

CRIMEWAVE 8

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**COLD HARBOURS**

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COLD HARBOURS



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## RON SAVAGE

**W**hen Clinton Tyler Bramlett Jr had started strangling her, maybe ten seconds ago – and for a hundred and fifty-two pound junior broker from Barnaby-Sax, CT intuitively understood the way to press a lady’s jugular – Sarah wondered if this naked guy on top of her understood the time required to kill someone by hand. Could he wait the seven or eight minutes until she lost consciousness and died, or did he expect her to die bing-bam-boom like they did on TV? More to the point, was Clinton Tyler Bramlett Jr a patient person?

Sarah had met CT for the first time tonight at this retro fern bar off Lexington, stain-glass, brass railings, polished wood, all that Laura Ashley Seventies Yuppie crap. CT said he had a sister named Clare who worked as a market analyst for Chase. Sarah said her genius brother Tommy was a pharmacist, and everybody called him ‘Acorn’ because daddy thought he was ‘the nut in the family’. Then she asked to see his driver’s license; told him what she usually did in these situations, how she worked for the DMV, which was totally true, and how these driver photos could reveal a person’s secret side, which wasn’t true at all. Sarah immediately memorized his social security number, date of birth, and full name, asking the boy to order her a Dirty Martini as she trotted off to the little girl’s room to do “My three P’s,” ie primp, powder, and pee.

Entering the lavatory, she seated herself in the last stall, removed the Blackberry from her mauve handbag, and did two wireless faxes. Less than five minutes later, Sarah emerged with a complete credit report on Clinton Tyler Bramlett Jr *and* assurance from the Department of Motor Vehicles that Mr Junior Broker didn’t have a DWI to his name. A girl alone couldn’t be too careful.

The irony didn’t escape her. Difficult to do when CT had his smooth, almost hairless legs currently straddling her naked body, his two pale hands wrapped tightly about her throat. And the eyes, my *God*, those eyes, what had she ever done to deserve that sort of hatred? *Hel-lo*. Perhaps the darling came from a hideous childhood, an uncompromising slut of a mother, a womanizing alcoholic father. Conceivably, daddy enjoyed beating up any person and/or thing that questioned him or moved. Yet that sounded so *Psychology Today*, so *Cosmo*.

*Why are you looking at me with those hateful blue eyes, CT? I thought we had a mutual, you know, thing and all. I mean, do I remind you of an old girlfriend, or your mommy – what, exactly?*

The single life was never easy, your guard had to stay up. The two main problems were psycho-boys and diseases. She knew either one could do serious damage. Unfortunately, they didn’t make prophylactics for the heads that counted. *I don’t blame you, CT, I blame myself for skinny dipping in the wrong gene pool*. Sarah always tried to dot her I’s and cross her T’s when it came to meeting Mr Right. But Clinton Tyler Bramlett was a college graduate, a *Yale* man, financially attractive, socially appropriate, color co-ordinated, politically correct, able to string more than five words without resorting to sports – the man knew *wine*, OK? Hell, the man was a *Republican*. If

you couldn't trust the Clinton Tyler Bramletts of the world, then what exactly was a girl supposed to do?

*Explore within*, as her therapist Rebecca insisted. Though Sarah's life had never been excessively dramatic, *Becca* – as in, “Hiya, call me *Becca*” – was always saying things like, “Oh, Sarah, you're sooo classically abused.” Another favorite *Becca*-ism, “Goodness, you are just the little queen of denial.” That was the prelude to this: “Don't you think you might be glossing over your father-daughter issues an itty-biddy-bit?” Sarah wanted to punch her therapist in the face – just once, nothing habitual – but she was afraid *Becca* would increase her weekly sessions.

CT was starting to look annoyed now. Guys always wanted you to do things *right away* for them, even die. That would come soon enough, Sarah could hardly breath, her skin had a definite flush, and she felt like her eyes were ready to burst their sockets. Of course, maybe he wasn't killing her. Maybe this was a whatever, a weird sex thing. Sarah heard that some people – what *Becca* called the ‘emotionally challenged’ – liked to cut off their oxygen just before doing the Big O. Apparently, strangulation gave a person an even *bigger* O. But thinking about it, Sarah was pretty positive that she and CT weren't doing anything remotely close to that.

Then CT said, “What the hell's wrong with you?”

Sarah tried to speak, but no air would come out. She did manage a “Mmm . . . mmm . . . mmm.”

“Just *die*, already,” said CT

*Why do you want me dead, Clinton? What in God's name did I ever do to you? Did you torture puppies and pull the wings off butterflies when you were a boy? Did mommy's milk run out before you could catch a cab to Starbucks? Did I wear the wrong blouse?*

*What's your damage, CT?*

God, Sarah *loved* that expression. When she was thirteen – this was 1989 – she saw the movie *Heathers*, the one with Winona Rider, and that's what everybody in the movie said, “What's your damage?” Not like “What's wrong with you?” but how were you hurt, how had the world and its charms disrupted your soul, bent your life. How did the people you loved and trusted cripple you? *What's your damage?*

The question always reminded her of Tommy, aka Acorn. “OK, all right, quiet, everybody,” her father would say to the family, usually at dinner. “Tommy's gonna talk, go on Acorn, you're the nut in the family. Tell us where your old man fudged up, where did I make my mistake *this* time?” Tommy told him; right on the money, too. Nine years old, ten years old, eleven years old, etcetera, etcetera, and Tommy boy told the old man, recited the list of the truly dumb stuff a not too bright father said and did each and every day. Tommy boy, the wise; daddy boy, the humiliated.

No one raised a fist or a voice, but there were battles going on. Many years later, after escaping his own therapy, Tommy, now far less oblivious, liked to call these daily battles the “humiliated humiliating the humiliator.”

*What's your damage?*

CT now glared down at her as if, well, as if he wanted to do what he was doing, strangle her. The phrase *Die bitch!* came to mind, was he thinking that? Or maybe the ponderous, *Why aren't you dying, bitch?* Like somehow she was ruining his day. Hel-lo.

Sarah had specifically asked her brother that very question: “So listen, Acorn, how long you figure it would take to strangle a person to death? You know, none of

that David Copperfield or David Blaine crap, just your average person.”

Acorn didn't miss a beat. “For brain death, roughly eight minutes.”

*See, see, Mr Junior Broker, Mr CT Bramlett – God, I can't believe there's two more at home like you – this isn't TV. . . you can't fit strangulation in before the first commercial, life isn't an orderly thing. The body, for your information, Mr Know-it-All, the body doesn't just fold up and die. People aren't that fragile. You gotta work to kill a human being, you got to make a major effort . . . you got to have patience . . .*

Sarah felt warm tears on the rims of her eyes. She didn't know if the sadness and the tears were real, or if Mr Sensitive was just squeezing last bit out of her like she was an empty ketchup bottle. God, talk about your pathetic childhood, Sarah remembered her daddy cleaning out their refrigerator on a Saturday morning – this somewhere between her eighth and tenth year – tossing empty plastic containers into the trash, the mayo, the ketchup, the mustard, and she had spontaneously combusted into these chest-wrenching sobs, as if those stupid empty bottles were her best, most dearest friends. This was the day she and her daddy had mutually decided, then and there, that eight or nine or ten year old Sarah was definitely a crazy person, too.

As if to verify their old agreement, Sarah's new thought was: *Hey, I just think I made a therapeutic breakthrough, or whatever. I got to call Becca . . . or maybe not . . . I mean, do I really want to give her the satisfaction?*

The bedroom had started to go black around the edges. Only two, maybe three minutes into the strangling thing and she was already heading for a blackout. But Acorn had assured her that losing consciousness didn't mean a person was dead. And it didn't mean the person was *going* to die, either. All of that depended on the knowledge *and* the actions of the strangler, not the stranglee. Many, many times the strangler would leave the stranglee long before the job was done, no checking the pulse, no checking dilation, only to wake up the next morning to police banging their fists on the door, thanks to an irate but living, breathing stranglee.

CT was grinning down at her, his soft, pale junior broker hands doing damn good work for a guy with a white collar gig and a hundred and seventy-five thousand in mutuals. Then something seemed to change. She didn't know if her neck had become numb from the pressure of his fingers, or if his grasp had relinquished a fraction of the force he'd been exerting on her arteries and windpipe. But the black edges had quit kaleidoscoping inward and were now gradually receding, the bedroom swimming back into focus. CT's expression had become . . . she wasn't sure . . . *different*. He no longer glared down at her with that dumb grin and those perfect white teeth. The eyes had gone glassy, the smile sagging into an inconsequential line. Sarah inhaled suddenly, and again, and a third time – quick audible gulps – the new air chilling her lungs. CT's hands still rested on her throat but without gripping her. His skin had begun turning pale, as if the color was draining off. When his hands finally slipped from her neck, Sarah screamed. The upper part of CT fell forward and landed on her chest. She wriggled out from under him, using her feet and hands to push away the body. Swinging her legs over the side of the bed and finding the floor, Sarah wrapped herself in the blue silk robe she'd dropped there three, four minutes ago. She took a deep breath to calm herself, leaned forward to check if CT's pupils were dilated, then she placed her index and middle finger to his neck.

Nothing.

Sarah did an audible sigh, and retrieved two glasses from the nightstand.

Both glasses were filled with red wine, one completely full, the other half full. She turned and walked toward the kitchenette, sniffing the half full glass. Acorn the pharmacist might have been daddy's little nut, but her brother could put together a new drug the way some people knew how to mix and match accessories. He was also a wiz on the computer. Give that boy a full credit dossier, and he could come up with the account number of your choice; in this particular instance, a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars in mutuals that he'd probably already transferred to the Caymans. Sarah thought about this, and her chance for a new tan, as she washed the wine glasses, rinsing away the warm soapy water, sitting each upside down on the tile sink to dry. ■

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Ron's stories have appeared in *Film Comment Magazine*, *Modern Short Stories*, *Tomorrow Magazine*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and Temple University's literary *Magazine*, to name a few. Other 2005 publications include *The Black and White Anthology* (TallGrass Writers Guild) and *Nocturne*. He's worked as a broadcaster, newspaper editor, actor and, for the last twenty-seven years, a psychologist at Eastern State Hospital in Williamsburg, Virginia.

## SUSAN FRY

The woman's body had been staged in exactly the same way as all the others. She lay on her back in the red dirt of the arroyo, her arms at her sides, her eyes closed, as if she'd fallen peacefully asleep. Her clothes – a knee-length black skirt and a white blouse – had been neatly brushed and modestly arranged. Even the bruises around her neck reminded Orlando of the other women.

But this woman was white.

“Orlando!”

Isabella's voice was sharp with fear. She pointed back toward the sprawl of low buildings that made up the shantytown of Loma Blanca. Orlando shaded his eyes against the sun's glare and saw a cloud of red dust whirl up from the desert road. There was something dark at the center of the cloud.

“It looks like an SUV,” Isabella said. She shivered and folded her arms around herself, her fingers pulling the flimsy cotton of her blue work shirt so tightly around her body that Orlando could see the delicate curve of her waist.

He shivered, too. The only SUV around Loma Blanca belonged to Carlos Mondragon. Orlando wanted to tell Isabella that everything would be all right – that he would protect her. But the woman's body was proof he couldn't.

“It looks like word has spread quickly,” he said. “I'll have to hurry. Turn around.”

“No!” Isabella protested. She bit her lip. “I need to tell the others what you find – especially the women who discovered her this morning. I promised. Otherwise they would never have let me tell one of the *policia*. Even you.” She paused. “I've seen worse than this.”

Orlando knew this was true. Isabella had discovered the body of her sixteen-year-old cousin, Rosa, lying in the dirt outside town the year before. She'd watched her father beaten by the border guards and seen two brothers sent to prison for smuggling drugs. But Orlando didn't want her to watch him examine the body. If she saw what he was about to do, she might never feel the same way toward him again.

“Turn around.” Orlando tried to sound firm, but he didn't know what he would have done if Isabella had still refused. He was relieved when she finally glanced back at the approaching dust cloud and nodded. The soles of her work shoes scuffed the hard ground as she turned away.

Orlando knelt next to the woman's body, trying to avoid any marks the murderer might have left. The dry, crumbled dirt cut into his knees. He crossed himself, took a deep breath, and bent over to pull up the woman's skirt. His shadow fell across the woman's bare calves, and for a moment, her skin looked as dark as Isabella's. He had a sudden, horrifying vision of Isabella lying there instead of this white woman – Isabella's straight black hair instead of this woman's reddish-brown curls, Isabella's full lips lightly coated in dust from the arroyo, Isabella's legs stretched out in the sunlight, her heels splayed.

The other twenty-seven victims over the past three years had been Mexican. Celia



Santiago, the youngest, had just turned fourteen. Orlando had found Celia's body himself, during a routine patrol. All the women had disappeared during the two-hour trip between their homes in Loma Blanca and their jobs at the *maquiladora*, where they'd sewn clothing for wealthy Americans. Carlos Mondragon, the owner of the *maquiladora*, paid well – twenty dollars a week. He paid in American dollars, which were more valuable this close to the border than pesos. It was enough money to make the women willing to walk five miles, take a bus fifteen miles across the desert, and then walk two miles more. It was enough to convince them to keep working, even when the women who disappeared turned up in abandoned lots, on dry riverbeds, or among the yucca groves at the edge of the desert.

It was enough money to convince even Isabella to keep working.

Orlando took another deep breath, tasting the iron tang of the dust in the air, and tugged the woman's skirt up to her waist. Carefully, using only the tips of his fingers, he spread her legs. Orlando's supervisor, Sergio Fuentes, had only allowed autopsies to be performed on a few of the bodies – or had been too careless to forbid them. Those autopsies had shown that the women had been raped. Orlando felt as if he were raping this woman again. In his mind, he sent a quick prayer to the Virgin Mary, asking her to tell the woman that he was trying to help her, not hurt her.

He saw the green and white paper, folded, roughly inserted.

Orlando snatched his hands away and let the woman's skirt fall back to cover her thighs. He closed his eyes, but he could still see the twenty-dollar bill. Just like all the others. Twenty-seven twenty-dollar bills.

Mondragon's workers received a brand-new bill every Friday as they left the *maquiladora*, money so fresh the paper crackled as if it had been starched. Isabella had insisted on taking Orlando to dinner on his last birthday, and she had paid with one of those bills. Its edges had been knife-sharp.

Behind him, Isabella whispered, "Does this mean Pablo Batista really is innocent?"

Orlando's head jerked up. Isabella was peering over his shoulder, her hand clutching the neck of her shirt. Orlando knew she was touching the cross she wore underneath, a gold-colored one suspended on black beads. He'd seen it for the first time two weeks before, when Isabella had let him unbutton the top five buttons of her shirt.

"Get back!" he shouted.

Shock flared over her face. She backed away so quickly she stumbled on a loose rock and nearly fell.

"I'm sorry, Isabella. So sorry." Orlando knew he was apologizing for more than just his shout.

Isabella looked at the body, then back at Orlando. Before she could move – either toward him or away from him, Orlando didn't know which she would have chosen – he heard the rumble of Mondragon's SUV.

"Go!"

This time, Isabella didn't hesitate. She ran, just as Mondragon's SUV roared over the lip of the arroyo. Unlike Orlando's careful approach, the SUV seemed to want to destroy any potential evidence. It drove in a circle around Orlando and the white woman's body, throwing up clouds of dust that clogged Orlando's throat and made him cough. When it finally stopped, Orlando was thankful to see that Isabella had vanished.

**Mondragon's bodyguard,** a muscular man with a brown leather gun holster openly strapped across his chest, held the front passenger door open. Another man stepped out, the heels of his boots crunching on the dirt. It was the chief of police, Sergio Fuentes.

Orlando swallowed. His throat felt raw from the dust.

Fuentes glared up at him. "What the hell are you doing here, Ortiz?"

Orlando knew that Fuentes hated him for many things, including the fact that Orlando was younger, taller, and much smarter than he was. Orlando hated Fuentes for many things as well, but he tried to keep that hatred from showing.

"I heard there was another body. I came to check it out."

"Heard from who?"

Orlando said nothing, carefully not looking in the direction Isabella had probably gone.

Fuentes frowned and took a step closer. In a low voice, he said, "You should have called *me* first." Then he turned toward the SUV.

Fear gripped Orlando's stomach. The windows of the vehicle were tinted so darkly that Orlando could see only his own reflection – a man with dusty hair and a thin nose. Isabella claimed he was handsome when he remembered to laugh. But now his lips were pressed tightly together, his forehead creased in a frown. Orlando forced himself to smile just as the window slid down and a cold blast of air conditioning hit his face – the comfortable temperature only the rich could afford.

Carlos Mondragon was the wealthiest man in Loma Blanca. He owned the *maquiladora*, a hacienda in the desert, a house across the border of New Mexico in Antelope Pass, and a condominium in Florida. He also owned Sergio Fuentes, and Orlando was terrified that Mondragon might just own him, too.

"What's going on?" Mondragon asked. His voice was deep and smooth, as if he'd been lying in the shade drinking sangria all morning. His sunglasses were the same shiny black as the car's windows, and Orlando once again saw his reflection, but much, much reduced – the reflection of an insignificant man.

"I assure you," Fuentes said quickly, "I have this all under . . ."

Mondragon held up one hand, and Fuentes fell silent. "Ortiz? It is Detective Ortiz, isn't it?"

Orlando nodded.

"Well? What's going on here?"

"It looks like another one, sir." The 'sir' came automatically to Orlando.

"Impossible. Batista has been imprisoned now for three months. The American investigators have gone back home. The murders are over." Mondragon pulled off his sunglasses. His irises were black and shiny, too.

Orlando said nothing.

Mondragon frowned and leaned back. For the first time, Orlando realized that Mondragon's son, Renaldo, was sitting next to his father in the car. Renaldo was eighteen. He had his father's wide face and thin lips, his father's height and broad shoulders. But he now sat hunched over, his chest concave, his hair falling over his eyes, as if he wanted to be anywhere but where he was. Orlando felt a flash of sympathy. Mondragon's house must have been a place of torment. Even the boy's mother, a beautiful woman who'd come all the way from Mexico City to marry Mondragon, hadn't been able to endure it. She'd left when Renaldo was ten. There

were rumors that Mondragon had beaten her every Sunday after church.

Perhaps it was the memory of Renaldo's mother that made Orlando speak. "I recommend we autopsy the woman. We could get a doctor in from El Paso." He regretted the words as soon as they sprang from his mouth.

Mondragon looked at him, thoughtfully. "He stands up to me, Fuentes, when you don't. Why is that?"

Fuentes said nothing.

"Ortiz?"

"Perhaps I'm just stupid."

"Perhaps."

Mondragon ran one finger down the side of his mouth, thinking. Slowly, he said, "I will, of course, ask Chief Fuentes to examine the body. But then I think it would be more . . . respectful to the family to return it to them for a quick burial. Don't you?"

Orlando frowned. The same thing had happened with nearly all the other bodies. They had simply been given to the women of their families as soon as they had been found, without further investigation. There was speculation, of course, about why Mondragon did not want the murders solved. People said he was protecting his factory's reputation. The factory sold goods to American companies, who, after the twentieth murder, had sent a few people down to investigate. But then Pablo Batista had been arrested, and the Americans had left. No one dared whisper that Mondragon himself might be responsible, that he was the only man in Loma Blanca who could afford to throw away twenty-seven twenty-dollar bills.

Orlando took a deep breath. "This woman is different."

Mondragon's eyes narrowed.

"This woman is white." Orlando stood aside to let Mondragon look at the body.

To his surprise, Mondragon blinked, as if startled. "Who is she?"

Fuentes cursed under his breath. "Tanya Anderson, an American teacher at the Relief Center."

"You knew her?" Orlando raised his eyebrows.

Fuentes shrugged. "My wife took a lesson from her in English."

Beyond Mondragon, Renaldo leaned forward. The boy stared at the body, then squeezed his eyes shut, as if looking at a light that was too bright.

Mondragon glanced at his son. "Weak," he muttered. "Just like his mother."

Mondragon made no move to block Renaldo's view. Orlando was tempted to do it himself. But he didn't.

**Because the woman** was American, even Mondragon had to allow an investigation. He ordered the body to be stored in the small morgue in Loma Blanca until the American authorities could be notified, perhaps the same ones who had come down three months before. Orlando should have been overjoyed at the victory. But as he walked home that evening, his knees trembled.

If another woman had been killed, Pablo Batista truly was innocent.

At twenty-four, Orlando supported his mother. He was proud of this fact. Most of his friends who were shopkeepers or auto mechanics still needed help from their parents and would until they were married, or even after. As a policeman, Orlando earned not only his salary, but also bribes from people he stopped for speeding tickets and parking violations. These things were a natural and accepted part of his

job. They were small things.

Pablo Batista was not a small thing.

Batista had been under suspicion because he owned the taqueria next to the bus stop the murdered women used to get to the factory. He sold spicy chorizo in corn tortillas. He sold Coca-Cola. He made his customers drink the Coca-Cola right there in front of him, because they had to hand the bottles back so he could get his deposit from the company. Orlando himself had purchased Coca-Cola from Batista many times.

Fuentes had brought Batista into the station. Batista had been skinny man who was vain about his appearance. He had worn his long hair in a ponytail, like a Brazilian soccer star, and sported a carefully-ironed red shirt that could have been silk. Six hours later, Orlando had seen Batista again, after his 'confession'. He'd seen Batista's bloody nose and the cigarette burns on his arms where his red shirt had been torn open. Fuentes had marched Batista down the hallway, and Batista had looked Orlando directly in the eyes. After a second, Orlando had looked away. Batista had been imprisoned two weeks later, and the murders had stopped.

Until today.

Orlando sighed as he passed the store on his street corner. The store had bars across the windows. Through the bars, Orlando could see the shopkeeper watching TV Azteca with the lights off, to save electricity. Orlando knew that although the news of the murder would not appear on the television set, it would pass through the town nonetheless, the way all momentous happenings passed through Loma Blanca – from woman to woman. The way Isabella had found out about the body that morning.

Orlando took a deep breath and walked through the low archway to his apartment building.

Sure enough, Isabella stood in the courtyard, the light from the bare bulb in the archway gleaming on her hair. She had probably just come from the *maquiladora*, because she still wore the shirt he'd seen her in that morning. But now it was wrinkled and stained with sweat under the arms from her walk across the desert. Orlando didn't care. He stepped forward and took Isabella into his arms. He felt her stiffen in surprise, but he only pulled her more tightly to him, squeezing his eyes shut. He could feel her heartbeat and his own thumping different tempos, like two out-of-sync machines from Mondragon's factory, about to break down.

"Orlando," Isabella protested. She twisted away from him. For the first time, Orlando realized they weren't alone. He stepped back, embarrassed, as Isabella straightened her shirt and quickly combed her fingers through her hair.

Three other women sat in the courtyard. They sat on the rim of the dry, crumbling fountain that had never, in all the years Orlando had lived there, actually contained water. The evening was hot, and the women fanned their faces with ancient fashion magazines, trying to catch the first, *piñon*-scented breeze from the desert, where it was already ten degrees cooler. Orlando knew the women, of course – ancient Ana Cruz, whose grandniece had been the first to die three years before, and Sophia and Lupé Garcia, whose little sister Felice had been the last one murdered before the American woman, just before Pablo Batista had been arrested.

Orlando shuddered when he remembered Felice. He'd had to drive Felice's mother to the murder site himself, so she could identify the body. She'd stared at the girl as if she couldn't believe it was her daughter. Then she'd turned on her other two

daughters. She'd flown at Sophia and Lupé, arms flailing. She'd beaten them, slapping their faces, shaking them by the shoulders, pushing them into each other, and yelling. "It's your fault. You left her alone last night. You left her to come home alone." Sophia and Lupé had stood silently under their mother's rage, because her words were true. Their mother had died from a heart attack a week later, and no one had seen Sophia or Lupé smile since. They spent every Sunday and Wednesday in the old, splintering black confessional at Our Lady of Forgiveness.

"It was Señora Anderson who was killed, wasn't it?" Sophia asked. Her cotton dress was a faded floral print, tattered at the hem. Her face was grooved rather than wrinkled, with deep lines between her eyebrows and on either side of her wide, flat nose. She was closer to forty than to thirty, and Orlando could see why no one had ever married her.

"You knew Señora Anderson?"

Sophia nodded and lifted her chin, proudly. "I took four classes from her. I learned in English how to ask for the time, and the names of vegetables."

"She taught me how to tell a man he was handsome," said Ana Cruz, said, smiling. Ana was eighty. Her white hair was so thin Orlando could see the scalp shining through at her temples.

Orlando smiled, too. For the first time, he found himself thinking of the American woman as a real person, as real as José's cousin or Felice. As real as Isabella. That thought made him cold, even in the warm courtyard.

"Señora Anderson taught me how to discuss the weather, and how to ask a housewife if she needed help around the kitchen," said Lupé.

Lupé and Sophia were the best cooks in Loma Blanca. They were so good, in fact, that Mondragon himself hired them for his Sunday dinners. They had worked for him many times since Felice had been killed. Orlando couldn't understand that. He knew, of course, that without Felice's salary, the unmarried sisters were sometimes only a few pesos away from going hungry. But to work for a man who might have killed your sister?

Then again, who was he to judge, after Pablo Batista?

As if she read his mind, Lupé said, "I heard there will be a real investigation this time."

"What do you mean, this time?" Orlando demanded.

"You know exactly what she means." Sophia glared at Orlando, her eyes small and mean, like a pig's. The muscles in her calves and arms were stringy from lifting heavy pots of *molé* and ground corn. "It's about time the police are going to do something about the murders."

"Only because Señora Anderson was American," Lupé said. Lupé was shorter and softer than her sister, but with the same flat nose. She was nodding, as if agreeing with an argument she'd been holding with herself for a long time. Her double chin tripled with the movement.

Orlando shifted from one foot to another, suddenly angry that he'd been kept standing in his own courtyard, forced to hear accusations that he was afraid were true.

"It's not your fault, Orlando."

Isabella put her hand on his arm. The calluses on her palm scraped against his skin. But her hand was warm, and he quickly covered it with his own, colder hand, grateful for the heat.

“No,” Sophia said, her voice dropping lower. “It’s our fault. For being poor, and Mexican, and women.”

“They said my Theresa was a *puta*,” Ana Cruz said, indignantly. Her scratchy voice cracked. “Your *Jefe*, Sergio Fuentes, he said that. He said that’s why they weren’t going to investigate.”

“He told us drug runners had killed Felice,” Lupé said. “Told my mother she should blame the Americans for buying the drugs.”

“He’s just afraid of Mondragon.” Sophia’s voice echoed through a sudden silence in the courtyard.

“She means that Fuentes is afraid,” Isabella said, quickly. She gripped Orlando’s arm more tightly.

But Orlando pushed her hand off. He knew what Sophia meant, and he knew she was right. That didn’t stop his voice from rising into a shout. “And you aren’t afraid of him?”

“Mondragon is a monster,” Lupé said. She nodded again. “The way he treats that poor boy. The way he treated his wife. Everyone said she left, but I never saw her pack a bag. She was a careful woman, too. Everything had to be neat, in its place. I never saw a suitcase missing. So where did she go? If she’d been American, they would have investigated.”

“But she was rich,” Ana Cruz pointed out.

Sophia shrugged. “Rich, poor, white – looks like women around here are all worth the same to Mondragon. Twenty dollars.”

“So why do you still cook for him?” Orlando asked, even though he knew his words were cruel.

Sophia looked up at him. She frowned, the groove between her eyebrows deepening. “Because if I discover he was responsible for Felice, I’ll kill him myself.”

Orlando looked at the muscles of her arms and calves. He believed her.

“I’d kill him, too,” Isabella said, softly.

Orlando stared at her in surprise. She narrowed her eyes, tightened her lips, and stared back at him.

“And I,” said Ana Cruz.

“I would, as well,” said Lupe.

Slowly, majestically, Sophia crossed herself, then leaned over and spit into the dirt. “But unlike the police, I would require proof. Not just a confession from a beaten man.”

Isabella looked at Orlando, then away.

**The Garcia sisters’** accusations haunted Orlando throughout the night. They were right. He was afraid of Mondragon. And because of that, he’d let an innocent man be put in prison. He’d let another woman die. Isabella could be next.

But was Mondragon the killer? Orlando remembered the look of astonishment on the man’s face. Mondragon hadn’t recognized Tanya Anderson. Fuentes had. And the police chief earned a large salary – twenty dollars more a month than Orlando did. Fuentes could afford to be the killer himself. It was certainly possible.

Somehow, however, Orlando could not believe this. He didn’t like Fuentes, but that didn’t mean the man was capable of murder, or rape, even if he had ‘persuaded’ Pablo Batista to confess. Surely, Fuentes would draw a line between ‘persuasion’ and murder.

In the morning, Orlando’s mother made his breakfast – two corn tortillas topped

with fried eggs and a dash of Tabasco sauce. She wore her red-flowered housedress and a spotless white apron, neatly tied around her waist. But unlike most mornings, she didn't sit with him and urge him to eat more, or ask him when he was going to marry Isabella and give her grandchildren. This morning, she served him with her mouth clamped tightly shut. The only noise in the kitchen came from Orlando's fork scraping across his cracked blue plate.

Because of this silence, Orlando knew that his mother had heard about the murder, probably the same way Isabella and the Garcia sisters had – woman to woman. But he didn't know what his mother's silence meant. Was she ashamed of him, angry, worried? He wanted to rest his head against her aproned stomach, to let her stroke his hair and tell him what to do. But when she reached down to take his plate away, he noticed the fragility of her wrists, the gnarled veins twisting across the backs of her hands, and the blue tint at the base of her fingernails. She could not help him. She depended on him to help her.

It was a relief to leave his small apartment with the dry fountain in the courtyard. He walked to the morgue and found Fuentes and another man he didn't recognize stooped over the battered steel autopsy table, peering at Tanya Anderson's body.

"Ah, Orlando, there you are," Fuentes said, as if they attended autopsies together every day.

Orlando searched Fuentes' narrow face, trying to imagine him as the killer. But he just saw a man with dark smudges under his eyes, as if Fuentes hadn't slept either.

"This is Dr Andrew Gomez," Fuentes said. "He came over from El Paso this morning to assist us."

Orlando nodded at the doctor, who nodded back. Dr Gomez was a short, stocky man, with a dimple in his chin so deep it looked as if it had been slashed there by a knife. His face was clean-shaven, except around the dimple, where a few prickles of dark hair had escaped his razor. But his white coat was impeccably clean.

"I understand you're the one who found the body," the doctor said. He lifted his cleft chin, as if he would have liked to look down at Orlando. His Spanish was fluent, but his accent flatter than Orlando's. Americanized. "Did you notice anything unusual?"

Orlando thought for a second, then shrugged. "She was just like all the others, except she was white."

"And did you observe the other autopsies?"

Orlando shot a look at Fuentes, who looked back at him steadily. Orlando knew this was his chance to say that the other autopsies had not been done. This was his chance to let the American know that the murders had not been properly investigated. And if he did? Mondragon would be furious. Fuentes would find an excuse to fire him. There would be no one in the police to protect Isabella and the other women. Orlando would have to become a mechanic, or perhaps take over Pablo Batista's food stand. Or worse.

He looked again at the doctor's white coat. It reminded him of his mother's apron.

"No," Orlando said. "I did not observe them."

Relief flooded Fuentes' face. Orlando wondered whether Fuentes was relieved for Mondragon sake, or for his own.

"Pity," Dr Gomez said. "Because she's not like all the others." His voice sounded condescending, even bored.

"What?" Fuentes spoke so loudly his words echoed off the grimy tile walls of the

autopsy room.

Dr Gomez held up a tray. The twenty-dollar bill lay on it, now unfolded. Dr Gomez picked it up with a pair of tongs and rotated it slowly. The bill was dirty. The creases from the folds were dark on both sides, as if the bill had absorbed fluids from the American woman's body.

"The murderer has left the bills in every woman's body after raping her, correct?" Dr Gomez asked.

"Yes," Fuentes said.

"Fascinating," Gomez said, peering at the bill. Then he looked at Orlando and cleared his throat with an air of self-importance. "The money could be the killer's way of justifying what he's done – he might believe he's paying the woman, or her family, for her time. Or he could see women in general as a commodity, something that can be bought and sold."

That description fit Mondragon perfectly. But Orlando gritted his teeth at the doctor's tone. Dr Gomez spoke about the women as if they were nothing more than interesting case studies.

"But this particular woman . . ." Dr Gomez said, and paused, as if he enjoyed creating drama.

"This woman?" Fuentes demanded.

Dr Gomez smiled. "This woman wasn't raped."

Orlando's mouth fell open. "You're saying the killer is changing his methods?"

Dr Gomez shook his head. "There's a difference between a *modus operandi* and a signature. A *modus operandi* is learned behavior. But a signature – especially one so consistent across earlier victims – is something the killer needs to do in order to feel satisfied. Raping and killing, cleaning up the body and arranging it neatly, inserting the bill . . . he's incapable of changing that."

"So we're looking at a different killer." Orlando's voice was loud with relief. Perhaps Pablo Batista had been guilty after all.

Fuentes' cell phone rang. He hesitated, then opened it and turned away from Orlando and Dr Gomez, as if for privacy. But Orlando could hear every word.

"Yes, Señor Mondragon." Fuentes bobbed his head as if the man was actually in the room. "I can be right there." Then he stopped bobbing. "But, sir, I don't understand. I assure you I have it under control." He listened for a few more seconds, then turned off his cell phone. He looked at it as if he couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

"He wants to see you," Fuentes said to Orlando.

"Alone?"

Fuentes nodded. "Congratulations." He sounded bitter.

**Orlando had never** been to the Mondragon *hacienda* before. The front hallway was tiled in black and white squares, and the ceiling rose so high above him that the viga rafters vanished into shadow. A servant led him into a vast room lined with arches looking out onto a green courtyard. The room smelled like flowers, and a fountain covered with blue and yellow tiles sprayed water high into the air. Orlando could feel the cool mist against his arms and face. He remembered his own dry fountain and sighed.

A long wooden table dominated the room. Mondragon sat at the far end. He wore a white, open-necked shirt with a tiny alligator logo over his heart. He was slightly slumped over, his hair mussed, his skin blotchy. He seemed older than he had the day before.



His son, Renaldo, sat next to him. Orlando looked at Renaldo, then looked again. Renaldo had been beaten. He had a black eye, a cracked lip, and a cut across his forehead that had been badly stitched up with thick, black thread.

"Thank you for meeting with me," Mondragon said, as if his son's appearance were nothing unusual. "I wanted to talk to you about the American woman."

Orlando tried not to look at Renaldo again. "Chief Fuentes might be more helpful."

"Chief Fuentes is no longer with the police. I have determined that his investigations of the past murders were incompetent."

"I see." Orlando swallowed.

"In fact, you have just been promoted. Congratulations, Chief Ortiz."

Orlando's eyes drifted to Renaldo. He forced himself to look back at Mondragon, who smiled, as if he knew exactly what Orlando was thinking.

"I'm not sure I'm ready for such an . . . honor." Orlando's heart pounded like a bell tolling a funeral mass. His hands were slick with sweat, and the spray from the fountain suddenly felt icy.

"You think it is up to you to decide if you are ready?"

"I suppose not."

"See? You're a wise man. You're ready." Mondragon paused. "You will, of course, receive a salary increase in line with your new position, as well as Fuentes' old office."

"I suppose I should thank you."

"I suppose you should."

Despite himself, Orlando found himself imagining what the extra money would buy. Better plates for his mother's kitchen, medicine in case she got sick. In a year or so, he might even have enough to get married. If Isabella would have him. He looked at the fountain again.

"I see you're admiring the garden," Mondragon said. "My wife designed it. She had very expensive tastes. All she cared about, in fact, was money. I should have just hired a prostitute." Mondragon's voice roughened.

Renaldo stirred, slowly, as if it hurt him to move. Mondragon glanced at his son. Then, to Orlando's surprise, Mondragon shifted backwards in his chair, away from Renaldo. It was an unguarded, unplanned movement. It was the first time Orlando had ever seen Mondragon afraid.

Mondragon took a deep breath, leaned forward again, deliberately, and smiled at Orlando. His smile almost looked natural.

"So. I wanted to tell you that we do *not* know who has killed the American woman." Mondragon shrugged, his voice once again smooth and even. "Sometimes, my son requires a little persuasion to tell the truth. Often I need a certain amount of proof in order to believe him. Can you understand that?"

Orlando shivered. No wonder Mondragon had blocked the murder investigations. Orlando imagined Renaldo taking a clean, crisp bill from the stack his father used to pay the workers. He imagined Renaldo folding the bill and . . .

The bill Dr Gomez had removed from the American woman? That didn't seem right, for some reason. But Orlando couldn't imagine why. He shook his head to clear the thought away. "What about the other murdered women?"

Mondragon waved his hand. "The others are gone. And done. It will not happen again."

Orlando looked at Renaldo. The boy met his eyes. Renaldo smiled. He smiled, even

though his cracked lip reopened, and a small line of blood trickled down his chin.

Orlando's throat went dry. He coughed. "What if I were to find proof that Batista was innocent?"

"And locked up my son, instead, you mean? I think you'd find that the murders would continue while Renaldo was in prison. As he clearly would have been incapable of committing them, you would have to release him. The Americans will not be interested, especially because I have already fired one man responsible for not investigating properly."

Renaldo smiled again.

**It was afternoon** by the time Orlando got back to Loma Blanca. The women who had worked the early shift at the *maquiladora* were trudging in and out of the stores lining the main street, shopping for dinner with plastic bags looped over their arms. Orlando knew from his mother that each bag would be carefully kept, washed, and rewashed until it fell apart. Orlando passed the *carneceria*, with its skinned goat, cow, and chicken carcasses hanging in the window, coated with flies. The sickly-warm scent of blood enveloped him. He walked faster, holding his face up, hoping for a cool breeze to wash the smell away.

Then he saw the Garcia sisters, Lupe and Sophia, stepping out of the *carneceria*, their plastic bags streaked red from the meat they had just purchased. Lupe stared right through him, but Sophia glared so fiercely that Orlando almost cringed. He walked even more quickly, expecting to hear curses shouted after him. He wondered if they'd already heard about his promotion, or if Isabella had. He knew he should tell his mother before anyone else did.

But first he went to Fuentes' apartment.

Fuentes lived in a much nicer building than Orlando did. The paint on the outside was fresh, and there were flowers in the courtyard, even if the elevator did not work and Orlando had to walk three flights up to the top floor. Someone had hung a silk cross embroidered with green vines under the doorbell. Orlando was surprised. He'd never even seen Fuentes at church. Maybe he would, now that Fuentes was no longer with the police.

Fuentes opened the door just far enough to show Orlando he'd changed out of his police uniform and into a stained orange T-shirt and work pants. Orlando smelled the hot, wet fog of rice cooking in the apartment behind him.

"I'm sorry," Orlando said.

"I'm sorry, too." Fuentes cleared his throat. "For everything. Batista . . . everything."

The two men looked at each other. Orlando heard a baby crying, and the sound of a television. "What are you going to do now?"

Fuentes barked a laugh. "My wife has relatives in El Paso. I may go *illegal* for a while."

He opened the door a little wider. A woman walked back and forth in the room behind him. She held a baby over one shoulder, and she was patting it on the back, as if trying to get it to be quiet. She didn't look at Orlando.

Fuentes shrugged. "Children sense unease. They know when things are wrong, even when we try and pretend they aren't."

Orlando nodded, thinking of Renaldo. He must have seen Mondragon abusing his mother, must have let it become a part of himself. And the careful way he laid out the bodies? Remorse? Perhaps just a neatness inherited from his mother.

“Good luck,” Fuentes said.

On his way down the steps, Orlando slammed his hand against the railings. A splinter wedged itself into his palm, and the wound throbbed with pain. He sucked at the sore furiously, then forced himself to slow down, find the splinter, and pull it out with his teeth.

He hadn’t tortured Pablo Batista himself. But he’d seen that Batista had been tortured, and had said nothing. He’d let Batista go to prison, and said nothing. Fuentes had his wife and baby to excuse his actions. Orlando had his mother, Isabella, and his own happiness. And now he had twenty dollars more a month. He imagined Renaldo picking up a crisp, twenty-dollar bill, folding it, and then stuffing it into Orlando’s mouth to buy his silence.

A crisp twenty-dollar bill.

Orlando stared at the blood trickling down his palm from the splinter. The money that had been removed from the American woman’s body was different from the bills he’d seen from the other victims. The American woman’s bill was dirtier and more creased. It was dirty on both sides. It had been folded before. It had been used.

**Ana Cruz, Isabella,** Sophia, and Lupé waited for him in the courtyard again that evening. But this time Orlando spoke first.

“I need you all to come down to the station with me.”

Isabella frowned. “Why? We are the victims here.”

“Perhaps,” Orlando said, quietly. He was afraid to look at Isabella. He was terrified that she might have been the one who had killed Señora Anderson. But when he turned his eyes toward her, he was relieved to see Isabella glare at him with anger, not with guilt.

Even so, he knew she would not be happy with him for what he had found. Orlando’s mouth felt heavy as he spoke. “The twenty-dollar bill from the American woman had been used before. It had been taken from the body of one of the other victims. We’re running tests on the bill to find out whose body that was.”

“Tests?” Ana Cruz demanded. “Why?”

“The relatives of that victim would be the most likely to have killed the American woman,” Orlando said. “The victims’ bodies were given back to their families, along with the bills found inside them. Twenty-dollar bills are valuable. Señora Anderson’s killer may not have been able to afford a new one, or may have wanted to use that particular bill as a symbol of grief.”

“But Señora Anderson had done nothing wrong! She wasn’t responsible for the murders.” Isabella looked at Ana, Sophia, and Lupé. Only two of them nodded back at her.

Orlando sighed and turned to Sophia Garcia, the one woman who hadn’t nodded. “The American woman wasn’t responsible. She was innocent. But her death would force the American authorities to investigate the others. Her death might have brought the first killer to justice.”

Lupé’s mouth opened, then closed. She, too, turned to her sister. “Sophia?”

Sophia said nothing. Her face was impassive, her mouth pressed into a grim line.

“Orlando,” Isabella said. “Think about what you’re doing.” Her voice had an edge to it he’d never heard before.

“I’m doing my job,” Orlando said.

“And letting the other murderer stay free. Is an American woman worth so much more than we are?”

“Is she worth less? She was innocent.”

Sophia held up her hand. It was an imperious gesture that reminded Orlando of Mondragon. “Isabella, be quiet. We can’t look to the police to help us. Can we, Chief Ortiz?” She emphasized the word ‘Chief’, and Orlando knew that the news of his promotion had indeed spread through the network of women.

“Sophia?” Lupé sounded angry. “You did this? Without including me?”

“I was trying to protect you.”

Lupé pinched her lips together. “I had just as much right to avenge our sister as you did.”

Sophia laughed and shook her head, as if at an old family joke. “You’re right. I apologize.” Then she rose to her feet, gracefully. Orlando held his arm out to her, and she took it. Her hand was large and strong.

Orlando took one last look at Isabella. She was beautiful, even in her blue work shirt, even in the evening heat. She would have made him a good wife. His mother would have been happy with her as a daughter-in-law. Orlando pushed that thought down deep inside himself, down with the knowledge of what he’d allowed to happen to Pablo Batista. Perhaps someday, as chief of police, he would be able to set Batista free.

“You know I’m right to do this,” he said to Isabella, softly.

Isabella shook her head until her dark hair swayed around her cheeks. “I know you’re a coward. What will you do when the real killer takes another one of us?”

Orlando closed his eyes. “It will not happen again,” Mondragon had said. Surely, Mondragon could control his son. But what if he couldn’t? Behind his eyelids, Orlando saw Mondragon leaning back, away from his son, and Renaldo, smiling. That smile had been a threat.

He opened his eyes. Lupé still sat on the lip of the fountain, staring at her sister in disbelief and anger. On Sunday, Lupé would once again cook for Mondragon. If Lupé knew who Felice’s killer really was, she might be as cunning and determined as Sophia had been. And Orlando might not be as sharp in solving that case. Perhaps Mondragon would even be relieved.

All important things in Loma Blanca passed from woman to woman.

Suddenly hopeful, Orlando turned back to Isabella. He knew what he was doing was a coward’s act, but it was the only solution he could see. He bent his head as if he were going to touch his lips to Isabella’s cheek one last time, so close to her he could feel the warmth rising from her neck. He whispered Renaldo’s name into her ear. ■

Susuan’s short stories have appeared in publications such as *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, *Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*, *Cemetery Dance* and *The 3rd Alternative*. She’s also sold stories to anthologies, including *The Museum of Horrors* and the upcoming *City Crimes*, *Country Crimes*. She’s won the 2004 Phobos Fiction Contest and a first-place prize in the 2001 Writers of the Future Contest.

Joel (see ‘Black Dog’ opposite) is the author of a story collection, *The Earth Wire* (Egerton Press), and two novels, *From Blue to Black* and *The Blue Mask* (both Serpent’s Tail). A second collection of his short stories, *The Lost District and Other Stories*, is due from Night Shade Books in 2006.

It was early morning, and the heat of the day hadn't soaked through the atmosphere yet. A boy, aged nine, was waiting at the entrance to a builder's yard in Solihull. He was thin, and had the kind of hollow eyes that suggested either recent lack of sleep or not so recent bruises. A few minutes after eight, a red-haired man arrived in a battered blue Metro. He was surprised to see the boy. They went into the building together. Nobody was there. The man unbolted the door to the yard. The air beyond the door was heavy with the smell of fresh tarmac.

A steel tank had been filled with hot tarmac the day before. The red-haired man was expecting to reheat it this morning and take it out to cover some roads in Yardley. But in the evening or the night, someone had poured the contents of the tank out in the middle of the yard. As this batch of tarmac was quite gravel-heavy, it made a heap rather than a pool. From a distance, it looked like a huge sleeping dog. Up close, the man and the boy could see the ridges of gravel starting to dry on the surface and the black liquid trickling from the base of the heap onto the concrete yard. A veil of steam flickered above the tarmac, distorting the neat pattern of the brick wall.

The red-haired man took a shovel from the building and began to refill the tank. It was a slow process, but there wasn't much choice if the tarmac was going to be used that morning. The boy offered to help, but the man said no, it wasn't safe. So he watched, though the tar-fumes made him feel sick. It was like being in a room full of smokers. The man had been shovelling the tarmac for nearly an hour when the boy screamed.

Near the bottom of the mound of tarmac, an object was poking through that looked like a black knee. The black was cloth, soaked with tar. The inside hinge of the knee revealed a streak of blue denim. By now the sun was high, and the air was thick with heat. The workman's shirt was soaked through. He carried on using the shovel, as carefully as possible, to uncover the body. It was a woman. Her long hair was matted with tar and gravel. The boy crouched in the shadow of the wall, shocked and hysterical, but unable to look away. The woman's face was smeared with tarmac, only just recognisable.

That was the story we put together from interviews with the murdered woman's son and boyfriend. Reconstructing the murder was far more difficult. True hatred leaves no traces. Forensic didn't turn up any direct clues to the killer's identity, but it did tell us that she'd been knocked out by a blow to the head some forty minutes before death. The cause of death was suffocation. Someone had knocked her out, then covered her with tarmac and left her to drown. She had died around four a.m. The name I've used for her in this account is not her real name.

The husband was a tall, skinny man with a goatee beard, a security guard at a DSS hostel for drop-outs. He said that when she hadn't come home that night, he'd assumed she was staying with her lover. "We lead separate lives. It's been going on for years." He and his wife were both in their mid-thirties. When I asked if he was upset to lose her, he paused for a while before replying: "I'd already lost her. I'm upset that she's dead. And the way she died. That shouldn't happen to anyone."

**BLACK DOG**

**JOEL LANE**

Apparently he'd come back from an evening shift to find their son alone watching TV. She'd gone out for dinner. After he'd cooked a late meal and put the boy to bed, he'd drunk some whisky and fallen asleep on the sofa. Around three a.m. he'd woken up and gone for a drive. "I was looking for Janine, but I didn't know where she could be. Then I gave up looking for her and started looking for other women. I knew where they were, but somehow I couldn't find one. They're too busy with judges and magistrates. I drove home just before dawn."

He said he'd driven to Yardley, where Janine's boyfriend lived, but he didn't know the address. He'd driven around at random, then gone to Ladywood in search of prostitutes. "Lucky not to get arrested. Specially as I was way over the limit." I couldn't work out if he was trying to annoy us with his misdemeanours or with the total lack of an alibi. Most likely, he just didn't give a shit. An insomniac neighbour corroborated his approximate times of driving away and coming back.

The boy was nine years old, but seemed much younger. He curled up in the chair, nibbling at his fingernails. I think he would have sucked his thumb if he'd been alone. There was a depth of fear and hurt in his dark eyes that made me think of refugees in newspaper photographs. He cried quietly from time to time during the interviews, with nothing in particular seeing to start him off or make him stop. The worst thing about a violent death is this: when you look at the corpse, you see the relatives. People who will have to absorb the poison of what has happened, wash it slowly out of their lives, live with it as an everyday fact.

He said the car driving off had woken him in the night. He'd listened for voices, footsteps, the slamming of doors that usually went with his parents arguing. But there was nothing. Later, the car had come back. He'd have preferred shouting and banging around to the silence that followed. He'd got up as if going to school, but instead gone to the builder's yard where his mother sometimes met her boyfriend. He'd been there before. He knew she had her own key.

Janine's boyfriend ran a small company that supplied building and road-mending materials. He employed two part-time assistants and a number of casual workers, but often kept his costs down by doing most of the work himself. He liked things done the way he liked them done. The office was a second home, away from his wife and two small children; he sometimes kipped down on the mattress in the spare room. Sometimes women spent time with him there. Janine was the main one, had been for a few years. He was a big man with curly red hair and freckles, barely literate but good with figures.

He said he hadn't seen Janine in five days when she turned up in his yard. "It was bad, seeing her like that. Very bad. She was a good-looking woman. We had a steady thing going. She knew I'd never leave my family. I was someone she could come to who wouldn't go on at her. We didn't just go for it every time. I'd get a take-away, some wine, a video. She said I was the boy from the wrong school." He looked puzzled, genuinely sad. "It was good. Do you think I'd end it like that? Look at the shit I'm in now, everybody knows my business. Why can't people just . . . leave well alone?"

