

EDITED BY  
JAY CHAKRAVARTI

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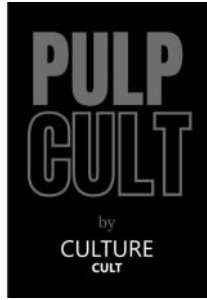
# UNSPEAKABLE

VOLUME TWO

UNSPEAKABLE CRIMES ○ UNFORGETTABLE STORIES

ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY FICTION





ANTHOLOGY



## TRIGGER WARNING

The following book contains fictions of many shades, some of which may contain depictions of violence, suicide, rape and various other crimes.

Reader discretion is advised.

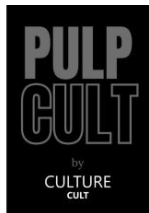


PULPCULT ANTHOLOGY  
CONTEMPORARY FICTION

# UNSPEAKABLE

VOLUME TWO

EDITED BY  
JAY CHAKRAVARTI



UNSPEAKABLE  
**VOLUME TWO**  
Anthology of Contemporary Fiction

Edited by: Jay Chakravarti

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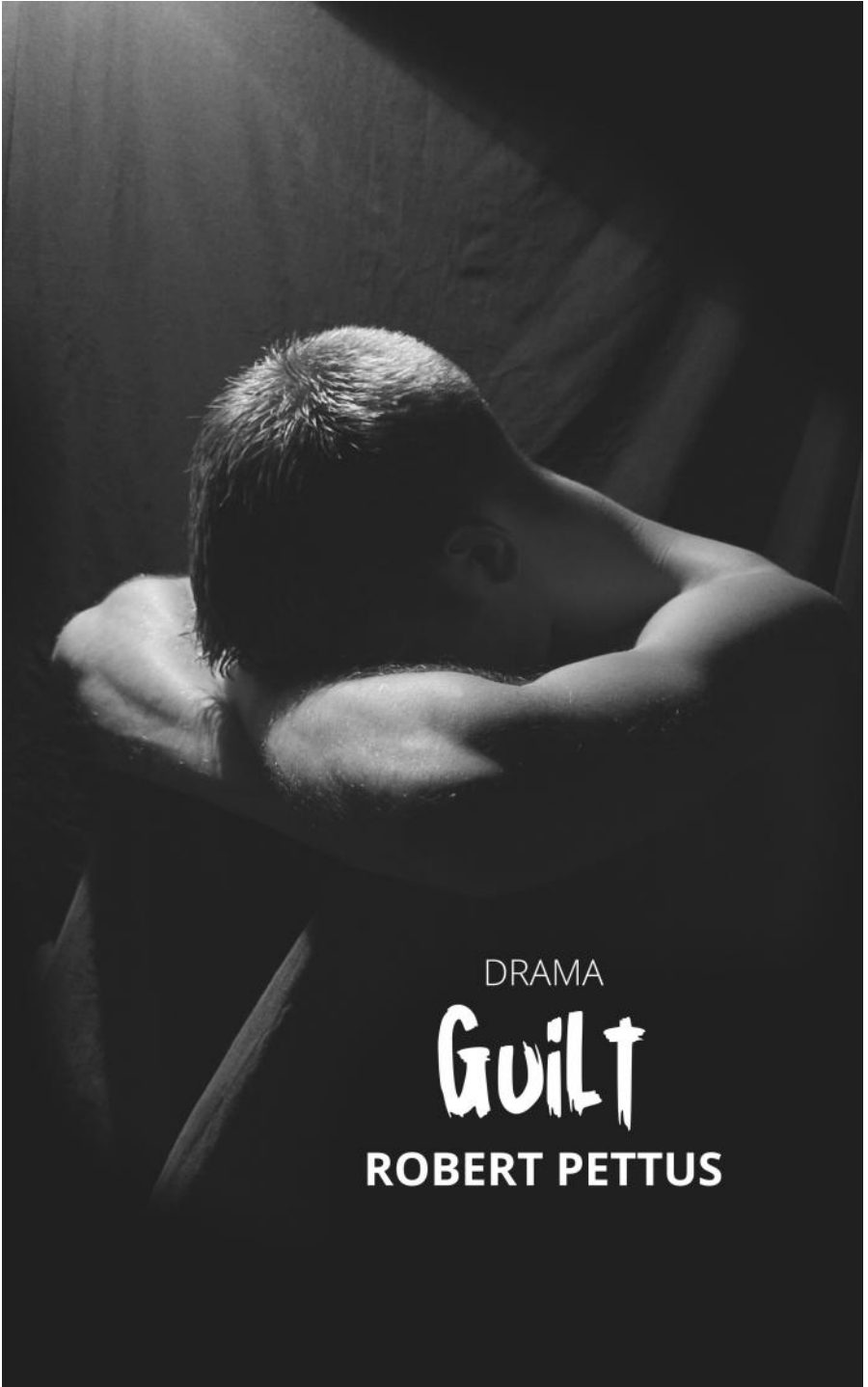
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# UNSPEAKABLE

VOLUME TWO





DRAMA

# Guilt

ROBERT PETTUS





Achilles did a 180 degree twist, hopping into the air, subsequently sprinting behind the couch and running a lap around the living room before abruptly stopping and flopping down onto the carpet. Jack watched as he sat on the ground, his back against the couch and his legs sprawled out in a V-shape.

“That’s a good one, Achilles! You’re quite the speedy little guy!”

Jack petted Achilles, stroking his head as the small brown rabbit continued laying comfortably on the ground.

“Okay, okay,” Jack said after a couple of minutes, “I can’t pet you the whole day! My arm is getting tired!” He slouched back against the bottom wall of the couch.

He began unconsciously twiddling his thumbs, a habit developed from the intense anxiety which hovered over him constantly like a chaotic, unpredictable storm.

Jack looked out the window. It was a cloudy day. There was a drizzle of rain. It was warm, and a bit windy. It was comfortable.

“What should I do, Mr. Achilles?” Jack said, “What’s next?”

Achilles ruffled his nose, as if to communicate what Jack already suspected: Achilles had no idea.

Jack stood up and walked outside. The misty wind blew against his face. He thought it felt nice.

He stared into the woods. It was spring, but the trees were still mostly dead. The wood was lifeless. On some occasions, a lonesome deer would emerge, as if from some ethereal emptiness, and sniff around in the parking lot of the apartment complex. When this happened, Jack would pick up Achilles, take him out to the balcony, and hold him up so he could see the wildlife. Jack thought Achilles would be interested to see such a (to Achilles, at least) massive creature.

No deer today, though. The wood was empty.

Jack walked back inside and fell asleep. It was about his bed time, anyway.

The drive to work the next day was foggy. The mist from the previous day had continued through the night and into the morning. The windshield wipers of Jack's small, sputtering Toyota Scion *THUMPED* and *THUMPED*, similar to the way Achilles *THUMPS* when he's angry, as they attempted unsuccessfully to keep moisture from the windshield.

The noise made Jack twitch with anxiety.

He tried to muffle the constant, necessary but frustrating sound with music from the radio. As he turned the knob, static white noise filled his ears. He cringed back into the driver's seat, swerving and nearly colliding with an oncoming semi-truck; its high-beams blinding and the blare of its horn further deafening. He pressed one of the presets. He wasn't sure which one because in his frustration he'd pushed three or four of the five buttons with his whole palm.

The soothing voice of Ann Wilson rang out over the static:

*He's a maaaaagggggic maaaaaan!*

Jack made it to work.

The warehouse parking lot was full. Jack drove in cyclical monotony around each section of the lot, searching for a space. He eventually squeezed in between an oversized pickup and a creepy, white, windowless van.

After putting the car into park, he grabbed the chair-lever with his left hand, leaned back, closed his eyes, and thought about how much he didn't want to go to work. It was almost 6:00 AM.

The toaster *dinged* as it discharged two pieces of burnt bread into the air. Jack, unable to catch them because his head was rattling from the *ding*, watched them fall back to the toaster and then to the dirty floor. He picked them up and began buttering.

The morning paper was sitting on the table in the break room. Jack sat down and snapped it open, a piece of the freshly buttered toast was hanging out his mouth.

On the front page read a chilling headline:

## LOCAL WOMAN FOUND DEAD IN NEARBY RIVER.

The cause of death hadn't yet been discovered, but based on the multiple stab wounds littering the body, police were assuming with confidence that it was a homicide.

Jack immediately sank back into his chair and pulled the paper over his face.

*"Was it me?"* He contemplated miserably, *"What if I did that?"*

He continued to drown himself in his chair with the morning paper.

*DIIIIIIIIIINNNNNNNNNNNNNNG* came the abrupt sound of the work bell.

Jack snapped up in his seat, looking at the clock. It was already time to start work. He shoved the rest of the dirty toast in his mouth, swigged his cup of hot black coffee, and stumbled out the breakroom door into the warehouse.

The ringing of bells and clanging of metal for the rest of the day filled Jack's head as his sense of paranoia grew.

*"I did it!"* He thought, *"I must have done it! Who else would do something like that! And they haven't found the killer; it must be me!"*

Horried, he continued monotonously pressing the buttons on his machine as the sound of steam and compression produced and then spat out one metal bushing after another.

This continued for hours. When the bucket filled, Jack grabbed it, lifted it, and placed it on the conveyer belt, the whole time thinking about the possibility that he was a murderer.

*"I did it! I just know that I did it!"* He brooded continuously.

When the *DIIIIIIIIIINNNNNNNNNNNNNNG* signaling the end of the work day finally rang out, Jack was in a twitchy state of detachment.

It was still raining on the drive home. The windshield wipers continued their frustrating *THUMP* as Jack again tried to drown it out with loud music. *The Immigrant Song* by Led Zeppelin played at full volume as Jack attempted to distract himself by singing along:

*“Abbbbbb... Ab... Abbbbbb... Ab... I come from the land of the ice and snow...”*

Jack’s paranoid mumbling rendition sounded much less inspired than the screeching confidence of Robert Plant. Jack continued to sing nonetheless. He wished he had the courage of a Viking.

When he walked in his apartment door, he set his things on the table and then exhaustedly sank into the couch. While battling with his involuntarily closing eyelids, he noticed through his mental haze Achilles gnawing on the bars of his cage. Jack, feeling sorry for his animal companion, arose and opened the door.

He petted Achilles, and the rabbit, grunting his disapproval, turned and ran off behind the couch, flicking his feet backward in resentment. Achilles, like most other living creatures, disliked being forced into a cage. Jack felt like he *needed* a cage. It might do him some good. He instead crawled into a fetal position on the couch.

After rocking back and forth in anxious discomfort for some time, sleep eventually came. It was fidgety, fearful sleep, but it was sleep nonetheless.

Jack dreamed.

He was kneeling in the middle of shallow, muddy river. It was completely dark outside. His hands were bloody, but he didn’t know why. Jack tried to screech out in terror, but no sound came. It was as if the misty, damp air muffled any noise that attempted escape from his throat. He kept silently screaming. There was a deer in the river; a doe. She approached him, bent down next to him, and began sniffing at his bloody palms. Jack screamed again. This time it wasn’t soundless. Noise erupted from his mouth as raspy incoherent terror filled the air. The doe jerked backward in fright, momentarily looking Jack right in the eye. She looked afraid, but she also looked like she understood him, as if to be communicating:

*“I know who you are... I know what you’ve done.”*

She then turned and ran. Water kicked back by her legs splashed into Jack’s palms, washing off some of the blood.

Jack awoke.

He was lying belly up on the couch. Achilles was standing on his chest, sniffing his face. It tickled. Achilles sprang off as Jack snapped up. Jack's eyes were frantic. They were darting back and forth, as if glancing simultaneously at both everything and nothing. They were tired eyes, even after napping. They were fearful.

Jack stumbled over to the bathroom sink and splashed water on his face. He looked at himself in the mirror. He thought he looked miserable; like a pathetic, scared man. He walked back over to the living room, sat on the couch, grabbed the remote, and turned on the television.

Jack, flinching, retreated backward as the full volume of the evening news blasted out from the TV set. The same headline, this time in auditory rather than written format, forced its way into Jack's skull and began chaotically bouncing around, destroying his already fragile psyche. With his eyes closed, he pointed the remote at the TV until the volume subsided.

*"I did that!"* He again thought to himself. *"I know I did that! Who else would do something so deranged? I must have done it! I know I did it!"*

Jack slouched off the couch and onto the floor. He laid there for some time. Achilles again jumped onto his chest; this time using his forepaws to dig into Jack's T-Shirt as if his heart were a potential burrow. He continued digging spasmodically until Jack lightly brushed him aside.

Jack stood up and walked to the door leading out to the balcony. He opened the door. It was still raining. He walked out onto the balcony. In the distance, on the other side of the parking lot, he could see a deer. It was a doe. Rather than grabbing Achilles to show him the wildlife, he instead stepped out onto the balcony. Mist dampened his clothes and face. He peered across the lot to the deer. He made eye contact with her. She stared back and kept staring.

