea was that I'd return to the boat in good time, innocently, been shopping. Surprised to find he wasn't already back, but no doubt he was getting sozzled somewhere; I'd act weepy but not —"



TWO LEGS OR A
PIECE OF AN EAR

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"I'll bet you would."

She pouted away from him. "I don't like the way you said that." But her hand clung tenacious as an octopus he'd seen once in some West Indies market; the seller hacked its tentacles from the wet board one by one and still the God-awful pads stuck.

She'd clung that way the previous night while he stared, already appalled, down into the water where the ripples had at once merged with the ship's wake... and the body had sunk at once. He'd caught himself thinking this death wasn't a moment's desperate impulse, she planned it, she weighted his pockets, got him extra blottoed and persuaded him out here and the drunken sod never realised... Those few blurred words the man had spoken while she was heaving at him beside the rail, hadn't they been propositions, love-bites? Love or anyway lust. "A perfect scheme," she was saying now, irritable, into his ear, "because

aren't there gangsters in this town, fightings and such — ”

“It's only the Mafia headquarters,” he inserted dryly.

“ — so isn't it likely that someone would rob him and then bang him on the head, bury him where he'll never be found? And if he does show up on a beach drowned — well, he was always drunk enough to fall off any dockside, and cunning enough to have left the boat this morning without being noticed.”

“A tight little scheme,” he said. “I'll bet you figured the sea currents beforehand too.”

“But, you fool, how does it look that I'm missing and you too? Me and a crew member? They'll think the obvious.”

“So what do we do? Hire a powerboat and catch up with them? Or fly to their next port of call?”

The afternoon had been interminable; he'd bumped into her around lunchtime in the Piazza San Georgio and her fingers had closed on his arm at once; she'd said with that dry chuckling sob, “Thank God I've found you!” Too loud as always; he'd steered her down the road into the public gardens and there, on a seat under palms which rustled like eavesdroppers, they argued. An accessory, she'd said, aren't you? Not that she would go to the police, of course, but an anonymous suggestion might be made. He'd said, “You bitch, I walked away. No crime of mine.” And got a vivid mental picture of how she'd present the happening: herself a terrified witness cowering while he, from rage or spite or robbery, slung the man overboard. You bloody fucking bitch, he'd said, and remembered the heavy weight's swing on his hand which had lain like fulcrums across the ship's rail. I never killed anyone, he told himself; and he almost wholly believed this.

From the alley beyond the outer courtyard there spilled the rattle of wire laundry-lines as washing was taken in, the beat of a drum and a woman's raucous song, the rich odour of fish and tomatoes and garlicky fresh bread, the clinking of coarse pottery. He thought, Christ, I'm hungry! and she said, “Catch up with the boat? No, I tell you that'd be a total giveaway. I didn't shove him overboard in order to go to jail. We didn't.” She slid her hand in sugary fury along his arm, she gripped him. “You've got to let me think,” she said, and gripped tighter. But past her voice hadn't he heard the sudden opening of a window — the groan and squeak of old wood-on-wood, much closer than the noises in the alley? Jail, he thought angrily, and murder; she's using those words like handcuffs; who the hell's up there listening to all this? (It must, from the direction of the sound, be up).

“Shut your mouth,” he whispered, “someone's listening.”

Her high loud voice immediately answered and he recalled how during the voyage she'd never said or done the expected thing. Poor girl, the steward and waiters had said, she smiles so brightly, she laughs and talks as merry as if she doesn't at all care that he's noticeably drunk each night and she's cold sober. And so recently married — why doesn't she leave him? Well, in a sort of way she had.

“Hi!” she called brilliant and loud, cutting past the alley's noise, “Anyone up there? We could use some advice.” She squeezed his arm and giggled louder, then called again. “Hi there! I've never...” she said, and turned to him, “I'm quite shy really and I've certainly never — ” A burst of radio music from the alley drowned her endorsement of her past's purity.

“Sanctuary,” she whispered, “isn't that what we need?” Passionate, intimate as if she were inviting him to bed. But her giggle had worn him down, and the reckless voice; for all the money in the world she wasn't worth fooling with.

"I won't hide like a rat," he said brutally and turned away; his arms, empty of her, felt clean.

Surely she was the one who'd pushed hardest; I've done, he told himself, nothing wrong. What had he meant to do here after jumping ship? Enjoy himself for a while, hadn't he? Drink and women and then a safe bed, solitary in a decent hotel; he had money enough for that. And when his money ran out he'd find another ship, but not a cruise liner this time; he'd pick honest cargo without complications like her. I've had enough, he told himself, of the rich and their fool problems.

He started toward the outer courtyard and the alley; at the same time a door opened much closer, as close as the opened window. An old door, not often used; he heard its grinding clank.

"Don't," she said, suddenly quiet and breathless, "please don't go. Not for a few minutes — don't leave me —"

"You can go too."

He took one stride from her, then another; did other footsteps echo in the courtyard? Quiet footsteps, descending...but surely elderly steps; the girl would be in no danger.

A palazzo, he thought, I'll bet that's what this building is. Someone on board had said the town was full of them, mostly half-ruined; he himself had laughed with the other guys at the over-the-top description of padded chair seats in one ancient wreck, fancy seats which barely concealed metal spikes... This house seemed to almost encircle its courtyards; the night was too dark to be sure. Belonging to some rich old solitary eccentric maybe, who'd take to the girl and give her a few nights shelter till the kid got her breath back and realised what she'd done there at the ship's polished rail. Perfect, he thought, just what the kid needs. "A princess," he said to her half-joking under his breath, "I'll bet that's who lives here."

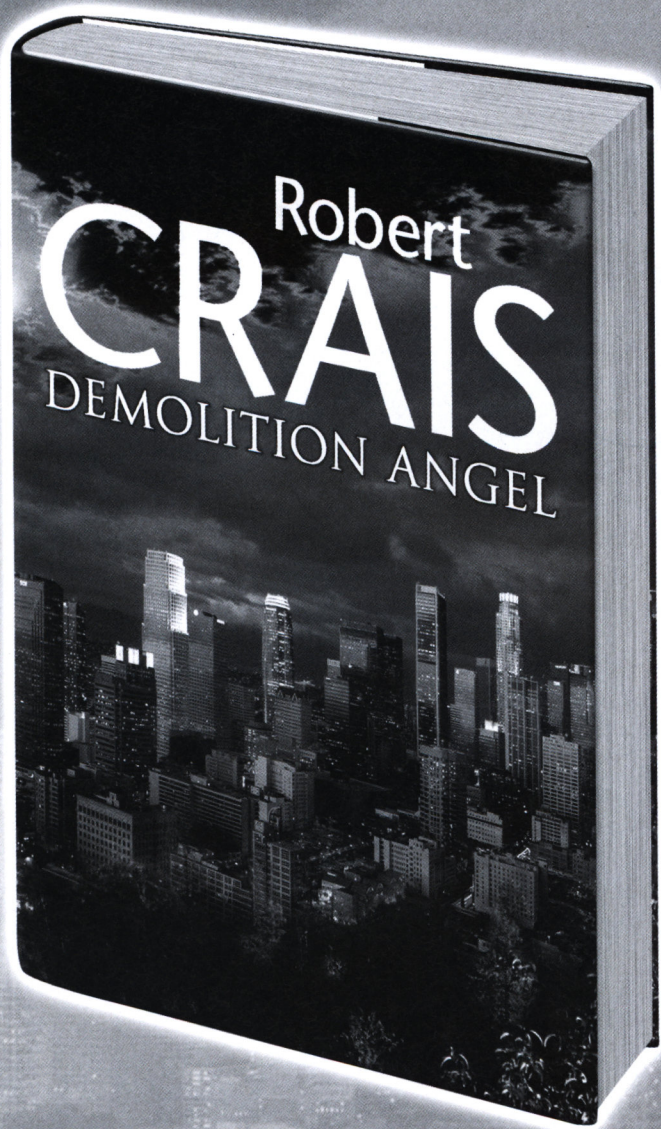
"Don't go —" *But she sounded less scared; probably she was interested in the glamour of the title and a possible stay in a house which called itself a palace. "Don't," she said in his direction and giggled; he decided to take this as a farewell. "Just imagine that," she said giggling while his feet carried him striding away from her, "I've never in all my —" She stopped as if someone had touched her unexpectedly, and a final shred of conscience held him motionless to hear her ask, "Are you really a princess?" and an ancient voice reply in passably smooth English, "Yes, my child."*

"Where are you going?" the girl called to him, but not as if she cared; indeed her footsteps began almost at once to move in the opposite direction. "Don't you want —" she called, then she was climbing steps; her tossed-back words fell bumpy and neglectful. "A good night's sleep," she called, and with the giggle, "Sanctuary," and something finally about safety.

She didn't speak again but at what must have been the doorway she giggled and the rusty old voice spoke in a tone of command. The door ground shut, the courtyard was silent.

Suddenly he started forward, then checked himself because wasn't she plenty old enough to look after herself, and plenty fly enough too? He stood listening for another moment, then he turned and walked quickly away through the outer courtyard to the alley. She would be all right in there, of course she would. I didn't, he told himself, hear anything of her after the door closed. Oh, there might have been a snatch of song or argument from another alley, which travelled across the façade. But surely I didn't — no, I'm really positive I didn't — hear her scream? CW

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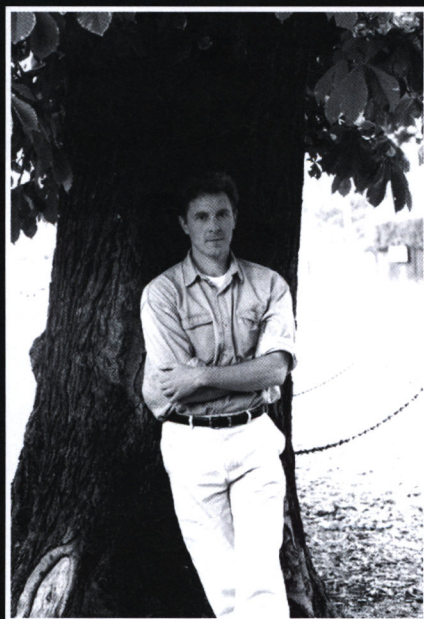


JAMES LOVEGROVE

KILLER-KILLER

Born in 1965 in Lewes, East Sussex, James Lovegrove currently resides in Lewes, East Sussex. While this would seem to indicate a somewhat unadventurous streak, it must be borne in mind that he also lived for long periods of time in Oxford, London and Chicago. However, as a neighbour pointed out to him the other day, "Lewes does have a tendency to draw you back to it." James has had six books published: *The Hope*, *Escardy Gap* (with Peter Crowther), *Days* (shortlisted for the Arthur C Clarke Award), *The Web: Computopia* (for 'young adults'), *The Guardians: The Krilov Continuum* and *The Guardians: Berserker* (both as JMH Lovegrove), and most recently *How the Other Half Lives*, a novella for PS Publishing. He is at work on a new novel, *The Foreigners*, due out this year. Other publications planned include a third *Guardians* book and a short story collection, *Imagined Sights*.

ILLUSTRATED BY MIKE BOHATCH



I wiped the Foreskin Collector's blood from the blade of my Gerber locking knife, then took a few steps back from the body and cocked my head like an art critic studying a canvas.

His ripped-open shirt revealed his bare, skinny chest. In spite of the crisscross coagulating streaks of blood, the letters I had carved there were distinct.

K I L L E R

I depressed the catch on the knife handle, folded the blade shut and stowed the knife in my pocket. The Gerber was a beautiful piece of kit. Light as a pencil, lethal as a sword. The flat of the blade was matt and looked as if it were in fact made of plastic rather than metal, like the blade of one of those children's dummy knives that retract when you stab. The partly-serrated cutting edge, however, was mercurially bright and mercilessly sharp. The Gerber was a countryman's tool, designed for skinning and gutting.

The Foreskin Collector's split throat gaped.

I searched his flat. It was small — sitting room, bedroom, bathroom, galley kitchen — and I did not have to look long to find his trophies.

They were in the refrigerator, sealed in Tupperware. Eleven of them, like some bizarre snack-food — Hula Hoops crossed with pork scratchings.

Why did he detach them from his victims? The police had theories. He was Jewish and resented the ceremonial surgery that had been performed on him at his *bris*. That was the favourite. But it was also conjectured that he was a Jew who hated Gentiles, and killed and circumcised them in a kind of home-grown religious-conversion rite. Or he was a rabbi gone mad. Or he was a woman who had been raped by a circumcised man and was exacting her revenge on male-kind. A Jewish woman, perhaps, who had been raped by an *uncircumcised* man.

Theories. Permutations. Variations on a theme. None close to the truth.

The Foreskin Collector was a young middle-class Caucasian male, like me.

He felt a compulsion to kill and mutilate, like me.

He enjoyed doing it, like me.

That was all.

I debated whether to set fire to the flat. While a fire would destroy any incriminating evidence I might have inadvertently left, the word I had carved into the Foreskin's Collector's chest would still be discernible in his charred flesh, to the coroner if no one else, and the trophies in the Tupperware container would escape harm inside the steel body of the refrigerator. It would be obvious whose body this was and who had killed him.

No. No fire. No need. I had been scrupulously careful when breaking in. I had kept my latex surgical gloves on all the time. More to the point, the Foreskin Collector shared the building with at least five other people in other flats. I did not want to risk their lives.

He would just have to wait to be discovered. In a couple of days he would be so ripe that none of his neighbours would be able to pass his door without noticing the smell. If for some reason his death was not featured on the news by the end of the week, I would phone the police and give them an anonymous tip-off.

The police knew me. By reputation, not by name. Most of them, I honestly thought, approved of what I was doing. They could not say as much, of course, but the efforts they had so far made to catch me were pretty lacklustre. Almost as if they wanted me to keep going. Helping them out. Doing what they wished *they* could do but were not permitted.

I was a killer of killers. A killer-killer. And I was 'killer' at it. So it might be said that I was a killer killer-killer.

The house was silent. All good folk asleep in their beds. I crept downstairs and let myself out through the back door into the communal garden.

The city droned slumberously to the indifferent stars. I tiptoed across the lawn through plum-coloured dark, and the trees souged, and a prowling cat took fright and scabbled over the wall into the adjacent garden.

The fence at the far end was easy to climb. An alley at the rear was where residents left out their bin-bags for the dustmen to collect, and where local kids rode their bikes, and where teenagers smoked and fornicated. Foxgloves and nettles proliferated. Condoms strewed the path like large pale flatworms.

I stole along the alley, unseen, unknown, a white blood-cell in a hidden vein.

It was as I was approaching my car that I became aware of being watched.

I had heard nothing untoward. I had seen no movement at the periphery of my vision. I just knew. A hypothalamic prickling. A certainty.

I scanned the windows of the sodium-gilded houses. Curtains were firmly closed in most of them. Those that were uncurtained were unlit and empty. There was no face peering from any of them.

Ahead: the street, snug with parked cars, not a soul in sight.

Behind: the street, snug with parked cars, not a soul in sight.

But someone was there, I was sure of it. Watching me. From the hedgerow of a front garden? Crouched between two vehicles? Con-cealed ramrod-straight behind the trunk of one of the sickly limes that paraded along the pavement?

In the midst of small-hours stillness, I stared around.

Gradually I was able to convince myself that there was no one on the street but me. The impression of being watched did not abate, but the evidence of my eyes and ears soon relegated it to the category of a phantom sensation. An illusion brought on by my adrenalised hyper-alert state. I needed that hyper-alert state to enable me to perform my work safely and successfully. On this occasion, it had been oversensitive and deceived me.

I unlocked the car.

As I drove away, I glanced in the rear-view mirror. Nothing.

But I checked the mirror several more times before reaching the end of the street and turning the corner.

I slept the sleep of the just and woke late. I had no job. I was independently wealthy, floating free above the quotidian concerns of the masses, buoyed by a large share portfolio inherited from my dear departed parents. I did not feel guilty about this. Why should I? The money made it possible for me to do what I had to do. By performing a useful service, I gave back to the community whose hard work provided my income. The fact that I took pleasure in what I did was simply a bonus.

Munching breakfast toast, I checked the Teletext news pages on the off-chance that the Foreskin Collector's death had gone public already. It had not. Never mind. Early days.

In my study, I stuck The Divine Comedy's *Fin de Siècle* into the stereo, and as the second track, 'Thrillseeker', got into gear, I booted up my computer. Accessing the folder I had named 'Bluebeard', I filled in an incident report on the elimination of the Foreskin Collector. Date, place, time of death, method of execution, any additional comments. Under the last heading I described the Tupperware box of prepuces, then wondered whether to mention the feeling I had had in the street of being observed.

Best not to, I thought. It seemed somehow weak. It was an admission of vulner-



KILLER-KILLER

55

BURNING DOWN
THE HOUSE

ability which I could accept inwardly but which would look stark and unforgiving when set in type.

The Foreskin Collector brought my total up to fourteen.

In 'Bluebeard' I had a map of the country on which the location of each of my kills was flagged with a crimson dot. Seven of my previous kills were in my home city. The Foreskin Collector made it eight. The other six were evenly distributed across the map. It was time-consuming and logistically demanding to hunt down and kill away from home, and I preferred not to do it. Luckily, the city where I lived was large and spawned a healthy stock of specimens of the type of murderer I preyed on.

For pleasure, I read through some of my earlier reports.

The Judge. My first kill. My maiden effort. A retired Crown Court beak who had dedicated the autumn of his life to capturing children and subjecting them to mock trials in which they endured savage torture before being suffocated to death with a carrier-bag. Surprisingly strong for a fellow his age, the Judge had put up quite a fight, but once I had the piano-wire garrotte around his neck I knew that the outcome of the struggle was no longer in doubt and that his resistance had barely a minute left to run.

The Bookworm. Staged his murders to resemble famous death-scenes from classic novels. Hanged one of his victims by a noose tied to a chimney-stack in the manner of Bill Sikes; pushed another beneath a train like Anna Karenina; crammed the mouth of another with powdered arsenic so that she perished the way Madame Bovary did. It crossed my mind that it would be poetic justice to crush his head in a bookbinder's press, but, averse to that kind of preciousness, I settled for simply stabbing the pretentious bastard in the back.

Jacqueline the Ripper. Went for male escorts exclusively. Employed their services, drugged their drinks, then murdered and castrated them, or castrated and murdered them, depending on how badly she was suffering from premenstrual tension. Apparently she was making a feminist statement, inverting gender norms, some Camille Paglia bullshit like that. I whacked her brains out with a baseball bat. A phallic riposte to her *modus operandi*? If so, an unconscious one.

The Carpenter's Son. Constructed bone crucifixes from the skeletons of his victims. His cellar housed one of the best-equipped private workshops I had ever come across.

The Alliterator. Killed only people whose forenames and surnames began with the same letter and who lived in a place also beginning with that letter. He was working his way through the alphabet and had reached K when I caught up with him. A certain Kenneth Kirkland of Kettering would never know this, but he was alive today entirely thanks to me.

Another 'Bluebeard' file comprised a list of killers who were still out there doing their thing. I opened it and ran my eye down the column of nicknames I had culled from police reports and from the further reaches of the Internet.

The Clockwatcher.

The Creationist.

Dave the Deviant.

The Skullfucker.

Absalom Slice.

The Prince of Wails.

Stephen Thing.

Black Velvet Glove.

Pureheart Peter.

Siseneg.

The Midwife.
Procrustes.
Cluedo Man.
The Haemophile.
Captain Scalpel.

And nearly a dozen more. All extant. All infesting the country. A secret underworld of murderers most ordinary people never got to hear about. Symptoms of a malaise that was infecting the entire human race.

Out there. Roaming. Raping. Ripping. Rending. Rendering. Reducing. Razoring. Roasting. Ruining.

At random, I selected one of them as my next target. I closed my eyes and plonked a forefinger on the screen. Procrustes.

Researching was always the fun part. I would set out knowing little about my target other than a nickname and an MO, and through diligence and application would begin to narrow down a location, a pattern, a mindset, an address, a real name. It was the thrill of the chase eked out over a period of weeks, sometimes months. Throughout, I would feel a deliciously grim doggedness in the pit of my stomach. As the clues fell into place like tumblers in a lock, my sense of anticipation would mount. Before I had even set eyes on the man or (more rarely) woman I was about to kill, I would begin to know how he or she walked, talked, dressed, gestured. I would begin to know sleeping habits and shopping patterns, food preferences and entertainment tastes. Cruising the Web at home or leafing through tomes and twiddling through microfiche in libraries, I would edge my way towards identifying my target, and once that was achieved, our first, final, fatal meeting would not be far off.

It was foreplay, of a kind. Preparation toward a satisfying climax.

How was I able to find these people when the police, with their substantial criminological resources, could not? I often asked myself that question, and the answer I had come up with was threefold.

Firstly, I had the time to dedicate myself wholeheartedly to the search. I was a loner, devoted to no one and nothing except finding and killing killers. I was prepared to put in long days and work through the night. According to the newspapers, police morale was at an all-time low, thanks to budget cuts, rising crime rates, and public mistrust. I had a sense of mission which few police officers, in these straitened times, shared.

Secondly, I had a genuine empathy with the people I hunted. I was one of them, after all. They were my kind.

Thirdly, I was just that bit brighter and more imaginative than the average Plod.

The Foreskin Collector made the *Nine O'Clock News* on the evening of the day I began my search for Procrustes.

The police covered up for me, as they had in the past. Officially, the Foreskin Collector had committed suicide, stricken with guilt over his heinous crimes. There was no mention at all of my mark on his body.

The police had tacitly given me *carte blanche* to continue.

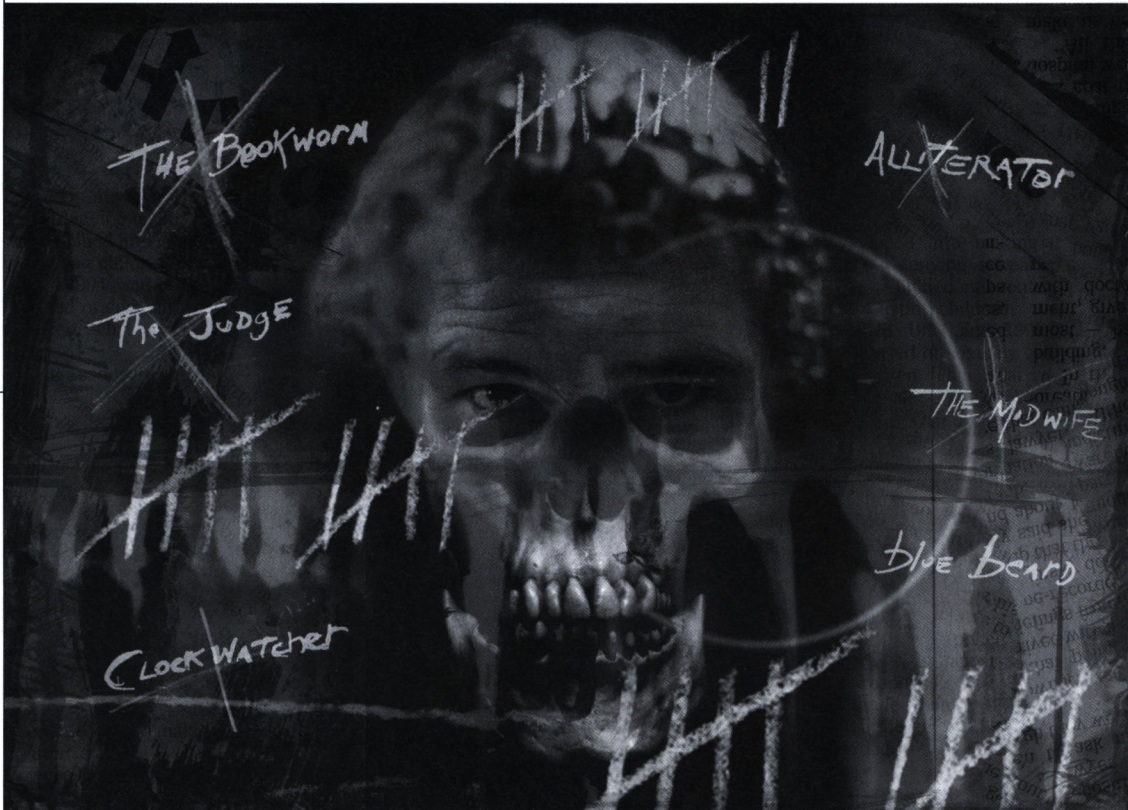
Going in, all I knew about Procrustes was that he either truncated his victims with a hacksaw or stretched them on a rack until they were precisely five feet ten inches tall, taking his cue from the robber in the Theseus legend who cut or elongated travellers to fit the length of a bed. So far six bodies had turned up on

wasteground in six different towns over the space of two years. Each victim had been either remarkably tall or remarkably short before Procrustes 'standardised' them, which led me to conclude that he was taking care to choose people who were nowhere near his five-feet-ten ideal. If he were to kill someone of that exact height, it would invalidate his whole scheme and he would probably self-destruct.