It was a desperate mess. The boy went to stay with his mother's sister while we tried to make sense of things. We had the father with his implausible car journey. The boyfriend who knew his way around a builder's yard. His own yard. Had they somehow collaborated to murder Janine? Or had she taken a hard look at the two men in her life, weighed up the options and decided to end it all? Both of them had been building a road over her for years.

A few weeks later, the Solihull police were called to the site of a fire on the Knowle industrial estate. When they arrived, the fire service were directing their hoses through the blown-out windows of a factory. It was half past three in the morning, and there'd been no night shift. That suggested arson rather than an industrial accident. The only person who'd been anywhere near was the night watchman for the estate, who'd called 999 when he'd heard the breaking glass and seen the fire reaching through the skylights in the metal roof.

This was the factory responsible for most of the tarmac and other road surface materials in the Solihull area. The fire hoses carried on flooding it out for an hour or more, while fragments of burnt tarpaulin rose through the broken windows like deformed bats above a Gothic cathedral. When we finally got inside, we could see the long tarpaulin-covered trough that occupied half the factory floor had been set on fire. The burnt tarmac was still bubbling and writhing with heat. The stink of it was beyond belief, and I felt something twist in my head as my lungs caught a trace of toxic fumes. I fell to my knees, and saw a figure lying against the wall in an unlit corner of the factory.

It was the boy, Janine's son. He was clutching an empty matchbox. Either he hadn't got away in time or he'd deliberately stayed to watch the fire. After he'd fallen, the blaze had scorched the soles of his trainers. He looked peaceful, as if he'd just dozed off while watching TV. The fumes from the burning tar had killed him. Not the swirling oil vapours that stank out the factory, but a gas without a smell: carbon monoxide. He was dead before the rising heat from the flames could break the windows.

He'd solved the crime more neatly than we ever could. While we endlessly interrogated our two suspects, recording statement after statement, he'd found and punished the culprit. Tarmac had killed his mother. So he'd killed tarmac. It was the perfect logic of grief.

Two days later, Janine's husband walked into our station and said he wanted to make a statement. He confessed to killing Janine in cold blood. He'd hit her with a hammer in their kitchen, then driven her to the builder's yard and used her own key to get in-side. He'd planned to kill her inside the building, but had tried the back door and seen the tank full of warm tarmac. He said she'd begun to regain consciousness as the black tide crept over her limbs. Panicked, he'd tipped the steel tank over and buried her.

At the end of the interview, I asked him why he had left it until now to make a confession. He said: "The black dog won't leave me alone." When he left the police station three days later, it was to go to a high-security prison.

The news of the confession spread rapidly that morning. By lunchtime it was on the front page of the *Evening Mail*. At the end of my shift, I decided to walk from the station to the house where Janine and her family had lived. When I got to the second turning, a familiar smell made me stop and breathe deeply. The road was covered with fresh tarmac. This was the softer kind, mostly tar, that was still used for suburban roads. It reminded me of an incident from my childhood. Once I'd followed an open-topped truck along the road as it dropped a thin curtain of molten tarmac behind it. The tarmac inside the truck was kept burning to make it liquid: a skin of pale blue flame.

Steam was still rising from the black surface. It must have been laid down first thing this morning. As I followed the route to the empty house, all of the roads were shining black. Traffic had been directed around this area. When I reached the house itself, the warmth and light seemed to leave me. I felt sick and cold, unable to move. I looked for some kind of mark in the fresh tarmac. What did I expect: feet running away, paws following? The surface was unblemished. I took another deep breath, wiped the sweat from my face and walked on. ■

### STEPHEN VOLK

I wake with a full bladder and lie there for several minutes, debating with myself whether to ignore it and try to go back to sleep, at the risk of waking again, desperate, in a few hours; or whether to toddle to the bathroom, at the risk of having difficulty getting back to sleep afterwards, perhaps not sleeping at all, or so erratically it made no difference.

The decision is the only thing occupying my mind. Nothing else can even remotely compete with it. I think of the many mornings, waking, peeing, when I was glad I hadn't stumbled in the dark to relieve myself but just nodded back off quite happily. Then again, the awful, silly dreams where you imagine you are in some Jungian urinal world and wake up, horrified, on the point at which the knot you've tied in it comes undone, the sphincter relaxes, fails you miserably, or maliciously, you feel the hot acid of the liquid spurt and you're sitting up, gulping and cursing, and feeling the warm vinegar stain clinging to the hairs on your thigh.

After several minutes, I sit up and swing my feet out of bed and hoist myself up. The draw strings of my pyjama bottoms are loose and I tug them tight and knot them as my bare feet slide like barges along the carpet. My eyes haven't yet grown accustomed to the dark, so I'm negotiating the bedroom like a blind person. I find the latch of the door and shamble out into the landing, running the flat of my hand along the wallpaper towards the bathroom at the far end.

Still on automatic pilot, between waking and dreaming, I dump my weight on the toilet seat, not even worried about the cold unsentimentality of the plastic. I am too unawake to stand, and anyway the chance of my getting an accurate aim in the bowl for the whole duration of my piss is remote to the point of inconsideration. I sit, letting the WC hold me like an egg in a cup, and tuck my prick into the void.

Urine immediately streams out of me, unrestrained, its smell harsh and glorious. I wait, head lolling forward – I am by no means in control of it now, it is in control of me – and look down at my feet on the cold lino. The broken purple flecks of veins surrounding my ankles, the hard scab of white skin at my heel, broken like a chrysalis and showing new pink skin underneath. The markings, like African body piercing; troughs created along my instep by the pattern of my socks. Ugly toes and ugly toenails, the big one gnarled and black-edged, needing clipping, and well on its way to becoming in-grown. I make a mental note to ring that chiropodist who comes to the market surgery once a week. It needs doing. It's starting to hurt, especially in those black slip-ons. It's agony sometimes, absolute agony.

I stretch my back as my pee becomes a continuous flow. I lift my elbows from my knees, and the rough sandpaper skin leaves an imprinted texture there.

I hear a pop from the vertebrae between my shoulder blades, probably only audible inside my head, telegraphed along the bones. It might be a trapped nerve, it might be age, it might be posture, it might be being overweight. I am always getting twinges, especially in bed, trying to get comfortable; twinges in the extremities, legs, arms,



hands, like pins and needles. Bad circulation, I'm sure that's at the bottom of it.

Also, the last few mornings I've woken up with my ears blocked, sometimes the right one and sometimes the left. Not every night, of course. I'll get some drops. Forewarned is fore-armed. I don't fancy that syringing business again, I know that.

Ear wax, circulation, backache, ingrowing toe nails! I'm a mess, aren't I? I'm sitting here cataloguing my aches and pains in the middle of the night. But the fact of the matter is, I'm sixty six years old and I've never had a day in hospital in my life. Not even when I was a child. All my friends broke their legs or arms, fell off swings or whatever. I never did. I wondered at the time what it would feel like to have that excruciating pain. I almost wished it would happen to me, so that I would be like them, but it never did. And I never had a bike to fall off because my Dad said there were too many hills, but all my friends' Dads bought them bikes.

That was a long time ago. What are bicycles now? Two hundred pounds if you're lucky. I saw a bike the other day, ultra modern, and I asked the feller, all toggled up in his skin tight shorts, showing all he's got, how much is that, and he said near enough a thousand quid. A thousand pounds for a bike! I nearly had a heart attack.

I pick up the toilet roll and tear off three or four strips and fold them. I delve my fingers between my legs and shake it and, taking it between my finger and thumb, I dab the end of it. It seems, as it does sometimes, like some brown and weathered attachment that belongs somewhere else.

When I used to teach Biology, in the years before comprehensives, there was no real attempt to give children an accurate notion of sex. There was no real wish to, by the parents or by anybody else. Who could be so sadistic as to corrupt the innocence of children by describing what such body parts were actually like? And did the adults teaching them really want to be reminded that, in essence, Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr in the surf were disguising a venous seven-inch erection and a hairy, moist vagina?

It was a different age then. Corny but true.

Nowadays, they think innocence is ignorance. Everything has to be *known*.

Then, Sputnik had just gone up and Kennedy had just pledged to land a man on the moon. There was a sense of hope and adventure about the infinity of space: it was vast, empty and beckoning. It was like being a child whose mother opens the front door for the first time and says, "Yes, all right, you're allowed to play in the street. But only till tea time." Tea time, of course, always seemed a long way off.

I worked in a primary school for fifteen years, before moving to the Grammar. Yuri Gagarin, CCCP on his helmet, was the hero of the day, swiftly replaced by the Americans in crew cuts. A few of the boys in class had crew cuts too. Peter Bennett, from the police houses, was one. And all the boys wore elastic belts, with S-clips like snakes, and wore elastic to keep their grey socks up, except they were always too tight, and made a mark, and they'd peel them down and give themselves a scratch. There was never any lip, and the children called you sir or mister, not out of fear, out of respect, out of decency, because their parents had respect and decency. Nowadays everybody assumes bad of everyone. Nobody assumed bad of anyone in those days. Never.

One day I went into a class and I said, "Right, Standard 4, this week we're going to make a time capsule." If you remember, there was a fashion at the time, of putting a collection of things in a sealed box and burying it, usually with some kind of civic ceremony, to be unearthed at some far flung date in the future of Mankind. So I explained the idea to Standard 4, and asked them to come in the following day, each

with an object to go into the time capsule. They got very excited and they had all sorts of ideas. Hands shot up in the air and they jumped up and down like they wanted to be excused, all jabbering at once.

“Can we, can we put food in, sir?”

“Not if it’s going to rot, no. And don’t take anything without asking, all right? I don’t want your Mum coming down here when we’ve buried her best set of pearls.”

“What about a book, sir?”

“A book’s fine, but make it something that means something special about *now*. Or about *you*.”

“Sir, in the future, if they have a nuclear war and everything’s wiped out and these men in flying saucers come down, will they find our time capsule?”

“I doubt that very much, Colin,” I said as the bell rang. There was a banging of desk lids. “And remember, whatever you choose, it’s supposed to tell people in a hundred years what we were like.” They all nodded emphatically, those who were listening. I looked round the walls at the paintings before leaving the room: Yuri Gagarin, CCCP, the Lone Ranger, My Mum and My Dad with long fingers and big hair and the sky a blue, uncomplicated scribble across the top of the grey cartridge paper.

At dinner time I went down to Evans’ Hardware shop in town and bought a cash box. It wasn’t very big but I chose one that had brass rivets and a chunky lock, so that it had the impression of solidity, importance, like a safe in a bank.

The following day Standard 4 brought in their goodies, which varied from the inventive to the predictable. Ashley Coombs brought a 45 record of ‘Telstar’, which we all sat and listened to on the school gramophone in the assembly hall. His brother Alan donated a Lucky Bag. We also accumulated a Bazooka Joe, a penny, a sherbet disc, a Bassett’s sherbet dip, a holiday photograph of Ruth Taplin and her family down Barry Island, together with an ice lolly stick, and a small book of pressed leaves. Then there was a Stanley Gibbons stamp album, nowhere near full. An empty bottle of nail polish, a spangly Alice band, a cub scout’s woggle, and two rings of elastic used for keeping the socks up.

I held these up, looped around the fingers of each hand, and said, “Brian Richards. Sock elastic,” and the kids all laughed. Brian Richards, a freckly boy with stick-out ears, looked flushed and indignant. I said, “No, very good, Brian. Excellent.” Brian poked his tongue out to the boy opposite as if to say ‘So there!’. The boy punched his arm. Brian punched him back. I said, “Hey,” and gave them the cold beady eye.

The rest of the class came forward to my desk one by one. With most of them I said “Good” or “Excellent” or sometimes “What’s this?” (for instance if someone gave in a half-smoked Woodbine ushered by titters). Ronnie Ellis gave a tightly elastic-banded set of his brother’s *Outer Limits* cards, so I told him he’d better give them back or we’d all be in trouble. His brother was in the Sec Mod and fifteen and had already been in trouble with the police. To replace it, he dug out of his pocket a lick-on tattoo of a pirate’s face, but seemed reluctant to part with it. Somebody else gave a small plastic Santa out of a cheap Christmas cracker. One little girl had written out all the words to a Beatles song, which I told her to stand up and read aloud to the class. It was a bit strange, this girl of nine talking about love, like Peter Sellers reading ‘A Hard Day’s Night’ in the style of Laurence Olivier. I led the class giving her a brisk round of applause. She blushed bright pink and I told her not to be silly, she did it very well: “Never be embarrassed by your accomplishments, Rhiannon.”

Another girl with, in the desk alongside her, walked to the front of the class. (Where is she now? What was her name? Would I even recognise her face?) She handed me her offering for the time capsule and turned and was walking back before I could say: "What's this, Carol?" or whatever her name was. She had handed me a folded up cutting from the *Echo*.

She turned back to me. "Sir, it's that girl. The one they can't find. From up the bridge."

I looked at the school photograph which had been reproduced, inadequately, in the newspaper. The girl had neatly combed hair, parted in the wrong place by the photographer. It made you want to reach in and ruffle her fringe, to put it right, to make it natural. The headline read HUNT FOR MISSING GIRL, 7. I felt a hard lump at the back of my throat. Standard 4 was quiet. I gazed around at their faces, their lack of knowing. "What makes you want to put this in, Carol?" I said softly. I was shocked, but I didn't say so. I tried to be matter-of-fact about it.

She shrugged, looking at her feet, one Clarks sandal on top of the other. "I just want to," she mumbled, almost inaudibly, fidgeting at her pullover cuffs. "My Dad said."

I folded up the newspaper cutting. On the back somebody was receiving a medal for swimming. The ink rubbed off on the tips of my fingers. "All right. If you want us to. We'll put it in the box. Thank you, Carol. Go and sit down."

When she'd returned to her desk, a boy came up. He had a box and in it was an egg, and on it he'd painted a clown's face, bright and cheerful, in Airfix paints, red, blue and white.

We were going to bury the time capsule the following day, over by the edge of the woods next to the tennis courts, just after morning break time.

That night I was sitting by the electric fire and I was going through the various bits and pieces, the Dinky toy, the parma violets, the love hearts, the drawings, a seagull's feather, a Janet & John badge, a toy compass, an air rifle dart and a target with holes in. The metal box already smelled of Sherbet Dip and liquorice pipes. I opened the press cutting about the missing girl, Annette Bayliss, and I read the article from beginning to end, even though I knew it word for word and I also knew it contained nothing new. It was three weeks since her Mum and Dad had last seen her, and the police were still chasing their tails. The girl had gone to fetch some milk from her Gran's in the next road at about five o'clock on the Sunday, and hadn't been seen since. In fact, she never reached her Gran's. She disappeared between the church and the chest hospital.

I folded it and put it in the bottom of the petty cash tin from Evans's. I decided to add something of my own to the collection, which I took from the inside pocket of my jacket. It was a small fragment of cloth, the sort from the inside of a duffel coat, where children write their name. On it was written in blue Biro ANNETTE BAYLISS. I took a paperclip from the bureau where I kept my papers and attached the piece of cloth to the cutting from the *Echo*.

It wasn't like Peter Lorre running away from the mob, with long shadows extending up the walls. It was in the back of my Anglia, smelling of plastic and rain.

I most remember her flat tummy, not a hair or wrinkle on it, with one of those belly buttons like the knot in a birthday party balloon. I held her skirt up, against her neck, just pressing enough to stop her shouting.

I told her, "Look at it. Look at it."

She was frightened but she didn't move. She was a good girl. I felt every pulse of blood in every vein of my penis. I felt I was inside it, I was in the blood stream fighting to get out. Its mouth was wet and popping like the little girl in the Bird's Eye peas advert on the telly. It was the only sound we could hear. I was stabbing myself to death in the groin. I was squeezing myself out of my skin. It was sitting there, I didn't exist. The conversation was between her and it. I was ready to explode, and I took her hand, and I wrapped her fingers around it, under mine. Her hand was so small, so cold. I held the tip to her belly and sperm flooded over her.

Afterwards, I saw there was an Elastoplast on her knee, half peeled off. I tugged it away. They say if you do it quickly it doesn't hurt. I rolled it into a ball. The toggle came off her coat and I buried that too, in the same place. It was damned difficult in moonlight, but my eyes gradually became accustomed to the dark. I broke a fingernail, right off. It was excruciating. It was seven o'clock: bath time in our house on a Sunday night, crinkly fingertips and *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*.

She wasn't from my school. I didn't know where she was from.

Everyone used to say I was a good teacher. Some of the young ones coming from teacher training, they didn't know how to handle a class, the kids were all over them in two minutes. And these days, it's worse. The kids do what they blinking well like. And if the teacher raises a hand to them, they get suspended, or sued. Or they get assaulted by the dad.

The police never found Annette's body.

I was a bit of a Mr Chips, I suppose. I moved on, up the Grammar School, then it all went comprehensive, and that's where I stayed. The old Secondary Modern, that's retirement homes now, what does that tell you? I saw the Eleven Plus come and go. I became Head of Science, then Deputy Head – 'Deputy Dawg' – mostly organising the timetables, which meant a lot of burning the midnight oil. He was a awkward old cuss, the Head (Mussolini they used to call him), but everybody knows it was really me running the school all those years, behind the scenes. I was always just pipped at the post. As they say, it's not what you know, it's who you know. I was never one to better my prospects by hobnobbing with the right people. I suppose that could be construed as a fault.

I had a lot of other interests. Hon Sec to the cricket for years, and the best President the Schoolboys' Football ever had. I retired from it last year and they gave me this slap-up do in Cardiff. I took Viv, though she doesn't usually like to go to those sort of functions with my sporting cronies, but it was in my honour, for all that I'd done for them over the years. They gave me a large cut glass bowl, engraved with my name and FOR SERVICES TO SCHOOLBOY FOOTBALL. It was a bit emotional, to tell the truth.

I often bump into some feller about forty, when I'm shopping down the precinct or over at Iceland. And he'll say, "Hello, Mr H. Remember me?"; and I'll look at him and think, who the hell? And he'll say his name and I'll go, "Oh, yes." And he'll say, "You used to teach me up the Grammar. God, you used to whack me. I deserved it, though." I'd like to have a pound for every time some feller has said that to me over the years.

I'm awake now, sitting on the toilet, my eyes getting accustomed to the dark.

I know I won't get back to sleep now, so I pull the chain ('flush the toilet' I should say: when did I last see a WC with a *chain*?) and as it echoes, I go downstairs to the kitchen to make myself some hot chocolate. While the milk is warming up in the

pan, I look through the back window at the big brick wall outside.

The fields behind, where I used to play, are all gone now, there's just the new estate getting bigger and bigger. More and more houses for the unemployed, I expect. I never see any of them working. They're always fixing their car or having a fag in the garden. And they all have kids by the truckload.

You wouldn't recognise the town now. People keep talking about a bypass. That'd really be the kiss of death, that would. No reason for any sod to stop here then.

I'm standing by the cooker with the smell of hot milk in the air when I hear a light creaking on the stairs and Oscar paddles in, in his SuperTed pyjamas, semi-somnambulating, dazed and on the verge of bewildered panic. He hangs on the fridge door handle and mumbles in his little lisp, "What, what, what time is it, Gramp?"

I say, "Three o'clock, sweetheart. It's still night time. Go back to bed. It's dead early, look."

He sees the milk boiling and sees the mug on the table and says, "No, I want to stay with you."

I sigh and he's awake now, or nearly, so I'm saying, "All right. Just for a minute." And he nods obediently and totters forward and I lift him up on the other chair beside me. He props his head on his hands with his elbows on the table. I make us both some hot chocolate, but by the time it's ready his little head is nodding forward. His head is a beautiful shape, a tiny little neck like the children in the Peanuts cartoons. Freckles you can count on one hand, as if they've been put there by a paint brush. An abbreviated face, bristles and bruises and blushes consigned to the distant and unforgiving future.

"I think this little boy is ready for bed," I say, combing his fringe off his forehead with my fingers. He looks at me bleary-eyed, lost and anxious in the unhelpable way only children can be, trying to think of an excuse to stay up, but the other part, the part that wants to sleep, taking over. He doesn't understand even his own body.

"Come on, nibblo," I say and pick him up. He's as light as air and his cheek is warm as toast against the silver hairs at the side of my neck. I used to tell the second years up the Grammar to go home and ask their mothers to get the butcher to give them a couple of bull's eyes. And when they'd come in the next week we'd cut them open, and I'd put a diagram on the blackboard. Aqueous humour, vitreous humour, iris, cornea, retina. And they'd cut into it, surprised how tough it would be, and the liquid would all come out, and they'd find this little perfect jelly-like lens in the middle of it. And I'd explain how it all works.

I go back to sleep.

Almost immediately, it feels like, I'm being shaken awake, and I'm suddenly sharp and alert and frightened for a second. Then I see that it's Oscar again, with eyes like eggs, saying near tears of panic now, "Is it morning, Gramps? Have I missed school?"

I roll over and squint at the clock alarm radio. "No, it's five o'clock. It's a few hours more, darling. Go back to sleep. There's a good boy."

"I can't go back to sleep now," he says, tugging at his pyjamas in illogical places.

"Yes you can. You can if you don't think about it." I hear Viv turn over in the bed next to me and I say, "It's all right, love."

I get out of bed and take him by the hand. We walk quietly to the room that's now the Boys' Room, and I tuck him up into bed, in the lower bunk, careful not to wake Frankie. There are posters of impressive space ships on the wall, saying THE QUESTION

OF WHETHER WE ARE ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE IS ABOUT TO BE ANSWERED. Sega games litter the floor: Batman, Riddler, Donkey Kong, Sonic the Hedgehog comics, the various limbs and attachments of transformer robots, and Ribena cartons. I tuck the duvet, awash with Disney characters I've never seen, under his chin, and he is almost, already, asleep.

"Where are we going to bury it, sir?" asked Sam Daniels' boy, who always wore long trousers.

"Anywhere you like, as long as it's not under the concrete," I said, taking off my tweedy jacket with the leather patches in the elbows. "Susan Satherly, you decide." I had picked one of the quietest in the class. "Where do you want it to go?"

She said nothing and pointed with a bendy double-jointed finger. I took the spade I'd borrowed from Mr Duggan the caretaker and prodded the earth in an exploratory fashion before clearing the dry leaves and starting to dig. We were on the far side of the tennis courts, on the fringe of the woods. The children stood in a circle around me occasionally chuckling or whispering; perhaps they were bored by now and other things were occupying their minds. Some boys arrived in soccer kit and started to kick about. Eddie Gayne, the PE master at the big school, waved to me a passing hello which was more like a Hitler salute. He wore track suit bottoms and a cricket V-neck sweater. The following year we would be friends.

The hole was two and a half feet deep when I stopped digging and blowed a hoot. "What do you think, then? Do you think that'll do?"

Standard 4 chorused, "YES, SIR!"

"Good." I picked up the cash box from the boy who was holding it sternly in his arms and put it securely in the hole. I demonstrated that the time capsule was locked and looked down at it and said, "Right then. Here we go. Everybody happy?"

It took a good deal less time to fill in the hole than it had taken to dig it. "OK. Gather round. Andrew Jenkins, I'm talking." The boys and girls came closer in dribs and drabs. "All right, Standard 4. Pay attention. I want you to remember." I looked at my watch. "It's eleven o'clock on Wednesday the tenth of May, 1963. The only people that know about this time capsule are me and you. I'm going to send a letter on school notepaper to the council, which they'll keep on file, which tells them where this time capsule is, with a map and the key." I held up the tiny key in the air. "So perhaps in fifty years, perhaps in a hundred years, when you're much much older, or maybe further in the future, when your children are your age or much much older, somebody will come across that bit of paper and think, hello." I put the cash box key in the breast pocket of my shirt. "Maybe the council won't be the council any more, maybe the school won't be the school any more. We don't know. But the point is it's there . . ."

They looked blank. I picked up the spade and with the flat of it I patted the rough earth that covered the hole, until it was smooth.

"The point is it's there," I said. "To tell people what we were like."

They had RE in five minutes and I walked them back, across the concrete tennis courts, in a crocodile, to school. ■

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Steve has written many films including *Gothic*, *Octane*, *The Kiss*, *The Guardian*, as well as TV programs and series including the infamous *Ghostwatch* and the imminent *Afterlife* (ITV1).

**B**lood and nails, that's all you need. Larry ran his hand over the wood. Smooth as a baby's ass and a mother's tit. He'd planed the cherry himself, by hand, not with one of those machines. Sure, he'd caught a few splinters, but that was the *blood* part of this business.

And what were a few calluses? Skin turned to dust just as surely as brain and bone did. And your heart probably crumbled faster than any of it. The meat didn't matter. What mattered was how you walked off the stage. That's what they remembered. And Larry McMasters was going to go out in style.

He dipped his brush into the shellac and lifted it to the lamplight. The thick, golden material hung from the brush like honey. If he sealed the wood, it would keep underground for a few months longer, maybe even a year. Would that be honest, though? Wouldn't that be putting just another layer between him and his return to the dirt?

Larry wiped the brush clean on the edge of the bucket and set it to soak in turpentine. Best to go with plain, bare wood. Like what surrounded him here in the barn. The barn itself was like a coffin, except it was filled to busting with life, chickens and pigs and old Zaint the horse. Zaint was so far faded he was about half glue, but he kept heading to the pasture of a morning and turning up again every night.

Larry's pastures had seen more drought than plenty. His days in the world hadn't added up to much. Fourteen years loading produce on trucks paid him with a bad back and a smoking habit. Oh, he'd had about eighteen good years before that, when his parents were still around to pay the bills, but those were so long ago and far away that they might as well have been in a book, or somebody else's memory.

Once in a while over the years, he'd had stretches where getting out of bed wasn't such a lost cause. This last year had shown some promise, which made it the cruelest and slowest of them all. And the blame belonged squarely on Betty Ann Armfield. Betty Ann. Betty Ann.

Larry gritted his teeth and laid the crown molding along the edge of the coffin to test for length. When you mitered the joints, you had to allow for that little bit of extra distance. There would be no putty or wood filler used on this job. No crack could be wider than a spider's leg. Larry's coffin had to be as airtight as possible so the rotting would be proper, from the inside out.

The phone rang in the house. That would be her.

Larry slammed his hammer against the work bench, causing his tools to jump and raising a ruckus among the hens. He looked at the angled box before him, six sides, planks straight, the knots aligned in something approaching art. Not that Larry had much use for art, besides the art of dying. But you did things right while you were on this earth, and let things take care of themselves after you were under it.

The phone bleated again, as insistent as a pregnant ewe. Larry wiped the hammer handle and hung the tool from its pegs. The handsaw gave a dull grin, hungry for

## HOW TO BUILD YOUR OWN COFFIN

SCOTT NICHOLSON

another meal of hardwood. Or maybe that was only his blurred reflection. He'd have to polish the saw later. But right now he had to answer the phone.

He stepped out of the barn into sunshine and tasted the mountain air. Rocks, water, grass, and trees, he had plenty of those. He owned seven acres of dirt, some bottom land and a ridgeline. He couldn't own any woman, though, and he couldn't make any of them love his land.

The walk to the house took thirteen seconds, another seven to get through the kitchen, and two more to get the phone to his ear. Betty Ann knew the distance, probably had an egg timer running at her end, and if Larry was ever more than five seconds late –

“Hello?”

Usually he just said, “Hello, Betty Ann,” but once in a while he got a call from work and those damned telemarketers had been trying to give him credit cards lately. He didn't believe in borrowing. You pay as you go, and when you had a chance, you paid a little bit ahead.

“Larry.”

“Hey, Betty Ann.”

“Where you been?”

“Working in the barn.”

“You and your damned wood. You ready?”

“We ought not talk about this kind of thing on the phone.”

Her laughter sounded electronic, as if she were one of those pull-string dolls. “You've always been paranoid, ain't you, Larry?”

“Just cautious, is all.”

“Cautious, my ass. Chickenshit, you mean. If it wasn't for me, you think you'd ever have a woman? Think anybody else could stand you? Any other woman let you play smoochie and run your hand down her skirt and –”

“That's not proper talk for a lady.”

“I ain't a lady no more. Not after tonight.”

Larry looked out the window, at the long dirt drive that led to the highway. “You sure you want to go through with this?”

“You ain't thinking of backing out on me now, are you? You better grow some balls and fast.”

Larry expected the blue lights to come down the drive any minute, because cops could probably read minds. And if not, they knew how to tap into phone lines, and Betty Ann never could keep her damned mouth shut. “I – I'm with you, honey. I promised, didn't I?”

“A promise from a *man*. Hah, that's worth about as much as an egg from a mule. You only promised because I was giving you my yummy sweet sugar at the time. Remember?”

Larry clenched his hand around the phone. He nearly flung it at the Franklin stove, but the Franklin had been in the family for four generations. Maybe he'd start a fire with his coffin scraps and melt down the phone later. “Of course I remember, darling.”

“And after, that part about snuggling in the dark. Bet you never heard pillow talk like that before.”

He had to admit he hadn't. But he didn't want to admit it out loud. Not when



they might hear. It was bad enough, him knowing. And Betty Ann knowing. And whoever Betty Ann blabbed to, at the hairdresser's or the Baptist Church or the Stateline Tavern.

"You know that kind of thing gets me all worked up," Larry said. "That's stuff's for in the dark, not out here in the daylight where God and everybody can see."

Betty Ann laughed. "You must have forgot about that time in the hayloft."

"Don't do this, Betty Ann. It's hard enough as it is."

"You know all about hard, don't you?"

Larry looked out the window at the far slopes of granite, the worn edges of the Blue Ridge. When you got mad, you just had to look way off in the distance, his Daddy always said. Daddy wasn't born a fool, just ended up that way. "That's enough of that. I made a promise, and I'll keep it. Are you going to keep yours?"

"But you ain't said what you wanted yet." She lowered her voice into the husky whisper that sounded like the result of a lot of practice. "But I got a good idea."

"I'll pick you up at seven. Like we planned."

"Like we planned."

"Bye, now."

"Bye. I love you."

The click of the phone rattled around inside his skull, bouncing against that word *love*. He'd heard that word a time or two before. And then push always comes to shove, and you find out it doesn't mean a thing. It's just a word.

He went back to the barn. He spread the velvet lining in the coffin and stapled it into place. Most people went with black velvet, but Larry believed in Royal blue. There was something churchy and sacred about it. When you went under the dirt, you wanted all the comfort you could get.

Glue had leaked from one of the corners where the angled wood met. Larry took a chisel from the workbench and scraped the clot free. He felt along the joint. Not a stray splinter, tight as a mouse's ear. He was getting better with practice.

He finished up just as the sun set on the hills. He tested the fit of the lid one last time. The lid wasn't so heavy, and he'd drilled holes where the nails would go. This would work just fine.

At least, the part you could count on. Wood was straight up and honest, you could shape it and trim it and make something that would last. You could build your own coffin with no problem. But you had to have somebody to drive the nails, because you damned sure couldn't do it from the inside.

He set the lid aside, wiped his tools, and saw that everything was laid out on the workbench. He blew out the lamp and hung it by the barn door. It was time to pick up Betty Ann.

**Larry sat in** his Ford and looked around the trailer park. Betty Ann could do better than this place. She was plenty dumb enough to marry some farmer and have a bunch of kids. You got married to the dirt up here, one way or the other. Some put it off for as long as possible, but the mountains always took you anyway. He blew the horn. Betty Ann wanted him to be right on the button, but she didn't mind a bit to keep him waiting. Finally, the trailer door opened and she waved.

Larry swallowed hard. She was wearing the red dress. Not a good choice for what they were about to do, because it made her easy to remember. Larry remembered

just fine. Maybe a little too fine, because his pulse was running hard, and he needed to be calm for what they were about to do.

She slid into the truck beside him and squeezed his leg. "Ready for anything?"

He pushed her hand away. "I keep my promises."

"So that's how you're going to be about it."

"The things I do for you."

"Don't forget the things I do for you."

Larry wanted real bad to lean over and kiss her. She was the prettiest of them all. But she said *love* too easy and often. She looked like the lying kind.

They'd find out about all that later, whether this was for real or not. He had a promise to keep, and so did she. He started the Ford and headed toward Tennessee.

They drove fifty miles, running past the dark quiet of Watauga Lake, winding through Shady Valley where the cows outnumbered the people, and then followed a gravel road along the river.

"You scared?" Betty Ann said. She'd been quiet for the last half-hour, a long stretch for her. She must have been thinking.

Larry had been thinking, too. "Not about this. I'm scared about the rest of it. About later."

"I'll take care of you." Her hand was on his leg again. This time, Larry didn't push it away. He stared ahead where the black road met the headlights.

"I know. Because you promised."

Betty Ann murmured happily beside him. She'd probably been looking for a dream man all her life. And that was what she found. A dream man.

He said, "Other women made promises. Some got broken."

"Larry, you ought to know by now that I ain't like other women." She leaned over and her breath was on his neck, and then, brief as a hummingbird, her tongue flicked across his skin.

"You'd best quit that so I can drive."

They were under the lights now, on the four-lane. Cars skimmed by in the night. Larry wondered where the cars were headed. He was willing to bet that everybody else in the world planned on sleeping in a normal bed tonight, that they didn't have the kind of dreams Larry had.

"Here it is," Betty Ann said.

The gas station had four pumps, and Larry was relieved they didn't take credit cards. An electric Marlboro sign flickered in the window. The man behind the counter was hidden by a row of fan belts. "You sure this is it?"

"Trucker told me about it. The owner's weird, he don't believe in banks. Thinks they're all run by thieving Jews."

One truck was parked behind the store, a slow hunk of steel that had four wheels on the back axle. It was a Chevy. No need to worry about getting chased down.

Larry parked by the door and left the engine running. If he had any sense, he ought to push Betty Ann out and let her thumb and screw her way back to North Carolina. But he didn't have a lick of sense, not where she was concerned. Plus, he'd made a promise.

He took the gun from the glove box. It was Daddy's, a .32 revolver that didn't have much knockdown but was big enough to move money. He tucked the gun under his arm and opened the door.

Betty Ann leaned over and kissed him before he got out. "For luck," she said.

The kiss tasted of sawdust.

The lights were dim, probably because the cheapskate owner tried to save on the power bills. The beer cooler in back looked tempting, but Larry had a long drive home. Rounded mirrors hung in the corners of the ceiling, but there were no video cameras. He went up to the counter and chose a can of snuff, the real kind, not that sissy, grainy stuff in the plastic cans.

He laid the snuff on the counter and met the man's eyes.

"That all?" The man looked to be a hundred-and-fifty, or maybe it was the bad fluorescent lights. He looked mean and cheap. Larry didn't dread this anymore. It was just another chore, something you did to get what you wanted. It was like making two pieces of wood fit.

He pulled out the gun, and the rest of it went like they were in a movie, like they both knew what to do and wanted to get it over with. The old man cleaned out the register, handed over his wallet, and even put the snuff in a bag. Larry backed out, checked for traffic, and tucked the gun under his arm. The old man even waved goodbye.

"Here." Larry tossed the money and the wallet into Betty Ann's sweet lap. "Like I promised."

"I love you," she said.

Larry glanced into the rear-view mirror. He wondered what kind of description the old man would give. Should have shot him. But that wasn't his way. You met the dirt when the time was right. He gunned the truck out of the lot and roared away into the Appalachian night.

**They went back** to his farm, the way they had planned. Larry had to admit the whole thing had gone smoothly. At least the first part of it, her part. He wondered if his part would be smooth, too.

They stood under the stars. Not a streetlight marred the dark view. This was how a man was supposed to live. Too bad none of his women wanted to live this way.

"Seven hundred and twelve dollars," Betty Ann said. "Plus some change."

"I could get the tractor fixed with that."

"You and your tractor."

"All you think about is getting out of here. You know how many gas stations you'd have to rob to even make it to the Mississippi?"

"It's a start."

"No. You're born to this mountain dirt. You belong to it."

"Don't start getting weird on me again, Larry."

"You're the one that keeps talking about love. And promises."

Betty Ann shut up for the second time that night. Larry would have to remember that for the future. If they had a future.

"I kept my promise, what about yours?" he said.

She came to him and hugged him, pressed those curves against him. The bills in her hand scratched his cheek. Her lips were soft. The red dress was thin.

"Want to go inside?" she whispered.

"The barn."

"Ooh. The hayloft again."

Larry took her hand and led her down the path that he knew so well. The barn was still, the animals mostly asleep. Old Zaint had put himself up in the stall, and the chickens had their heads tucked under their wings. Nobody would see.

Except maybe the cops. One day they'd get around to digging behind the barn. But maybe Larry wouldn't be here when that happened. Betty Ann might be, or might not be, depending.

He lit the lamp and took her to the workbench. The coffin glowed in the lamplight. It was his best ever. He couldn't keep down the pride that warmed his chest.

"What do you think?" he said.

"Damn, Larry. It's a . . ."

"What do you think?"

"What's going on?"

"Your part of the promise. I need to know if I can trust you."

Betty Ann backed away. She looked scared, but she didn't let go of the money.

"Do you love me?" Larry said. He picked up the hammer. And the most important part, the nails.

Betty Ann made it to the door, but Larry knew about how they tried to run. The first one had almost made it to the creek. Almost. But Larry had fixed the door after that.

She pressed against the wood, her eyes rolling around, looking for a place to hide. There was no hiding from promises. Larry approached her, holding out the hammer and nails.

"You promised," he said.

This time her whisper wasn't the husky, practised kind. "Don't hurt me."

"I would never hurt you. I love you, remember?"

"What do you want?"

"I did for you, now you do for me." He pointed to the coffin, hoping she'd be impressed by the craft he'd put into it. "I want you to seal me up."

She didn't understand. They never understood. "Bury you? But you ain't dead yet."

"I'm just trying it out beforehand. Dying's too important a business to put off till the last minute. Need to check for size and comfort, and I can't do it alone. It takes two."

"You're crazy."

Larry stared at the lamp until his eyes burned. "You love me. At least, that's what you said. I risk life and jail and reputation for you, and you won't do one little thing for me."

He turned away. She was like the others. You ought to know better than to hope. You ought to know by now that love is just a word, a selfish, lying, hurting word. Then her hand was on his shoulder. Something had changed between them. Maybe, seeing that Larry was willing to kill for her if necessary, Betty Ann had found a strange respect. "I always knew you was weird."

He smiled. Money didn't matter, not next to the other thing. "It won't take but a minute. And I ain't got nobody else. Nobody I can *trust*, that is."

He gave her a look like the one from that time in the hayloft, the one she seemed to get all swoony over. "You'll have to put the lid on. Do you think you can drive the nails?"

Betty Ann nodded. He kissed her. She took the hammer and nails. He climbed into the coffin and inhaled the cherry. She looked so good in her red dress.

The lid fit perfectly. The first nail was awkward, she missed and busted her thumb. Her blood was likely soaking into the wood. He was glad he'd passed on the shellac.

Love was built on blood and nails. You had to have both, or it didn't mean a thing.

By the third nail, she was in the rhythm, and drove it home with four blows. Sixteen nails total, while Larry's heart pounded in time to the hammer.

Her voice was muffled, but he could understand her. "Are you all right in there?"

He said nothing. The air was stale. The coffin was the perfect size. He could be buried in this, when the time came. It would be a proud way to meet the dirt.

"Larry?" she hollered.

He waited.

"Can you breathe?"

She wouldn't hear him if he answered.

"I been thinking," she said. "If I don't let you out, I get the money all to myself."

God damn. She was a keeper. Not like those others, the ones who folded when they hit a knot or caught a splinter. This might be the one he could trust sharing his land with, his life with, his death with. Two holes and two tombstones, side by side, forever.

They could get to that part later. First, he needed to see how good she was with a shovel.

He pulled the hammer and crowbar from the secret fold in the velvet and began loosening the lid from the inside, too excited to concentrate. Hope pulsed through his flesh.

This one might work out. She was the real thing, better than the others. A killer. Tight nails, warm blood, a wooden soul. And cold, cold dirt in her heart. ■

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## KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

**P**amela sat in the center of the courtroom, not too close to the front because she didn't want to call attention to herself, and not in the back because she didn't want people to think she was hiding. She had done everything she could to blend in: she wore no make-up, and her clothes were Northwest business casual – a pair of brown slacks with an off-white sweater. With her left hand, she fingered her juror number – 267 – thoughtfully provided on a little wooden keychain so that she wouldn't lose it.

The court clerk pulled numbers out of a box and handed them to the judge. He was balding, and the top of his head shone in the fluorescent lights. His nasal voice boomed through the courtroom without the aid of a microphone, “Five-hundred-and-eighty-one. Five, eight, one.”

As the unlucky man rose from his seat on the left side of the courtroom, the remaining members of the jury pool swiveled to watch him walk toward the jury box. Six people sat there already, hands folded, heads down, waiting.

The judge had said they would pick twenty-seven, enough for two juries and three extras. Both juries would listen to the case, although one jury would be designated as ‘alternate’. The remaining three people were alternates also, added protection for a death penalty case that could last over a month.

Pamela had been called up two weeks ago, along with 1,000 others out of this county of 50,000, and she had stood in her kitchen, clutching the letter, feeling an uncomfortable sense of irony.

When she had come to Ricketts Rock, a town so small that it seldom showed up on any map, she had decided that she would live as quietly as she could. She didn't want to draw attention to herself, good or bad. That meant getting a driver's license, registering to vote, being a good citizen. It meant concocting a history, and trying to smile at the locals. It meant lying, each and every day.

The jury summons had caught her in the lie: she couldn't back out because she had used a false name on her voter registration form. She had to go along with the fiction that she was Pamela Jackson, and hope that something about Pamela would keep her off the largest and most notorious jury the county had seen in decades.

“Juror thirty-four,” the judge said. “Three-four.”

A woman two seats from Pamela stood, and nearly tripped as she tried to get out of the row. Pamela kept turning her number over and over, the hard wood edges catching on her fingertips.

She had decided, when she had gone to orientation and received the outrageously long questionnaire, that she wouldn't lie if at all possible: she knew that trying to remember too many lies had tripped up more than one person.

So she had placed her personal views on the pages, thinking that they would disqualify her. Particularly the carefully worded questions on pages 10 through 13, the ones about law, the death penalty, and murder.

Question 33: *Do you believe that some acts are so heinous that they can only be punished by death?* To which she had replied: *Yes.*

Question 50: *Have you known or are you related to anyone who was murdered?* To which she had replied: *Yes.*

And Question 117: *Do you believe Raymond Northrup is guilty of the crimes of which he has been accused?* To which she had replied: *I could care less.*

She had felt certain that the defense attorney, going through the questionnaires, would demand she be taken out of the jury pool, especially when she had had to explain her answer to question 50 on a later questionnaire. (*How was the deceased related to you?* Husband. *Explain the circumstances of the death:* He was a jackass. Of course, she didn't write that. Instead, she made up a lie about a beloved uncle who died in a convenience store robbery.)

"Two-sixty-seven," the judge said. "Two, six, seven."

Pamela's hand clenched around the number. She touched her round juror button, pinned to her sweater, and cursed silently. Her luck had abandoned her.

Now her goal was to be dismissed in the *voie dire*.

She grabbed her book – Patricia Cornwell's treatise on forensics and Jack the Ripper – and slung her purse over her shoulder. Then she eased out of the row, past the loggers and the truck drivers and the waitresses, and walked, head down, shoulders slumped forward, to the jury box.

Her heart was pounding. She had often pictured herself in a courtroom, but not here, not among the jury. Instead, she expected to be at the tables, an attorney beside her, defending what was left of her miserable little life.

**Another half hour** went by before the rest of the twenty-seven victims were chosen. Then the questioning began, starting with the first juror picked, a dapper man who was the only person in the room, besides the attorneys, to wear a suit. Fifteen minutes into his *voie dire*, he was dismissed for claiming he did not have a strong stomach.

As he stepped down, the clerk drew a new number from the box, and another prospective juror took the first juror's place.

Pamela noted the excuse, and apparently so had the second juror. He made the same claim, which caused the judge to issue a gusty sigh.

"If we dismiss everyone with a weak stomach, we'll have no one left." He faced the defense attorney, who had posed the question. "If you believe these crimes are too graphic, we'll make sure there'll be no crime scene photos after lunch and we'll provide sickness bags, just like the airlines. Now, move on."

Pamela was the first up after the luncheon break. She returned to the courtroom loggy from the personal pan she'd had at the nearby Pizza Hut, and exhausted by a morning of listening to other people's lives.

During lunch she had toyed with changing her strategy, possibly saying that she did not approve of the death penalty or that she did not believe a person was innocent until proven guilty. But all of those answers would have contradicted her juror's questionnaire, a questionnaire that had informed her on the top of every page that her answers had the force of answers given under oath.

A new answer would call attention to her. If she was lucky, she would escape without much attention being paid to her at all.

Finally, the attorneys reached her. She had to repeat her name and her address.

"You own a bookstore, Ms Jackson?" The prosecutor, Daphne Sullivan, stood in front of the jury box. She was a middle-aged woman who wore a stylish black suit that seemed out of place in this small county.

"Yes." Main Street Books, the new-and-used bookstore she had opened in what passed for Ricketts Rock's downtown. When she had first received her jury letter, she had hoped that being a small business owner would disqualify her, but the clerk of courts had quizzed her, found out that she had a part-time assistant, and that the store sometimes closed when Pamela planned a day off, and decided that the store could afford to lose Pamela for a few weeks with little or no hardship.

"Do you enjoy reading?" Sullivan asked.

"Yes."

"Do you often read books like that one?" Sullivan nodded at the Cornwell.

"Yes." That was a deliberate lie, one concocted to get Pamela off the jury.

"Would you hold the book up so that everyone can see it?"

Pamela did. Her copy, a hardcover with a shiny dust, looked black and official.

"We won't have to worry about a weak stomach with this one," the judge muttered, even his soft words echoing throughout the courtroom.

"Do you watch *CSI*?" Sullivan asked.

"Sometimes," Pamela said.

"*Cold Case Files*? The forensics programs on The Learning Channel?"

"Sometimes," Pamela said.

"So you feel you have a grasp on the forensic side of police procedure?" Sullivan asked.

Pamela shrugged.

The judge said, "We'll need a verbal response for the record, Ms Jackson."

"When you say 'a grasp,' I don't know what that means," Pamela said.

"Do you understand it?" Sullivan said.

"It's just science," Pamela said.

"And you understand science?"

*Of course, you fool. I have more advanced degrees in biology and chemistry than you can dream up.* Pamela had to bite back the response. She wasn't a scientist now. She owned a bookstore. She was a mousy woman with mousy clothes who tried to disappear when people looked at her.

"I try to understand it," she said, which was as close to the truth as she could come.

"I have no problem with this juror," the prosecutor said, and turned toward the defense attorney, Jake Chivara.

Chivara was too slick for this part of Oregon. His suit had the shine of silk, and his hands were manicured. His black hair had a layered cut that cost more than Pamela's entire outfit, but his eyes shone with an intelligence that she recognized as a match for her own. He adjusted his suit coat as he walked toward the rail. "Do you consider murder your hobby?"

Her fingers clutched the book, its hard edges biting into her palm. "*My hobby?*"

He nodded toward the book she held. "You read about it. You watch television programs about it. You obviously think about it a lot."

True enough. She didn't like how perceptive he was. "I watch television programs about politics and biography and history, too, but I don't consider them my hobbies. I live alone. I run a bookstore. I read almost everything that comes through the door."



“But you brought that book for a reason, didn’t you?” Chivara asked.

“To read while I waited,” she said.

“You could have brought a romance novel,” he said.

She shrugged. “I would have finished it in the time allowed. I wanted something that would last me all day.”

“Be honest, Ms Jackson. You brought that book so that we’d assume you know police procedure. You wanted to force us to kick you off the jury.”

She looked at him in surprise and knew, at that moment, she had been caught. She had never been caught before, at least, not in her manipulations. It was a strange sensation.

Chivara smiled at her. “I don’t like being manipulated, Ms Jackson.”

Pamela’s hands slid on the book’s cover. She was sweating.

“Your questionnaire says you believe that some crimes should be punished by death,” Chivara said.

“Yes.” She swallowed hard. This was the first time, in all of the questioning, that someone had mentioned the questionnaire.

“Does that mean you believe in the death penalty?” he asked.

“I haven’t given it any thought.” At least not in that way. The law was the law and she had nothing do with it. She didn’t plan it nor could she change it. Human laws weren’t immutable like scientific ones, but they existed and nowadays she did her best to live within them.

“Do you have a problem sending a man to his death?” he asked.

“Not in the right circumstances.” Her answer had too much of an edge to it. She wished she could take the words back the moment she uttered them.

Chivara smiled again. “What sorts of circumstances, Ms Jackson?”

Her mouth was dry. “I thought we were talking about the death penalty.”

“We are. What circumstances? *These* circumstances?”

“If he did it,” she said.

“Do you think he did it?” Chivara asked.

“I could care less,” she said, repeating her answer from the questionnaire.

“Really? You don’t care one way or another?”

She didn’t like this attorney. He was irritating her. “Unless you put me on this jury, this crime has no impact on my life. I don’t really care what that man did. I don’t really care what the President does either, and he has a lot larger impact on my life than some petty murderer.”

“Petty murderer,” Chivara repeated softly. “You’re quite interesting, Ms Jackson. You know science and read about the law, but you say this case doesn’t concern you. If we put you on the jury, would you care then?”

“Not really,” she said. “I’d just be doing this because you’re making me.”

Chivara’s smile became broad. “At least you’re honest.”

He walked back to his table, examined his notes, and then leaned over the railing, clearly speaking to his jury consultant.

Pamela’s heart pounded hard. She tried to keep an impassive expression on her face, but she found it difficult. For the first time since she’d shown up in this courtroom, she was frightened.

After a moment, Chivara looked up. “Ms Jackson, do you know my client?” He swept his arm toward the defendant. Until this moment, Pamela had refrained from

looking at him. She had seen his photograph on the county newspapers and once on the front page of the *Oregonian*, but she hadn't really looked at him. Nor had she looked at him the one or two times he waited on her.

"We've never formally met," she said.

"But you have met," the attorney said.

"He waited on me once at the Sneaker Wave," she said. "And at the Italian Noodle."

"Did you have a conversation?"

She shrugged, then added for the record, "Probably not."

"Probably not?" Chivara repeated.

"I go out alone with a book," she said. "I usually don't have conversations."

Truthful again.