Lightning lit up the night. The crack of thunder filled the sky. Jack flinched. The doe was gone. Jack was afraid.

A tickling feeling brushed against Jack's leg. In his paranoia, he turned quickly. He felt familiar fur as his shin pushed aside the soft creature at his feet. Achilles was thrown off the balcony.

Jack, mortified, looked to the ground below. Achilles was dead.

He ran outside and grabbed Achilles. Achilles was dead. Jack held him. Blood spilled out onto his palms. He looked across the parking lot. The deer was back.

They again made eye contact. Lightning again struck. This time the deer didn't move. The deer looked confident, though sad. Jack rocked back and forth. He screamed. He started crying. He pressed his face to Achilles limp body. It was an accident. He didn't know what he was doing. He wasn't in the right state of mind. He did it, though. That part was undeniable. He was guilty.

"Hey!" came a voice from above.

Jack looked up and saw a resident of one of the neighboring apartments standing on her balcony.

"You know we're not allowed to have pets here, right? You shouldn't have that rabbit!"

Jack, bewildered, screamed again.

ROBERT PETTUS is an English as a Second Language teacher at the University of Cincinnati. Previously, he taught for four years in a combination of rural Thailand and Moscow, Russia. He was most recently accepted for publication at Allegory Magazine, The Horror Tree, White Cat Publications, Savage Planet, Short-Story.me, Kaidankai, Tall Tale TV, The Corner Bar, A Thin Line of Anxiety, Schlock!, Black Petals, Inscape Literary Journal of Morehead State University, Yellow Mama, Apocalypse-Confidential, Mystery Tribune, Blood Moon Rising, and The Green Shoes Sanctuary. Guilt is one of the stories he recently wrote.

THRILLER

# THE HUNTING GROUNDS

PATRICK KENDRICK







**A**s I peered around the area, the fresh, green, forest scent was replaced with another, one of a mushroomy, rotting scent: something dead. Not uncommon in the woods to come across the carcass of a squirrel or raccoon that met an untimely end. Coyotes, once the surge of the west, had migrated successfully as far south as these Florida piney woods and some were even snatching small dogs off of the streets. For reasons I still can't explain, I followed the odor.

Just inside the still lush, pastoral area, less than fifty yards away from where the bulldozers had already begun terraforming the natural wetlands into an extended runway for vain, amateur pilots, the grass still pushed up blades through the rich muck. Looking closer, I saw what, at first, I thought were shoots of a new plant emerging, still white, like sprouts that have not absorbed enough sun to activate their chlorophyll and turn green.

But plants do not have painted fingernails and I immediately recognized who these belonged to and felt two distinct and very different emotions arise in me: heartbreak and rage...

I had arrived at the Sweetbay Natural Area where we were supposed to meet Dr. Miles at four o'clock, my 1998 Honda Civic sputtering along, threatening to finally die in a cloud of blue smoke, its engine dripping black oil like blood from a wound.

As an Environmental Science major, my car was particularly embarrassing to me. It made me feel like a corporate manufacturer whose company spewed pollutants into the air and earth with impunity, only I was without the money or dispassion that came with that manufacturer position.

The donut shop I worked at part-time while attending college as an out-of-state student barely gave me enough money to fuel and maintain my ancient clunker and the small "cottage," I rented behind an old, retired firefighter's house. The scholarship I'd won paid my tuition but I was living

off Ramen Noodles and day-old donuts and my ribs were showing like an emaciated prisoner of war.

It was raining that dismal day, so the class was probably going to be canceled, as it had been several times when the Florida skies turned quickly from sunny blue to dark gray and dumped water on us like a biblical allegory. Present were about a half-dozen *classmates*—and I use that word optimistically—as I felt that I fit in like a turd in a punchbowl, being the only Native American dude from Anadarko, Oklahoma in a sea of white-skinned, rich kids that didn't have the grades, or ambition, to go to a bigger university.

As the rain intensified and lightning cracked in an angry sky, the other students scattered like field mice. I sat in my car and waited for Dr. Miles, the water pouring in through rust holes in my car's roof. The parking lot soon emptied but I stayed. Dr. Miles was never late and she would have sent a group text to us if she had to cancel, so I waited for her. And waited.

To tell the truth, I had a crush on her.

Dr. Nancy Miles, at twenty-five, was only five years older than me but had already earned her doctorate's degree and was heading the Environmental Science program at Palm Beach State College. She was pale, blonde, and blue-eyed—I never saw anything like her on the Res—and sitting next to me with my mahogany skin, when we occasionally went to lunch, she seemed like an ephemeral being, a translucent fairy, keeping company with a dark, mythical, forest animal.

One day, she asked me, "Do you want to go hunting?" I thought it was an odd question for someone who was so passionate about nature and wildlife but I was so smitten by her that I would have emphatically said, "Yes!" if she'd asked me to go dumpster diving. She then took me to Riverbend Park off of Indiantown Road and asked me to help her get some things out of her trunk. I thought she might be unloading a Winchester rifle and cartridges for our "hunt," but as I came around to the back of her car, I found a box full of hunter's cameras. They are small, usually inexpensive, remote cameras, typically painted in a camouflaged pattern. Hunters use them to identify areas where game, such as deer or wild boar frequent.

Dr. Miles used them to do “sampling,” a scientific system where the observer, like the hunter, places the cameras in remote areas, where they click away, the shutters activated by an infrared motion detector. She showed me some pictures she’d collected of various animals that had strolled by her cameras in the past several months.

“Very cool,” I said, unable to wipe the silly grin off my face. “Great White Hunter,” I quipped.

She laughed and gave me a hug though she was barely tall enough to grasp much higher than my waist.

Without much thought, I bent and kissed the top of her head, relishing the scent of her hair which smelled like flowers. I realized what I did suddenly and was going to apologize for being so forward, but she squeezed me tighter and when she smiled up at me, it was all I could do to keep from kissing her. We released each other and went about the park, setting the cameras in various places where they could not be seen by people. A week later, as we sat together over coffee, she showed me the pictures of the animals she obviously loved, her face aglow with happiness.

Dr. Miles seemed as fascinated with me as I was with her—though I’m sure the romantic twinges were mine alone—I think because I was so different from anyone else in the school. Maybe she looked at me as another rare species that piqued her interest. I didn’t care, she had *my* interest, mostly because she was also kind to me, which was not always the case with my classmates.

Even in this so-called enlightened age, from other “young adults,” I heard snickers and dumb redskin jokes and epithets at school. They even made fun of my name, Bill Roan, often calling me “Roan Drone,” or Roan Around Bill,” which I accepted as slightly better than “Chief,” or “Tonto.” I didn’t care. As long as I could get a glimpse of Dr. Miles once a day, I was content.

My name came from my father’s father, Roan Bull. When he was placed in a white man’s school and his name was listed backward on the student rolls as B. Roan, it was changed to Bill Roan by the school, and living on the Res, my grandfather had no say in the matter. So, the erroneous

name was passed down.

When I won the scholarship to Palm Beach State College, I did not want to go. I'd won some other scholarships to schools in Oklahoma and nearby states, Texas and Kansas, but my father told me, "Go to Florida. It's the farthest from here." I told him I would miss home and he said, "This is not our home. This is a big prison where the white man made us go over one hundred years ago. We cannot see the bars of our cells but they are here."

The rain dwindled and I looked at my phone. No calls from Dr. Miles. Something bothered me, in my stomach, like I suppose a parent feels when their son or daughter is not home at the agreed-upon time.

I squeezed out of my small car. I have been tall since I was fourteen, like many Plains Indians, and now I am six feet, four inches. At school, I have been asked to play sports, like football, or basketball, but I just want to learn science and study nature. Humans have been torturing our mother earth for as long as we've been here, some more than others. Maybe I can make things better someday.

I walked carefully through the wet forest. The green scent of pines and loamy, damp soil and night blooming jasmine, filled my nostrils. I liked the perfume of it all. On the Res, everything smelled like dirt or booze.

As a boy, I learned how to track animals and I found myself scanning the ground as I walked and listened. I heard the screech of a red-tailed hawk and saw him in a nearby tree, waiting for the last drizzle to stop. An angry squirrel barked at me. A mocking bird sang like a schizophrenic, going from one sound to the other without ever repeating the same tune. But nature's orchestra was soon drowned out by the sputtering of small plane engines that were beginning to warm up and take flight, after being temporarily grounded by the passing storm.

Dr. Miles held a deep-seated hatred of the small but intrusive north county airport, whose patrons included rich professionals who just *had* to fly their own aircraft, close to their own waterfront homes, rather than cavort with the commoners at the nearby international airport. She especially detested that they had requested, and were approved, by the county

commissioners to expand their airstrip into the Sweetbay natural area, as long as they “replaced a similar amount of wetland in a nearby area,” which, to Dr. Miles meant “developers could build a pool and put some potted plants around it and the commissioners would say, ‘that’s good enough for a wetland sanctuary!’”

I looked past where the other students had been, their footprints crossing atop each other’s as if they were dancing in circles. I spied the pine needle-covered path that encircled a shallow lake and could make out some small puddles that held rainwater about the right size and spaced apart as one might make walking.

As if I was drawn along by a homing beacon, I walked along the edge of the path, looking at the prints and wondered if they might be Dr. Miles’ steps. They were small, like her feet. Thinking of her, my chest felt like a bird was inside it, fluttering its wings. I knew that my feelings were ridiculous, a young man away from home and family, pining over a beautiful woman who was kind to him. It was silly, but one cannot help a feeling that is driven as much by biology as it is emotion.

There was a boyfriend that Dr. Miles saw from time to time, a cop who worked in one of the nearby municipal police departments, and who also ran his own private security company. But, as infrequent as they saw each other, I knew it was a relationship that was not blossoming, and that knowledge gave me hope. She told me once that they argued about her points of view on protecting the environment as opposed to his belief in planned growth that ensured taxes that supported schools, like hers, and other “community needs.”

Her cheeks grew red as she told me—she was so passionate about nature—but I think she was embarrassed for having been so honest with one of her students and changed the subject.

After that, she placed her hand on mine and told me to call her Nancy instead of Dr. Miles, but it was difficult for me to do so.

My class had been given assignments: to research various indigenous plants and to do a report on them. The class was seldom held in a room. We met at parks, natural areas, and wetlands. I’d chosen the Cephalanthus

occidentalis, or Button Bush, as my research project. It wasn't a rare or endangered plant but it was unlike anything I'd seen in western Oklahoma. A voluminous, leafy bush, it looked like dozens of others except for its flower, which was a white starburst, a Mum with spikes instead of soft petals, a white explosion in freeze-frame.

When I found Dr. Miles,' her hand sticking up from the ground where the rain had rinsed away the dirt meant to conceal her, it was as if she had been signaling me. She was surrounded, like in a nest, by the theme of my report, the Button Bushes. It was like flowers at a funeral.

My vision blurred from tears as I began to dig her out, holding on to the impossible desire that she might actually still be alive. I dug along the path of her arm and finally uncovered her face. She was still beautiful in death, her eyes specked with mud but the blue irises as vivid as Myosotiscorpoides, also known as Forget-me-nots, which were her favorites. Her lips were blue, too, her skin so pale and cold it was like refrigerated porcelain.

There was a small red flag near her body, like one of those used to mark underground cables or gas lines so people don't accidentally hit them while digging. It was odd to be there but I didn't give it much thought as my attention was focused on my teacher, my friend, my *love*, now dead. The finality of that was overwhelming to me.

I gently brushed the mud from her face and saw the fist-sized purple splotch on her right temple and wondered if whoever struck her was left-handed, like me. Her pupils were dilated as if looking intently for something in the dark, maybe one more plant that could be saved. One pupil was bigger than the other, indicating brain damage. I'd aced my anatomy and physiology classes and I retained much of that information. When one pupil is bigger than the other, it almost always means brain death.

Dr. Mile's—Nancy's—nostrils and mouth were filled with the earth and I wondered if she had still been breathing as she was covered up. That thought dried my tears and fueled my fury. It was still sprinkling but the sky only held distant heat lightening as the storm moved away. The storm in my heart stayed.

I thought of the time we'd had gone to another park, this one by the ocean, and she'd found a "rattle seed." It was a big seed, like an oversized peach pit. She took my hand and placed it in my palm. "Shake it," she told me and when I did, it sounded just like a rattlesnake.

I smiled and said, "Cool."

She beamed at me and said, "Keep it. It's my little gift to you." Then she gave me a hug and a kiss on my cheek and said, "Let's go get something to eat," and I thought my heart would explode. I put the seed on a leather string and wore it around my neck.

Sitting there with her now, I knew I should call 9-1-1 but I just wanted to stay with her, the only person I was close to in this now humid, lonely, dispassionate hell.