I settled down to the task of pinning him down. Days whirled by. Weeks danced past. I delved among clippings. I pored over maps. I rifled through records. I looked. I laboured. I learned. The picture formed, coalescing, crystallising.

During this period, that feeling of being watched recurred a number of times.

Once, in a library, I had the distinct impression that somebody was scrutinising me across the room. Raising my head from the university journal I was studying, I gazed around with surreptitious idleness. All the other library-users were bent



over their reading matter. The librarian, returning books to shelves, had her back to me. No one was paying me any attention. Yet I could have sworn that, somewhere in that large dusty room, somewhere amid the bookcases and thousand upon thousand of stacked volumes, there was someone with their eyes on me.

Another time, I was out shopping for groceries when I became convinced that I was being tracked along the supermarket aisles. Because of my lifestyle I was able to visit the supermarket at times when it was not crowded. As I trundled to and fro with my trolley, I was sure that one of the few other shoppers in the store was dogging me. I kept sensing someone close behind me. Consequently, whenever I halted to load an item into my trolley, I would cast a glance in both directions along the aisle I was in. If there was anyone in sight, however, it was seldom the same person twice. My follower, assuming he or she existed, would

have to have been a master of disguise, capable of switching between personae in the twinkling of an eye.

A couple of times while working out in the gym I felt strongly that one of my fellow exercisers was staring at me. People in gyms have a tendency to eye one another up, but this was more than that. I used the wall-mirrors to see if I could spot my observer. Everyone was absorbed with their treadmilling or cycling or abdominising or weightlifting. Everywhere I saw the usual red faces and puffed cheeks and strained veins, nothing out of the ordinary.

At one point I even thought I was being watched while in my house. I was in my study, at my computer, when the now-familiar tingle started up in my brain. I went to the window. The view was of back gardens, the rears of the houses on the street behind, a distant gasometer. No one was visible except for a child clambering on a climbing frame three gardens along from mine.

I snatched the curtains shut and got back to work.

Had I been constantly perceiving that I was being monitored and followed, I would have concluded that I was not mistaken and would have taken appropriate countermeasures. In the event, since the sense of surveillance came so infrequently and intermittently, I was able to dismiss it as a trick of the imagination. I was not the sort to be prone to paranoia. I decided I had been working too hard. I had, after all, been hunting and killing killers nonstop for nigh on six years. It was time to take a sabbatical. Once I had dealt with Procrustes, I promised myself I would book a long holiday. Visit some exotic places, relax, let myself be waited on by waiters, massaged by masseuses, sunned by the sun, waded by waves.

If you work alone, sometimes you cannot tell when you need a break. Sometimes your subconscious has to drop increasingly unsubtle hints.

So I thought.

Procrustes was a disgraced, disgruntled professor of classics. Having been fired from his university post for assaulting an undergraduate who could not properly conjugate a Greek pluperfect, he now scratched a living as a private tutor. In his leisure time, he abducted strangers and forcibly lengthened or foreshortened them in his basement. He himself was one inch taller than five feet ten. His mission was to be able to look down on everyone, but his classicist's sense of empirical precision compelled him to want to look down on everyone *equally*, from that small but crucial one-inch advantage.

I spent a fortnight in the university town acquainting myself with Procrustes's routine, such as it was. I could simply have cornered him in a dark alleyway one night and slashed open an artery, but it was important to me to develop a rapport with my target, to understand the urges and inner rhythms he obeyed. It brought us closer together and turned the act of killing into something approaching a consummation.

Finally, after much loitering and tailing and stalking and staking-out, it was time. I was ready. So, in a different way, was Procrustes.

I broke into his house while he was out at the pub one evening. For an hour I lay in wait, a statue-still, shallow-breathing presence in his home. His nemesis.

As a classicist, he would have appreciated the reference.

On the wall of my bedroom at home there was a framed poster depicting a little fish about to be eaten by a larger fish, in turn about to be eaten by a larger fish, in turn about to be eaten by a yet larger fish. It was, I had been told once, a visual allegory of capitalism.

Perhaps. To me, it was emblematic of what I did. I preyed on the predator. I fed on the fish that fed on the little fish.

I thought of that poster every time I made a kill.

Procrustes let himself in around ten PM. Somewhat the worse for wear, he fumbled with his keys and dropped them on the doormat. He picked them up and closed the door behind him. He started singing softly: “Gaudeamus igitur, iuvenes dum sumus...” Let us rejoice therefore, while we are still young men.

Ensnared on his landing, huddled out of sight, I heard him walk to the kitchen and get out a saucepan. His nightly nightcap: Horlicks with a tot of whisky.

I could not imagine a more disgusting drink.

A few minutes later, steaming mug in hand, he returned to the hallway and began to climb the stairs. I had the Gerber out and ready.

The mug fell, splashing hot white liquid across the landing carpet. The sweet, rank smell of milk and malt filled my nostrils. Malt from both the Horlicks and the whisky. Forcing him against the wall, I stared deep into his eyes. I did not have to say anything. He knew who I was and why I was there.

The knife whickered in the dark. Strings of blood graced the wallpaper. Useless sounds cluttered his throat.

When the sentience had gone from his face, I lowered him to the floor and, kneeling, sawed open his tanktop sweater. Then I undid his shirt and painstakingly etched the six letters into the meat of his chest.

K I L L E R

I settled back on my haunches. As always, there was satisfaction at the completion of a job, mingled with disappointment at losing the goal I had been building up to the past few weeks. A feeling as at the end of a piece of music which, with the last note, turns from a major key to a minor. A Phrygian cadence, as it is known.

And then: an unexpected sound, as though one of the orchestra had dropped an instrument. A gun to the back of my head, and the tock of a hammer being cocked.

It was him. I knew it in an instant. The one who had been watching me. The one who had been following me. All along, he had been real.

“Don’t turn around,” he said.

An accent I could not place. Scots, maybe?

“This won’t hurt,” he promised.

How did *he* know?

“There aren’t many of your kind,” he told me. “You’re extremely rare. That makes hunting you a highly skilled and specialised occupation.”

I saw it then. I had thought I was on the top of the pyramid. Below me the killers, below them their victims. But there was another level to the pyramid of which I had been unaware, and this man was at its apex.

He killed the killers who killed killers. He was the fourth fish, the one that ate the fish that ate the fish that ate the little fish.

I heard the first click of the trigger being depressed. A preliminary catch. All he had to do now was squeeze a tiny bit tighter.

There was no escape. I was weirdly calm.

I was a killer killer-killer. That made my killer a killer killer-killer killer.

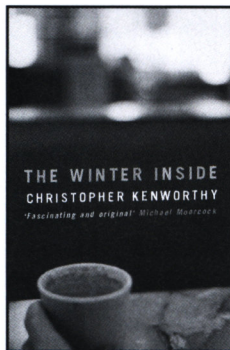
Was there a yet higher category? Killer killer-killer-killer killer? And above that another one, and so on, like an ever-expanding food-chain of death? Mortality *ad infinitum*?

I was contemplating this eternity of endings as the bullet entered my brain. CW



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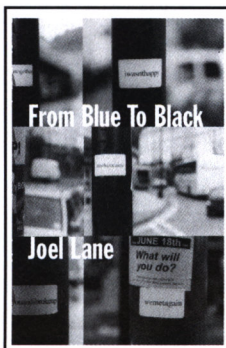


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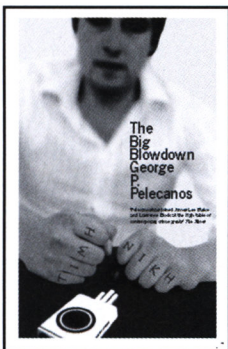
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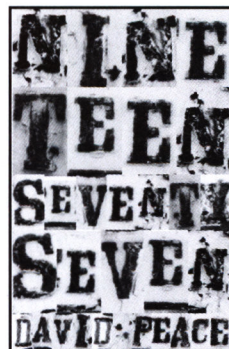
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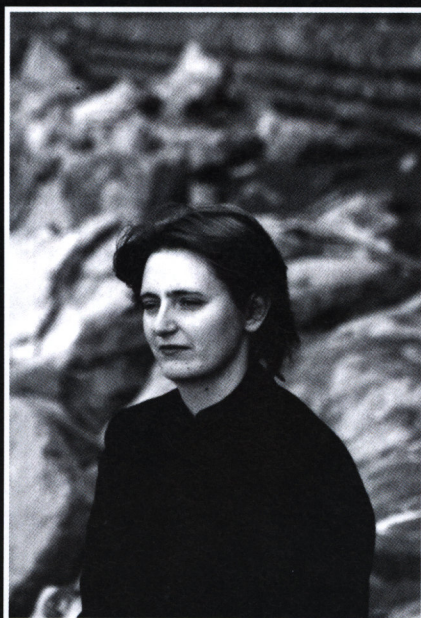


CERI JORDAN

PLAYING MOTHER

Ceri Jordan lives in mid-Wales, in a large rambling house full of other people's dogs and cats. She turned to writing after ten years in theatre, during which her principal claim to fame was almost electrocuting Val Doonican. She still regrets this missed opportunity. Better known for her SF and dark fantasy work, 'Playing Mother' is her first venture into the grim and gritty world of crime.

ILLUSTRATED BY ANDY COX



As they took the slip road up onto the Butetown Spur, rain thumping against the blood-splattered windscreen as if God had finally decided to lend a hand, the DJ said “Here’s one I’ll bet you haven’t heard in a while,” and, over the intro, “For everyone out there battling the weather tonight...”

“Stop the car — what’s his name...?”

“Robbie.”

The Taff was a strip of yawning black beneath them, fringed by the sparse, pale lights of Grangetown. Robbie slammed the car into fourth gear and floored the accelerator. From the tinny speaker on the dashboard, Michael Stipe began to wail. *This one goes out to the one I love —*

“Oi, Robbie ! Stop the effing car!”

This one goes out to the one I left —

“I said stop the effing — ”

— *behind.*

To his left, the Cogan Spur, the sleepy backstreets of Penarth. Too obvious. Carry on. A-road all the way through to St Bride’s, then the M4 at Junction 33, that was it. Just concentrate on the numbers. Not the blood, not the pistol unused in his pocket, not the three in the back seat and what the hell he was going to do with them. Just the map in his head, and the numbers.

Glancing into the mirror and finding no pursuit, no blue lights, nothing but a couple of delivery vans and the rain, Robbie leant across and turned the radio off. In the sudden silence, the younger girl — whose name he still didn’t know, whose name had been none of his business until ten minutes ago — began to sniffle into a lipstick-stained tissue.

“You know,” he observed, “I didn’t think anyone actually said ‘effing’. As such.”

Cheryl scratched at her scalp, where dark roots were beginning to show, and returned to the ritual of fumbling through her pockets. “Leave the poor cow alone.”

The girl sniffled again. “Was he really dead?”

“He was dead,” Wyn said, and had to clear his throat, painfully, before he could continue. “We wouldn’t have left him otherwise. Would we?”

It was the first time he’d spoken since Angel Lawrence died. Glancing up into the rear-view mirror, Robbie met his gaze for a moment. Blank. Empty. Like the men invalidated home after that bloody balls-up in Macedonia, staring unblinkingly out from under the bandages, waiting for the hell inside their heads to subside.

Blinking away after-images as reflected headlights glittered on the river below — the Ely now, narrow and edged by deserted yards and stunted, sinister woodland — Robbie said softly, “No. Course we wouldn’t.”

Wyn nodded firmly, as if he’d just established an important point, and sat back in his seat.

“There are cigarettes in the door compartment beside you, Cheryl. Just have one and stop fumbling about.”

“Ta.” She extracted a packet of low tars from the litter, waved them round at the others. The girl wrinkled her nose as if she’d been offered a dead rat, and Wyn just sat there, staring blankly at the rain. Rebuffed, Cheryl produced a lighter (gold, he noticed, watching them all in the rear-view, and shaped like a fish) and lit up. “Want one, Robbie?”

“No. I don’t smoke, thanks.”

Cheryl closed her eyes and drew on the cigarette. “Now,” she suggested, exhaling, “would be a good time to start.”

Watching his knuckles whiten on the wheel as he braked lightly for the next

curve, Robbie offered: "Will I put the radio back on?"

Wyn shuddered deeply, and said, "We'll have to stop and let them out soon."

"Not yet."

"Jesus, Robbie, we're in — " he squinted out at the dark for a moment — "Trelai Park already. How are they ever going to get home?"

"If they've any sense," Robbie murmured, "they won't ever go home."

"What d'you mean?" the girl demanded, lunging forward to grab at his shoulder. "I said I'd be home by midnight. What's my mam going to think?"

Robbie looked sideways at her in the treacherous light. "What's your name?"

"Carla."

"Sit down, Carla."

"The hell I — "

"Once we're safely away, I'll let you out, and give you the money to get back. What you do then, that's your problem. But the car's not stopping yet. So sit down."

Carla swallowed slightly, and shuffled back into her seat.

People didn't argue when he used that tone. Sometimes they'd snap, and go for him; drunk boys in pubs, or worn-out, desperate men who'd done something stupid and couldn't face the consequences. But no one actually argued with it.

The lights fell away behind them; open country now, worked-out farms and poorly attended tourist attractions half-glimpsed as they hurled northwards. Easing the car down to forty-five, he realised for the first time how lucky he'd been, to survive so long in this business with just a rep and a tone of voice.

Luck ran out eventually. He'd always known that. Things went wrong, and you got out with whatever you could carry and started again. That was what he expected out of life. That was fair enough. He'd just never expected to end up playing surrogate mother to a dead dealer's heir and two street-corner tarts on the A4232 on a wet night in August, with barely a hundred in his wallet and nowhere safe to run.

"**These Irish bastards,**" Angel Lawrence had been saying as they turned into Factory Street a little after nine. "Our Robbie's worked for me how long...?"

Robbie shifted position in the driver's seat, checking he could get to the gun fast enough if he had to. "Three years, Mr Lawrence."

"Three bloody years," Angel agreed, nodding until the folds of his neck shuddered in agreement. "And it's hard enough to get him to take a bloody beer off you. Now I offer him a little fun, and what does he say?" A parody of Robbie's accent, stage-Oirish, inaccurate enough to suggest he'd never really listened to the real thing. "He says, 'No thanks, Mr Lawrence'. Says it'll interfere with him doing his job." Elbowing Wyn in the ribs, Angel raised his voice to a near-shout. "The whole point of having a tart, Robbie, is so you don't need to use your hands. Isn't it?"

Wyn sniggered briefly. Maybe just being polite; but like the rest of the family, you could never be sure. Eyes on the road, Robbie smiled tightly. "Yes, Mr Lawrence."

"'Yes, Mr Lawrence', he says. Bloody hell. You're a good man, Robbie, don't get me wrong here. But you need to bloody loosen up. Relax." A crooked grin creased his face. "After all, we're celebrating. No more maintenance to pay that bitch. Did I show you the wedding photo she sent?" A crumpled photo landed in Robbie's lap; the former Mrs L, resplendent in orange silk, on the arm of a tall Latino man with a dark, immaculately groomed ponytail. "Married a bloody Spic, too. Small-time grass dealer selling to kids in the Valleys. Pathetic." The



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familiar scrape of a lid being unscrewed from a hip flask, a couple of gulps. "Still, more'n she deserves."

Wyn's pale eyes met Robbie's in the mirror, cold as a demon's.

The crossroads with the imaginatively-named Factory Lane boasted the only working streetlight for a few hundred yards, and the girls fluttered around it, arguing listlessly in the dying light. Trade must have been brisk; normally, there'd be a couple of dozen girls around, but he could only see five. Six, with that foreign-looking one huddled shivering in the doorway. Looked like she was coming down off something rough. Certainly shouldn't have been working.

Pushing aside bad memories, Robbie slowed the car to walking pace, and kept his eyes on the road.

This was the worst part of the job. The other duties, they were mostly what he'd learned in the army. Waiting, watching, noticing things; looking out for the captain's back, because he was always too busy being a bloody captain to watch out for himself. Driving, more waiting, sometimes a tense moment, a hand halfway to a gun because someone else's bruiser had been stupid, tried to play the big man at the wrong moment. But mostly, like the army, it was just long tense shifts preparing for things that never happened.

And nights like this.

The girls had spotted them now, and were coming to the kerb; spread out in a neat line, no fighting, no shuffling. Because this was a civilised transaction, an agreement between consenting adults, not a cattle market at all.

He watched their disappointed faces in the mirrors as the car crawled on, propelled by Angel's commentary. "Look at those tits, bet they're fake... No bloody way. No son of mine shags a jungle bunny, not while I'm still breathing..."

And, finally, just as Robbie thought they were up for another drive, another street corner: "Stop."

He braked lightly, easing to a halt beside the next girl. Woman, more like; had to be forty, even under that make-up. He'd seen her before, on different corners, different nights. Leaving the handbrake off, just in case, he half-turned to check the road. Empty. The rejected tarts were drifting away, lighting cigarettes and muttering among themselves. Three blokes in a car like that, could have been a nice little catch.

Angel wound down the window, smiling benignly at the bleach-blonde as she draped herself against the passenger door, stroking the metal with perfectly manicured fingers. "Hello, Cheryl. Remember the game we played last time?"

She nodded slowly, the corners of her mouth turning upwards.

"Right you are, then." Angel opened the door; Robbie tensed. The street was still empty, except for the disinterested girls and the coughing wreck on the doorstep. Nothing was going to happen here. Maybe Angel was right. Maybe he should just relax.

"This is my boy, Wyn," Angel told her, as she squeezed past him into the rear seat and found herself crushed against a weakly grinning teenager in a baggy suit. "His first time out. You recommend someone for him?"

Wyn squirmed, and turned a colour that Robbie couldn't find a name for. Total embarrassment purple, maybe. Cheryl's mouth wrinkled, and she nodded at the girl at the end of the row. "Only started last month. Nice girl. Not much on conversation, though."

"I'm not paying her to talk." Angel swung himself out of the car, beckoning. "Oi, you. The redhead. C'mon."

The girl glanced at Cheryl; some signal must have passed between them, because she smiled thinly, tottered up the road and lowered herself into the back seat.

Resigned, Robbie leant across and opened the passenger door. Despite those daily sessions at the gym, Angel Lawrence wasn't the skinny young lad he'd been when he got his nickname, and he wasn't going to fit in the back now.

Grinning like a jackal, Angel leant into the front of the car. His breath smelled of whisky and ginger. "Come on, Robbie, boy. Last chance. On the management, too."

Robbie shook his head slowly. "If we try and fit six people in this car, we'll get pulled over. Where's the point in taking risks?"

"Lighten up, Robbie, for God's — "

And then she was there; a glimpse of blonde hair and heavy eyeshadow as she leant in beside Angel, her hand playing across his shoulder, giggling like a demented Marilyn Monroe. "You boys got room for one more?"

"Bloody hell, Robbie," Angel smirked, "how can you turn that down? Look at the legs on — "

He stopped then, a split second before the shot. It wasn't that he'd seen the gun; couldn't have, she had it in her right hand, behind his back. But he'd known, somehow, just known.

And then there was the soft thump, like a dropped book on a stone floor; blood sprayed the passenger seat, the windscreen, flecked the pristine grey of Robbie's jacket. Angel buckled at the knees, his weight pushing the passenger door closed. For a moment, his startled face was pressed against the window, staring blankly in at them through blood and fragments of his own skull. Then his legs failed completely, and he slid into the gutter, out of view.

The girl staggered back, the gun limp in her hand. Some stupid first-timer, just discovering what it felt like to blow the back of an old man's head off. Behind her, the dark-skinned junkie stood up; a heavy jaw, a young man's face under that deceptive mass of loose dark hair, and a sawn-off shotgun cradled lovingly in both hands.

Recognition flickered in his eyes — not Robbie, but someone in the rear seat. Then he raised the shotgun and sighted along what was left of the barrel.

Robbie did the only thing he could. Leaving the gun untouched inside his jacket, he floored the accelerator, and took the corner onto Rover Way at sixty-five, scattering stray dogs and bouncing the dustbin they'd overturned back up onto the pavement with a clatter to wake the dead.

They were five hundred yards down the road, headed for the Spur and safety, before either of the women remembered to scream.

Carla woke up with a start as they eased into the parking area, blinking round the unlit car as if hoping it had all been a dream. "Where are we now?"

"Junction 54," Wyn said mechanically. "Outside Sanclêr."

"Where?"

"Past Carmarthen," Robbie told her. The car park was all but empty, most of the cars clustered near the invitingly-lit doorway of the Hi-Style Diner. He headed for the edge of the cluster, where they'd be able to get back to the car under cover if they needed to.

"Carmarthen. Shit."

"Well, that's what most people think," Cheryl agreed. She'd spent the last ten minutes fixing her face with the aid of a tiny mirror and a torch, and she actually looked fairly presentable. A bit underdressed, for driving through the arse-end of the world on a wet Friday night, but not enough for anyone to call the police.

Robbie parked up behind a tatty charity minibus, using the handbrake this

time, and undid his seatbelt. Behind him, someone was already clawing at the door locks.

“Child-lock’s still on,” he announced, and turned to face them. Cheryl, quiet and passive, waiting to see what happened. Wyn, still too shell-shocked to know what to do. And the girl, Carla, shivering and picking at the doorhandle with her ragged red nails.

“In a moment, we’re all going to go inside, use the facilities, and get some coffee. Then we’ll decide what to do next.”

“I just want to go home.”

“I know, Carla. We all want to go home. But we’re going to do this sensibly. No one’s going to call the police. No one’s going to run off. We’re going to act like normal, average people, and we’re going to find a way to sort this mess out. Okay?”

Wyn nodded in that unreadable way of his. Then Carla. Cheryl just shrugged.

“Good. I’ll meet you all in the diner in ten minutes. Wyn, give Carla your raincoat. Cheryl, take mine. It’s on the back window shelf.”

The locks snapped open, and Carla practically threw the rear door open and tottered away into the night.

Cheryl smiled. “Guess she doesn’t like raincoats.”

As they emerged into the night, thin mist condensing on their jackets, Robbie asked softly, “Are you armed?”

Wyn shook his head.

Terrific. “Doesn’t matter. Just keep your eyes open. Right?”

Wyn was already slouching away into the dark.

Scowling, Robbie reached inside for his one scrap of evidence; then locked the door, moved round to the rear of the car and ran his hands over the cold metal. The shotgun blast had nicked the left wing. Just scratches. Could have been anything. Relieved, he opened the boot. Tools, half a fishing rod, old Fanta cans. A smell of rotten fish. And a spotless overnight case. Spinning the combination locks to the day and month of Wyn’s birthday — sentimental bastard, Angel — he opened it.

There. Under a couple of clean shirts and a whole heap of tissues and wet-wipes, a black cotton jacket. Didn’t match his trousers, but it was dark enough and late enough for no one to notice. Careful to keep his left arm at his side, disguising the bulge of the holster, he changed jackets and stuffed the bloodstained one into a carrier bag. Covered in his hair and sweat and all sorts, and Angel Lawrence’s blood. They’d have to burn it, eventually, but that wasn’t important now. Take everything in sequence. That’s how you get through. Concentrate on what needs doing now. Take care of today, and tomorrow would take care of itself.

The tremors started in his knees, like they always did. It only took seconds for them to spread up into the body, the hands, scattering the minipacks of tissues from his numb fingers, but sometimes it took twenty minutes for them to die away.

This time, it was a minute at most. One deep, steadying breath, and he could support his own weight again, pick up the tissues and put them away, hunt out the first aid kit and tuck it under the passenger seat, just in case.

He could cope. Natural stress reaction, that was all. He was in control.

For the moment.

Sanclér Motorway Services had been designed by a sixties nostalgia freak, all coloured plastic and glistening chrome. Piped rock-and-roll vibrated through



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the cracked speaker in the toilets as Robbie took a leak in the cleanest cubicle, and checked the clip in his semi. Nine. Not good. There might be a few rounds under the mud-mat, passenger side, but since Angel had taken to hiding his personal stash down there, ammunition had become something of a lower priority.

All in all, this was a bad situation.

He walked out into the foyer, took a quick, casual look around. There wasn't anything much to look at. A couple carrying their whimpering children back out to the car, murmuring to soothe them. Three Asian lads laughing outside the ladies', like they were daring each other to barge in. Too young and too loud to be any problem.

It wouldn't be dignified, for the girls to come out and find him there like he was stalking them. Not after that bullshit pep-talk he'd given. Frowning, Robbie moved through into the diner.