Chivara's eyes narrowed, and she had the sense that he thought she was holding something back. He turned away, and she hoped he would dismiss her for cause. Instead, he said, "I have no problems with this juror."

The judge turned to her. "Is there any reason you believe you should not sit on this jury?"

Dozens. She had dozens of reasons, but none she could admit to. Neither attorney had given her a way out.

"I don't know if I can be impartial," she said, "given that I've met him."

The judge let out another of his gusty sighs. "The interactions you've had with the defendant are no different than sitting across a courtroom from him day in and day out. So give it a try, Ms Jackson."

"Your honor," Chivara said, "this is why we wanted the trial moved."

"You made that motion and I dismissed it," the judge said. "If you want to try this case for the court of appeals and not for the jury, go ahead, Mr Chivara. Otherwise, get over the loss and move on."

Pamela's cheeks were warm. Her ploy hadn't worked, might even have backfired.

"Juror two-six-seven," the judge said, "you'll be sitting on this case."

**Since it was** the off-season, the cut-rate hotel that the court used to sequester juries was happy to have them. The jurors even got to have their own rooms, a luxury for which Pamela was grateful. She didn't like company in the best of circumstances, and this certainly was not the best of circumstances.

That first two days in the courtroom were difficult, especially for the other jurors. The prosecution laid out its case, and the defense gave its own theory of the crime. Most of the jurors were already familiar with the crime, but the details made them squeamish.

Pamela didn't mind the details, but she had trouble wrapping her mind around the crime at all.

Apparently, the defendant, Raymond Northrup, arrived home one afternoon in a rage. He shot his wife, his two daughters, and his infant son, supposedly planning to kill himself as well. In the end, he chickened out (or "Came to his senses," as Prosecutor Sullivan said), and called 911 instead. The paramedics arrived to find a house filled with blood, and Ray Northrup sitting on the couch, watching reruns of *The Simpsons* as if nothing were wrong.

The prosecution promised pictures and the tape of the 911 call; the defense promised experts showing how the police botched the investigation, figuring that

they already had the killer when, of course, the defense claimed, they had not.

Pamela listened with – she thought – clinical detachment, picturing both versions of the crime: a man pushed to his limits by bills, sick children and a nagging wife, hauling the shotgun out of the front closet and turning it on all of them; and the same man pushed to his limits, who arrived home after a hard day's work as a waiter (he could get nothing else in this small town) to find his entire family slaughtered.

But the clinical detachment didn't take, or perhaps it was a façade, designed to fool even herself. For that night, and two nights thereafter, Pamela had the nightmare, the one she had fled when she had come to Oregon.

The images were jumbled: Jason stumbling backwards, his hand up; Jason on the floor, his face gone; Jason's blood staining the wall beside their stove. She started to grab things – her ring, his watch, their checkbook, and then she set them down.

She knew better – even her dreamself knew better – and instead, she took the cash from the drawer, and the bike leaning against the old Billingsly house next door.

More images from before: the water from the shower draining pink; her clothing in the wash machine, the smell of bleach in the air; the half-eaten ham sandwich that had started it all. She had been clutching it, trying to force it down, when he had walked in. *You can't do anything right*, she had said to him. *I wanted hot mustard, not sweet. Don't you ever listen?*

His voice, meek and soft, infuriated her, and at that moment, she woke up, covered in sweat, shaking, uncertain where she was, figuring at first it was some anonymous hotel on the trip west, then remembering how she had gotten herself into this new predicament years after the fact.

The hotel looked the same as the others: a double-bed barely bigger than the single she'd had in her first apartment; end-tables so cheap that if she leaned on them, they'd crack; a television set bolted to the dresser, and a double-size window with a single pane of glass so thin that it could shatter with the pressure of a determined fist.

Pamela got up and paced, her feet cold against the worn carpet. She was glad she was alone – who knew what she had cried out, what she had actually said?

That first night, she didn't go back to the bed, sleeping instead on the scratchy sofa, an equally scratchy blanket pulled over her scrunched-up form. She didn't sleep much and when she did, she dreamed of being uncomfortable, not of the past.

And she returned to that couch after every day of difficult testimony, after every photograph and replaying of the 911 call, until the clinical detachment she thought she had achieved that first day became an actual reality.

She could listen, store facts, theories, and opinions in one side of her brain, and kept them separate from the other side.

The emotion side. The side that had always given her too much trouble.

**Three-plus weeks** of testimony, arguments, breaks and confusion. Three-plus weeks of 'retiring' to the jury room to wait while the lawyers and the judge worked something out. Three-plus weeks of small talk with people who probably never would have entered her store, people who probably hadn't voluntarily picked up a book in their lives, people who – with the exception of the transplanted Californian – had never lived anywhere but here.

Small minds with nothing but television and the trial to occupy them. Talk of the trial was off-limits until the testimony was over, so the Small Minds discussed the

previous night's *Frasier* or the *Buffy* rerun or the late-night movie they were given on tape so they wouldn't watch the local news and talk shows.

She didn't watch any of it. She didn't discuss any of it either, preferring to read. The guards – at least they felt like guards – let her assistant deliver books, sometimes four and five a day, and Pamela read rather than socialized. So long as her mind was busy, her body remained calm.

The guards would paw through the bags, of course, verifying that everything Pamela's assistant brought were books, verifying that her assistant hadn't hid a newspaper article about the trial as a bookmark, verifying that there was no note advising her how to vote at the end of the trial.

But no one looked at the titles either. She finished the Cornwell, moved onto a history of the fingerprint, then followed that with a history of the corpse. A few tomes on forensics, a study of ballistics, and of course, dozens and dozens of novels – all shapes and sizes.

She read and thought and listened, and wished she had known all of this years ago, before she had come west. She would have done things oh so very differently. How easy it would have been to make it seem like *he* had gotten angry over the sandwich, *he* had hit her repeatedly, *he* had grabbed the gun.

But she hadn't known any of it. She had done the best she could with the little bits of knowledge she had, and she had managed to escape.

She lived here now, a new life she mostly enjoyed, and saw no use re-evaluating every second of the past.

**Then, finally, the** moment arrived. The closing arguments ended, the jury instructions were repeated *ad nauseum*, the defendant staring at jurors as if he were trying to fathom what each and every one of them were thinking.

This time, when they went into the jury room, there was a palpable sense of relief. The restrictions were off: they could discuss anything now, and the Small Minds all started to talk at once, offering opinions, offering advice, discussing what an ordeal they'd been through, how they couldn't stand the pictures.

Pamela couldn't stand the voices. Middle-class, grating, most of them with that slightly dulled speech she'd learned to recognize from locals. She sat in one of the upholstered chairs nearest the door, and wondered how she would get through this.

The jury room itself was small with two exits – one leading back into the courtroom, the other into the hallway. The room had no windows. Whoever had designed this room had certainly visited and obviously enjoyed the ambience of hell's ante-room, because even the temperature was correct: hot enough to make the already small space seem unbearably stuffy.

“Right, Ms Jackson?”

She heard her name and looked up. The transplanted Californian was looking at her. He was a wiry blond with a scraggly mustache whose rope-thin body and denim shirt made him look like a man who belonged outdoors, not trapped in a room furnished with modular office chairs and a cheap fake-wood conference table. “I'm sorry,” she said, peering at his name badge. Z WILSON. She should have learned his name in the past few weeks. She should have learned all of their names, but of course, she hadn't.

“I said, I think we should get around to electing a foreman first, then talk about

the case. What do you think?" His blue eyes studied her with an openness she didn't like. Obviously he expected her to be on his side.

"Looks like you're already doing a fine job," she said. "We don't need a vote."

"We'll vote." His voice had that irritated edge Jason used to get when she didn't give him the answer he liked.

She leaned back in her chair, deciding to give Z Wilson some distance.

The woman who wore the giant silver cross on the front of her blouse each and every day reached to the center of the table and took twelve little pieces of paper from a notepad. Then she grabbed pencils and handed them out as if she were a school teacher. She gave Pamela her paper and pencil last, smiling at her. Pamela did not smile back.

"Perhaps," said the Silver Cross, "perhaps we should say a small prayer so that God will guide our work."

"A small prayer?" Pamela asked, unable to keep silent in the face of this new irritation. "What kind of guidance do you want? Dearest God, please let us know if you want this killer to go free or if you want the state to fry him. Amen."

"Ms Jackson," said the Californian. "That's enough."

She shrugged and pressed her lips together, but she had made her point. Two of the Small Minds who hadn't said anything yet – the first man chosen, and one of the other women – glared at Pamela as if she had killed the three children and the namby-pamby wife.

The wife, quite frankly, sounded like she deserved it, but the kids, well, Pamela didn't believe in killing kids. Kids couldn't be blamed for the situations they found themselves in. Only the parents were responsible for that.

"Write down the name of the person who think most suited for jury foreman," the Californian said. "Then put your paper in this little bowl next to the notepad. Don't sign your name."

"Why don't we just have a real election?" Pamela asked, clutching her pencil. "You and whoever else is enough of a control freak to want this idiot job?"

"You mean you?" another Small Mind asked.

"I don't want it," Pamela said.

"Vote for whomever you'd like," the Californian said.

Pamela sighed and shook her head. Then she wrote down *Z Wilson: Because I believe in validating power grabs*, folded the paper into tiny squares and set it in the bowl.

Hers was the sixth. One Small Mind – a twenty-something man who was already going bald – chewed his pencil and looked from person to person before writing on his paper. He was the eleventh to put his vote in the bowl. The Silver Cross lady was the last, and she looked spooked.

"Mr Acenan," the Californian said to yet another Small Mind, "would you mind reading the results? Mrs Dunbar will tally them."

The Dunbar woman took another sheet of paper from the stack and held her pencil poised. The man dug inside the bowl, removed a piece of paper and read the results aloud.

Pamela wished she could take the book out of her purse. Who would've thought that average citizens would take this job so very seriously?

The Small Mind reading the papers had finally gotten to Pamela's. He glanced at her, his face flushed, and only read the name, not the commentary.

“You know,” Pamela said mildly, “censorship is against the law.”

“And you’re a disgrace,” the Small Mind said, still clutching her paper. “Can’t you be serious about this?”

She thought of answering him honestly, but she knew the word ‘no’ would piss him off. So she said, “I just want to get down to business. I’ve already lost a month of my life to this mess. I don’t want to lose another one because you people dither.”

“An election isn’t dithering, Ms Jackson,” the Californian said.

“You’ve already taken over,” Pamela said. “Why do we have to bother with the election?”

“Because,” the Californian said, “it’s part of the instructions. See? Item four. Elect a jury foreperson.”

“You said foreman before. Can I change my vote?” Pamela asked. “I didn’t consider any women.”

Someone made a sound of disgust. Mrs Dunbar said loudly, “We already have a majority for Mr Wilson. So he is our *foreperson*, unless there’s an objection.”

Pamela almost objected, just out of spite. She had to entertain herself somehow. But she was beginning to realize that her own antics might prolong this already painful situation, so she said nothing.

She crossed her arms and listened to Mr California-Wilson read the jury instructions that the judge had already read to them, then ask if there were any questions that needed discussion or clarification before they got down to the ‘nitty-gritty’.

Everyone said no, except Pamela, of course, who really didn’t like the grade-school way this deliberation session was turning out. But she had decided to be quiet, and so she would be. She listened, or pretended to, while the jury discussed the rules, then reviewed the rules, and then discussed them even more.

Finally, at four o’clock, Mr California-Wilson suggested that they take a preliminary vote – gosh! Just like the instructions suggested! – to see how far apart they all were. The vote would be anonymous, of course, and all the little pieces of paper would go into that damn bowl again.

She put her little piece of paper on top of her book, a novel called *A Certain Justice* which Pamela had chosen more out of irony than interest, and then paused.

She really hadn’t given the fate of Mr Raymond Northrup much thought, although she had done her part. She had listened, without prejudice and with that hard-won clinical detachment, to days and days of repetitive testimony, to argumentative lawyers and bad judicial rulings, to witnesses who hadn’t known a damn thing and to witnesses who believed they had.

She had listened, she had absorbed, and she had come to no conclusion.

Yet they were asking her for one now. And if she was going to be the good citizen she was pretending to be, she had to give a real opinion. She supposed finding him guilty would get her out of here the quickest. After all, that was what the Small Minds seemed to believe, if their post-trial conversation was any indication.

But she couldn’t write *guilty* on her piece of paper. Her hand froze over the page every single time. She was stunned to discover that the decision really did matter to her.

After all, she could have been the person sitting next to Chivara. She could have been pacing some jail cell right now, wondering if twelve disparate people would sentence her to a lifetime of imprisonment. She owed Northrup as much consider-

ation as she had, mostly because she hoped someone would give her the same consideration if (when?) her time came.

She bit her lower lip, then glanced up at the bowl. It looked full. A number of the Small Minds were staring at her again.

Her hand shook over the paper. She gripped the pencil tightly and wrote *Not*, leaving off the guilty. She didn't want Mr California-Wilson to misconstrue her intent.

She folded her piece of paper in half this time, just like everyone else had, and then she shoved it into the bowl. The Silver Cross woman grabbed it and handed it to California-Wilson as if he weren't capable of grabbing it himself.

He nodded toward the Dunbar woman and she got out yet another piece of paper so that she could tally the results.

Pamela expected more than one not-guilty vote. After all, it was pretty obvious that Northrup didn't have the balls to kill his entire family, no matter how angry and frustrated he got. But she was the only not-guilty. California-Wilson tried not to ask for names, but she knew they'd find out, so she admitted it.

And that was when the clerk of the courts arrived, and told them to break for the night.

**The next morning**, the Small Minds had game plan ready. They were going to review the evidence to convince her.

"Don't you want to know why I think he didn't do it?" Pamela asked.

"It doesn't matter what you think," Silver Cross said. "You obviously didn't care enough to listen."

"I listened," Pamela said. "I even made notes every evening. Did you people bother doing that?"

No one answered her. No one even looked at her.

"Look," she said. "I could change my vote so that we could get the hell out of here. Lord knows, I don't ever want to see you people again. But I don't think this guy did it, and I'm not going to send him to jail just because I want to sleep in my own bed tonight."

She was rather proud of herself. She sounded like a Real Citizen, like someone who cared about her fellow man.

"So," Mr California-Wilson said with a notable lack of interest, "why do you think he didn't do it?"

"Because," Pamela said, careful to keep her tone respectful and polite, "he didn't run."

"Most people know better than to run," Wilson said.

"Most people know better than to kill their families," one of the Small Minds muttered.

"What?" Mrs Dunbar asked.

The man shrugged. "I'm just saying if you're going to apply that kind of logic, then the whole case all falls apart."

The Small Minds argued among themselves for a long time, apparently forgetting that Pamela was the one they had to convince to change her mind. For a while, she thought she had convinced a few of them, but no.

They simply liked arguing.

And another day went by without any progress at all.

**The week blurred** into a series of questions and answers, followed by arguments. “Ms Jackson,” someone asked at one point, “how can you think he didn’t do it? He was covered in blood.”

“So was the house,” she said. “Didn’t you look at the pictures? He sat on the couch, by his own admission. It was soaked in blood. Maybe he even hugged one of the kids like the defense attorney said. What would you do if you came home to your entire family dead?”

Of course, during the ensuing argument, she didn’t say that she wouldn’t have hugged a dead kid. But the arguments were never really about her, anyway.

“Ms Jackson,” one of the Small Minds said long about day three, “he told everybody at work that he was on edge, that he felt like he was going to explode. It’s pretty clear that he did.”

“Hell,” she snapped. “I’m on edge. Does that mean I’m going to go on a rampage and kill you all to calm myself?”

It sounded tempting, but she knew better. She hadn’t hurt anyone – deliberately – since she washed her husband’s blood off her skin five years ago.

“Ms Jackson,” the Silver Cross idiot said to her on day five, “who else could have killed that family? Nothing was stolen and no one else even knew them, so no one else had a reason to kill them.”

“You mean someone has a reason to kill an infant?” Pamela snapped. She ignored the wife. The wife bothered her. Pamela would have killed the wife given half a chance. Just because the woman hadn’t been happy with her reproductive choices and her husband’s inability to earn a living didn’t give her the right to whine all the damn time.

Like these people were doing. The room really had to be bigger, much bigger, so that Pamela could pace.

She was alone and remained alone on this not-guilty thing. Even when she convinced the entire jury to go back into the courtroom and listen to the read-back of some testimony about the way that Northrup was found. His voice on the 911 tape, filled with emotion (she knew from personal experience that after killing someone, the emotion drained away), and the way he sat on that couch – as one cop put it – like he had nothing left to live for.

Ten days. Ten days they argued and fought and screamed at each other. (She didn’t scream. She hated raised voices.) And they couldn’t make her change her mind.

Ten days and three hours. The lunch break was when Mr California-Wilson, whom she’d taken to calling the remaining Beach Boy to his face because he irritated her, knocked on the court-side door, and told the clerk that the jury was hung.

**Fascinating word, hung.** Past tense of hang, an active but unhappy word which meant to suspend or to die by hanging or to deadlock. All of those meanings had a little murder in them. Just a little.

She had committed a killing after all.

And like the one she had committed before, she hadn’t given it much thought until she actually completed the act. By then, the deed was done and she had to deal with it. It simply felt wrong to change her mind, as if she had lost a principle or something.

So when the judge polled the jurors – all of them, including her – and asked if there was any way to resolve the deadlock, she had spoken a forceful no.



The judge had no choice but to release the jury from its duty. The case was over, and the prosecutor had lost by one vote. The defense didn't cheer, although Northrup had looked for someone – anyone – to hug and get no volunteers.

Pamela filed back into the jury room with the Small Minds, happy she would never see them again, collected her things, and left the courthouse.

She had to go to the hotel to pack, and then she would be able to go home. Packing took longer than she expected – she had lived in this dive for nearly two months – and when it was over, she found that she would actually miss the place.

She'd learned to sleep in the bed, finally feeling like the ghost of Jason and his hideous death were behind her. The nightmare, completely gone.

It was almost as if she had been on trial and had forgiven herself.

The drive from the hotel to Ricketts Rock took her past the courthouse. The cameras and crowds were gone. The place looked almost deserted. She was nearly past it when she realized that she had left her book inside.

She almost thought of donating it, then changed her mind. She had donated enough to this stupid cause already. She parked in the lot, just like she had on that very first day, and went inside by the front door. The anteroom was empty except for one of the court employees, sitting behind a counter.

The employee looked up, and clearly didn't recognize her. Pamela had taken off her juror button the moment they had been excused. "May I help you?"

"I was on the Northrup jury," Pamela said, "and I left a book in the jury room."

The employee swiveled her chair, looked behind her, and reached down, lifting *A Certain Justice*. "This it?"

It was. Pamela had never summoned enough energy to read it. She thanked the woman, took the book, and turned.

"Ms Jackson?"

The familiar voice sent a shiver through her. She looked over her shoulder. "Mr Chivara. I thought you'd be off celebrating with your client."

Chivara smiled. It wasn't that predatory smile he used in court, but a rather wistful one. "I had a few things to get out of the courtroom. I see you did too."

She nodded, tucked the book under her arm, and started to leave. He kept pace with her.

"I understand you're the one who hung my jury," he said.

"So?" she asked.

"So," he said as he pushed open the door leading outside, "it surprised me."

"I'm sure it didn't, counselor," she said. "You picked me for some reason and it wasn't my good looks."

He laughed. The sound echoed across the empty street. "That's true. I thought you'd help my client, but not in this part of the case."

She stopped. "What does that mean?"

"It means, Ms Jackson, we found that you lied on your jury questionnaire."

She felt cold. She knew better than to say anything. If she confirmed or denied, she would play right into his little game, whatever it was.

"And since we found that out, we figured we could use you as the basis for our appeal."

"You planned an appeal?" she asked.

"Every good defense attorney keeps one eye on the current case, and one eye on

appeal. You were my ace-in-the-hole.”

“I was your ace-in-the-hole when you picked me?”

“Now that wouldn’t be quite right, now would it?” This time he gave her the predatory smile. “Of course, no one can prove when we learned that you didn’t have a murdered uncle. Nor can they prove when we discovered that Pamela Jackson isn’t your real name.” Her chill increased. “Lying on a jury questionnaire is perjury, Ms Jackson,” Chivara said, “and I’m an officer of the court. Technically, I can’t let you get away with that.”

She forced herself to breathe. Then she turned around. “I can’t say anything to you. You’re accusing me and doing it in a do-you-beat-your-wife fashion.”

“Am I?” he asked, his arms crossed.

“Besides,” she said because she had to, because she couldn’t keep silent, “if I did lie, and you discovered it, are you going to serve your client by reporting it? After all, I did hang your jury.”

Chivara studied her for a long moment. “If I were still prosecuting, I’d already have you for identity fraud, and perjury. If I keep digging, what else would I find?”

A trail of temper, which had ceased. She had found her own kind of peace here in Seavy County. “I like fiction, Mr Chivara,” she said. “We established that on the day of jury selection.”

“You like crime dramas, Ms Jackson,” he said. “We never established that you liked only fiction.”

She remembered the feeling she’d had that first day in the courtroom – that he was the only worthy adversary she had ever found. He was as smart as she was, which was a problem.

“We never established what lengths you’ll go to in order to win a case,” she said softly. “Looks like we’ll learn that one today.”

Then she turned around and headed down the steps to her car, feeling his gaze on her back. She half-expected to hear his footsteps following her, to feel his hand grab her arm, to pull her back and take her into that courtroom.

She’d be the one going to jail, and then she’d be the one going to trial, defended by someone like Chivara. Just like she’d imagined.

Just like she’d feared for the past five years.

But Chivara didn’t follow her down the stairs. In fact, when she got into her car, and looked out the window, he was still watching her.

He had to choose between letting the client he had clearly thought guilty (after all, why else scheme for the appeal?) go free or letting a woman who had changed her identity and committed at least two small crimes that he knew of go free.

Poor Mr Chivara. Such choices he had.

Such choices she had. Did she stay and pretend like nothing happened, trust the bastard to do what was in his best interest? Or did she run, again, losing all the money she’d put into her store and her home?

She clutched the key to her car. People who ran were guilty: she had argued that in the jury room, and her argument would come back to him. He’d know she’d done something.

But if she stayed, he’d have only his own conscious to wrestle with.

As a good defense attorney, he did that each and every day.

She put the key in the ignition and started the car. Chivara was still watching her.

She waved at him as she drove out of the parking lot.

Away from the courtroom and juries and the law.

Screw Chivara and his suspicions. She was going back to her store, her home and her life, her solitary life as a model citizen, a woman who did her duty and nothing more, just like everybody else. ■

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Kristine has published a number of mystery short stories, most of which have been in one or another year's best collections. She's a winner of the Ellery Queen Reader's Choice Award, and an Edgar nominee. Kristine is currently publishing two mystery series: the Retrieval Artist series, which is sf/mystery, and the Smokey Dalton series, which she publishes under the name Kris Nelscott. The Retrieval Artist series has won the Endeavor Award, and has been nominated for a Hugo. The Dalton series has won the Herodotus Award for Best Historical Mystery, and has been nominated for the Edgar. The current book, *Stone Cribs*, is a finalist for the Oregon Book Award.

## TOM BRENNAN

**W**hen Marc walked back from the hens' coop at sunrise, he found footprints in the damp red soil below the girls' bedroom window. He set the wicker tray of warm eggs on the sill. The deep footprints led through the farmyard, up to the house, then past the chestnut trees toward the road. As he followed the tracks, a line of watching crows erupted from the fence rail, cawing.

Marc counted the imprinted cleats of work boots and trainers. Almost the same tracks as before.

He carried the eggs into breakfast but didn't tell Yvonne or the girls about the footprints. They might worry. But later that day, when Boncourt came to help set the fox snares, Marc mentioned the tracks. Boncourt reminded Marc about the meeting at Morisault's farm. This time, Marc agreed to go.

On the fourth Sunday in October, after morning Mass, Marc followed the other men up to Morisault's farm. It was the largest in the village, and close to the foothills and the border. In the kitchen, Morisault stood with his wide back to the roaring blue-tiled stove, stooping a little, his head brushing the oak beams.

The men sat on worn pine benches around the table. Rain dripped from jackets onto flagstones. It mixed with the dark red soil tramped in on their boots. Morisault's wife poured wine for everybody before she left them, closing the door behind her. Rain attacked the windows, hammering the glass. The men drank from glasses and clay mugs. They waited.

Morisault spoke first. "My grandfather built this farm. He planted up these fields. At first, he lost half his seeds to the birds. Then, one day at sunset, he nailed a fat, dead crow to a post in the big field."

Someone coughed. A hand reached out for the cracked yellow jug of wine.

"The other birds would circle but they wouldn't land. They'd move on to some other field, some other village, and ruin the crops there."

For a few minutes, no sound other than the rain. Then Boncourt said, "I caught two of the bastards in my hayloft, smoking. I could've lost the barn. Maybe the house, too."

As if a sluice gate had opened, everyone wanted to speak:

"Three of them followed my eldest, Marie, home from school. If she hadn't called the dogs out of the yard, God knows what would have happened."

"They helped themselves to my lad's bike, and a crate of wine!"

"We lost half our crop of apples."

"Louise won't go to the village alone any more."

Everyone had a story. Marc told them about the footprints and the stolen food and hens. Eventually, someone mentioned Thierrot. "That didn't have to happen."

Late one night, three weeks before, Thierrot had gone out to check his animals. His sons had found him the next morning beside the stables, stabbed in the chest. Marc's village lay beneath a pass, a notch in the mountains; they had always had

immigrants of every nationality coming over. But it had never been this bad before.

Marc said, "I don't think that was the immigrants. It was the runners, the ones that guide them over."

Morisault shook his blunt grey head. Thierrot had been his cousin. "It wouldn't have happened if the immigrants didn't come here. We have to stop them."

Nobody could argue with that. Every man in the room had been to Thierrot's funeral. They had seen his family, his two sons not yet twenty years old. When Marc had looked into the face of Thierrot's wife, he could see his own wife standing there, red-eyed and dazed, dressed in black.

"You think it will work?" Boncourt asked.

"It will work," Morisault said.

Still, Marc hesitated. But he thought of Yvonne and the girls sitting alone in the farmhouse. The nearest policeman thirty kilometres away. Their nearest neighbour, Lucas, more than seventy years old. Marc had put locks on the windows, another bolt on the back door. But who wanted to live in a cage?

The men looked up at Morisault. One after another, every man in the room nodded.

But how would they choose one of the immigrants? It had to be a man, that much they knew. Not too young, but not old enough to have his own family, his own children. They didn't want that.

Morisault split the men into two groups. Marc took the first night. When Yvonne asked him where he was going, he told her he'd be at Morisault's. All the men would say the same. The wives knew.

That first night, nothing. They played cards in Boncourt's Peugeot, parked up by the old loggers' road. Boncourt brought his dogs along, wiry Lurchers that slept at the men's feet. With the farmers Givre and Chasset, the men took turns to patrol the woods but heard nothing. It felt good to be out in the cold air, with the smell of rich, damp earth. Above them, a field of diamond stars.

The second night, just before Morisault and his shift took over, they caught two men coming down from the pass. The immigrants stood in the beams of Boncourt's and Givre's flashlights, staring at the shotguns and the straining dogs. But the men looked too old, late thirties or early forties. One of them wore a wedding ring. Marc and the others let them go and watched them run away without looking back.

At home, Yvonne stopped asking Marc where he was going. Like everyone else in the village, she waited. When she found Marc awake early in the morning, she didn't comment. Marc had always been a restless sleeper.

October became November.

They found the man on the seventh night, close to twelve o'clock. Marc heard Boncourt's whistle and ran over, his shotgun ready.

The man stood in a clearing, shielding his eyes against the flashlight. Wearing frayed wet jeans and a black leather jacket, he clutched a woman's yellow woven shopping bag in his left hand. He had no ring on the third finger.

Boncourt told him to drop his hand. Then Marc saw the man's face: eyes screwed almost shut, hair black as oil falling across his forehead. Skin like mahogany. He looked about twenty years old. From his lips, quick bursts of breath that turned to mist.

Morisault and the others arrived. The men stood in a circle around the immigrant, glancing at each other. Above them, restless birds or squirrels rustled in the trees.

Far away, a car revved its engine, then faded. Boncourt locked his dogs in his Peugeot. When he returned and stood next to Marc, he stank of brandy.

Most of the men had brought flashlights or lanterns. They turned them off until only one beam lit the immigrant in the clearing. He stood there, clutching his shopping bag. Maybe he didn't understand. Maybe he understood too well.

For a moment, he looked at Marc. Marc looked away, then remembered his two girls getting off the school bus and walking back to the farmhouse. They had to walk almost two kilometres from the bus stop, in the winter darkness. There were no houses close to the lane. Nobody to help them.

Marc raised his eyes and stared back at the man.

Morisault stepped forward. In his right hand, the knife he used on the pigs. The curved blade flickered in the torch beam.

Still clutching his bag, the immigrant tried to run through the circle of men. Someone knocked him down. He dropped the bag and fell on all fours.

In one movement, Morisault grabbed the man's hair in his left hand and tugged the head back. Morisault's right hand drew the blade across the man's throat. Blood hissed across the clearing.

The immigrant tried to stand. Trying to push the blood back with his hands, he stumbled to his feet. He made a sound halfway between sobbing and swallowing. He stared at the men, swaying. Then he fell onto his back. After a few minutes, he didn't move.

The men stood around the clearing. The wind threshed the trees. Someone fetched a green plastic sheet from a car. Another produced blue nylon rope. The men bound the body and carried him to Morisault's Renault. Morisault spread old newspapers inside the car before they slid the body in.

The men washed their hands in the stream below the clearing, then drove down to the village. Marc rode with Boncourt. The dogs stayed quiet in the back, their heads down, ears flat and eyes staring. With one hand on the wheel, Boncourt drank from the brandy bottle, then offered it to Marc. Marc took a long gulp, then another.

In the darkness, he saw the taillights of the other cars leading the way, like animals' red eyes staring back. Below the men, the village lay silent. A few streetlights glowed yellow. The men had already agreed where they should leave the body.

As they drove into the main square, nobody watched them. No windows opened. No curtains parted. The fountain had stopped.

Morisault parked in front of the Town Hall's heavy wooden doors. To the right of the main entrance, the third glass door along wore signs and stickers in five languages. The immigrants congregated there for help, for money and information.

The men dragged the body from Morisault's car and rolled it from the sheet. With more of the blue rope, they tied the man's hands to the advice centre's door. Nobody spoke.

Slumped against the door, with his legs draped across the stone pavement and his face and neck in shadow, the dead man looked drunk. Or asleep. But none of the other immigrants could avoid seeing him.

One of the men had picked up the yellow shopping bag; he set it beside the body. It fell over and two green apples rolled out. Inside, Marc saw a sweater and a rag doll, almost the same type of doll his girls had played with years before.

One by one, the men drove away. Boncourt dropped Marc near the farmhouse.

Yvonne sat in a pool of light at the kitchen table. She looked up from her book, then down at Marc's boots and trousers. She nodded once and poured him a glass of brandy. As Marc drank that, he heard her running the bath. Sophie, their youngest, asked Yvonne if she could come down to see Marc. Yvonne told her to go back to bed.

The next day, the Spanish news teams arrived first, at ten o'clock. The French and English teams arrived after lunch. But all of them left before nightfall. When Marc came in from the fields, he caught the evening news. Blue and white screens blocked off the site of the body. Behind the woman with the microphone, some of the village boys waved into the camera. One boy turned a cartwheel and landed on his backside in the mud.

Yvonne switched off the TV and called the girls in to dinner. The family didn't talk over their food. As Marc watched the girls eating, he wanted to reach out and pull them to his chest, smooth their hair and hold them. He couldn't imagine life without them. And how would they cope without him?

The next morning, the news announced that the immigrant had been married. He'd had a son and a daughter, both a year old.

"We weren't to know," Morisault said. After the news, most of the men had made for Morisault's farm.

"That's true," Boncourt said. "He looked young, didn't he? And he didn't have a wedding ring on, right? Right?"

Nobody disagreed. They drank Morisault's wine and talked about crop prices and the winter ahead. On their way out, Morisault said, "It's done now. It'll be shown on Spanish TV; everyone will see it and understand. We can rest easy."

And the village lay quiet for a while, undisturbed. People talked about Christmas, about parties and celebrations. They didn't see any immigrants.

Then, the second week in December, when he couldn't sleep, Marc found new footprints by the kitchen door and the bedroom window. Someone had stolen all of the eggs from the coop. Boncourt said he saw three men at the edge of his yard, just watching him. Givre found his dog killed, stabbed through the neck.

Morisault called another meeting. Boncourt drove around just before sunset to collect Marc. Marc hesitated; he told Boncourt he didn't want to let the men down, but he wouldn't be going. Boncourt nodded and said he understood.

From the kitchen window, Marc watched Boncourt drive away. He could see flocks of birds darting and circling over the lower field, black specks against the orange sky. As soon as the sound of Boncourt's engine faded away, the crows came down to land. ■

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Tom's publishing credits include *Storyteller*, *Writers of the Future XVIII* anthology, and several small press literary magazines. His first novel was published last year by Gale/Five Star in the USA. Tom lives in Liverpool.

## MICHELLE SCALISE

—1—

**Yellow brush strokes** slashed across the tunnel's ceiling from Inspector Richet's lantern. He knelt, angling light into the dead woman's face and casting me in shadows. I studied her in silence. She wasn't pretty. Nose too prominent, a mess of freckles covering her cheeks and neck. Along the banks, a policeman searched for her missing right leg.

Following a path at the river's edge, I discovered her just after midnight. Auburn hair ensnared in the rocks caught my attention. I leaned over, staring into the water. She sank and re-emerged with the lapping waves, head floating like a toy boat, bobbing along the shore line. When she opened her mouth to speak it quickly filled with water. Her blue lips were hypnotic.

The theatres were just letting out. Overhead, horses clomped back to the fashionable parts of town. The coroner's wagon would be a while.

"What's a gentleman like yourself doing down here this time of night?" Richet asked.

"My play opened at Drury Lane last week," I said. It was as close to the truth as I was prepared to share. In actuality, my five-act tragedy in blank verse, based on Keats' last days, closed shortly after the London critics harshly denounced my talent.

Without thinking I wiped rain from the shoulders of my coat before noticing that the sky was clear. Moonlight flickered on the water's surface like the reflection of gas lamps against a black curtain but I could feel raindrops sliding down the back of my neck. I caught a glimpse of something floating to shore and realised with a start that it was a small gilt frame.

Pulling it from the water, I studied the parchment enclosed inside. The ink was blurry, as if I were reading it through a fog. I rubbed at the glass but still failed to decipher any words.

Drawing a handkerchief from his vest, the Inspector covered his nose and mouth as he complained about the stench. "Nothing more revolting than the smell of a dead whore," he said, raising her skirt to expose a thick waist. She wore a black leather shoe on her left foot.

A wilted carnation was pinned to her breast, although the Thames had damaged it almost beyond recognition.

The woman wore an orange silk dress with a lace collar that looked as if it might have been smart. The wet garment enveloped her and I shivered, chilled at the thought of how her skin must feel.

"Jenkins," the Inspector called. "Get down here."

The officer returned to the tunnel, carrying a wooden leg. "Look what I've got here, sir." The artificial limb was painted to resemble skin, with springs and hinges at the joint.



"It's hers," Richet said, pointing to the deep white scarring where her skin puckered just above her knee.

Distracted once again by the rain running in my eyes, I wiped my face. My hand came away dry.

"Seems a popular place for them to jump," Jenkins said, pointing up at the bridge. "I pulled that old harlot, Rose Macree, from right about this very same spot. Coroner said she'd been in the water a week. Foulest tempered woman you'd ever want to meet. She was a sight when I found her, too. I must have arrested her twenty times. Still, her face was so bloated I didn't know her from a stranger."

I couldn't see what gave the corpse away as a prostitute to the police. She could have been a shop girl or even a lady. But when I made the mistake of pointing this out, the two officers looked at me as if I'd lost my senses.

The Inspector studied the woman's carnation. I didn't bother explaining its significance.

A few loose strands of auburn hair wrapped themselves around her neck like a noose. I reached down to loosen them. Suddenly her lips moved, water gushing from her mouth as she tried to speak. "I drown in the gutter . . ."

I flinched, pulling my hand back.

"Have you no sympathy?"

"Did you hear her?" I cried.

The Inspector ignored me and raised the woman's eyelids.

"Will you look at that," Jenkins said, brushing by to get a better view of the corpse's blood-veiled eyes.

"A blow to the back of the head can cause that," Richet explained. "She must have hit the rocks when she jumped."

"She spoke! You must have heard it!" I reached out to grab Jenkins and the woman's wilted flower fell from my grasp.

Richet noted the time in a small notebook and then, with an uninterested air, asked for my information again in case a coroner's jury was called.

"My name will not be remembered," I said.

The Inspector copied it down as if I were making sense.

—2—

**"Sir, wake up!"** someone yelled in my ear.

I almost fell off the bench as I struggled to sit upright, grasping my closed umbrella like a weapon. The police officer standing over me tapped his night stick against my seat.

"Has the coroner's wagon arrived yet?" I asked. Wiping the rain from my white trousers, I strained to recall when I'd fallen asleep.

The officer laughed. "You're not dead. Though I suspect sitting out here in this storm much longer might give you a good chill."

I glanced down at the river's edge. The woman was gone. "When did they come for the body?" I asked. "Has the Inspector left too?"

"What's this about a corpse?" the officer asked, leaning over to study my face more closely and sniff at my clothing.

"I found her right there," I said, pointing under the bridge. "Then I ran up and

called for you . . . no, that's not right. You and the Inspector arrived . . ." I dropped my hand slowly. It wasn't the first time chloral had caused me to hallucinate but I'd never before wandered in such a condition.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I must have been dreaming."

"Well, you don't smell like you've been drinking," Jenkins said. "Here, let me help you up. This really isn't a part of town a gentleman like yourself should be out in at this hour."

I assured him I'd be fine and slowly made my way back to the crowded street.

I thought the drug had worn off until I heard the sound of the dead woman following me. Somehow she'd regained her wooden leg. It beat along the cobblestones like a heavy walking stick, splashing in every puddle seconds after I did. I didn't have the courage to look back. Instead, I picked up my pace.

In my rush to escape her, I came around a corner too quickly, stumbling into a group of painted boys standing under a gas street lamp. One of them stepped forward, blocking my path. "Do you have a cigarette?" he asked, tilting his head in such a way so I'd be sure to notice the beauty of his face. He appeared to be in his early twenties but his eyes were hard and ruthless.

I looked up briefly, then turned to cross the street.

"Hey, I know you," he called. "You're a friend of Childe's. Remember? We've met at his gatherings at The Savoy. You said you might have a part for me in your next play."

One of Aleck Shelbourne's young men, *renters* he called them. He laughed the first time I expressed concern over bringing the boys to one of Childe's parties. "You worry too much, dear. He'll love them. And you know how much he adores company whenever he can free himself of the wife."

I should have known if I travelled this part of London long enough I'd run into one of them. Jeffery was his name and I vaguely recalled him saying he'd once been on the stage. At the time, I was so mesmerised by the flawless shape of his lips I would have said anything to keep him talking. I gave him the carnation in my lapel in return for a kiss.

—3—

**Returning to my** rooms, I changed into a silk robe and mixed a drink of chloral and brandy. The calming warmth of the drug came quickly and I sighed, wiping beads of sweat from my forehead. Staring at the inkwell, I considered the letter I had to write to my father. I dreaded asking for money once more. He would complain about wasting my Oxford education and ask me again to consider going into the Civil Service. As I reached for a piece of paper, I noticed a few lines of tiny scrawl I couldn't recall writing. A candle beside me flickered and waned as I tried to read the swirling words. But the ink soon turned to blood in the firelight, dripping into my lap. I fell asleep with the quill still in my hand, which looked remarkably like a knife, and dreamed of a beautiful boy with ruthless eyes.

I was in Childe's suite at The Savoy, seated on a gold damask settee. The room was dark but I could hear voices. Occasionally a shape would pass by like a ghost. Smoke from the burning incense made me light-headed.

"Oh sweet delicious lips," I said, quoting a Barlas poem I only half-recalled. "From which I fancy all the world's blood drips —"

“Do you want to kiss me?” the boy interrupted.

*His mouth is safe*, I told myself.

I avoided his gaze, tasting him gently at first then more urgently with a hunger that unnerved me. I wanted to crawl inside him. He moaned, pushing his body closer. Running my hands up his thigh, I felt the tight, coarse material of his pant leg grow loose and damp to my touch as if he were melting. I pulled back and discovered the boy was gone. The dead woman had taken his place.

“It’s all his fault,” she said.

I awoke with a start to the bruised purple sky of dawn. Something moved to my side and it took all my strength just to turn my head.

She stood at my window gazing out at the rooftops, her face still hideously swollen.

*My God, I kissed that mouth*, I thought.

“What do you want?” My voice, though just above a whisper, rang in my pounding head. I squeezed the quill in my hand. It felt real. In spite of the chloral, I was beginning to wonder if she really was just a hallucination.

She seemed confused, surveying the place as if not quite sure how she’d come to be there. In spite of her appearance, there was something vaguely familiar about her. A memory so slight I couldn’t grasp it.

Without saying a word she turned, walking through the glass panes as if they were stage curtains.

As I was dressing, I noticed the crumpled piece of paper under my desk. Partially burnt from the candle, I could only make out a few sentences: *An outcast but the river can’t stifle her words. She speaks of my tomorrow. We shall drink bitter wine from the same etched glass. A green carnation . . .*

I sat down, going back over the lines. The hallucination had obviously been facilitated by a poem I’d begun. It had followed me throughout the night and into dawn like a stray cat. Increasing the dosage of chloral, I reasoned, would take care of the strange half-waking world I couldn’t seem to escape.

**I took my** grandfather’s watch to the silversmith. They offered me less money than the last time. I accepted it and walked next door to the tailor to see if my new suit was ready. It was essential that I looked the part of a successful playwright even if it was a façade.

After a quick stop at the chemist, I returned home. My dwelling consisted of two neatly furnished rooms rented at a reasonable cost in a boarding house run by a distant third cousin who insisted I call her Aunt Jane. I found her waiting for me in her parlour, dressed in a faded yellow morning gown and cap. Mrs Kersley and Mrs Radford, two widows in black who rented rooms on the second floor, sat at the table with her, sipping tea and gossiping about the neighbours.

“Dear boy,” Aunt Jane said, handing over a slip of paper. “You have a telegram. It arrived just after you left. Perhaps that dreadful manager has changed his mind about cancelling your play.”

“All for the best,” Mrs Radford said. “Silly way to earn a living, if you ask me. Now you take Mr Radford, God bless him. Forty years’ honest work at his bakery. Do you think I would have married him if he hadn’t had a respectable profession? At your age you need to think about these things. A handsome boy like yourself shouldn’t have any problem at all finding a wife.”

Mrs Kersley snickered as if it were all a joke. Her son was a doctor.

I excused myself, desperate to return to my room. As I hurried up the stairs, Aunt Jane called out, “Did you read the news about the Childe trial? I do hope you’re not still keeping company with him. I know you said he was just an acquaintance but one can never be too careful. What would your father say?”

I closed my door quietly as she continued to talk. Leaving my packages on the couch, I tore open the envelope.

*Your play is charming and mournful but fear it would not do well with American audience. Must regretfully decline.*

I reread it three times before tossing the message into the fire. The New York stage had been my last hope. I changed into my new evening coat and headed back downstairs.

“I’ll be dining out tonight.”

“Don’t forget tomorrow,” Aunt Jane said. “My friend Mrs Johnson will be joining us and she’s bringing along her granddaughter from the States. I hear she’s very pretty.”

—4—

**Standing outside the** theatre where my play had languished, I stared up at the empty marquee, recalling the excitement of seeing my name. Across the road, at the Saint James, Childe’s latest romance was another huge success. I didn’t begrudge him the glory though. He’d championed my writing from the moment we’d met, introducing me to theatre people and the aesthetic crowd that looked upon him as their high priest.

The box office shade was closed. Opening night, the girl sitting behind the window selling tickets, had wished me luck as I passed by. “No,” I told her. “You must say break a leg or I shall have bad fortunes.”

Occasionally, in my sullen thoughts, I blamed her for my failure.

I followed a dusty streak of light from the doors down the aisle. The shabby red velvet seats still echoed a memory of applause. Stopping on the stage, I closed my eyes. For one moment I had been adored. Or so I thought. Now in the silence, dank as a sewer, I recalled women yawning behind their fans, gentlemen standing to leave even as they continued to clap. And me, basking in my failure like a fool with flowers in hand. Gazing into a sea of masks, I was mollified. “Liars,” I whispered, leaving my footprint on a flyer for my play that had been left on the ground. Even Shelbourne had fed me rose petals. Laughing as he exclaimed what a success I would become. Only Childe in his kindness had been honest. “Tremendous first effort, my boy,” he’d said. “Perhaps a little too esoteric for the public, they seemed a bit confused in places, but certainly a finer job than my overblown first attempt to win over the masses.”

Stage hands that just a week ago had greeted me with a smile now avoided my eyes as if blood pooled behind them. I couldn’t bring myself to force an acknowledgement from them. Instead, I took the wooden stairs two at a time heading up to the office.

“This is why I don’t put on plays by first-timers,” Mr Pearson, the manager, explained. “I’ve seen you out with Childe and his crowd but you didn’t take advantage of your connections when you had the chance. Of course now any association with his name . . . well, that’s beside the point. I told you to get some good reviews placed in the papers. They all do it but you had to let your pride guide you. I’ve been in this

business twenty years, my boy, and I know how it works. You *tell* the public your play is grand. You don't wait for them to judge for themselves."

I tried to concentrate on his advice but finding the dead woman waiting behind his desk had thrown me. I stumbled over my words pretending not to notice, but the moment I spoke, she dropped to her knees.

"It was Miss Prescott," I said, wiping the sweat from my forehead. "I knew she wasn't right for the part of Fanny Brawne. Her acting was forced. Even the *Times* said she failed miserably to show a single believable emotion. What if we could get Lily Langtry to reconsider?"

Clarkson sighed, rocking back in his chair. "She turned it down the first time. Why would she want to get in now the whole thing has failed?"

I glanced over at the woman and suddenly she seemed like a omen, a jinx trailing at my coat-tails.

"I'm sorry things didn't work out," Mr Pearson said, rising from his chair and walking through the woman at his feet. "Come by when you finish that new piece you told me about. What was it again? The life of Saint Patrick?"

"Saint Sebastian," I muttered. "I can be finished in a week."

"Take your time," he said, opening the door. "It's too late to get started this season but maybe in a few months."

My hand shook as I grasped the banister, retracing my steps. I left by the backstage door to avoid the empty seats out front.

A cold rain blew across my face. As I hurried across the street to purchase a newspaper, the sight of two workmen stopped me. I gazed up at the Saint James Theatre. The men were on ladders, painting Childe's name off of the sign.

"Hey, you there," I yelled. "Who told you to do that?"

A hand clasped my shoulder. I turned to see Aleck Shelbourne standing behind me, dressed in a dove gray suit with a white rose in his lapel. "Come with me," he said. "I can't have you screaming on the streets like a fishmonger."

We stepped into a small restaurant, taking a table with a view. Shelbourne studied his surroundings first, always careful to be seen in only the most aesthetically pleasing establishments, before ordering two brandies. Though he was always broke, he came from a wealthy family that begrudgingly bailed him out every time the bill collectors came calling. He considered working an ungentlemanly way to spend a day though he liked to play at publishing for the chance it gave him to mingle with young artists. We'd been lovers for almost a year though he'd never given up his obsession for painted boys.

He raised his glass and smiled. "What shall we drink to?"

I pushed his hand down. "Does Childe know what they're doing over there? His play is sold out every night. Why would it be closing?"

"You really should read something besides dead poets occasionally." Shelbourne offered me a cigarette from a silver case. "The newspapers have turned this into a huge scandal. You can't be seen out on the street defending him, for God's sake. It'll ruin you."

"I don't care."

"Of course not," he said. "You're young. But think about it for a moment and you'll see that I'm right. It is better for us all to distance ourselves from anything to do with him."

I almost choked on my drink. "I can't believe you'd say something so disloyal. Once he's found innocent . . ."

Shelbourne sighed, reaching across the table to pat my cheek. "They've paid off three renters to testify against him. You know one of them quite well. Jeffery Scott. It may be Childe's trial but all of our names could be tarnished. Just yesterday I read in the papers . . . You're not looking well. Here, have another sip. I hope you're not still taking that damn chloral for your nerves. It killed Rossetti, you know. Ask Swinborne the next time you run into him. He'll tell you the whole sordid tale."

"You introduced those boys to us," I said, looking out the window. "And now Childe suffers for it. Even if you don't feel some responsibility, I do. I went along with you."

"He's far from a martyr," Shelbourne said. "Though I know how tempting it is to cast him in such a romantic light. If he'd had any sense at all he'd gone to Paris till this whole thing blew over, but no one ever accused Childe of having any –"

"Do you see that?" I asked, pointing outside.

Shelbourne sighed. "I know the failure of your play has been difficult but you must get over it. Write something else. Perhaps something with a bit of humour this time. Personally, I love a good romantic –"

"Right there," I said, struggling to remain calm. "Under the ladder. That woman in the orange dress. My God! Will she never let me be?"

"This is really going too far." Shelbourne grabbed my hand tightly. "You must stop taking that drug. It is muddling your mind. Do you hear me?"

"I found her last night," I explained. "She drowned in the Thames. But the police said it never happened. She was in Pearson's office today when I spoke with him and now here she is again."

"Calm down," he said, lowering his voice. "Chloral can cause a man to hallucinate. No, don't shake your head. If you don't believe me ask the chemist."

"She's haunting me," I whispered.

"Oh the drama of a tortured artistic soul." Shelbourne smiled. "Why must I always fall violently in love with artists? You're all quite mad. I think we need to get out of London for a while. I know it's the height of the season but what if we were to go to France? I wouldn't be missed much, I'm afraid. But I have faith that by next year all our sins will be forgotten. Oh, by the way, I have your poems here."

"What did you think of them?" I asked, looking back at the theatre. She was gone. And Childe's name was now covered up as if he'd never existed.

"I think they're beautiful. Very Byronesque."