I used to think Florida was beautiful compared to Oklahoma—the palms bent in the wind, the oceans lapping the nearby shore—but it was a dark place now, one I wanted to vacate as soon as possible.

Just then, a bulldozer roared to life and startled me. I'm not sure why but I sought cover, running into a nearby hammock, filled with cabbage palms and cypress trees, and more button bushes. The equipment operator must have taken cover when the lightning started and was returning to work to finish raping the land.

I wondered if he might have seen anything but then began to consider what might happen if a red-skinned young man approached him saying he just happened to find a dead white woman out in the woods. On and around the Res, I'd seen many of my brothers arrested for crimes they did not do, for fights they did not start but often finished, for "stealing" things they had bought, for looking in the wrong direction, especially at a white woman. All ended up in jail.

If there were no other suspects, I would be a good candidate to become one. Still, as the bulldozer rumbled toward the very spot where Dr. Miles now slept forever, I felt I had to do something and my mind raced trying to come up with a reasonable plan.

My heart beat faster as the bulldozer came within twenty feet of Dr. Miles's grave, its giant blade churning up the precious earth like cake

icing, when the driver turned sharply and stopped, the motor still running as he began to back up.

I stood up to yell at the driver to stop before he ran over Dr. Miles's body but he didn't hear me, or worse—it dawned on me—didn't care. He backed up quickly until the heavy, tank-like tracks of the metal monster ran over the spot where she lay. Then, he pulled forward *and did it again* before pulling forward a few feet and turning the motor off.

I crept forward to better see what he was doing. I was close enough to hear the engine ticking from the heat and smell the burned diesel fuel. From my vantage point, I could also see one of Dr. Miles's—Nancy's—arms, crushed and blotched red. I did not want to see more.

My mind reeled in disbelief and my stomach heaved but I managed to keep from being sick. I sunk to my knees and tried to breathe. My hands shook but it was not from fear.

In many tribes, like my own, when someone dies, we do not say their name again for a year, so I chose not to refer to Nancy as Dr. Miles anymore. I would do what she had asked and call her Nancy.

The driver jumped off the machine and calmly walked back to where Nancy had been. He was a sinewy, leather-skinned man, with an unruly black beard and small eyes hidden in flesh that was lined from years in the sun. A John Deere cap was mashed down on his little skull as he looked at a cell phone he'd pulled from his pocket and made a call just like it was any other day. Then, he bent over and plucked the red flag from the ground, ambled back to his machine on his bowed legs, and tossed it inside the cab.

It occurred to me the flag had been placed there to mark, no, to *target*, where Nancy was.

The driver reached inside his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He shook one out and gripped it between his lips, then lit it, cupping hands that looked like gnarled crab claws to shield the cigarette from the wind.

Within minutes, I heard a siren wailing and coming closer. I stayed where I was, now caught up with an insatiable curiosity about what was



transpiring. Perhaps it was because of my heritage, a history of people who have been systematically wiped out or duped with false treaties, or maybe I was just paranoid after witnessing what I'd just seen, but I was staying if for nothing else but to find rest for Nancy's soul.

There must've been a construction entrance coming in from the airport that was encroaching into the Sweetbay Natural Area because soon enough, a police car came bumping along a dirt road that encircled the now cleared land, its lights flashing. The car came directly over to where the driver and his crushing machine sat idly waiting as if returning to a familiar place.

A cop got out of the car and walked clumsily but casually along, through the tilled earth. No hurry, no pep in his step. His polished black shoes were not meant to traverse uneven ground and he sort of tip-toed to avoid mucky spots. He approached the bulldozer operator and immediately shook hands like they were old friends. They greeted one another and I could read their lips: *Hello Carl*, the cop said. *Hey Randy*, the operator said, and added, I think, because it was hard to see clearly. It was like either, *just like you said* or *we said*.

A chill ran up my spine. It was Nancy's "friend."

The two men walked together to where Nancy was and the cop crouched down and looked at her body without emotion, like a dog tilting its head, trying to figure out what it was looking at.

He nodded and stood again, then went to his car, called in on his radio, and pulled out a clipboard to begin filling out a report. He was way too relaxed for a man who's just seen a beautiful woman crushed under an earth-moving machine.

I crept closer, slithering on my stomach like a snake, but I wasn't watching my surroundings and I came across a nest of quails and startled the mother into the air. It drew the attention of the cop and the bulldozer operator.

"Randy," the cop, immediately pulled out his gun—with his left hand, I noted—and pointed it in my direction. Carl reached into the cab of his dozer and pulled out a pistol, too.

Sweat beaded up on my brow and a trickle of it ran down into my eye. I didn't flinch. I was in high grass and I mashed myself deeper into it, rolling slightly back and forth so that the grass might help cover me. Then, I tried not to breathe.

The two men came my way, taking high steps so they wouldn't trip in the grass or step into a hole. They reminded me of Nazi's marching, goose-stepping toward me. My heart pounded so hard, I was sure they could hear it as they came closer. I heard Randy pull the slide back on his automatic weapon and Carl drew back the hammer on his pistol. If I tried to jump up and run, they'd mow me down at that range even if they weren't good shots, but something told me they were.

They were within about twenty feet of me now and I remembered the rattle seed that Nancy had given me. I inched my hand toward my neck and pulled on the string that held the seed. Then I shook it furiously so the sound was loud. It sounded just like a diamondback rattler, one that was getting irritated.

The two killers stopped and one whispered, "You hear that?"

The other—the operator, by the sound of his redneck voice—said, "Uh-huh. That's a rattler, man. Big 'un, too. That's prolly what stirred up them quails. We best not go any further. Might be a nest of those vipers in there."

"Okay," said Randy, reluctantly. "Coroner will be here soon anyway." I heard both of the guns uncock and the cop holstered his, then their steps crunched through the grass, the sound fading with distance.

Then, I was able to breathe again.

I could hear them talking as they walked away. "Think forensics will be any problem?"

"Nah," said Randy confidently. It's an accident, not a crime scene. My shift supervisor will stop by. He might suggest we do a breathalyzer on you just as a precaution but there's nothing to worry about there. I got you covered. Might take a couple of hours to clear the scene and the media could show up but I've already got a press release ready for them."

"Yeah? How's that go?"

I peaked through the grass and saw Randy stop, thoughtfully rubbing his chin, as if trying to remember his lines.

“Professor Nancy Miles, a professor at Palm Beach State College was performing a field study as she often does with her classes. The class was canceled due to the inclement weather, but it appears Dr. Miles decided to do an unpermitted survey on her own in a restricted construction area. Carl Scott, of Scott Clearing, Inc. was contracted by the North County Airport to clear the land in preparation for expanding the municipal airport. With the motor running and having no reason to expect people in a NO TRESPASSING area, Mr. Scott was backing his equipment up and tragically, but accidentally, struck Dr. Miles while operating his bulldozer. It is a very unfortunate accident but Officer Randolph Wesson, the first police department officer to arrive on the scene, wants to use Dr. Miles’ unfortunate death to remind people they should never go into the woods alone, and always tell friends or family where you’re going. And, never go into an area marked, ‘No Trespassing,’ especially when heavy equipment is being operated.”

And that’s exactly what the papers reported the next day, along with a brief follow-up story on Dr. Miles’s life and family: both parents and a sister were killed in a high-speed train accident when the crossing gates did not come down—no surviving family members. Where she grew up: Key Largo, Florida, and went to school: University of Florida, and her time teaching with the state college as well as her preoccupation with environmental concerns, including the natural area of Sweetbay. A sidebar detailed the approved extension of the airport that Dr. Miles had fought against but which was ultimately approved, where she was inadvertently and ironically killed when she walked into the site under construction. The president of the college has already suggested they would name a wing after her at the school in honor of her important work with the environment.

The end.

Only it wasn’t the end for me.

As I read the name of “Officer Randolph Wesson,” my blood boiled as I thought of him with Dr. Miles, her trusting him, he using, then

discarding her on once protected land, like an empty beer can. I knew without a doubt that he had killed her and placed her body in that muddy resting place so that it would appear she was accidentally killed by the bulldozer driven by his accomplice, Carl Scott. But what was the motive? Was he jealous of her flirtation with a young, Native American student? I didn't think so. My mind raced, trying to think of why he might kill this wonderful woman. A woman I loved.

Nancy had mentioned Wesson owned his own private security company and that he had bid for the contract at the municipal airport. Had she discovered something that might have compromised that bid? Maybe, she'd found something that would've prevented the extension of the airport.

I read the story, again, through tear-filled eyes, my rage, surely like that of my ancestors, who watched as a government with its own agenda ruthlessly extinguished lives with no more thought than extinguishing a cigarette. If I could put on war paint and hunt them down I would. If I could...

### *Hunt.*

"Do you want to go hunting?" I remembered Nancy saying that day we'd gone to Riverbend Park. We'd gone hunting with cameras.

I crumpled the newspaper, my hope renewed. My rust-bucket car coughed and choked all the way back to the Sweetbay Natural Area, where I had spent the previous night, feeding mosquitoes and watching the police investigation, such as it was, unfold, the coroner and other cops come and go, their outcome already determined. Now, I hoped I could find what I needed: proof to put "Randy," in jail.

I walked slowly down the same pine trail as I had the day before, stopping to peak under bushes and look up in small trees to see if Nancy had placed any cameras there. When I didn't find any, I kept going.

Finally, I came to where she had been, where she had last drawn a breath among the nature and wildlife she had been trying to preserve. The mucky area where she had been assaulted and mashed into the black soil like a seed planted, but one that wouldn't grow. The place was surrounded by button bushes, my bushes, the ones I'd been writing about for my research

paper. The ones that surrounded her gravesite now and, as I parted the tender leaves and the white starbursts of flowers that looked like camera flashes frozen in nature, I heard the soft click of a shutter snapping a picture and found what I was looking for.

I took the cameras—all of the fifteen I had found, perhaps there were more—back to my car and downloaded them to my laptop. The cameras had been taking time-dated pictures since she placed them there the day before, which would be shown on all the news channels the next day. They were filled with pictures from many angles: of Nancy's beautiful face as she set up each camera, of protected burrowing owls that peered into them with curiosity, of the man in the police uniform who approached her, then, after arguing, struck her head with his left fist and buried her, of me uncovering and weeping over her, of the bulldozer aimed at her then twice backing over her body, of the two conspirators shaking hands, of the impotent investigation, of the still night and the return of the owls, and the armadillos, and other creatures of the woods inching back after man's intrusion, as if in mourning, like the parents of slain children returning to a shot-up school, or a car crash scene, or a drowning pool, just to be near the one they had once loved. And forever would.

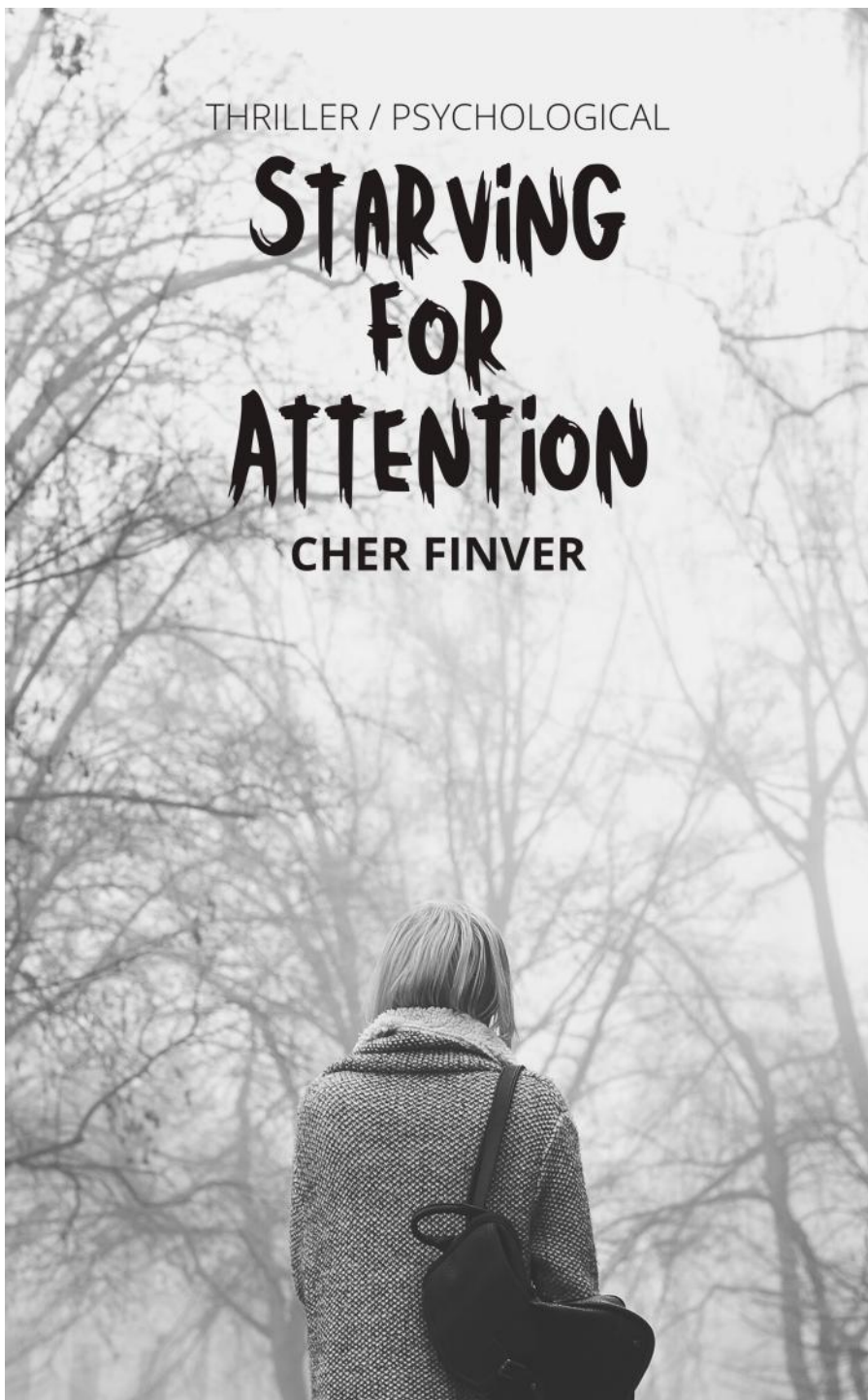
PATRICK KENDRICK is a former firefighter, freelance journalist, and technical rescue team member. He retired to write novels and began his own company, Fire O.W.L., that contracts with the Department of Defense to train soldiers and guardsmen in urban search and rescue techniques for responses to domestic terrorist attacks. His novels have earned two Florida Book Awards, the Hollywood Film Festival Award, Authors In Schools Literacy Award, and the Royal Palm Literary Gold Award for Best Biography, 2021. His fiction novels include: *Papa's Problem*, *Extended Family*, *Acoustic Shadows*, *The Savants*. *American Ripper: The Enigma Of America's Serial Killer Cop* is his award-winning non-fiction book, which is the basis of a documentary film, *Descent Of A Serial Killer*, for CBS-TV, through Peninsula Television (Ireland)  
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THRILLER / PSYCHOLOGICAL