The tables were dirty, and there was only one counter open, manned by a spotty boy reading a car magazine under the counter. He straightened up uncertainly as Robbie approached, as if the place had been deserted so long that he was no longer sure how to react. "What can I get you, mate?"

"The biggest coffee you've got," Robbie murmured, scanning the confectionery counter. "Four of them."

While the boy fumbled with ugly porcelain mugs and packaged cream portions, he loaded the tray with chocolate and crisps, adding a couple of bottles of fizzy water as an afterthought. Punching icons on the till, the boy grinned feebly. "Long journey?"

"That's right."

He took a table in clear view of the door, and waited.

Cheryl arrived first; spotted him immediately, and settled herself opposite, pouring cream into the watery coffee as if it was going out of fashion. "Well?" she asked, after a moment. "What's next?"

"When the others get here."

She stirred the coffee absently, clanking the teaspoon against the rim of the mug. "You done this before?"

"No."

She shrugged. Trying to look surprised, and failing. "How did you get into this line of work anyway? Can't imagine they advertise in the job centre."

"I don't see you're in any position to criticise."

"I'm not criticising. I'm asking."

Robbie closed his eyes for an instant, hoping that would validate the answer he was about to give. Suddenly, he felt very tired. "I heard a lot from people who'd come out of the army, and couldn't adjust. When I came out, I chose a job where I wouldn't have to adjust at all."

Raising the mug to her perfectly rouged lips, Cheryl flashed him a thin smile. "What's so funny?"

She shrugged a little. "I lost sight of what it is I do years ago. To myself, my family, the stupid buggers who stump up the money. Sometimes, I can't imagine there ever was a daft single mother who couldn't pay the rent one week and decided she'd stand on a street corner, just the once, out of desperation. But when I look at you, I can see who you used to be. What you could still be, if you walk away from here now."

Robbie massaged his temple with one hand, trying to decide what it was she was really saying. Nothing plausible occurred to him. "Look," he offered, a blind guess, "if you're asking me to get you out of that, set you up — I don't have that

kind of money. Neither does the boy.”

“What boy?” Wyn murmured, taking the seat beside Cheryl.

Flicking his wallet out of his pocket, Robbie emptied it dramatically onto the table. “We’ll need petrol before we leave. Could risk the credit card, maybe. Police won’t necessarily be searching for us yet. That leaves this for you and Carla. Fifty-five each, and small change. Enough for a taxi.”

“Fifty-five quid, minus the taxi fare, for a whole evening?” Cheryl exhaled through her teeth. “What the hell am I supposed to tell Terry about this?”

“You won’t have to,” Wyn murmured. “It’ll be all over the news by morning. Gland bloody execution. By a fucking tart, too...”

Robbie laid a hand on his arm until his breathing stabilised again. “Save it, Wyn. There’ll be a better time.”

The boy shook his head. “I’ve got a better idea. We’re going to turn round and go back. Drop these two off, then go to Mum’s place. She’ll give us both an alibi, for my sake. Tomorrow, we start asking questions. There are only a few... businessmen in Cardiff with the nerve to pull this off, right? We just have to find them.”

Robbie took a mouthful of coffee; took his time over it, too. Letting the boy wait. Letting him understand that he wasn’t his old man, and he had no right to lay down the law here. Finally, when Wyn looked like he was about to make another announcement: “No. We’re not going to do anything of the sort.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because,” Robbie murmured, and passed him the wedding photograph.

“I don’t...”

“The one huddled on the step, the one who looked like a junkie. The one who blew half our near wing off.”

He didn’t have to go any further. The wheels were already turning in Wyn’s head, fragments of information, suspicion and horror slotting together like the clues in a Sherlock Holmes case, baffling but inevitable.

Cheryl drained her coffee mug, and muttered, “I’d better go see where the kid is.”

Click.

Like a lock failing on a trapdoor, letting in the light; everything falling into place. Wyn was getting up to let Cheryl past, but he stopped, obedient and confused, at Robbie’s signal. She scowled, too tired now to manage anything else. “Now what?”

“Story’s not over, Cheryl. Don’t you want to know who it is in that picture, who’s trying to hurry along our funerals?”

Her eyes searched his face for a moment, looking for something to shape her excuses around. Like she was wondering what had given it away. How calm she’d been, maybe. Fixing her make-up in the back seat with such steady hands. Or the soap-opera speech about what a good lad he was at heart.

“I don’t care,” she said finally. “He’s not after me.”

“You were there. You’re a witness,” Robbie reminded her. “Sit down, Wyn. The lady’s not going anywhere.”

“But the girl — ”

“Probably throwing up in the bogs. She’ll keep.” He turned back to Cheryl; poised halfway out of her seat, her mouth a hard line of crimson. “You knew Angel. He liked you. He’d pick you out of that line-up straight away. God knows why, with younger and fresher everywhere — ”

“That’s it. Let me out of here.” She shoved hip-first into Wyn; but he understood now, leant forward to block her path, grinning like this was a family game. No

one was paying any attention anyway. "Give me the money, and let me out, or I'll scream the place down."

"Let you go and phone the Spic? No way."

A slow smile played across Cheryl's lips as she sank gracefully back into the chair. "Did that already, Robbie. He knew you'd head this way, he was already halfway here."

Robbie was out of the seat before the words had even sunk in; grabbing Wyn's arm, hauling him upright. "You," over his shoulder to the impassive Cheryl, "stay there. If you come after us, I'll kill you."

Cheryl shrugged. "Done my job. Just like you. You're a pro, no one has any grudges with you. No one will come after you." Her voice followed them into the stifling heat of the foyer, soft and very clear. "Not if you leave the boy."

Memories, crowded in when he least expected, least needed them; sand, wind, someone in pain and calling for him, out in the light where it was suicidal to go...

Gripping Wyn's arm as if he expected the boy to make a run for it, Robbie turned him towards the rain-smearred double doors. "Stay beside me. This is the spare key — if anything happens, take the car and go."

"But Carla — "

The double doors slid open before them, admitting a swirl of wet air and the distant swishing of motorway traffic. "She's not our problem," Robbie murmured. "From now on, there's just — "

The door beside him came apart in a waterfall of glass.

He pushed Wyn towards the dimly bleeping games machines, pure instinct; dropping into a crouch as the second blast punched through the wall behind him, spraying the foyer with shredded chipboard. Someone was screaming, way in the back of the cafe. Cheryl, the boy at the counter; didn't matter. He hit the floor, rolled, the semi already in his hand. That was both barrels gone, but no one was stupid enough to rely on a sawn-off as a main weapon, not even a small-time grass dealer with his eye on another man's wife and another man's empire.

The edge of the games machine loomed, offering cover; garish letters screaming TOTAL ANNIHILATION BONUS LEVEL in the flickering light. Wyn was in behind the other, poised in a kind of frozen excitement, unsure whether to laugh or scream.

"Robbie...?"

"Shush."

Silence. Water dripping through the damaged ceiling behind him; sobbing, a distant car alarm. Movement.

He fired without even thinking; the white saloon shuddered under the impact, but whoever, whatever he'd seen was already back in cover behind it. Two cars to the left and they'd both have a clean line of fire; damn, he needed better cover.

Pain exploded in his shoulder, pinning him to the wall. The semi spun from his hand, thumping against the foot pedals of the machine, clattering out of reach. Shadows shifted in the dark; he reached out, trying to push them away, but they were further away than they looked. Wyn was yelling something.

"Leave him alone."

The pony-tailed man looked down at his thoroughly unwanted stepson, and smiled.

"He's just doing his job. You want me, then fine." His voice had moved; must be standing up. Trying to provide a distraction, maybe, but it was pointless,

there was too much haze, too much pain. “Just leave him alone.”

“God,” the new arrival muttered, levelling the pistol, “she was right. You talk too much.”

The door of the ladies’ creaked, just a little. He heard it, Señor Ponytail, and started to turn, but far too late. The broom handle caught him on the side of the head, staggering him; broken glass slithered underfoot, and Wyn was there, pinning him to the ground, hitting him, hitting him until there was more blood than the glass could account for and the gun fell harmlessly to the tiles.

Fingers pressed to the wet fluttering pulse in his shoulder, Robbie levered himself onto his knees, and shuffled out of cover.

Carla looked at him as if she’d forgotten who he was, dropped the broom, and began to cry.

“Good girl, Carla,” he managed, his throat so dry he could barely speak. “You’re doing really well. Don’t lose it now.”

She swallowed hard, and kicked the broom handle, as if it was responsible for this whole mess. It didn’t seem to help.

“Shit,” Wyn managed, slumping back into a sitting position, blood staining his knuckles. “You okay?”

“No, actually, I’m not. Help me up.”

It was Carla who moved; supporting his weight carefully, expertly, as his shocked body struggled to cope with the effort. He wondered vaguely how many friends she’d helped limp home after a bad night, how much violence she’d seen before tonight.

“It isn’t bleeding much,” she observed. “Can you move your fingers?”

Robbie nodded vaguely. “We’ll fix it in the car. Wyn. Take his gun.”

The boy looked at him as if he’d asked for the square root of ten billion.

“Take his gun, and deal with him. Or I will.”

Shivering, Wyn retrieved both guns; handed the semi to Carla, and stood there for a moment, trying to decide which angle to aim the pistol at, where to target.

“Stand further back,” Robbie murmured, as Carla helped him out into the rain. “It’s a messy business, killing.”

Wyn blinked at him a couple of times. Then pulled the trigger.

They waited out the night halfway up a farm access road above Whitland, taking it in turns to doze as the rain leaked through the sunroof and smeared the windows, washing away the past. When they finally emerged into the beginnings of the commuter run, close to 8AM, Wyn driving with the stiff caution of a learner and Carla shivering in the front seat, the sun was shining.

“Where to?” Wyn asked, as they reached the bleak outskirts of Carmarthen.

Robbie yawned. The bleeding had stopped, the wound was clean. He’d get by. He had to. The Babes In The Wood here were his responsibility now. They needed him.

The idea was strangely enjoyable.

“Llandoverly, Brecon, Hereford,” he announced, as Carla turned the radio on. News on the half- hour; they should find out whether the car was being looked for. “Back roads. Then up to Birmingham. I know some people up there, they’ll put us up until we can find somewhere.”

Wyn nodded, and nudged the indicator as they approached the northbound turning.

The DJ said, “Here’s one I’ll bet you haven’t heard in a while,” and Carla smiled and began to sing along. CW

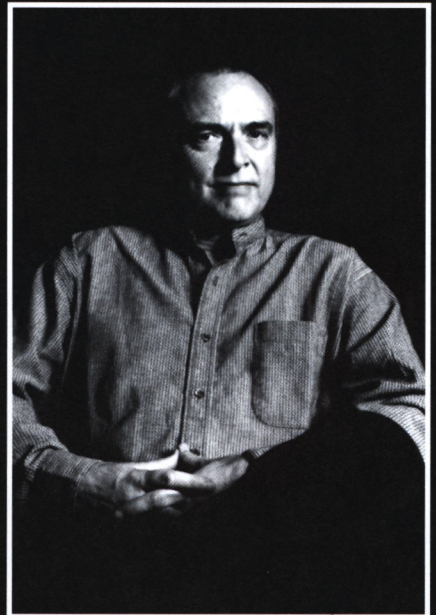


PETER CROWTHER

SHATSI

In the space of just eight years, Peter Crowther has edited or co-edited twelve anthologies, written a collaborative novel (*Escardy Gap*, with James Lovegrove), produced several hundred review columns and author interviews, and sold some eighty stories (some crime/mystery, some horror/fantasy and some even straight-ish sf) to magazines and anthologies on both sides of the Atlantic. Two collections of his stories – *The Longest Single Note* (where 'Shatsi' first appeared) and *Lonesome Roads* – were published in 1999; a third, entitled *Conundrums to Guess*, is scheduled for a spring 2001 release in the USA. He recently started a specialist publishing imprint – PS Books – just so he has something to do in his spare time. He lives in England with his wife, Nicky and their two sons.

ILLUSTRATED BY RODDY WILLIAMS



When the wind is just right you can smell the dreams. They're almost palpable, a thick mixture of smog, sweat and hope, drifting along Wilshire, Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards, pooling in the hollowed-stone footsteps and handprints of Marilyn Monroe and Hank Fonda, Jimmy Stewart and Jeannie Crain, and all the others that litter the sidewalk and courtyard of Grauman's Chinese Theater.

For Benjamin Wassermann, it would always be Grauman's. Fuck Teddy Mann.

Bennie Wassermann, whose resumé now has him as Sherman Tyler, sets the black valise down on the cracked paving stones beside the public phone kiosk and shuffles in his pocket for some change. He drops a quarter into the slot and dials. A woman's voice answers. "Thank you for calling," the voice says. Then, "Herman Morris's office, how may I help you?"

Bennie has heard the line before, albeit with a different name maybe, but it always seems like the words or the phrases are in the wrong sequence.

"Hi there," he says, sounding real friendly. "Is Mr Morris in right now?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr Morris is in a meeting this afternoon."

Bennie has to give it to her, her patter is well rehearsed. The woman sounds genuinely distraught that the guy can't take the call: the only problem is that Bennie knows he *can*. "Can he be interrupted?" Bennie asks, oozing concern and sincerity, spreading on a little bit of Peter Falk in *Columbo*, the re-runs for which Bennie always watches on Channel 13. "It's important."

"I'm sorry," comes the response.

He waits.

"What is it regarding?" the voice asks, covering her ass. "Maybe somebody else —"

"It's a... It's a personal matter," Bennie says, sticking to his script, smiling as he delivers the hesitation. He pours sunshine into the mouthpiece, sunshine and professionalism. A Fuller Brush salesman with a hint of Jimmy Stewart, awkwardly playing with his hat brim, shifting it around in his hands. "But I think he'll want to take this call."

There's a two-second delay before the voice says, "I see. May I tell him who's calling?"

"He won't know me...*doesn't* know me."

"Well, as I said, Mr Morris is busy right now. Is this something you could write him about?"

Bennie shakes his head and then remembers that the woman can't see him. "No, no, this is something that really needs to be dealt with over the telephone."

"I see." But her tone says that she doesn't see. She doesn't see at all. "Well, may I tell him what it concerns?"

"It's personal," Bennie says. "I already told you that." A harder edge gleams in the words like a discarded razor-blade catching the light, Martin Balsam in *Psycho*.

"Yes, well, as I told you, Mr Morris is —"

"Tell him it's about his cat."

"Pardon me?"

Bennie shifts the handset to his other hand and frowns. In the mirror on the wall in front of him, Bennie thinks maybe he just caught a glimpse of DeNiro in that shitty remake of *Cape Fear*, even down to the Hawaiian shirt. He says, "Look lady, you heard me. Just tell him."

Another pause. "Hold the line please."

Bennie fishes a handful of coins from his pocket and drops them onto the open directory beside the phone.

A man's voice says, "What is this?"

Bennie is still Max Cady. "Mr Morris?" he says.

“This is Morris. What is this? Something about my cat? Is she okay?”

Bennie says, “Mr Morris the theatrical agent?”

“Who is this? Is this some kind of stunt?”

Bennie shakes his head and thinks Damon Runyon. “No, this is some kind of telephone call,” he says.

There’s a long silence on the line before Morris says, “So what about my cat?”

Bennie can’t keep the grin out of his voice. “She’s fine, Mr Morris, just fine. She’s missing you.”

“Where’s Rita?”

“Rita?”

“Yeah, Rita. She’s looking after Shatsi. Is there something wrong with her?”

“Is that Rita or Shatsi?”

“Listen you dumb fuck, don’t mess around with me. I’m asking you if my cat’s okay.”

“I already told you, Mr Morris, the cat’s fine.” He moves the handset back to the other hand again, frowning at the moisture glistening on the plastic. “Your cat’s name is *Shatsi*? What is that? Is that German? French? It sounds French...”

“Who are you?”

Bennie says, “Me? I’m a Samaritan, Mr Morris. Call me... Call me the patron saint of animals.”

“You’re a fucking animal you... What you doing to my cat?”

“Hey,” Bennie giggles. “Hey, I’m not doing anything to your cat, Mr Morris. I love cats. Really.” He waits to see if Morris is going to say anything. When there’s no response, he says, “Next to caviar, I love cats the best. Cat stew maybe, or cat carbonnade...or maybe ca — ”

“What the fuck are — ”

“Don’t shout at me, Mr Morris.” He flexes his shoulders. That wasn’t right, he thinks. A little too much Tony Perkins, too vulnerable, too weak. He closes his eyes and, pushing a smile into his tone, he pictures Christopher Walken in *True Romance*, talking to Dennis Hopper. Reasonable but firm. “I don’t like it when people shout at me,” he says. “Like I say, I only like cats next to caviar or fillet steak. Thing is,” he continues, the smile broadening into a real shit-eating grin, “I can’t afford caviar. Can’t even afford fillet steak.”

“What have you done with Rita?”

“Ah, Rita.” He pauses. “She the little Spanish bitch?”

“What have you done with her?”

“Rita’s fine. Everybody’s doing just fine, Mr Morris. We’re all fine here.”

“Put her on. Put Rita on the line.”

Bennie clucks, puts on his regret voice, his *Oh gee whiz, I don’t think we can do that* voice. “She’s not here, Mr Morris. Rita isn’t here.”

“Where is she?”

Bennie shrugs. “Back where I left her?”

“Oh, Jesus Chri — ”

“Hey, now hold on. Don’t go getting — ”

“What have you done with Rita, you sick fuck?”

“Now you’re shouting at me again, Mr Morris, and I told you I don’t like that. I’ll call you again soon and we’ll talk.” He slams the handset down onto the cradle and glares at it, feels the muscles at the side of his jaw twitching. He turns and kicks the concertina door to the phone booth until it shakes, kicks it once more and watches the top pane of glass slide slowly out of place and down onto the floor. He lifts the handset again and listens, hears the dial tone and slams it down again, then kicks the pane to the back of the booth next to

the valise, watches it shatter against the wall, his jaw still twitching.

Sick fuck? Was this any way for a theatrical agent to speak? He'd heard that Morris was connected and that proved it. He picks up the valise and makes like he's going to throw it out into the street and suddenly feels a shift of movement inside. He leans against the glass and shakes his head, laughing a little, the twitching fading away now. He's getting to much into the part. Time to settle down.

"Looks like it's me and you for now," he says, his mouth against the shiny black leather. "Shatsi." He shifts the word around in his head until it feels right, like well-chewed gum. He puts the valise under his arm and steps out of the booth. Somewhere over west, a siren wails like a banshee. Bennie figures it probably isn't for him.

Back in his apartment, Bennie tips some more bourbon into the funnel and watches it pool in the bum's mouth, thin rivulets pouring over the unshaven chin. The bum shakes his head from side to side and Bennie grab's hold of the guy's nuts, tight, like he's going to tear them right off through the stained crotch of his jogging pants. The bum makes to call out and that relaxes his throat. The level of bourbon falls rapidly and the bum swallows, reluctantly at first and then gratefully. He coughs and splutters while Bennie looks at the bottle. Looking down at the bum, Bennie dials the number.

"Hello?"

"Mr Morris?"

"Yeah, it's me. What do you want?"

Bennie smiles across at the cat and whispers, "Don't record me." Then he hangs up, waits a minute and dials again.

"Hello?"

"Hey, long time no speakee Mr Morris." He chuckles and then stops — it was sounding like Frank Gorshin's Riddler. "How you doin'?"

"Will you tell me what you want?"

"Hey, you're shouting again. No shouting, okay?"

There's no response, just the electronic hum of silent frustration, the all-permeating darkness of murderous anger seeping down the line.

Bennie says, "I said, okay?" He slaps the table with his free hand. Special effects.

"Okay, okay. Take it easy."

"That's better Mr Morris. You recording me again?"

"No, I'm not recording you."

"You're lyin' to me, Mr Morris. Are you lyin' to me?"

"No, no, I'm not lying."

"Because if you are then it might be that little Shatsi here says nighty night to her master, you know what I'm sayin' here? Shatsi go beddy-by permanent, you understand?" He holds his breath, hoping he's not overdoing it.

"I understand. I hear you loud and clear."

"Good. Hey...loud and clear: I like that. It's like out of the movies, you know what I mean?" Bennie lets the silence hover and then says, "But you know all about the movies, am I right here Mr Morris?"

"What do you want?" Morris's voice is calm and quiet. "Is it money?"

Bennie laughs and affects a nasal whine. "'Izzit money?'" He laughs again. "You bet your life it's fucking money, Mr Morris. Second thoughts, you bet your cat's life. Little Shatsi here. You catch my drift?"

"Yes, like I said, loud and clear."

"Yeah, right: loud and clear." Bennie throws in a giggle and is only a little

SHATSI

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BURNING DOWN
THE HOUSE



surprised at how realistic it sounds. “I still like that,” he says.

“Good. So everybody’s fine?”

“Everybody’s fine.”

“Then,” Morris says, hesitantly, “we have to make sure everybody stays that way, yes?”

“Right.”

A pause.

“So how do we do that?”

Bennie draws in his breath, making like he’s thinking about it. “Well, it’s gonna be expensive, you know what I mean?”

Morris says, “How much?”

Bennie says, “Pardon me?”

“How fucking much do you want?”

“Ah, well — ”

Morris sighs and Bennie thinks he can hear other voices whispering somewhere near. He pictures them all crouched by the telephone or maybe a couple of handsets, everyone advising and suggesting. And Morris getting suddenly pissed at the whole thing.

Sure enough, Morris says, “Now listen to me, you shitwipe, and listen good.”

Bennie smiles and punches the air. He says, “Hey, you’re — ” and sure enough Morris interrupts.

“Hey you’re nothing, fuck-up. *Listen* to me. Rita is in hospital and — ”

“Rita?”

“My maid.”

“Right. The Spanish bitch.”

Morris lets it ride and says, “She saw you?”

Bennie stays silent, breathes a little heavy...like he’s trying to think back, trying to remember.

“She said you were like a superhero.”

Bennie can’t stop the snigger. “Like a *what*?”

“A superhero. Like in the comicbooks, she said. Big black cape.”

Bennie looks across at the bed, across at the bundled-up black cape lying over the headboard. “That’s some ID,” he says.

“It is with the sneaker.”

Bennie smiles. Bingo! “S-sn-sneaker?” he says, dragging the word out like he’s suddenly gotten nervous.

“You left your sneaker on my front lawn.”

“So what are you, huh? Prince Fuckin’ Charmin’? You gonna go round town tryin’ on an old Nike to everyone you see? Shee-it!”

“You drinking?”

The question catches Bennie on the hop. “Huh?”

“I said, are you drinking? Think about it, asswipe. It’s an easy question. Look at your fucking hand and tell me if there’s a glass in it.”

“So what if I’m — ”

Morris lowers his voice, like he’s breaking a confidence, and says, “So this. You bring my cat back and we call it quits. Maybe I even let you have a bottle for your trouble. Like a reward for finding Shatsi? Plus I give you back your shoe and maybe a few dollars to fold up in your back pocket. What do you say to that?”

Bennie gulps in three or four mouthfuls of air, swallows hard and then lets out with a belch, right into the mouthpiece. “What say we forget the reward and I eat your cat, Mr fuckin’ hot-shot theatrical agent?” He thinks a second for a suitable exit line, smiles and adds, “My momma always tol’ me never to drink on an

empty stomach.” He slams down the handset and smiles across at the sleeping bum.

Outside the window behind the bed, the sky is black and moody.

“Okay,” Bennie says, “time to go walkees.” This time, he’s using his normal voice.

It is almost midnight.

He drags the unconscious bum out into the yard and lays him beside the car. Then he dresses him in the cape and bundles him into the back seat. He throws the valise in after him.

The drive takes a little under forty minutes. When he gets to the top of Beaconsfield Drive, Bennie turns off the ignition and lights and rolls down to the clump of trees and parkland adjacent to Morris’s house. He sits there for almost fifteen minutes to make sure he hasn’t been seen, then he gets out of the car.

A minute later, he pulls the bum out of the back seat and drags him around the front of the car, lays him half on the road and half on the sidewalk.

Bennie gets back into the car and starts it up, drives forward over the bum. Slowly. He hears the bones crunch even over the sound of the engine.

“A Dodge is one heavy fuckin’ car, man,” Bennie says to the night, his voice a cross between the Fonz and Jim out of *Taxi*, in the days before Christopher Lloyd was a wacked-out scientist in the *Back to the Future* films or a Klingon spaceship captain in that *Star Trek* movie — the one where they rescued Spock from the planet that was blowing itself apart with the Genesis project doo-hicky.

Bennie gets out of the car and runs around to the crumpled body, kneels down beside it and feels for a pulse. The bum is as dead as dead can be.