I knew it didn't bode well for me that he failed to mention anything about actually publishing them.

"The Guild hasn't been doing well," he said. "Yesterday that prosecutor, Bateson, used one of Childe's essays from the last issue as proof of his immoral lifestyle. Even my piece on the history of Greek art was called into question. It's all in today's paper. So I suspect sales will drop drastically. If only he'd had the discretion not to be so blatant. No one is actually seen out in public with renters. It's just not done. I warned him that people were jealous of his success. Sooner or later someone was bound to turn him in to the authorities. I suspect it was one of those blackmailers he refused to pay off. Just laughed them off as if a few painted boys couldn't touch him."

“I understand perfectly,” I said, tucking the poems back into the file under my arm as I stood to leave. “Childe committed the vulgarity of having been found out and now we must all abandon him. Perhaps we could go down to the courthouse and throw stones at his carriage like the Philistines seem to enjoy doing.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “You know I love him as much as you do. But do take my advice . . . and stop wearing that flower. It won’t do to draw attention at this time.”

—5—

**Shelbourne and I** took our seats in his private box. It was the closing night of Childe’s play. We were both dressed in black evening coats. I wore a green carnation in my lapel, a sign of solidarity amongst the aesthetes. I glanced at the patrons below us, spying a few similar flowers and pointing it out to Aleck.

“Fools,” he said, removing his gloves. “It’s not as if Childe were here to witness their lavish devotion.”

The sight of so many empty seats surprised me and suddenly I realised how naive I’d been.

“It really is his best work,” Shelbourne whispered as the house lights dimmed. “And strangely prophetic in light of his tragedy to come.”

The curtains opened before I could ask what he meant.

On the surface, it was a typical Childe comedy. A simple romance between a Lady and a poet posing as a man of wealth, talking his way into high society. But unlike his other plays, sorrow shadowed the tale. Underlying the witty repartee was a note of sadness and pain I hadn’t expected. The story of a man wearing a mask so he might be accepted is found out when the authorities come to arrest him for running up debts he can’t pay off.

Tears welled in my eyes as the lead actor spoke for the playwright, saying to the Lady after she’d discovered his secret, “Will you shun me now? Act as if you never knew me?”

Shelbourne squeezed my hand. At that moment I decided I would go to the Old Bailey tomorrow and sit in the courtroom. Perhaps Childe had seen into a future where everyone would turn their backs on him, leaving him to suffer alone. It wasn’t just the fashionable society that had ostracised him. Suddenly the thought of hiding in the shadows sickened me.

In the final scene, the actor stood on a balcony with the Lady. “I drown in the gutter,” he said. “Have you no sympathy?”

I was stunned. The dead woman’s words had come back to haunt me.

Struggling to catch my breath, I tried to focus my attention on the stage. In the end, the poet was forgiven. It was a contrived ending that Childe knew his audience would demand. But he must have known it was a lie.

As the lights went up, Shelbourne said, “It’s a pity really. I believe this would have been the play he’d have been remembered for.”

“They can’t do this to him,” I said. “It’s not right.”

“My boy, I know how much you admired Childe. We all did.”

“He’s not dead, for God’s sake! What if I fall next? Will you walk over my corpse?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “You know I adore you. I’d never let them . . .

What is it? You look ill.”

In a box directly across from ours stood the dead women, balancing on the railing. Drops of water from her orange gown fell with the slow grace of petals onto the empty seats below. Her eyes gazed heavenward as if she were praying to the rafters.

“Please don’t,” I whispered, reaching out as if I might catch her.

She jumped, and everything went black.

**“Drink this,” Shelbourne** said, kneeling at my side. “How dare you suggest I don’t care about you? I can’t believe what this drug’s done to your state of mind. I think a nice rest in the country would do you wonders. We’ll leave tomorrow. You could work on your new play.”

“I can’t,” I said, struggling to sit up. “Aunt Jane has planned a dinner to introduce me to an American girl. I believe she’s trying to marry me off.”

Shelbourne laughed. “I certainly hope she’s rich.”

I stood, clutching the railing for balance. The house had emptied out.

“I saw the apparition again,” I said, pointing. “She jumped from the balcony.”

“Where?” he asked. “Mrs Childe’s box?”

It took a second for his words to sink in. “Who?”

“Childe’s wife,” Shelbourne said, slipping a coat over my shoulders. “She was sitting there tonight in a dreadful pale blue gown. Childe has obviously stopped choosing what she should wear. Not that it ever did much good. She had money but no prospects and he had the personality to bring her into society. Of course, that’s all over now. No one speaks to her any more. Even Lady Gordon won’t be seen with her. It doesn’t help that the newspapers have branded her as a martyr or a fool depending on whom one reads. And Childe is vilified more simply because he’s a married man who carried on with rent boys.”

“Does she have auburn hair?” I asked. “Skin very pale and freckled?”

“That’s her,” he said. “And she is not dead. You see that it’s the chloral now? I was right here and I can tell you with absolute certainty, Mrs Childe did nothing of the sort.”

“But this isn’t the first time,” I said, unsure of myself. “I don’t know her and yet I saw her at the Thames and then . . . Perhaps it’s an omen. She’s going to die soon.”

Shelbourne laughed. “You’d make an awful fortune teller. Have you considered the possibility that someone pointed her out to you once? Either way, she is not a ghost.”

“She had a green carnation pinned to her gown,” I said.

“She’d never wear such a thing,” he said, holding the box door open for me. “Can you imagine Childe’s wife supporting the aesthetic crowd?”

I promised Shelbourne to cut down on the chloral but the moment I arrived back at my rooms the vow was forgotten. I just wanted to sleep without dreams.

**Childe’s house was** on a elegant street in London. I knocked at the front door and waited. There was something almost subversively amusing about Childe living amongst the gentry.

Earlier in the day, I’d travelled across town to the Old Bailey but Childe’s trial had become as popular as his plays. There wasn’t a single empty seat to be found. I



spent some time on a bench in the hall, yawning as I listened to the barristers argue. Just as I decided to leave, a court officer pushed me aside. "Give us room here, gentlemen," he said. "I've got a witness to get in there."

The young man walking behind him with his head down was Jeffery Scott, the painted boy I'd spent an evening with. He noticed me and gave a nod. My legs shook as I reached for the back of the seat, afraid I might crumble to my knees.

Once he was led through the doors, I let out a sigh of relief.

"Him!" The voice echoed in my head. "He's one of them."

Scott was suddenly next to me, grabbing hold of my arm though no one else seemed to notice. "Tell them how you kissed me," he hissed in my ear.

"Go away," I cried, pushing through the crowd to escape. "I don't know you."

"What's wrong with him?" someone said.

"Drunken fool, is what he is."

A gallery of smirking faces watched me stumbling backwards down the hall. Scott had disappeared. The further along I went the more that confusion set in. I couldn't remember the way out of the building.

"There must be an exit door!" I cried, turning another corner. Suddenly I was plunged into blackness. A few guarded steps as if I'd entered a cathedral. "Is anyone there?" A row of stage lights flashed on, blinding me. I quickly recognised the sounds and smells of the theatre. My footsteps echoed across the floorboards. The noise of an expectant audience sent me back to opening night.

I wasn't certain if I was there to introduce my play again or to take a bow.

"Hello?"

Someone snickered and I looked down. Jeffery Scott sat in the front row. "I have walked the streets you walk, an outcast," he said, quoting a familiar line from one of Childe's poems.

"How dare you utter his words!" I yelled. "You have ruined him. He was always kind to you. We all were."

"Do you call a few coins and a silver cigarette case kindness?" he said, tossing a handful of green carnations at my feet. The colour bled across my shoes. "Pretentious fops pretending you were better than me. Without your masks of gentility, do you think they'd treat you any differently than they've always treated me? We are all in the gutter."

I ran before he could say anything more.

Jeffery Scott's words followed me as I staggered back through passageways. I finally found the stairs leading to the front entrance of the courthouse.

In a daze I made my way down the street stopping only when the realisation hit that I was lost. Glancing down the block, I saw the familiar sign for the Café Royal and ran for safety.

Once I reached the restaurant, I peered in the windows searching for any familiar face. At one time it had been a popular hang-out for writers and artist. Now the place seemed deserted. Most of the small tables were empty. As I opened the door, someone calling my name. I turned in time to see a thin figure rushing down the pavement and waving his hand. Adrian Swift greeted me with a hug. His ribs poked through the wrinkled gray coat he wore.

"Will you dine with me?" he asked. His eyes were rimmed in red; he looked like he'd been crying. Adrian, a gifted and ambitious illustrator, was seldom seen outside

of the occasional gallery showing. Consumption kept him bedridden in his rooms for weeks at a time. Seeing that we were the youngest of the aesthetic crowd, I'd always felt a certain bond with him.

Hoping food might help dissipate the drug, I agreed to join him. I knew if I waited a couple hours Childe would be returning home and I could pay him a visit in private.

Adrian ordered a whisky and drank it quickly.

"Are you sure you're well enough for that?" I asked, noticing the way his ink-stained hands shook.

"They've fired me from the magazine," he said. "All because of my association with Childe. He's ruined me."

I reached over, brushing his dishevelled blond hair back from his face. His skin, a brilliant pale white brought on by the illness, was cold to the touch. "Childe gave you your first job illustrating. Try to remember that. And he is suffering now ten times what we may experience."

"You always were unreasonable when it came to him," he said, pushing me away. "I may owe him a debt of gratitude for my start but I don't owe him my career. Besides which, I always felt my work on his first collection far outweighed the text. Still, I shouldn't be tainted by his perversions. It's not as if I ever attended those parties."

Adrian claimed that he was asexual. That the only passion that should matter was art. He insisted that Stefan, the man he lived with, was just a friend who dived in publishing. Shelbourne quickly dispelled that story after we were introduced at dinner one evening.

"He's a second-rate pornographer," Shelbourne explained once they'd gone. "Spent six months in a French jail for a novel he published. Another one of those priest seduces a young girl in the confessional tales. And badly written, if I might add, which in my opinion is the real crime. I met him in Paris shortly after his release. He was hanging all over a painted boy that I found first. Adrian can keep up the front if it pleases him, but I know better."

At the time, Adrian's deception had seemed silly. Now I wondered if he hadn't been right to hide.

"What shall you do now?" I asked.

"I still have to finish the art for the French translation of Childe's last play," he said. "Unless I've been let go there too."

The irony seemed lost on him so I let it pass.

"Stefan offered me some work. But I suspect nothing will come of it. He's stopped going to his office. All he does now is lay in bed and quote Swinburne, that is when he's not weeping uncontrollably. I fear the trial may be driving him mad." Adrian poured a small bottle of laudanum into his empty glass and sighed. "This morning I asked him if he'd like to walk in the park. Do you know what his response was? 'Laurel is green for a season, and love is sweet for a day, but love grows bitter with treason and laurel outlives not May.' I don't know if he'll snap out of it but until then I must bring in some money to support us."

"I'm going to pay Childe a visit this evening," I said. "Perhaps you could join me? I'm sure if he knew what had happened he'd find some way to help –"

"Have you lost your mind?" he cried. "I'd rather dine with a leper than be seen on his doorstep."

**Just as I** began to wonder if anyone was going to answer, the door was opened by a servant I recognised. Once a week Childe escaped to his hotel room at The Savoy. At parties that carried on until dawn, we drank claret and talked of art. His valet was always in the background, serving drinks and food then quietly disappearing as the night wore on.

“Bergson, it’s good to see you,” I said, stepping into a spacious grey entrance hall.

“Sir, if you’ll follow me,” he said, “Mr Childe is in the library. It is good of you to pay a visit.” He opened a door then stood back. “You know most of them won’t.”

Before I could respond he was gone, and I was quickly swallowed up in the elegance of the room. The walls were painted midnight blue and the ceiling glistened in gold like sunlight. One wall was filled with books, another held two large mythological engravings in gilt frames. A vase of lilies stood on the mantle. Subdued light shadowed a cast of Hermes that stood on a red column in one corner. Childe, dressed in a royal purple velvet robe, sat behind a large writing desk and gazed out at the street through glass-beaded curtains. He wasn’t a handsome man – some might even have called him homely but for the expensive cut of his clothing and the light that sparkled in his eyes as if he were always on the verge of sharing a fine joke.

“Have you come to pay your condolences?” he asked.

I smiled, taking a seat on a red silk sofa that faced the fireplace. “Not at all. I wanted you to know I’ve seen your latest play and I’m jealous as hell. I may never write again.”

Childe suddenly laughed, climbing from the shadows to take a place beside me. “You’re a mad angel. I can’t believe after all that’s gone on, you’d come here.”

“It really is bad form to flaunt your genius to the rest of us mortal playwrights.”

“If I’d had any sense at all,” he said, pressing a hand to my shoulder, “I would have stolen you from Shelbourne the moment he introduced us and fallen madly in love. Of course, you would have left me in despair once you realised I was nothing but an old fool.”

I glanced briefly into his melancholy face, then quickly looked away. “I’d have done nothing of the kind.” To my left, on a small table, stood a gilt framed letter, signed by Keats. “My God,” I whispered.

“I bought it at auction last year,” he said. “They were selling off his words to Fanny as if they were nothing more than picture postcards. If art holds no prominence in this world what does?” I read silently until Childe suddenly quoted the last lines. ““All my thoughts, my unhappiest days and nights have I find not at all cured me of my love of beauty, but made it so intense that I am miserable that you are not with me; or, rather that I breathe in that dull sort of patience that cannot be called life.”” He stopped, staring off into the distance.

I cleared my throat, almost afraid that he’d forgotten I was there. “You know I came to the courthouse today but I was forced to listen from the halls.”

“Poor dear,” he said, shaking his head as he poured two glasses of brandy. “The acoustics must have been dreadful. But I suppose you heard everything that boy had to say. I truly am sorry for the pain this is going to cost all of you but I fear . . . well, no need to talk of that. Have you heard what has replaced my play at the Saint James? *The Amazing Lyndon’s Magic Show*. Truly, it’s the first good laugh I’ve had in a week.”

“Idiots,” I muttered. “I hope it fails miserably.”

“There’s little chance of that,” he said. “Lyndon claims he can cut off a man’s head without loss of life. He’ll probably play to a packed house for the rest of the season and the manager won’t have to deal with troublesome writers and actors.”

Bergson quietly entered the room, waiting for Childe to finish before leaning down to whisper in his ear.

“She’s here now?” Childe asked.

“No, sir. When I explained you had a visitor she left before I could stop her.”

Childe dismissed the valet. His hand shook as he reached for his glass of wine.

“Were you expecting someone?” I asked.

“No,” he said, watching a shadow drift past the window. “It’s best that you are here. So what do you think of my library? I designed the whole interior of the house.”

“I could have guessed as much.” Walking to the bookshelves, I admired the rows of Greek and Latin classics, French literature and presentation copies from his contemporaries. “No one has your sense of aesthetics. Your wife must love it here.”

“I believe at one time she did. Anne is gone now. We both thought it best if she went to stay with her sister. I suppose she’ll sell the place once I am sentenced.”

I turned back to study his face. He wore his wavy brown hair long, letting it fall over one eye. “You don’t really think they’ll find you guilty?”

“They already have,” he said. “I look at the jurists and I know. If they’re forced to hear the dirty details of my life from one more rent boy they may just string me up right there on the spot. My lawyer warns me that I could get the maximum prison sentence. I can’t conceive it will be more than half a year but he believes the judge may fault me for being married.”

“What ever made you do it?” I asked, then realised how forward it sounded. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to . . .”

He laughed, waving my apology aside. “I know everyone assumes I married her just to give myself an air of respectability. But Anne was the first person who ever truly needed me. Even in her bloom she was no beauty, never travelled in social circles. Spent the season locked away in her country home, if you can imagine such a thing. I brought her out, introduced her into society. And I do love her. She’s rather shy but intelligent and a charming companion. I consider her my closest friend. I suppose that sounds odd but there you have it.”

I thought about the woman I’d seen at the Thames and wondered if I’d taken the image of Childe’s wife and in my hallucinations recast her as a ghost. “I believe she was at your private box last night,” I said.

“Anne?” he said, sitting up. “She attended my play? My God, what was she thinking?”

“Perhaps I’m mistaken. The woman I saw walked with a limp.”

“She lost her leg in a carriage accident when she was young,” he said. “I suppose she thought her attendance might help me in some way.”

Lost in my own thoughts, it took a moment for the melancholy in his voice to remind me why I’d come to visit. I knelt, taking his hands in mine. “What if you were to leave? I’ll help you. We could get you on a boat for France before dawn. I have a cousin there you could –”

“There is no dignity in running.” Leaning down, he softly kissed my lips. “Besides, it would give the Philistines too much satisfaction if I were to flee. But I shall never forget your kindness in offering to help me.” He ran his fingertip along the outline of my mouth, hypnotising me with his touch. “Now you must go, my dear. I won’t

have my friends tainted any further, if I can help it.”

“I don’t understand how you can await your verdict so calmly,” I said, frightened that I might never see him again.

“Did I mention that I’m thinking of becoming a Catholic?” He helped me to my feet, lead me to the door. “It’s such a beautiful religion.” He stopped when he saw the look of frustration on my face and sighed. “I’ve heard enough tales about Pentonville to know that I can’t possibly last a year there. No gentleman could. I’d always hoped to die like Byron, fighting for a heroic cause, or disappearing into the sea like Shelley. There’s something so sadly small about ending one’s days in a cell like some disregarded pickpocket.”

I could only nod my head when he asked me to send him my new poems. Bergson held the door for me, bowing slightly as I left.

—8—

**Preoccupied with worry** over Childe’s future, I almost tripped in front of a passing carriage. Stumbling back on to the pavement, I was quickly pulled from my contemplation by the familiar sound of a wooden footstep. I glanced back. A cloaked figure emerged from the fog.

As she came closer, my anxiety was replaced with anger. “Why do you follow me?” She jumped at the sound of my voice then quickened her pace.

I reached out to grab her arm as she passed “Answer me! Why do you plague me?”

“Let me go,” she cried, pulling free of my grasp. “You mistake me for someone else.”

“Mrs Childe?” I said, startled to find that she wasn’t a figment. “What are you doing here? Your husband said you were in seclusion.”

“I thought he might need someone.” Pulling a white handkerchief from her pocket, she dabbed at her eyes. “I should have known he’d take comfort elsewhere. He always has.”

“He’s worried about you,” I said. “Though I suspect that is of little comfort now.”

“What am I to do?” she said, looking back at her home. “He believes he’s protecting me by sending me away but I am already ostracised. Everyone in London cuts me now.”

“I’m sure that once the trial is over people will . . .” I hesitated, unable to get over the shock that she was real.

“Do not tell my husband that you saw me.” As she walked away, swallowed by the mist, I listened to her footfalls with a sense of dread.

I arrived home just in time for dinner. Afterwards I took tea with Aunt Jane, Mrs Johnson and her granddaughter, Nelly. The girl was eighteen years old, attractive in a mild sort of way and either too shy to speak in front of strangers or, I feared, unable to think of anything to say.

“You’re a playwright?” Mrs Johnson asked without waiting for an answer. “We went to the theatre once, didn’t we, Nelly dear? I can’t recall the title but it was very amusing. And afterwards we dined out. I had roast duck and it was terribly under-cooked. I was sick with a stomach ailment for a week. As soon as I felt well again, I told Mr Johnson that under no circumstances would I ever attend another play. I could have died.”

I cleared my throat and spoke to the young lady. “Do you enjoy art? I went to the Royal Academy last week to see the Pre-Raphaelite exhibition. I believe it’s showing there for another month.”

“I like silhouettes,” she said, glancing up at me then quickly returning her gaze to the floor.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Silhouettes,” she repeated. “I draw them.”

I tried to think of a response.

“Don’t forget your china painting,” Mrs Johnson said. “Nelly paints lovely landscapes on tea cups. And she’s very accomplished on the piano.”

I sat my plate down, noticing how badly my hands shook. It had been hours since my last dosage of chloral. I was desperate to end the visit and get to my room.

“Perhaps you could take Mrs Johnson and her granddaughter to see the paintings,” Aunt Jane suggested, giving me a quick nod.

“Well, the museum is closed tomorrow,” I said without much enthusiasm. “But if you’d like we could –”

“Oh, the following day would do just as well,” Mrs Johnson said. “We have no plans on Thursday, do we dear?”

Nelly gave a tiny smile.

Once they were gone, I ran upstairs and swallowed half a glass of chloral. Curling up in a chair in front of my fireplace, I thought about what Childe had said about marriage and respectability. I tried picturing my life with a girl like Nelly. Perhaps, I thought, I could grow fond of her the way Childe had with his wife. I was tired of the weight of my life. The glass dropped from my hand as my mind drifted. Leaning over to retrieve it I caught sight of a figure. It was almost a relief to see that it wasn’t the dead woman this time.

The American girl stood in front of my chair. She seemed to have no difficulty looking me in the eye. But her clothes were quite different from the stylish gown she’d worn to dinner. Now she wore a red satin dress with a low bodice. The skirt was short, exposing her legs to the knee. Her petticoat was black.

“Do you want to kiss me?” she said, crawling into my lap.

Her breath felt warm against my neck. I vaguely pictured her in my bed without any sense of excitement and smiled.

She asked again, the sound of her voice deepening with each long drawn out word. I pushed her away and suddenly it was Jeffery Scott staring back at me. That perfect mouth waiting. I closed my eyes and met his kiss.

“We are all drowning,” he whispered.

—9—

**I spent the** morning copying my poems for Childe and working on my new play. It was far from complete but I had to get Pearson to read it before he found something else for next season. It was early afternoon before I finished. Packing everything into my case, I hurried down the stairs.

“I’m leaving now.” When I didn’t get a response, I looked into the parlour. Aunt Jane was gone. The newspaper lay unread on an end table. I flipped it over to the front page and read the headline: *JURY TO DECIDE CHILDE CASE*. Taking a seat, I read through the article. The prosecutor expected a verdict by the end of the day. I skimmed through the rest of the piece until my eyes stopped on a familiar name.

*Jeffery Scott, a young man with a police record who has appeared briefly on the stage, was asked to describe Childe’s private parties. He said he’d attended at least four of them and there was never a woman in attendance. He and his friends, all between the ages of*

nineteen and twenty-two, were given gifts and money by Childe and his guests. At this point, Scott produced a silver cigarette case he'd received. When asked if he or his companions had ever had unnatural relations with Childe, he answered yes though he said there was never any undue pressure put upon the boys. Scott shared the identity of fifteen gentlemen he'd met at these gatherings, all of whom had acted in an immoral manner. After examining the prosecutor's list, Judge Edward Gains refused to allow three of the names to be used. It is speculated that the gentlemen in question may be members of the House of Commons or Parliament. Those men mentioned by Scott included Reginald Rhodes of Hampstead, John Cook of Kensington, Peter Hughes of Dulwich . . .

I went back over the conversation I'd had with Childe the night before. He'd made a point of apologising for the misery Scott's testimony would bring to us because he assumed I'd heard it all from the hall.

My hands shook as I finished reading the list of names. I wasn't there. But Aleck Shelbourne was. I stared at it for a time, unsure if I was truly seeing it.

*I won't have my friends tainted any further.*

I crumpled up the newspaper and tossed it into the fire.

"Sir," the kitchen maid said, startling me as I glanced up at the doorway. "A man just come round the back door with this package for you."

I figured it was something from my father and shoved it into my case.

**"Mr Shelbourne has** gone to Paris."

I stood at his doorstep like a beggar, staring at the servant as he repeated the explanation. Even Shelbourne's help had to be beautiful. His butler, a young man from Spain he'd met on his travels, managed to convey a sense of haughtiness I suspected he'd learned from watching Aleck.

"You must be mistaken."

"I don't believe I am. Mr Shelbourne had some unexpected business he had to attend to at once."

The betrayal was so swift and clean I almost couldn't believe it. "When did he leave?"

"Shortly after breakfast this morning."

As fleeting as a promise, I had been forgotten.

"Is there anything else, sir?"

*Yes, I wanted to scream, tell me how often he's taken you to his bed.*

I controlled the urge to wrap my hands around his neck and strangle the words from his throat. Just as he was closing the door, I reached out, blocking his way. Behind him, at the foot of the stairway, stood Shelbourne's monogrammed leather case. The servant followed my gaze.

"Let me through," I said, pushing him aside before he had a chance to stop me.

Aleck was in his white-walled study, tossing handfuls of letters into the fire. Above the mantle hung a large portrait of Shelbourne dressed in Greek garb, the only colour in the room. He'd commissioned a former lover to make him look like Byron. I'd always thought the painting was pretentious, even by his standards.

Smoke drifted across the ceiling. In his left arm he cradled a small white terrier with black whiskers. The dog snarled, baring his tiny teeth as I entered.

Shelbourne looked surprised for just a moment but it was quickly replaced with his usual air of boredom. "Romeo, shush," he said kissing the dog's head before gently placing him on the floor where he stood at his master's feet nervously shaking.

"I'm glad you've come. I'm afraid I have to go away for a while. My family needs me to take care of some business in Paris. Rather dull work but it can't be helped."

It wasn't even a good lie but of course I hadn't given him time to come up with anything better.

His servant tried to bully past me. "He forced himself in after I told him –"

"You may leave us, and tell Richards to bring the carriage around front," Shelbourne said, tossing the rest of his papers into the flames before turning back to me. "I told him I didn't want to be bothered but of course I wasn't expecting you."

A copy of *The Times* sat at his desk.

"You were going to leave me," I said. "I can't believe that you'd sneak away without a word or concern for me. Everyone knows I'm with you. It's only a matter of time before –"

"Oh, that," he said, reaching for his gloves on the mantle. "I'd almost forgotten. Imagine anyone taking the word of a renter over a man of my lineage. It's too ridiculous to even consider."

"And yet you were burning my letters," I said. "Don't deny it. I recognised my seal on one of the pages."

Shelbourne glanced down at the flames. "They were old business papers, one of your letters may have got in there by mistake. Really, this behaviour of yours is getting strange. Are you still taking that drug?"

"This has nothing to do with the chloral and you know it." I couldn't stand the way he refused to look at me as if I were nuisance he couldn't get away from quickly enough. "Last night you said you wanted to take me along when you left town."

"Not this time, dear," he said. "My father may be there and . . . well, it just wouldn't be right now. Perhaps you should go home to your family until this mess blows over."

"Is there no one you show loyalty to besides yourself?" I cried.

He grabbed his coat from the back of a chair. I couldn't help noticing the way his hands shook. "You're behaving irrationally and I have a carriage waiting." I backed away from his arms as he tried to hug me. "I won't be gone long. Six months, eight at the most. Your new play should be done by then. I expect you to save me a front row seat. You know how much –"

"I won't forgive you for this, Aleck," I said. "You're not the only one who has a lot to lose."

"You're a nobody!" he shouted, then quickly regained control. "I didn't mean that. Of course we are both gentlemen. But you must see that the possible damage to your bourgeoisie father and what I could face are completely different. My relations will disown me. My social life here in London will be ruined. I'd like to believe the brilliance of my personality would survive such a disgrace. But we both know that my personality really rests on my position." He sighed and gave a feeble smile. "Well, enough of the confessions. I shall pine away for you and even though you're unhappy now I'm sure you'll miss me. But what is it you like to say, sorrow feeds art?"

"So does hatred," I said, pushing him aside.

**Heavy rains flooded** the streets. I barely felt it. A weight lay on my chest, crushing my heart. I wasn't sure if I was breathing any more. The voice of vendors followed



me, but the sounds were incoherent. Just grey background noise. Stumbling into people, I couldn't even bring myself to apologise. There was a strangeness to my pain as if it were coming up on me in waves. Each time it drew me down I was sure I'd come up screaming like a madman.

Standing at the chemist's counter, I felt a sense of security knowing the three bottles of chloral in my hands would be enough to end my life. The means to release myself from all the pain was as calming as a lullaby.

Behind me two men discussed what to do for a toothache until the subject suddenly changed. The words slowly slipped through my sorrow.

"They found him guilty on both counts. Indecency and sodomy."

"How much time do you think he'll get?"

"Well, knowing Judge Cryer –"

"Excuse me," I said, turning back. "Is it the Childe case you speak of?"

"Jury convicted him about a half hour ago," the man clutching his jaw said. "And rightly so if you ask me. It's sickening the way –"

"Thank you," I muttered, shoving the drug into my pockets.

**Aunt Jane and** the two old widows were waiting in the parlour when I returned. Whatever conversation that had been going on stopped at my entrance. No one seemed to notice the dead woman seated on Jane's favourite yellow sofa. I acknowledged the ladies with a quick nod, hoping I might escape up to my room.

"A moment of your time," Aunt Jane said. "I must speak to you about something of grave importance. In regards to your . . . acquaintance, Mr Swinbourne." She looked to her friends for support, but they continued with their needlepoint as if they'd gone deaf. Even the corpse was too busy concentrating on me to back up Jane. "Well," Aunt Jane continued, "there's something in today's newspaper that –"

"He's no longer my friend," I said. "We've had a falling out."

"Oh, goodness," she said, waving her hand in front of her face in a silly pretence to show that she'd been near to fainting out of concern. "You can't imagine my relief. I was just telling Mrs Radford that you couldn't be a party to such things. A nice handsome boy like yourself. But you must be more careful in whom you choose to associate with. Of course, I blame myself."

"Oh no, dear," Mrs Kersley said, patting her arm as she scowled at me. "The fault is not yours."

"I should have introduced him to more of the right people," Aunt Jane cried.

I sighed. "Aunt Jane, please don't upset yourself. You've been very kind to me. And what about the American girl? Didn't you –"

"Oh, I almost forgot!" she said, startling us all. "Mrs Johnson called on me this morning. Her granddaughter has asked if you would take them to see the paintings this week. They'll be by on Thursday. Now wouldn't that be something to tell your father. Your dear old auntie finds you a beautiful rich wife."

"I'll be happy to take them," I said.

Aunt Jane clapped her hands like a giddy school girl.

I made my way up the stairs to my room, the widows' voices following me as they planned my future. At the last step I stumbled, almost falling back. The dead woman's face stared back at me through a window on the second floor landing. I couldn't help myself. I began to laugh, tears welling in my eyes.

**“First let me** apologise to the jury who was forced to hear the vulgar details of this trial. I have no doubt you rendered the correct verdict.” The judge paused, glancing briefly down at Childe. “It is no use for me to address you. Any man that can commit such acts has no sense of humiliation. This is the worst case I have ever tried. Even the severest sentence that the law allows is inadequate for your crime.”

I stared at Childe’s back, unable to blink, wishing I hadn’t decided to come down to the courthouse.

“The sentence of this court is that you be imprisoned to hard labour for two years in Pentonville.”

Above the roar of the crowd, even as they cheered, I distinctly heard Childe saying over and over again, “My God, my God.” A guard took hold of his arm as he swayed, leading him down the aisle. A low hiss followed by the chants of “Shame” echoed in my ears as if they were directed at me. I held my head in my hands and wept, too frightened to defend him.

**I couldn’t kill** myself. The realisation left me depressed. For hours I lay stretched out on my bed moving the bottles of chloral around on the night stand like chess pieces. I’d written nothing so far that would live on after me. This grand bit of egotism was all that kept me alive. I couldn’t bear the thought of being forgotten. Which led me to dwell on my finances and my father. In the midst of my misery I suddenly recalled the package I’d received and stumbled out of bed to retrieve it.

Opening the box, I noticed the unfamiliar handwriting on the brown wrapper. Inside, wrapped in a piece of red velvet, I found Keats’ letter to Fanny Brawne. Childe had enclosed a note which read: *I pass this on to you with all my deepest affections. Keats, like all great artists, understood but couldn’t live with the truth that the secret of life is suffering. May your lessons be more gently learned than mine have been.*

My hands shook as I studied the gold frame. At Childe’s home, I’d been too distracted to notice that it was the same one I’d seen floating in the Thames.

I fell into a dreamless black sleep, cradling the letter to my chest.

The next morning I sat across from Aunt Jane as she blathered on about the wealthy American girl in between bites of a soft boiled egg. Opening the newspaper, I was startled to see a sketch of Childe in the courtroom below the heading **THE AESTHETIC CULT IS OVER.**

“And she’s such a lovely girl too. Don’t you agree? A dowry is important but one can’t overlook character and beauty. Have you written to your father about her yet? No? Well, perhaps it’s too soon but when you do . . . Is something wrong, dear? You look upset. Minny, bring him some breakfast. I know he said he wasn’t hungry but it’s always been my feeling that one should never start the day on an empty stomach.”

Page two of the paper contained a sketch of a woman’s face. **BODY WASHES ASHORE ON THE THAMES.** Scotland Yard was looking for help in identifying the apparent suicide victim. At any other time, the discovery of a one-legged woman drowned in the river would have made the front page. Unfortunately, on this day, her husband’s verdict took precedence.

**After six months,** I received a letter from the prison governor approving my request to see Childe. The visit would last only fifteen minutes any time between the hours of two and four o'clock in the afternoon.

I cancelled my plans to lunch with Nelly the next day, claiming an appointment with a respected theatre manager. She wished me well and reminded me that her father would certainly back my next play once he had a chance to talk with me. Her parents were due to arrive from America in a fortnight.

The dark shadow of Pentonville Gaol swallowed me as I stepped up to the portcullis-like gateway jutting from the main building where a series of madhouse windows watched my arrival. A clock tower rose above the archway like a giant unblinking eye.

A cold wind blew at my face as I was led through the small paved courtyard and up a broad flight of stone steps to a glass door leading to the prison itself. The silence that greeted me came as a shock. The only sounds seem to come from my shoes tapping against the floor and the clanking of the officer's keys. A door was opened and I was led into a small waiting room.

"You'll need to sign in, sir."

Suddenly I feared leaving my name. What would it mean that I'd come to visit him? Would they suspect me too?

"Sir?"

I wrote quickly, smearing the ink with my hand.

"Come with me," the officer said.

Metal doors were unlocked and locked as he led me through corridors and into a vaulted room divided by two rows of iron bars.

One chair stood on each side. I took a seat and waited.

Childe was led in wearing handcuffs, a mud-brown suit and a peculiar brown cap, the peak of which hung so low as to cover his face like a mask. Only his eyes appeared through two holes cut in the front.

A warder removed his hat and helped him to the chair.

"D377," he said, gazing up at clock on the wall. "You've got fifteen minutes."

I couldn't find the words to speak. I'd never seen him unshaven but even without the straggly beard his face was so thin I barely recognised him.

"From your expression," Childe said, "I must look even worse than I feared." Placing his shackled hands on a small table in front of him, he wiped away at the grime. I noticed his fingernails were broken and bleeding. "No one has a name here. I am D377."

I reached out, grabbing the bars. "I'm so terribly sorry," I whispered. "What can I do?"

"Don't pity me," he said. "There are those in here who suffer more. Last week they brought in a sixteen-year-old boy. He was sentenced to four years for stealing a red silk handkerchief from Lord Hampton." A bit of his former self shone through as he smiled. "Who would have thought Hampton even owned a handkerchief?" And suddenly we were both laughing.

He told me that the only reading he was allowed was a bible and asked about the latest books and plays. I told him I'd heard that he was selling out every night in Paris.

"You must go to France when you are released," I said. "I'm sure they'll gladly produce your next work."

Childe stared off for a moment as if he hadn't heard me, then said, "I'll never

write again.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I’m not permitted ink or paper here,” he said. “I can’t even tell a story. We speak to no one except the guards and they treat me with open contempt because of my fame. I am an outcast among outcasts.” Tears filled his eyes. “I’m forced seven days a week to walk a hideous device they call the treadmill. Six hours a day, ascending six thousand feet, step after step leading nowhere and without any other purpose than simply to cause pain. But I could live with it if they would just give me back my words. Even when Anne comes to my cell at night, all I can do is weep.

At the mention of his wife, I leaned in closer to the bars. I hadn’t seen her image since the day she died.

“But don’t tell a soul,” he said under his breath. “They’ll think I’ve gone mad and send me to Bedlam. I couldn’t bear any more shame.” He stared over my left shoulder. “She never moves her lips but I hear her.”

I glanced behind me but there was nothing there.

“She’s the reason you’re here,” he continued. “She told me you’ve ignored the premonitions and . . . I don’t understand. Anne says you knew she would die? What does she mean?”

I looked over at the guard, hoping our time might be up so I could escape. The officer glanced at the clock and held up five fingers.

“It was the chloral,” I said, wiping the sweat from my forehead. “I take it for my nerves. One night I imagined a woman drowning in the Thames. But when I told Shelbourne, he said the drug was causing hallucinations. If I’d believed for a moment that it was real and I could have helped her . . .”

“You couldn’t,” he said, gazing intently at the empty space at my side. “And it was too late for me to save her. If I’d never married, the judge would have been more lenient. My lawyer said that with my fame and connections, I might not have been –” Suddenly he jumped from his chair. “My God! She says you’re going to make the same mistake I have. Is this true? Have you learned nothing by my fate? You’ll never disguise who you are.”

“That’s enough of that!” The guard hurried over, grabbing Childe’s arms as he beat at the bars.

“When I get out of here I’ll take you to Paris,” he said, his fingers tightening around the metal. The officer smacked Childe’s hands with a wooden baton until they bled. Tears streamed down his face but he refused to let go. “We can be together there.” His words came so fast I had trouble understanding him. “I’ll rent a chateau and we’ll write grand plays that all of society will line up to see. We’ll make them adore us. I did it once, I can do it again.”

The guard opened the door, yelling for assistance. Three more officers ran in. Childe was dragged from the room screaming my name.

**Three weeks after** my visit, Childe died in prison of dysentery. His death brought about a belated show of guilt from the London press who all made a point in the obituaries of praising his plays. One anonymous reporter even questioned whether he should have been in prison at all. In spite of that, a request from Childe’s lawyer to have him buried in the poet’s corner of Westminster Abbey was quickly denied.

His body was shipped to Paris for burial.

I told Nelly I would take her to France for our honeymoon. I figured I could escape for a few hours while she shopped. Just long enough place a lily at his grave.

—15—

***It is the drug***, I told myself.

Nelly, bathed in the reds, blues and golds cast from the huge stained glass window above us, squeezed my hand. Whether to draw my attention or out of affection, I wasn't sure. With my heart beating furiously, I glanced behind me again. Childe walked the altar steps over and over, never reaching the top. He wore the hideous cap that covered his face but I recognised his eyes. I couldn't look away.

"In the name of God," I muttered. "Somebody help him."

"Do you take this man to be your . . ."

"Dear," Nelly whispered, "are you feeling ill?"

I couldn't answer.

In the front pew, Aunt Jane sobbed loudly beside my parents. *Perhaps she sees him too*, I thought. It wasn't possible that everyone in the church was blind to what was happening.

"I do," Nelly said.

Suddenly Childe lost his footing. His knee came down on the wooden step hard enough for me to hear the crack.

I moaned, pulling my hand from Nelly's grasp.

Childe struggled to stand but his knee kept giving out. He seemed to be talking to someone, pointing at his leg.

I knelt down and grabbed him by the waist. He was so thin that I could feel his ribs. "You're all monsters!" I cried. "The whole lot of you can go to hell!"

There was mumbling from the pews but I paid them no mind. "It's going to be fine," I told Childe. "We'll go live in Paris like you said."

"The boy's gone mad!"

Prison guards rushed the stairs. I thought I heard Nelly shrieking as I was thrown on my back. Childe was still in my arms.

"And you'll regain your fame," I continued. "Every night will be a sold-out show."

"Can you hear me, son?"

They tried separating us but I kicked and screamed. I knew if I let him go there'd be nothing left for me.

"Don't let him near my daughter! You hear me?"

Suddenly I was lifted. For a moment I thought I might touch the angels carved into the arched ceiling. I pointed out the cherubs to Childe, knowing how much he'd love them. He didn't seem to hear me but I wasn't worried. We were together now, and safe. ■

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Since 1994 Michelle has sold over two hundred poems and short stories. Her work has appeared in such anthologies as *The Darker Side*, *The Big Book of Erotic Ghost Stories*, *Dark Arts* and *Cemetery Dance* magazine. *Intervals of Horrible Sanity*, her first collection, was published in 2003 by Medium Rare Books.

# ADJUSTMENT

## LUKE SHOLER

**T**hey confirmed it the way they always do: half the money transferred to my account. Then I went to the Golden Monkey, the restaurant they use. I ordered tea and when I cracked open the fortune cookie your name came out. On the back were two words: REDEEM YOURSELF. I left a tip even though nobody tips here and eyed the bamboo calendar on the way out. December 26 was circled in green.

By December 26 you will be dead.

I walked west on the Calle José Abascal past the mattress stores and car showrooms. They were dark and closed for the siesta. The rain had caught everyone on the street without umbrellas and we went with our heads down like at a funeral. It is December 9. You have some living left. I have time to work.

**There is a** café across from the apartment you rent on the Calle Santa Engracia. I sit at the window watching your door open and close. They sent me photographs but I don't need photographs to recognize you. There was one, black and white, of you scratching your ankle as you're dressing for a party. There's nobody in the room, it's obvious. I felt jealous of the photographer; you didn't even know he was there.

In the café I order coffee with hot milk. The sugar comes in tubular packets. There's a handful of the men who wait out their mornings in cafes. I'm dressed just like them: a hunter green coat, brown loafers. I read *El País* and watch your door. I'm studying the movie times when you come out.

You have those yellow knee-high boots on. Your stockings are black and your skirt is also yellow. You wore that same outfit once on a boat party in Buenos Aires. The night you lost your driver's license and we looked all over the deck and you thought you saw it floating on the water. We had a deckhand fish it out but it was just an old pocket bible. It didn't matter anyway; you never drive. People take you places, or taxis do, or you walk and the men watch you.

You step out onto Santa Engracia and it's one of those bright winter days that Madrid is so famous for. The sunlight hits your hair. It's different; you've put some red in it. But at least it's your own hair. I remember one time you sent me a text message to meet at Moma. I walked in and it was full and I didn't see you anywhere. When I went to the bar to order, someone with blue hair said, "I'd like a *vodka limón*" and her arm grazed mine. I paid for her drink and asked her which of those people was the best dancer. She said, "No one's even dancing." I knew it was you but we acted like strangers. You let me invite you to dinner and then we took a taxi to your place and you didn't take the wig off even when you lay back on the bed.

You go down Santa Engracia past the pensioners and circular benches in the Plaza de Chamberí and continue all the way down to the Plaza de Alonso Martínez. I follow you from a block and a half, but it's easy to track you. You don't speed up. You don't even look over your shoulder. That was the part of you I craved and hated: your confidence, your aloofness.

I start to run when I see you descend the stairs to the metro. When I get to the turnstiles I lock up. No sign of your yellow boots and Alonso Martinez has three different lines that could take you anywhere in the city. But maybe you haven't caught a train. Maybe you just used the passageways to come out on a different point in the plaza. You did that sometimes; it was faster than waiting for the light. I turn a circle. People are moving in every direction. You're gone.

**You speak three** languages. The German you got from your father, a developer from Munich, and the Spanish was thanks to your mother, a student from Valladolid. When they got married she didn't put her degree to much use; your father made enough for everyone. Your third was English, a fundamental part of your private school education. It was your weakest language though, you'd learned it without interest, so insisted I spoke to you in English. You wanted to improve. I conceded. But in my head I spoke to you in Spanish.

You had different jobs. For a long time you worked as a translator for the German Embassy on the Calle Fortuny. I met you after work sometimes and we'd stroll over into the Barrio Salamanca feeling richer than we were. Later on, once you'd inherited that apartment, you only worked part-time. You'd go to offices to teach German executives Spanish or Spanish executives German. Your schedule was complicated though, and you cancelled many dates last minute. "Sorry," you'd say, "a class has come up." Only later did I question you.

**I traveled a** lot, on odd days. I told you I was a journalist, that I covered the European Commission. You started asking questions. We were in bed once and you said, "Why don't you ever send me postcards?"

"Brussels is boring," I answered.

"Just tell me about your day. What you're reporting."

"Do you really want to hear about the Lisbon Strategy?"

"Well describe the food," you said.

"I don't like to write."

"You're the journalist," you laughed. "OK. Bring me a Belgian waffle."

"It would get stale."

"Bring me *something*. *No sé*. Something typical."

"Fine. Chocolate."

My next job was in Bologna and I killed a fat man in a white silk neckerchief. That was his trademark. I had a contact in Belgium buy the chocolates, express mail them to my apartment in Madrid, and I gave them to you at dinner the night I got back. We were in an Italian restaurant; it seemed appropriate. There is a place in Bologna where seven roads meet and two uneven towers rise into the sky. I shot him once and he died contemplating those towers.

"What were you covering this time?" you asked.

I cleared my throat and called the waiter over. "We'd like the wine now."

"What were you covering?"

"Nothing. The Enlargement. People are arguing about whether Turkey is European enough."

"You said that last time."

"Well, we're still there," I said.

“Did you do any daytrips?”

“No, just Brussels.”

“You didn’t go to Bruges?”

“No, I was tired.”

The waiter uncorked the bottle and I sipped it.

“That’s funny,” you said. “Because these chocolates are from Bruges.”

The wine suddenly tasted like vinegar. I could barely swallow.

“The wine is fine,” I told him. “Thank you.”

And that same night you demanded to come back to my apartment, even though we always went to yours. “Come on, I’ve never seen your place.”

“It’s not clean,” I said. “I’ve just got back.”

“It doesn’t matter. I want to make love there.”

I breathed out. “No, I’m tired. Tomorrow?”

“If you don’t take me to your apartment right now, you won’t see me tomorrow or ever.”

I paid the taxi and the whole way up the stairwell I was petrified. Did I leave my gun out? What about the photographs of the man in the white neckerchief? I unlocked the door. You went straight to the kitchen and started opening cabinets. Meanwhile I looked around. The relief hit me; I’d remembered to put my things away. “You have three plates . . . a bowl . . . and an unopened bottle of olive oil.”

“I don’t like to cook,” I said.

“*Pues*, why don’t you offer me something to drink while I clean this place up a bit.”

You were in the salon when I entered holding a bottle.

“What is this?” You were pointing at my bags.

“What?”

“You went to Milan,” you said, pointing at the airport tags.

“Bologna,” I corrected. “By way of Milan.”

“Who with?”

“No one.”

“*Who* with?”

I breathed in and held it. “It was business.”

“No lies. It’s over.” You turned, halfway out the door. “You know, I only have one question. Who bought the chocolates?”

**I called you** the next morning and asked you to meet me. You declined. You knew all you needed to.

“It’s not what you think,” I said.

“Prove it.”

“Come over.”

You hung up and I stared at the table until there was a knock at the door. It was you.

“No lies,” I said. “Sit down, I’ll be right back.”

I came out of my bedroom with two plastic bags and set them on the table. You screamed.

“You have a gun!”

“Don’t touch it.” I opened the other bag. “These are photographs of a man I visited



in Bologna. He's dead now."

"I don't understand."

"I visited him. With this gun."

"Why?"

"They paid me to."

"Why? What had he done?"

"I don't know. That's a question I never ask."

You were quiet for a time.

"So that's your job."

"That's my job."

You tried to leave but I pulled you back. You hit me, you screamed.

"Stop," I said. "Stop."

I started kissing you. I could smell your shampoo, your detergent. I kept kissing you, and then you kissed back, and there was no more screaming.

**Shortly after that** your father died. "I loved him," you said, "but I didn't respect him." You were trembling. You'd never looked more beautiful or more alone. "He left me an apartment." You burst out laughing and crying. "He left me an apartment."

I hugged you the entire afternoon and at sunset we went to have a look at it. It was on the Paseo del Pintor Rosales; almost 200 square meters. We went back and forth in the empty rooms, our shoes loud on the parquet floors, and watched the sky turn colorful then dark out the windows.

"This isn't the first time I've been here." Your voice was stiff, far away.

"Meaning?"

"He gave me this place on purpose."

"Meaning?"

"I could never live here. Not after that."

But then I didn't ask. I didn't want to know what you meant.

**You were suddenly** the owner of a very valuable piece of property, and to celebrate we took a trip across Mexico and the American Southwest. In the bowl of smog that is Mexico City we stopped in at a restaurant you thought looked good. We ordered tamales because they were the house specialty, and you tried to eat yours husk and all.

"No," I laughed, "not like that. You have to peel the husk off. Here."

It was funny. Everything in Mexico seemed so exotic to you. Even the beggar children that tugged on your clothes made you smile. You bought a white shirt with bright embroidery all over the front and walked around the streets like a pretend peasant. All I saw were the women defecating in the corners.

We crossed into the United States and stayed at a resort in Tucson, Arizona. The Catalina Mountains surged diagonally out of the earth and the sky was so big you felt dizzy. It was August, the month of the monsoons, and we spent the whole day making love while hail and lightning crushed the desert outside. When we left our room the sky was still purple, but the rain had stopped. We walked around the complex like survivors of a shipwreck, broken palm branches and gravel everywhere, and you were the first to see it. "No! No!" You ran toward a Spanish-style fountain, then turned around and started slapping me on the chest crying. An infant was

floating face down in the fountain. His blond hair spread on the surface. “Do something!” you screamed.

But before I could, you pulled him out and started pushing on his stomach. But he was already dead. The resort staff turned up. No one knew who the child belonged to. We waited until the ambulance came and still no one knew who the child belonged to.

You were rigid, your eyes shaking. “Let’s go home.”

**Back in Madrid**, envelopes from the company started arriving. Inside were photographs of you. You in parks, cafes, taxis. And at your side was a man in a suit. Not the same one every time, but always a man in a suit. There was one of you in a restaurant. You’re laughing, you have your hands over his. On the back was written: BE CAREFUL.

**They said I** was losing it. I remember: *Your private life is obstructing your performance.* They were talking about Glasgow. One weekend I had a job there. A man who owned certain properties. I knew stupid facts about him. He had a lazy eye; it made his colleagues nervous. He was born in the same month I was.

I told you: “I’m going to Scotland on a job. I’ll be back Sunday night.”

Your kiss was dry. “Have a safe flight.”

Except I didn’t leave Madrid. The man could live another week; I didn’t care. I had all those photographs of you in my head and I couldn’t leave till I figured it out.