# STARVING FOR ATTENTION

CHER FINVER







**M**y mom has a routine of walking around the Medford High School track across the street on the weekends and I usually follow. Even when she puts on her Walkman and ignores me. Mom's grey sweatpants fall just below her hips. Her brown hair has lost its luster and she's always moody. Lately, all I've seen her eat are apples.

I pull up on my tube socks before starting with a light jog. This is until my asthmatic lungs remind me not to do that. When I catch up to my mother, I whisper to her that I miss my brother. She cannot hear me. She does not want to hear me.

No longer did I hold the title of a big sister because Julian died a few months ago. His death has been ruled an accident. I know better but we aren't talking about that.

Eddie Murphy's *Party All the Time* is playing at an obnoxious volume through Mom's headphones as I try running off ahead of her. I make a mental note that Eddie Murphy will be remembered one day as a famous singer. Not that I can ever stay up late enough to watch *Saturday Night Live* or anything.

My lungs are starting to burn, so I slow down my pace yet again and readjust my New York Mets sweatband. My mom likes the Yankees, but they didn't just win the World Series, did they? Heavy breathing forces me to take in my surrounding aromas, the cedar trees and my knock-off Giorgio Beverly Hills perfume. I can also almost taste the red dirt on the track. Encircling the high school track is a vast thick forest. We used to go on walks through the forest as a family. Not anymore.

As I continue walking the track, my mind turns to the letter sent home to all parents from my middle school yesterday. *Watch your children. Possible kidnapper on the loose.* Mom is making her way across the field to head home, fragile as ever. This is when I see a man standing perfectly still, hidden

among the many trees behind her. I tell my mother about him as we walk home. She quickens her step and does not look back.

When I draw this man, my mom rips up my picture. She then tells me to go to 7-Eleven. I'm given three bucks and a note from her to the cashier stating that it is okay to pick up a pack of smokes for her. I'm thirteen. I close our apartment door to the sound of Mom crying. She cries often.

A cute boy is chewing a wad of gum while looking at dirty magazines as I am leaving the convenience store. We make eye contact briefly, and I use that opportunity to give him a look of disgust. So I'm surprised when he walks up behind me as I wait for the stoplight to turn green so that I can cross the street safely.

"Hey, ya wanna hear a dirty joke?" He blows a giant pink bubble, letting it pop in my face.

"No, thank you." I pound on the crosswalk button a few more times.

"I'm Lucas. What's your name?"

I consider using a fake name like I've seen my mom do whenever she is hit on.

"Vivian." *I guess I am going with my real name.*

"Vivian, it is nice to meet you."

The light indicates to walk as Lucas continues. I notice his nails are dirty. *Boys.*

"So, a guy takes a girl back to his place. They take a shower together and ..."

"Eww. Stop. I said I don't want to hear your joke!"

"Okay, fine. Do you believe in God?"

The question causes me to stop walking and Lucas runs right into me.

"How do you go from dirty jokes and magazines to God?" I ask.

"I have an array of interests." His smirk is adorable, like Michael J. Fox's. "So you don't believe then?"

"I don't know. My mom doesn't talk about God much."

"My Pops is a preacher, so I know all there is to know about God," Lucas states proudly.

"That's totally cool for you," I mumble sarcastically.

“My house is this way.” He points in the opposite direction of where I live. “Will you be at the 7-Eleven tomorrow?”

I shrug. “Depends on when my mom runs out of smokes.”

I think about Lucas that night. I start drawing pictures of him instead of the man from the forest. I keep my sketches to myself this time, drawing hearts around the words “*Vivian loves Lucas*” in my cherry-scented red marker. We start meeting up regularly. Mom works double shifts, which means I am left alone for hours after school and in the evening.

“Do you like mac and cheese?” I stand on my toes to reach for the box in our near-empty cabinet.

“Who doesn’t like mac and cheese?” Lucas happily drums on the Formica table.

He has a good point.

“My Pops and I are going to another men’s Bible retreat this weekend.” Lucas stretches out his back against my kitchen chair and his back pops. I am not too fond of the sound.

“Cool beans.” I add the expired milk and butter and stir vigorously, trying to deflect from my jealousy.

Lucas notices.

“You know what the Bible says about envy, don’t you? A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones. Proverbs 14:30.”

I roll my eyes. Maybe I would miss Lucas, but I was envious of the parent-child quality time they would be spending together. My mom has no time for me. Lucas and I finish dinner and I start to do the dishes. I imagine that this is what a healthy marriage must look like.

The next day, my school sends home another letter, which I throw in the trash. Two children are now missing. I follow my mom into the bathroom.

“Can I watch you do your make-up, Mom?”

“Hon, I’m late. Go watch TV or something.” She is distracted yet again.

The little free time Mom has, she allocates to exercise and dates. She is still so beautiful to me, despite her apparent eating disorder. *"Thin is in,"* as they say in the magazines.

I do not listen to my mother. I sit on the powder blue toilet as she leans over the bathroom counter, applying a heavy layer of neon eyeshadow. Her oversized sweater hides her shrinking figure and her stirup pants are too loose. I change the subject.

"There's a boy I like. His name is Lucas. He lives with his dad. They do stuff together."

There is no change in my mother's demeanor as she starts to tease her bangs. I choke on the Aqua Net hairspray she is over spraying.

"TV, Viv. Go!"

*Maybe if I were kidnapped, she'd give a shit.*

I head for the living room as Mom slams the bathroom door behind me. I call Lucas while twirling the long phone cord between my fingers and tell him to come by tomorrow. I had a surprise for him.

I've never been kissed, but I am hopeful that Lucas will change that. I point my well-developed chest toward him, bat my eyes, flip my hair and everything. He is telling me about his latest father-son adventure when I lean in.

"Hey, whatcha doing?" Lucas steps back.

"You don't want to kiss me?" I turn bright red.

"I've thought about it. I thought about kissing you the first day I met you."

My heart skips a beat. "So, what's the problem?"

"Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. Hebrews 13:4," Lucas recites.

"It's not like I want to have sex with you. That's gross." Crossing my arms, I stare down at my Reebok sneakers from the Goodwill store.

"I've made a promise to God, to my Pops too."

"So, you're not going to kiss anyone until your married? That is just stupid. And excuse me, when we met, you were looking at a dirty magazine

and trying to tell me a dirty joke!”

There is silence for what feels like an eternity. I flip on MTV and sing along to Madonna. I start to tell “*Papa Don’t Preach*” when Lucas sloppily sticks his tongue down my throat mid-note. I wished he would have waited until the music video was over. I love Madonna.

My mind trails off from the Material Girl to Sunday. I’ve been invited to go to church with Lucas and his father, Bill. I’m pretty nervous. What if Lucas tells his dad that we kiss now and stuff?

You could tell that at one time Bill was handsome, just like his son. Now his eyes droop and he looks exhausted. His Oldsmobile is meticulous, which I can appreciate. I notice I am starting to develop a headache and I’m dizzy. *Now is not the time.*

“Vivian, what does your mother do? Which church does she attend?” Bill makes a left-hand turn at the Woolworths without using his turn signal. It seems adults are judged by job titles, so I lie and say she works for NASA. I avoid Lucas’s puzzled expression. Bill does not question my answer and moves on.

“And church?” He glances back at me over his rimmed glasses, as a scolding Santa Claus would.

“Well, I’ve never been to church. My mom says she was force-fed religion as a child and vowed to do differently by my brother and me.” As soon as I utter “brother,” I regret it.

“Oh. Lucas didn’t mention that you had a sibling.”

“Pops!” Lucas is annoyed.

“It’s okay, Lucas. I used to have a brother. Julian died a few months ago. He was three.” My mind flashes back to the day he died.

As a preacher, Bill must deal with death all the time. He reminds me that Julian is in a better place, blah, blah, blah. As we enter the church gates, Bill’s name is right there on the sign that also states the Sunday service hours. *It must be nice to be so important.* Bill is charming and charismatic as he stands at the podium. He is nothing like the man I just met in the car. I zone out after that, closing my eyes to relieve my headache and other symptoms.

That is until we are asked to pray for the two children recently kidnapped and still missing from our neighborhood.

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A receptionist wearing a shoulder-padded power suit calls out my name. *Dress for the job you want, not the job you have.*

“Vivian Scottsdale?”

My mom grabs my hand.

“We are here. Hi, I’m Maggie, this is Vivian.” Mom pushes me forward as if she wants everyone to know that she’s not the one about to get her head examined. Again.

Every therapist’s office has the same staples. There is a couch across from a chair, a motivational poster or two and a box of Kleenex. And in the case of a child therapist, games and toys. *I’m too old for those.* Mom kisses me on the head as she reminds me that she will be in the waiting room. I want her to come back in and kiss me on the head just one more time.

Ms. Kathy, as I am told to call her, was fresh out of college. Those therapists-in-training cost less. She reminds me of my mother a bit if my mom were healthy.

“Do you want to talk about what your mom found you doing the other day?” Ms. Kathy asked as she is looking down, taking notes.

“I have no idea what you are talking about.” I yawn as I’m already bored.

Ms. Kathy bends forward in her chair. Now I have her attention. Her breath smells like tuna fish. The can of New Coke on her desk leads me to believe she has just finished eating.

“The missing children. Tell me about the missing children.”

“Those posters that I put in the trash? Is this what this is about?” *I’ve been to therapy for more serious reasons than this.*

“Why would you tear down posters of children who are still missing? Do you know where they are?”

I quickly try to think of a response.

“No, but they are probably dead. Been missing for a while.” I’m hoping my matter-of-fact-ness gets her to change the subject. It does. *Awesome.*

“Can we talk about the man in the forest?” Mrs. Kathy chews on the end of her pen cap. *Real professional.*

I’d rather go back to talking about the kids so I shut down, and the remainder of my session is spent playing some of those games. *I’m really good at Pictionary.* As I stand up to leave, I notice my file has a handwritten letter from my mother. Ms. Kathy quickly steps in front of it as she opens her office door.

There is no talk of therapy as we pull into the diner that Mom works at. She promises to bring me out a piece of chocolate cake after she collects her paycheck. I can tell Mom is disappointed. *Like I could solve what a detective can’t!* Mom is gone long enough for me to drift off in the backseat. I dream about the man in the forest. He smiles at me. I smile back.

I eat my cake the next morning for breakfast and head out the door for school. Lucas is waiting for me with a smile. We hold hands, walking in silence until we aren’t.

“What did the therapist say?” Lucas stops at the same traffic light where we first met.

“She asked me why I was throwing away the missing signs for the dead kids.”