Bennie takes the knife from his pocket, cleans it on his jacket, and slides it into the bum’s outstretched hand, curling the dead-as-dead-can-be fingers around the handle. Then he runs back to the car and grabs the valise out of the back seat, pulls out the drugged cat and throws the valise back in. He slams the door. With the cat under his arm, he runs back to the body and goes into the performance.

“Oh my *God!* Oh my good *lord!*” Bennie shouts to the night. He stands up and yells, “Hey! Anybody! There’s been an accident out here.” He runs back to the car and leans on the horn, cringing at the sound as it rings through the early morning stillness.

He moves back to the body, stares down at it.

Somewhere behind him a light comes on.

He hears footsteps and muffled conversation.

Then the bum groans.

Bennie says, “Jesus Fucking Christ!” and kicks the bum in the side of the head. Someone shouts, “Who’s out there?”

He considers dropping the cat, getting in the car and driving the hell away from the whole mess. But he’s come too far to stop now.

“There’s been an accident out here!” he shouts, loud, so nobody can hear the dull thud of his shoe hitting the bum’s head again. *What is he, this guy — a fucking Kryptonian?* “Over here!”

Bennie turns around and sees a dim movement over by the front door behind the gates. Still a ways off. He braces himself and jumps into the air, landing with both feet on the bum’s head. It splits like a melon.

“What you say?” a voice asks.

Wiping his shoes on the grass as he walks towards the voice, trailing them behind him like he has two club feet — or maybe like Boris Karloff in the Frankenstein movies — Bennie says, “I knock this guy down and...and he pulls a

knife on me. Guy's carrying a cat, for crissakes, and he pulls a knife on me."

"Who're you?" Gene Herman Morris says, his voice filled with sleep.

"Me? I'm —"

"What are you doing here?" Another voice, over to the left.

Bennie turns around and looks into the beam of a flashlight, shielding his eyes with his free hand. The beam moves off and illuminates the figure on the road.

Bennie waits, dreading some telltale movement, half expecting the bum to stand up and — *Truth, Justice and the American Way!* — just dust himself down. But the body doesn't move, not even when the guy holding the flashlight bends over him and lifts his one bare foot.

Bennie sighs with relief. That was just what he didn't need: a near-dead vagrant brought back to life by somebody tickling his feet.

The voice speaks again. "I said, what are you doing here?"

Bennie shrugs. "I was...you know, I was out driving." He points across at the house and waves his arm around the whole deserted street. "Hey, I often drive around the movie people's houses. You know?" He shrugs again. "I'm an actor myself but —" Another shrug. "I'm between roles right now." He laughs disarmingly. "Looking for the big break."

"Looking for the big break at one o'clock in the morning?" the voice asks. It comes from the figure alongside Morris.

Bennie turns around to make sure the bum's still on the ground. "He dead?" he asks.

The man stands up, shines the flashlight at Bennie's car. "Yeah, he's dead. Good car," the man says as he walks to the Dodge.

Bennie laughs. "Old car, more like. Still, it gets me around."

The man is running his hand along the front of the hood, like he's caressing it. "No, I mean there's not even an impact mark."

"No?" Bennie shifts from one foot to the other. "Huh. Well, I hit him a good one." He shrugs. "Maybe I wasn't going fast enough to do any real damage."

"Did plenty of damage to him," the man says, swinging the flashlight's beam back to the crumpled body.

Bennie decides that the statement doesn't need a response from him so he lets it go.

The two men in the shadows are muttering.

Morris steps forward. Bennie recognizes him from photographs in the movie magazines. "So you're an actor?" he says.

Bennie gives another shrug, laughs a little and looks down at his feet. "Well, trying anyway."

"Maybe I can help you out," Morris says, holding his hands out.

Bennie does a surprised stutter, a kind of who and why, both abbreviated to "Wh —"

"That's *my* cat," Morris says. "Guy stole my fucking cat." He nods to the bum. "Can you believe that?"

Bennie hands Shatsi to Morris and shakes his head. "It's a weird world," he says, slapping his leg.

"Well, I figure I owe you," Morris says, tickling the cat under the chin, frowning at the lack of response he's getting.

"He looks traumatized," Bennie says, pleased with himself at changing the cat's gender without even thinking.

"It's a she," Morris says.

"Oh," says Bennie. "Sorry."

The man in the shadows steps forward. "So he pulled a knife on you *after*

you'd hit him? Or before?"

More shrugs from Bennie. "I, er... I hit him — well, first off, he just suddenly appears, you know? Across the street?"

The man with the flashlight is opening the Dodge's door. Bennie can hear the click. "And?"

"Oh," says Bennie. "Let me think." He laughs and clasps his hands together. "It all happened so fast," he says. "Yeah, that's it," Bennie says, "I hit him and he goes down — " He claps his hands. "Boom. Like that, you know? And I get out of the car and go around to him and he pulls a knife!"

Now Morris says, "The guy pulls a knife on you when he's lying in the road?" He chuckles. "I guess you really pissed him off."

Bennie falls in with the chuckling. "I guess I did."

"Then what?" says the man.

"Well, I... I kicked him in the head," Bennie says, suddenly realizing that that all makes some kind of sense — it also explains the guy's head looking like a fruit crumble. "Yeah, I kicked him in the head — " He demonstrates. " — twice, like this, and I take the cat from him." He flashes his open palms and smiles. "And then you guys appear."

A voice behind him — from the Dodge — says, "This is your car, right?"

"Sure it's my car," Bennie says, turning around. "You think I'm a thief? Hey, *he's* the thief," he says, pointing. "That guy over there."

The man is standing with the door open, leaning on the roof, looking across at Bennie. He lifts something into view. The valise. "This yours?"

Bennie feels whole sections of his guts tearing off and sliding down to the tops of his legs. He starts to laugh a little and gives a little shrug, looks around at Morris — who's even now taking a step towards them, frowning — and glances at the other man, who's watching him, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Well?" the man says again.

Bennie nods. "Well, it's my sister's," he says.

The man nods. "Well, I guess that must make your sister pretty small."

"I didn't mean — " Bennie starts to say.

"There a problem, Joe?" Morris asks.

Joe slams the Dodge's door and walks around holding the valise like it's a trophy. "I think so, Mr Morris," he says. "No sign of impact on the hood or the fender, car stinks of booze, bag stinks of pussy — and not the kind you'd want to spend a night with — and — " He points across at the still prone figure on the street. " — guy there shleps across town with one bare foot and there's not a mark on it. That's what set me off wondering in the first place."

"Wondering? Hey, you know," Bennie says, indignantly, "I did you a favor, but this is all getting a little strange for me and I'd just as soon — "

Morris nods to the second man and the man grabs hold of Bennie's arm.

"Like I said," Morris says, "looks like I owe you."

Joe has now reached him and taken his other arm, swinging the valise by his side. The first man has pulled something out of his pants pocket. Bennie can't see it fully but he doesn't think it's a contract. It looks too solid.

What's the phrase? *Cast iron*.

"Let's go inside...discuss your part," Morris says. "Frank, bring him inside. Get rid of the car, Joe. And clear the street."

As the other man — Frank — starts to walk him towards the gates and the waiting house beyond, Bennie tries to think of something to say.

"Say Goodnight, Gracie," Joe whispers as he lets go of his arm. CW

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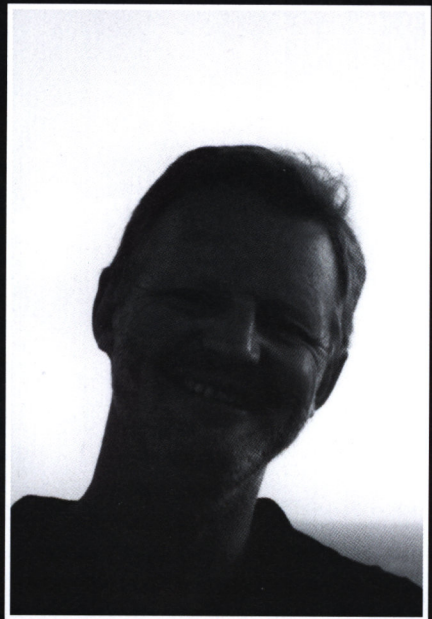


PAUL MARSHALL

THE TERRORIST'S TRUTH

Paul Marshall has been a teacher several times, a journalist and worked for a handbag company in Soho. Two of his plays have been produced on Radio 4. He has had an increasing number of stories published in a variety of magazines and a feature article published in *Mojo*. He has found, through *Crimewave*, that crime pays, but not very much.

ILLUSTRATED BY WENDY DOWN



Henry stands by his barbecue. The steak pieces sizzle compliantly. Beside him his immaculate garden stretches down towards the high conifers. Their shadows fall across the lawn, stretching to touch the white wall of the Georgian town house in Hampstead's Streatley Place. On a sunny day, like the one now drawing to its close, the borders are aflame with scarlet roses. Henry brushes the portions of meat with a deep red sauce.

His wife Anne is greeting Wilf who has arrived as invited, punctually at eight. Wilf has brought a bottle of champagne.

Anne has just slipped into some tight blue jeans, high heeled boots and a tassled, suede top. Two minutes ago, she was still brushing her hair, which she's always kept long and somehow kept golden.

"You look like a country singer," Wilf says to her.

"Stand by your man," she sings.

"Your biggest mistake," Wilf whispers in her ear.

"Don't start!" She twists away with a dance step or two. In a louder voice she announces, "There will be the four of us."

Henry responds. "Ah yes. What's her name again?"

"Camilla."

"Camilla." He repeats the name. "You've got that Wilf. Camilla. She's thirty-six my informant tells me. She invited herself. Amazing isn't it?"

Anne hands Wilf a glass of wine. "It wasn't quite like that and Henry knows it. This is supposed to be a good Bordeaux. I'm on my fourth!"

When Wilf's relationships fail, which they always finally do, Anne is there to introduce someone new. "I get a kick out of watching you lusting for these creatures," she told him once. "It's not as good as having you for myself but it's the next best thing." Sometimes it amounts to something. Often it amounts to nothing. For Anne, it's part of the thrill. "Camilla is simply one of my evening class art students. She's from South America but I know very little about her."

"That's surprising," Wilf remarks. "Your homework is usually so thorough."

"I've got business interests in Sao Paulo," Henry says, "so this evening could prove interesting. They want some decent housing for the expanding middle classes out there, apparently."

Wilf turns to Henry. "This champagne is for you." He's rehearsed this several times, anxious to sound carelessly assured. Instead it sounds subservient. Why did the difference in money make him behave this way? "Happy Birthday for Tuesday."

"Forty," reflects Henry turning the meat. "But I feel twenty years younger." Henry plays tennis. In fact he looks ready for a game now, in his white top and trim white shorts. He studies the bottle's label. He frowns. "Maybe you lecturers *should* get paid more."

Wilf now feels even more wretched. He is overdressed, wearing a tie for goodness sake, and on his feet are the scuffed leather shoes he teaches in. He rather imagined the meal would be inside, that the whole thing would be far more formal.

Anne shows Wilf around the garden. He is asked to smell the roses. He dutifully obeys. The density of the sweet scent takes him by surprise.

The door bell rings. The three of them look up. Anne rushes through the house to meet Camilla.

Camilla smiles, fixing her eyes in turn on Henry, then Wilf. Her hair is cut short and appears strikingly dark against her pale olive skin. Like her hair, the long dress is very simply styled and completely black. Her only jewellery is a pair of small earrings in the shape of birds in flight. Wilf concentrates on how it might be if her smooth naked skin was pressed against him.

They sit in reclining wooden chairs. Henry draws attention to them. "You won't approve of these or the table," he says to Camilla. "Hardwood from the rainforests. My company is planning to build in Sao Paulo. Any advice about that? Which part of South America are you from?"

There is a pause as Anne attempts to tear her steak apart with her serrated knife. The others watch as thin dark blood oozes onto the plate. "Is this meat done Henry?"

"I'll be forty next year," says Wilf, more confident now from the wine. "Tell me Henry, are the good times ahead or behind?" Inviting Henry to talk about himself sometimes made him tolerable.

Camilla cuts in before Henry has a chance. "Behind." She leans forward, moving her plate to one side. "The first forty years include the span between eighteen and twenty-five, when we are most alive, most responsive. For me these were the years everything happened. I fell in love for the first time, lost my virginity. In these years I went to University. I learned about art and literature. I became a freedom fighter, took drugs. I travelled all through North America, Europe and Indonesia. I was married, divorced. Even the bad times were great times!"

Henry points a fork at her. "Freedom fighter? You mean a terrorist." But at that moment a small bird swoops down onto the bird-table beside them.

"It's so tame!" whispers Anne. "Whatever is it?" For a brief moment, the bird's vivid yellow and green transfix them.

"So brave," Camilla breathes.

"Is what Camilla saying true for you Anne?" Wilf asks. He wants to continue this conversation to find out more about Camilla. How fascinating to talk to a genuine political activist who has actually witnessed first hand the terrible social injustice in South America. He looks briefly at Anne and her silly gaucho outfit. He wonders why he has believed for so long that she is the only woman he has ever truly loved. Perhaps it was as well that Henry had stolen her away, seducing her with his immoral earnings.

"Say 'no' Anne," laughs Henry loudly. The little bird holds its position, as if trained against its nature. "Disagree with someone for just once. Just once!"

Anne, by tilting towards Camilla, shields herself from Henry's stare. "It's the *best* time," she says. "It's the best time by far. I was at Bristol University with Wilf, more years ago than I would like to admit! We had very strong ideals in those days."

"Anne, you are so beautiful. You are my friend." Camilla leans across the table to stroke Anne's arm but her elbow brushes Henry's glass which rolls off the table. It smashes against the patio stone. The bird, startled, flies off towards the conifers.

Henry kicks the broken glass into the earth of the flower bed. (They have a gardener who is paid the going rate.)

Darkness has crept up on them. Wilf can hear music from somewhere, perhaps from a party not too far away. He wants desperately to take Camilla elsewhere.

Henry turns on an outside light. It shines unpleasantly into Wilf's eyes. For several seconds he can see nothing at all. "I am sorry it's so harsh," says Anne.

"It's meant to be," Henry quips. "It's designed to track down insurgents." They all notice the insects, large moths in particular, caught in the beam. "The dance of death," Henry observes. Anne points to her empty glass. He hands her the wine bottle. "Well Camilla, I have no degree. I am a builder. I make things people require for survival. We all need a roof over our heads. *That's* something worth fighting for wouldn't you say? I still get my hands dirty too, if we're a man short."

Anne plays with the wisps of grey hair on her husband's neck. "It has made us rich!" she shouts, punching the air with her free arm. "Have you seen Henry's brand new Volvo? It's got some special safety thing. What exactly is it Henry?"

"Side Impact Protection System," Henry explains wearily. He rises to his feet, abruptly, to stretch his legs. Alone, he walks to the end of the garden.

The mobile phone rings from the kitchen table. Anne rushes into the house. It is her daughter Claire. She explains that she has to stay at her boyfriend's flat. She has missed the last train. She blames herself. Henry is right. Too soft. She has always been too soft.

She turns round to find Wilf facing her. "She's not even fifteen." Anne has tears in her eyes. "One abortion already," she whispers.

"I thought I'd help with the coffee," Wilf says. He kisses her lightly on the cheek. She holds onto him tight, something she has not allowed herself for many years. He has to remove her hands firmly. "The others might see us." He would have risked all and kissed her on the mouth but the thought of Camilla is too distracting.

In a tiny room above a small newspaper shop in Ladbroke Grove, Camilla has recreated her own version of South America with sunburst batiks and woven wall hangings. "This is temporary of course," she explains.

"You have created something out of nothing," Wilf enthuses.

He is sitting on an old deep sofa. Camilla stands in front of him. She lifts up her dress, sweeping the material to one side. She sits astride him. "In my country the Henrys and Annes are the engineers," she tells him. "They are architects, attorneys and physicians, living in their split level houses high up in the hills. There are sea birds up there: gannets, pelicans, cormorants, yes even albatrosses come that far inland! It is the place of blood red sunsets. Of course there is a price to pay, a big price for those who have stolen this paradise, after the guests have finished their cocktails on the verandahs, after they have posed as if still in the era of colonial days, after they have contributed to discussions about the opening of new markets and reserves of foreign currency, after they have made their polite and dignified exits. It is later, during the silence, when the house is still, when the only sound is from the insects. The price, Wilf, is the fear that we will come for the host in his bed, that we will butcher him with our knives. And his family too."

Camilla lowers her head as if to kiss Wilf's mouth but he has to ask her the question: "So what did *you* do? What did you do to these people?"

"I remember the dog. 'The dog, the dog, shut the dog up,' I hissed to my partner. Suddenly the barking stopped. The killing had begun. We found him in the bedroom, the economist guy, there with his wife. They were lying on their sides facing the same way." She reaches across him for a cigarette. She fumbles for the lighter. "You want to be quick for them. You try to be as quick as possible for yourself."

Wilf tastes the stinging of the barbecue sauce at the back of his throat. He feels a lump of undigested meat coming up into his mouth. He wants to push Camilla to one side, to run to the sink to rid himself of all the food and wine in his stomach, to rid himself of this night, to rid himself of her. But she has him pinned down. She is pressing her firm shoulders into his palms. He can feel the sinews, the hardness of her muscles. He is aroused by this body of strength, its certainty and its will to act. He moves his hands down to the bare skin of her thighs.

She pushes him away and sits at the small pine table. She exhales from deep

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inside. "I had this sudden notion that we were being watched. I looked behind me and there was a child, a little girl staring at us, clutching a toy monkey. She was in a white nightgown with blue trimmings, a little blue pocket. The monkey had a yellow hat. My partner walked slowly towards her. He placed his knife on the corner of her parents' bed. Her eyes were fixed on my partner. Then she saw the knife. Her eyes kept darting from his eyes and the knife and back again. The girl's mouth opened slowly but no sound came."

Camilla flicks ash onto the metal ashtray.

"She saw our faces. That was the problem. 'We have to kill them *all*,' my partner said. He was trying to act cool but I could see his hands trembling, his whole body trembling, even the muscles of his face. The girl was just standing there right beside him as if waiting for an order. I grabbed hold of my partner. I tugged at his sleeve with all the force I had. I dragged him from the house. We escaped to the hills above the cluster of housing, beyond the compound. My partner produced a small hip flask of whisky. He kept repeating the same thing. 'She saw our faces. We should have killed her, killed them all. We've done the wrong thing.' Back at the hideout we told the others that we saw the little girl clutching her toy monkey with its yellow hat and so we decided that her father, an evil, evil criminal, responsible for the misery of thousands of defenceless peasants, for that is what they are forced to be, we decided that he should live.

"My reputation isn't good, Wilf. Back at home they think I'm one huge risk. They think I can't get the job done. They said they'd give me a second, and last, chance. They sent me here, out of harm's way, to deal with Henry. But I have to know what I'm into. That's why I joined Anne's class, to get invited to the house. I had to be convinced about your Henry's crimes against humanity."

Henry? She couldn't seriously be considering doing away with Henry. It is such a bizarre idea that Wilf doesn't dare ask her. Instead he says, "So why tell him you were a terrorist?"

"To draw him into an argument so he'd have to defend his plans for Sao Paulo."

"Then our bird of paradise appeared from nowhere."

"It was just a yellow wagtail!" Her mood changes as if suddenly awakened. "Your friends, Henry and Anne. They know nothing that matters do they? Nothing about beautiful, natural things. Ah yes, except for roses from Hampstead's very own local garden centre." She tilts her chair back. "Never mind," she adds darkly. "I have enough evidence. All that I need."

"What evidence? What do you mean?"

She looks directly at him. "You very much need to be on my side Wilf. You have to be."

Wilf is suddenly afraid for Anne. His fear for her takes hold of him. A vivid picture of her forms in his mind of her cowering in a corner, hopelessly shielding her face and body. And the knives are out. "You mustn't bracket Anne with Henry. Anne is a good person Camilla, a good, kind person."

"I've worked very, very hard on Anne. At each evening class I stay behind to help her clear up, wash the brushes, collect up the unused paper. Of course I have told her what a wicked man this bastard is, how he is building where the hills are prone to landslides. In Rio, in 1988, 277 people were killed from one landslide and over 19,000 people were made homeless. These are the real crimes. But she will not leave him. She is a big danger to us Wilf. I cannot make the same mistake again. I have given her every chance. She could, and would, destroy us."

So this is all it takes he thinks as Camilla beckons him to the table. She stares at him intently. He notices how very dark she now appears: the thick eyebrows,

the heavy lashes, the eyes themselves. "It will look like a terrorist attack. This is why we will use the Russian cheesecake. They will absolutely know it is me. Wilf, they will never suspect you, never. How could they? Why would they? That is the beauty of it. It is me they will come for."

But Wilf's mind is swimming, outmanoeuvred by her body, exhausted by her words. I get it, he rehearses silently. I agree to murder two people for a cause I have no interest in and risk life imprisonment. But somehow he does not say this. Instead he tries to listen to the intricacy of her scheme while contemplating vaguely on the absurd banality of it all. There is a bomb, a cylindrical biscuit tin crammed full of one and a half kilos of dynamite, aluminium, nails and buckshot. Apparently, a Sainsbury's 300 gram Scottish Shortbread tin will do fine. There's a wick and a cigarette lighter. Finger prints, forensic evidence, the fluid and fibre collectors? All that detailed stuff he imagines those 500 page airport novels to be weighed down in? He understands nothing about the fantasy of it all, let alone the reality. He is a philosopher by trade. He should be asking himself: is it a humanitarian bomb or an evil bomb? He has no idea. All the time there is an aching in his thighs where Camilla's thighs rested. He wants her back on top of him, like that, again, more than anything else in the world. Would he kill for it? It seems he might.

He looks down at the grain patterns in the table's surface. "And what about you?" he whispers, then repeats the question more firmly. "What about you? What happens to you?"

"Oh I will make fools of all of them, the ones in uniforms, the ones without uniforms, the ones in the cheap suits, the ones in expensive suits, and the ones in skirts too, of course. They know it's me. Then they find out it can't be. So they look for someone like me. I have been trained for this, for day after day, for hour after hour. I know exactly how to play this, believe me. They never look for people like you, I promise." She kisses him very softly on the mouth with a new gentleness. "Don't worry about me. I will find you again soon when it is safe. Then you can place your hands wherever you like, for as long as you like." She kisses him lightly once more. "Listen to me. Listen, listen, listen. All that matters now are my instructions. Shut everything else out." She leans towards him, staring into his eyes. "This is what you must do..."

He does listen, understanding now that he cannot afford to let his mind wander a moment more. He concentrates like hell. Then she tells him to leave.

It is 6:45AM. Leaving Victoria Station he heads for Wilton Road. Early buses pass by. Chains are unlocked, iron grills removed. As the city frees itself from the night, he frees himself from the claustrophobia of Camilla. The clear cold light of the morning compels him to focus on cold reality.

Ahead of him stands a phonebox, maybe twenty paces away. He has spent so much of his life impressing upon students the importance of being rational. Now, no thoughts at all come to mind except that he must contact Anne.

"Is Henry there? Are you properly awake?"

"He leaves at six."

"Camilla. It's about Camilla."

"Are you stranded or something? Did she kick you out?"

He tells her about Camilla. He tells her everything.

"It's all complete fantasy," Anne sighs. "She has one vivid imagination does that girl. She's tried all that with me but I checked her out. She left Brazil when she was thirteen. She's never been back." She stifles a yawn. "She's nuts. You don't have to see her again. Nor do I; the art course is finished. To hell with her.

Now, how about this? Henry has given *me* a present. He had it hidden in the garage all the time you guys were here last night. It's an absolute darling, a little Peugeot. It's got a CD player, electric windows, a glass sunroof, a driver's airbag... Wilf? Wilf? Are you still there? Aren't you listening to all this?"

"When you're like this I could kill you." It's a risky joke, except that he's already replaced the receiver.

Stepping from the kiosk, he sees that a woman with a small girl in a pushchair has been waiting. He smiles at them both. "All yours," he says.

The girl, who is clutching a large white teddybear looks up at him for a moment, hesitates, then screams. The mother attempts to calm her down. "It's all right Amy. It's all right."

"Yes, it's all right," Wilf tells the child. "I'm completely harmless." Seeing the woman give a half-smile he adds jokingly, "I'm actually a very decent bloke."

The woman crouches down to undo the pushchair belt and has some trouble lifting her daughter clear. This is why she will claim later that she did not see the man who talked to her being dragged into the back of a rented dark blue Escort.

"I thought you'd want me enough Wilf," Camilla says, twisting round from the front passenger's seat. "I really thought so. Now you are nothing but danger for me."