I followed you that afternoon into Retiro Park and you met a man with curly hair and a loud laugh. His tie was lime green. You gave him two kisses and squeezed his hand. You glanced around; he did too. Then you both went and sat at the steps of the Palacio de Cristal. The swans coasted on the pond. I kept hearing his laugh. After a while he passed you a letter. You read it as he looked on. He underlined several words with his finger and touched your thigh in the process. Then he stood up. You gave him two kisses, hugged him, and he was gone. As you re-read the letter, a wonderful smile settled over your face.

**I’m back on** Santa Engracia, in the same café, watching your apartment building. It won’t be difficult to kill you but it will be hard. I’ve asked them for twice the original amount. Meanwhile I’m here, on the street we walked nearly every day of our relationship, and I don’t have my gun. You asked to see it once; we were in the Plaza de Olavide.

“I never carry it. Only on the day of the job.”

“That means you’re even more dangerous,” you said. “That means you’re good.”

**Another envelope arrived.** I saw you in that black-and-white world of elegant men. The man in the green tie was the one you visited most. You and him at a table, your teeth delicious with laughter. Was he one of your students? An executive you taught German to? But that didn’t make sense; you taught in offices. These were all street shots.

I missed another job. There was a diplomat in Barcelona for the World AIDS Conference. I was supposed to catch a flight: there and back in the same day. But at dawn I woke and your arm lay exquisite and warm over my chest and I stayed all

day with you. We ate lunch in our underwear. I didn't want you out of my sight; I didn't want you to stop being mine. The sadness I felt when we were apart was harder and harder to tolerate. It pervaded everything: the Peruvian women selling knitwear on the street; the schoolgirls with their bellbottoms and empty beds; the faces of bus drivers.

A man bumped into me on the metro the next morning. His sunglasses shattered on the platform. I apologized. We knelt to pick up the pieces. He said something.

"What?" I asked.

He stopped, and looked straight into me. "Too many mistakes."

**We had dinner** once in your new apartment on the Paseo del Pintor Rosales. You didn't live there, so we had to bring dishes and pans from your other place. I had my briefcase with me.

We were in the kitchen cutting vegetables and chorizo. You lit the stove.

"I'm surprised the gas is still turned on," I said.

"My father kept all of his properties running great." You dripped olive oil onto the pan. "I feel obligated to do the same."

"Are you ever going to live here?"

"No." You glanced over. "I hate this place. I told you."

I was quiet. I knew it was a bad idea, but I said it anyway: "Actually, you didn't tell me. Nothing concrete."

The oil was popping in the pan.

"My father used to throw parties here. For important people. To win contracts."

You added the vegetables and the pan hissed like a volcano.

"I had to serve drinks, flirt a little."

You wouldn't make eye contact with me.

"There were a lot of empty rooms. Men drinking."

You wouldn't make eye contact.

"He took me into one of the rooms. I couldn't believe it was happening at first."

I couldn't speak; I touched your arm. You drew back and knocked a glass over. Shards slid across the counter.

"*Mierda.*" Your voice cracked up. "Come on. Let's go to the salon."

We sat on the parquet floor, using newspapers as place mats. All I could think about was which of the empty rooms. How old you would have been. I made myself eat, wishing you were the same person you were an hour ago.

After dinner we went to wash the dishes. We were waiting for the water to get hot. You put your hands around mine, washing them. The water was hot now. You massaged the soap in, and I closed my eyes, but the water started to burn, and it was burning hot but I couldn't pull away; you were squeezing my hands.

"Let go!"

"Why don't you ever hit me?" you said.

"What the hell?"

"In bed," you said. "Other boys have."

I shoved my back into you and broke free. My hands were bright red. So were yours. "Is that what your boyfriend in the green tie does?"

You laughed. "What boyfriend?"

"The one you meet all the time."

“What are you talking about?”

“Curly hair, strong laugh. You can’t get enough of him.”

“Are you *jealous*? Is the big killer jealous?”

“Look.” I went to my briefcase and took the photos out. “How many of them are you fucking?”

“*Qué coño!* You’ve been stalking me?”

“How many?”

“All of them. I do whatever I want.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t that what you liked? Lies? Betrayal? The big journalist, the killer.”

And now I do hit you.

And you tell me to never come near you again.

**A knock at** my door. I look through the eyehole. It’s the man from the metro, the man with the broken sunglasses. I press myself against the wall. A letter comes under the door. I wait. Shoes descend the stairs. Then pick it up.

*Twice the original amount will be paid upon completion. Deadline unchanged. No more mistakes.*

I lean against the empty refrigerator. You were here counting my dishes. A different night, when it was raining, you swept your hand across the bare walls and said this place looked like a fly-by-night business.

And I think what it said when I cracked open the fortune cookie: REDEEM YOURSELF.

This is what they do, to agents who get distracted. They ask for a show of loyalty. They make you eliminate the distraction.

I remember, a man who specialized in politicians. He made himself famous for leaving a German Christian Democrat in a hotel bathtub, dressed in a suit and tie, water up to his chin. No cause of death was ever found.

He was also famous for his addiction. He had a dealer, just one, and they were closer than brothers. His cocaine was of a devastating purity.

One day, the agent overdosed and missed a job. Later, he sniffed two lines and shot the wrong politician.

The company gave him a new target: the dealer. And they gave him weekly drug screenings.

The coroner never identified how the dealer died.

Time passed. Then, one of the screenings came back positive.

The coroner never even identified the agent.

**December 24.** The streets are chaotic with shoppers. I follow you up Gran Vía and down Preciados, and believe me, this time it’s not easy. A tumult of heads, chestnuts, and fur coats separate us. The gun weighs against me like the weight that pulls dead men to the river-bottom.

You enter a large clothing store, take some shirts and trousers, and go to the fitting rooms. I follow you. It’s easy to slip in; the assistants are overwhelmed on the floor. I have a sweater folded over my gunhand. There is a hole, headheight, in the door. I watch you change. Your bra doesn’t match your panties. I stand on tiptoes, as if to pass the sweater to you, and take aim. You’re bending down. Your spine, your shoulderblades rise against the skin. I used to kiss them, as you lay on your side,

without waking you.

I can't do it.

**I call you** on Christmas Eve. You're on your way out; you don't have time to talk.

"I just wanted to give you your gift."

"I don't want it," you say.

"I haven't seen you for months. We could talk, be civilized."

"I have to go, I'm late."

"I'll come by the day after Christmas. What time is best?"

"Don't," you say.

I was quiet. I was hanging up.

"Nine o'clock," you say.

**I stop in** at a shop we used to go to in Malasaña. They're playing Christmas music. *Heavenly host sing alleluia, Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born.* I've never felt farther from salvation. I point to a change purse made from laminated comic strips. The shopgirl takes it from the display case.

"This one?"

"Yes. And could you wrap it for me? It's a gift."

She does, then bags it. My fingerprints are nowhere on it.

**You greet me** without a hug or a kiss.

"This is for you."

You unwrap it. You start to smile. "How cool! *El mundo de Esther*. It's my favorite comic." Now you hug me, but it's not real. "I don't have anything for you, I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter," I say. "That's not why I've come."

We go to the salon. We both sit on the floor. We're drinking red wine.

"Your gloves are still on," you say.

"I'm still cold. From the street." I set my glass on the floor beside me.

"How's work?" you ask.

"It's coming together. And yours?"

"Same as always."

"Still seeing the man in the green tie?" I adjust the gun in my coat.

"You have no right."

"Are you?"

"*Joder . . .*" you say, shaking your head.

"Are you?"

"No. And you know what? I never was."

"What?"

"Not him. Not anyone."

"What?"

"That was your paranoia. Those photos *de mierda!* Do you know who those men were?"

I have the gun aimed under my coat.

"They were real estate brokers," you say. "Investors."

"Don't, what are you talking about? Don't lie."

"Not anymore. I only did that one time."

“Why?”

You just glare.

“Why?” I say.

“To feel the power a lie gives you. To be on the other side of the betrayal.”

I get to my feet and spill the wine. “Don’t play with me.”

“They were buyers,” you say. “I was selling the apartment my father gave me.”

I pull my gun. “Make me believe you.”

You don’t scream, you don’t even move. “Coward.”

“Prove it! Prove what you’re telling me!”

I track you with my gun as you go to your desk and pull out a paper. “It’s my bank statement. Check the balance.”

You have over €800,000 in your account.

“I sold the apartment.”

“Why?”

“I hated the way I felt there.” Your eyes are locked, but vulnerable.

“They’ve ordered me to kill you,” I say.

“You’ve gone crazy.”

“And if I don’t, they’ll send someone else.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Start running.”

“What?”

“Run!”

You fall back over the couch and scramble. I close my eyes and fire. It’s the loudest sound I’ve ever heard in your apartment. I fire off the whole clip. Your balcony window shatters and falls like a curtain. I open my eyes. You’re crouched, paralyzed.

“At least it will look like I tried,” I say. “Stand up.”

You do, but don’t come any closer.

“Live off cash until you change your name. Then never come back to Spain.”

I drop the gun on the floor.

For you to live, I face the consequences unarmed.

**I’m walking on** the Avenida de Felipe II. Children run across the air vents and laugh as their jackets fly up. It is sunny and cold. They’ll send a man. It will be the one with the broken sunglasses. The children place plastic bags on the vents and they float into the sky like parachutes set free. I don’t want you to worry. I don’t want you to ever look over your shoulder. I want to die in the sunlight. I’ll wait here for him in the sunlight. ■

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Luke has published many poems in publications such as *The Laughing Dog: Strictly Poetry*, *Zeniada* and *Better than a Stick in the Eye*. He studied Creative Writing at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Arizona, from which he holds a degree in English Literature. Luke currently lives in Madrid, where he teaches English.

**K**ensington came to work Thursday afternoon with a piercing. Wyatt noticed because she kept lowering her head, and pressing a wadded up Kleenex to her open mouth. In a short time, the little knot of tissue paper was stained a bright red. He positioned himself at the computer terminal to her left, and watched her from the corners of his eyes, while he busied himself with a stack of returned videos, bleeping them back into the inventory with the scanner. The next time she lifted the Kleenex to her mouth, he caught a direct glimpse of the stainless steel pin stuck through her bloodstained tongue. It was an interesting development in the Sarah Kensington story.

She was going punk, a little at a time. When he first started working at Best Video, she was chunky and plain, with short cropped brown hair, and small, close-set eyes; she went around with the brusque, standoffish attitude of a person who is used to not being liked. Wyatt had a streak of that himself, and had imagined they might get along, but it was nothing doing. She never looked at him if she could help it, and often pretended not to hear him when he spoke to her. In time he came to feel that getting to know her was too much effort. It was easier to shun and loathe her.

One day, an old guy had come into the store, a forty-year-old carnival freak with a shaved head and a dog collar cinched around his neck, a leash dangling from it. He wanted a copy of *Sid & Nancy* and he asked Kensington to help him find it. They chatted a while. Kensington laughed at everything he said, and when it was her turn to speak, the words came falling out of her mouth in a noisy, excited rush. It was a hell of a thing, watching her turn herself inside out like that over someone. Then when Wyatt showed up at work the next afternoon, the two of them were around the side of the store that couldn't be seen from the street. The circus gimp had her flattened against the wall. They were holding hands, their fingers entwined together, while she poked her tongue desperately into cue-ball's mouth. Now, a few months later, Kensington's hair was an alien shade of bright copper, and she wore biker boots and haunted house eye shadow. The stud in her tongue, though, that was all-new.

"Why's it bleeding?" he asked her.

"Because I just got it," she said, without looking up. She said it bitchy too. Love had not made her warm and expressive; she still sulked and glared when Wyatt spoke to her, avoiding him as if the air around him was poisonous, abhorring him as she always had, for reasons that had not and never would be defined.

"I figured maybe you got it stuck in a zipper or something," he said. Then he added, "I guess that's one way to keep him interested in you. He isn't going to hang around for your good looks."

Kensington was a pretty hard case and her reaction caught him off guard. She glanced up at him, with startled, miserable eyes, her chin quivering. In a voice he hardly recognized, she said, "Leave me alone."

Wyatt didn't like suddenly feeling bad for her. He wished he hadn't said anything

**IN THE RUNDOWN**

**JOE HILL**

at all, and never mind that he had been provoked. She turned away from him, and he started to reach out, thought he would snag her sleeve, keep her there until he could figure out some way to apologize, without actually saying he was sorry. But then she spun back and glared at him through her watery eyes. She muttered something, he only caught part of it – she said *retard*, and then something about knowing how to read – but what he heard was more than enough. He felt a sudden, almost painful coldness spreading across his chest.

“Open your mouth one more time and I’ll yank that pin right out of your tongue you little bitch.”

Kensington’s eyes dulled with fury. *There* was the Kensington he was used to. Then she was moving, her short thick legs carrying her around the counter, and along the far wall towards the back of the store. A sour-sick feeling came over him, mingled with a sudden irritability. She was headed for the office, and Mrs Badia; running to tell on him.

He decided he was going on break, grabbed his army jacket and shoved through the Plexiglas doors. He lit an American Spirit, and stood against the stucco wall outside, shoulders hunched. He smoked and shivered, glaring across the street in the direction of Miller’s Hardware.

Wyatt watched Mrs Prezar swing her station wagon into Miller’s parking lot, her two boys in the car with her. Mrs Prezar lived at the end of his street in a house the color of a strawberry milkshake. He had mowed her lawn – not anytime recently, but a few years ago, back when he mowed people’s lawns.

Mrs Prezar got out and moved briskly towards the doors of the Hardware. She left the car running. Her face was thick and heavily made up, but not bad-looking. There was something about her mouth – she had a plump, sexy underlip – that Wyatt had always liked. Her expression, as she went inside, was a robotic blank.

She left a boy in the front seat, and another in back, strapped into a baby seat. The boy in front – his name was Baxter, Wyatt didn’t know why he remembered that – was skinny and long, had a delicate build that must’ve come to him by way of his father. From where Wyatt was standing, he couldn’t see much of the one in the baby seat, just a thatch of dark hair, and a pair of chubby waving hands.

As soon as Mrs Prezar slipped into the store, the older boy, Baxter, screwed himself around to look into the back. He had a Twizzler in one hand and he held it out for his baby brother. When his brother reached for it, though, Baxter jerked it out of reach. Then he held it out again. When his brother refused to be goaded into making a second grab, Baxter swatted him with it. The game continued along these lines for a while, until Baxter stopped to unwrap the Twizzler, and pop one end into his mouth for a lazy taste. He had on a Twin City Pizza cap – Wyatt’s old team. Wyatt tried to figure if Baxter could be old enough to play in Little League. It didn’t seem it, but maybe they let them in younger now.

Wyatt had good memories of Little League. In Wyatt’s last year with Twin City, he almost set a league record for stolen bases. It was one of the few moments in his life when he had known for sure that he was better at something than anyone else his age. By the end of the season he had nine steals total, and had only been caught once. A doughy-faced left-handed pitcher got him leading off first, before Wyatt had a chance to get his feet under him, and all at once he was racing back and forth in the middle of a rundown, while the first baseman and second baseman closed in



from either side, softly lobbing the ball back and forth between them. Wyatt had tried, at the end, to burst for second, hoping to drop and slide in under the tag . . . but almost as soon as he made his decision he knew it was the wrong one, and a feeling of hopelessness, of racing towards the inescapable, had come over him. The second baseman – a kid Wyatt knew, Treat Rendell, the star of the other team – was planted right in the way, waiting for him with his feet spread apart, and for the first time Wyatt could ever remember, it seemed that no matter how fast he ran he was getting no closer to where he was headed. He didn't actually remember being called out, only running, and the way Treat Rendell had been there in his path, waiting with his eyes narrowed to slits.

That was almost the end of the season, and Wyatt was hitless his last two games, missed the record by two stolen bases. He never got a chance to find out what he could do in high school. He didn't play in a single game, was always on academic or disciplinary probation. Midway through his junior year he was diagnosed with a reading disability – Wyatt had trouble connecting things all together when a sentence got more than four or five words long, had for years found it a struggle to interpret anything longer than a movie title – and was dropped into a remedial program with a bunch of mental deficients. The program was called Super-Tools, but was known around school by a variety of other monikers: Stupid-Drools, Super-Fools. Wyatt had come across some graffiti in the men's room once that read I EM IN SOOPER TULES & I EM REEL PROWD.

He spent his senior year on the fringe, didn't look at people when he walked by them in the hall, didn't try out for baseball. Treat Rendell, on the other hand, made varsity as a sophomore, hit everything in sight, and led the team to two regional championships. Now he was a state trooper, drove a souped-up Crown Victoria, and was married to Ellen Martin, an ice-white blonde, and undoubtedly the best looking of all the cheerleaders Treat was rumored to have banged.

Mrs Prezar came out. She had only been inside a minute and hadn't bought anything. She was holding her jacket tightly shut with one hand, perhaps against the gusting wind. Her eyes passed right over him a second time, no sign she recognized him or even noticed he was there. She dropped into the front seat, and banged the door shut, backed out so fast she squealed the tires a little.

She hadn't ever looked at him much when he mowed her lawn, either. He remembered one time, after he finished in her yard, he had let himself into the house, through a sliding glass door into the living room. He had been cutting her lawn all morning – she was rich, her husband was an executive with a company that sold broadband capacity, she had the most yard on the street – and Wyatt was sunburned and itchy, grass stuck to his face and arms. She was on the phone. Her husband wasn't around. He was never around. The kids were gone too, out with the nanny. Wyatt stood just inside the door, waiting for her to acknowledge him.

She took her time. She was sitting at a small desk, twirling a coil of yellow hair with one finger, rocking back in her chair, laughing now and then. She had credit cards spread out in front of her and was absent-mindedly moving them around with her pinkie. Even when he cleared his throat to get her attention, she didn't so much as glance at him. He waited a full ten minutes, and then she hung up and swiveled to face him, instantly all-business. She told him she had been watching him while he worked, and she wasn't paying him to talk to everyone who went by

on the sidewalk. Also she had heard him go over a rock, and if the lawnmower blade was chipped, she'd make sure he paid for a new one. The job was twenty-eight dollars. She gave him thirty and said he was lucky to get any tip at all. When he went out she was laughing on the phone again, moving the credit cards around, pushing them into a pattern, the letter P.

There wasn't much left of Wyatt's cigarette, but he was figuring one more, and then he'd go in, when the door opened behind him. Mrs Badia stepped out, dressed only in her black sweater, and the white vest with the nametag pinned to it, PAT BADIA, MANAGER. She grimaced at the cold, and hugged herself.

"Sarah told me what you said," Mrs Badia began.

Wyatt nodded, waited. He liked Mrs Badia okay. He could kid her sometimes.

"Why don't you go home, Wyatt," she said.

He flipped his butt onto the blacktop. "Okay. I'll come back in and make up my hours tomorrow. She isn't working then." Gesturing towards the store with his head.

"No," Mrs Badia said. "Don't come back tomorrow. Come back next Tuesday to pick up your last check."

It took him a moment to figure that out, for some reason. Then he got it, and felt an unwholesome heat rising to his face.

Mrs Badia was talking again. She said, "You can't threaten the people you work with, Wyatt. I'm sick to death of hearing people complain about you. I'm tired of one incident after another." She made a face and glanced back at the store. "She's going through a hard time right now, and you're in there telling her you're going to rip her tongue out."

"I *didn't* say – it was the pin in her – do you want to know what she said to me?"

"Not particularly. What?"

But Wyatt didn't reply. He couldn't tell her what Kensington had said, because he didn't know, hadn't caught all of it . . . and he might not have told Mrs Badia even if he did know. Whatever she had said, it was something about how he couldn't read. Wyatt always tried to avoid talking about the trouble he had with grammar and spelling and all the rest; it was a subject that inevitably brought more embarrassment than he could stand.

Mrs Badia stared at him, waiting for him to speak. When he didn't, she said, "I gave you as many chances as I thought I could. But at a certain point, it isn't fair to the people you work with, to ask them to put up with it." She stared a while longer, sucking thoughtfully on her lower lip. Then she cast a careless glance at his feet, and as she turned away, she said, "Tie your shoes, Wyatt."

She went back in and he stood there, flexing his hands in the frigid air. He walked slowly along the front of the video store, around the corner, to the side of the store that couldn't be seen from the street. He bent and spat. He tilted another cigarette out of the pack, lit it and inhaled, waited for his legs to stop shaking.

He had thought Mrs Badia liked him. He had stayed behind late sometimes to help her close up – something he didn't have to do – just because she was easy to talk to. They talked about movies, or about weird customers, and she listened to his stories and opinions as if she were really interested. It had been an unusual experience for him, to get along with an employer. But now here it turned out to be the same old crap in the end. Someone had a personal grievance against him, an axe to grind, and there was no due process, no effort to hear everyone out and get all the infor-

mation. She said, *I'm sick to death of hearing people complain*, but not which people or what complaints. She said, *I'm tired of one incident after another*, but didn't you have to judge this incident on its own merits, and all the other so-called incidents on theirs?

He flicked his cigarette away – it hit the asphalt and red sparks jumped – turned and started moving. He came around the corner at a fast walk. The windows had a lot of movie posters taped in them. Kensington was staring out at the parking lot through a gap between posters for *Pitch Black* and *The Others*. Her eyes were blood-shot, a little unfocused. He could tell from the moony expression on her face that she believed he was long gone, and before he could stop himself he lunged at the glass and banged his middle finger against it, right up against her face. She jerked back, mouth opening in a shocked O.

He spun away and lurched across the parking lot. A car swung in suddenly from the road and the driver had to slam on the brakes to keep from hitting him. The driver gave his horn an angry poke. Wyatt lifted his upper lip in a sneer, flipped him off too. Then he was on the other side of the parking lot and plunging into the scrubby, littered woods.

He made his way along a narrow path; it was the way he always went home when he didn't have a ride. Among the trees were rotting, waterlogged mattresses, filled-to-bursting bags of trash and rust-streaked kitchen appliances. There was a little freshet which had its headwaters at the Queen Bee Car Wash. He couldn't see it, but he could hear it trickling through the undergrowth, and the smell of cheap car wax and cherry-scented carpet-shampoo was occasionally very strong. He was moving more slowly now, head hunched between his shoulders. In the gathering dimness of early evening, it was hard to see the most slender branches that stuck into the path, and he didn't want to walk into one.

The trail came out at the dead-end of a dirt lane which curled along one side of a shallow, famously polluted pond. The lane would take him out to 17K, and a short distance along that was the road into Ronald Reagan Park, where Wyatt lived alone in a one-story no-basement ranch with his mother, his father having run for the hills years before and good riddance. The lane was weedy and disused. People parked there sometimes, though, for the reasons people usually drove to such spots, and as Wyatt rustled through the last of the undergrowth, up towards the road, he saw there was a car there now.

By then the shadows beneath the trees had massed together into a darkness only a few degrees from full night – although when he looked straight up he could still see some color in the sky, a pale violet shading into an apricot yellow. The car was on a slight rise and he didn't recognize it until he was close. It was Mrs Prezar's station wagon. The driver's side door was cocked open.

Wyatt hesitated a few paces away from it, the wind catching strangely in his lungs, he didn't know why. At first, he thought the car was empty. No sound came from it, except for some soft ticking noises beneath the hood, as the engine cooled. Then he saw the black-haired four year old in the back, still strapped into the baby seat. The boy's chin rested on his chest and his eyes were shut. He looked asleep.

Wyatt glanced around for Mrs Prezar, for Baxter, scanned the trees, the edge of the pond. He couldn't imagine why anyone would leave the boy asleep there like that. But then, when he glanced back at the car, he saw Mrs Prezar. She was in the

driver's seat, but hunched over, so that from where he stood, only the crown of her shiny blonde head was visible above the steering wheel.

It was a moment before he could move. He found it hard to start forward again, was badly unsettled, for no reason he could pinpoint, by the scene before him. The little boy asleep in the back seat frightened him. In the twilight, the kid's face was fat and tinged faintly blue.

He stepped carefully around to the side of the car and stopped again. What he saw drove the air out of him. Mrs Prezar was rocking back and forth just slightly. Baxter was face-up in her lap. His eyes were open and staring. He had lost his Twin City Pizza cap somewhere. His head was shaved to a fine, colorless bristle. His lips were so bright red, he might have been wearing lipstick. Baxter's head was tipped back so he appeared to be staring at Wyatt. Wyatt saw the slash in his throat first, a glistening black line in the approximate shape of a fish-hook. There was another wound in his cheek. It almost looked like a long black slug resting on his very white face.

Mrs Prezar's eyes were open wide, too, and they were red and raw with tears, and yet she made no sound as she wept. There were four long smears of blood on the side of her face, marks left by a child's fingers. She took one long, shuddering breath after another.

"Oh God." She was whispering on each exhalation. "Oh Baxter. Oh God."

Wyatt took a step back, unconsciously recoiling, and put his foot down on the plastic lid of a discarded soda cup, heard it splinter under his heel. Her shoulders jumped in a reflexive shrug and she cast a wild look up at him.

"Mrs Prezar," he said, in a voice he hardly recognized, hushed and gravelly.

He expected wailing and cries, but when she spoke it was in a benumbed whisper. "Please help us." For the first time he noticed her purse was on the ground, by the car door, some of the contents spilled out into the mud.

"I'll go get someone," he said, and he was already twisting at the waist, preparing to turn, to fly up the lane. He was still fast, he could be at 17K in a minute, could flag down a passing car.

"No," she said in a tone of sudden, frightened urgency. "Don't go. I'm scared. I don't know where he went. He could still be somewhere nearby. He might of just gone to wash himself off." Throwing a panicked look at the pond.

"Who?" Wyatt asked, glancing over at the pond himself – the steep embankment, the close stands of ratty little trees – with a withering feeling of alarm.

She didn't answer him, said, "I've got a cell phone. I don't know where it is. He took it, but I think he dropped it on the ground next to the car. Oh God oh God. Will you look for it? Oh God please don't let him come back."

Wyatt was dry-mouthed and his insides felt sick, but he moved forward automatically, gaze sweeping the area around the dropped purse. He crouched, in part so he could see the ground better, and in part so he would be invisible to anyone approaching the car from the other side, the side facing the pond. Some papers and a tangle of scarf had fallen out of her bag. One end of the scarf – silk, shimmers of yellow and red – was floating on a puddle.

"In your purse?" he asked, pulling it open.

"Maybe. Maybe. I don't know."

He dug through it, found more papers, a lipstick, a compact, little brushes for her

face, no cell phone. He dropped the purse and stared intently along the length of the station wagon, but it was difficult to make out much of anything in the early evening shadows.

“He walked towards the water?” Wyatt asked, his pulse banging steadily in his throat.

“I don’t know. He got in at the stoplight. When I was waiting for it to turn green at the corner of Union. He said he wouldn’t hurt us if I did what he said. Oh God, Baxter. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry he hurt you. I’m so sorry he made you cry.”

At the mention of Baxter’s name, Wyatt glanced up, was helpless not to, could not hear the boy mentioned without feeling a dreadful compulsion to look at him again. He was surprised at how close Baxter’s face was to his own. The boy’s head was hanging over his mother’s thigh, less than a yard away from him. Wyatt was seeing Baxter’s face upside down, the dark stab wound in his cheek, the clown-red lips – red from the Twizzler, not the blood, Wyatt realized, in a sudden flash of remembering – the wide, stricken eyes. Baxter was gazing blankly past Wyatt’s shoulder with glazed eyes; then those eyes twitched slightly and fixed on him.

Wyatt screamed. He lurched to his feet.

“He’s not –” Wyatt said, gasping, his lungs sucking at the air. It was hard to get enough oxygen to speak. He swallowed, tried again, “He’s not –” and he looked at Mrs Prezar and stopped once more.

He had not, until now, been at an angle to see her right hand. It rested on Baxter’s leg. It was closed around the handle of a knife.

He thought he recognized it. They had a couple clear plastic cases of them in Miller’s Hardware, on a counter to the left of the door, just past the racks of camouflage jackets. Wyatt remembered one in particular, with a ten-inch blade, one edge serrated, the steel polished to a mirror-brightness. Wyatt had been in there looking once, he had noticed it. He might even have asked to see it. It was the first one anyone would notice. And he remembered the way she had come out of Miller’s, how she held one arm clutched stiffly across her overcoat, how she came out without a bag.

She saw him looking at it. She glanced away from him, and stared down at it herself for a moment, looking at it with an expression of bewilderment, as if she had no idea how such a thing had come into her possession. As if, perhaps, she had no idea what such an instrument might even be for. Then she looked back.

“He dropped it,” she said, staring at Wyatt with a look that was almost pleading. “His hands were bloody and he got it stuck in Baxter. When he tried to pull it out, it slipped out of his hands. It fell on the floor and I picked it up. That’s why he didn’t kill me. Because I had the knife. That’s when he ran away.”

The hand closed around the Teflon grip of the knife was stained deeply with blood; blood darkened every groove across her knuckles, the cuticle around her thumbnail. Drops of blood were still falling off the waterproof sleeve of her jacket, dripping onto the leather seat.

“I’ll run and get help,” he said, but he wasn’t sure she heard him. He spoke so softly he could hardly hear himself. He was holding his hands up in front of him, the palms turned outward, in a defensive gesture. He didn’t know how long he had been holding them that way.

She put one foot out on the ground, started to rise. The sudden movement alarmed him and he staggered back. And then there was something wrong with his right foot, he was trying to take a step back, but it was pinned to the ground somehow,

wouldn't move. He glanced down in time to see he was standing on an untied shoelace, and then he was tottering off balance, pitching backwards.

The impact was hard enough to drive the breath out of him. He sprawled on his back across a moist carpet of fallen leaves. He stared up at the sky, which was now a deep violet hue, and scattered here and there with the first and brightest of the early evening stars. His eyes watered. He blinked and sat up.

She was out of the car, a yard away from him. She held his sneaker in one hand, the knife in the other. He had come right out of his shoe. His right foot was clad now only in a gray athletic sock, and was cold in the frozen damp.

"He dropped it," she said. "The man who attacked us. I wouldn't. My babies. I wouldn't hurt them. I just picked it up."

He scrambled up off the ground and hopped a step away from her, putting very little weight on the right foot, to keep it from sinking into the cold mush of the leaves. He wanted the shoe back before he ran. He looked at the sneaker – she was holding it outstretched towards him – and then at the knife. Her right hand, with the knife in it, hung limply at her side.

Once again she followed his gaze, looked down at the knife, looked back. She shook her head slowly from side-to-side in some kind of mute denial.

"I wouldn't," she said, and dropped the knife. She leaned towards him, holding out the shoe. "Here."

He edged a step closer to her, and took the shoe and tugged on it, only she wouldn't let go of it at first, and then she did, but only to grab his arm. Her fingernails sank into the soft underside of his wrist, digging painfully into the skin. It frightened him, how suddenly she grabbed him, how tightly she had hold of him.

"I didn't," she said. He tried to wrench his arm free. Her other hand was grabbing at the front of his open jacket, at his sweater, smearing blood on him. She said, "What are you going to say to people?"

In his panic, he wasn't sure he had heard her right and didn't care. He wanted her to let go. Her fingernails were biting painfully into his flesh, but worse than that, she was getting blood on him, all over his hand, his wrist, his sweater. It was sticky and unpleasantly warm and more than anything he didn't want her streaking it on his bare skin. He grabbed her left hand at the wrist, and tried to make her let him go, squeezed until he could feel the bones in her wrist separating from their joints. She was blubbering, crowding him. Her right hand closed on his shoulder, fingers boring into the socket, and he struck her arm aside, and shoved her, not hard, just to drive her back. Her eyes flew open and she made a horrid, choked little cry. Her right hand flew up and suddenly she was scratching his face, he felt her fingernails laying him open, felt the hot sting of blood in fresh cuts.

He grabbed the hand raking at his cheek, and bent her fingers straight back until they were almost touching the back of her hand. Then he punched her in the breastbone and heard the air gush out of her, and as she bent forward he hit her in the face, a driving downward blow that split his knuckles. She staggered drunkenly forward and grabbed his sweater and when she went down she pulled him down with her. She still had him by the wrist, her fingernails tearing at him. More than ever he needed to make her let go. He grabbed some of her hair and yanked her head straight backwards, twisted it back until she was baring her neck to him, until her head couldn't be forced any further back. She gasped and let go of his wrist and

tried to slap at his face and he punched her in the throat.

She choked. He let go of her hair and her head fell forward. She held her neck in both hands and sat there on her knees, her shoulders hunched, and her hair hiding her face, breathing raggedly. Then her head swiveled. She looked at the knife on the ground behind her. She let go of her neck with her right hand and started to reach for it, but she was slow, and he shoved himself past her and snatched it off the ground. He turned and hacked it in the air to warn her away.

He stood a few feet off from her, his own breathing labored, watching her. She stared back at him. Her hair was in her face, but she looked at him through the frazzled, blood-knotted coils of it. All he could see were the whites of her eyes. She was breathing more slowly now. They regarded each other in this way for perhaps five seconds.

“Help,” she said, in a hoarsened voice. “Help.”

He stared at her.

She rose unsteadily to her feet.

“Help,” she called out for the third time.

The left side of his face stung where she had scratched him. The stinging was especially bad at the corner of his eye.

“I’ll tell people what you did,” he said.

She stared at him a moment longer and then turned and started to run.

“Help me,” she shouted. “Somebody help me.” He thought he might run after her and make her stop it, only he didn’t know how he would make her stop it if he caught up to her, so he let her go.

He took a few steps towards the car, and put one arm on the open door, resting his weight against it. He felt light-headed. She was already a long ways down the lane, a dark figure against the paler darkness of the woods.

For a short time Wyatt stood there, panting. Then his gaze happened to fall, and he saw Baxter staring up at him, his eyes large and round in his slender, fine-boned face. Wyatt saw, with a fresh wave of shock, the boy’s tongue moving around in his open red mouth, as if perhaps he had some intention of speaking.

Wyatt’s stomach plunged. He felt weak through the legs, looking at the boy again, at the slash across his neck, that almost fish-hook shape that started behind the right ear and curved down to just below his Adam’s apple. Looking straight down at him, Wyatt could see blood yet surging from this wound in thick, slow pulses. The seat under Baxter’s head was puddled with it.

He stepped around the open door and stood over Baxter. He looked to see if the car keys were still in the ignition slot, thought maybe he could just drive the car up to 17K and then – but they weren’t and who knew where they were. The bleeding – the important thing to do in a situation like this was stop the bleeding. He had seen about it on *E.R.* You found a towel and balled it up, pressed it into the wound and applied pressure until help arrived. He didn’t have a towel, but there was the scarf, on the ground beside the car. He dropped to his knees by the open door and the overturned purse, and grabbed the scarf. One end was soaked and dripping mud. He hesitated for a single squeamish-sick instant, then wadded it up and pressed it against the slash across the boy’s neck. He could feel the blood pumping against it.

The scarf was a thin, almost transparent piece of silk, already wet from the puddle it had been half-lying in, and in a moment it was saturated, and blood was leaking down his hands, the insides of his arms. He let go, let the scrap of silk fall away,

wiped his hands compulsively against his shirt front. Baxter was watching him with stunned, fascinated eyes. Blue like his mother's.

Wyatt began to cry. He had not known he was going to do it until he was doing it. He could not remember the last time he had wept openly. He grabbed some of the papers that had spilled out of Mrs Prezar's purse, and tried squeezing these into the wound, but they were even more useless than the scarf. They were shiny white papers, not at all absorbent, several pages stapled together; in the twilight Wyatt saw he was holding a credit card statement. Stamped across the top of the first page were the words PAYMENT OVERDUE in red ink.

He thought of dumping out what was left in her purse, looking for something else to use as a compress, then shucked off his jacket, pulled off the white vest that he wore to work, balled the vest up and pressed that into the wound. He held both hands over it and pushed down with the greater portion of his weight. The vest was an almost luminescent white in the gloom; but then, as he pressed down on it, he saw a dark stain spreading upwards through it, soaking into the fabric. He tried to think what to do now, but nothing would come. He flashed to a memory of Kensington, dabbing at her tongue with Kleenex, the way each ball of tissue paper was soon soaked red. He had a thought, strange for him, a thought that connected Kensington and the silver pin in her tongue and the slash across Baxter's throat; he thought how the young are pierced by love, innocent bodies torn and ruined for no reason, save that it suited someone who held them dear.

Baxter's left hand floated up from his side. Wyatt almost cried out when he saw it at the edge of his vision, a ghastly white shape gliding through the darkness. Baxter's fingers wavered in the general direction of his throat. Wyatt had an idea. He took Baxter's left hand and pressed it down to the compress. He reached into the car, found Baxter's other hand, placed it on top of the first. When he let go, the hands remained on top of the blood-soaked vest. They held it only loosely – but it stayed in place.

"I'll just go for a minute," Wyatt said. He was shivering violently. "I'll just run and bring someone back. I'll get to the road and I'll bring someone back and we'll take you to the hospital. You'll be okay. Just hold that against your neck. You'll be okay, I promise."

Baxter stared blankly up at him. His eyes had a dull, glazed look that Wyatt didn't like. He got to his feet and started to run. He went a few yards and then kicked off the one sneaker he still had on and started again.

He ran at a full, long-legged sprint, gasping in the wet cold air. The only sound was the heavy thud of his feet on the hard earth. It seemed to him, though, that he used to be faster than he was, that when he was younger, running was less of an effort. He had not gone far before he felt the sharp bite of a cramp in one side. Although he took great sucking breaths, he could not seem to bring enough air down into his lungs. It was the cigarettes maybe. He lowered his head and ran on, biting his lip, trying not to think about how much faster he might have been if only his side didn't hurt. Wyatt looked back, and saw he had only traveled a few hundred yards, the car still in sight. He was crying again. As he ran he said a prayer. Words came out in whispered bursts, each time he exhaled.

"Please God," he whispered into the February darkness. He ran and ran but didn't feel that he was getting any closer to the highway. It was like being in the rundown again, same feeling of hopelessness, of rushing towards the inescapable. He said, "Please make me fast. Make me fast again. Make me fast like I was."



At the next bend in the road, 17K came into sight, less than a quarter of a mile off. There was a streetlamp at the end of the lane, and a car idling underneath it. It was a tan Crown Victoria with police lights on top, switched off – a state trooper’s car, Wyatt thought with relief. It was funny that he should just be thinking about the rundown again; maybe it would turn out to be Treat Rendell. A man – just a black silhouette at this distance – got out and stood by the front end. Wyatt began shouting, and waving his arms for help. ■

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Two of Joe’s stories for *The 3rd Alternative*, ‘The Black Phone’ and ‘You Will Hear the Locust Sing’, made the shortlist for this year’s British Fantasy Awards (results unknown at the time of writing). His first collection, *20th Century Ghosts*, is available this October from PS Publishing. Visit Joe’s website, [www.joehillfiction.com](http://www.joehillfiction.com), to play a creepy flashgame based on one of his stories, post to his message board, or learn more about upcoming work.

# THEN THE SNOW BLEED IN

## DARREN SPEEGLE

A blizzard had blown in that morning and the slopes of the Neckar valley were covered in snow as I cautiously made my way down the mountain to my evening date with a hot drink or two. This was peculiar weather for Baden-Württemberg, Germany, particularly in April, and I knew that the dancing flurries I walked through merely represented a lull. The village of Neckarschatten – Neckar means ‘shadow’ in English – was living up to its name. The sky was as sinister as it was bleak, bringing an early twilight upon the cluster of steep roofs and the church steeple rising out of their midst.

Standing at the last overlook, where the path I was on intersected the wider trail that carried tourists to the three castle ruins along the ridge, I saw that a barge had tied off at the moorings between the edge of the village and Der Schwan, my destination. Though the long concrete deck with its massive iron posts wasn’t part of the inn’s dock, I suspected the vessel’s crew could be found inside the Swan’s bar, having down a few frothy *Eichbaums* before drowning out the storm with their snores in the rental rooms upstairs.

It disappointed me thinking I wouldn’t be able to sip my enhanced coffee in the exclusive company of Ilsa, the sweetly aproned live-in proprietress, and Oskar and Eduard, the two older gentlemen who haunted the place in the cool months before the tourists descended. This was my fourth April stay in Neckarschatten, and in all my evening appearances at the Swan I had seen only a handful of customers outside my companion fixtures. Bernhard and Andrea, the couple with whom I (originally my ex-wife and I) exchanged houses one month out of every year had rightly predicted I would love the place for that very reason. Ah well, I told myself, it might prove interesting eavesdropping on the men who made their living ambling the once levied waters of the Neckar.

As I passed under the railroad tracks, stopping at the road for a string of local traffic trying to work its way around an insane cyclist in shorts and ear muffs, I could see the figures in the Swan’s lighted windows. While there were at least two patrons too many, the place seemed quiet as usual. I walked across the road, the wind off the river icy cold. A flapping sound drew my attention to the barge, where a corner of the material that covered its load had come loose in the wind. The weight of the snow on top of the covering kept it from lifting like a ghost sail. As I walked around to the riverside entrance, I realized dusk was arriving fast, though with that luminous quality that only snow brings.

“*Abend,*” I said as I stepped in, tapping the white stuff from my hiking boots.

Three voices answered in kind, Ilsa smiling her smile, Oskar and Eduard giving me a look beneath their brows that said any secrets were to be guarded tonight: strangers were about. It occurred to me that I, myself, would have been the object of that same suspicion the first time I showed up in the Swan had Bernhard and Andrea not been there to smooth things with the natives. I gave the slightest shrug, mine and the world’s way of communicating indifference, and stepped up to the bar admiring Ilsa sparingly.

To my perception, Ilsa was a dichotomy. Aproned, charming, and German on the one hand; curvaceous, sultry, and *European* on the other. As always I paused, feeling the burden of my whole nation as I refrained from flirting with her like she had once told me other Americans had. It was a terrible torture, but one I endured willingly to simply be her otherwise satisfied customer.

“What may I serve you tonight?” she said in my language. She liked to practice her English on me – another thumbscrew, as I found it thoroughly enchanting.

“You may serve me an Irish coffee if you’ll join me.” Nothing out of line in that request; my barmates had taught me that a drink on the proprietress’s side of the counter was one more drink sold. In fact it had been at one of these trysts that she had disclosed the bad habits of my fellow countrymen.

She cast a surreptitious glance toward the far wall, where I now observed *three* salty types to be seated. The brawniest of them, alone on one side of the booth, caught my eye for a moment. His nod was nearly imperceptible, indeed might have been a product of my imagination as he returned his attention to the tall mug he gripped in his fist. I gathered I wouldn’t be eavesdropping on these men. There seemed to be no conversation at their table; cheerlessness hung there, sticking to their mouths like the foam from their beers.

“Bailey’s?” Ilsa asked me, two glasses in one hand, the foreknown answer to her question in the other.

She seemed to be acting out a scene as she poured the cream liqueur, then the coffee, topping each drink with a dollop of whipped cream. As she handed mine to me, I forced her, through my persistent stare, to look at me.

“I do not like him,” she said in a low voice.

“You know one of them?”

“The captain. Georg. He has stopped in before.”

She didn’t need to point him out. His bearing, his presence accomplished that.

“He doesn’t seem to want to bother anyone,” I said.

“No, he doesn’t seem to.”

“Is there some reason –”

“Shhh,” she said, tilting her head slightly in their direction. I looked to see the two men who sat across from the captain abandon their seats and stride to the exit behind us, faces scribbled with some negative emotion.

“He brought his crew with him then as well,” Ilsa said as the door closed behind them. “They left wearing that same expression, as if he had ordered them to go.”

Eduard, who knew a smattering of English, entered the dialogue: “I do not remember these men –”

“*Du warst nicht hier*,” she snapped almost too quickly for my ears. The message would have gotten through, regardless.

“No,” Eduard said in a perplexed voice. “No, I was not here.”

“Maybe we should just cool it,” I said. “The man’s sitting right over there. And he has a right to drink here as much as anyone.”

Ilsa smiled. “Of course you’re right, Brent.”

Lighting a cigarette, watching her through the trail of smoke, I could see that she wasn’t convinced.

**There is something** in words. The way they speak to specific aspects of you . . . your

logic, your reflexes, your circulatory system, your nerve endings. Hers spoke most succinctly when Georg, with but a nod to all of us, donned his coat and followed the path of the other men outside into the renewed snowstorm. I wanted to raise my glass to him, bid him a fond departure, but Ilsa's look spoiled any comradely feelings.

"I helped him push off the last time," she said.

The effect of those words, opaque as they were, spread like a hatch of spiders inside me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean he needed someone to take care of the lines."

"What about his crew?" I asked.

"Yes, that is the pertinent question. They showed up again later." She turned to Oskar. "*Wann sind die zwei Leichen an der Werft hochgekommen?*"

"*In Oktober,*" he said, looking as puzzled as Eduard on my opposite flank.

"Their bodies came up by the wharf," she went on. "They had apparently come untied from the base of one of the piles."

"You're serious."

"A local man was arrested. You may know him. The children call him *Vogelscheuche* – 'scarecrow'. His real name is Pohl." When I shook my head, she went on: "He had been seen drinking with them during the night they moored here. The man was eventually released due to insufficient evidence. But no one believed he hadn't been involved. He is a little *tick-tick*" – she tapped her forehead with her finger – "and people have always been suspicious of him. He was eventually pressured to leave the village."

"The men had rented rooms for the night?"

She held my eye for a second, then quickly glanced away. "Yeah."

Unsure exactly what to make of her behavior, I pretended to ignore it. "Do you suspect Georg?"

She took a deep swallow of her drink, licking the cream off her upper lip. "I don't see how he could have done it," she said, still not looking at me.

"Why?"

Now she looked. Straight into my eyes. "Because he was with me all night."

I didn't have time to process the wound; the door opened again, the swirling snow forming an aura around Georg's bulk as he stood there for a moment gazing at Ilsa before entering. The cold preceded him as he stepped forward, removing his gloves. The door fell to, sealing us in a tomb. "*Ich habe vergessen zu bezahlen,*" he said. *I forgot to pay.* He stood between Eduard's stool and mine as he pulled out his wallet and a twenty euro note, asking if that would cover it.

I noticed her eyes never made contact with his as she nodded, shoving the money in the register without offering change.

Georg turned to the rest of us, announcing in an emotionless voice that he and his crew might be forced to stay a couple of days because of the storm. He would be interested in hiking up to the castle ruins in the morning. Did we know the way?

I started to tell him, but Ilsa put her hand on my arm, stopping me. As Georg observed this familiarity, I thought I saw a dark shadow pass over his features.

"The fox hunt," she said, using English.

For a moment I thought it something contrived, then I remembered the flier I had received the previous week, notifying the village that the mountain would be inaccessible the following Monday. "You don't think it has been canceled?" I asked.

"They wouldn't do that until the last possible minute."

“No matter,” Georg said – in English. “I will find something else to amuse me.” He bid us *Tschüss* and proceeded to a door in back that accessed the stairs to the rooms above.

Ilsa looked at me. The words that emerged from my mouth would mark the first time I had mustered the courage. “Do you want to stay at my place?”

She nodded; then, to my surprise, traced Georg’s steps to the stairway door, locking it as she would when closing for the evening. As she returned to the bar and began counting the register’s cash, I realized she was doing just that.

I caught a crossfire of annoyed disappointment from Eduard and Oskar.

*In case you haven’t looked outside*, she told them in her most brusque German, *there is a blizzard happening*.

Reluctantly they rose to retrieve their coats.

**There are two** ways up to my house from the river: through the village and through the forest. I presented both options to Ilsa, not withholding that I almost always used the latter. Aside from the obvious advantage of shielding against weather, the forest route was quicker, better exercise, and there was always the chance of seeing boars, particularly just before dawn and just after dusk. The notion of encountering an animal that was notoriously protective of its herd and unafraid of humans didn’t exactly appeal to her. But the idea of getting there more quickly did.

The forest seemed to glow as we hiked up the slope’s zigzagging trail. Because spring had hit before the blizzard, there was a sufficient canopy to keep the worst of the storm out. What made its way through whirled like computer animation around us, just at the verge of the real. Though the material of our gloves stood in the way, Ilsa’s hand in mine was only another ingredient in the fantasy. There had always been magic here. It was why my ex-wife and I, in spite of a cool wet sample stay in Neckarshatten, had decided it was worth the annual trade for our Florida beachside home.

A beautiful dreary magic.

Three quarters of the way up there was a *Hütte*, shelter for the wanderer. We sat on the bench inside, and she clung to me for warmth, burying her face inside my collar, lips brushing my throat. I found myself telling her what I wouldn’t have dreamed of telling her previously – that I had wanted to warm her ever since I’d first met her. I realized as I spoke the words that even that far back, a full two years before our divorce, the end had arrived for Darlene and me. Maybe that was the dreary magic’s attraction.

I shared these thoughts with Ilsa, and she clung to me all the more tightly. I couldn’t imagine there existed any better trail to anywhere. I had to coax her on. She was cold, she kept telling me. Cold.

**I got a** fire going. Fed us hot soup, then *crème de cacao* as I invited her to experience the view from the deck. She declined in favor of the confines I had continued to enjoy after my wife sailed her way. I didn’t know how to court her, or even if I should. I let her dictate the nature of our night together and bless me that I did, for the warmth we found required only a blanket and our naked bodies. Somewhere in time I let the last drop of *crème de cacao* fall on my tongue, and then, as I lay my face on her belly, listening to the music of her breathing, I didn’t care if there was a tomorrow.

When in Germany I normally woke at five-thirty, had coffee, then took a hike among the boars and castles. That morning I slept in till after eight, waking to a

cold fireplace, the blanket twisted wildly around me, Ilsa nowhere to be seen. I raised the Rolladen of the nearest window to reveal a world saturated in white, then shuffled down the hall to my bedroom, where I wasn't surprised to find Ilsa curled up in the covers with only the top of her head visible. I let her be, grabbing my housecoat and slippers from the bathroom before returning to the living room to start a fresh fire. As it spread its warmth I brewed coffee, put two pieces of frozen Brötchen in the oven, and fetched the butter, marmalade, Schmierwurst, and Gouda out of the fridge.

When the coffee was finished, I poured a cup and went out on the balcony to wait on the day to unfold. While the wind had died, the snow still fell hard and a veil of frozen mist obscured the slope. At least a half meter of snow had fallen, the branches of the trees groaning with the burden. I remembered the fox hunt with a smile. If they had gone ahead with it, the chase would be well under way by now. I listened unsuccessfully for the dogs, but decided I probably wouldn't have heard them through the cushion of snow. I barely heard Ilsa's voice behind me.