“How do you know they are dead?” Lucas says with urgency.

“Are they home? Have any ransoms been demanded? They are dead.” Lucas shifts his weight.

“God says do not fear...”

“Oh, will you just stop? You felt me up yesterday. Get off your holy horse, will ya?”

The traffic light changes and so do my feelings for Lucas. I have way more important issues to deal with right now anyway. I write him a note later in class and break up with him. I assume he is devastated because now he won’t talk to me.

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As Mom’s stomach growls loudly, she pulls out another apple from her purse. She hardly makes eye contact with me anymore. What I did must be eating her alive. *Eating. Why wouldn’t she eat? Please eat!* We are waiting to

see Ms. Kathy again. I have made some progress with her. The man in the forest? I was seeing my father. I miss him. He died from cancer at the beginning of the year, and I guess my imagination got away from me. This is not the first time I've seen things that weren't there.

I'm going to get Mom well. I will tell her that I will continue therapy only if she goes too. We will be as close as Lucas and Bill are. Just the two of us. After my dad died, I had scraps of my mother's attention, which I relished. But it wasn't enough time for me.

This is why I drowned my little brother when my mom left the bathroom to take a quick phone call. I wasn't watching Julian as closely as I should have been when he slipped under the water. That is my story. Less than two minutes underwater, that's all it took. He didn't fight me. He didn't even try to scream or cry. I held my hands against his chest as he was lying on his back. He just looked up at me confused and terrified.

As I watched the last of the air bubbles rise to the top of the water, I stepped back out of the bathroom and slid down the wall in the hallway. I noticed my sleeves are wet and pulled them up. Mom couldn't fathom that I did anything wrong. She thought it was a terrible accident. *At first anyway.* This was the day Mom stopped eating. See, I must fix her as I'm the one who broke her.

Just a few days later, I open up the newspaper to a story about the still-unsolved kidnapping of those two children. There is a photograph of a little girl's bloody shoe in a field. A Mary Jane shoe to be exact. Black and shiny, with a strap across the instep and a kitten heel. I can picture the little white frilly socks that the girl probably wore with them. Half-way down the article, there is another photo. A police officer is wearing a glove, holding up the other shoe. My eyes widen. The sole of that shoe reads, "Children are a gift from the Lord: they are a reward from him."

I run to the bathroom and barf. Could Lucas? *No, no way.* Bill? *Maybe.* A child in our community would trust a man of Bill's stature. I think back to Bill's Oldsmobile and the faint nagging scent that gave me that headache. Bleach.

I vomit again before going back to the newspaper. The timeline. Were Bill and Lucas together when the children went missing? I am so enamored



with the image of the shoe that I drop the paper after squinting to see the welcome retreat sign in the far distance.

*Okay, Vivian, think.* Everyone has secrets. I don't want Lucas to go to a detention center, testify against his dad or lose him to prison. *It's horrible not having a daddy.* I know Lucas is not strong enough to handle any of that. I do feel sorry for the families of the missing, just not enough to call the authorities.

---

It is now the day after Christmas, 1986. The missing kids are gone from the news channels and newspapers now, replaced with more recent horrors. I hear through some classmates that Bill and Lucas just up and moved out West. *Good for them.*

I lay the bouquet on the grave, blow a kiss, and make my way to the waiting car. In the driver's seat sits my grandmother. Too distraught to get out of her vehicle and pay her respects, she sobs as we leave the cemetery and turn onto the highway. Mom's heart stopped a few days ago. Everybody knows that your body needs fuel.

*Why didn't you eat, Mom? All you had to do was eat.* I stare out the window as I head to my new home. My grandmother lives an hour from my mom and me, but we hardly ever saw her. Now, it will just be the two of us. *I can start over here.*

As we get out of the car, Grandma takes my hand to steady herself and I smile at her. She kisses me on the head. This time, I smile to myself and look up at the sky.

CHER FINVER is a mother, wife and writer living in Las Vegas, Nevada. She's the author of the 2017 memoir, *But You Look So Good and Other Lies*, as well as several other works of fiction, poetry and non-fiction. When not enjoying time with her three rescue dogs, Cher enjoys water aerobics, jigsaw puzzles, crime docs, and lunch at the Olive Garden. Diagnosed with MS in 2000, Cher is often told she looks good, which is a perfect time to remind everyone that not every disability is always visible.



A black silhouette of a person with curly hair, shown in profile facing right. The silhouette is set against a dark gray background with a fine, grainy texture. The person's head is tilted slightly upwards, and their hair is voluminous and curly. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

DRAMA

# LINEAGE

LIZ LYDIC



“I think we’re all looking for resolution here,” my high school principal said in the general direction of me, my mom, and my dad. Mr. Conti was in his signature pose: leaning back in an office chair, hands behind his head. The week I was set to graduate with the Central Texas High School Class of 1992, Mr. Conti was asking how me and my “fellow violators” felt about not walking in the ceremony, as punishment for our involvement in the slaughter of a Future Farmers of America livestock goat.

“I’d rather just apologize to the school board,” I said. My chin flicked upward as I spoke, instead of collapsing toward my chest as it might have before the previous Friday night. Unknown to me then, that Friday night would be a marker in my life. At the time, it was a simple ‘yes’ instead of my typical ‘no.’ There wasn’t even any kind of aggressive pressure from my solicitors - Clay Torres, James “Davidson” Davidson, Jonathan Henrich, foreign exchange student from Poland Aleksander “Ziggy” Zielinski, and Nathaniel Dorn.

“It’s not your choice, Dan,” my dad said. “Mr. Conti is in charge here.”

“Co-rrect.” Mr. Conti’s response prompted my dad to nod, my mom to grip her practical Jansport purse tighter, and my stomach to shrink.

“So, when you said ‘how would you feel,’ you weren’t asking me my opinion, but actually, telling me through the use of rhetoric - in order to exert authority - what the decision already is?” My neutral tone, my nerdiness (I’d probably be diagnosed with Asperger’s if I was a teen today) prevented my statement from sounding snide, and instead, as if I was reading the inside jacket of a novel.

“Dan-” my dad started, but stopped.

Conti studied me. In the silence, I identified something he’d said that was agitating: that the people I was with were ‘fellow’ violators,

insinuating an established camaraderie. In reality, I was just there at the moment something was happening.

Jonathan Hendrich and his mom lived across the street from me. Jonathan's mom was loud, bossy and crass. My mother hated her. That a friendship never evolved with Jonathan was either because of my mom's preference, or at least to her great relief. My only two friends growing up were Tanner and Derrick. I suspected our trio originated as an arrangement between our parents: "If your nerdy, awkward child helps our deviants stay out of trouble, we'll make sure they are loyal." Tanner and Derrick held respect enough in most social circles. What they liked about me, I think, was my humor, my blatantly critical take on things. One of the hardest parts about being shy but not necessarily nice, was the sort of bottling up I felt. With Tanner and Derrick, I felt it less.

A simple, automatic 'Hey, man' between Jonathan and me had set that particular Friday night in motion. Around 10pm, I was returning home from my after-school job at Safeway market. In my headlights, I'd seen Jonathan, Clay, Davidson, Ziggy, and Nathaniel lingering on or around Jonathan's Volvo. The body language and lack of inertia indicated that the group was not in the middle of anything nefarious.

"What up, Burrell?" Clay had called out. "You seen Ziggy's Olympic threads?" On the far side of Jonathan's car, Ziggy was beaming in a 1988 Olympic bomber jacket, and the group - now suddenly including me - was asking questions about his country's wrestling team and how Polish girls were stacked. My dweeby inquiries about how the 1984 boycott impacted participation in the upcoming games were lost amongst the debates about which one of us boys would look the faggiest in the jacket.

Relaying the sequence of events from that moment on was not unlike explaining how I won a particular game of Chutes and Ladders: a spin led to a certain advancement, and so on, until I was at the end. Ziggy told more stories. A neighbor's light went on. There was discussion of getting out of there. Clay - the apparent Alpha - had a restless energy for which the rest of us seemed to feel responsible. His idea to go to the high school sounded interesting. There was no particular plan, but an unspoken understanding

that the issue would resolve itself when we arrived. Later, I would come to miss the hubris of adolescence: that inspiration would find us without requiring pursuit.

We wandered around the quiet campus for a while, kicking trash cans, trying to climb flat cinder block walls, and racing each other across the football field. I didn't say much, just joining in with full enthusiasm at each activity. I ignored a tiny pull of guilt about Tanner and Derrick.

The high school's agricultural area was adjacent to the science wing, which backed up to the football bleachers. It seemed inevitable, based on our edginess and the school's geography, that we'd end up hopping the chainlink fence surrounding the greenhouse, pig and goat pens.

We explored the area with unease. Not knowing the abilities of these animals, plus the obvious invasion of their peace, gave way to our defensive anger. We walked closer, then backed away, scuffing dirt and hay toward them. The air was thick with heat and the smell of shit. Talk turned to the fate of the livestock.

"You think those FFA kids make good money selling them?" Nathaniel asked.

Clay shook his head. "Depends on if they sell them when they are dead or alive." This did not seem corroborated by anything, but the other boys nodded.

"They shoot them?" Nathaniel was half-smiling, his t-shirt damp at the armpits.

"My uncle," started Ziggy, "he a butcher, you know. He kill the thing by holding it tight then slice it. Then, he tie the thing to go, like, upside down." Ziggy leaned his body to the left, hands holding the legs of an imaginary animal in demonstration. "Then, all blood can go out, you know?"

Violence now looming, we proceeded to toss around suggestions as to which one of us would be best suited to hold down a braying goat, and which would be most adept at slitting its throat.

I cannot, to this day, remember how this theoretical discussion morphed into our entrance into the goat pen. Like a useless cliché, it all happened at once. Davidson grabbed a goat; Nathaniel another. When Clay

restrained the third, it was clear that his would be the target. Jonathan toggled like a referee between the pairs. The bleating was surprisingly loud.

“We need a knife!” Clay yelled.

My impulse was to oblige, but - with no thought behind it, just my words, and my body throbbing and eyes now blazing - I instead told Ziggy to go to the greenhouse where I had seen an oversized pair of pruning shears. He didn’t know the word, so I screamed “Big scissors!” and mimed their opening and closing with my arms. Everything was urgent, loud, and fast. Ziggy ran back and was about to go to Clay’s goat, but I blocked him. My arm across the front of his bomber jacket, I shouted “No! This isn’t *for* you!” and I took the shears.

“Should you hit it on the head first?” Clay was yelling, and he looked scared. I didn’t answer. I just allowed my body to work its way through the task of opening the shears, and then make the forceful, deep and quick swipe from left to right, and for my breath to release a corresponding “Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!” For once, my voice didn’t create a well-articulated statement that would make its way down from the mayhem of my brain. Instead, energy simply exited my body as I completed this self-imposed mission deftly and naturally.

The goat was limp, and Clay was covered in blood. Looking at his hands, he too emitted a glottal cry. The surviving goats went berserk. The other boys screamed in joy “Fuck yeah!” and “Holy fucking shit!” over and over, laugh-grunting, eyes wide and maniacal. I snapped out of the moment quickly and raised my voice to say “Guys, there is the question of the carcass.” Blank stares and quiet followed. I looked over at the dead goat.

Clay and I were off the hook for the retrieval of the body, and I found this logic touching. Nathaniel suggested dumping it in the athletic pool, and later I’d remember that one of the girls on the swim team had dated and then broken up with Nathaniel the year prior. The task took ten minutes, and when the other boys returned, I handed Ziggy back the Olympic jacket, which I was holding. He grinned at me. We all parted to drive home, discard soiled clothing, and wash off.



Ziggy inadvertently got us caught. The student he lived with - a classmate we'd all known since kindergarten - arrived home late that Friday night from work as Ziggy was sneaking in. The bomber jacket covered the blood on Ziggy's shirt, but there was a large smear of red on his face, likely swiped from his hand in some habitual scratch. The student 'brother' - assuming a fight had occurred - shouted, and the ruckus awoke the host family. In an attempt to provide an explanation for the blood, Ziggy simply could not find an alternative to the truth quickly enough. Mr. Conti was called in the morning.

I didn't walk in the graduation ceremony. Summer vacation started with no fanfare or academic victory. I endured suffocating shifts at Safeway, saving for tuition for the University of Chicago, where I'd attend in the Fall. My parents never spoke of the incident, starting with the day we walked out of Conti's office in silence. Their avoidance of the subject that summer and from there on out left me with the assumption that I had single-handedly ruined their lives. When I came home for school breaks, I took cues from the chill in the air, which I returned in self-preservation. Eventually, I stopped visiting them altogether.

Sometime while in Chicago, through great effort and intention, I stopped talking in such a formal, awkward manner. Despite multiple attempts by them both to prevent it, I completely fell out of touch with Tanner and Derrick. I felt a natural separation from them, eventually leading to a breaking-off from everyone I knew. What I had guessed was my fate became real: I was out of everyone's reach, always on the outside looking in.