Whoever the man was in the back, who shot him dead right there and then, had obviously done such a thing before. The gun was right for the job; the wound made little mess. The CCTV bears witness to all that. It's just a question of identifying him. Camilla won't say a word despite the persistence of the ones in uniforms and the ones without uniforms, the ones in cheap suits, the ones in expensive suits, and the ones in skirts, too. CW

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THE HOUSE

ART BY DAVID CHECKLEY



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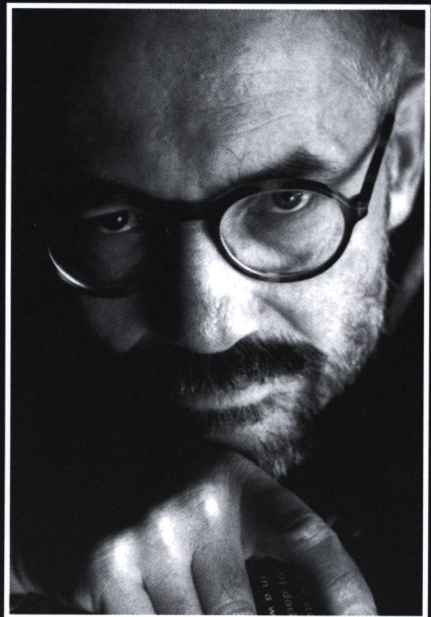
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GARRETT RUSSELL

DOUBLE OR NOTHING

Garrett Russell has spent most of his life writing advertising copy. In longer forms of fiction, he has also written many episodes of Australian television soap operas, half a Cantonese cop movie, one unpublished novel and short stories which have been published in Australia, Asia, the United States and now Britain. His crime stories appear regularly in anthologies published by CrimeWriters Queensland – check out the website <www.powerup.com.au/~crimewritersq>. Garrett now splits his time between business in Brisbane, beach bumming around Noosa and family life on a farm in France.

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID CHECKLEY



“Christ! The snake’s loose!”

“What snake?”

“What snake do you bloody well think? The only one we’ve got on bloody board. The western fucking taipan!” Devlin was practically crawling up the back of the pilot’s seat in panic.

“Don’t crowd me.” The pilot shrugged the little man away from his shoulders with more force than he needed and deliberately let his movement translate to the controls. It had the desired effect. Devlin pulled back with a strangled oath as the aircraft lurched through the black night sky.

If there was one thing Devlin was more scared of than snakes, the pilot knew, it was flying.

Devlin sank into the seat to the pilot’s right, pulled his legs up off the cockpit floor, dragged the snub nose .38 out from his sweat-stained belt and nervously snicked it off safety.

“What do you think you’re doing with that?” The pilot glanced sharply away from his instruments at the revolver, resisting the urge to slide his own feet off the rudder bars, out of the darkness under the instrument panel and up under the relative safety of his own bum.

“Soon as I see it, it’s dead,” Devlin hissed. “I don’t care how much the fucking thing’s worth, it gets a bloody bullet.”

“We’ll all be dead.” The pilot’s voice grew in authority. “You’re more likely to hit the fuel than the snake.”

He tapped the auxiliary tank for emphasis. It was a huge hulk of plastic strapped into the cabin just behind them. A Britten-Norman Islander usually has eight seats for passengers and two for the crew. This one had only the seats in the cockpit. The rest of its cabin, a deep dark cavern beyond the pale green light of the instruments, was crammed with the extra fuel and as many wire mesh cages as could be stacked along the floor and hard against the square sides of the fuselage.

Inside the cages, packed with far less care than you’d expect for collectible items worth over fifty thousand a pair on the world market, was a sad assortment of reptiles and birds that would never see their native Australian bush again.

Devlin almost shivered as he looked at the tank and reluctantly slipped the gun back into the sweaty waistband of his shorts. Even a man of his limited imagination could see the danger of firing in a confined space with so much high octane avgas.

“You got any better ideas, captain?” he snarled, leaning into the pilot’s face.

His breath stank of rum, thick and sweet as molasses in the sticky cockpit air. It filled the pilot with craving and anger: an exquisite thirst that made his cheeks tingle and his mouth water so much he could taste the sleazy pleasure of the dark liquid that filled his mind, and a seething fury that Devlin had broken the one rule they’d ever agreed on. Devlin knew the risks of temptation better than anyone.

But Devlin was not normally the one who rode shotgun aboard the Islander, so he wouldn’t normally have to face his own demon fears. The knowledge of this helped strengthen the pilot. Anger, he realised with a sudden insight, was an antidote to addiction. He relaxed a little.

“You sure it’s gone?” he said calmly, ignoring the sarcasm that dripped off Devlin’s last word. “Maybe I should go back and have a look to be certain...”

He snapped the buckle of his harness open and noticed with satisfaction the sudden look of horror on Devlin’s face.

At 150 feet above the coastal forests of the gulf country, the pilot had control, not Devlin. It was the only circumstance in which either man could consider such a radical reversal of their normal relationship, and even though both knew damn well it was the last chip the pilot had left to play, Devlin couldn't help but react to the bluff.

"Stay put and do the job I fucking pay you for," he said, the panic creeping back in his voice. "The cage is wide open, for Christ's sake!"

The pilot felt the primitive prickle of sudden fear at the back of his neck. So it was true. The snake would be loose all right, all two metres of it, probing through the blackness of the cabin and looking for something — anything — to vent its terror on.

The inland taipan is its formal name, what the academics call it when they're not speaking Latin. To the bushies, it's the fierce snake, and the only reason it's not generally ranked number one in lists of Australia's most dangerous snakes is that the few people who encounter it are those crazy enough to seek it out in the desert west of Birdsville where it lives. And if they're stupid enough to get bitten without a supply of anti-venene handy, they always die.

The pilot was certain taipan anti-venene of any kind was not a standard item in the Islander's first aid kit, and equally sure that neither Devlin nor anyone else involved in his enterprise would have bothered adding it.

His mind raced through a checklist of possibilities.

"Maybe it's not on board. The cage could have been open before we loaded it," he said the first one out loud, the one he knew absolutely to be impossible, only for the sake of Devlin's nerves. Maintaining control was critical now.

"Maybe." Devlin hadn't thought of it himself. "And if you're right I hope it bites that lazy bastard in the balls."

The lazy bastard was, in theory, Devlin's business partner, the only other person in Australia who knew about their flight tonight. He's the man who normally would have been in the co-pilot's seat, keeping watch on their cargo and their hired help, doing the business on the other side of the Arafura Sea.

"I'll tell you what, but," Devlin had brightened at the thought, "if it *is* on the ground I could get him to catch the bugger. We may as well make the flight with a full payload. With a bit of luck we'd only lose..." He glanced at his watch. "About half an hour."

"You'd need all your luck just to get back there." The pilot was alarmed at how quickly Devlin's greed had overcome his fear. "A night landing's like suicide."

He knew Devlin knew this. He'd told him often enough, every time he reinforced the limits beyond which he refused to take any aircraft. The one shred of self respect he knew he could never afford to lose was in his own ability in the air.

He was — *is* — a damn good pilot. He'd proved it yet again about eleven minutes ago, when he opened the throttles and sent the Islander bumping heavily down the dark dirt strip. Too heavily, he knew, with its overload of fuel and fauna, but within the stretched limits of the machine and the man who coaxed it into the thin black air.

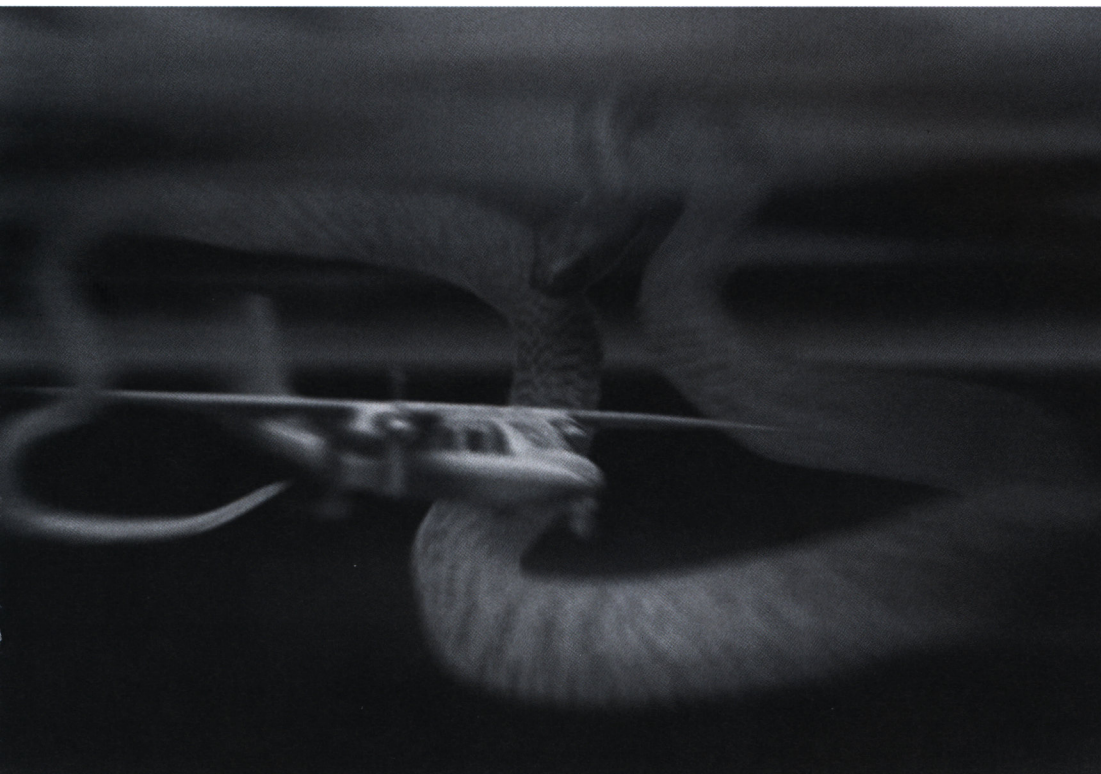
It was a take off any pilot would call dangerous — landing lights off a moment before he eased back on the yoke and lifted the reluctant nose into the sudden darkness, feeling rather than seeing the treetops at the end of the strip slide under the belly with, if they were lucky, twenty feet clear. Once, on one of his early trips, he had landed on their secret little Indonesian island with gum leaves and branch tips jammed in the wheels.

He'd had more dangerous take offs. Thirty years ago, there would have been Charlie's machine guns in the trees. But the flights were shorter then. On Devlin's trips, the take off was the start of an eight hour run. Even if he could find his way back to the property they ran the operation from, even if he could find the thin 1,200 foot strip of dirt in the dark sameness of the gulf country bush on a moonless night, even then the Islander would be too heavy for anything but a madman's landing.

"I'm maintaining my heading," he told Devlin to make sure he got the point.

Devlin just nodded. His face shone with nervous sweat in the instrument lights, eyes dark as a rat's, lips as thin as prison soup. He shifted stiffly in the seat. No way was this man going to last all the way across the Gulf of Carpentaria with his legs jammed up under his arse.

The pilot broke the silence: "You'll have to contain the snake somehow."



DOUBLE OR
NOTHING

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"Catch the bloody thing?"

"Not catch it, put something between it and us."

"Like a barricade behind the seats?"

Devlin was always quick to pick up on an angle.

"Hand me that fucking torch."

He moved off the seat as gingerly as a man stepping into a minefield. He slowly crept back into the cabin, his head jerking like a sideshow clown's, following the beam of the torch and looking for danger in every crack as he started to slide the cages around.

Devlin had every right to be cautious. He should have been moving into the taipan's territory, but the pilot knew with a sudden stab of burning pain that it was too late.

He could already feel the dull throb of the afterbite pumping up from the bare calf of his left leg. He registered surprise at how quickly the rudder bar felt leaden under his foot. But he didn't cry out and he didn't panic as he felt the muscular coiling under his seat.

A part of his mind looked with icy detachment at the irony of the scene: Devlin glancing behind himself as he worked, terrified of a danger he'd already escaped.

A sick grin took over from the grimace of pain that had screwed the pilot's face. So he'd lost another toss. It always was a fifty-fifty chance that the snake would strike him rather than Devlin.

He knew that all along, right from the moment he slipped the latch on the cage as he crawled through to the cockpit to start his pre-flight checks. The cabin door was already locked. The coins were in the air.

It was a punt he couldn't resist, and he couldn't even say he'd taken it rashly. This was a move he'd plotted for at least an hour, from when Devlin announced he was making the trip, and from the second he saw the size of the attache case Devlin wasn't letting out of his sight.

Usually the smuggled wildlife was all the payment required for the small white parcels they'd load along with the fuel for the return flight. Occasionally, Devlin's partner would have to hand over a few thousand more, always in cash. But this time, Devlin's presence on the plane with a bag so big could only mean one thing: this backload required enough cash to make the man nervous.

More than enough money, the pilot figured, for him to keep the promise he'd made to himself all those years ago. After he survived that first night flight across the gulf, he swore it would be the last. And it should have been: ten grand for two nights work was good money in Bahasa Indonesia, English, double Dutch or any other language.

But there were too many bars in Burketown, too many bottles of rum to be drained, too many packs of cards to be shuffled and too many pairs of pennies to spin.

Devlin knew how to pick the right man, and on the few occasions he couldn't pick his pilot straight up from the gutter and pour him into the Islander, he knew how to swindle him back to submission.

Double or nothing, that was the game.

Double or nothing, and the certainty that no matter how many times the pilot might win, Devlin always had more to play with.

Double or nothing had got him here, and he knew with all the telling clarity of the final whistle that Devlin had won for good.

Or was it more like a draw?

The detached part of his mind saw Devlin's panic as he struggled with the co-pilot's controls while the pilot slid down a bumpy path of shivers and spasms to unconsciousness. He savoured Devlin's terror, trying to land with too much power and a dead man's weight on the rudder bars. Then he also saw, in a jarring flash of gambler's instinct, that the bastard might just be lucky enough to survive.

It was the one last chance the pilot couldn't afford to take.

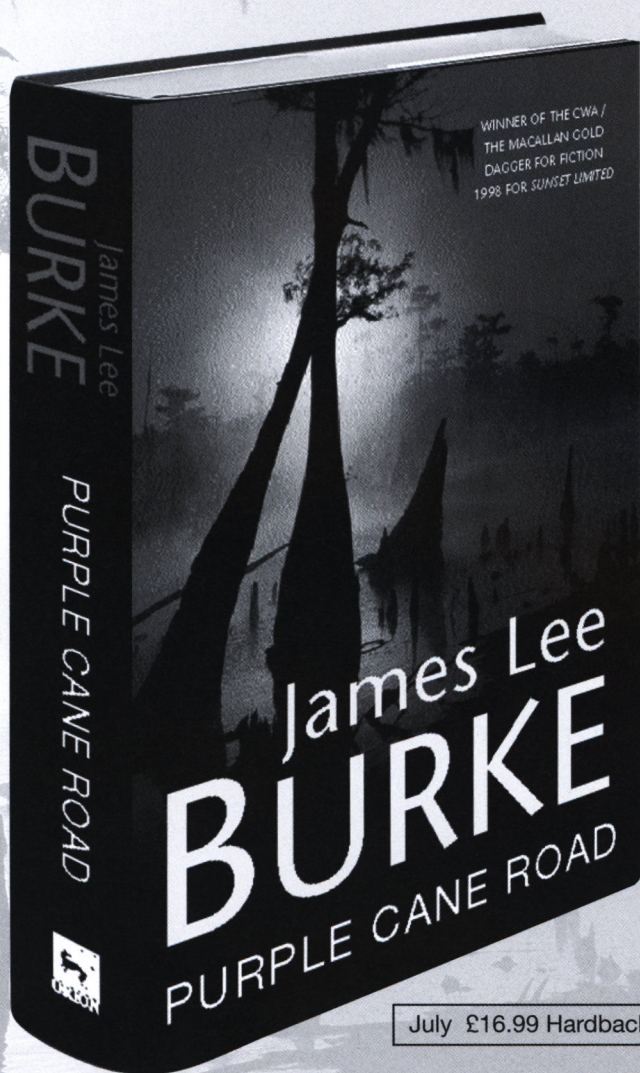
What the fuck, he was a dead man anyway.

"What the fuck?" He heard Devlin's muffled yell from the floor of the cabin as the little man was flung sprawling back by the aircraft's lumbering acceleration.

With the throttles pushed full open and a muttered apology to all the animals, the pilot shoved the nose down in a screaming power dive towards the dark mass a hundred feet below. CW

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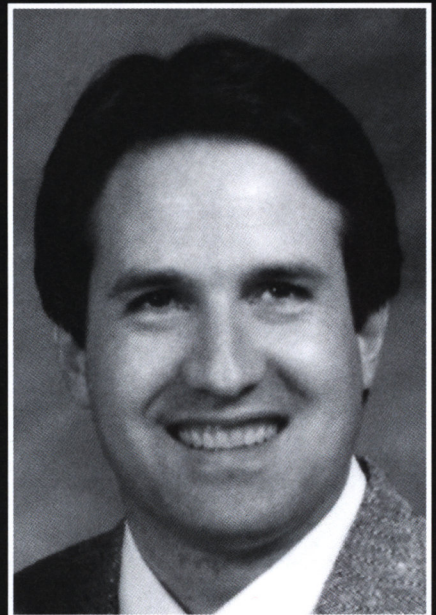


MARTIN SIMPSON

BREAK AND ENTER

Martin Simpson made a huge impact in Britain and in his native America with his first published short story 'Last Rites and Resurrections', and again with his second story 'Dancing About Architecture' which won the 1997 British Fantasy Award. As well as fantasy/slipstream fiction, he also writes clever crime stories – you may have read 'No Drowning Mark' in the first issue of *Crimewave*. Martin lives with his wife and two young children in Gainseville, Florida.

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID CHECKLEY



It's 3:15 in the morning and I'm standing in the living room. My ears are ringing, and my eyes aren't completely adjusted to the light yet. My cousin Wayne is lying on the floor beside the wall, staring down at the gunshot wound in his left side. The man who shot him is standing across the room, holding the pistol he shot him with as if he's forgotten he has it. It's his living room we're standing in, and I'm facing what you'd call a legal situation.

I know the man's name is Roger Morris, because I read it off the University of Michigan diploma on the wall in the den five minutes ago. He graduated twenty-three years ago with a BS from the College of Engineering. I know he lives alone, because I've staked out his house on five different days during the last month. I know he leaves for work every morning at 8:15, and he gets home anywhere from 5:30 to 6:30. I'm a semi-professional burglar.

My name's Robert, after my dad. I'm 28 years old. I know that my being a burglar doesn't predispose you to feel kindly towards me, since you're more likely to be a homeowner than a break-and-enterer, statistically speaking. But hold on to that a minute.

When I say that I'm a semi-pro, I don't mean that I don't have the work habits of a pro. I just mean that I have a day job. I'm a Service Specialist at a Quik-Lube, which means I change people's oil and flush their radiators for eight hours a day, four days a week. I work four days instead of five because the owners of the place, smart businessmen that they are, would have to pay benefits if I worked forty hours.

I'm your typical straight guy at my day job. "Hello, my name is Robert and I'm the Service Specialist assigned to your car." I say that twenty or thirty times a day, and if you brought your car in, you'd probably like me. I sometimes talk customers into buying one of our air filters for \$3.50 more than they could get it for at Wal-Mart, but I don't try to sell them one if they don't need it. I've got access to the cash register and a lot of credit card numbers, but I've never stolen a dime from the Quik-Lube in the three years I've been there. That might seem strange to you, but I keep my day job and night job separate.

I guess I've broken into more than three hundred houses in the last ten years. In all that time, I've only been caught twice. I spent less than two months in jail the first time, and that was only in the county lock-up, which doesn't hardly count. The second time was four years ago. I did eighteen months, and it was what you'd call a learning experience.

I've seen the same TV 'reality' shows and news specials on crime that you probably have, and they're about as full of crap as you should expect of TV by now. When I was inside, I learned that you can generalize about criminals just like you can about any other group, but you've got to remember that no single one of them will fit the picture exactly.

Your average burglar has got more than a touch of the voyeur in him, truth be told. I talked to a lot of break-in guys when I was in County, and more than a few of those I knew pretty well admitted to getting turned on sexually the first time they broke in to someone's house. I know that happened to me. Before you judge that, try imagining how it would sound to someone else if you wrote down whatever weird little things turn you on. I mean, if a pair of red pumps or the way somebody drinks a soda can do it, why can't breaking into a house? Of course, you hear all these weird stories about guys jacking off on the bed in their victims' houses, but that's not what I'm talking about. Those types are sickos, the same ones who vandalize places or kill house pets for no reason, or take a dump on the kitchen floor before they leave.

I'm talking about a more general kind of excitement, a feeling of power. It's

a real high, to be inside someone else's place. The house is more yours than theirs then, for as long as you're inside.

Most break-in guys will tell you that they prefer going in when the owner's not around. It makes sense. But I like it late at night, when I know the homeowners are asleep in bed. Number one, because if they're gone, you never know when they're coming back. People have a way of forgetting something right after they leave, and then they return and walk in when you're just getting down to business inside. Nope, I'd rather I knew where they were all along: right there in bed. If you're a pro you know how to go about your business quietly, and a penlight should be all you need to find your way around. And even if they get up during the night, they're disoriented and half-asleep, and you can almost always hide while they take a leak or an aspirin or whatever.

Of course, every job has its drawbacks. Going to jail if you get caught is no picnic, even if it's a rinky dink county lock-up. Dogs are a pain, too. The big ones can take a chunk out of your ass, and the little ones yap to wake the dead. But I've always had a way with little kids and animals. Twice I've been in places that had a dog that I hadn't known about, and I kept both of them quiet with hot dogs out of the fridge. Cats are a different story. I've never known one of those quiet little bastards to give a damn that you're ripping off their owners. They just watch you with those weird eyes and never do anything one way or another. That's good for me, of course, but it's still aggravating to think about, and I wouldn't want to own one.

I did my first burglary when I was eighteen, the summer after I graduated high school. I hadn't been able to find a job after graduation and I needed money. I got three hundred dollars and an adrenalin rush like you wouldn't believe, and I was hooked. Even after I got a job in the fall at the paper plant, I kept doing burglaries. Since then I've had four day jobs counting the Quik-Lube, but I've always kept up my night job.

I never went to college, but I'm self-educated. I read a lot on all different subjects, although criminal justice and the law are my favorites. A magazine article I read one time said that something like 30 or 40 percent of burglars go through family picture albums when they're inside someone's place. Isn't that odd? The theory was that they come from broken families themselves, and want to fantasize about how the other half lives, so to speak. I don't buy that. Even though I've occasionally looked at some family pictures on the job, and even though my family wasn't what you'd call a Norman Rockwell painting, I just look at the pictures out of curiosity. I always try to match up the house and what's in it to the family photos on the walls.

That's how I first realized that people are more than one thing. I've found porno magazines in all kinds of houses, sometimes in the neatest and most expensive houses in town. And not just mild stuff like *Playboy*. I mean trashy biker stuff, S&M. Violent gay stuff, when I know the folks are a married couple. Twice I even found kiddie porn. That really bothered me, but I couldn't think of any way of reporting it. In the end I left a whole bunch of the magazines all over the front lawn, so the neighbors could see it the next day.

Once I was in an old couple's house, and one bedroom had this shrine with a little elephant figurine with candles around it, like for an Eastern religion. Buddhism, or Hinduism, one of those. And that old couple was white, born and bred in America. There were black-and-white pictures in their albums, showing both of them growing up in some small town. One woman's house had one room filled with Elvis stuff: posters, dolls, dishes, a lamp. Probably one out of every five or six places I've been in has some weird collection or other. You'd be

amazed at some of the crap people get it in their heads to collect.

Tonight is the first job Wayne and I have ever done together. He's my dad's brother's kid, and I never really knew him when we were growing up. The whole family knows I've taken a couple falls for burglary, and after Wayne got out of County a month ago for the same thing, he showed up at the Quik-Lube and we started hanging out. After that, things just sort of developed, and here we are.

I still don't know what made Roger Morris wake up. We were inside maybe ten minutes total before he flipped the light on and surprised all three of us. I've got great ears and better instincts, but I never heard a thing. All of a sudden the lights were on and he was standing there holding a little revolver. I never carry when I'm on a job, and the only thing Wayne had with him was a penlight and a set of lock-picks. He looked as surprised as I felt when the light came on, and he made a little barking sound in the back of his throat, half-cough, half-laugh. "You scared the shit out of me," he told Roger Morris.

"You sons of bitches," Roger said. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"



"You caught us," I said, and raised my hands. "We're unarmed."

"Well I'm not," Roger said.

Wayne said, "No shit," and shook his head, disgusted at our bad luck.

Roger looked at him, and his eyes sort of narrowed, and all of a sudden I had a real bad feeling. He was a wiry little guy in boxers and a white T-shirt, and I saw the forearm muscles bunch up in his gun arm. "I asked you two a question. What are you doing here?"