"Is there enough for me?"

I turned and there she was, my blanket wrapped around her, an old pair of my house shoes on her feet. I could have seized her and kissed her like it was our last moment on Earth. But I wasn't sure. Of myself. Of her. "What would you like in your coffee?" I said.

"Just cream."

I paused to touch her hair as I stepped past. She rested her cheek against my hand, and I could feel that her skin was already growing cool again. I told myself that the coffee would cure it, but as I filled the mug in the kitchen, watching her back as she stood motionless at the balcony's railing, I wondered. Returning with the coffee, I found her staring at an invisible point beyond the mist.

"When it's clear you can see the Swan from here," I said, handing her the steaming cup.

"I don't want to go back down there," she said.

"Doesn't Mareike take care of breakfast?"

"Yes."

"When do you have to go in?"

"In the afternoon."

I put my arm around her waist, following her gaze into the white. "Why are you so afraid, Ilsa? You said it couldn't have been him . . ."

She winced as she touched the coffee with her lips. "He left for a short while before dawn. He said he was going to his cabin on the barge. He wanted to leave me with a gift. Something to make up for his . . . inability."

"Inability?"

She spoke through the flush that visited her pale cheeks. "When he came back complaining that his crew hadn't returned to the boat and that he couldn't find them in their rooms, the gift was forgotten."

"Ilsa, back up a minute –"

"I assumed we had both forgotten . . . I think I may have assumed wrong."

Her words chilled me. The crewmen, a gift to her?

"His *inability*, Ilsa? Do you mean sexually?"

"He is a monster," she said in a whisper.

I knew as much as I wanted to on that subject. "Come inside. Call Mareike and

tell her you won't be coming in."

"No. I can't leave her with him."

"Tell her to put up a sign saying the Swan is closed today."

"But the guests . . . what if they want to check out?"

"Then *auf wiedersehen* and *bon voyage!* Jesus, Ilsa."

The words seemed to arrive on her like a gradual dawn. I squeezed her waist.

"Come inside."

She didn't follow immediately. I waited at the door until she finally turned, taking my hand. Behind her the pitch seemed to change, the mist and snow warped by the glass sliding to against the *tick-tick* world. The fire cowered at our approach, *her* approach as the mug trembled in her hand, spilling onto her toga and the tile floor. When she had planted herself before the hearth, bunching up with the blanket, the flames, the coffee, I grabbed the cordless off the wall. I started to hand it to her, then thought better.

She raised an eyebrow.

"We have to go to the Polizei," I said.

The brow lifted further. "What use? It was the Polizei who pressured Pohl – *Vogelscheuche* – to leave the village."

"Ilsa, I don't care about scarecrows."

As the firelight played on her features, I could see that she could see that I didn't.

"When do you want to go?" she said.

"After breakfast."

"I'm afraid to be out there."

"I'll go," I said. Touching her hand. Finding it warm, finally.

**The high trail** was too deep in snow to negotiate comfortably without appropriate boots, so I took the forest path. As I passed under the canopy the mist parted for me, providing a halo of visibility within the realm of trees. Snow continued to come down in giant flakes, and the silence penetrated deeper than any sounds might have. Under other circumstances this would have been the serenity I searched for in every morning. Instead I listened to the forest's densities for motives and intents; and the forest itself seemed to listen back. The snow fell with motives in mind. I heard it in my ears and gut.

Other trails crossed mine. About a third of the way down the slope, I took the one I knew to be the straightest means of traversing the kilometer or so to the village. I soon noticed a set of footprints leading in the same direction. The fact that the depressions hadn't filled indicated that someone had been on the trail recently. *Very* recently . . . as I spotted a large red stain in the snow a short distance ahead. The sudden fear felt like a gust of fire over my skin. But then reason clocked in, and I considered the likelihood that the hunt had gone as scheduled.

I stood over the stain, the snow burying it before my eyes. A lot of blood had been spilled, trailing off along a still visible swath in the snow. Whatever had been dragged across the forest floor had been heavy; it certainly was no fox. Reason bowed to emotion. I scanned the forest, imagining movements at the fringes of the halo, nightmare shapes emerging from the mist. The snow fell, and fell. The last of the evidence at my feet disappeared.

I proceeded, picking up the pace. Within a few meters more drag marks appeared.

Then more blood – this time tainting the pale skin of a birch tree to the right of the path. I searched my surroundings, but the snow was so heavy now it blocked out even the mist. A cove of young fir trees brought still less visibility, the glowing flakes of snow saving the forest from dissolving in darkness. I tripped over something, peered down at the lump to find that I had uncovered a patch of fur, a dog's ear. Then a face appeared in front of me, a huge German face smeared in blood, and dark and light became a single event.

**My eyes cracked** as they opened upon total blackness. The instantaneous cold that greeted me was an extension of my dream, the scarecrow's teeth as it descended on me chattering *tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick* . . .

Dense, freezing blackness. And out of it, the waves of a distant pulsing drum, initially my only point of reference. As I began to find my body, its gravity, its muscles, I realized I was lying on my back. I had the vague sense of motion, and of a separate lulling accompaniment to the drum. I turned to my right and encountered resistance, to my left – the same. A strange warmth expanded at the base of my skull, which I now recognized to be the house of the rhythmic beating. I reached back and discovered wetness. The image of the stains in the snow returned, and I understood that my movements had reopened a wound. That knowledge brought the throbbing into focus and I remembered, without moving my mouth, or uttering a sound, the icy clarity of a scream.

Huddled, smothering blackness. I reached up and felt cold material – plastic, perhaps nylon. It didn't make sense at first; I had to dig my lighter out of my pocket, grapple with its frozen wheel and a woefully slim supply of oxygen. When I finally got the flame, I almost lost it again because of what was revealed *beneath* the black covering. I lay in the company of bodies, some in hunters' clothes, others in crewmen's, all wearing their life's blood like an extra layer against the cold. It was clear to me, even through the pounding in my head, the gauze over my senses, that I was supposed to be one of the dead. The sense of motion, the sounds in my ears defined themselves now. We had been lined up on the barge, beneath its tarp, like a presentation.

Or a present.

The scream gathered internal force, but before it could break free of me the plastic began to rustle and crackle. I shut my eyes and mouth in anticipation of what was to come. My imagination played how it must look from the other side as the tarp was pulled across our bodies like the lid of a sardine can over its contents.

"Für dich, Ilsa," announced a voice I recognized as Georg's. It sounded as though it came from directly above me.

The little voice that followed was Ilsa's, almost a whisper as she said, "Brent. *O Gott.*"

"Für dich, Ilsa," he repeated.

I could *feel* him bending down as he spoke, and prepared myself for the shock of his touch. He clenched the front of my coat and lifted me up so that he could emphasize the fact as he proclaimed me part of his gift to her. As he spoke the words I dared to open my eyes the merest bit, to pin the exact position of his face. Then I stiffened my already frozen fingers into knives and thrust upwards. With a squeal unbecoming his bulk, he dropped me and grabbed his eyes. I wasted no time, seizing his vulnerable crotch in my fist and twisting and squeezing as hard as I could.

Behind him Ilsa came to life, grabbing the nearest thing to her, an attached but unused rope. While Georg was still occupied with his wounded package, she wrapped



it once around his neck, then tossed the excess to me. My hands found their way up the loose rope until it was taut in my fists and then I pulled as hard as I fucking could, with the bulwark itself as my opposite in this tug of war. Somewhere in the middle we caught the captain's tongue protruding from his vein-blue cheeks, and the strangled sound of *Geschenk*, which translates to 'gift' in my language, then the vessels in his eyes burst, his knees buckled, and he fell among the dead.

I held the rope in my open palm, looking at it, then at Ilsa. Then the snow bled in, as if it had only just begun falling. ■

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Darren's stories have appeared in a variety of venues such as *Chiaroscuro*, *Underworlds*, *Fangoria Frightful Fiction*, *Verte Brume: The Anthology of Absinthe*, and *The 3rd Alternative*. He's just published two story collections: *Gothic Wine* (Aardwolf Press) and *A Dirge for the Temporal* (Raw Dog Screaming Press). Darren lives in Germany.

# LOST IN DARKNESS

## SIMON AVERY & IAN FAULKNER

“No change,” Neil said. A redundant statement. He smiled to himself ruefully. Charlton nodded. Placed a hand on one of Aimee’s. Squeezed. He looked to the heart monitor, and back down the corridor to the crowded wards, to the windows full of darkness and rain. To Aimee’s brother and his lover. Felt his eyes burning. Looked away again before he gave way beneath the weight of it all.

“Time for coffee,” Neil said with too much forced levity to his voice.

“Leave me here,” Charlton said. “You go.”

Neil was shaking his head. “Coffee and a smoke then. On me.”

“No. I’ll stay here.”

“Up.”

Charlton felt his fist close. Blood rushing in his head. He closed his eyes.

A darkness waited for him there, one he was reluctant to admit. It was the dark of rage, of wanting retribution for what was done, the dark that was pacing him day and night wherever he went. It refused to be outrun, outdistanced; it waited for him to wake in the morning, it hindered his sleep at night.

He got up.

“It’s my fault,” Charlton said as he closed his hands around the cup. “My fault.”

“Bollocks,” Neil said quickly, too loudly. John looked up from scratching at the Formica surface on the table. Smiled. “Bollocks,” Neil said again, quietly this time. “This has *nothing* to do with you. You can’t protect people twenty-four seven. This shit just happens. It’s a fucking harsh thing to sit with but it’s true. There’s no point in feeling guilty. It’s not going to help her, and you know it.”

“Why your fault?” John enquired quietly.

Charlton could feel his jaw clenching. Tension rising in him. *Christ, he had no fucking control any more.* “A white woman with a black man?”

“Oh, bullshit. It was just some –”

John raised a hand. Placed it over Neil’s to placate him. There were families glancing up whenever Neil raised his voice. They only wanted this to be a haven from the problems *out there*. Just somewhere to drink their coffee and smoke their cigarettes; to stare out of the window at their own darkness looking back at them.

Neil saw all of this in John’s eyes, Charlton realised. It was the kind of closeness that came with time and intimacy. Had he shared that with Aimee? He couldn’t decide. Her absence kept making him remember her differently, made him soften the edges perhaps. But it was nothing they’d not have been able to iron out, given time. Just the residue of past relationships, old wounds and recriminations that she hadn’t felt able to speak about. All he’d got were the scars they’d left on her, both actual and otherwise; the rough edges that he’d not been given the time or opportunity to smooth away.

Rage again. Boiling in him. Every time it was a struggle to keep it down. He’d known from the get go that once he and Aimee had developed into an item that certain types

of people would have a problem with the idea. Even members of his own family. The only answer he felt was just to *get on with it*; fuck everyone else. Living your life according to other people's expectations was no life at all. But now he wasn't so sure. He had no idea if this was guilt or something else. Just a feeling for the sake of feeling.

Charlton hung his head and smoothed a hand across his brow. He had to stay calm. He couldn't afford to explode. His emotions were a roller coaster crashing from uncontrolled rage to uncontrolled grief. He needed to retain some semblance of control.

Intellectually he knew Neil was telling him the truth. There was no proof the attack had been anything other than some sick fucks getting their kicks at Aimee's expense. But his heart and gut told him different. His chest cavity was filled with broken glass and each beat of his heart ground the ache in deeper; compounded the fear and guilt.

He *was* to blame. No matter how he looked at it, it was his fucking fault. He'd promised to protect Aimee, sworn he'd never allow her to be hurt again.

He had failed. And worse, he had lied.

The noise of the chair slamming over on the tiles cut the room's murmured conversations off like a gunshot. Charlton felt frowns and hostile scowls lash his back as he pushed through the swing doors and fled down the corridor. He ignored them. He could feel the darkness growing inside him; alienating him from everyone. He didn't know how to stop it or if he even *wanted* to.

The rain splashed over him as he escaped the confines of the hospital. Above him the evening blossom of fireworks lit the sky. He ran through the hospital car park, the falling water blinding him. He needed distance in order to think. And used the movement in order not to.

**When Charlton stopped** and came back to himself he was standing on the lawn in front of Aimee's flat, blankly staring at the darkened windows. His clothes were soaked through. He was cold and wet, but his head was clear. The fury that had driven him from the hospital had momentarily abated, sunk once more into the depths. Charlton slumped, sagging, suddenly weary without the adrenaline rush of his rage. Wide-eyed he stared at the sky. *Shit*, he thought, *what've I done?* He shook his head, despondent, finding no easy answer in the heavens. He shivered and looked back at flat before him. The blocky edifice was dark, the windows along the face darker still. It was late. Time he went home. He needed sleep.

He raised his eyes one last time to the third floor window that was Aimee's bedroom and flinched, starting at the sudden blaze of light. The window was no longer a blind pool of shadow. It shone with warmth and colour. "Aimee?" he asked, his voice little more than a sigh. Charlton frowned. *What the – ? Was someone in Aimee's flat?* Anger flared, flooding his brain with hot molten fury. *Someone was in Aimee's fucking flat!*

With a bang, Charlton flung open the glass outer door and, before the noise had cleared from the stairway, pounded up the two short flights. At Aimee's front door he pulled her spare keys from his sodden jeans and scrapped them over the metal lock plate, haste making his fingers clumsy. He twisted and pushed simultaneously, crashing into the hallway, the door banging against the wall and tearing the keys from his hand. Charlton bulled into the unlit living area, a snarl plastered across his face. A growl rumbled in his throat. God help whosoever was in the flat, because Charlton wouldn't – he couldn't help himself. If there was someone fucking with Aimee's stuff, he'd kill them. So help him God, he'd fucking kill them!

The bedroom door was ajar. Light filtered through the gap. Movement. A shadow. Charlton crossed the distance and kicked open the door. "Right, you fuckers!" he screamed, spittle flying from his lips. Hands fisted and ready.

No one. The room was unoccupied, just as it should be.

Charlton spun around and searched the remaining rooms, slapping the walls to light the flat, switches digging into his palms. Living room. Bathroom. Kitchenette. There was no one. The only presence he felt was the fading ghost of Aimee.

The scent of her perfume lingered in the bedroom, floating up from pillow and sheets, wafting from her wardrobe when he threw open the door. On the bedside cabinet Harry Potter lay discarded, unfinished, her place marked with a slip of paper. Cosmetics were haphazardly scattered on bathroom shelves, a crumpled tissue forgotten on the vanity unit beneath. Silken, spun gold threads were caught between the bristles of her brush. A cushion sagged and shaped by wear in the living room. Aimee's outline imprinted upon the sofa from countless evenings sat before the television. The jewelled shell of a CD lay discarded on the hi-fi, hinting at her last mood. A cup stained with stale dregs of tea on the end table.

Like a marionette with cut strings Charlton folded down onto the sofa. Visions of Aimee flashing through his memory like slides through a projector. Each remembrance more painful than the last, until grief broke in him and he cradled his head in his hands, his chest hitching as the sobs tore him apart.

He couldn't stop here. It was too painful. Aimee's absence was too palpable. And he knew from bitter experience that his own flat would be little better.

Everywhere he looked he saw Aimee.

The projector clicked in his head. The slideshow changed. The pictures cast upon the screen were no longer the Aimee that was. No longer the tall and willowy Aimee with the long blonde hair that seemed to shine from within; with the robin's-egg blue eyes that changed with her mood, one-minute pale green, the next lightest blue. No longer the beautiful, trembling, loving, hopeful woman he had fallen for. Now the slideshow was all the ravaged and broken Aimee. Raped and beaten so brutally her skin had turned the colour of rotten fruit. Bones broken. Skin torn, stripped, grazed and cut in a million places. New, far worse scars layered on top of the old, faded, almost forgotten ones. His beautiful Aimee lost in the darkness of a coma. Lost in a darkness that would be with her even after the drugs were washed from her system.

His own darkness welled up from within Charlton and swamped him. Like a wave it rushed through him, smothering the pain, banking the hate. It was a darkness that demanded.

Thrusting himself up from the sofa, Charlton left the flat. He slammed the door behind him and headed down the stairs. Feeling sorry for himself did no one any good. The motherfuckers that had blinded Aimee, that had cut out her tongue and punctured her eardrums, that had carved signals of hate upon her chest, they would all pay. Three times three. An eye for a fucking eye.

He wanted to know how Neil stayed so fucking calm. He was her brother for God's sake. Neil should be out here hunting those scumbags down with him.

*He's got John to think about.* Charlton stopped. He was breathing hard. The chill air and the steadily increasing rain cooled him down. Had Neil been right? Did shit just happen? Was it really nothing to do with him? Or had his philosophy of *fuck 'em, who cares, it's our life* been to blame? Was he really *so* blameless? No. It had to be his

fault. *If she'd been going out with a white bloke this would never have happened.*

Round and round. Up and down. Charlton felt like he was going mad. He needed to sort his fucking head out. He needed some place to chill.

Pulling his mobile from his jacket, Charlton dialled up Neil and John's number. Ear pressed to the thin plastic he listened to the phone trill, counting the number of rings. Was it too late? Perhaps he shouldn't be call –

"Hello." John cleared his throat, half asleep. "Who is it?"

"It's me, Charlton. I . . ." He didn't know what to say. What the hell was he doing ringing these guys? They had enough on their plate without mollycoddling him.

"You OK?" John asked the silence. Wide-awake now. "CK, you there? You OK?"

In the background Neil asked a question. The words were muffled, lost across the distances, but the concern was clear as a bell. Charlton felt his throat threatening to close around his voice and hurriedly choked out his request. "Can I crash at your place? I . . ." He couldn't finish.

"Sure. What's happened? Are you OK?" John asked.

Charlton couldn't answer, his throat was too tight; it clicked whenever he swallowed, too dry to work. No moisture left. He heard John's voice, tinny in the background. He heard the phone exchanged. "Charlton, it's Neil. What's up? Are you OK?"

"I'm fine. I just can't . . . I just need a place to stay. For tonight?"

"Where are you? You OK to get here?" Neil asked. Then without pause, "Look, get a cab. I'll cover the cost, OK? It's not a problem. We'll see you in a bit, yeah?"

There was no hesitancy in Neil's voice. Like Aimee, his door was always open. It made Charlton's chest tighten. "Thanks, Neil. I'm . . . Well, I'm sorry about this evening, you know, at the hospital? I didn't mean to go storming off like some –"

"It's forgotten," Neil interjected, cutting Charlton off. "Just come home. OK? Just come home."

**They'd made up** the spare bed for him by the time he arrived. Neil and John sat him down, trying to work the edges out of him. But he was having none of it. He couldn't decide why this was; he felt as if he were outside of himself, incapable of any kind of stillness. There was no placating him. But he could suddenly see with cold clarity the distance between good and bad. It seemed that there were no greys left in the world. *Pick a side.* His head was fucked.

"Have a drink," Neil was saying, disappearing into the kitchen. "There's some Vodka somewhere . . ."

"Just *sit* for a while," John said. He sat on the table opposite Charlton; his eyes set with concern, frustration at not being able to get through. "This is not doing anyone any good."

"I thought I saw someone," Charlton said as Neil reappeared with half a bottle of Smirnoff, and some glasses, which he placed in between the three of them. "In Aimee's place."

"Aimee's?" Neil said, a note of concern rising in his voice.

"But it was empty," Charlton said disconsolately. "No one fucking there. Ridiculous. I'm seeing things now."

Neil had emptied the Vodka into the tumblers. "We're all at our wits' end, mate. Drink up, eh? To Aimee?" He raised his glass and an eyebrow, hoping for affirmation from the others.

Charlton raised the glass. "To Aimee," he said. Knocked it back.

**He didn't think** he'd sleep but when he put his head down in the dark, shivering despite the radiators creaking with warmth throughout Neil and John's flat, he succumbed quickly. In the dream Aimee called to him and, without any conscious volition, Charlton found himself following. She led him barefoot into the city, her hair flying into her face and hiding her eyes whenever she glanced back at Charlton to beckon him on, urging him to keep up as he stumbled and tripped in somnambulistic haste, unable to close the distance between them.

The city surrounded Charlton, vacant but for the birds flooding the sky. They arced across his vision, seemingly trapped in a perpetual loop. Like a moment spliced together that never ended. He had followed Aimee once before and knew what came next.

Tears ran down his face as Aimee pressed herself in and out of the shadows cast by the Cathedral and back into darkness through the gates out onto Colmore Row.

She guided him across the road, past the empty façades that housed an office and a bank, and turned to wait at the mouth of the deserted alleyway, the piece of the loop where her three attackers stood, ready to enact, without remorse or regret, scenes that would haunt him time and time again. Aimee stepped into the alley and her eyes dragged Charlton in with her, forcing him to bear witness to the atrocities her attackers performed, seeking out his eyes at all times as he watched helplessly, unable to look away, recording the detail of their crimes to ensure punishment was just.

**Ben MacKay dodged** a solitary car, the Queensway slick under his Adidas' as he crossed the road, Hurst Street at his back. The chill wind cut through the cheap denim of his jacket, prickling and puckering his flesh like the fear he felt at the flat. He'd just had to get out; score something to get him through the night, let him sleep without the nightmare. There was no way he could spend another minute in that flea-infested shit hole the council had stuck him with, not without a little smack or blow to take the edge off. The bloody place freaked him out. Ever since Lewis had got done in, the walls had seemed too thin. He could hear the old farts next door whispering about him, their voices scratching and scraping at his mind, making him paranoid. He kept seeing shadows at the edge of his vision, no matter how many lights he left burning; fleeting movement that made his heart race and the breath snag in his throat.

Last night he dreamt about the girl they'd done and woke up screaming like a baby. He'd been convinced she was stood in the room with him, looming over his prone body as he thrashed in his sweat soaked bed. They'd only meant to scare her, have a bit of fun. Teach her a lesson for shacking up with a nig-nog. It just got out of hand, that's all, and now he couldn't sleep for thinking what they'd done. He'd spent the rest of the night in his living room, curled up on the threadbare and sagging sofa, eyes burned raw by the hundred-watt glare of the ceiling light. He would not admit it to Webb, or anyone else for that matter, but he was scared. Shit scared. His nerves were frayed, close to breaking; lack of sleep and too much shit taking their toll. He'd not been able to relax for over a week now. Way too jumpy. He felt hunted. Haunted.

Stepping onto the pavement Mack increased his pace, nervously glancing behind him as he turned the corner onto Hill Street, past what used to be the Albany Hotel. He thought he'd heard the slap of footsteps lapping at his own, but the dim sodium revealed nothing more sinister than litter and shadow. Another car rounded the

traffic island, a taxi taking some late night revellers home, the starry headlights flashing through the drizzle and hurting his eyes.

Mack faced forward, shaking his head as he hurried along. He really had to get a grip. Webb would beat the crap out of him if he ever let on he was freaked this bad. Webb didn't approve of Mack's habit at the best of times. Sure, he had a reason for needing a fix, what with the girl and then Lewis being killed and all. Not that there was any link. The pigs reckoned Lewis had just fucked with the wrong people. He'd always been a psycho. Still, Webb would kick his arse if he found out about Mack being so shit scared he needed a little something just to turn out the lights.

A bent and discarded Coke can rang out on the pavement, clattering at his heels, and making him jump just as he stepped off the curb at St. George House to cross Station Street. "Shit!" he cried out, suddenly breathless and panting. He swung around, his heart beating in his throat. But the street was empty of life.

*Must have been the wind*, he thought, stepping out of the road and crossing to the edge of the pavement, craning his neck in an attempt to see back around the Albany's corner. Nothing. There was no one in sight.

Mack swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. He wrapped his arms around himself, holding tight. He glanced across the road at The Crown, wishing the bar was open. He could've really done with a drink right about now: a couple of pints of lager, maybe a whiskey chaser to warm him up. Anything to calm him down. He knew he couldn't carry on like this. The strain of holding it all together was too much. He was literally jumping at shadows. Holding back tears, Mack threw a last glance over his shoulder at the way he'd come, then turned and shuffled on up Hill Street.

*Fuck this shit*, he thought. He couldn't let anyone see him acting like this: like a big girl's blouse. He hawked and spat into the gutter, straightening up from the hunched fearful posture he'd adopted, disgusted with being such a fucking poof. He had to pull himself together.

Pausing to light a Benson's, his hand cupped around the lighter's flame to shield it from the rain, Mack once more heard pursuing footsteps and his shakily reconstructed mask of arrogant belligerence crumbled. He spun around, the unlit fag dropping from his lip, a scream locked tight in his suddenly hitching chest. Eyes wide, pupils dilated, he scanned the street. There was no one. The street was still deserted.

Shaking uncontrollably, his breath coming in shallow gasps, rasping icily through his teeth, Mack backed up. This time he was certain he had heard the click-clack of heels from behind. He *hadn't* imagined it. Not this time. Someone was definitely following him. *Fucking* with him. His jacket scrapped along the rough brickwork on his right, the noise startling him and making him cry out as he stumbled along.

*Please leave me alone*, he silently pleaded, terror bubbling just beneath the surface, pushing icy beads of sweat from his pores. *Just leave me the fuck alo –*

Mack felt a hand slide across his mouth, blocking his airway. Then an arm snaked around his throat and dragged him backward into the recess of an old abandoned emergency exit. He felt the first blow strike his head and his legs crumpled. His vision wavered, black motes flapping at the periphery like crows. Pain exploded through his face as it smashed into the concrete. Lightning flashes of agony went off in his skull. Blood poured from his nose, choking him. He could feel a flap of skin hanging down from his forehead and imagined the cold gleam of bone glinting through the rain.

Gagging, Mack spat out a tooth and attempted to raise his arms. If he could get

to his feet, fight back, he might have a chance. A kick cracked ribs and knocked him down. Pain lanced through him, bright and sharp. It hurt to breathe. He couldn't move. Another hard punch, and a cheekbone shattered. His head whipped sideways, tearing his scalp on the rough brickwork. Blood swam across his eyes. Another blow. And another. And another. Mack twitched and whimpered amidst the stink of piss. A kick lifted him. Another caught his head. Blinding agony as his eye disgorged from the socket like a bloody oyster. The rain of blows registering less and less as darkness clawed at his senses. The last thing Mack felt was the crunch of his spine, then death claimed him and he felt no more.

**When he woke** Charlton felt the hard surface beneath him. Not the bed he'd fallen asleep in. Panic rose inside him as he felt something flutter against his face. A leaf. He sprang to his feet as if stung. He was in the square surrounding St. Philip's Cathedral.

The phone roused him. He reached into his jacket pocket. Stared at it for a moment, not really registering the caller on the display. Distracted. The leaves were still blowing around him. The sound of early morning traffic sluicing through the rain. His clothes were sodden and stained. "Neil," he said. Nothing else. His mind was a blank.

The generosity had finally gone from Neil's voice. "Where the fuck are you?"

Charlton closed his eyes. He was too tired for this. "Town. When did I leave?"

There was a moment while Neil gathered himself. He was a man unused to bursts of temper. "I didn't realise you *had*, you daft bastard. Came in this morning and you'd gone."

"Too much to drink, I daresay," Charlton said. He felt adrift. That distance again. Getting wider. Like looking at the remains of the world through the wrong end of a telescope.

"Two measures of Smirnoff?" Neil said. "Not fucking likely."

"Neil –"

"*Listen*. There's only so far you can go until you start alienating people," Neil said, his voice quieter now, more controlled. "And the rope is *fraying*, my friend. Don't let this change who you are."

There were sirens somewhere in the city. A cacophony of them. Neil's voice was diminishing. Charlton stood, felt the wind leafing through him. Ambulances. Police too. Something big. He couldn't think about that when all it did was remind him of Aimee. It was nothing to do with him. Forget it.

"Look, I'm *sorry*, alright. Neil? I need to sort this out myself. I'm fucked over this," he admitted. But the line had gone quiet as the sirens diminished. "Neil?"

"Charlton," Neil said. "I'll call you back, alright?"

Charlton couldn't decide what he could hear in Neil's tone. "What? What is it?" he asked.

There was a pause. Then Neil said: "The police are here."

**They had all** three of them in separate interview rooms by afternoon. Left them alone with the grilled window high above head height, the screwed down table; the uniform green paintwork; the tape recorders; both video and audio.

Charlton couldn't move. There was a weight inside him now that wouldn't be dislodged. *Bring it on*, he thought, *I don't give a shit*. What, after all, was there left to lose? He could hear the bustle of activity in the police station above him, in adjoining



rooms. He wondered if they were interviewing them all in turn: John first, then Neil, then himself. Comparing answers, trying to find a chink in the armour. But their armour was *innocence*, surely to Christ. They couldn't pin anything on them if there was no guilt to be found. That kind of bullshit only happened in TV, in cinema.

By the time the investigating officer arrived with a young female DC, Charlton was asleep, spark out, his head on the table. However inhospitable this room was, it was a sight more comfortable than a park bench. He felt female hands rousing him and he started awake suddenly, the blood roaring in his ears. "Rough night, Mr Keen?" the DI asked. The necessary stiffness in the man's voice instantly raised Charlton's hackles. He felt the chair complain and give as he leaned back into it. No good. Too many kinks to work out.

"Every night is a rough night at the moment."

"I daresay. DC Allen, would you mind terribly getting Mr Keen here a cup of our delightful coffee?" To Charlton he said without a trace of humour in his voice. "Black, I take it?"

Charlton felt a sudden rush of vertigo. Had to shake away the feeling that this old man who looked too much like Ernie Wise, but with a cross to bear, was not trying to goad him, to get him as edgy as possible before the interview began.

DC Allen turned on her heels and the DI watched her go, his eyes trailing from her shoes to her black tights to her rear end. Charlton watched him watching. Old school policing. Perfect. He felt heat in his extremities. Adrenaline pumping.

With the formalities dispensed with and the tape recorders set, the DI introduced himself as John Rose. Charlton stared from the file between them to the man's hard expressionless face. He tried to will a vacancy into his eyes. Clapped his hands between his knees. Heard 'Bring Me Sunshine' in his head, but it didn't help.

"First I'd like to know your whereabouts last night, Mr Keen. Could you give me an outline of your movements from the beginning of the previous evening after you left the hospital?"

The DC returned with a polystyrene cup of coffee. Set it down in front of Charlton and seated herself beside Rose. Her face was as blank as Charlton was willing his to be. He touched the cup. Watched the coffee steam. Could feel their eyes on his face.

"I found myself at Aimee's flat after I left the hospital –"

"Found yourself?" Rose interrupted. "Had you not intended to return there? Do you often find yourself simply stumbling from one location to the next?"

Charlton found himself sighing through his nose. His jaw clenching. *You smug cunt.* "I was disorientated. Confused." Charlton paused. "Perhaps unconsciously it felt like the safest place to go." If he expected any sympathy, neither of the faces on the opposite side of the table offered any. He suddenly felt afraid of where this might be going.

"Did you let yourself into Ms Williams' flat?"

Charlton saw the third floor window, awash with light. He saw himself rushing up the stairs, fumbling with the keys to Aimee's flat, bursting into each room in turn, finding nothing. No one. Just the ghost of Aimee's presence in her things, the way her life used to be lived. "Yes," he said. "I thought perhaps someone might be inside."

"Who? An intruder?"

"I don't know. Whoever attacked Aimee perhaps."

"But there was no one?"

"No."

“Just you.”

“Yes,” Charlton said, and fixed Rose with his eyes, hearing the implication in the man’s tone. The DI stared him back down. There was an extraordinary stillness in Rose’s eyes that left Charlton cold. There was no wedding ring on his finger, he noticed, for reasons he couldn’t dwell on. This was a man who lived for the job, was changed incrementally by it over the years. The thought chilled Charlton. *Changing. Don’t let this change you.*

Rose wanted to know, was he there long? What time did he leave? What did he do next? How would he describe his state of mind at the time? Charlton tried to keep a lid on the anger rising inside him. *Just answer the questions*, he thought. *They have nothing on you.* “And afterwards,” Rose continued after referring to his notes, “after you’d returned to Ms Williams’ brother’s home, what did you do?”

“We had a drink. The three of us.”

“Mr Williams, his *partner* Mr Saunders, and yourself?”

Charlton ignored Rose’s tone when he said *partner*. “Yes. The three of us.”

Rose snorted. Sat forward. “Hardly the time to be drinking socially was it Mr Keen?”

Charlton gripped the hard plastic of the chair. “I think it was *exactly* the time to be drinking socially. Neil thought it’d ease all of our nerves.”

“So you were saying your nerves were frayed. You were at your wits’ end?”

“Yes,” Charlton said, adding quickly, “but not the way you’re implying. My girlfriend was beaten within an inch of her life, and even though the culprit is still out there, you see fit to waste your time badgering innocent people.”

“No need to get agitated, Mr Keen,” the DC piped up, her eyes wary. Her body was tensed, as if she expected Charlton to lunge at Rose. Perhaps it happened a lot. “We aren’t implying anything,” she added. “We’re simply trying to ascertain a clear picture of the last few days.”

Charlton sat back but Rose wasn’t finished. “But you hadn’t been there long before you left again, had you Mr Keen? Where did you go upon departing?”

Charlton began to speak but then hesitated. Where *had* he gone? All he remembered was the dream of Aimee, guiding him to the scene of the crime, to watch helplessly as the loop continued. Unable to avert his gaze. A *dream*. So. What to say? The words felt wrong. Felt like a lie before he had them on his tongue and out. “Walking. I walked into the city. I felt trapped indoors. I had to be out and about.”

He felt Rose’s eyes searching his face. He tried to maintain eye contact but the lie wouldn’t let him. But if Rose was aware of the deception, then his next question betrayed nothing. “And you woke *where* exactly this morning, Mr Keen?”

“St. Philip’s Cathedral,” Charlton said, glad momentarily to be certain of something. He’d told Neil the same thing this morning and Neil would have said as much in his interview.

“On a bench,” Rose said. “And you don’t remember how you got there?”

“I must have been tired. No buses home, so I slept there.”

“No money for a taxi home?”

“I’d had a drink. I was tired. I wasn’t thinking clearly,” Charlton said, exasperated.

Rose raised his eyebrows. Exchanged glances with DC Allen while Charlton sipped at his coffee. “So you couldn’t accurately describe your whereabouts from the hours of, say, four a.m. to six a.m.?”

Charlton sighed. “No. Probably not.”

“And we wouldn’t find incriminating evidence on your clothes, now would we, Mr Keen?”

But before Charlton could reply, Rose changed tack suddenly. Turned over a loose leaf of paper in his file on the table between them. “Do you know this man?” He pushed a black and white photograph towards Charlton.

The face in the arrest picture rang no bells. He looked like an addict. A druggie. Hollowed out. Cheekbones you could cut yourself on. Hair unwashed and ragged, starting to fall out. Eyes that looked used.

Charlton shook his head, saw Rose watching his reaction to the face. “No. Never saw him before in my life.” Shook his head again. “Sorry,” he said heavily.

“What about this man?” A second picture. Skinhead, stubble growing in like grain on the photo. Hard eyes.

“No.”

Rose retrieved the pictures and closed the file on them. He looked disappointed. Then he yawned. Rubbed at his neck. There was an uncomfortable lull. The DC was not about to open her mouth again so the silence lingered. Rose tapped at the file, seemingly lost in thought. Charlton pulled at the edges of the cup, concentrating solely on his nails and the polystyrene sliding beneath them.

“One final question,” Rose said finally, his face troubled. He placed a palm flat on the file, then looked challengingly at Charlton.

Charlton waited, his hand frozen on the cup.

**Afterwards, the walls** couldn’t contain him. He paced his flat like a wounded animal. Picked objects up and looked at them, hardly recognising them: the dish that held the seashells that Aimee had collected one wet morning in Bournemouth before he woke; the dog-eared John Updike paperback that he’d begun weeks ago and that had gone untouched since Aimee’s attack; the plates on the drainer from the last meal they’d shared together; the pictures of them at Neil and John’s last party, both of them too pissed to conceal their affections so late in the evening. How could an *event* reduce a life so? How could the loss of one person be enough to diminish the spark of another?

Charlton felt the familiar swirl of vertigo pluck at him. Pulling him off centre. The darkness rising. He felt sick. Nauseated. White noise hissed through his head. Deafening. Was this letting go?

Carl Webb. That name felt like a scar on his mind.

Questions were demanding answers he was unable to provide. He wanted to scream at the injustice of it all, to weep it all away. His sinuses burned from all the unshed tears evaporated by the anger raging inside. His gut was a seething cauldron of bubbling hate for a man he didn’t even know.

Carl Webb. How could he not have known about Carl Webb?

That was a question. That was *the* question. The *one final question*, and it had almost undone Charlton. Over and over it replayed in his head. The interview. The questions. Rose’s innuendos and insinuations, poorly concealed barbs ripping at Charlton’s mind, scarring it, permanently etching a name into the creases and folds, burning a single name into his psyche like a brand; the acid marking him for life.

“One final question,” Rose had said. “One final question,” daring Charlton to rise to the bait. Waiting him out. “One final question. Do you know a *gentleman* by the name of Carl Webb?”

The name had meant nothing. Charlton had resignedly shaken his head, just wanting it to be over. “No,” he said.

“No?” Rose asked. “I am surprised.” Rose had looked anything but as he’d stared at Charlton. “Strange, that,” he continued after a beat, “because I’ve been led to believe Ms Williams knew *him* quite well. *Intimately*, in fact. It also seems Mr Webb used to knock Ms Williams about. Not know anything about that either, do you, Mr Keen? Not something you like as well, now is it?”

The jet engine roar of Charlton’s rage drowned the remainder of the interview out. Charlton had no idea how he managed to stop himself flying apart and answer Rose’s questions that, no, he didn’t know any Carl Webb, and, *no*, it wasn’t something he liked. *How fucking dare he!*

The thought of what Rose had been implying made Charlton’s blood boil. Rose was nothing more than a dirty old bastard. He *knew* nothing. Probably thought Aimee got what she deserved for going out with a darkie. The racist fuck!

Why hadn’t Aimee told him about Webb? Why protect the fucking scumbag? All Charlton had known was her last boyfriend had hurt her. Hit her. He didn’t know the bastard had put Aimee in the fucking hospital. She should have told him. What did she think he’d do? Didn’t she trust him? Didn’t she . . .

No. That wasn’t it. It was just too painful. Bad memories. Aimee always said the past was history and the present was what counted. She’d just wanted to forget, move on, Charlton knew that. But why the fuck didn’t she tell him? Why hadn’t *Neil* told him? He must have known about –

Neil! The phone creaked in Charlton’s fist as he pressed the receiver to his ear, listening to it ring at the other end of the line. *Where the hell are they? Come on. Answer the phone. Answer the damn phone.*

“Hello?”

“Neil. It’s Charlton – ”

“Where’d you run off to, you daft bastard?” Neil asked, cutting Charlton off before he could start. “We need to talk.”

“Too fucking right we do. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what? When? Look, we need to – ”

“About fucking Carl Webb,” Charlton shouted, ignoring Neil’s confusion and concern. “About Aimee.”

“Charlton. Listen, calm down.” Charlton could hear the strain in Neil’s voice. “We need to talk about the police. About Rose.”

“I don’t care about Rose. I want to know about – ”

“For fuck’s sake,” Neil exploded. “They’re trying to fit you up. They think you–”

“Carl Webb.” Charlton snarled the name, once more overriding Neil. Nothing else mattered. He had to know.

There was a moment of silence on the line as Neil reined in his fraying temper. “He’s a Nazi prick, mate,” Neil finally answered, voice quiet. “You *know* this. This is old ground, for Christ’s sake. Forget him. You’ve got more important things to worry about.”

“He did it, didn’t he?” Charlton said, numbly. His voice so soft Neil almost didn’t catch it.

“What? Charlton? Charlton?”

The phone dropped from Charlton’s suddenly nerveless fingers and clattered on glass tabletop. Forgotten, Neil’s voice was a distant, insectile buzzing from the handset’s

speaker. Charlton pulled the residential directory from the shelf beneath the telephone table and opened it. Finding the address he sought he moved woodenly down the short hall to the front door. Behind his eyes it all played out for him. The projector in his head clicked from one slide to another, fitting the pieces together. It all made a horrible kind of sense: Carl Webb, Aimee's Nazi ex, left behind for a black man; the swastika carved into Aimee's chest, raw and bloody; the motiveless, meaningless attack; the police, Rose's questions. Everything made sense.

With the front door to his flat open, Charlton paused in the doorway, his mind still reeling from the shock of discovery. He swayed. He couldn't seem to catch his breath. His balance was off. He seemed to be vibrating, suppressed energy shaking him from head to toe. Something in him wanted to let go, relinquish his hold and just float away, give in to the darkness.

**The flat was** down a side street off the Hagley Road. It sat above a dingy, rundown newsagent's. The shop's roughcast exterior flaked and stained. The unwashed display windows were dark and sightless, begrimed with dirt from the road. Discarded sweet wrappers, cigarette packs and torn front pages, forgotten already, huddled in the shop's doorway to escape the chill wind. A gated stairway at the side, lock broken, bulbs smashed, led up to Webb's flat.

The steep steps were litter choked and filthy as Charlton edged up them. Someone had smeared dog shit over Webb's walls and broken glass crunched under his boots. The claustrophobic space crowded him, suffocating, damp and reeking. In the gloom Charlton could just make out the tags and obscene cartoons that decorated the walls beyond the stain of shit. All around him were neon-coloured swirls of abuse, crowned at the summit of the staircase by a badly spray-painted swastika. Clearly Webb was already a marked man.

The darkness that had paced Charlton from the first moment he had heard what had happened to Aimee, finally, fully caught up with him. His mind went blank.

Charlton raced across the small landing that opened out before him, the space only fractionally wider than the staircase preceding it. He couldn't discern any light from inside. Charlton closed his hand around the corroded knob and twisted, but the door was locked. He banged on it. "Hey!" he shouted, pounding on the wood with his fist. "Open the door, you piece of shit!"

From inside he heard muffled thuds, the sound of a rat in a cage. "Leave me alone you cunt! Just fucking leave me alone!"

Charlton hesitated. Did Webb know he was coming? He could hear fear in the man's voice. He sounded like a man who'd been under siege for days.

"Webb! You let me the fuck in or I swear I'll kick this fucking door down!"

"Fuck off! You've had your pound of flesh already. Isn't that good enough for you? You're a fucking maniac, you are!"

That was *enough*. He'd had his fill of people treating him like they *knew* him. How could they when he scarcely recognised himself these days? Charlton stepped back and rammed his shoulder into the door. It gave a little, the wood creaking under the impact, but refused to open. He raised his foot and kicked out. Wood cracked. He kicked again. And again. The wood splintered at the fifth blow, the cheap lock ripping free of the frame. The door slammed open and Charlton rushed into the flat, into the darkness.

**The police found** him on his knees in the living room, hunched over the body. Blood on his hands, on the carpet, on the walls. They took him outside, pushed him roughly into the back of the squad car. He pressed his forehead against the metal grille, until one of the officers told him to sit back. There was a vacancy burrowing itself into his gut, an absence of feeling. He heard the officers murmuring, could see the lights flickering in the street as a crowd of onlookers gathered. Staring at them he felt divorced from it all. *Us and them.*

He thought of being returned to the interview room and of Rose, and closed his eyes. Just darkness. Floating in darkness. *This* was how it felt to cross the threshold.

As the crowd parted to let the car pull away he felt the spark of something inside, and realised it was Aimee, standing in her flat, lying beside him, leading him through the city, and into Webb's flat. He'd carried her like a burden and like a light at the end of some impossibly long tunnel. A spark. Flickering in the darkness. He willed it to go out.

**"How long do you wait?"** *How many times do you ask yourself?*

"I don't know, love. You'll just know when it's time."

"It's just such a huge decision. How do you decide?"

John didn't know of course; how could he? How could anyone?

Finally they talked themselves there. They'd stayed up all night, drinking cheap Australian wine, then had sex that Neil felt symbolised everything and nothing. Hung over and unshaven the following morning, he and John had brushed hands in the waiting room, stared at all the vacant faces, then squinted at the sunlight that lanced through the doctor's office. Voiced the decision that Neil felt might change him forever. He'd felt rooted to the chair, as if gravity was forcing him down. Tying him to the Earth for his troubles.

There were forms to be signed and dated. Too many. John was a constant presence beside him; the rock that Neil swam to, clung to. When it was done, the day suddenly grew overcast and the doctor's office felt impossibly small. Neil closed a hand over his face while the doctor stepped outside.

That afternoon they turned off the machines almost ceremonially. It felt like closing a book that Neil wasn't yet done with. The room felt weighted down with silence. Neil buried his face in John's hair and wondered what there was to feel next, what there would be to feel in a week, a month, a year. He realised he was holding his breath on behalf of Aimee. But he couldn't let go.

He spoke to Charlton the following day on the phone. The conversation was terse, the silences intractable. How could he *know* this man any more?

"She was always there," Charlton said. "In the flat. In the street. In Webb's room. Always there." He sounded inconsolable.

"She's gone now," Neil said. "At peace, I suppose."

But wherever Charlton had gone, Neil couldn't follow. Had it happened to John, would he feel differently? Who knew? Charlton was still denying he'd known anything about Carl Webb before the attack. But witnesses had placed him at Webb's flat *days* before. It only went to show how deeply losing Aimee had affected Charlton. Perhaps he had always been a coiled spring, violence waiting to happen. Had Aimee been his only comfort? His control?

He spoke about leaving, about floating into darkness, and with every word, Neil

only felt more lost. Rooted to the spot. He was glad to be done with the call.

The day they sentenced Charlton for the murders of Darren Lewis, Benjamin MacKay and Carl Adam Webb, they flew to Italy for a week. John had surprised him with the tickets. Promised him sex, sun and culture but not necessarily in that order. And somewhere miles above the ground, Neil looked out at the clouds and realised that he was still holding his breath. Aimee's breath.

He breathed out. ■

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Simon has published stories in a variety of magazines and anthologies, but this is Ian's first publication. They both live in Birmingham.

# THE GREEN LADY

JAY CASELBERG

She's back again, whispering dark and dangerous in my ear, dogging my footsteps with her half-felt shadow. She's beautiful, but I reluctantly understand the sinister nature of her trappings. Her breath is warm and rich upon my cheek, full of the scent of other places.

I reach forward, slowly stirring, watching as the liquid swirls in the small glass on the wrought iron table before me. Shadows congregate at the edges of my perception, clustering in the corners, smearing the mirrored walls of this quiet and smoky bar. Outside, people stroll past, oblivious to the gathering shades posed and ready at the doorway, ready to leap out and ride their backs. Let them walk on. There's no saving them, no saving any of us, especially me.

This morning, I walked through the Old Town Square, pacing the cobbles and watching their straight-line patterns disappear into their own eternity. The morning was crisp, cool, the light breaking across the Gothic towers of Our Lady of Tyn. Around the edges of the square, waiters in their crisp white aprons pushed and carried tables and plain white chairs, arraying them in places where the tourists could drop their bulk and consume large glasses of that pale wheaty beer. No such consumption for me. I had an appointment. She was waiting for me, as she waited for me daily.

Praha. It's a place that dreams are made of.

I stopped for a while to stand in front of the astronomical clock, watching the blue and gold, early enough to avoid the tour groups who would cluster in front of it taking photographs as soon as the morning rush began. The heavens moved before me. After a time, I sighed and moved on. There was no avoiding where I had to be. Slick wet cobbles, morning cold vapour rising from the river in golden light as I crossed the George Bridge, all of it a fairyland. That fairyland held the darkest one of all, but not all of you can see her. Not all of you have the required capacity or dedication that she needs.

My bar sits on Wenceslas Square. A few doors down is a workman's lunch place, all slick and metal, the front window greased with vapour from the serving trays. I'd eaten there once or twice, when I remembered. But then, eating there was not particularly a thing to remember. There is more sustenance in that glowing pearl sitting before me. At the bottom of the hill sits a casino, one of the many that populate the town these days. There was more than one way for the tourists to throw their dreams away. Well let them. They had that luxury. I do not. My dreams are clinging things that crawl across my spine and into the corners of my eyes when my vigilance fails. I can feel the bones inside my skin, waiting to clamber forth and greet them, oblivious to the tearing ruin that it might cause.

I came to Prague initially seeking . . . what? Dissolute and callow, I sought my muse, for Prague was the place where I was going to pen my literary masterpiece. Once upon a time it was Paris. The great artists, the novelists, the tradition of creativity, but Paris had had its day. The flocking of the foreigners had tarnished the



creative spark that once hunted its tree-lined avenues and renaissance towers, stalking the empty page. Now the province of designer labels, furs and ridiculous little dogs, trotting along with upturned noses, chi-chi Paris held nothing for me. It was time to turn to more fertile ground. Like others before me, I headed for the East and the gothic fairyland, unspoiled, or so I thought, little realizing the nature of the fairy that lurked within its streets.

As I walked those broad streets, searching for inspiration, as I strolled past Mozart's place, the others, the greats, I found nothing but emptiness inside. Somewhere, outside of that city in a small town a few miles away stands an ossuary, a place called Sedlec, a church made almost entirely of human bones. Like those fragments, we, the seekers, found the bare bones of motivation, nothing more. The reality had stripped away the flesh, leaving the knowledge of my failure lying like dry ash in my mouth, and in the mouths of many others. I was forced to the conclusion that I had to seek my muse somewhere else. I just couldn't find it in the history and the stately city streets. It was hiding, waiting for me elsewhere, in shadowed rooms, but I didn't know it then.

I sip, and I can feel her behind my shoulder again, watching, smiling that tainted smile. She knows, you see – knows my failures and my disappointment. She whispers her delight. I gesture to the barman, and he wanders over to my table, the bottle held in one hand, ready to refill my glass. He stands above me, dark receding hair and broad face, broad greying moustache, pale stubbled features without a hint of judgement. His hand is steady as he pours. Just for that moment, she scuttles away, leaving me to lift the carafe of water and dribble it over the small white square, watching it mix. It doesn't take her long to return, her phantom fingers drifting across my shoulder, caressing the back of my neck. She touches my cheek with gossamer and I try to ignore her. She's just seeking the bones beneath, and I can feel them straining, trying to reach through the too-thin flesh. But my eyes, deep as empty wells, are fixed on the glass in front, watching the opalescent swirl. She cannot have me that way.