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2016

A post from my uncle appears in my Facebook feed: a scanned image of a man wearing a loose tie, large jacket, and lapels. It's titled '1827, John Burrell.' There's a comment from my cousin Mia: *'Is that our relative that killed Native Americans?'* followed by an emoji with a miniscule hand covering

its mouth. I feel my neck heat, and in all caps, I write: *WHAT?!?! Mia responds with a comment, Too much to type. I'll call u.* I immediately wish I had gone to any of the recent family gatherings Mia has hosted. She lives so close to me in San Antonio, and yet I rarely see her or anyone I'm related to. I tell myself often that it's not too late, that one of these days I'll take her up on invitations to go the five miles to see her, and start this adult version of us.

On the phone, we catch up for a few minutes before there's a lull.

"So, this John Burrell thing. Apparently, Uncle Jagger made some kind of discovery in Grandfather's family history stuff, a record or something about our...hang on, let me get this straight..." She's silent for a beat. "Ok, it's our great, great, great, great, great grandpa. I guess he was somehow involved in an event in Oklahoma - did you know anyone on that side of the family had lived there?"

"Yeah, actually, that's familiar," I say, remembering my mom's brief interest in genealogy when I was ten years old. She had joined a club through the local library and attended a single meeting before declaring it "too full of unrelatable people," code for her excruciating discomfort with other humans.

"Oh, well, I had no idea! So, John Burrell, was apparently in a group of men - *white* men - who stole land from Native Americans. Not just stole, but also *murdered* them." I let this information sink in, creating a quick visual of the era. I have sudden pity for John, being scrutinized by us, his family.

We discuss it a bit more before the topic tapers off. It feels good to talk to her, and it's sincere when I tell her that I am available for her Easter party in April. After looping on our conversation for an hour, I register with Ancestry.com.

There are pictures, names, and timelines to sort through. I find John. There is a newspaper article, a small piece written in the Atoka Times in 1827. My relative was one of eight men who overtook a Native American settlement on the Northeast side of the Atoka Creek, Native American territory in 1822. Half were charged with kidnapping, and the other half - including John - were charged with murder. The last paragraph explains why

the event was being written about five years later. Three of the men serving time had been executed the year before. My relative was receiving a pardon by the governor, who felt as if John, the youngest member of the criminal group, 'lacked the intelligence' to understand the consequences of his actions.

Suddenly exhausted, I lay down, and invite images as they appear effortlessly behind my closed eyes. There's John with the seven men: he, plucked by the others. Or, perhaps, *joining* them. I curate vague circumstances: John traveling down a road, the rest arriving in pairs, or maybe in small groups. Or, John entering a general store where the seven of them are already situated. Maybe they collect one another not with the malicious intent that makes the story easy, but with the overwhelming simplicity of space and time: assembling the way a tumbleweed makes its way across land, gathering whatever is in its path, the energy moving the unit of nature forward. Weighing our two crimes against each other, mine and John's, I look for the thread that connects us: his crime more heinous, mine less explainable. I zig-zag between the stories, and realize how useless any of us are in our attempts to control the specific breadcrumbs of our life paths, never more so than in our youth.

It's late when I rouse myself out of bed the next day, and I get decent with food, shower, and clothes, then decide to take a walk. There's no destination in mind. After an hour, I realize I'm heading in the general direction of Mia's house, and I don't stop myself from continuing. I pull out my phone to text her if I can come by, but then put it back. *It's ok*, I think, *to just show up*.

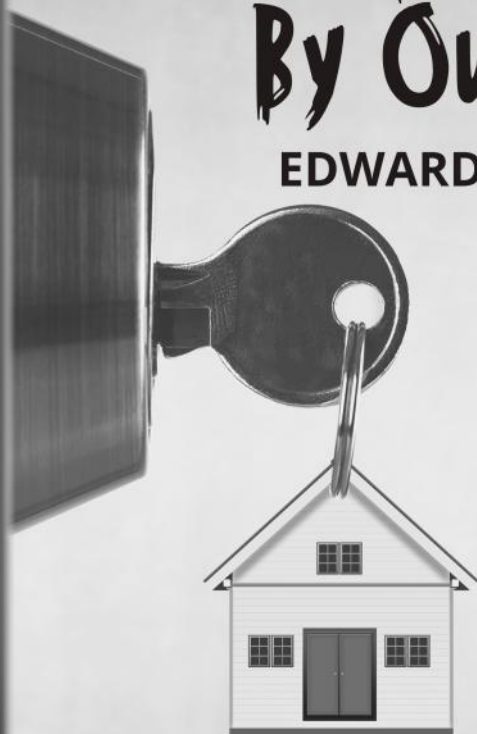
LIZ LYDIC's work has appeared in McSweeney's, Typishly, Rougarou, Little Old Lady Comedy, The Belladonna Comedy, Pine Cone Review, Ruminant Magazine, The Offing, Robot Butt, Moss Piglet, and is forthcoming in Farside Review, Eggplant Emoji, and Defenestration. Liz is a mom, writer, and an admin for a city in the Los Angeles area. She also does theatre stuff. Visit [lizlydic.com](http://lizlydic.com)



HORROR

# FOR SALE, BY OWNER

EDWARD AHERN





**M**My house was built on the cusp of the Roaring Twenties and the Depression. It crouches on a corner lot knoll; windows framed to ignore its neighbors. Over almost a century it's tolerated improvements and modernizations. We occupants are another matter.

I grimaced at the prospective house purchasers. Suburban buy-ups, original wife and husband, two pre-adolescent kids, probably a dog. I forced a smile. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, I'm so happy you're taking an interest in my little home."

At 4300 square feet it was disqualified from little, but I knew false modesty was expected. "Thank you for agreeing to see the home while I'm in it. I love this house and so want to meet those who might buy it."

*And be bound to it*, I thought. "And this must be Jim and Sally." I reached past the parents to shake the children's hands. The boy did so grudgingly, the girl kept her hands at her sides.

"What's that Mrs. Anderson? Sarah and Peter, yes of course and please call me Estelle. Tickled you're interested in the house's history, I've written and self-published its story, you're welcome to take a copy of it when you leave.

"My house does have an intriguing past. Many, many good things happened here, but Aldous James, who had the house built, died in the library under suspicious circumstances. Nothing ever proved. Back in the forties there was a husband-and-wife knife fight in the kitchen. She died; he was executed. In the swinging sixties, thruplets and quartlets abounded in the four bedrooms, eventually causing chain divorces...

"This is the solarium, which they called the Florida room back in the Thirties... There were three marriage proposals here, two of them accepted. The third got ugly, the disappointed suitor threatening to burn the house down. But he disappeared shortly afterward, never resurfaced."

Peter Anderson had been reddening throughout Estelle's running commentary. "Really, Estelle, you should be pointing out the attractions and amenities you list in this house-the master suite with bath, the indoor jacuzzi, the entertainment ready kitchen, the dining room big enough for a family Christmas..."

"Oh, Peter, you're doing so much better than I could." I turned my skinny frame and focused on the two children. "The attic and basement are finished, carpeted and air conditioned, with cable access and WIFI reception, very private and perfect for gaming or little experiments."

Jim, maybe ten, cracked a grin. Sally, a little older, smiled hesitantly. Estelle turned her attention back onto Sarah and Peter. "Counting mine, seven families have lived in this house and a U.S. senator and a rock singer were born here," I didn't mention that the singer had also died here, of an overdose. They'd find out if they read my book.

Peter, a six and a half footer, had shaded back down. He spoke up. "You must know that your price is over market."

I reapplied my smile. "Let's not get into pricing until you've seen if the house suits you. And vice versa of course."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, just that life styles should mesh with the house's form and function. A home is the intimate part of your universe, you wouldn't want to be an invading alien. It should be like a household god to you, like the old Roman Lares were."

Sarah wrinkled her eyebrows and smiled. "That a weird slant on things, but I like it. Are the Lares protective?"

"Often." I didn't mention the death of my daughter. "Here's the elevated deck, wonderful for outdoor events. It can handle twenty people."

Sally's posture had unfrozen. "What not nice things happened on the deck, Mrs. Lawrence?"

"Ah, Sally, there've been at least two hundred cheery parties out here over the years, but four decades ago there was a fight between the then owner Ted Malone and his hated next door neighbor Roger Stevenson. The police report said that Roger fell off the deck and shattered his leg, but those



there said Ted shoved him. Who knows.”

Peter was frowning. “How is it that you seem to know so much about troubles before your occupancy? I doubt your neighbors remember them.”

I’d prepared lies for these kinds of questions. “Rumors die hard, and I verified them with visits to old neighbors in nursing homes. The house’s history is my hobby, my avocation.”

Tour over, I seated them in the living room and brought in coffee, juice and pastries. “You’ve seen the house, please excuse me for a moment.”

Peter interrupted my leaving. “About the pricing...”

I held up a hand. “As I told you, it’s not the time to talk prices. My house has a personality and a distinct life experience. First you should decide if it suits you. It’s a little like dating. You’re attracted to a girl first and then learn if her family has money.”

He started to speak, but Sarah cut him off. “The house has wonderful features, but it’s so, so old fashioned in its layout. We’re used to more a more open interior design.”

“Of course, dear. Some do find that the separate rooms provide privacy, helping people keep their little secrets. Or big ones.”

Sally spoke for the first time. “I could live in the attic, it’s like a separate world.”

Sarah shushed her. “You can’t hide in the attic.”

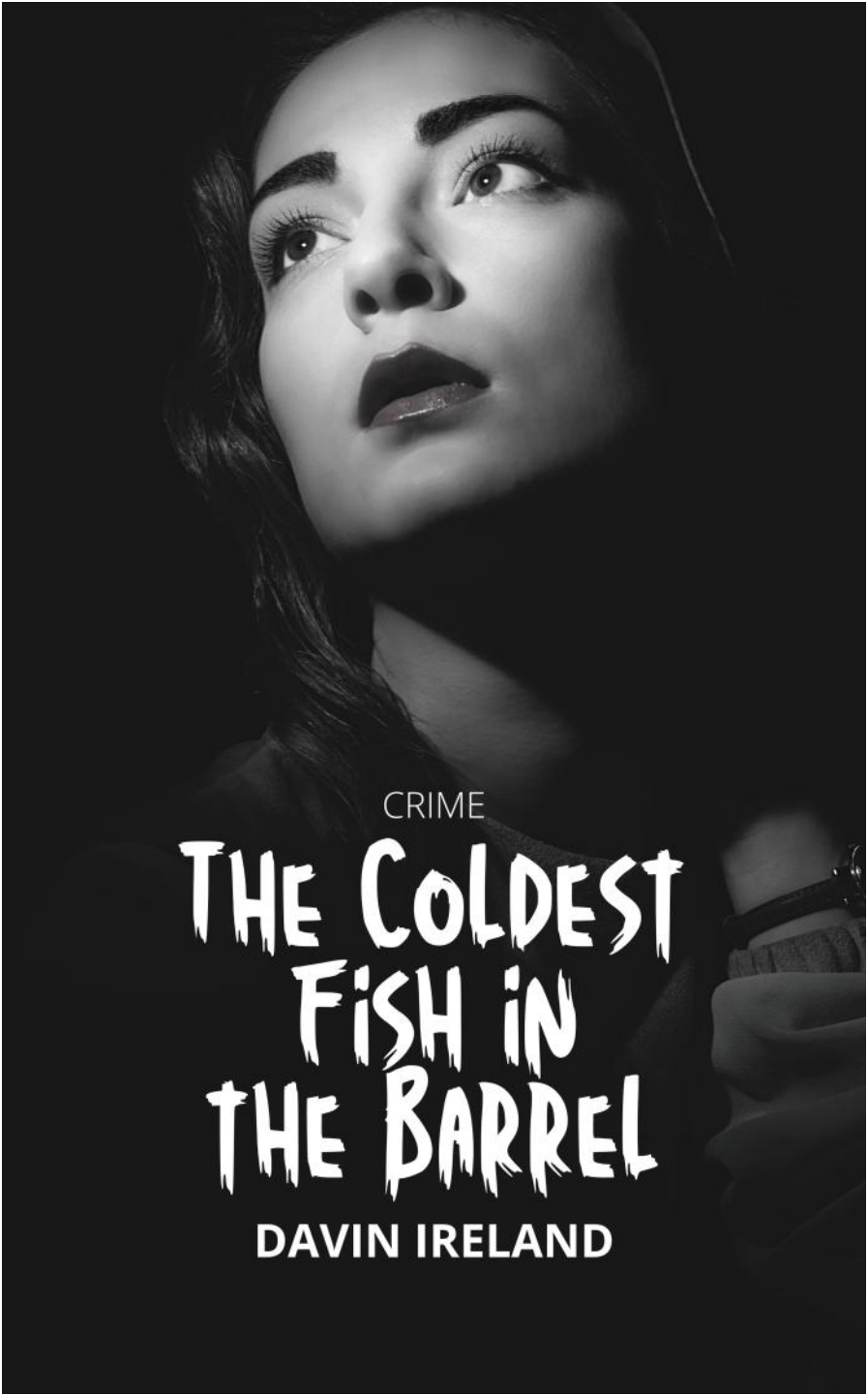
I excused myself and walked out of the sun room and into the library, then over to the fireplace, the lungs of the house. I leaned against the mantel. *They’re wrong for you. Too normal.*

I listened. *Ab. Really? So Peter can be wire twisted, and Sally shows decadent promise.*

The Andersons looked up at me when I returned. I focused on Peter. “What sort of price did you have in mind?”