Wayne must not have been watching Roger as closely as I was, because he said, "C'mon. Don't screw around with us. Call the cops and get it over with." I was watching Roger Morris's eyes when he pulled the trigger. I know what I saw there.

Wayne took a half step back, and looked down at his shirt, where a hole had magically appeared. "Oh, man," he said. His voice was quiet and calm, like he was only annoyed. He tugged his shirt out of his pants and pulled it up. There was the wound, round and dark against his white skin. Already the blood was

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coming, and when it started coming faster, he fell backwards. As he sits back up, the blood starts to gush, and he moans. He clamps a hand over the wound and looks at Roger Morris with frightened eyes. “Why’d you have to do that? I never — ”

The tone of his voice jars me out of my thoughts; I guess I’ve been in shock. But now I can hear the ringing in my ears again, and I kneel beside Wayne.

He says, “Oh man, Bobby, that really hurts.” He lifts his hand for a second, then clamps it back. “What’s in there?”

I’ve been around guns a little, growing up, but I’ve never seen anyone shot. I say, “I don’t know, Wayne. It looks like a .38.”

He grimaces. “No, I mean what kind of organs are in there? It’s too low for the heart, right?”

I look at the spot where blood wells from beneath his fingers. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure.”

“So what else is there? Kidneys, I guess, and the stomach. Where’s the liver?”

“I don’t know, Wayne. I think maybe that’s where the spleen is.”

“What’s the spleen do?” he asks.

“I’m not sure, but I don’t think it’s such a serious thing to injure. Remember, McMahon had a lacerated spleen against the Raiders in ’86, and he was back in time for the playoffs.”

Wayne’s hand shakes a little, and the breath hisses between his teeth. “Oh man, Bobby, this ain’t no game. I need an ambulance.”

His face is suddenly very pale. I turn to Roger, who is still standing in the same spot, his gun arm now hanging by his side. He’s almost as pale as Wayne. I snap at him. “Call an ambulance, now!”

I don’t think he heard me. He’s staring at Wayne and walking across the room toward us. “I didn’t mean — ”

He stops and freezes, looking over my shoulder. I turn back around and see that Wayne’s eyes are closed, and his head is sort of crooked. I put a hand against his forehead. It feels warm, but when I pull up one of his eyelids, the eye stares upward and the pupil doesn’t dilate from the light. There’s suddenly a lead weight in my own chest, and I can’t swallow. When I lift Wayne’s hand from his side, blood trickles out of the wound, but it doesn’t gush like it had been a minute ago.

“Is he dead?”

Without thinking about it, I spin around and hit Roger Morris with a right cross, the first time I’ve ever punched a guy. Outside of prison I mean. He falls backwards and drops the gun, and I pick it up.

I pace back and forth for the couple minutes it takes me to clear my thoughts. I know the spot I’m in, of course. Even though Roger killed Wayne, and did it with his own gun, and will tell the first cop on the scene the whole story, I’m still screwed. It’s a little quirk of the law in this state that when you’re committing a crime and someone gets killed, even if you’re not directly responsible, and even if it’s your partner, you can be charged. Crazy or not, that’s the law. And there’s Wayne lying on the floor, and here I am, looking at a felony ticket and some serious state time.

And here’s Roger Morris, rubbing the side of his head where I hit him and staring like he’s not sure where he is. Saying, “Is he dead?” and, “I didn’t mean to kill him.” Looking at him now, I can’t say I disbelieve him. At this moment, he is real sorry he killed Wayne. Genuinely sorry.

But I know what I saw a couple minutes ago, when he pulled the trigger. He was happy to catch us, happy we were there. He bought that gun and practised

with it and brought it home with one thought: he wanted to catch some low-life scumbag criminal breaking into his house or attacking someone he knew, and he wanted to blow that criminal away. Like most folks, he didn't know about people. He didn't know you can be a criminal and still hold down a day job, or that you can stand in someone's bedroom while they're asleep with a gun in your hand and still be afraid. Or that you can be a low-life amateur stick-up bum like Wayne and still bleed all over a rug and leave a big hole in the world when you die.

Now he knows, and he's having to readjust his thinking about things.

So am I. I'm still facing that legal problem, and there's still only one way open to me. Roger doesn't pay much attention to me until I'm holding the gun right up in front of his chest. Even then it takes him a few seconds to catch on.

It's still dawning on him when I pull the trigger. It hits him a little higher than I meant to, high enough on the pectoral that I think it missed the heart. So I adjust downward and pull the trigger again, but the gun just clicks. Don't tell me... I break the revolver open, and sure enough. It's a five-shot, but for some reason it was only holding two bullets. I've found a lot of guns in the houses I've robbed, and I've never come across one that wasn't either fully loaded or completely empty. Tonight is just full of firsts.

I stand up, look around, start to feel like a royal asshole. But there's no helping it, so I kneel down beside Roger Morris. "Rog?"

He's holding his chest with his eyes closed, and he jumps when he hears his name. He squints at me, and coughs. "What? How do you know my name?"

"Where do you keep the bullets?"

He opens his eyes wider. "What?"

"The extras. The gun only had two bullets in it, and I think I missed your heart. Where do you keep the extra bullets?"

"You want me to tell you where you can find the bullets to kill me with?"

"Damn it Roger, I don't like this any better than you do, but I'm in a fix here. You've got to go. If you don't tell me where the bullets are, I'm going to have to find something heavy around here and beat you to death with it. That'll be a lot worse for both of us."

His eyes get wider, and he scoots himself up into a sitting position, still holding his chest with his right hand. "You wouldn't do that. You weren't even armed. You don't kill people."

"Never have before," I admit. "Have you killed anyone else before you killed Wayne?"

He looks at me, and his face crumbles a little. He coughs again, and rubs his chest. Finally he says, "Top drawer of my dresser, the right hand side, in the back."

I find them where he said they'd be, and when I reload I'm careful to put the used casings in my pocket. A gun leaves a mark on each casing that gets chambered in it, and even though I'm planning to ditch the gun later tonight, I want to be extra careful. I wasn't lying when I said I'd never done this before.

When I get back to the living room Roger has crawled a couple yards closer to the front door. That bothers me, but there is nothing for it.

I was glad he told me where to find the bullets. I hated the thought of having to beat him to death. Like I say, I'm not a violent person. Just the same, I was in the process of sizing up the thickness of the legs on the chair beside me — wondering if they'd be heavy enough to crush someone's skull — when he told me where to find the bullets.

And when I tell him I'm sorry, after I've reloaded and just before I shoot him again, I mean it. People aren't just one thing. CW

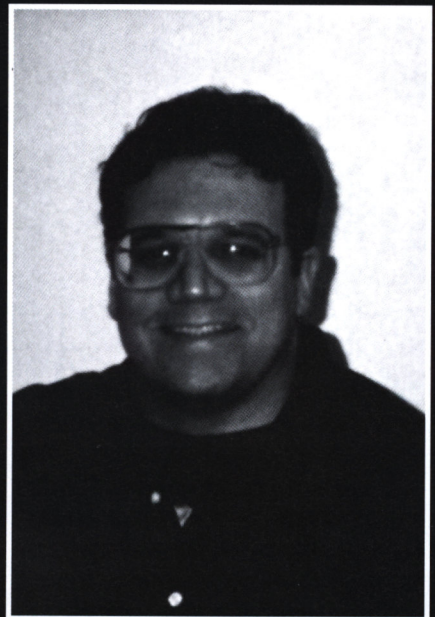


TOM PICCIRILLI

AT ONE STRIDE COMES THE DARK

Tom Piccirilli is the author of eight novels and a 'Felicity Grove' mystery series. He's also the creator of the cult favourite 'Self' tales featuring a modern-day necromancer and his deminic alter-ego, and is currently working on a 'Self' novel. An omnibus collection of forty stories, *Deep Into That Darkness Peering*, is out now from Terminal Fright Press. Tom grew up on the south shore of Long Island and attended a year at Suffolk Community College before moving on to graduate from Hofstra University. These days he divides his time between New York City and Estes Park, Colorado.

ILLUSTRATED BY WENDY DOWN



“Hit him again, Dandelion,” Linnette whimpered against her pillow.

I snapped forward in bed as if knifed in the groin, suddenly nauseous as the icy sweat slid over my chest. I turned and leaned over her as the rain thrashed harder against the windows. Her eyes fluttered in REM, a slight tic tugging the corner of her mouth into a quivering grin. She was out cold, her breath tinged with rum, talking in her sleep.

“What?” I whispered.

She liked stealing the sheets and winding herself into them so tightly that I could never simply roll over and begin making love to her in the night. With her body completely wrapped, she lay curled on the left side of the bed, facing away from me. Her auburn hair was difficult to distinguish from the dark blankets. I pulled them back and unburied her. A dusting of salt whitened the gentle folds of her throat, the suntanned expanse of her cleavage freckled and covered with a sheen of gooseflesh. Her jaw line jutted an almost defiant angle.

Beneath the rum she smelled of musky sex, a sweet fruit shampoo, and Jeff’s favorite perfume *Compulsion*. Somehow Linnette had gotten the idea that I liked the awful odor too, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her the truth.

“What?” I repeated, but she murmured nothing else.

No one’s called me Dandelion in sixteen years, and then only Kelly did.

So, I thought, she’d finally told him.

I got up, threw Jeff’s tacky robe on, and went downstairs to sit in the den. I stared at the paintings lining the walls: blotched spatters and derivative cubist fare. He proved much better at being an art critic than an artist, and although he knew his own work remained terrible he’d never given up his taste for the paint.

I wondered if Kelly had given enough details about that night for him to put it into brush strokes. I flipped through the finished canvases stacked in the corner and thought I could see hints, here or maybe here, wherever there was an especially brooding sort of shadow laid out lengthwise, or a particularly splashy toss of red. I drank his scotch trying to imagine what Kelly might be telling him tonight, and what he would mention to Linnette tomorrow, and what she would eventually whimper to me in her sleep.

I left an hour before dawn, drove home and sat parked in my driveway staring up at my bedroom window. Lightning lit the yard. The metallic red of Jeff’s Fairlane beside me was blinding.

Maybe if we hadn’t all been best friends and lost our virginity on the same night, at the same moment and in the same car, we wouldn’t have become so knotted together in such a taut but carefree manner. I didn’t mind the swapping so long as I didn’t have to witness Jeff and Kelly together or ever hear much about it. All three of them had voyeuristic streaks to a degree, and sometimes wanted to perform or view a show, but I preferred to keep things relatively simple.

We’d hit a few snags along the way but nothing that didn’t shake loose after a while. Most of the problems had to do with unresolved jealousy on my part. Jeff apparently enjoyed making love with my wife in a much more vast array of places, positions, and with a more assorted number of accoutrements than I. In the past, after returning home from nights with Linnette, I’d had to fix broken toilet seats, kitchen tiles, and even a busted rain gutter — I never asked about that one.

The sky continued opening up, and in the flashes of lightning I could see that the window up there was slightly open. Jeff liked fresh air. My night stand was probably being water-stained into crap.

So, she’d finally told him.

I pulled out of the driveway and headed east, back into the heart of hell.

The four of us had gone far from Weldon Falls, but we hadn't gone far enough. Thirty-seven miles and sixteen years proved a world away. After graduation Jeff and I had found jobs together on *Fierce* lifestyle magazine, with promotions eventually landing him as an art columnist and me as the associate editor and graphics designer. Kelly and I had married at eighteen and moved out on Prom Night, sneaking off through the woods to my pick-up while her father followed with his shotgun and three coon hounds.

Jeff later told me that the sheriff had found the drunk bastard hunched in Mrs Willingham's back yard, peering in the bathroom window and slobbering over her sixteen-year-old daughter taking a bath, the coon dogs in the hen house muzzle-deep in chicken guts. The sheriff's daughter was also sixteen — and he also raised chickens — and took a personal interest in the situation. He proceeded to lecture the alcoholic moron on the ills of such behavior, repeatedly driving home the point with his steel-tipped boots.



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After four months I realized we couldn't quite afford the house we were renting. I was making fair money at *Fierce* already, putting in twelve hour days doing layout, copy-editing, and overcoming my fear of computer graphics, but taxes and insurance can cut you off at the knees when you're under twenty. Kelly had been a cashier at the Falls' Suds'n'Duds since she was twelve, and ringing up beer and chips was as natural to her as drawing water from a well and filling the trough. It was the coiling lines of strangers and the computerized check-outs at the new Wal-Mart that drained the color from her face.

Jeff and Linnette married that summer as well, at first living with her mother until Mama found Jeff's cannabis stashed in a makeshift hydroponics unit in back of the shed. They moved in with us and spent a couple of weeks on the convertible couch before they got their own place.

I took a turn off the highway I'd sworn to never take again. The drive was anticlimactic — no ravens flying into the windshield, no lurkers from the woods

waving me away. Just the moody murk of the sky fading into purple, strung with patches of hesitant blue among the roiling clouds. All the rage and anxiety under wraps didn't hurtle through. I vaguely wondered why I was here.

Undernourished cats zipped out of the sere and kudzu, and dodged in front of the car as I slowly cruised up and down the muddy county roads. I drove past the trailer park and high school, and the drive-in that had never been converted into a shopping center. A tireless Chevy without a passenger side door rested atop cinder blocks on the edge of my parents' property. Both of them had died five years ago, my mother from Alzheimer's and father from cirrhosis. I heard my brother rented the place out for a while before moving back in with his third wife and three step-kids. He'd cut down the cork elms.

The storm lightened to a breeze-blown drizzle. I needed gas and pulled into the one station in town: BARNEY SHANE'S FILL'ER UP. There were only two pumps, and one actually still read 'Regular'. The N-E-Y in BARNEY had been poorly painted over and replaced with a runny mismatched R-Y. A fat basset hound lay on the bottom porch step out of the rain, watching me suspiciously with ugly bloodshot eyes as chickens clucked and high-stepped around him. I honked once and got out. My hands were shaking.

Barry Shane, Barney's son, used to be rather bookwormish, with a penchant for Twain and James Fennimore Cooper. A couple of years older than me, he'd quit school to work for his daddy but was always reading whenever you drove up. He didn't talk much and didn't like to be talked to, and just kept to himself and pumped your gas, took your money and went back to reading.

He came out the screen door on the run. When it slammed shut a child started crying. The hound staggered to its stumpy front legs, couldn't quite get its backside completely in the air, yawned once and flopped onto its side.

Barry had grown a gut that looked like a conjoined dead twin, and he'd lost half his hair already. He wasn't carrying *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, but his eyes were brighter than I recalled. "How you doin' this morning?" he asked. "What can I get you?"

What else could you say at a place called the Fill'er Up? "Fill it."

"Sure," he said, smiling. "How you like the rain?" One of his front teeth had a neatly rotted hole in its center, but the rest were perfectly straight and white. He carefully placed the nozzle into the tank. He seemed happier than I remembered.

A woman came out onto the porch carrying a well bucket of chicken feed, with two crying naked tow-headed boys following her. Despite her matronly hair style, eye patch, and loss of at least twenty pounds, I recognized Dora Lichfield. Both kids clutched at her skirt, gasping for air. One shrieked, "I don' wanna! No!" The other just howled plaintively. She was the first girl I'd ever held hands with, back in the third grade.

Barry's smile dropped as if a trowel had scraped it off his face. "Didn't I tell you to get the kids dressed?"

"You also said you wanted me to feed the chickens now."

"Yeah, after you put some clothes on the kids. It's wet out here and they'll catch sick." She looked at me for a moment and shuttled the children back inside. "Women," Barry said. "Can't take 'em back for the deposit, can't shoot and bury 'em without the dogs digging 'em back up."

I got the feeling he didn't recognize me because I hadn't changed that much. I hadn't spiraled along with the rest of my generation the way you were supposed to when you remained in the Falls. Barry replaced Barney, and I would've taken over my father's bait'n'tackle shop, and my sons would have bickered and hated each other's guts while I died of cirrhosis. Thirty-seven miles and sixteen years

was only a hair's breadth.

"Check under the hood?"

I'd had the car inspected and tuned a week ago, but told him, "Sure."

The screen door slapped shut like a mousetrap snapping. The dog whined, tried to swing getting to his fat legs again, and failed again.

"Your radiator's low and you're down about a quart of oil too," Barry said. "Be back in a second." He took off around the side where I knew he had diluted bottles of antifreeze, windshield washer and radiator fluid. If he put another quart of oil in he might blow out the rear main seals of my car, but he didn't care so long as he could stiff me the extra three bucks. Dora tossed feed around the walk, sort of dancing over towards me, wagging her hips to and fro until the kids couldn't hold on to her skirts anymore. They both wandered about like lost blind men, unsure of where to go, what to do. I knew the feeling.

She whispered, "Hello, Danny Lyons."

"Hi Dora."

"Never expected to see you again. You're looking nice."

I wondered about the eye, and whether she'd only scratched the cornea or if there was an infection, or if she'd lost it altogether from having Barry's fist shoved into it one too many times. "You too."

If a patch could wink, hers did. "Pants on fire."

Barry returned with the can of oil and bottle of radiator fluid already opened. He swiped at one of the boys and then at the other, not really much in the way of pain, certainly not like my Dad or Kelly's father, but it got the heat corkscrewing through my chest. My breath hitched. He did the same thing to Dora as he passed her by, the back of his hand simply fluttering out — such an unconscious action, that little push — shoving her aside. He was already grinning triumphantly because he'd gotten a few bucks over on me. How we needed our petty victories. These were the only conquests you could look for in the Falls. Fists held weight and spite. You could see it everywhere, that little push.

"Maybe you shouldn't do that," I said.

The smile remained soldered to his face, watery radiator fluid sloshing over my hood as he came to an abrupt halt. The bottle fell and stayed upright. His boots ground into the gravel. "What?"

"I said don't do that."

"What you talking about? Who the hell you think you are?"

"You still read, Barry?"

"Huh?"

"Maybe you should read more. Maybe you never should have stopped."

Puzzled, he continued lurching towards me — maybe thinking of the old days when he had childhood fantasies of riding riverboats and chasing injuns through the forest — only a touch more angry than curious now. He was about to give me that little push too. His expression remained neutral, as it was before, the self-loathing and calm and disgust mixed into the ashen paste of his face, the same all the time. I smacked the oil can aside, backhanded him hard across the cheek, and slapped him again with an open palm the way my father had taught me. The kids gawked and quit crying. The dog managed to get to its feet.

Barry landed on his ass with a jolt, a thin trail of blood leaking down his chin. My mouth watered with the idea of crushing his windpipe. I stood there shivering and sucking air.

Wiping his lips, those eyes wide and chin pulled back to his chest, he finally knew me. Barry Shane, son of Barney Shane, proprietor of the Fill'er Up and one of my past neighbors, looked me dead in the face and, with more remorse than I

could ever spare him, said, "What happened to you, Danny Lyons?"

Hit him again, Dandelion.

There just wasn't time to tell it all. I left them there. It's not what I had come back for.

Strange that I should sit for twenty minutes at the gas station but blast by the house squatting high on the ridge, where everything had ended — and started — that night. I only spotted the McKenna place in my rear-view as I circled back heading for the highway. The house hadn't changed for fifty years and wouldn't for fifty more; one thing you could say for the Falls is that property could sit open and empty for decades but no one would enter or vandalize it. Nobody cared enough.

Wind could sweep up over the ridge and catch you full in the heart when you weren't ready for it. It could crack you open worse than a wave slamming you onto a reef. Stretched canvases and easels would spin straight up like helicopter blades and crash against the high branches.

Max McKenna had taught Jeff and me how to paint. An artist of some acclaim, too stubborn to leave the home he'd grown up in, he never lived as though he'd found wealth and success. He took a shine to us for no reason I could ever discern; neither of us had much inherent talent. For weeks at a clip, during the winter when the bait shop closed, the three of us would sit out back overlooking Weldon Falls, drinking beer and letting the dark night train whistles sweet talk us.

Occasionally the girls would come up and sit, but not often and not for long. The town nearly looked livable covered with snow, and ice crystals lent themselves to Jeff's cubist view of the world. He'd argue with Max about light and shadow and technique, sketching charcoal nightscapes of square stars, a rectangular moon.

A deaf-mute, Max's vocal chords had been ransacked by cancer back in the Fifties and his hearing had gone shortly afterwards. He got along fine with growls and rumbles and gestures, besides the point that he never had much to say to begin with. Jeff loved the hell out of the guy, and so did I. He was the kind of old man who didn't deserve to die the way he had. I know. I killed him.

Neatly, we fell into our cycle once more, on time, as I pulled into the driveway and saw Jeff coming down the walk. His step was a bit off as it usually was after a particularly vicious bout with my wife. Hair wet from their morning shower, his shaggy blonde hair hung across one side of his face in a mass of looped curls.

"Hey, Danny," he said. "You finish the layout yet? I'm not sure, but I think I might be able to swing an interview with Francessi. He's hot property on the Coast now, with his *Slumped Man* series. You think we can squeeze it into this issue?"

This was how it had to be — no mentioning of details or desires, fulfilled or not. "Sure," I said.

"Good, I'll phone him this afternoon." He looked as if he hadn't slept all night. He always looked as if he hadn't slept all night when he'd spent all night with Kelly. Still, it was him who asked me, grinning like a proud older brother, "You okay, Danny? You seem whipped."

"Couldn't sleep much."

"The storm was murder. Want to get some breakfast?"

"No thanks."

Like with Max, we never needed to say much to each other. "You sure you're all right?"

"Just peachy."

"Oh Christ." He dropped back a step as if I'd tagged him with a left hook. "Peachy, that's beautiful. You're going to use a word like that and tell me nothing's

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wrong. I know that tone of voice. You're pissed about something. Come on, Danny, spill it."

"We'll talk later."

"Oh yeah, you're pissed at me, all right. What did I do?"

"We'll talk, Jeff."

He grimaced. "Okay then, I'll see you later at the studio."

My head had been screaming the entire morning, but now the migraine kicked in full throttle. I enjoyed how the brightness burned at the edge of my vision, and the nausea somehow warmed me now, the rage crawling all over. There was a lingering scent of burning ozone, the lightning strikes had been that close. My jerry-rigging on the rain gutter had come undone in the storm and now hung limply by one bolt at the far end.

Kelly met me in the foyer, dressed in the black full slip and lace bodice I'd bought her for Christmas. It clung and rode, stuck to the wide and tender curve of her hips. Finger smears of talcum powder streaked the soft angle of her underarms and knees. Her hair was still wet too. "Danny," she said, my name always smoothed down in an air of anticipation.

Moving into my arms, she remained impressed with my jealousies — shallow or not — and often went to extremes to keep them from killing us. She kissed me and whispered in that passion-laden voice, "Hello my baby. I missed you..." Eyelids at half-mast, the splashes of caramel-colored freckles over her nose faded as her face grew darker. "...Missed you so much." Her words were slurred with sleepiness, the heady lust bleeding through. It's what I needed. Cheeks flushed from the morning's exertions, her neck glistened, moist and dripping, slightly bruised from his clawing fingers. "Hmmmrrrr," she wheezed, a rattling laugh. Sparks spun off her fingernails. We dropped back onto the couch and she moaned, "Get me, c'mon," as if I needed an invitation.

That's when I noticed the door to the closet had been torn off its hinges. I jumped off her and sat up. "Jesus Christ! You two ought to be put in a cage!"

"What? You care about that now?"

My teeth dried out. I could feel the curl of my lip tugged into a snarl. "And I bet my night stand's been stained to a piece of shit, too!"

"What?" Kelly stared at me, and crossed her arms, ashamed of one of us. It took a few seconds to realize my knuckles were white. For the first time in my life I wanted to hurt her, and cover those bruises Jeff had left on her with my own. "What is it?" she asked, fear in her voice, the wheeze and purr gone.

"Why did you tell him?"

She shook her head and squinted like a dazed game show contestant. "Tell him? Who? Jeff? Tell him what?"

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying about anything! I don't even know what you're talking about!"

I grabbed her face in my hands and pulled her to me until we were nose to nose. She did a hell of a job holding the tears back, gnawing at her bottom lip. My girl had understanding, and if she'd given me up to her lover, maybe she actually had a reason. I couldn't see one, whatever it might be. "About that night," I said.

No matter how deep we planted Max beneath the years he was always right there in bloom again. Anxiety came flooding. Max could do it to you. Her breath caught, a crimson glow rising on the silken skin of her throat. "I didn't. I swear I never said a word. You know it, Danny, you know it. I would never! I'm not lying."

Of course she was; she had to be. I could just imagine what kind of depths they'd plumbed in their post-coital conversations after smashing up my house.

And then the realization spread across her face like fire — a horror of my own

making, in the name of love, as her mouth split wide into a perfect, delectable 'oh' and the tears came streaming. Her forehead was pale as bone. She sniffed once, either snuffling her sobs or because she could smell the Falls on me. "You've been back there, haven't you, Dandelion?" she wept.