At a table across the room, this small dark space, a group of college boys are egging each other on. Loud in their bravado, they laugh and joke, grimacing one by one with the bitterness of her taste. Maybe they're on vacation, a quick trip, sampling the sex clubs, the casinos and more forbidden fruit. Poor fools, they cannot know. There is no quick fix here. The lady requires dedication, not some brief adventure in a foreign bar. She requires sacrifice – a sort of sacrifice they cannot possibly give or understand. Short cropped hair, football shirts and jeans, they sit over the other side, glowing with health and their youthful enthusiasm. Again, they go through the ritual, pouring, swirling, sipping, and their laughter grows louder with the edge of imagined risk. Soon they'll pretend, even to themselves, that her touch is upon them and they'll each have tales to take home, all invented, though perhaps believed, even by themselves. I've seen their type before, late night, in the trendier, tourist-conscious bars and clubs. Those places have developed their own flashy rituals. They abuse, they twist the proper ways of doing things to make it more impressive to the unschooled eye, desperate to attract the foreign dollar. The silver spoons are ornate, the glasses etched. They soak the cube, and then set it alight, pouring a river of flame into the glass, smiling as their patrons grimace and swallow.

"Fools," I whisper across at them. Behind my shoulder, she chuckles her agreement.

One of them catches me looking and nudges his companion. They can't have heard. The other, thick set, short dark hair, square jaw, looks across, narrows his eyes and mutters something. I have no business with them, and I return to my own glass, stirring gently, around and around.

"Fools," I say, under my breath.

They appear to lose interest in me, and return to their game. Their raucous foreign voices grate on my senses, and that's strange, because I must have sounded like them once. In how many ways have I changed? Again, I reach for my glass, sipping gently. Eventually they leave, swaying a little, making much of how much they've had. But they've gone, and she creeps back, letting me know that she's here. How can I possibly forget?

When I first came to Prague, I wasn't alone either. Alicia was with me then. She had come with me, eager and just as naïve as I was. She was going to share the dream that we'd discussed through long dreamy nights before the end of school. We stayed in a hotel for the first couple of weeks, as we looked for somewhere to live – a small, inexpensive pension, but clean and friendly. Eventually, we found the tiny, upper-level apartment we were to share, looking out over rooftops and the river. Though basic, it was comfortably within our budget. Together, we'd saved, working part-time through school, and putting away as much as we could to finance the grand plan we'd crafted in our final year. I would write, and Alicia, pursuing her love of art, was going to paint and draw. Prague was the ideal location for both of us, all that Eastern European culture and the streets dripping with architecture and history. It was still cheap enough to be able to spin our money out long enough to make it count. For the first couple of months, it all went beautifully. We revelled in the majesty of the place and the total strangeness, snuggling together in our single bed at night. It was summer then, warm and clear, the ancient streets and squares thronging with visitors and tour groups. We played at being tourist ourselves and ate cheap, simple local meals together. It was all part of the adventure. I wrote and Alicia produced her sketches and pastel drawings. From time to time, she'd take a stool and go down and sit on the George Bridge, sketching, along with the other struggling artists hawking for the tourist trade.

Then it all dried up. There was a vast void inside me, begging for words to fill it, but none came. Alicia had no such problem; her work continued unabated. I started to resent her capacity to produce next to the wasteland of screwed up pages and scribbled, crossed-out lines that littered my days. I'd leave her, bent over her drawing pad, and wander the streets, watching people, looking at the buildings, trying to pick the locals and the tourists, but still nothing came. I started to frequent cafes, and finally bars. That was when the other woman entered my life, after I discovered my little bar on Wenceslas Square. I remembered my history. I remembered the poets, the playwrights, the creative muse that had walked the streets of Paris in times past, and hesitantly at first, but then more bravely, I tried. I knew, after that first glass, that this would be no fleeting relationship. I knew that here lay true dedication to my art. This would require sacrifice, for if I was to do it, I would do it properly. Three weeks it took, before she made her first, half-felt introductions. So shy, but once she knows you . . .

After that, I was committed. That's always the way when another woman enters your life. It doesn't matter what dreams you might have crafted together, what plans

you'd built on the tissue-thin platform of your relationship. The other woman changes it, changes the dynamic between you. Not too long after, Alicia and I parted, perhaps in unusual circumstances, but my muse required my devotion. My muse required sacrifice and after all, it was mine to give. The small apartment was empty after Alicia had gone, and oh so quiet. We'd both lost whatever contact we had with those back home, after our months in that foreign city. We'd relied on each other for company, not having much facility with the local language yet – enough to get around, but only fragments. There were no questions asked about her leaving, and that was good. There was no one to explain to.

It's winter now. Alicia is gone and I have my lady to keep me company. One day soon, she might even show me her face, or dance suggestively right in front of me, the trails of pale-green fabric floating around her lithe form, but there is work to do before that happens. These winter nights draw in close early, sending chill damp fingers down cobbled streets. Outside the bar, others are leaving, going home, or back to their hotels and pensions, but I am just getting ready as the darkness draws in, gearing up for my night. This night is special, just like the night a couple of weeks ago. The bars and clubs will be opening soon. I listen for her voice, but she is strangely quiet just now. The back of my scalp is tight, pulling hard against the skull, a tendril of ice crawling between the follicles near the crown, so I know she's near, but no words tell me of her closeness.

I spend about half an hour more, carefully sipping at the last precious traces sitting in my glass, and watching the passing crowd, waiting until it thins a little. Then, when I feel the time is right, I stand, pulling my long, beige coat around me against the chill. I take a bill from my pocket, and folding it carefully in half, I place it flat on the table. I lift the water carafe and gently place it on one corner of the folded currency to hold it in place. Turning once, I nod briefly to my barman and he nods back, watching impassively as I step out onto the street. For a few seconds I stand there, considering, wondering what I'm doing, but then I feel her behind me and that's all it takes. Ah, my lady, what is it you are doing to me?

It's not too much of a walk down the hill and across the intersection of streets that lead down into the Old Town Square. I need to cross the square, wend my way between pastel buildings, past shop fronts filled with icons and religious artefacts to reach the seedy back streets where the clubs ply their trade. It doesn't take me long, and the darkness has crept down, filling cracks and entranceways with deepest black. I've become a familiar sight around these parts, one of the locals. Even the working girls give me no more than a second glance. The first is usually filled with recognition and distaste. I wonder that I may have deteriorated so much in my appearance. There was a time when I was thought at least passably attractive. I lift a hand to my face, gently touching where my cheekbones are hard and angular against my skin.

This district is filled with clubs, most servicing the sex trade with their glossy plastic interiors, bright lights and thumping music. Most of the girls who do the shows, who work the clubs, are transitory. Nobody gives a damn about them. The influx of Western capitalism and the mafia have seen to that. Foreign tourist money just seals it. I stop, and give a brief hollow laugh. How could I have become so much of a local? Then, more serious, as I feel her touch again, I continue on my quest. It is time.

I've become such a familiar sight around this neighbourhood that I'm even refused

admission to the clubs these days. Perhaps it's the way I look. Perhaps it's because they know I won't spend any money, that I'll just stand against a bar all night watching the room with my haunted stare. But that's okay too, because I don't need to climb their stairs to get what I've come for.

Tonight it's a new club, one that I haven't used before. It's wise to vary the locations. I pull back into the shadows and I wait. She's beside me here in darkness. I can feel her anticipation almost as strongly as I can feel my own. Two hours, three, I don't know how much time passes, but it's worth the wait. Across the street, treading down the stairs and past the doorman, wearing knee-length leather boots and a dark woollen coat pulled around body, comes a blonde. They're all blonde. I watch as she heads up the street, and quietly I slip out of the shadows. Head down, hands buried deep in my own coat pockets, I follow at a discreet distance. It doesn't take me long to catch her.

Though I do this in darkness, in the damp, gloomy streets, though the night washes all colour away, turning it grey-black, inside I know I've failed again. This one is not good enough either. And as I huddle there, stooped over her still form, her limbs at strange angles, I know. Her blonde hair trails across the dirty cobbles. She is just like the last one, and the one before. She is just like Alicia. The wound upon her throat is poor sacrifice and ragged. Shining black, touching almost green in the darkened alleyway, it is poor sacrifice indeed. Almost green in its blackness. But almost is not good enough. As I wipe my knife clean on her cheap woollen coat, I know. A shaft of light catches a turn of the blade and reveals the colour for what it really is – deepest, vibrant red. I see it and I sigh.

Somewhere, behind me in the darkness, there's a giggle, slight and girlish. She knows, you see. She always knows.

I reach into the purse, the girl's pockets, taking the few coins and the bundle of notes lying there and shove them into my coat. She's done well tonight, this girl. The tips were good. They'll do to eke out a few days more in my small, sparse apartment. They'll do to help me meet my appointment on the morrow. Next to us, battered steel dumpsters rest on their wheels against the alley wall in a line. Picking up what remain of the girl's belongings, and lifting one of the pale-green hard plastic lids, I toss them in, then let the lid drop shut. It's funny that it's green.

My lady laughs again, quietly this time. She's whispering in my ear.

Perhaps I'll write tomorrow. I think though, perhaps, I won't. ■

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Jay's stories have appeared in *Underworlds*, *The Mammoth Book of Future Cops*, *Interzone* and many other places. He's currently under contract to Roc Books in New York, his most recent novel being *Metal Sky*, with *The Star Tablet* out in December.

The first visits had been straightforward enough. He'd started going there to meet women. His wife had been gone almost a year and the women at work seemed too old for him. It had been a long time since he'd thought about how a woman might see him, the kind of messages he sent out. Did he even send out messages? Everyone did, according to the articles in the women's magazines, which had become his secret vice. After Clara left and he'd been so stupefied by the whole thing he'd thought reading them might help him understand – certainly she'd spent more time reading them than telling him the truth.

*How To Tell Your Man What He's Doing Wrong.* He wondered if she'd read that one and if so, why she hadn't followed its recommendations. Maybe she'd decided he wasn't worth the aggravation.

He didn't go to Jack's to meet women anymore. To see them, yes, to smell them. To be in their presence.

"I tell you, the women go crazy there!" Mark had thought going to Jack's was the best thing Jim could do. If he wanted to meet women, and what man didn't? "It's either Jack's, or a church, or even better a funeral at a church. But Jack's is where they really let loose, where they really get crazy." Jim didn't actually want a crazy woman, but maybe momentary insanity was as good an icebreaker as any.

Dating had this vaguely disturbing terminology – breaking the ice, sending messages. It seemed strangely science fictional, contact between two alien species. He couldn't imagine his parents being this way, but he couldn't remember much communicating taking place there, either. Maybe it had always been this way and he'd just never noticed before. Marriage protected you from the real terrors of relationships.

"I don't think I've danced in years – how about you?"

The fellow – about his age, maybe a little older – made this opening statement and waited for an answer. Some people might be tempted to make fun of him, but Jim wasn't one of them. Something had to be said first and perhaps this was as good a thing to say as any. The first thing you said in any relationship had little long-lasting meaning. The first thing you said could even be a lie. The woman's eyes moved slightly down and up again, almost imperceptibly, a sizing up and a conclusion. She had to determine if this guy was at least in the ballpark and if she didn't do it now she might be stuck with a major incompatibility for half the evening. Not as cruel as it sounded – she was doing both of them a favor.

At their age the standards were a bit looser, of course. At their age even a man years out of shape might interest an ex-prom queen.

The woman smiled, always an encouraging sign. *Good for you, fellow,* Jim thought. *Good for you.*

Mark had stopped coming to Jack's several years ago, having found a girlfriend and then moving to Seattle where he thought people were friendlier. "It's the rain and the gloom that brings people closer together." Mark had theories about all

**FRIDAY NIGHTS**

**STEVE RASNIC TEM**

varieties of human behavior. Nothing strange about that, of course. Theories were pretty much all most of us knew about being human. Mark's problem was that his theories were a bit further off the beam than most, and his need too obvious, too painful to observe.

"Look at them," Mark had said, gesturing toward the variety of women crowding the dance floor, heads drifting up and down. "It's just like sex."

Jim had understood then that Mark knew very little about sex. Not that Jim was an expert. But during the course of his eight-year marriage to Clara they had had three different kinds of sex, all of them authentic in their own way.

Initially there had been the pretense of passion and exhaustion while they attempted to understand the real passion that lay beneath: the bellies sucked in, the dramatic breathing and groaning and sudden cries, the collapse at the end and the various half-true declarations, and the final separate awarenesses that they had not quite found the complete release they'd always dreamed of, but they knew it was there.

Then there had been two years or so of slow comforts, a joining in weariness at the end of the day, and the easing out of tears and the almost-desperate final embraces. These were the times Jim would always recall with fondness, and think of as love.

And then there came that last year of marathon exhaustion, as if both of them were in training for the new life to come, using each other like exercise equipment, a race into oblivion before turning over and falling asleep.

Mark had no idea of any of this. All he had seen out on the dance floor were tides of women. It had been ladies' choice and the ladies had chosen to move together as one, not so much displaying themselves as keeping themselves alive, for to stand unmoving when you could still hear the music was to harden into something ailing and sad.

"**I'm on the** road a lot," the tall sandy-haired man said to the woman he was dancing with.

Jim's partner was a short, pale woman several years his senior. She never smiled; dancing with strange men was a serious assignment for her, self-assigned or based on recommendations from friends or a therapist.

"That must be very interesting, to be able to travel all the time," the woman in the red dress replied.

The man laughed a little too hard, on the edge of being offensive. Jim saw the woman frown. *Do you think I'm stupid?* was in her face but she didn't voice it.

The man might have told her about his time on the road because it was the only thing he could think of to say or because he wanted to quickly signal his lack of interest in a long-term relationship. The woman's assessment that this information was somehow interesting was probably a lie, but it gave her an excuse to express a desire to travel which might have also encouraged further conversation about distant places and times. The man might have truly found her to be stupid, or boring, but more than likely he had laughed as an anxiety release. Jim heard more nervous laughter out on the dance floor than in any other setting he could think of.

Some time during this assessment Jim had changed partners, without being fully aware that it was happening. The woman across from him now didn't look at him, one of the many advantages of a fast song. Fast songs also afforded the opportunity to release sexual tension, an important mechanism for avoiding violence when there

were a lot of young single men in the club at one time.

“She did you a favor, leaving you,” Mark had said that first night at the club, a little too loudly. “At least now you can get yourself good and properly laid.” Jim had barely controlled the urge to punch him. He had never punched anyone, and now it seemed appropriate, dealing with a fool. But he didn’t.

Next to him an older man wearing red suspenders gyrated to music Jim suspected he had never heard before. Jim was bad with ages – people his exact same age always looked much older or much younger to him – but he thought the man must be over sixty. He danced with a woman who might have been his daughter, but Jim didn’t think so. Unattached women at Jack’s tended to be quite democratic with their dance partners. To be otherwise might send an unwanted message about their motivations for being there. The guy appeared to be using the music as an excuse for exercise, holding off death as best he could. Jim wondered if he had any romantic interest in the younger woman. It was doubtful, but you could never tell for sure.

For ten years Jim had been coming to Jack’s for ‘oldies’ on Friday nights. The mix of ages and singles versus marrieds had stayed pretty constant during that time. But ten years had been long enough for the newer music, played from eleven to midnight each evening, to become part of the oldies musical rotation in subsequent years. At this point the regulars usually started losing interest, most of them eventually dropping out altogether. Jim often wondered what they did on their Fridays instead. He suspected that a particular sort of sad self-consciousness had come into the experience for them as the music aged, preventing them from completely abandoning themselves to the music.

Jim felt himself immune to sadness. He’d long ago concluded it was like checking into a bad hotel room. You just went down to see the manager and requested another. No sense being anxious over a chance encounter – what was life beyond a series of chance encounters?

This evening few smiled out on the dance floor. Either they had their minds on other activities or they were so focused on doing the current activity correctly they forgot how their faces should appear. A smile wasn’t always best, of course, but it was a convenient default.

Explaining some new intention to exercise or diet or tan or purchase or hairdo or make-up style, Clara used to say, “After all, your body is a vessel.” Jim hadn’t always taken the statement seriously: she threw it away too easily. He supposed she didn’t really understand it herself, despite the fact that she’d always been obsessed with her ‘vessel’: keeping it fit and clean, adorning it to fit the times and her mood, reshaping it as a final, desperate measure when it no longer resembled what it used to be.

Out on the dance floor these vessels bobbed up and down on a tide of rhythmic noise, mouths and minds open, receptive to whatever filling might be available: jobs, partners, a life in the suburbs, a vacation on the beach, a trip out of town, a grope in the back of a shiny black van. Like dancers at some voodoo ceremony, waiting for a random god to possess them. No matter what people said about their lives, none of it was true in any sort of fundamental way. Even your name, he thought, is arbitrary. A physical body dancing in the tide is as close to what you are as anything.

A dark-haired woman with a white streak like a curved knife blade above one ear stood at the edge of the floor watching him. He looked around. Apparently at some point his dance partner had disappeared, and at the moment he had no memory of

what she had looked like. He wondered how long he'd been dancing by himself, thinking it should embarrass him, but it did not. He had seen people – mostly drunk, mostly women but not always – dance by themselves before.

He stopped dancing, but not so abruptly as to draw additional attention. He found himself swaying rhythmically as he moved off the floor. He couldn't help himself. The woman continued to stare at him. He thought at first to avoid her – the bold ones almost invariably became drunk and irritating – but found himself exiting the dance area close to where she stood. Maybe it was the hair. She looked more curious than anything. Jim didn't think he'd ever seen her here before.

"You seem to have lost your partner." She smiled, letting him know the comment was friendly.

He smiled back. He seldom went long without a dance partner, but smiling was something he rarely did. The small events of a life were simply not that amusing. "And you don't appear to have a partner."

The woman began to dance, moving slowly out to the floor, and after a brief hesitation he joined her. He thought it staged and somewhat silly, but it was almost closing time, and he had been there for hours, so why fight it – she seemed like a nice lady.

Still, he would have just finished this little dance and said his goodnights if she hadn't stared at him the way she did, eyes wide open like a curious child's, taking in every detail of his face and expression. If only to distract her he remarked, "I don't believe I've seen you in here before."

"I buried my husband two weeks ago," she said, as if that were a logical reply.

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, well, *I'm* sorry. It's not something to share in a first meeting."

"It's this place. People find themselves saying strange things." But of course she wasn't one of those people. She was simply being perfectly honest. Looking at her, he suspected she was barely capable of anything else.

"You must have been coming here for awhile." Women had said this to him before, of course, but it bridled him a bit because he could tell she expected an honest answer.

"Years," he said. "But it hasn't improved my dancing any."

And she laughed a genuine laugh, which made her seem too vulnerable to be in a place like this, and he began wondering how it would feel to hurt her.

After Jack's closed they walked outside together. This was not something Jim usually did. Usually he ignored all invitations spoken or implied, said his goodbyes, and returned to his apartment alone. It was a small place, hardly big enough for his own concerns.

But when Helen asked him outside for a walk ("It's strange, I'm not sleepy at all") he had said yes. Of course. And had allowed her to take his arm.

There was really no place to walk outside Jack's. The building was off an access road by a major north/south interstate, the hot air rank with oil and diesel fumes. Every few minutes a tractor trailer would blow its air horn and rumble past on its way to a nearby depot. Jack's neighbors were other bars and rundown hotels, a storage business and a lumber yard. Very little grass grew above the curbs, but even here an effort at landscaping had been made with rounded, white-painted stones and the occasional flower bed. Jack wondered what kind of person put out such effort, when it had no chance of being noticed. But at least it gave them a place to walk off the pavement. Property fences ended a few feet from the curbs, so that there was a continuous



strip of this poor vegetation and painful landscaping. By including the occasional tree used to obscure side entrances or other semi-private features, an optimistic imagination might envision a parkway in the early morning darkness. He suspected that to be her particular fantasy – she seemed far too at ease for his own comfort.

“It’s probably unseemly for me to go out so soon, but he was ill for such a long time, and I was so afraid I’d turn into one of those women.”

“Those women?”

“Women who stay at home the rest of their lives, or until they can’t stand it anymore and come out of hiding just to make the worst possible choices.”

“Is that important to you, making good choices?”

She stopped and gripped his hand tighter, looking up at him. When had they started holding hands? He had no idea. Like school kids. He wanted to get his hand away from her, but didn’t want to break the curious tone of the evening. “Probably not as important as it should be,” she said.

They walked more than an hour with hands linked at the edge of the curb until awkward footing gave him the opportunity to withdraw his hand. He watched her as she looked up at the lightening sky, at the shadowed trucks passing on the highway, smiling as if she were out on some great adventure, some sort of safari, and such naïveté repelled him. Clearly, she hadn’t the slightest grasp of the true dangers of the world. She was a murder waiting to happen.

“You’re not married, are you?”

He looked at her in surprise. “No, of course not, why would you think . . .”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. I just had this sudden thought, ‘Maybe he’s married.’ I don’t know why.”

Actually, the fact that she thought to ask the question raised her in his estimation. He briefly considered answering ‘yes’, curious what her response might be. “No. My wife left me years ago.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry.”

“No, no. Like I said, it’s been years.”

She said nothing for awhile, concentrating on her feet. A shiny, fifties-style diner gleamed from the lot ahead, but after that there was nothing but weeds and ill-kept road for a mile or more. Such stupidity, he thought. Women were killed in places like this. Bodies were dumped. So much unnecessary waste in the world. So much lost potential.

“I was married for years,” she said quietly. “Happily, but it was almost all I ever knew. Each day must be like an adventure for you. You must feel like you could do anything.”

She was giving him every opportunity to impress her with his lies. So this was the way it happened. This was the way nice, lonely women got themselves killed. “Right now,” he said, “I suppose I *could* do anything. Just to see how it would feel.”

“Oh, I can tell you have a great deal of potential. I could see that from the beginning.”

“Just to feel *anything*, really. People go to such lengths sometimes. Just to feel something.”

“That’s so true. And all the time it’s right there in front of you.”

“The opportunity is there. No one would know.”

“Absolutely. No one knows how any of us feels.” She grabbed his forearm and looked up into his eyes. “But I believe you can tell a lot about a person, if you just

look at them, really look at them.”

He returned her gaze, trying to let something come through that would beam down from his eyes and brand her. Not a warning exactly. Perhaps just a glimpse at what the human heart is truly capable of. But she hadn't a clue. “I can tell that you're a very sensitive person,” she said, misinterpreting everything. “Let me buy you breakfast.”

**They sat together** in the diner for over an hour eating their slow breakfast. Everything was too bright: the chrome trim around the walls and tables, the ghastly intensity of the fluorescents, the early sap of the day rising out of unpromising concrete to fill the air with brilliance. Her face. Older than his, he thought, much older than she'd seemed in the dark. But he was so bad with ages, he reminded himself. It suddenly occurred to him that *he* might look old. That's why she had taken such a risk, gone walking out into the darkness with a less-than-perfect stranger. Because he'd looked too old to do her any harm.

Make-up had caked near her eyes and at the left corner of her mouth. He could see now that she used a little too much lipstick. And something was wrong with her eye shadow: she looked more bruised than seductive. No doubt during the walk here she had perspired, and the make-up had run a bit. Or maybe it had happened during dancing. Some women perspired more, but he hadn't been aware of her dancing with anyone other than him. It had been as if she'd been waiting. Waiting for someone like him. Her murderer.

Not that he had ever murdered anyone. He'd never even punched anyone. His previous murders had been strictly academic. He was like one of those fellows who played entire games of chess in his head, and never went near a board and pieces. She might have been his first.

But the woman didn't know how to put make-up on anymore. That was it, wasn't it? She'd come to Jack's like this, and he hadn't known because of the dim lighting.

She smiled up at him. A small bit of congealed egg clung to one powder- and grease-smearing cheek. He picked up a napkin and dipped one corner into his water glass. “Here,” he said. “Here. You've got something on you. Let me.” And he reached over, and she sat still as a daughter while he smoothed the place by her mouth, and blended her eye shadow, and gently removed the food clinging to her cheek. “Like a picture,” he said. “Like a pretty picture.”

She held his hand. “You're a good man,” she said, knowing absolutely nothing about him, and it hurt him so to hear, and he could feel the anger coming as if from a great distance.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I have to go the bathroom.” He got up and walked to the back of the restaurant, and the hall that led to the restrooms, and he walked past the restrooms and out the back door, away from his first real victim.

The morning was hot and dusty and he was still dressed in his best outfit, the black shirt and slacks and the thin silver tie. He walked through the weed and dirt lot behind the diner and wedged himself through a break in the fence.

He walked down several blocks of bad pavement, poor houses and trashy yards. Ahead of him was a church, and a number of people in nice dresses and suits stood beneath an awning in the graveyard. He came as close to the funeral as he could. No one noticed him. Until a woman's voice, slightly to his left and behind. “I see I'm not the only one who's late,” she whispered, and drew closer, stepping beside him so

they looked like a couple who had traveled here together to pay their respects.

“I didn’t know her that well,” she said softly. “But I hear she was just a wonderful woman.”

He tried to look beyond the perfect make-up job, and could not. “I didn’t know her at all,” he said.

“I know exactly what you mean,” she replied, completely misunderstanding him, not knowing anything that would help her through the next few hours. ■

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Steve’s new and forthcoming work includes stories in *Outsiders*, *Dark Arts*, *Corpse Blossoms*, *Evermore*, and *Black Static* (previously known as *The 3rd Alternative*). This autumn Wormhole Books will be publishing Steve’s chapbook *The World Recalled*, which he also illustrated.

# IS IT BETTER NOW?

STEVE MOHN

**P**hilly Fischelle woke from the dream, in the dark, in his car, in the woods where he'd parked to wait till dawn, when he'd walk across a field to shoot a guy Charles DeCirce wanted out of the way.

Darkness like a solid, silence like a vault. Before, he had been able to look out his window and up through a break in the autumn trees and, because it was a moonless night, had seen vivid stars. But he'd known that the weather would turn and the overcast had moved in.

In the dream he had been stabbed and opened his eyes at that point, not in fear but the way you do when you know the alarm is about to go off. Wondered what time it was. The dashboard clock used to glow. He had put his watch in the glove box but didn't feel like rooting for it. He guessed it was three, three-thirty, time of night when you usually wake. He had coffee in a Thermos but that was for morning. He eased the stiffness in his back. You can't sleep at the wheel of a car, even a big Plymouth like his, a '67, eight years old, the front seat like a sofa. And Philly hadn't thought he would sleep. Yet he'd had that dream. You had to be out cold to dream like that, sharp as a Hollywood movie, with dialogue even:

"Yes, I am the doctor."

Clear as an actor's voice.

Philly lit an Old Gold. They made him wake with razor blades in his chest but that first puff told his body what it lived on. The purple afterimage of lighter flare burned to Day-Glo green. That doctor had looked like B.F. Skinner – who really was a doctor, a psychologist, he'd learned in high school. Mr LaPorte had tried to make Philly read a book by Skinner, about these people who lived in a place where they got little rewards all day to make them act right. Philly had read six pages so hardly felt Skinner was important enough to start showing up in his dreams to stab him deep in the belly with a carving knife.

But just like a movie. His car barreling through the woods at night – as if seen from a helicopter. Then it was like usual, because he never saw himself in dreams, he just lived them the way he lived his life. He was driving and he had a guy in the car, looked like a Neanderthal Man but in a flannel shirt. They came to a T-intersection of two country roads. The headlights splashed this wild array of destination and hazard signs, twenty, maybe thirty, more than you would find at a real intersection. Arrows pointing left, right, down. Curved arrows or two going off from one stem. But one was an S and the film-dream cut in close: it had a baby s-arrow coming off it. That was the only time he'd felt scared.

He was not scared now, though it bothered him to have to roll down the window, as if having it down to let the smoke out made him vulnerable to those maniacs in campfire tales who murder kids making out in cars.

Philly sighed smoke. He had left his car and gone up the road; it was bright behind him, light coming through the trees the way it does in movies. He found this old

rusted-out panel truck full of barking dogs. Dobermans. Vicious looking, but one took his hand gently in its long white teeth, led Philly back the way he'd come. This dog became that Neanderthal Man. Then Skinner, in a long coat, the light on his glasses, said: "Yes, I am the doctor." From a doctor's black bag he had taken a gleaming knife and plunged it into Philly's stomach.

Philly was not Philly by then: he had switched over to being Neanderthal DoberMan, while the guy Philly had been fell – but he was a rag dummy with a face stitched on, showing a long intestine of pulled-out upholstery stuffing. And he had awoken, not scared, only amazed that you could have a dream like a story of your life or the movie of it, not *meaning* anything so much as saying:

So this is it then. Today. Today makes three.

First time he shot a guy for Charles DeCirce, Philly Fischelle was sixteen.

**Drug deal. Should** have known. Philly should have known – he always told himself that. "You should of known," he'd tell himself, smoking, looking in the mirror late at night or after work. But you don't know anything at sixteen, so if guys like Charles DeCirce (never ever *Charlie*) seem to like having you around and kidding with you – you don't question it. And Charles was not after Philly. Charles had gorgeous girlfriends, neither slutty nor dumb. Like Gwen, the year Philly was sixteen. A little thinner, better clothes, Gwen could have been a Miss America. "Whole-some," Charles told Philly, making it two words and winking to emphasize the hole part. Being let in on that – it made you his pal. You could tell yourself that just hanging out with Charles would land you a girl like Gwen.

"She won't take a lotta shit from you but she'll ball your brains out."

And Philly would nod.

Then one day, in Charles's car: "Open the glove box there."

Charles always called it a glove *box*, never a glove compartment, so Philly called it that. He hit the button, the drawer dropped down. A square-angled gun as big as a car jack.

"Whoa," Philly said.

"Take it out, it's not loaded."

Heavy though. He guessed five pounds but learned later it was two and a half, pistol and magazine, a little more with seven rounds in the handle and one "in the pipe," as Charles liked to say. A forty-five.

"Point blank, you could blow a guy's head right off his neck."

Philly nodded. "Whoa." And fit his finger through the guard.

"Watch, it's loaded."

Philly froze. "You said it wasn't."

Charles shook his head. "Never take anyone's word."

Philly breathed in and out. "How do I check?"

"Put it back." Charles turned the ignition. "Show you at my place."

**Dawn. One moment** it's black-dark then you blink again and there's a shift so slight you nearly lose it. Trees like black veins cut out on deep purple sky. He had slept again. Dug his watch out of the glove box. Five thirty-five. October. The days weren't getting any longer.

He had an Old Gold with his first cup of coffee, the red Thermos cup hot in his

hand, the window open, fresh air. A bird started: *yeep yeep!* Philly wished he was in bed but this waking up with the woods, the birds, an animal rustling in the dried leaves stopping as if it had caught itself being too noisy – he liked that. But now that he could see individual trees he felt conspicuous; not so far off the road a Trooper couldn't drive by, ask what he was doing. "Yeah, the wife and me had a big fight – no, I ain't had nothin' to drink. I had 'em fill a Thermos at the HoJo." He knew how to lie to a cop. Sure as hell wasn't gonna shoot one. Even if his gun was in reach, it wasn't 'his gun' in that respect.

Not his gun, like Melanie was not his wife.

She would leave that creep McGuinn and marry Philly, if he asked. Philly bagged oats at the Agway seed elevator in Warners. It was go-nowhere but better than minimum wage and he got health and dental. And today he would get five hundred for the guy. Philly had a savings account he could feed it to. Too much of that and the IRS would think *What's this?* but he could launder it. Melanie would love it if he said: "Hey, I got this little savings account, let's go to The Keys." She'd be open-mouthed, hands out: "You *never* have money!" Melanie knew Charles was not an honest man and even complained that Philly wouldn't get in deeper: "It's what anyone else would do," she'd say. Though he couldn't be sure if she was taunting him or interrogating.

Melanie didn't know about the two guys he'd shot. You don't tell people that stuff. You try not even to think about it. And when you do, you treat it like that rainbow slick oil makes on street puddles. It's there and it's gaudy, but if you shift your angle slightly the colors go away; you still see the faint gray separation lines between the reds and blues but shift a little more and it's just black water on the street.

He drank more coffee then got out to take a leak and saw that he was well off the road; no Trooper would ever see his car. So many deeply wooded places around Syracuse, even with all the development going on, and Philly had grown up there, driving around at all hours, getting stoned or making out, backing into tractor paths or little lanes that cut down to swamps where people dumped trash. So when Charles called up: "Know that barn over on Bishop, across from the old fish hatchery?" Philly said: "Sure." Charles said: "There's this shit we gotta do."

Philly dashed coffee from the red cup, shook out the Thermos, screwed in the plug, screwed the cup back on. He locked the driver side and went around to the passenger side for his gun bag, locked that side, slung the gray canvas satchel on a shoulder and walked into the woods. Dry leaves crackled like potato chips, sticks broke underfoot. He wore a thin zippered jacket over a woollen turtleneck, tan golf cap. He didn't need the down coat he'd slept in. The walk would get him warm then he'd have to walk back.

It was some hunting season or other, not deer yet. Pheasant, maybe grouse. His father had hunted grouse, pheasant, had run bird dogs, English Setters. That was a long time ago. His father was dead, out mowing the lawn in a heat wave, a heart attack. His mother lived in Florida so his sister visited, mostly. But killing that first guy (not his father's death, nor his mother's move south) had been the true start of Philly's drawing back from things. He had gone numb and watched a lot of TV afternoons – *Mr Rogers' Neighborhood*, *Sesame Street*. Stoned often, living at home, he could go to his room if The Night came back, pretend to read. He'd lie on the bed, on his belly, a book open in his hands, and stare at The Night as if watching a movie or recalling a dream.

Titus, the guy's name. A fat man, mustache and goatee stitched around his mouth. Glasses. Wore his shirt-tails out. He and Charles met in a clearing, their cars facing, headlights on. "Just need to fix this deal," Charles said in the car. "Just fix it. Nothin' to it. But if he starts like he's gonna shit, show him that thing."

Should've *known*, Philly repeated like a mantra, churning his feet to brake his way down into a ravine. He paused in the bottom on rocks rolled smooth by a stream gone dry with the season, the stream bed and both sides of the ravine carpeted with fallen leaves, looking for the best way up the other steep side, for saplings to grab, pull himself up by. Winded by smoking, he looked downstream and wondered if, hopping from rock to rock and skirting the mushy spots that stayed damp till winter, you might find that second guy down that way. They had rolled him into a ravine like this, of which there were thousands all over New York State. In a year there would have been nothing left but bones pulled apart by raccoons, foxes, people's dogs. The skull would break down, rolled like a rock.

And that would be the second guy. Titus they'd left with his car, the lights out. He hadn't died right away. Philly had not meant to shoot him. But showing the gun, he'd adjusted his grip as he swung it up. It kick-banged out of his hand, stung like a hardball caught barehanded. Only a few feet away, Titus took it in his right lung and it spun him so hard the crap flying out of the exit wound sprayed Charles as well as back into the clearing. Titus recovered his balance but doubled over then sat, trying to breathe on one lung as the other filled with blood. When he lay back, his big belly working like blacksmith bellows, Charles said, "OK," as if he had ten seconds to find something hidden. Opened Titus's car, dug through it, found a cardboard box about the size you might get in the mail, then killed the lights. "OK," he said, and motioned Philly into their car. Stood watching Titus, holding the box like a schoolbook. "OK," as he got in behind the wheel. "OK." Drove from the clearing, Philly still holding the gun, Charles saying, "OK," but firmly now, nodding as if, soon, he would start to explain his new idea, had to set it in his mind first.

**The barn stood** apart from the woods, black with age, one end grown over with vine and a crowd of sumac. Between the barn and the woods where Philly had emerged lay a cornfield cut down to stubble. Empty rows combed to the edge of Bishop Road. A thick line of brush and trees hid the barn from the road. Philly went down the edge of the field, about a hundred yards, marching like his father, huffing a song that kept changing. One hand on the strap of his canvas satchel, he felt the forty-five beat time on his left side, heard the spare magazine, box of rounds rattle. Like I'm goin' to work, he thought. But this time would not be like the last. First time was an accident: knowing this had helped Philly past it. Like knowing Titus was no one to care about, just a guy, like Charles, dealing drugs, trying to be the main distributor for Central New York – that distribution now under Charles DeCirce, working out of Elbridge, a crossroads village on Route 5. The second time, Philly had been in this daze of simply not knowing what to do or even what was going on. Charles had had him over to the house many times since the first shooting, talking about it, not pushing it, making sure Philly was OK, making sure he had money. "You want a girl? I know a nice girl. A phone call and she's over here." Philly hadn't felt like it much but didn't want Charles thinking anything was wrong, that Philly might break up and himself become a guy who had to be out of the way, shit that had to get done.

So they all went out in the car, Charles, Philly and this guy, a big loud kid with pimples and blond hair like an old broom forever swept in one direction. A few joints, a few beers, some bennies. When they pulled off into a field to piss off the beer, Charles led them to the edge of some woods. Late summer, warm wind beating waves through the timothy grass. No moon. The guy talking a streak, his water flying off to one side in the wind – he was laughing when Philly blew his forehead into the trees.

Nothing to see. He pitched into the woods face first. Charles stepped down to straighten him out then rolled him down a brief but steep ravine, using a little flashlight to make sure he had rolled far enough. Hung up on a root but his dead weight spilled him over finally. Next day it rained. Philly Fischelle was eighteen.

That was two years ago. Philly had picked up the job at Agway in Warners, where Melanie McGuinn was in the office. Her husband worked down Newport Road in Camillus, at the cutlery, which meant he could have just about any knife that he wanted and that made him risky. But Melanie stayed till 4:30 most days and Philly hung around, talking. Melanie knew Charles.

“My oldest brother knew him, he was over the house a lot. You know he’s up to his ass in like drugs and stuff?”

“I don’t know,” Philly lied. “He never uses. I never see him stoned.”

She grinned at him lazily, wagging her head. She wore her long black hair like all the girls did, parted in the middle, and big round glasses, and had this fast head-down way of walking, like her knees didn’t bend – he’d seen her scissoring along the concrete aisles in the warehouse, between stacks of seed oats on pallets, a sheaf of inventory clutched in one hand. Caught her looking at him once when he was helping unload a boxcar and she stood waiting for Harrington, leaning on a loading bay garage door track, and Butch, on a lift truck, to quit yarning about the time the guy who owned The Cato Hotel lost it in a pool game. Philly smiled at her, like Harrington and Butch were hard to take but so what?

Melanie, grinning, cocked her jaw to one side, like she was crunching hard candy. Walked over with the sheaf of inventory. “Hey, Philly, this stuff look any good to you?” He stepped in close beside her to look at the sheets, her hip against his telling him that it was OK, his two fingers very light in the small of her back telling her that he would catch her if she fell.

A driveway rutted by tractor tires climbed a short rise to a wide open barn door, zinc wheels frozen on sliding tracks. Philly looked in, let his eyes adjust. A fairly clean concrete floor, nothing in it but a few broken deal chairs in back and a potbelly stove worth money had it not been a quarter ton of solid orange rust. He was early and went in to wait. Picked the chair in back that still had a seat and all its legs and sat, set his canvas satchel on the floor. He’d cleaned and oiled the gun and loaded both magazines.

He smoked, reminding himself to pocket any butts.

And asked himself: So, this is it then?

He made himself think again of the dream but it didn’t tell him anything. Dreams like that mean what they mean or mean what you make them mean by staring at them. And if he shot this guy today, then that was it. He was sober and knew he could do it, but if he did then that would be his life. But if he looked at Charles and handed him the gun (which was Charles’s gun anyway) and said: “I can’t do it,” Charles would



shoot the guy himself then wait till Philly turned his back and shoot him too. Philly knew it. He was in. The only way to stop being in was to be out of the way.

They weren't there yet, he could just leave, get his money or some of it (if he couldn't get it all at once) out of that bank machine he had a card for, get the rest at some other branch where they had a machine (to find one he might have to drive around) but then leave the state. Find something else like the Agway job – if he went far enough he wouldn't have to change his name. Charles was not so big a deal that he could track you to Singapore and have someone knife you. Maybe Charles just wasn't that big a deal period, or he wouldn't need Philly to do shit for him. He'd hire it out. But, no. He can have it be me, 'cause I always pull the trigger, my prints all over the gun. The Night I shot that guy, he didn't try to take the gun from me, didn't ask for it back, he looked in the trunk and came up with that satchel: which now lay on the concrete, gray light from a side window shaping the gun as if buried in dust, tenting the square box of rounds. Should've known, he thought, shaking his head. Charles said, opening the satchel for Philly to put the gun in: "Gotta take good care a this." Instead of throwing it away, dropping it in the lake, like he should have. He knew from *The Godfather* that people got rid of these guns. But he'd always been afraid to bring it up. Or get rid of it. Then what if Charles called and Philly didn't have it?

But that second time, the second guy, Philly realized, Charles wanted me, 'cause who'd think I'd shoot anybody? A kid, eighteen. And him too, a kid.

Well, I'm twenty now. That other kid, he was just loud. Only thing wrong with him was that. He was loud. Couldn't trust him. Seventeen.

He sat on the chair.

**A long white** Lincoln pulled up and parked in front of the open barn door. Philly blew smoke and ground out the cigarette exactly where he'd ground out others and slipped the stub into a pocket holding six. Scuffed the sooty ashes with his boot. The Lincoln wasn't Charles's but Charles stood out from behind the wheel with the keys. He wore most of a disco outfit – flared pants, large-collar shirt, shiny buckles on shiny shoes – but over it wore a leather jacket. His gold curls, in a Greek God cut, were squashed on one side. Though he seemed to care that someone might be watching him commit a capital crime, he seemed also to care that his haircut didn't look right, touching his hair as he slid along the white car to open the trunk. Charles was big as well as tall, strong enough to lift out of the trunk a small thin man with tied hands and feet and a red rubber ball in his mouth. Charles dragged him out of the open and into the barn.

Another man slammed the trunk. He filled a deep blue woollen overcoat so obviously expensive that Philly stared. Even in weak light, the fabric glowed. The man had black hair, nicely cut, dark eyes with sad baggy eyelids. Behind the eyes there didn't seem to be anyone. It was like the overcoat walked in.

Charles dropped that small thin man he was dragging. The overcoat told Charles: "Get him on his knees," and told Philly: "Let's get goin'." The thin man, hearing this, yelled behind the rubber ball, shook his head. Drool hung from his nostrils. Messy hair framed his bald pate. Satisfied with how the kneeling man looked, Charles backed away but cut a look at the blue overcoat and leaned at the small man, yelling: "You piece a shit!" then checked the overcoat to be sure he'd done it right. The

overcoat didn't seem to notice.

Philly thought: I can't do this.

"Hey, you." The overcoat talking. Philly looked at him. The man tapped his forehead with one thick finger. "I want to see the bullet come out here. You shoot him in the back of the head, make the bullet come out right here." Then he flung his hands out, indicating spray, like a director.

The kneeling man screamed, forcing more stuff out of his nose. He rapidly kicked the concrete with the square toes of what had been flashy shoes, squealing inside. Charles stood with his hands slightly out from his body, ready to step in if Philly couldn't do it. "Come on, Philly. Let's get this done."

Keening noise from the kneeling man. Philly squatted and plucked away the thin canvas, picked up the forty-five and stood. Moved the slide out a little, saw brass in the chamber and let it back easy. Thumbed off the safety and took up a stance, raised the gun straight out to about a forty-five degree downward angle. The overcoat stepped sideways for a better view of the kneeling man's forehead. Philly stepped back and swung the gun up level. Fired four times at the overcoat and swung a little right. Fired four more times. Seven in the handle, one in the pipe. Every one a chest shot. Loud. Loud. His hand stung, his ears rang. He heard, distantly, the empty magazine drop free, caught it and set it on the satchel to grab the full spare. He clapped it in and walked to the car.

Walked around the blood that lay in loops and threads. Flung droplets had rolled up dusty little balls on the concrete. Blood speckled the car. There was no one in the car but a gym bag sat on the back seat, new, blue and white, a Westhill gym bag with an emblematic Westhill Warrior, this Roman soldier in a plumed helmet, holding up a short sword. Philly opened the driver's door to unlock the back door and grabbed the bag, knelt by the car to zip it open.

Lots of money and not bank money. Bank money came in paper wrappers. This money was mostly old twenties in rubber-banded bricks. Twenty dollar bills that had paid for twenty dollar bags of pot.

He could not begin to guess accurately how much. He could not have then told you his own name.

Taking the gym bag, he went back in to where the kneeling man still knelt, eyes shut lightly as he waited for God to be good or just be. The blue overcoat lay face down with big bloody holes in the back. Charles lay curled on his side, facing the wall. Blood had pooled under both men. Philly dug out a pocketknife and cut only the kneeling man's wrist bonds then folded the knife away.

"Guy in the leather jacket has the keys. Take the car, get out a here." Philly collected his satchel, cut his eyes all around. Then his hands started shaking. His whole body started shaking. He walked out fast with the satchel and the gym bag in one hand, the forty-five still in the other.

Did I do that? Did I know I'd do that?

**Is it better** now? He walked fast along the plowed edge of the cornfield, the neat rows of stubble describing the gentle roll of the field. They should of known! he raged. Guy in the overcoat could of made Charles do it. But, no. Right there's the whole point of having me! Marching up the cornfield, and maybe because he worked for Agway, the word *cultivated* came to mind. Charles fuckin' *cultivated* me! I do the shit – stupid kid!

It was better now. Yes.

But killing Charles closed up his throat and he wept. He had to stop.

People would hear about it. People knew Charles – Melanie knew him to say hi. Last time Charles had looked her over, liking her bust and trim waist, the flare of her hips. Her eyes cut away.

With his gun arm sleeve Philly wiped his wet face, sniffed hard and spat. “Man!” he yelled raggedly at no one.

“Hey, man!”

From somewhere behind.

“Man – wait up!”

When he was sure he had heard it, he felt as if he’d dropped all the acid in Central New York. Not even thinking who it might be, but hearing the running footfalls behind him, Philly swung the gun up, swung around and squeezed one off dead-center on the thin guy’s chest.

*snap*

Full magazine but he’d forgotten to jack one in. Out of sheer relief that he hadn’t blown the running man in half, Philly yelled: “You fucking stupid son of a bitch!” Doubled-over to yell it.

“Hey, man – wait up!”

Still doubled-over, but now in disbelief, Philly laughed in gusts of gulped breath: “What? What? Wait up? GO AWAY!” He waved the gun.

“No, man – it’s cool!”

“No, it’s not *cool*! Get away from me!”

“Man!” No better at running than Philly, the man staggered to a walk but did not halt. Kept coming with open hands halfway up. “Just wait, man!”

Mediterranean with a Florida tan, he had a clown nose and hangdog eyes, frizzy hair going grizzled. He wore the disco look too but still had his jacket. The open shirt with large collar, the flared cuffed pants and the obvious lack of a big gold neck chain or bracelet, or those chunky rings, made him look as if he’d been rolled the night before and left in the country: he had just come-to and found a guy hunting grouse with a forty-five and no dogs, which would make him pretty good but, at least, someone you could ask for help. (Or so it went through Philly’s head, like LSD logic.) Stumbling over tractor clods in those flashy shoes, halfway holding up his hands, he kept coming, grinning now the grin of a man who has nothing to offer but he’s going to bargain with you anyway.

“I just gotta talk to you a minute!”

“No, get outta here! Get the goddamn car. I told you where the keys are!”

“Man, I gotta talk, it’s just –”

Philly swung the gun up. “Get *out* of here!” he roared.

Anyone awake within a mile must have heard it. Deer would have looked up. The man held his hands higher, shut his eyes, but kept walking.

“You gotta listen, man. You got to.”

Philly set the gym bag and satchel down. Jacked a round into the chamber. Pointed. “*You* listen,” Philly said quietly. “You go away. You have no time. You get away from me and stay away. You don’t have to thank me, you don’t have to know me. It’s over. It’s just over. Now just go.”

The man nodded, grinning, understanding perfectly, but shook his head. “I just

need that bag.”

“Go. Away.”

The man nodded. “I gotta have that bag.”

“You can’t.”

“I know, it’s cool, but I gotta.”

“No. Go away. I gotta get away from here now,” Philly said. “I need some money. I saved your –” Philly searched for words “– skinny ass in there, now go away. Take the fuckin’ car, sell it. Dig those guys’ wallets out – must have all kinds a cash. Credit cards. Why don’t you run? What’s the matter with you?”

The man wagged his head, grinning but weeping too without tears; he had wept himself dry in the trunk of that Lincoln.

“I gotta have the bag. I owe that money.”

“No – stupid – they’re dead – didn’t you look at them?” Tears welled. Philly tried to fling them away by shaking his head. His stomach suddenly hurt so bad he bent over, holding the gun up, then, afraid the man might try to grab it, made himself stand up straight. He breathed in, shuddering, swallowing. Stared at this desperate man, who had been, moments ago, as surely dead as any man condemned to die at dawn by a firing squad. Philly told him: “You’re flipped. I’m sorry, but you – you just have to go home. I have to go.”

“I need that money. Or these guys are gonna kill me.”

“Jesus Christ!” Philly hissed through his teeth, searching the sky. “Those guys – are dead! You don’t *owe* them anything. You’re freaked out. I get it. But all you have to do is go away – forget it.”

The man swung his head and shoulders back and forth guiltily. “No, man, it’s other guys – I owe the money to these other guys. *Other* guys.”

Philly sniffed hard to clear his nose. Lowered the gun. It was possible. Guy could have had a bag of money, Charles and the overcoat got mad at him about something else, figured they’d just take the money. Could even pay Philly out of the bag and keep their own five hundred.

But there was a lot of money in the bag. Say it was all twenties and every rubber-banded brick was a thousand. How many bricks in a gym bag? Fifty, easy. Fifty thousand dollars right there. Could be twice that or more – and what if it’s fifties on the bottom?

He and Melanie could go to The Keys, never come back. Philly saw a boat, bright sky, blue water. Saw Melanie shutting her eyes, showing her teeth, going: “Awww, Jesus!” the way she always did when he made her come. Nights like that, lined up. Palm trees.

Either that or some gray kitchen in a second-floor walk-up in Warners, that creep McGuinn, drunk outside, beating the door: “Juss wanna tockt’ya, Melanee!” Night after night of that, till he finally breaks his neck falling down the damn stairs. And, any time, she could say: “This isn’t worth it.”

Philly looked hard at the small thin man.

You can shoot him.

You shot Charles. You shot four guys now, and now you get something for it, finally.

Philly picked up the gym bag, the satchel, turned and walked away, toward the woods and his car.