ED AHERN resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He’s had four hundred stories and poems published so far, and six books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of nine review editors. He’s also lead editor at The Scribes Micro Fiction magazine. <https://www.twitter.com/bottomstripper>





CRIME

THE COLDEST  
FISH IN  
THE BARREL

DAVIN IRELAND



I wanted nothing to do with it, not on a night like that. It was cold, late, and I could practically smell the steam from Jean's casserole wafting into the narrow hallway of our apartment, where it would linger like a promise of good things to come. In my mind's eye, I was already kicking off my shoes and swinging little Toby, the four-legged surrogate for the kid we've been talking about, into my arms.

But instead here's me: Captain's orders, parked across the street from the Grand Hotel, watching everything get wet. The rain, it just came down. The endless downpour of afternoon had deteriorated into a deluge that thrashed rooftops, awnings and passing cabs whilst reflecting smears of colourful neon trim from the gutters. You couldn't get away from it. And somewhere behind one of those lighted third-floor rectangles, a freshly-minted widow, unaware of her newfound marital status, was ironing her deceased husband's shirt, taking a call from her sister in Poughkeepsie, waiting for the tell-tale ratchet of a key in the lock ... later than usual, perhaps, but probably not by much. Maybe she hadn't noticed it yet.

I slammed the door of my Oldsmobile and peered up at the lighted edifice of the Grand. Ominous and vaguely antiquated in appearance, its granite and stucco façade vanished into the darkness and the impenetrable storm clouds overhead. Not wanting to dwell, I snagged a break in traffic and skipped across the road, fists burying themselves deep in the pockets of my trench coat. One of those fists encountered a badge. I flashed it at the Grand's indifferent doorman, who scarcely twitched an eyebrow, and slotted it into the breast pocket of my jacket. Gonna be needing it again soon, I thought. Then I was crossing the lobby and dodging hostile glances from old men swaddled in layers of tweed and crackling newsprint -- the kind that eye you with disapproval from the depths of their easy chairs for reasons maybe even they don't understand.

"Excuse me, sir?"

The voice was as flat and cold as the marble facing that encased the reception area, and about as deserving of my attention. "Can I help you with anything?"

I punched the elevator button and swept off my hat. Stood there dripping rainwater all over the Grand's expensively buffed floor. The voice addressed me again, markedly less friendly this time.

"*Sir*. Yes, you by the elevator."

I turned around slowly, shirt collar tightening about my throat. The hotel porter was barely out of his teens, hair so thickly oiled that it reflected perfectly the shape of the sconced wall-lamp mounted above the key rack. Without making a big fuss of it, I let him know that he was right to call me sir, and that my business was none of his damn business. I also added that I was a representative of the law, had thirty years and over forty pounds on him, and was in no mood to answer stupid questions. Not that I actually *said* any of the those things. When it's past supper time and you're this pissed, body language does the job a whole lot better than words.

He got the message.

Gratified by a job well done, I turned to one of the old farts who sat eyeing me over his copy of the *New York Times*, and grinned. According to the *Times*' banner headline, the Soviets had just detonated a hydrogen bomb in a place called Novaya Zemlya. With a name like that, I guess it had to be true.

The elevator doors swished open.

#

Christ, this never gets any easier. That's what I thought as I punched 3 and folded down the wall-seat usually reserved for the elevator operator. Or at least it had been reserved for the elevator operator until the management wised up and allowed the residents to push their own buttons for a change. Unhappily, all the seat took the weight off of was my feet. The greater burden wasn't physical. When the watch commander first offered to train me up as a bagman -- this wasn't too long after my transfer down from

Boston -- I respectfully declined and assumed my rebuttal to be the end of it. I couldn't have been more wrong. Earl Peyton made the request again a couple of weeks later, and when I declined a second time, wondered if I might at least go on the payroll temporarily. Just to keep my fellow officers from 'getting antsy', as he put it. I turned that one down, too. Eventually he asked me real slow if I ever suffered from a crick in the neck. I knew what he was getting at. I told him I could look the other way just as well as the next guy.

Turns out I was wrong about that, too.

I discovered just *how* wrong during the Donny Ballantine case. Ballantine was a bad apple -- and I mean rotten to the core. A teenage delinquent who had recently acquired a taste for armed robbery and assault, he forever put himself beyond the pale when he brutally raped a sixty-seven-year-old grandmother of five at knifepoint. He then stamped on the poor woman's wrists to prevent her dialling for help, and ambled off into the night. Luisa Quinones eventually died from internal haemorrhaging after three days on a heart-lung machine up at Belle Vue.

It was open-and-shut. Prints, matching blood type, witness identification. A youth fitting Donny's description even made an abortive attempt to cash his victim's pension cheque at a gas station in Queens the morning after the assault. Then it emerged Donny's got family in the Department, and all of a sudden the whereabouts of certain key pieces of evidence was called into question. I blew my top right there in the squad room when they told me, threatened to take it to the Feds if the missing items didn't reappear by end of shift. Long story short? I've been working the shit detail ever since. Scraping dead teenagers off the freeway, pulling the lost and the lonely out of the East River, telling some pie-baking PTA mom that her boisterous eighth-grader just blew one of his fingers off with a zip gun fished from a trash barrel.

It could be worse. But not by much.

The elevator pinged and the doors swished open, revealing the lush burgundy pile of the third floor. I followed it to the Ropers' apartment with a gnawing in the pit of my stomach that was more than hunger alone. The

thing is, most of the time it's not that difficult. Nine times out of ten the mere sight of you will do it -- which is why the Department generally prefers to send a uniform to this kind of gig. If you're lucky, you don't even have to open your mouth. Just kind of stand there looking all solemn and official-like. But I had a feeling about Cathy Roper. Probably because I'd known her old man.

On reaching the end of the corridor, I took a moment to compose myself.

It's a terrible thing to say, but Terry Roper was always destined for a bad end. A small-time crook with a big-time attitude, he'd rolled in and out of trouble with the law since grade school, and liked it just fine that way. Marriage to Cathy hadn't changed him much. When she bluffed her way into a secretarial job with a big Manhattan advertising firm, he started spending a lot less time on the street and way more at the track, a change which only fuelled his taste for the big time. Not that the little woman was a paragon of virtue herself. A \$400-a-day pick-pocket by the time she graduated from the street to the typing school, the story went that Cathy Roper could peel and stone a Babcock peach without taking it out of your pocket. A woman with talents that prodigious had to be watched.

Especially on a night like tonight. I ran a hand through my hair and straightened my tie. Thumped the door with my fist. There was no telling what kind of reception I'd get. Were it two o'clock in the morning instead of seven-thirty in the evening, she might already be in denial. That happens a lot. *Don't be ridiculous, my husband can't possibly be dead. I spoke to him only this morning.* But because it was the time she'd be readying herself to pour him a cocktail or a nice glass of beer ... well, that was different. Women don't take kindly to men who die on them at or around meal times. It feels too much like a criticism.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, I retreated a step to afford her a view of the dick lurking beyond the Judas hole. A pause followed a key turning in a lock. I don't remember the door opening. All of sudden she was standing there right in front of me, a pack of Kents in clutched one hand, a gold-plated lighter in the other. I couldn't say whether Cathy Roper was



beautiful. Without a doubt, she fell short of the mark if you liked your women blonde, full-figured and none too bright. There was something about her, though. A sharpness, a vitality, an air of unpredictability masked not at all by the languid nimbus of her perfume. Best not think about that right now.

I raised my shield until it was level with my shoulder. "Mrs Roper?"

She perused the gold badge for a bit, then turned her attention to me, face appearing to tighten and relax all at the same time. Not that she was fooling anyone. Her eyes exhibited none of the impending rawness of grief one might expect -- and the only thing the paleness of her skin really lacked was a dab of rouge at the cheeks. All the same, Cathy Roper knew her husband was dead. I could see it in the set of her jaw. She may not have pulled the trigger. She probably wasn't even there at the time. But she was involved. That much was evident. After a moment that was comfortable for neither of us, she said: "It finally got done, huh?"

A chill spread across my back. With a welcome like that, I didn't think there was much point in guiding the distraught widow to a chair before breaking the bad news. Best get straight to the point. "Detective Roy Handley," I told her, softening my tone more out of habit than respect. "There's no easy way of putting this, Mrs Roper, so I'll come right out and say it. I'm afraid your husband is dead."

Cathy Roper looked as if she expected me to collapse into gales of laughter right there and then. "Would it make any difference *how* you put it?" She made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "Doesn't matter, forget it. Come on in."

She threw the door wide and retreated along the narrow hallway between rooms, heels clicking on some nice parquet flooring. "Drink?"

I closed the door behind me, only slightly giddy from that perfume. It made a change from the funk of Jean's casserole. "Sure thing," I mumbled, "bourbon if you've got it," and followed her into the main room. Normally I don't touch alcohol when I'm on duty, but the lateness of the hour, coupled with the bizarre turn of events, caused me to break a habit of a lifetime. Also, I have to admit to being somewhat intrigued by the situation. A man

dies and his wife doesn't even blink? I never met a spouse who didn't at least *try* to look aggrieved.

"Let me guess," she said, and splashed about an inch of Wild Turkey over a couple of rocks. She handed me the glass, then poured herself a Bloody Mary. Another moment and she raised a toast in the direction of the East River. "To a very average husband and one heck of a poor provider," she declared. "May the fishes have their fill, God bless 'em."

She downed half of her drink, grimaced, freshened it with more vodka.

"I hate to disappoint you, Mrs Roper," I said, "but they found Terry lying on the docks. Two shots to the head. Clean kill. No witnesses." I took a stiff pull on the bourbon and waited for a reaction. When the best she could manage was an impassive shrug, I added, "We'll be requiring your presence at the morgue for purposes of identification." Cop-speak. No matter how many times you use it, it never stops sounding like an accusation.

She tipped me a cool wink in response. "Call me Cathy," she said, and added a single ice cube to her glass.

That did it for me. Prior knowledge of a homicide is one thing, but flaunting it in the face of the law? Damn it all, the woman was practically begging me to take her into custody. I told her as much, and proceeded with the advice that now might be a good time to call a lawyer.

"Are you kiddin' me?" The fledgling widow looked genuinely astounded. "Maybe you oughta check in with Eddie before you start spouting off like that, fella." She took a long swig of her drink and showed me a set of teeth stained with diluted tomato juice.

"Eddie who?"

"Eddie *who*? Jeez, you really are new to this game, huh? *Eddie*." She tapped her temple with a lacquered fingernail. "Merrill?"

The sensation of a chill creeping across my back returned, only stronger now. "You mean *Captain* Merrill?"

"Only until they promote him to Major."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," I told her.

“Oh, it’s possible.” She downed the rest of her drink and made herself a new one. All Mary this time, no blood. “It was your guys knocked Terry off in the first place, remember? Or are you gonna play dumb about that, too?”

Now the reek of that perfume was making me ill. Was this some kind of a joke? I soon realized nothing could have been further from the truth. I was here on specific Captain’s orders. That meant only one thing. In his roundabout way, Captain J. Edward Merrill was telling me the Department had the will and the wherewithal to bring me into line even if I didn’t go on the payroll. And if that included implicating me in a murder, so be it.

I got the message. I finished my drink and placed the empty glass on a side table. “Do you mind if I use your telephone?”

She nodded at a gleaming Stromberg-Carlson handset in the corner. It shared table space with an art deco lamp that had seen better days. “Knock yourself out,” she murmured, and aimed a hooded glance at me on her way out of the room. I dialled the station direct, and after a few heated words with the switch-board operator, was put through to the desk sergeant.

“Phil, this is Roy Handley,” I said. “I’m up here at the Grand with Terry Roper’s old lady and something’s seriously out of whack.” I shielded the mouthpiece with my hand. “She just broke some news to me that, quite frankly, I don’t feel I should --”

Phil cut me off with a belaboured clearing of the throat. Matter of fact, it was a damn sight more than belaboured. Phil was a sixty-a-day man, and when he got going it was like listening to a coffee percolator boil over.