I fixed the closet door and took a nap. Max could speak in my dreams, but even dead he held only a single resentment, the same one that had killed him. He'd written a letter of introduction to the editors of *Fierce* but it wasn't quite as professional or aggressive as I would have liked. I thought they'd never take me on, and Kelly and I would be out of the Falls on our own in even worse failures than before. I wanted an edge, to hedge my bets, some parting cash or a safety zone I could drop back on if the interview fell through.

With my pick-up packed with our stuff, Kelly's daddy and his coon hounds hunting us through the woods, we stole up the ridge to Max's place. My god, I only needed three of his paintings. He'd done hundreds, scattered about his house stacked high in empty rooms, covered in dust, throwing shadows all over like strangers milling at a party. He'd never miss them, and I could sell the pieces or claim they were my own work, whichever helped out more. Max didn't even sign half of them, and most of his own work he considered shit.

Max, dead *and* asleep, still knew. His soul was nailed to his product. The light snapped on overhead like the eye of God catching us. Max sneaked up on me, his face so full of sorrow, a kind I'd never seen before. Not even in my reflection, and I'd thought no one was more piteous than me. Kelly shrieked and spun, as if Max meant to garrote us, instead of us being the thieves in his home.

Kelly screamed again out of shame, and the heat surged over my brain — how could he stare at me like that over three goddamn paintings when they might keep me out of the Falls? His hands came up to the canvases and — I didn't know which of us was tugging, who was shoving, oh God maybe he even meant to *give them to me*, but I couldn't be sure. I backhanded the old man, the way all our fathers had taught us. Maybe I hit him again, or perhaps he struck some piece of furniture, but when my vision cleared Max was on the floor bleeding from his ears.

"Hit him again, Dandelion," Kelly said.

"Christ no." We ran. The letter was perfect for *Fierce*. I got the job. I got my life. I got out of the Falls. I never even took the paintings.

When I awoke the three of them were in the bedroom with me, staring. I checked the clock and saw I'd slept for nearly ten hours. The moon filled the window, framed by the blinds and carved into one of Jeff's cubes. I cleared my throat and said, "So."

"What's it all about?" he asked.

"Now there's the question."

Linnette sat on the edge of the bed and ran her fingers through my hair, stroking my eyebrows in one of our gestures of tenderness. "What did I do? Did I do something wrong?"

"He went back to town," Kelly said, the sobs about ready to wrack her. "Something's happened. What's happened?"

"Yeah, Danny, let us all in on it." Jeff put his arm around his wife as she continued touching my face. A sign of jealousy from him? Overprotection? It was almost enough to make me smile. "What's eating you?"

"Max is," I told him, and watched his eyes.

There are moments too charged with the past to proceed any further into the present. We were tangled in our lovers' knot, drawn to a dead standstill. Something had to give, inside me or out. Kelly wore her slip, that lace driving me crazy even

in the heart of such insanity. Jeff threw an arm around her too, and turned aside to stand before my wife, as if he'd take bullet for her, defender of both his ladies.

"I've been dreaming of the old man lately," Linnette said. "It's that time of year."

"What's this got to do with Max?" Jeff asked.

I nearly burst out laughing in his face. I couldn't help it. "I murdered him," I said. "Kelly told you, and you told your wife and now we all know I murdered a man for nothing." The rage came up from deep but before hitting topside it folded and burrowed back down. "I'm going to the police."

Kelly broke from Jeff's grasp and brushed Linnette aside with that little push, her fists suddenly on my collar, lips on mine. "No, you're not. Don't you dare even think it."

I could live with the truth between us, but not when anyone else knew. "Listen, baby, I —"

"She's right, you're not going to the cops." Jeff grinned an absurd grin and shot his wife a sidelong glance. Linnette drew back and Kelly moved forward, so that we were all on the bed in each other's faces. A seal's bark of laughter escaped him. Linnette groaned, a nice heavy moan from the gut like when we made our passive love without taking out any rain gutters. Jeff tried the bark and grin again, and couldn't make either of them this time. "You didn't kill anyone, Danny. It was me."

Kelly and I spoke together, voices so expressionless that they sounded exactly the same. "What?"

"I'm the one who killed Max."

"No, it was me... What're you...?"

"I did it for you," he said. "You needed him dead for some reason, right? I didn't know why, Danny, but I could guess, and I didn't much care. You wouldn't have done it unless it had to be done, and that was good enough so far as I was concerned. Kelly's daddy came after me while he was out looking for the two of you on Prom Night. Me and Linnette searched and saw your truck on the ridge. We watched you through the window. It was the only lit room in the house. Both of you were frantic, you almost walked right out in front of us. I know that kind of fear, Danny. By the time I got inside Max was hobbling around on his knees and I threw him down against that big table...remember that thing? So, I finished it for you."

I felt as mute as Max, and it took a while for the sentence to slither out. "But how could you? You loved him."

"Loved you more. I'm telling you, I saw those paintings on the floor and could guess what was going through your head. I took them. They're still in my den someplace."

I'd probably flipped through them this morning without even recognizing them. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Figured we'd get around to it, one of these days."

What kind of colors would I have used to portray this group scene from now on? A dark schism cutting across an otherwise ordinary tableau. Carnal confessions, sins, and stupidity would take most of the black, blue and other hues of mood from the palate.

The night brought out what it had to bring out in each of us, one by one. Kelly smiling now with her tongue at my throat and Linnette taking my hand, the two of them doing a giggling tug-of-war dance with me as the pillows were shuffled and blankets thrown back. Jeff put his hands on each of them while I settled into new urges, maybe playing at the voyeur a little more, reaching for the stained night stand to turn off the lamp, plying thighs and letting the square moon drape pale threads across the knot of us, as we led one another into the darkness full of warm whispers and loving arms. CW

ANTONY MANN

THINGS ARE ALL RIGHT, NOW

Antony Mann is an Australian writer living in Oxford with his wife Judy and proto-toddler Zac. His story 'Taking Care of Frank' appeared in *Crimewave 2: Deepest Red* and won the 1999 Crime Writers' Association The Macallan Short Story Gold Dagger Award. One of his stories, 'Gunned Down', was broadcast recently on Radio 4 as part of their New Writers' Week, and another, 'Burma Skyway', will be published in issue 24 of *The Third Alternative*.

ILLUSTRATED BY RODDY WILLIAMS



It was Sunday when I saw him, a Sydney summer's afternoon not long after Christmas. It hadn't rained in a while. Late weekend smog hung over the city skyscrapers, low in a cloudless pale blue sky, and thinning out a little as the sun began to stray towards the mountains in the west.

On the harbour pedestrian forecourt, the tourist traffic strolled past. I sat on a public bench in front of a council-tended shrub border, murdering an hour, watching the world go by. A cream and green passenger ferry was pulling out into the harbour, its engines straining for momentum, churning water behind. Beyond it, on Bennelong Point, I could see the Opera House, white tiled roofs fanning out against the skyline. Behind me was the Museum of Contemporary Art, host at the moment to a truckload or two of Warhol frippery shipped in from America, shoes and designer bags and cans of soup, a testament to the durability of the vapid.

Buskers were dotted around the harbourside pavements, some more persuasive than others, all looking out for that relaxed weekend tourist dollar. South American guitar combos were usually a big hit, often outpointing even the clean-cut seven-year-old violinists. And novelty acts could score well. Across against the railing to my right a grey painted lady stood on a portable dias and acted out the dignified benevolence of the Statue of Liberty. Motionless, surely set to melt under the glare of the sun, she would bow forward in regal gratitude whenever coins jangled in her money tin. Down to the left a tired juggler in harlequin garb was busy putting a brave clown face on the balls he dropped. Ten yards away was perhaps the best of them all, certainly the bravest, a young man or woman — it was difficult to tell which — arched over on all fours inside a donkey costume. This cartoon-style beast, with its sweet round eyes and buck teeth, and circlet of bells tinkling around its neck, was having no trouble attracting the wonder of small children, and consequently the spare change from their parents' pockets.

It was as I sat, admiring the simplicity of this performance, and the patience it must have taken to remain crouched over in a stifling costume in the worst heat of the day, that Nick Sykes came into view. I didn't recognise him at first. He was one of a group of young beggarly types that was walking my way from the direction of Circular Quay train station. The three of them stood out from the tourist stream — the other man was about thirty, red-haired and bearded, and dressed in a species of New Age tat. Barefoot and thin, he wore faded purple jeans and an open-necked sandy vest. His face was ruddy and unshaven, and he carried a bottle in a brown paper bag. The woman was roughly the same age, plump and blonde, in blue jeans and sandals and a worn rainbow top.

As for Sykes — it was one of those rare moments in which you set eyes upon someone you take to be a stranger, and so are granted the opportunity to see them again as though for the first time, before that instant of recognition when memories and associations come flooding back.

He looked well-fed. His face was on the puffy side, and his lips were full and red enough to add to the impression. There was a hint of flab on his upper arms and thighs. His hair was straight and brown and hung down thickly, but well short of his shoulders. Of the three, he was the most nondescriptly attired. He wore cheap blue and white rubber thongs, and baggy grey shorts. Not the knee-length modern kind, most commonly found in the company of skateboards and baseball caps, but a pair your father might have once bought to wear mowing the lawn or clearing out the gutters. His peach coloured singlet flapped loosely around his waist.

As it happened, the three of them stopped fifteen feet away directly in front of me, blocking my view of the donkey. They were discussing something, I don't know what, in the course of which Sykes took off his sunglasses and gazed

around. For a second his glance met mine, and it was then that I knew him. I've heard it said that the regular use of heroin keeps you young. Maybe it's true, because Sykes didn't look a day over twenty-five, and I knew he had to be at least eight years older than that by now.

He glanced at his watch, spoke again and nodded to his friends and, as they walked off, he came over and sat down in the vacant space beside me.

It's not easy to explain precisely how I felt. A few moments before, I had been sitting half-dozing, lulled by the passing parade and the warmth of the Sydney summer afternoon, but now thoughts raced in my brain, spurred on by the adrenalin surge in the pit of my stomach. In a flash there came the deep anger, and a dark bitterness akin to hatred. Yet there was also uncertainty and fear. What was Sykes doing, sitting down next to me like this? Surely he would realise that I wasn't about to welcome him back into my life with open arms.

But Sykes lounged against the back of the bench, his arms splayed out on either side, his left hand almost touching me. With his right, he pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shorts. Flipping the top back, he used his pursed lips to coax a fag into his mouth. Then, he turned to stare directly at me, sending another charge of electricity down my spine. It was all I could do to return his look. Slowly, I turned my head to face him. I felt myself begin to tremble, but Sykes only smiled, holding his lips together so the cigarette didn't fall to the ground. His big heavy-lidded eyes lingered on me, and he said, "You got a light?"

"Sorry?"

"A light." He shrugged, patting his hands against his shorts pockets.

I had assumed that, because I had recognised him, he would know me too. But it was eight years since I'd seen him last, and although he looked pretty much the same, I had changed. I'd been finding it hard to cut back on the beer, and heading into my mid-thirties I'd put on a couple of stone in what seemed like a few weeks, but was probably more like a year. I'd been losing hair, too, at a rate that might have alarmed some, but served only to remind me that I was my father's son. And there was the added likelihood that in those eight years Sykes had lost a goodly proportion of his brain cells. Maybe I'd disappeared from his memory altogether, another blank space to match his junkie conscience.

I appreciate that I had a choice, to stay or to go. I might have stood and walked away without uttering another word, but I didn't. Maybe I *wanted* him to remember. I reached into my shirt pocket and produced an orange disposable Bic. He leaned in as I spun my thumb against the wheel, releasing compressed gas and sparking the flint. Flame sprang up and ignited the tip of his cigarette. I caught a glimpse of his inner arm, pocked with fresh needle holes.

"Thanks, pal."

"No problem," I said, pocketing the lighter. There must have been something in the tone of my voice that wouldn't stay hidden, because Sykes turned his attention on me again. But he got it wrong. He didn't twig that I was talking thickly because it was *him* and it was *me*, sitting on the same bench on the harbour forecourt. He thought I was pissed off because he'd neglected to offer me a cigarette.

"Sorry." He proffered the pack. "You want?"

I took one and lit it, and together we leaned back, sucking on chemicals, while another laden ferry chugged out into the harbour.

He must have been between hits, because Sykes was in the mood to talk.

"This is one of my favourite parts of the city." He swept his arm in front of him quite dramatically, as though with the movement he was pulling back a curtain to reveal the sun-splashed blue harbour waters. I looked where he looked, saw what he saw. It was indeed a beautiful thing.



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THE HOUSE

"Days like today, they make you grateful for what you've got, eh?" he said with an engaging, lopsided grin.

"It's a good one, all right," I said. "I like the heat."

"You're a heat man, eh?" Sykes nodded along slowly. "Me too. I don't care how hot it gets. Those nights when you can't sleep no matter what you do, when you're bathed in sweat from head to toe, from midnight til dawn? They're *my* nights."

"The cold's okay as well," I said, idly wondering how Sykes would reply.

"Crisp winter mornings? When the sun's out in a blue sky and the air bites against your skin? Man, nothing beats them."

"Except the hot summer nights."

"Hey, they're both good, right?" said Sykes with a laugh. It surprised me, but I laughed too. Charm is charm, it gets by your defences without you knowing it, and pretty soon your defences are down. Once, I had liked him, but I didn't want to again so, as I stubbed out my cigarette on the ground between my feet, I imagined that the glowing tip was the light behind his eyes. I picked up the butt and rolled it between my fingers, then flicked it over my shoulder into the shrubs behind me.

"You waiting for someone?"

"Meeting friends at The Orient. In a while. Seemed like a nice day to get some sun." I paused. "A good day for thinking."

"Can't do too much of that," he said.

"Unless you do too much."

He frowned then. "Me and my mates," he said, looking up the forecourt towards the Harbour Bridge, in the direction his two friends had gone. "We're kind of trying to get back up north."

"Oh?"

"Yeah..."

In the instantly contrived version of his life which he proceeded to tell me, it turned out that he was from Queensland. Of course, it's possible that he was. I had always thought he was a Sydneysider, but then, that was only what he told us. His friends and he (Sykes called them Monica and Kev) had been mugged in Kings Cross two nights before and lost all their money. Quite a bit it had been, too, although he neglected to invent an actual total.

"So how much exactly did you lose?"

"Enough," he said weightily, expelling air.

"That's tough."

"So it goes."

"So what are you going to do?"

"We'll hitch. There's always rides going all the way to Brisbane."

"No worries then."

"No. The thing is... Look, your opinion of me is going to bottom out after I say this, but we don't have any money for food tonight. Normally I wouldn't bring it up, but this is a genuine, genuine thing."

It was beautiful to watch.

"How much do you need?" I asked.

"Twenty dollars?" he said, apologetically.

So that was how much a hit cost these days. Didn't seem much to me, but hey, what would I know? A picture came into my mind then, of my sister, physically wasted, emotionally flagellated, all her money gone up Nick Syke's arm. And with that money gone, those thousands of dollars sucked out of her by that charming man and his feigned love — a love that she only ever imagined, I concede, and yet which was reciprocated by her into his emptiness, which he filled daily with his own infatuation for a filled needle...with that money gone, so

was he, and that was the last time I had seen him, walking out the door of our family home and away from her empty bank account. Leaving behind a river of tears, an ocean of loss.

For a few seconds I weighed it up in my mind. It was a disappointment to have to forego the opportunity which presented itself, to smack Sykes in the face, possibly knock him off the seat onto the concourse and give him a good kicking. I could even feel my toes twitch in anticipation as I imagined my foot slamming into his face. But there was just that outside chance of something more, and I couldn't pass it up.

I took my wallet out of my pocket. "Here, take a hundred."

"Really?" Sykes was too greedy to be suspicious, but I felt I had to explain anyway.

"Just won a motza on the pokies," I grinned, enjoying my own opportunity to fabricate. I pulled the green plastic bill from the fold of the wallet and rubbed it between my fingers. "Hardly means a thing to me."

I swear that as he grabbed the hundred and stuffed it into his shorts, there was a fleck of drool in the corner of his mouth. He looked at me then, for the last time. It was his final chance to say 'Don't I know you?' or 'Hey, I guessed it was you all along, man! You think you had me fooled? I really fucked your sister over, didn't I? Gave you some grief, too, as I recall'. But he didn't say anything. I checked my watch.

"Gotta go," I said, standing up.

"Yeah, yeah," said Sykes distractedly, already contemplating that night's entertainment. "Hey, thanks, right?"

It was a long shot, but you never knew. He might just spend it all at once. CW

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THE CRIME WRITERS' ASSOCIATION

LAUNCH OF DEBUT DAGGER AWARD 2000 FOR NEW CRIME WRITING

The Debut Dagger is awarded to the winner of the CWA's annual new writing competition, open to anyone whose work has not been published before. Now in its third year, the Debut Dagger is sponsored by leading publishers including Orion, Macmillan, Little, Brown, Hodder & Stoughton and Headline.

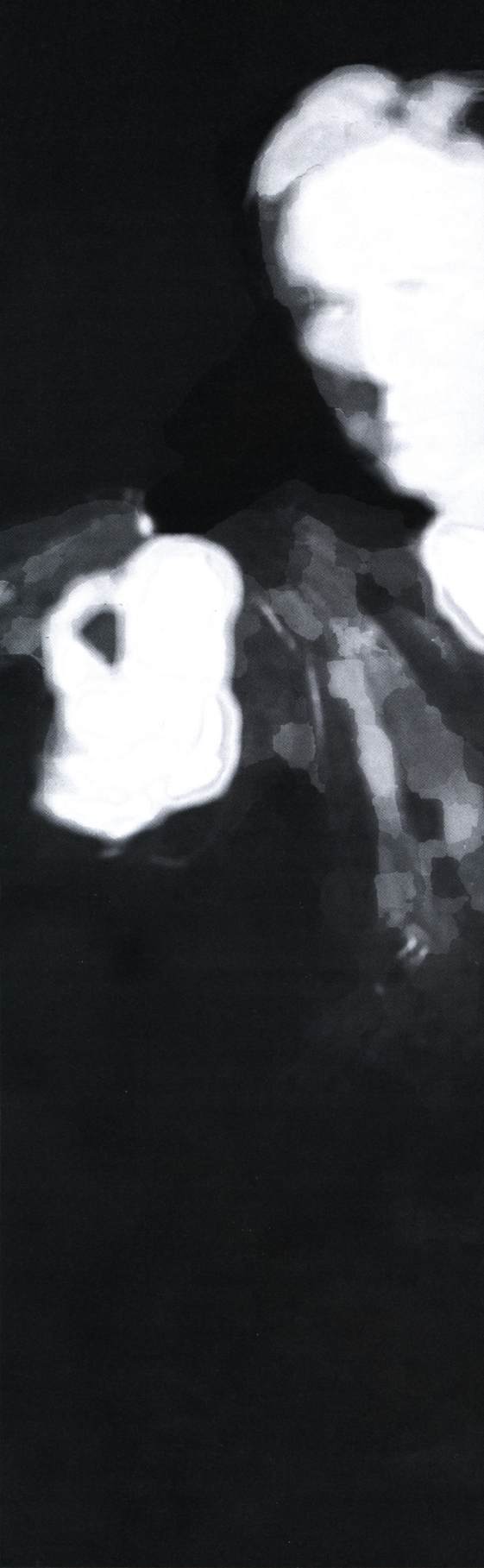
Potential writers have until 14 August to produce a 500 word outline of their crime novel and its opening pages (up to 3,000 words). Crime includes anything from historical mysteries and period whodunits to thrillers. There is an entry fee of £10.

Professional readers will assess the entries and the final decisions will be taken by a judging panel of publishing editors and crime fiction experts. The top ten entrants will each win a parcel of crime novels from the sponsoring publishers and an editorial report on their entry. The overall winner will receive free tickets and accommodation for two at Dead on Deansgate, the annual crime writing convention in Manchester in October, and a £250 prize.

1998's winner gained a substantial two-book contract — the first book, whose first chapter formed the winning entry, is due for publication this spring. Last year's winner was signed up by an agent immediately and is negotiating a book deal. For more information send an SAE to CWA Competition, PO Box 62, Okehampton EX20 2YQ.

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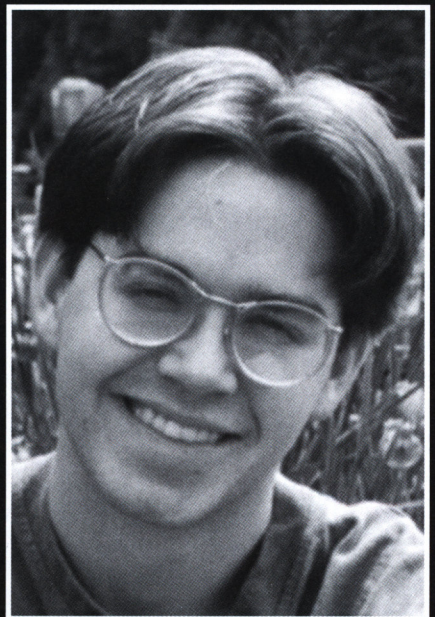


STEN WESTGARD

SHOVEL THEM UNDER AND LET ME WORK

Sten Westgard attended the Clarion East writers' workshop in 1995. Currently he lives in Norwalk, Connecticut, and is pursuing a masters degree in computer science. Sten has published five stories in our sister publication *The Third Alternative*, with a sixth forthcoming, and others in magazines such as *Tomorrow* and *Realms of Fantasy*, plus the Ellen Datlow edited anthology *Black Swan*, *White Raven*. It's a little known fact that Sten met his wife at a murder mystery party. She was the murderess, but Sten is happy to say that since then he's convinced her to give up her life of crime.

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID CHECKLEY



“Let me tell you about hearts, Sandy,” Josiah Buriel says, not really to his new partner, but to the air. “Everybody wants the heart of a small child, but no one knows how to get one.”

Before Sandy Newman, the large-boned, reticent man sitting next to Josiah, can respond, a beeper goes off. Josiah takes a last bite of his hamburger, then puts it down, pushing the plate of congealing grease and cold fries away from him. As he chews, he takes a small case out of his breast pocket, and looks at the liquid crystal display.

“I’ll have to do the introduction while we drive,” Josiah says, swallowing. “We’ve got a call. Looks like a good one.”

Sandy doesn’t respond, feeling a mixture of relief and anxiety. Relieved that he doesn’t have to respond to Josiah’s strange folklore, anxious about getting behind the wheel again. He hasn’t driven an ambulance in ten months. As Josiah drops a few bills on top of the check, Sandy shifts his big body uncomfortably off the stool, leaving his half-eaten sandwich behind him.

As they stride to the door, Josiah grabs two napkins from a booth dispenser. He wipes each of his fingers, meticulously cleaning the grease off his hands.

“You worked the lower east side, Sandy?” Josiah says, as they walk out to the street. Josiah’s van sits unobtrusively beneath a streetlamp. No siren, no red cross, just a simple gray.

“Yes, I did,” Sandy says, still nervous. “Until they decided to stop sending ambulances there.”

“Must have been tough work,” Josiah says, shaping the statement like a question. He turns his dark brown eyes on Sandy as he hands him the keychain.

Sandy pushes the button, unlocking the doors. He is familiar with the tiny, cramped space inside. The driver’s side has a radio and traffic scanner, the passenger’s side a portable terminal, tapped into the hos-net. In the back, the van’s walls are stacked, compartment after compartment, full of chemicals and medicine and various kinds of scanners, probes, and equipment.

As Sandy gets in behind the wheel, he feels the adrenalin begin to flow. A host of memories flood back as he revs the engine and switches on the headlights. The diner and the smell of fried meat fade into the background.

“There’s only one difference between this and an ambulance, Sandy,” Josiah says. Then he stomps his foot loudly on the van’s floor, right in the empty space in the middle.

“No gurney,” Josiah smiles. “We don’t carry patients. Only parts.” Then he moves to the front seat, sitting down, turning on the terminal. A colorful window appears, full of patient data and coordinates. The light from the screen reflects off Josiah’s round glasses. “We want to get to Mercy Hospital.”

“I know it,” Sandy says, swallowing dryly.

“Good. Be quick about it then.”

Sandy pushes his foot against the gas. The van moves onto the street, as the radio and the traffic scanner come alive with data. He weaves in and out of traffic, passing the slow cars, the drivers who aren’t in a hurry. Sandy’s grip tightens on the wheel as the EMT reflexes seep into his hands and the memories flow into his mind. Memories of previous ambulance rides, frantic drives with dying patients, DOA’s, and those who died even before the ambulance reached them. Too often Sandy had arrived in time to see a corpse, ripped apart by bullets, stilled by a heart attack, or simply wasted away by hunger. But Sandy has no time to regret these past traumas; he needs this new job desperately.