“Man – you can’t do this, man!”

Get him in the woods. Stand out here like this, someone's bound to come by. Stumbling footfalls behind him fought tractor clods. Philly wore hiking boots.

"Man – come on!"

Philly kept going. Guy like you, head up your ass so far, a stick a dynamite wouldn't get it out. What's one less of you?

"Man – come on, man!"

Yeah, come on! Jerk.

Philly Fischelle had never been so coldly angry in his life. Now you know what you believe, he told himself. What he'd been too scared to feel the night he shot Titus, too stoned to feel the night he shot that second guy, he felt now. He had saved this man's life – the man should have gotten the gym bag out of that Lincoln and given it to Philly. "Here, man. Take it. I want you to have it." You should have known. Nothing's ever that clean, like he's this innocent man and all you have to do is one good deed.

"Man, it's South America, man – you don't know what kind a shit you're getting into!"

"I'm not in it," Philly said.

"Man, come on. It's coke money, man! I sold the coke, I owe the money!"

Philly kept walking, the edge of the woods not twenty yards away.

"This is so unfair, man!"

Philly wagged his head, yelled over one shoulder. "You're selling coke and I have to be fair?"

"I have a wife and kids, man!"

"You shouldn't have a wife!" Philly yelled. "Sure as hell shouldn't have kids."

"I know, man. Think I don't feel sorry?"

"Fuck what you feel." Philly ducked under a low bare butternut limb, beat through the twiggy brush into the woods. Vertical trunks like columns stood in the baked leaves. No underbrush. The ravine he had crossed before made a scar like a wrinkle in a blanket. Brush rattled as the man in the wrong clothes fought through, brambles grabbing him, creepers catching the squared-off points of his shoes. He tripped and fell to his hands and knees.

Philly turned and looked at him. "How much money's in this bag?"

The man stayed on hands and knees, seeming to count, dunking his head as he caught his breath. "Twenty grand."

"If I count and there's more –"

"A hundred and three. OK?"

It sounded like a number you might end up with.

A hundred and three thousand dollars.

Philly said, "We'll split it."

"I gotta –" But the man's breath went out of him. He seemed to kowtow to Philly. Then pushed himself up and said: "I gotta pay it all back, man."

"Sell your house," Philly said.

He shook his head. "It's not worth that."

"It's worth fifty. My Mom sold our house for fifty, couple years ago, and it was little."

The man shook his head. "It's not worth ten!"

"There's that Lincoln out there. Those guys' wallets, credit cards. That guy with

the overcoat must have a watch on worth a thousand bucks.”

The man shook his head, weeping openly. “You ever pawn a thousand-dollar watch? You get a hundred dollars for it!” He wept, sank back on his heels, fit his face into both hands and wept like a mourner at a grave. He was misery, it was his name. He’d screwed up and screwed up and now here he was. He’d spent most of the night in the trunk of a car, knowing a bullet would kick him in the head come morning. Knowing it was all his own fault. Maybe even thinking he *should* die. He raised himself to spread his hands and tell Philly: “I’m a shit! I screw myself. I’m never right. I’ve had every idea you can have!” He shook his bony, knuckled hands. “None of them work – ’cause I had them! Anyone else would be OK. You say you’ll do this, they’ll give you money. It all looks so goddamn reasonable! But you try it yourself and a thousand things go wrong. You can’t keep up. And then you have some kid – it’s your kid, it’s your mistake like.” He swallowed mucus and tears. “And he’s lookin’ at you and he knows you’re stupid.” He began to laugh. Tears rolled down his face, made his agonized grin soaking wet. “So you try somethin’ else.” He sniffed, wiped his eyes. “Sur-prize!” He picked up dry leaves and threw them like confetti.

Philly looked the other way, into the woods, to spare the man or himself, he wasn’t sure. Both.

“You know, this morning I knew I was gonna shoot you. I just hadn’t met you yet. If I’d met you already, I would of shot you.”

The thin man nodded, laughing and weeping. Shook both index fingers at Philly, as if Philly had nailed it.

Yet he had come out here to try to get his money, had run after Philly with no gun, not even a stick. You could show him the bullet, put it in, point the gun at him. He would stay on you like burdocks.

But a hundred and three thousand dollars. Philly driving an eight-year old Plymouth, renting a walk-up in Warners to save on gas because of OPEC, walking to work mornings, walking back with Melanie late afternoons, then her walking back to get her car.

Shoot him.

Would it change when he touched Melanie, when he gathered her to him with his fingers light on her back, just above the swell of her behind? Would it be different pulling her in to kiss, her face lowering just before, eyes closing as he angled up her glasses?

Philly separated the straps of the canvas satchel from the gym bag handles and slung the satchel over one shoulder. Stood weighing the gym bag, creating a physical knowledge of one hundred and three thousand dollars – since he knew what gym bags weighed. Then half flung, half dropped it on the crisp leaves, said:

“Go on, beat off.”

He listened to, rather than watched, the miserable loser carefully draw the bag of money to his breast and stand with it like a dead baby. Heard him turn in the crisp leaves and *crunch crunch* out of the woods, through the brush into the field. Through a hole in the brush and naked twigs Philly watched the man leap stubble toward the barn and the car he had to use.

No. Fuck this. Shoot him. Philly raised his gun, sighting along it expertly. One shot would knock out a vertebrae. Philly watched the man run, small off the wedge at the end of the barrel, run until he reached the car, used a sleeve to wipe the blood

off and get in then get out and run into the barn. When he comes out, shoot him. It was a hundred yards and most people with a forty-five couldn't hit the ground at that distance. But Philly lined him up on the sights, followed him into the car, at the wheel now, a man-shape target, dark in the white car, smaller and smaller as he backed into the road, shifted into drive.

Philly stood as if carved, his arm shaking, still aiming, starting to ache, the weight at the end pulling down. ■

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A spate of romanticized hitman movies made Steve's gorge rise. He asks: "Is it possible for this kind of person to redeem himself at all?" Steve's first crime story appeared in *Crimewave* and he's since written and published several more. He also writes sf/slipstream stories, which have also been widely published in venues that include *Interzone* and *The 3rd Alternative*.

## RYAN G. VAN CLEAVE

**N**O PARKING – TOW ZONE doesn't mean the same to Javier as it does, apparently, to Americans – in Ensenada, if you're willing to bust up some slobby-drunk \$3-an-hour tow guy, you're OK, or there's always those kids who beg “*Cuidarte el coche, mister?*” – so this evening when the lantern-jawed cop with the world-loves-me grin moved to impound the illegally parked truck, Javier did what any irritable, lousy-day-havin' Mexican worth his *cojones* would've: he gut-shot the bastard and headed for the border.

Earlier that day, cruising north on Sepulveda in a back-jacked GMC Sonoma, with *el Virgen de Guadalupe* in green and pink neon glow-in-the-dark paint on each door, Javier was a juggernaut of success who should've been king of the world. His Tommy Hilfiger jeans pockets bulged with a rubber-banded wad of fives and tens, part of the \$4,800 he got for selling the rights to one of his latest songs, ‘Love Me, Love Me, Love Me’, to Mariah Carey's people.

He always carried cash like this.

Something about the sag of money in his jeans made him feel safe, like he could take any punch the world was going to give him. Today, though, he felt like he'd been slugged in the stomach so hard the wind was knocked out of him and try as he might, he couldn't catch it back.

**The conversation with** his agent last night had gone like this:

“C'mon, kid. They just don't think it'll be a smash.” Arnie called all his clients ‘kid’, though he himself was only twenty-eight. His office was waist-high with folders, memos, stacks of manuscripts and lyrics, unattached wires and phone cords.

Javier said, “I get it.”

“Fickle business, and the stars are worse than most is all I can say,” said Arnie. “Really sorry, kid.”

Javier asked, “Any chance of doing some jingles? Dog food, diapers, anything?”

Arnie put his arm around Javier and led him to the door. “I'll let you know. But let me give you a piece of advice, *gratis*. You go around pissing off the star-power and you're done. *El fin*.”

“But it really was an accident,” Javier said.

Arnie shook his head. “Kid, if Tina Turner says you grabbed her tits, then by God you grabbed her tits. I don't care if you were falling or drunk or bumped in the ass. This is L.A. What happens is what the person with more money said happened.”

**Even driving an** ass-kickin' pickup didn't help, though it clearly had cool hydraulics and 400-watt subwoofers that when he turned them way up, the air those things put out was enough to make the CD player skip. Someone had dumped a lot of money into this pickup. Javier cranked up the Marilyn Manson CD he found in the player as loud as a jackhammer, but then clicked it off, finding the grim silence of the



afternoon more suitable. Traffic was light largely because people came out in droves to the beaches, multitudes seeking a greater happiness in the sun-mocked waters of the ocean even though the sand was too gritty, the beaches just plain dirty, and the haze too thick. Sometimes they still found a bit of happiness, but only for an afternoon, a weekend. They didn't understand anything.

Javier drove as fast and recklessly as he dared, weaving from lane to lane, not even caring that this car wasn't registered in his name. It had been parked slantwise across a handicapped spot and a half in front of Manny's Bottle Store when Javier pulled up, intending to grab a few sixers of St. Paulie's to booze away the day. Keys were in it, engine was running. How the hell couldn't he have done it?

It became a game, to see how long he could drive with his eyes pressed so tight he saw stars wheeling through the canopy of night on the back of his eyelids. First the gas pedal, then lay off, then more and more, then off, until he barreled along at eighty-eight, passing cars moving in the same direction like they were in reverse.

The Los Angeles sky was stark blue, marred by a few radium-white clouds. Most everything looked unnatural to him, not just zooming along in a stolen pickup with a three-pound gun rammed into the waist of his pants, but for the better part of his life it'd been this way. With the constant drilling of his granola-eating, Birkenstock-wearing, World Wildlife Federation sponsoring, No-Nukes parents, the world was a morass of pollution and ecological corruption, no matter how placid and serene it might appear to the untrained eye.

As much as Javier tried to ignore that sordid part of his childhood, he found himself slipping little geo-conscious messages in his songs: *love me, baby, and make the sky pure; plant a tree, baby, so I know our love's sure*. He never let anyone see those early lyric drafts, loaded with doozies that were mercilessly slashed with red pen on later revisions.

He felt like if he took another dollar for writing some song that made his insides churn he'd kill himself. And yet he was pissed that his career was put in a tailspin by Tina's bad mood bitchiness. He didn't grab her wrinkled old titties. Who would? He pushed the car faster until he could almost, with his eyes clenched in a death-grip of blackness, know intimately what it feels like to flop feet-over-head from four miles up, the wind roaring like falling into the mouth of a gurgling volcano, everything splattered into a morass of color and brightness as the world revolved below, waiting to take him for good . . .

✦ There were horns. He shook himself from the aftereffects of vertigo and realized he had come to a stop on the inside lane of Sepulveda, backing up traffic a good block and a half, his chronically faithful survival instinct taking over during his lapse into chaos, autopiloting him to a stop. He gave the Oriental gangbangers in the dark Mercedes behind him the finger then leisurely coaxed the car to thirty miles an hour. The nausea of deep anger – shame? – tightened his stomach into a knot. Quivering uncontrollably, he remembered finally to breathe.

Javier's face and forehead were covered in droplets of sweat. *Is this what it's like to lose your mind?*

Desperate for something sugary and maybe a six-pack or two, he screeched to a stop at a White Hen parking lot. Javier did the bottom two buttons of his peanut-brown windbreaker to cover the gun. The White Hen was empty save himself and three others. A halfway attractive blonde behind the counter thrust her body into a

dancer's pose, one meatless hip angled forward and her chin, too, pouting out as she examined herself in the silvered security dome in the upper corner. In her plain khaki White Hen Uniform and shapeless pants, it was an unusual juxtaposition of sexiness and sheer foolishness, kind of like those old Cyndi Lauper hits. An older man with perfect white teeth and a cane smiled awkwardly at Javier, then tap-tapped out, three boxes of fat-free Ho-Hos under his arm. The last was a small woman with deep brown eyes that seemed set a little too close. She looked directly at him though he tried to duck her gaze behind a circular rack of Batman comic books.

"Señor Flores?" she asked, her small face braving a look of disbelief. "Oh-my-God-it's-an-honor! I'm transcribing your *La Canción de las Mujeres Azules* for oboe, piano, and xylophone. It's an amazing piece." A relatively pretty woman with a soft Virginia accent, the particular timbre of her voice reminded him of Whitney Houston, who he hated with a passion if for no other reason than her people always tried to lowball him. "You're amazing."

Javier shook his head no, then lied, "*No hablo ingles.*" She was wearing a long dark-red skirt and very high heels, which he would've considered sexy had it not been today of all days. The type of person he'd love to sit by on a plane across the country, to share a bottle of overpriced champagne with. She couldn't be more than twenty-five.

"But your bio says you're from Boston."

"*No entiendo*, I'm sure." Ensenada, Mexico, really, but he wasn't about to point out her error. This sort of attention was like a branding iron on raw nerves. If he'd wanted to be a star, he'd have stayed on as a backup in Julio Iglesias' band – he'd have gotten his shot soon enough – but after Madonna thanked him by name and flashed a picture at the Billboard Music Awards, one helluva bad picture of them hugging after splitting a liter of cheap bourbon in Barcelona, everyone knew who the hell he was and it was driving him nuts. He was scooping fans off like fly carcasses from the grille of a bug zapper; merciless in their one-track minded pursuit.

She slid forward, eyes downcast. "Do you think . . . My God, I can't believe I'm even asking this . . . but do you think you might be willing to, um, to take a quick peek at my piece? See if you can give a few pointers?"

Here Javier fell victim to laughter, needing longer than he expected to regain control of myself. "Quit riding my ass, lady," he finally said, his patience with the world at an all-time low.

At this woman started sniffing, moments away from tears. Javier was the type of guy who took care of people, would offer a stranger a Kleenex or change for the bus, but right this moment, all he wanted to do was smack her. He sighed several times, deeply. The feeling didn't go away. A brief stint in Menudo, followed by a long tour doing background vocals for Julio Iglesias, and now an Academy Award, a couple of Billboard Music Awards and four Top-10 hits, all the cash he could realistically need – it almost seemed not worth it at the cost of his once-treasured privacy. And with the Tina Turner thing, he was blacklisted, so the future looked bleak, too.

"You go home now," he snapped, a sour taste in his throat which accompanied the numbing sensation that had become his life.

The woman blubbered, "I don't think I can." She spun her head to the side, away from him, to fix upon a crimson stain on the floor next to the Icee machine that chugged wildly, its snowblower blades chewing through a windowed tub of soupy

reddish liquid labeled Bananaberry. The second tub's flavor, Grape, was empty, though the stir-blades still spun diligently through the air.

"Why not?"

"I thought you didn't speak English."

Javier stood immobile, giving away nothing. God, it was hot in that store.

She said, "OK, OK. That wasn't fair. But I have to go with you."

"What?"

"My horoscope said I would meet someone famous and that we'd have an adventure together." The way she emphasized 'adventure' made him wonder if she was trying to pick him up. Songwriters never got picked up.

"Look, I'm not at all famous and even more important, you don't know what you're getting yourself into," he said, unbuttoning his coat to flash the dark hilt of the pistol. It was a Desert Eagle .44 magnum, a doorbuster pistol that'd pulverize a skull at close range. At least that's what the fellow at the gunshop who wore an old Panama hat and had a nose that looked knee-smashed had said two years ago after his folks' place in Monterey was busted into. The best type of gun for home protection was what Javier wanted and this big cannon of a thing was what he got.

Her face remained smooth, expressionless. What he took for paralyzed confusion clearly wasn't when her eyes narrowed and she broke the silence by purring, "I've got handcuffs and shackles in the trunk of my Fiero."

With Javier unable to speak, she took the advantage to sidle close, transforming before his eyes into a sleek vixen with a mouth obliquely shaped, designed specifically for God-could-only-imagine. "I had no idea someone like *you* could be this wild," she murmured, looking sideways into his face.

Behind the counter, the dancer/clerk sucked on an Icee then tried hard to walk on her toes, stumbling again and again into the wall of cigarette cartons behind her, cursing angrily.

Javier recoiled, bought three twin-packs of Twinkies, then pushed through the glass door out into the muzzy heat of late afternoon. She trailed, though he refused to look at her as he got into the pickup. She stood – stunned, maybe – at the front of the store, hands on hips, regarding him oddly as he screeched off, not even caring that for the second time he'd been too distracted to buy booze. A good old-fashioned cowboy bar is what I need, he thought, cranking the engine hard until she disappeared from sight in the rear-view mirror.

Not dark yet, stars popped to life in the sky that was grayed-over with smog. He ripped open the first pack of Twinkies with his teeth then ate them so fast he barely tasted the creamy white filling sliding down his throat, coating it, causing him to cough hard. He wondered what it'd feel like to be unable to breathe. And just like that, he was thinking about Eileen Statner and the gaping emptiness he now felt at the memory of her, the first girl he'd ever slept with. Other thoughts wriggled loose, how she shaved the delta of skin between eyebrows a little thicker than a person might want and there were the just-a-little-too-snug wool church girl skirts that he loved to create static rubbing against, but mostly when he thought of her now – ever since he'd seen her name among those missing when ValuJet 592, an ancient DC-9 en route to Atlanta from Miami, crashed in the Everglades – all he came up with was a blank, like dipping a bucket into a well and bringing it back up, still empty.

That accident had happened two days ago, Saturday, May 11, 1996, but it was only

this morning at the Starbuck's near his apartment via the *L.A. Times* that Javier realized he had a personal connection to this otherwise innocuous tragedy. A fire had broken out in the cargo hold, said the article, filling the cabin with smoke and probably asphyxiating the 110 passengers and crew members before they were swallowed by the swamp; Javier gave the pickup a lot of gas as he wondered if Eileen's pretty half-Greek/half-Italian face scrunched up as she tried so hard to gulp air when there was none to be had.

**The first bar** he came to was a dive, little more than a gutted brownstone, really, named Teddy's. Javier tucked the Desert Eagle under the passenger seat and went in, not caring that he'd left the Sonoma half in a fire lane, half in a handicapped zone. It was the only available spot within two blocks and he just didn't give a crap about much other than drowning the growing feeling of pure panic in his chest. He knew he could numb it until it became manageable, but it wasn't going to be easy.

Unlike everywhere else Javier'd been today, Teddy's was packed. He chose a seat next to a fragile old white-haired man who folded and recoiled from a cinnamonoy shot, if the bitter stink of his breath was any clue. The bartender, an old blotchy-faced guy who'd obviously spent too many days on the beach, took his request for a bottle of vermouth without blinking, giving him a bottle of halfway respectable hooch and a glass.

"Long day?" barks the bartender from the pail of soapy water he dipped glasses into. Javier took a slug of liquor, nodded. "The longest."

"You're at the right place. Most've these guys went down before noon."

The yuppie-ish guy on Javier's other side smelled like limes and cigarette smoke, a not altogether unpleasant combination, though he had never in his life smoked. Something about the cracked reddish bulge of the man's lower lip gave Javier the idea that he, like the others, apparently, frequented Teddy's. He was wearing a brown now-serviceable Willi Smith sport jacket that once surely cost eight hundred dollars.

"Bum one?" Javier asked, accepting one from the pack of Marlboro Menthol and lighter, then firing it up like a pro. He inhaled too deeply at first but managed to swallow most of it without sputtering like a half-drowned idiot in the deep end of a pool. Asphyxiation. The word itself gave him the shudders.

"Not much of a smoker, are you." Wasn't really a question, the way he asked.

"It's been a long day," said Javier, as if that were an answer to damn near every question. His barstool teetered beneath him on three mis-sized legs. The feeling that he could topple at any second, go careening off his – at least for the moment – safe perch, gave him a wild sense of randomness.

Javier wondered if Eileen'd had any kids. He hadn't spoken with her in, what, seventeen years? Javier stubbed out the cigarette against the side of the bar. The smoke wasn't doing anything for him.

"Cocksucker," mumbled the old man. Javier put down his glass with a sudden flare of adrenaline and the urge to hurt, but realized that the old guy was simply talking to himself, head buried in the crook of his arm, reliving some old memory himself that likely wasn't pleasant, from the look of it.

The ex-yuppie turned to Javier and asked, "So what's your sign? Whaddya do for a living? Come here often? Pick a line – I'm drunk as a cinder block and just feel like talking."

Javier poured another and downed it as if he needed alcohol to fortify him saying, "Probably won't believe this, but I write music."

The man nodded. "I played trombone when I was in sixth grade." He was drinking martinis and each time he put the glass to his lips, his hands shook so bad that he dribbled onto his chin, his now-multi-stained oxford shirt. Javier wondered if he had a disease that made someone shake like that.

"Michael Laski," he said, holding out his hand for Javier. They shook.

"My name's Javier Flores."

"Isn't that Spanish for something?"

"What?"

"Flo-res."

"Yes."

"What?"

Javier sighed. He'd had this exchange at least a dozen times in his life. "Flowers."

"Flo-res. I knew someone with that name once."

"Yeah. We're all related."

The man cackled with laughter. "Doesn't sound like the name I'd expect from someone white as my grandma's ass, either," said the man, spilling a bit more of his martini onto his face as he slurped.

"I was born in Mexico, but my parents were Americans who'd gone there for a world hunger relief program, that sort of thing. Thought it'd be ethnically proper to give me a true Mexican name so here I am, Javier Flowers."

"Good to know you, Mr Flowers," the man said, extending a hand again. "I'm Michael Laski."

Javier ignored the hand in hopes the man would stop talking to him, but then Javier realized he wanted to talk. Didn't matter that it was some boffo drunk, either.

Javier said, "Can you believe I've never been back to Ensenada – that's where I was born – since I was two years old? I've always thought of myself as a Mexican/American, but here I am, twenty-six years old, and I don't have any memory of where I was born. Isn't that nuts? With my folks being world-hoppers and having grown up in so many different places, it's like I don't have a heritage at all. Like I belong to no place and no one."

The man *hhmmmed* appropriately but then his eyes rolled back into his head and he lumbered off to the bathroom, hand over mouth. Just when Javier was settling in for a little quiet, save the jukebox wailing old 80s singles – Van Halen and Devo, mostly – she walked in. The girl from White Hen. She came into the warm bar-darkness and sauntered right over to the now-vacant seat and took it.

". . . the hell you doin' here?" demanded Javier, losing the first few words in a choke on vermouth.

"Look, I didn't mean to scare you off."

Javier stopped her. "You didn't. I just forgot to buy beer at the store so I came here."

"I like your music, so therefore I like you. I lied about the horoscope thing, I admit, but I'm not ready to give you up yet." Here she signaled the bartender for a beer.

"Suck my cock, cocksucker." The old man again, apparently talking in his sleep now.

The alcohol was starting to work its way through Javier now, pulsing like fire through his veins, his joints, a not-entirely unpleasant kind of agony. “Who the hell do you think you are?” he asked.

She smiled, “My name’s Tamara, but I’d prefer if you called me Tam.”

“Tam,” he repeated mechanically, testing the weight of it on his lips. “Tam.”

“Look, I said I was sorry about the handcuff thing,” she said, somewhat exasperated, thought she cheered some when the bartender slid a frothy Busch Light at her. “Maybe I should’ve offered you plain, ordinary *you drop your pants I’ll drop mine* wall-socket sex. Maybe I should’ve kept my fool mouth shut, I don’t know. But what I do know is that I really am a big fan of your music and I really am arranging a good number of your songs for high school bands and quintets. I want to know about the music, where it comes from.”

Javier snorted. “Music’s the last thing on my mind. I’d rather eat hot coals than talk, let alone think about music.” ‘Achey-Brakey Heart’ cranking away from the speakers over the bar didn’t help.

Tam slurped some of the grayish froth from her mug, then laughed unpleasantly. “OK. What do you do in your spare time other than write music?”

“Nothing,” he admitted, a little shocked at the truth of it. He took another pull of vermouth. There really wasn’t much to him other than that, despite his parents’ best efforts to get him interested in books, the Peace Corps, Boy Scouts, soccer, and a few dozen other activities normal people engaged in. “Not one thing.”

“Well, if you were going to start up a new hobby tomorrow, what the heck would it be?”

He paused, then surprised himself by saying, “I’d want to be a soldier. You know. One of those guys who dresses up in Civil War gear and gets out in a field with three hundred other guys. I’d want to be one of the guys who dies. You wouldn’t think about it, but there’s a problem with dying right off. Some of these things last all afternoon and if you get whacked early, you gotta lay there all afternoon pretending you’re dead. Me? I’d be perfect for that.”

“Yeah,” said Tam, stretching out her arms as she stifled a yawn. “Me, too.”

Javier wasn’t sure if she was teasing, but didn’t really care. He added, “I’d even go to Alabama – that’s where most the Southerners’ graves are, I think – to pick out someone specific to re-enact. Someone from the Virginia 19th Infantry. A man named Walter, probably. That’s who’d I be.”

“First or last?”

“Huh?”

“A man with the first name Walter, or the last name? It makes a difference.”

“I suppose it does,” Javier said, without saying which he meant.

“So you’d really like to pretend you were some Civil War guy who’s long dead and buried, laying around in some field somewhere for a couple of hours while other grown men pretend to shoot each other with play-guns?”

Javier said, “Why the hell not? I mean, my God, I haven’t done one thing in my life that I can look back at and say *Cristo, yo esto loco*, you know? I write Top-40 songs, for Pete’s sake.”

The rows of beer glasses on shelves behind the bar began to rattle as the unmistakable sounds of a jet overheard rumbled out even Garth’s wailings for a few moments. No one reacted to the familiar noise except Javier, who looked from side

to side in a panic.

“How close are we to L.A.X.?” Javier asked the bartender stiffly.

“Maybe fifteen minutes on a good day.”

“Well, goddammit,” Javier said, drinking more vermouth in a gulp than he meant and sputtered a bit trying to keep it all down. He felt awful, and it wasn’t just the alcohol or the bad music.

“You OK, soldier-boy?” asked Tam. “You look kinda pale.”

And before he could answer, there it was, ‘Love Me, Love Me, Love Me’ blasting out of the jukebox. Though he’d only received the money for the rights late Friday, the actual song had been in Mariah’s hands for a few weeks – long enough for her and the studio musicians to zip off what they hoped was another hit single and sure enough, here the damn thing was. Javier couldn’t even imagine how a bar like this had a single so new it couldn’t have been out for more than a week. He hadn’t even received his copies let alone caught it on the radio.

He was up and moving, elbowing his way through the crowd until he found the duct-taped jukebox cord. Javier yanked hard and the music groaned to a halt.

“Hey, asshole!” growled some college-age kid who dressed like a young professor but looked like a tight end. The kid glanced at a petite redhead who sat at a round table behind him as if seeing how she’d react to his machismo. “We was listening to that!”

“*Chinga tu madre*,” Javier said, turning to head back to his vermouth.

“Hey, asshole! Get your ass *back* here,” the kid yelled, grabbing Javier’s shoulder hard and it was that physical contact, that invasion of buffer zone that did it. Javier snapped.

He grabbed a handful of well-gelled hair and snapped the bastard’s head down at the same time he drove his knee upward, impacting so hard there was an awful crunch as the guy’s nose disintegrated. Wheezing wildly, the guy collapsed backward against the table, all at once spitting blood and gasping for air and sobbing like an infant, and the redhead was moaning, trying to beg someone to stop the fight but no one was going to get in the middle of this bloody melee, and evident to everyone in the bar, Javier had the taste of it now and wasn’t about to stop.

He kicked the guy in the crotch and hefted a bottle from a nearby table like a club when the bartender, who was a skinny man in his late fifties, slapped the bottle from Javier’s hand. The sound of it smacking into a thousand fragments on the floor brought Javier, more or less, back to reality, which included a crowd of stunned onlookers and a well-bloodied two hundred and thirty pound college kid rolling on the floor, blind with pain and rage at having his nose broken and his nuts bashed all to hell.

“Get the hell outta here. Now!” said the bartender who, as if a magician, made a Louisville Slugger appear from nowhere. He waggled it meaningfully.

Javier headed for the exit, and this time, people got the hell out of the way rather than have this crazy man get close enough to touch them. Outside, the air was thick and sweet with the nervousness of new dark, black veins on the map of sky that didn’t tell him anything about where he was, did nothing to quench his thirst for the real name of the swaying shapes inside his head. Javier sagged against a NO PARKING sign and that’s when he saw the cop, a portly man with too intent on dragging a Texas wheelclamp from the trunk of his police cruiser over to the Sonoma.

Javier's stolen Sonoma.

His body asking for anything but calm, he went to the passenger side of the car, opened the door, reached down and fished out the Desert Eagle, clicking the safety off with his thumb.

Right then the cop looked at Javier through the front windshield – his eyes surprisingly clear through the dust-caked glass, they were the color of silver oil – and Javier thought of the moon's milky eye watching him, the white fog inside his body that aspired to be lighter than air, the press of a new language whose words were nails in his heart; Javier fired through the windshield without even bothering to aim, taking the surprised officer full in the chest and for the briefest of seconds, Javier swore he could see starlight lancing through a fist-sized hole where the man's stomach once had been, but then the body hurtled backward into the cop car parked in front of the pickup, where it thunked atop the trunk, a spray-pattern of bloods and gobs of what had to be flesh covering the back window of the black and white.

Javier, who'd felt only three days ago like he could do anything, couldn't do anything at all but gape at the corpse he'd created.

"Ho-lee Shee-it!" whistled Tam. She was in the doorway of Teddy's, her sleek form silhouetted somehow by bad country music – apparently the jukebox was up and running again – cigarette smoke, and the steely cold of dark. Her lipstick was smudged like she'd been kissing someone.

Sirens blared.

Either the bartender had called or maybe someone'd heard the gun's thunder, it didn't matter. Javier looked at Tam and lost himself for a moment in her scared, lovely little eyes – he could almost see himself in them, standing tall and grand, bigger than his reedy five foot eleven frame had ever allowed before. His muscles felt a tug, painful, and he wanted to reach out, take her in his arms, erase the careful boundary drawn between them, but she glanced to the left, then back at him, saying, "Go! Get the hell away!" and whether it was the truly beautiful way her lips formed with such a simple word – *Go* – or the near-manic lilt to her voice, he obeyed, knowing this moment would forever be chiseled in his mind, a truly perfect second of music so different than the rest of his life, the noise of the world.

Once inside the pickup, he barreled into the neon-shrouded dark, chilled ocean wind blasting through the now-gone windshield to pummel his face, his body, tearing hard at his clothes, as he freefell through southern L.A., rocketing now through Redondo Beach, moving relentlessly south, towards the border, towards his destiny where he'd either find himself or meet disaster; the star-prickled sky looked down, mocking him with their false brightness, knowing full well that challenging Fate like this could only end in tragedy.

Still powerless, still guilty, Javier shuts his eyes and lets the speed of the journey overtake him until he is one with the night, the cold bosom of dark that reaches for him with arms of ice. ■



**T**he first time I shot a man I messed up. Lenny thrust the silenced Berretta into my hand and told me to get on with it. I was just watching as usual, not taking much notice. Then the gun lay slack in my palm. Lenny pushed the barrel away from his chest.

“In that direction, please,” he said mildly.

“Now?” I said.

“Now.”

The fat man on the floor of the old barn was trussed and gagged. He wore only a pair of white boxers and they were wet with fresh piss. His eyes were wild, flicking between Lenny and me. He knew what was coming.

I should have got up close, pressed the barrel against his head. Instead I snapped one off from a few feet away. It took him in the right shoulder. I’m not a good shot. You don’t have to be in this business. You’d think otherwise, I know, but believe me, get in close enough and it doesn’t matter how bad a shot you are.

The man flopped backwards and tried to scream. He was gagged tight, though, and it came out as a mew. It reminded me of cats fighting at night-time. I fired again and this one hit him in the belly. He snapped forward as though taking a punch. I couldn’t see anything at first then blood leaked through the sweat. The man spasmed, his bound feet and hands flexed, fought for purchase on the wooden floor.

I raised the gun again and tried to aim this time. But Lenny reached across and touched my arm. “Leave him.”

“Why?”

“Just watch,” he said.

So I did. It took a while. I didn’t time it, but it seemed like ages. Probably seemed a lot longer to the man. At one point I tried to look away but Lenny wouldn’t let me.

When it was over we stepped out into the bright, sweet warmth of a May afternoon. We stood for a while, getting used to the light.

“What was that all about?” I said.

“A lesson.”

“Next time I’ll get in close, two to the head – ”

“Not that lesson.”

I squinted at him. “What?”

“I wanted you to see what it can be like. Dying.”

I shrugged. “It’s hardly the first time.”

“The point is, it’s not always quick.”

“Whatever,” I said.

He sighed. “Just try to remember how that man died.”

“OK,” I said. But I knew that I wouldn’t.

The car was parked in a nearby copse and we made our way back to it.

“Do you know who he was?” I said.

**THINK OF A NUMBER**

**ANDREW HUMPHREY**

Lenny walked quickly and I had trouble keeping up. I just about caught his nod.

“And what he did?”

“Yep,” Lenny said.

When we got to the car, a beat up Datsun, Lenny tossed me the keys. “You drive.”

I tried not to seem too pleased. I got in and turned on the ignition and gunned the engine a little too enthusiastically.

“Easy,” Lenny said.

“Sorry.” I eased the handbrake down. “So, did he deserve it? To end like that?”

“Not that it matters,” Lenny said, “but, yes, he did.”

I nodded and steered the Datsun onto the dirt track.

**I was eight** years old when I last saw my mother. A decade ago. I stood at the front gate as dad ushered her into the back seat of a large black saloon. I remember the colours . . . black car, grey sky, mum’s red coat. And the smell of mum’s perfume and my father’s breath. The taste of the ice-lolly he gave me to keep me quiet. As he slammed the car door shut I bit through the chocolate coating and my teeth ground against the wooden stick. It made me shudder.

She didn’t look back as the car pulled away. It was raining. The streetlights were on. As the car grew smaller it was engulfed in golden light. That could be my memory playing tricks, of course. A lot of things could.

“Where’s mum going?” I said. Melted chocolate and ice-cream dripped onto my fingers.

“Away,” my dad said. “For a while.”

“When will she be back?”

He ruffled my hair and said nothing.

**When we reached** the main road Lenny drove. I slept for a time and when I woke it was dark and we were still driving.

“Where are we going?”

“East,” Lenny said.

“Why?”

“Why not?”

I shivered. I fiddled with the heater, but nothing happened.

“It works as well as the radio,” Lenny said.

“We could have nicked something decent.”

“This won’t be missed. Or noticed.”

I retrieved my jacket from the back seat and huddled into it.

We stopped at an all-night café for an early breakfast. I had a full English, with extra fried bread while Lenny had his usual: granary toast and orange juice.

“Don’t know what you’re missing,” I said with my mouth full.

“You know better than that, Luke. I avoid all that rubbish. That’s why I look so young for my age.”

“Which is?”

He smiled and didn’t answer the question. As usual. I’d put him at sixty, seventy maybe. He’s tall and straight backed with thinning hair that’s grey at the edges. I think his teeth are still his own but he talks and smiles in such a way that you rarely see them. His skin is smooth, coffee-coloured, unblemished. I’ve known him for as

long as I remember. I called him 'Uncle' once, but then I've called many men 'Uncle'.

The café was empty except for us and two elderly men, who sat in a far corner and drank tea without speaking. A radio played softly and the fluorescent tube above us crackled from time to time without going off.

The girl behind the counter asked if I wanted more coffee. She was in her twenties, I supposed, peroxide hair, too much make-up, melon-like breasts that squashed against the counter as she leant against it.

"No," I said.

"Manners," she said. "Don't they teach you please and thank you at school these days?" Her voice was light, sing-song, trying to tease. I could feel her eyes on my face, willing me to look at her.

"I wouldn't know," I said. "I've never been to school."

I glanced at her and she was smiling. At first she thought I was teasing her back, starting to flirt. Then the smile faded. I don't know what she saw in my eyes and I don't care. She didn't speak again and that was good enough for me.

"I wish I had your charm," Lenny said.

"One day, maybe." I finished my breakfast and pushed the plate to one side. "Where are we off to?"

"Hemsby."

"Oh, the glamour."

"I've got a caravan there, on the front."

"How long?"

"Two, three weeks?"

"Is it for a job?"

Lenny drained his orange juice and watched the girl as she busied herself behind the counter. "I expect something will turn up."

"It usually does," I said.

**When I was** fifteen my dad told me that mum was dead. We were in his study. It smelled of leather and aftershave. I watched the rain hammer against the window. It was relentless, unyielding. I could barely make out the lawn that lay beyond the glass.

"How?" I said.

"In the Asylum."

"What Asylum?"

"It's very sad."

I studied his face. A neat moustache, no lines to speak of. Clear, guileless eyes. He could be anyone. A normal person.

"When?" I said.

"A year ago."

I stared at him. I tried to remember the last time my mother kissed me. I thought of her red coat and struggled to recall the smell of her perfume or the shape of her smile. If she smiled.

"But why . . ."

"Uncle Bernard is coming this evening."

I put a face to the name and felt something twist in my stomach. "When?"

"About six. You will . . . be good, won't you?"

I looked at the floor and nodded. What else would I be?

I went to my room. I had an hour to myself so I read and watched the rain. I breathed through my mouth. My room stank of semen and sweat. I flung a window open, tried to air it out a little. It made no difference. It never did.

**We dumped the** car in some woods and walked into Hemsby at first light. The caravan was smaller than I had imagined and smelled of damp.

“Wonderful,” I said.

“Just needs airing out,” Lenny said

“Whatever,” I said and clambered onto the narrow couch and slept for twelve hours. I think I woke once. Lenny was bending over me. His face was in shadow. He didn’t touch me. He never touched me, even when I first met him, when I was still living with my dad. I asked him about that once. “People change,” he said. He wouldn’t elaborate. I still don’t know what he meant.

When I woke Lenny handed me a mug of tea. Strong sunlight angled in brightly through a dusty window.

“I’ve bought us some clothes,” he said. “And a new car.”

“New?”

“Well, it’s an ’88 Metro. But the radio works.” He handed me some money. “Your share of the fee.”

I counted the notes. “It’s more than usual.”

“You earned it.”

“I suppose. Just about.”

I threw the blanket off and stood up. Lenny turned his back on me and drank some tea. I pulled on a fresh T-shirt and a pair of jeans.

“I’m decent.”

“I somehow doubt that,” Lenny said, turning. He opened the caravan’s door, letting in air and light and the sound of the sea and of children playing.

“How long have you been doing this, Lenny?”

He hesitated. “Actually, you’re my first apprentice . . .”

“I meant the job. Killing people.”

“Thirty years, give or take.”

“How many men have you killed?”

A pause. “Think of a number.”

“How did you meet my dad?”

He threw the dregs of his tea onto the bare grass at the front of the caravan and pulled the door shut. “In the eighteen months we’ve been . . . together, that’s the first time you’ve mentioned your past. I’ve rather admired that.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t think about it.”

“Thoughts don’t count, Luke.”

“My mum went to church every week. She believed in heaven and hell.”

“I know.”

“I’ve never even seen her grave, Lenny.”

He buttoned his shirt to the top and slid into a linen jacket. “The day’s getting away. We’ve got work to do.”

“A job?”

Lenny nodded.

“Did it come through when I was asleep?”

He threw me the car keys. "You can drive. And watch the clutch, it sticks like a bastard."

The clutch wasn't so bad. We took the coast road for a couple of miles then headed inland. Lenny gave directions curtly and I followed them without comment. He leant forward in his seat and he drummed his fingers against the plastic dashboard. Which was pretty animated for Lenny.

"You all right?" I said.

He didn't answer so I just kept driving, taking a right by an old church. The trees in the graveyard were crammed with pink and white blossom. The road narrowed quickly, the fields either side closing in.

"I do them a favour," Lenny said. I glanced at him, but he was looking straight ahead.

"What?"

"We all die, don't we?"

"That's deep, Lenny."

"The ones I . . . meet, at least they go quickly. Most of them. Most of them are dead before they know what's hit them."

"Which must be a comfort."

"Don't mock me, boy." His voice was razor-edged, colder than I'd ever known.

"I'm sorry," I said, and meant it.

After a moment he said, "No, *I'm* sorry. I seem to be in an odd mood today."

"I noticed."

He guided me left and the road widened and we passed through a tiny village into a flat sweep of bare heath studded with clumps of trees and patches of bright purple heather. The sun was high now and it was hot inside the little car. Lenny took his jacket off and slung it onto the back seat. I wound a window down. The air smelled of vanilla.

"Not that it's always quick," he said. It took me a moment to pick up the thread of his conversation.

"They have since I've been with you. Except the last one and that was my fault." I thought of the men I'd watched him kill. With a gun, mostly, close up. A couple of broken necks and cut throats. The speed of it had shocked me at first, but not for long.

"Sometimes it's in the contract. Make them suffer. And the customer's always right." I waited for him to elaborate but he didn't. He touched my arm. "Pull in here." I did as I was told. He reached into the back of the car and fished a mobile phone from a jacket pocket. He dialled a number, listened for a moment then broke the connection. He put the phone back and turned to me. "Half a mile ahead on the right hand side is a small terrace consisting of five houses. We're going to park in the drive of the first one then you'll go in through the front door, find the occupant, shoot him in the chest and head and then we'll leave again. OK?"

"What, now? In daylight?"

He passed me a gun. I didn't recognise the make. It was silenced as usual. "You take this. I'll drive."

We swapped places. "Why the rush? There could be people from the other houses about. Lenny?"

But he was already driving. Before my head had cleared the houses were in sight.

The end cottage was painted pink with a shingled drive. The front gardens were small and, mercifully, empty. I winced at the noise our tyres made on the shingle. Then the car was still. “Go,” Lenny said.

I went. The door was locked and I shouldered it open. Ahead of me was a flight of stairs and beyond them a kitchen and two rooms off a small hallway. I hesitated for a moment then heard movement from the second of the rooms. I kicked the door open. The man was in his fifties, short and fat. He wore a burgundy dressing gown and sandals. He was standing by a table, a newspaper in his hand. His mouth was opening and closing but no sound came out. I knew him. I waited for his features to settle and for the first hint of recognition to cross his face then I shot him in the centre of his chest and then in the head. He fell forwards and didn’t move. I knelt by him. One hand was resting by his head, palm downward, fingers splayed. I held it for a moment. Then I left.

Lenny drove quickly. “I don’t think anyone saw us.”

“I remember his hands. He still has the calluses. I remember each one.”

“He used to be a builder.”

“Uncle Bernard,” I said and laughed.

**I was almost** seventeen when I left home. Lenny took me. I was given two days notice and no say in the matter at all. The thing was, I didn’t want to go. It was all I knew; my stinking room, an endless succession of men, a cramped, loveless excuse for a life. Leaving it scared me. Lenny was kind, but then he always was, compared to the others.

“You need to learn a trade,” my father told me. He stood by the fireplace, his hands behind his back. He looked bored. “Something useful. You need to look after yourself for once.”

I was by the door, a single suitcase in my hand. Lenny was next to me, his face impassive. I didn’t know what he did then and it was another week before I found out.

“When will I come back?” I said.

My father looked at his watch and yawned. Actually yawned. “Lenny is a busy man.”

“I’m too old,” I said. “Aren’t I?”

He didn’t answer.

Lenny said, “Come on, lad,” and we left.

**Back at the** caravan Lenny said, “The next couple of days are going to be busy.”

He’d made me sandwich but I couldn’t eat. “We’re not getting paid for that one, are we?”

“I’ve got three more lined up. But we’ve got to be quick and then we’ve got to leave. Go north somewhere, maybe abroad.”

“Why?”

“These men are linked. This isn’t my usual way. We’d be caught.”

“Why are you doing this?”

He threw my sandwich away and rinsed the plate in the sink. “How old were you? When it started?”

“You were there.”

“No. Not at the start.” He watched the water as it sluiced off the plate’s surface.

“Ten. Eleven. Something like that.”

“How many, in total?” He still stared at the sink as though something there fascinated him. The plate was probably cleaner than it had ever been.

I shrugged. “Think of a number.” He turned towards me again, drying his hands. “How come you knew my dad?”

“It was a mistake. People change, Luke. Their . . . tastes change.”

“Right.”

“Do you want to do this? Will you help me?”

“Killing four of them? Hardly scratches the surface, does it?”

“I know. But it’s a start.”

I nodded slowly. “It’s something. And it matters. Thank you.”

He glanced at the floor. I’d never seen Lenny look embarrassed before.

**We caught Eugene** in the bath. Lenny held him and I cut his throat. I remembered the smell of him, the texture of his skin, the shape of his cock. In the car, as we drove away, I kept laughing and laughing until Lenny told me to shut up.

I didn’t recognise Frank at all. He knew my name, though, and Lenny’s. He screamed them over and over as he begged for mercy huddled in the corner of his isolated cottage. I shot him four times then handed the gun to Lenny. “I don’t know him.”

“You do, Luke,” Lenny said. I took his word for it.

It was dark outside and the air was cold and no matter how deeply I inhaled I couldn’t seem to get quite enough oxygen into my lungs.

“Are you OK?” Lenny said. He put a hand on my shoulder then let it drop away again.

“Never better.”

“Nearly done. For now, at least.”

“Who’s next?”

“Derek.”

“The name doesn’t ring a bell.”

He was beside me now. “I expect they all blur into one.”

“Not exactly.”

“Anyway, I’ve got a meeting with him. Tomorrow. Early.”

“A meeting?”

“Derek has a wife and children.”

“Ah. Your code.”

“A man must have his limits.”

“No women, no children.”

“It’s a simple rule.”

“And you’ve always stuck to it, have you?”

“Almost always,” Lenny said.

**We met Derek** at seven-thirty at the ruins of an old church a couple of miles from Sheringham. He stepped out of his 4x4 and frowned when he saw me. Then Lenny was next to him, smiling, slapping him on the back, driving an eight-inch kitchen knife deep into his chest. Derek slumped forward and Lenny slid deftly to one side to avoid breaking his fall. Lenny knelt and rolled the dying man onto his back. I came

to his side.

“Does he ring a bell now?”

“Vaguely.”

“I thought he would have made more of an impression, the things he did to you.”

“And how do you know what he did?”

“I watched,” Lenny said. His eyes were on my face but I kept looking at the body. For the first time I felt that Lenny wanted something. Love? Forgiveness?

“Why the hell did he meet you?”

“Why do you think? He thought I had something for him. Or someone.”

“Didn’t he know what you do?”

“He didn’t. He does now.”

Then he surprised me. He kicked Derek hard in the face. He did it twice more then straightened his clothes and walked back to the car. I followed.

“Is that it, then?” I said.

Lenny gunned the engine and drove past Derek’s body. “Almost,” he said.

**I realised where** we were going long before we arrived. Not that the roads were familiar but something inside me flipped and shuddered, and a flat, metallic taste settled in my mouth.

The boy who opened the door was maybe thirteen, with floppy blond hair and eyes that were too big and too bright. He could have been my brother. Perhaps he was. He held the door open and stared at the floor.

My father was in the study.

“You look like shit,” I said.

His favourite leather armchair dwarfed him now. His eyes were sunken, his skin yellow-tinged and deeply lined.

I moved closer. When he spoke his breath was like a chemical spillage. “You took your time.”

“Been busy,” I said.

“Won’t you come any closer? It’s the smell, I suppose. Bowel cancer. The smell is the least of it, believe me.”

I pointed the gun at his head.

“I never touched you,” he said.

“Never,” I agreed.

He blinked slowly. “You’re doing me a favour. I’ve got six months. At most.” He tried a smile. “I’m assured it will feel like longer.”

I glanced at Lenny. He nodded. I lowered the gun. “Where is she?”

A thin shaft of sunlight fell across my father’s lap. He seemed to recoil from it. “Why?”

“I want to know what you did with her.”

“Ask *him*,” he said, nodding at Lenny. As the light strengthened the skin on his hands became transparent. I could see veins and bone. I had to look away. “You can go now,” he said.

The boy was sitting on the stairs, staring at the floor.

“What about him?” Lenny said as I slammed the door behind me.

“He’s not my problem,” I said.

We sat in the car for ten minutes without speaking. I kept my eyes turned away



from the front door and the upstairs window. Eventually I said, "You've kept in touch, then?"

"On and off."

"Are we sitting here all night?"

I didn't think the car would start at first. It had a manual choke and Lenny was too heavy with it and almost flooded the engine. He got it going eventually and we drove towards the outskirts of the city.

**It was early** evening when we entered Lincolnshire. "It's even flatter than Norfolk," Lenny said.

We stopped at a service station and Lenny bought a cheap bunch of flowers. He gave them to me as he ducked back into the driver's seat.

"For me? You shouldn't have."

"You'll need them in a bit."

We bypassed Sleaford and Lenny took a couple of minor roads then stopped to wrench open the entrance to an abandoned gravel pit. He entered then closed the gate behind him. We drove across a narrow, flint-strewn road, past two small flooded pits. The road widened and we passed empty portakabins, an old weighbridge and three rusting hoppers. Ahead of us lay a lake that was bigger than both of the smaller pits combined. It was enclosed by man-made cliffs. The water was green and choppy and the low sunlight didn't penetrate it at all. Lenny parked and made no attempt to move.

"Take your time."

"Here?"

"I haven't stopped for the scenery."

"I mean, exactly?" Lenny nodded. "How do you know?"

"I just do," he said.

I took the flowers and stood by the water's edge. I had no idea what to do. I didn't know any prayers. I tried to summon up my mother's face but I couldn't. I lobbed the flowers into the dirty water and went back to the car.

"That was quick," Lenny said.

"There's something I want you to see."

"What?"

"This is difficult, Lenny. Humour me, please?"

He shrugged and got out of the car. I let him walk ahead. He stumbled on a piece of flint and dropped onto one knee. It was the only hint of clumsiness that he'd shown in all the years I'd known him. He turned his head back and upwards, towards me. "Bugger," he said, smiling. The smile froze when he saw the gun.

**He wasn't heavy.** I emptied his pockets then kissed his face and tipped his body into the water. He floated for a while then sank. I wiped the blood from my mouth, walked back to the car and drove north. ■

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Andy's stories have appeared in many British genre magazines, including once before in *Crimewave*, for whose *Crimewave Specials* line he has completed a dark, brooding mystery novel called *Alison* which will be released soon. He lives in Norwich.

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