“Must gotten pretty bad if they’ve stopped sending ambulances there anymore.”

Josiah watches Sandy from the passenger seat, his stare tightening as he focuses on Sandy.

"It was all right," Sandy says, lying. "It was a good job." *A job I no longer have*, he thinks. *The only thing that kept me off the streets and out of the slums, gone. Josiah is the last step between me and the ghetto.*

Sandy darts the van between two cars, barely making an exit ramp. His throat feels dry and he swallows again. Images play back in his head. He recalls the times he and partner, Jim, arrived before the police. The times they had to stop the husband beating his wife. The times they interrupted the child abuse long enough to take the kid to the hospital, so the broken bones could heal and be broken again.

Josiah looks intently into the terminal, typing quickly, watching the changing screens with interest. He speaks as he works, giving instruction while Sandy speeds to Mercy Hospital.

"This is a modified terminal, Sandy," he says, moving the trackball to select another screen. "It indexes the current demand for transplants and organs. You've got your major hospitals, like St Mary's, St Joseph's, what have you, as well as your high-end markets, like the Glessing Clinic."

Sandy feels the tires screech beneath them as they round the off-ramp. He stifles the memory of his last ambulance trip, of his last trip to Mercy, as he concentrates on driving. He feels the sweat beginning on his forehead and his armpits.

"This is sort of the flip side of your old job," Josiah says. "Procurement still saves lives. But it's a different kind of deadline. We aren't heroes, either — not like you were before. We hand it over to the EMT's and the surgeons so they can be heroes, but we don't get the credit. We're just suppliers."

Sandy thinks to himself, *I never wanted to be a hero. All I wanted was a job.*

"Take this right," Josiah says, pointing toward a side street. "It's quicker."

The ambulance takes a corner fast, throwing Alan Devaut up against the wall. He doesn't feel the bruise. He only sees the EMT's hanging on, leaning with the motion, letting nothing stop their efforts to save Trisha. Trisha's face is covered with bandages, white gauzy things turning slowly pink and red. The bandages totally obscure her face, so much that Alan wonders, incredibly, if this is really his daughter. Perhaps this is not her, but someone else's child who snuck into his house and fell down the stairs. Alan asks himself desperate questions: how could I have left her alone? How could she have taken those five minutes and turned them into something this horrible? How could she fall from such a height, and land on that thing like she did? How can this be happening?

There are small patches attached to Trisha's chest, with wires snaking out of them to the square heart monitor sitting in a part of the ambulance wall. Moments ago, the EMT ripped away Trisha's shirt to put them there. Now shreds of cloth lie beneath her on the gurney and the floor. The electric-blue line fluctuates, now jumping, now steady, now jumping not so much, now steady a bit longer...

Alan watches the EMT grab a vial and syringe. Her hands are covered with blood, but she doesn't seem to notice, concentrating only on the motion of drawing liquid into the syringe. There is blood on her shirt, on his shirt, on the floor of the ambulance. So much blood from so small a child...

As the EMT prepares to insert the needle, Alan's face grows cold and pale. The EMT's are shouting at each other, saying words he's never heard before, using acronyms he can't decipher. He hears them radioing up ahead to the hospital, to let them know his child is on the way.

Sitting on one of the ER beds, Denise Hughes gulps from a bottle of stale orange juice, trying to get some rest out of this lull in activity. She watches them wheel the body away. Denise struggles for a moment to recall the boy's name: Jamal. The dead boy's name was Jamal.

She looks at her doctor's greens, noting wearily that Jamal's blood is beginning to dry. Turning reddish-brown now, a grim reminder of the chaos minutes past. Less than a half hour ago, Jamal arrived full of holes from a shotgun blast, a random victim of a drive-by shooting. He died before she could get him into surgery.

In the periphery of her vision, Denise sees a tall, thin man with a sharp widow's peak, talking with Jamal's parents. He pivots the screen of his palmtop to face them. Though she turns to look, Denise can't read it from where she sits, but she knows it is a large number by the raised eyebrows. The mother and father exchange glances. Denise guesses the sum is a month of the doctor's salary, probably ten months of their salaries. They can't resist it. It's too tempting, and it can do them too much good. Edmund Cavender, she remembers, giving a name to the thin man. The hospital procurer.

Jamal's face had been untouched. The shotgun had destroyed the boy's chest, but left his head unblemished, still young and smooth and innocent. *Young corneas are in demand this year*, Denise thinks bitterly, *and Cavender knows it. But at least Cavender procures for the hospital. He won't sell it to Glessing, or some other place where they operate on the rich and famous, where any body part can be done, undone, resized, or replaced. Where the price tags are big, but they never lack customers.*

They haven't mopped up yet. Denise can still trace Jamal's path by the crimson smudges on the tiled floor.

Denise hurriedly finishes her orange juice as Martin, a nurse, approaches and interrupts her break. Silently, he hands her a chart. Martin's face is also strained with fatigue; the beginnings of a one AM shadow grows on his chin.

Denise finds the scribbled notes hard to read. She's been awake for twenty hours now, and her concentration is waning. *This is the last time I cover someone else's rotation*, she tells herself. "What's this one?" she asks, finally.

"Eight-year-old boy. Broke his arm."

"X-ray?"

"It's in your hand."

Denise looks through the chart and finds it. She lifts it up toward the ceiling. The florescent light reveals a clean break. Straightforward to set. "How's the boy?"

"Frightened. But his parents are more frightened. In fact, you'd better change into new greens before you talk with them."

"All right, I'll go change and then you can show me to him," Denise says. She stretches for a moment, then gets up off the ER bed.

The admissions nurse spots them, and runs toward them with a portable phone.

"We've got a call from an ambulance, Dr. Hughes," the admissions nurse says, short of breath. "You'd better talk to them..."

Sandy parks in the Mercy Hospital visitor lot. Josiah steps into the back of the van, quickly tossing a few items in his briefcase. He checks his hair and teeth in a mirror. Then he hands a bulky case, about the size of a tackle box, to Sandy.

"Dry ice and such," Josiah explains, "for preservation."

"Right," Sandy says, grabbing the case by its handle. He opens the door.

"Wait," Josiah snaps, "I need to coach you."

Sandy turns back toward Josiah, whose eyes gleam beneath the van's ceiling light.

"I handle the negotiations, all right? It's best if one person handles these things, you understand. A whole team frightens the next of kin. If I need you, I'll let you know. Otherwise, stay quiet and keep the details to yourself."

"Sure," Sandy nods. Josiah signals him to wait, and opens the glove compartment.

"I don't expect any trouble. I know some of the staff at this hospital. I get to know weekend shift doctors pretty well."

"Here," Josiah pulls out a leather holster and a revolver. He hands it to Sandy. Sandy stares at the nickel-plated steel, feeling uneasy.

"You know how to use one. I mean, you carried one when you were an EMT, right?" Josiah asks.

"Yes," Sandy says, as the memories threaten him again. Bad times.

"In case someone tries to rob us," Josiah says, by way of explanation. Then he gestures at the rest of the parking lot. "Security, Sandy. I keep an automatic in my briefcase, myself."

Sandy takes the gun and straps it on beneath his jacket. Then they head toward the ER entrance. Josiah walks steadily heel-toe, heel-toe. His shoes are comfortable, his suit conservative. He looks the perfect part of a caring, concerned procurer.

As they walk Sandy remembers the feel of a gun. He and Jim faced off a drugged-out thief, once. They had a heart attack victim in their gurney, the ski-masked addict had held them off, waving an old Mac-10 around with one hand, stuffing vials and syringes into his pockets with the other. The pistol metal felt cold in Sandy's hand as he drew it. His hands quivered as he fired one shot, then another, then a third.

Sandy remembers he didn't want to shoot the crazed thief, and that his hands shook for days afterward. He wants to put the EMT days behind him, and just make an easy living as a driver, carrying organs to people in need. No more heroics.

In the darkness of the X-ray room, Denise looks at the portrait of the little girl's skull. The black and white images make a bleak picture; a grim prognosis lurks in the film. This ER shift has already lost one. She does not look forward to losing another. She wishes she could stay in the X-ray room for the last hours of her shift, and let the new resident assume the responsibility of telling the father.

She stiffens, knowing that's the weak way out. She doesn't want to be that kind of doctor. *Take a few moments*, she tells herself, *and try to find the words. Find the way to break it gently.* She picks the X-rays off the display.

Denise blinks as she comes out of the dark room, holding the film in her hand. The waiting room is full of haggard, worried people, most of them in rumpled, thrown-on clothes. Magazines lie unread on the tables. A few people stare blankly at the television set mounted in the ceiling. Alan Devaut leans forward in his seat, elbows on knees, hands clutching head. His eyes are pressed tightly shut, as if he were willing all this to be a dream, a nightmare from which he can awaken. Denise touches his arm.

"Mr Devaut?" she asks, politely. "Could I speak with you?" She can't discuss this in the waiting room, not in front of other people. He deserves a bit of privacy now.

Denise leads him quietly into the business end of the ER. Alan is shocked by the activity of the nurses and doctors, in stark contrast to the unmoving people in the waiting room. He has a difficult time focusing. "How is she?" he asks, with a frightened tone. He isn't sure he wants to know the answer.

"They moved Trisha up to the ICU."

"I'm sorry?" he asks.

"Intensive Care Unit. We've put her on a respirator — to keep her lungs breathing."



SHOVEL THEM
UNDER AND
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She guides him into the X-ray room. In the darkness, Denise finds it easier to talk to him. She talks to his face, or at least the part illuminated by the display lights.

Denise places Trisha's film on the display again. "This is an X-ray of your daughter's skull."

Alan expects something dramatic in the picture, but it looks fuzzy and unfocused to him. He can't pick out much beyond the shape of Trisha's head. It's a view of the top of her skull, looking down from above. Denise points to several hazy, irregular shapes. Alan wouldn't have seen them if she hadn't pointed them out.

"These are fragments of Trisha's skull," Denise says quietly, clinically, like she was describing parts of a machine. "When she fell, they were pushed into her brain. Here, here and here."

Alan breathes in. *Calm down, listen to the doctor*, he tells himself. *Calm down.*

"These smaller fragments are shards of glass. Here, here, here, and here," Denise says, pointing at another set of hazy objects, "which were also forced into her cortex by the fall."

Denise switches to another X-ray, this time a side view. She points out the shards of glass and bits of bone again, silently. Trisha's skull is abnormally flattened; the debris lies deep in her brain.

Alan puts his hand up to his eyes, massaging them, trying to get them to see, to understand better. His fingers come away wet. He hasn't realized he's crying.

Denise's voice grows colder still. "The bone and glass have damaged a significant part of Trisha's brain. Even if we surgically removed the fragments, she would still have massive brain damage." Standing in the dark, she can't tell how Alan's taking this.

Alan sobs. He weeps for a moment. Then he tries to collect himself, and whispers, "Go on. I want to know what to do."

Denise walks over to the door and turns on the light. "There isn't much we can do, Mr Devaut," she says, finding herself reciting lines she has memorized, words that others have said before. She delivers a tired rerun of a fatal prognosis she heard during her first year of residency. "The brain damage is permanent. Much of the cortex has been completely destroyed, and some of the deeper brain. What that means is that Trisha has no higher thought, and she can no longer breathe on her own. She is brain dead."

Alan breaks. A defeated, broken look overtakes his face. Staggering to the wall, he leans against it and cries. Denise feels herself withdrawing, too tired to empathize with his pain, too afraid of letting herself feel so much loss.

"My child," Alan whispers as he sobs.

"Mr Devaut, I wish I could say something positive about your daughter's condition. I wish I could give you something to hope for. But I can't."

Alan does not reply. Denise delivers the rest of the bad news, like a dose of medicine. All in one blow, but better than something drawn-out, an incremental death.

"All we can do now is keep Trisha's body functioning. We can respire her lungs, move her arms and legs, take care of her bodily functions. When the rest of her brain deteriorates, as it inevitably will, we could even take over the running of her heart. But all she would be is a body linked up to machines, a set of organs kept running by technology, nothing more. She'll never wake up."

Alan moans. His ashen face is covered with tears and sweat. But still he struggles to hold himself together. *Listen to the doctor, Alan*, he tells himself. *Keep your dignity, have some pride. Don't disgrace your daughter.*

"There are other procedures we have to talk about now, Mr Devaut. Let me call someone for you to talk with, all right? If you could just wait one more minute in

the waiting room?”

“Yes, fine,” Alan says, taking a shuddering breath. “Thank you. I’ll be all right.”

“There’s some coffee by the waiting room...”

“Thanks. I’m all right.”

Alan walks slowly back to the waiting room. As he does, Denise closes the door to the X-ray room, letting her own tears fall, letting her strength fail for just a moment. Then, swallowing it down again, she dials up the psychologist on call. While Trisha Devaut as a person is dead, Alan Devaut still has to choose when to let her body cease working. He must attend to that task, as well as a myriad of other details.

“Hello, Carol...” Denise says over the phone, letting the mechanics of the call bring her back to functioning.

Sandy sits quietly at the table, alone in the room reserved for police officers and EMTs and anyone else who might frighten people in the waiting room. Sandy holds a styrofoam cup of coffee in his hand, but does not drink. Josiah has been gone fifteen minutes, talking with some tall, thin gentleman.

Sandy fidgets in his chair, feeling the tautness of the holster against his chest. He feels the sweat accumulating around the shiny, silver-like gun, trickling down along his ribs. He wishes he had known about the gun earlier, before he applied to become Josiah’s partner. If he had known guns would be involved, however minor, he might have said no.

Sandy can hear the frantic work of the nurses and the doctors down the hall. His heart beats quicker in sympathy, as every sound reminds him of the last adrenalin-soaked day he carried someone into Mercy Hospital’s ER.

Sandy and Jim were carrying a badly wounded Crip that night. Jim decided to cut through enemy Blood territory to save time. Within moments, Sandy heard cars pull alongside, their stereos playing so loud that the ambulance windows shook. Then a barricade appeared up ahead. Before Jim could turn the ambulance around, the Bloods had surrounded them, fencing them in with their cars. The gangbangers bristled with pistols and rifles and cruel smiles. Sandy worked the radio frantically, trying to get any police car to respond.

A tall, muscled gangbanger walked up with an AK. He shot the back door open, pulled the wounded Crip out onto the street. The Bloods tired quickly of kicking him, and then they tired of his dying agony, so they shot him.

They held Jim and Sandy at gunpoint, so they could watch every groan and drop of blood. Then the gangbangers shot Jim. Sandy screamed as the bullets tore into his partner, waiting for them to tear into him. But they didn’t shoot him. They wanted to leave a witness, and they thought it funny to see if Sandy could reach the hospital before his partner died.

He didn’t.

They stopped running ambulances into the ghetto the next day. When it took a two-car escort to get to a call, you were no longer in a city, you were in a war zone. One without Geneva Conventions. One where the people outside the ghetto didn’t care what went on inside.

Getting a job with a procurer had seemed like a good step. Now that Sandy knows Josiah and he must carry guns, however, things have changed.

Josiah walks past, his rapid steps like gunshots on the tile floor. He winks at Sandy as he heads toward the waiting room.

Alan sits, almost frozen. His back aches, but he is not aware of it. He holds his head at an angle, creating a cramp in his neck, but he is not aware of it. He clen-

ches and unclenches his hands slowly, but he is not aware of it.

Josiah checks his tie, smooths his hair one last time, and enters the room. His face assumes a somber cast, one worthy of a serious official. "Mr Devaut?" he asks quietly. He knows the name from the chart, which the admissions nurse was so kind in giving him.

"Yes?" Alan says, looking with confusion at this new face, another unidentified man in the parade of unidentified hospital officials.

"I'm Josiah. I work with the hospital. There are some affairs that need to be dealt with. Would you mind coming with me?" Josiah smiles a small, correct smile. He's trying to help. They leave the waiting room, walking down a hallway to a room with a small table with coffee and sweeteners. A man with a case stands up from the table to give them space. Alan doesn't notice him, doesn't see the nervous look on the man's face.

"I know this isn't a good time, Mr Devaut, but there really isn't any other time to discuss this. It's a difficult thing to ask of you."

Alan shudders, wondering what more horrible thing could befall him. What news could be worse than what he's already heard?

"Let me begin by asking you this: are you an organ donor? I mean, have you signed that line on the back of your driver's license?"

"Well, no," Alan says, caught off guard.

"In the event of your death, do you want your organs used to help others?" Josiah asks, pressing just a little.

"I guess so."

"Mr Devaut, you were the legal guardian and father of Trisha. I have the unpleasant duty of asking you to consider allowing her organs to be used for donation."

Alan feels a jolt, as if a cold wind had just traveled up his back. He still can't believe Trisha is dead, but they are already asking him to parcel out her corpse. Nausea overwhelms him for a moment, and he gags slightly.

"Are you okay, Mr Devaut?" Josiah asks, his eyebrows contorted. "Are you still with me?"

"Yes," Alan says, forcing himself under control again. "Yes."

"I know this sounds horrible. I wish I didn't have to ask you this right now, but I can't wait. There are other children out there, in great need of transplants. Thousands of them, who will die without the gift of donation."

An image of death strikes Alan. A vast ash-colored blanket, like a dirty hospital sheet, falling down from the sky and smothering the children beneath it, Trisha's death merely a tiny stitch in the sheet.

"If you could see it in your heart, Mr Devaut, to allow us to take some of Trisha's useful organs, maybe some meaning, some good, can come of this tragedy. Part of Trisha will live on in every person who gets a gift from her."

"You're right," Alan says. An altruistic act may ease the pain. "It would be a good thing for Trisha... I think she would have liked it."

"Certainly," Josiah says, echoing Alan's growing resolve. He opens the snaps to his briefcase. "There are a few papers that must be signed, of course. Some legal issues that must be taken care of..."

Denise walks into the waiting room, looking for Alan. She walks down the hallway, hoping he hasn't left, or fainted in the men's room. As she nears the table, she sees the papers and the clipboard, and a strange man in a charcoal gray suit with Mr Devaut. The man in the suit glances up from the papers. As Denise locks her gaze with his, she recognizes him for what he is. The wariness in his eyes gives him away. A freelance procurer.

Denise pushes herself between the procurer and Alan. Denise turns to Alan, speaking with a sharp, angry tone. “You haven’t signed anything, have you?”

“No,” Alan says, bewildered.

“This man, whoever he is, is not part of Mercy Hospital. He’s not our procurer.”

Alan looks at Denise, then at Josiah, who holds his tongue, waiting to see how the game will play out.

“He wants to take your daughter’s organs and sell them. He’s in it for the profit. He makes his living off violating corpses.”

“I am a licensed organ procurer,” Josiah answers calmly, standing up. “Mr Devaut here is aware of that fact. I do make my living at it, which means I sell them,” Josiah says. He tries to step toward Alan. “Mr Devaut, this woman has mistaken me for some of the disreputable members of my trade.”

“Don’t deny it. You make vultures look good,” Denise says.

“I don’t understand,” Alan says.

“Mr Devaut,” Denise says, still angry, “this man is trying to gain legal hold of your daughter’s organs and use them for his own purposes.”

“Which I am licensed to do,” Josiah protests. “Mr Devaut, if you compare my terms with anyone else’s, I’m sure that you’ll find mine are more equitable, more charitable.”

“More profitable,” Denise sneers. “He’ll pay you more because he’ll sell your daughter’s organs to the highest bidder. Private clinics, foreign surgery spas. If you sign his papers, you’re denying help to the truly needy. We have our own donation program.”

Suddenly Alan feels like he’s being assaulted with different truths. Denise and Josiah are battling with conflicting versions, and Alan can’t figure out which is correct.

Josiah turns to Denise. “Young lady, I’m afraid you have mistaken me for someone else. I work on retainer for St Joseph’s Hospital for Children. There are several patients in dire need of kidney transplants. I was about to explain this to Mr Devaut before you so rudely interrupted me.”

Denise falls quiet. The wrath flows out of her, but not her suspicion. “I want a phone number. I want to confirm this.”

“By all means, please,” Josiah says, reaching inside his jacket pocket and pulling out a business card. “Call this number. Ask for Jennifer Papalia.”

As Denise strides to the nurse’s station, Josiah smiles, saying, “There’s been a horrible misunderstanding, Mr Devaut, and I’m afraid that you have been thrust into the middle of it. I didn’t wish to become a disturbance to you. But you see what I must deal with.” Josiah gestures toward Denise and shrugs his shoulders. “Now, as soon the doctor finishes telephoning, we’ll want to go over the papers.”

Josiah closes one of the compartment drawers with a satisfied sigh. Moving into the front of the van, he settles comfortably into the passenger seat, where he takes a Kleenex from the glove compartment. Methodically, he wipes each of his fingers clean.

“That was a fair night’s work,” Josiah says out loud, mainly to himself. Switching the terminal on, he taps into the hos-net, typing, talking absently as he does. “We got the kidneys. Could have gotten more if that doctor hadn’t been there. Normally, we have an understanding, but... Oh well. Get us back on the interchange, Sandy.”

Sandy swallows, then drives out of the emergency entrance of Mercy Hospital. He makes a right at the intersection, heading toward the interchange that leads to St Joseph’s.

Josiah stares at his computer, ignoring the van and Sandy, talking to himself.

“She just doesn’t understand that you can’t have the benefit of organ transplants on demand without any of the costs. Altruism doesn’t drive an industry. You’ve got to give people incentive.”

The computer beeps once, and text rapidly marches across the screen. Josiah smiles broadly. “Two kidney requests from Glessing Clinic. Nice figures, too.”

Sandy tightens his grip on the wheel, trying to control his distress, the growing sense that he has become a part of something unclean. The nervousness shows on his face. “Aren’t we heading for St Joseph’s?” he asks, his voice trembling.

“As a matter of fact, no,” Josiah says. “Glessing pays the highest rates for pre-school kidneys. They’re the next left.”

“You said you were on retainer for St Joseph’s.”

“I am, Sandy, I am. I just never deliver the good stuff to them. I throw St Joseph’s the odd bone or two, but I can’t make a living giving it away. Certainly couldn’t afford you if I operated like that.”

Sandy feels cold, chilled by the layer of sweat beneath his shirt. His fingers dig into the wheel. A sense of rage builds in him, pulsing, growing, filling his mind with thoughts of vultures. Sandy pulls the van over to the shoulder of the road.

“What’s the matter?” Josiah asks, looking up from the terminal.

“Get out,” Sandy says, overcome, feeling angry and confused.

“Sandy, what are you doing?” Josiah says.

“Get out of the van,” Sandy says, as a part of himself begins breaking, bursting, snapping.

“Sandy, I think you better get going. This van is going to the Glessing Clinic, and you’re either driving me there or you’re getting out.”

Sandy kills the engine, a loathsome throbbing in his ears. He turns to face Josiah. “You’re a grave-robber.”

“I don’t steal, Sandy. The man gave me his consent. Once he gives me that, I can do what I want with the organs. It’s a free market.”

“Just get out!” Sandy cries, not wanting to hear the logic or the rationalization.

Even in the dim illumination from the streetlamps, Sandy sees the determined look in Josiah’s eyes. He won’t be budged. “Sandy, you can’t steal this van from me,” Josiah says, and Sandy hears him move the briefcase along the floor, but he can’t see what he’s doing. Josiah conceals the movement with his body. “Don’t be stupid, Sandy,” Josiah continues. “Procuring is need-driven. There’s always more need for organs than supply. It’s simply the way it is. Demand high, supply low. You know what that means.”

“You’d better get out, Josiah.”

Josiah opens the clasps of the briefcases with a pop. “It’s not like we’re kidnapping people off the street and ripping out their organs.”

“Put the briefcase down,” Sandy says, his words a frightened whisper. The van feels constricting, claustrophobic. Josiah’s gruesome words seem to attack him, as his hands reach into the briefcase.

“They’re corpses, Sandy. Whether or not their organs go to charity or profit, they’re still just as dead. Nobody cares if a few parts are missing.”

“I’m giving you one last chance, Josiah,” Sandy says.

A car drives past the van, its headlights blinding Sandy and Josiah momentarily.

Josiah draws his automatic. Sandy dives backward off his seat, his hand closing on his pistol, pulling it free. Hemmed in by the terminal, Josiah tries to pivot. The van fills with the roar of gunfire.

As his vision clears, Sandy sees the blood pour down Josiah’s forehead.

Sandy accelerates back onto the interchange, smelling the too-familiar odor of death, trying hard not to wonder if St Joseph’s can salvage Josiah’s organs. CW

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EDITED BY ANDY COX
COVER ILLUSTRATION © MIKE BOHATCH

FICTION • CRIME & MYSTERY

TTA PRESS



UK: £5.99

ISBN 0 9526947 3 5



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