“Don’t make a big deal out of it, Roy,” he growled, and followed this with a perfunctory cough. “Everybody round here likes you, you know that. Just say what you gotta say and get out of there.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “You mean you knew about this all along this and you didn’t even *warn* me, you son of a bitch?”

“Hey, we all got our crosses to bear, pal. How d’ya think the boys feel with you running around all whiter ’n’ white and knowin’ what you do. People need a little reassurance, is all I’m saying. What can I tell you?”

*That you're a sorry excuse for a cop and a disgrace to the badge*, I thought, but neglected to say.

"Okay, forget it. You've made your point. Now excuse me while I go slap the bracelets on this --"

"Wait a second, Roy. There's one more thing." And with that, my buddy the desk sergeant started to sound a little worried. "There's some confusion surrounding Roper's body."

"Confusion? What the hell does that mean?"

Phil cleared his throat a final time. "We can't find it."

"Can't ... ? You mean it's *missing*?"

"No, I don't mean it's missing, Roy, who said anything about missing? We just got a minor logistical problem that needs ironing out, that's all. Look, you want the truth? The body went astray during transit. It'll turn up." He paused just long enough to cover his big fat ass should this whole thing blow up in his face. "I'm warning you nicely, Detective Handley. You go shooting your mouth off like the last time, and I'll deny this conversation ever took place. You get me?"

"Loud and clear, Sergeant Grabowsky," I told him, "and thanks a bunch." I was so disgusted I cradled the phone without telling him goodnight. That was probably a mistake. Because when I turned around, Cathy Roper was standing in the middle of the floor with a gun pointed at my chest. She knew how to do it, too. Feet spread, two-handed grip, barrel trained on my sternum should I made any smart moves.

"That didn't sound like a friendly chat to me," she said.

"It didn't need to," I told her. "It was informative."

"Uh-huh." She waved me over to the couch. I elected not to sit on it unless directly ordered. Always be playing for time, that's what they teach you at the academy. Never let the perp take complete control of a given situation. If he does -- or if the *he* turns out to be a *she* -- make life as difficult for them as you can. Make them work for it, in other words.

"So what's next?" I asked, and when she opened her mouth to reply, cut her off with an answer to my own question. "Listen, Cathy, this situation we have here? It's kind of like a game of chess, okay? You have to be think-

ing three or four moves ahead all of the time. I know you can't be doing that or you'd have asked them to fit that thing with a silencer. Just in case things got out of hand. What are you gonna do, give Merrill the excuse he's been waiting for?"

I don't think my pitch went down quite as smoothly as that little round of Bloody Marys she'd treated herself to, but it went. And with good reason. Merrill had planned this not-so-chance encounter with the *both* of us in mind. Deep down, Cathy Roper knew that. She just needed someone to lead her away from her own denial.

"What are you talking about?" she snarled.

I took a long breath. Working for that uptown marketing company must have put her in contact with a better class of people. One that included police captains. "You've become more demanding of late, for one thing," I told her, "because women like you always do. And for another, he still hasn't left his wife, has he?"

"Eddie loves me." The words fell from Cathy's mouth like broken teeth. And like broken teeth, they lacked any kind of charm.

"You pull that trigger and you solve two problems for him at once," I pushed back. "And don't harbour any illusions. No court in the land will believe the word of a murder suspect above that of Captain J. Edward Merrill of the New York City Police Department, and that goes double when the victim is a ranking detective. It just doesn't work like that."

The wings of Cathy's nostrils quivered a couple of times in a way that was disturbingly sexy. Her breathing quickened a pace. Then the steely resolve that had typified her attitude up until that point gave way to something approaching fear. She advanced a couple of steps -- for a moment I thought she was going to pistol-whip me across the face -- and snatched the handkerchief from my breast pocket.

"Go on, take it, take it" she urged, wiping the gun down thoroughly, frantically, before tossing it at my chest. "I didn't want it in the first place. I only agreed because they said you might get violent."

“No need to worry about that,” I told her, all the while examining the gun, “and nobody need to know about this. We can work it out between ourselves.”

Cathy folded her slender arms across her chest at that, looked as if I’d made a lewd suggestion. “Er, how exactly?”

“By pretending it didn’t happen.”

She nodded warily. “Are you going to get in trouble for this?”

I told her I’d be fine as long as we both kept our mouths shut.

“Will I?”

“Get in trouble? That depends. The best thing you can do right now is commit everything you know about Merrill to paper. Personal habits, secrets he might have told you, intimate details of his home life. Hell, if he’s got a mole in a compromising place, put that in there too.”

Cathy kept her arms folded, but eyed me along her lashes. “And then what?”

“Pay a lawyer to hold onto it for you. Tell Merrill a copy goes to the District Attorney and every major newspaper in the land should anything ‘untoward’ happen to you. Accidents included. That oughta keep him sweet.”

I slipped the gun -- it was Smith & Wesson Model 10, common to any precinct in the five boroughs -- into my pants pocket and turned for the door. Should I have wished her luck? Added a word of encouragement? To leave it like that seemed blunt, even for me. But then the image of poor Terry Roper sporting those two unscheduled peep-holes in the middle of his forehead sprang to mind. I closed the door behind me and left without as much as a backward glance.

Job done.

#

Three minutes later I was back in the car and on my way home. I would have made it in time for dinner, too, had a couple of rookie traffic cops not pulled me over in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge. The giant, rain-lashed

structure loomed out of the darkness as the two youngsters approached my position, a little too much swagger in their step for this to be a routine stop. I instantly knew something was wrong. You don't send a pair of junior officers out on patrol together unless you're expecting to lose one or both of them. Those are the rules of the game.

"Looks like you got a busted tail light there, mister," Rookie #1 observed. He shone his flashlight the length of the car, the downpour turning its beam into a brightly shimmering cone.

"Wasn't busted when I parked."

"Well, it is now. License and registration, please, sir."

"Coming right up. And if you boys behave real nice, I'll show you my gold shield, too."

Rookie #1 stole a glance at Rookie #2, and gulped. "You a cop?" He was right to be nervous. You stop an off-duty detective on a crappy night like this, feel free to expect any and all forms of abuse as a consequence. So when he posed the question, what he really meant was, *Am I in trouble?* That made him sound a little too much like Cathy Roper, which I could have done without.

"Detective Roy Handley," I told him, and reached for my badge. For some reason I think I knew I'd be disappointed. Cathy Roper -- the not-so-grieving widow and retired pickpocket -- must have snatched my handkerchief from that very same place not half an hour before. Little wonder the pocket was empty. No more handkerchief. No gold shield, either.

I turned my attention back to Rookie #1. He wasn't going to like this.

"I, er ... don't have it," I said, and tried to keep my face as neutral as possible. "A known felon by the name of Catherine Roper picked my --"

"Step out of the car, please, sir."

"What? On a night like this? Are you fucking *kid*ding me?" I raised a hand to block the glare from the flashlight, which at that moment happened to be shining directly into my eyes. The nearest officer reacted immediately. I couldn't see what he was doing because I was dazed by the glowering beam,

but I heard it. A holster unsnapping, shoes scuffing on asphalt, the unmistakable click of a hammer being drawn.

“Wait a second,” I yelled, “you’ve got me all --”

“Out of the car! Now!”

There was no arguing with him. Rookie #1 was down on one knee, weapon aimed straight at my head. Rookie #2 looked like he was getting ready to keel over in a dead faint. I decided to play along.

“Take it easy,” I told them, “I’m exiting the vehicle as requested.” I popped the door and stepped out onto the road, squalling rain plastering my hair to my scalp and forehead. I raised my arms, jingled the car keys in my left hand. “Here you go,” I said. “Happy now?”

“Turn around.” Rookie #1 was really getting into this. He snatched the keys from my grip and ordered me to place both hands on the roof of the Olds. Then he told me to spread ’em. I did everything that was asked of me. I also continued to repeat, in a firm but reasonable tone of voice, that I was a gold star detective, and that if Rookie #2 called the station, the desk sergeant would be only too pleased to confirm my identity. It didn’t wash. Rookie #1 got down to frisking me while I was making my case, and it didn’t take him long to find the piece stowed in my pants pocket. After that, it didn’t matter what I said.

“You got a permit for this thing, mister?”

I was back to being a ‘mister’ instead of a ‘sir’. “It’s not mine,” I told him, “it belongs to Catherine Roper, the woman I mentioned earlier. The widow?”

“Let’s just stick to the gun, okay? What’s it doing on your person at this time of night?”

“Catherine Roper *gave* it to me.”

“She did, huh? Put your hands behind your back.”

I complied, and was cuffed for my trouble.

“You know what the really weird part of this is?” added Rookie #1. “A Mrs C. Roper reported a weapon just like that stolen not thirty minutes ago.” Before I could tell him she was a lying piece of shit, he tossed the car keys to his friend and told him to check the trunk. “You don’t mind if I take



a look around inside the vehicle while he's doing that, do you? Search the glove compartment, check the --"

"Do whatever you want," I told him, "just make sure you get word to the station, kid. And do it fast. This is your job now."

I think Rookie #1 was fixing to give me a taste of his nightstick about then, even with traffic tail-backing into darkness. He had that dull-eyed look of anger some people get when they no longer recognize the boundaries. But instead of unloading on me, his head swivelled on his shoulders and he just seemed to ... stop.

"What you got?" He addressed the question to his pal, who looked as if he was getting ready to puke.

"Get over here."

Still with his gun on me, Rookie #1 backed up until he was standing level with Rookie #2 at the rear of the vehicle. For a long moment they just stood where they were, faces bathed in the reflected glow of the flashlight. Rainwater streamed from their peaked caps in miniature cascades. Then Rookie #1 raised his head and smiled at me.

I should have known they'd get me in the end. Unless I was sorely mistaken, Terry Roper's missing body had just turned up in the trunk of my car. And I'd bet a pinch of salt to a pound of shit I was carrying the gun that killed him.

I guess Jean will have to feed the rest of that casserole to the dog.

DAVIN IRELAND recently returned to the south of England after three decades in the Dutch city of Utrecht. His fiction credits include stories published in over seventy print magazines, webzines and anthologies worldwide, including *Aeon*, *Underworlds*, *The Horror Express*, *Zahir*, *Pseudopod*, *Rogue Worlds*, *Storyteller Magazine* and *Something Wicked*. You can visit his site at [davinireland.com](http://davinireland.com)



A black and white photograph of a police car. The car is in the foreground, with its roof and a light bar visible. The word "POLICE" is written on the light bar. In the background, a crowd of people is blurred, suggesting a public event or a scene of investigation.

**POLICE**

DRAMA / CRIME

**IT TAKES  
A VILLAGE**

**SIMON LONSDALE**



**T***his was the problem with back roads, anything can happen,* concluded Tom.

The tyres crunched and squealed as they threatened to skid out of control with every twitching movement. The evening was dim and a dusky blue, only a few scarce and flickering street lights showed the winding way. The faint beams of light glinted off his Sheriff's badge, scratched and battered brass, Tom tried to ignore the metaphor for his career.

'It's fine. I didn't fancy arriving there alive anyways,' Deputy Kimberly Ansell said from the passenger seat.

She was in her early thirties, lean, kind and usually honest, although Tom felt she was holding on tighter than his driving required. Her hands gripped her belt and the handle above the door while she shot him a sideways glance.

'Never got you killed yet, have I?' Tom shrugged, squinting at the assumed road.

'Well, I guess we aren't exactly moving precious cargo,' Kimberly thumbed behind her to the back seats.

Behind the protective mesh bounced around a pasty young man with tussled brown hair and a face as if he was constantly waking in a cold sweat. He was clammy and had his hands cuffed together. He didn't respond to Kimberly's observation but stared ahead looking for the next hazard that Tom brought their way.

'This route was your brain wave anyway, if we die, I'm splitting the blame 50/50,' Tom said.

'No way, Tom-boy. I'll take 20% at the most,' replied Kimberly.

'Can we not haggle our death blame please? It's a little unnerving,' the man in the back said quietly.

'Shut up,' both officers said as one.

Tom rarely did prisoner transports anymore; they were frequent as the town's jail was small. The Sheriff's office was more outfitted for a drunk's one night rehab than genuinely qualified criminals. Transports were minor excitement for the deputies while Tom drowned in a tangled pool of slippery and spiralling red tape. He had volunteered for this one though, he needed to see it through and finished. The headlights of the patrol car tore at the darkness ahead as Tom pushed them further into the abyss, like a veteran of the sea plunging his ship into one last oncoming storm. Tom felt his heavy eyes and his shot nerves tug at his senses, after this he would finally sleep again. If he even remembered how. Two long years.

'Chief!' Kimberly yelled.

Tom plunged his foot down onto the brakes and hoped they worked better than his reactions. The ground gave way under wheels and they turned a little to the right before lurching to a stop. Kimberly and the prisoner panted as they regained their composure, Tom peered from his window.

'Well,' Tom breathed. 'What new brand of senselessness is this?'

The cones of the headlights curved around a car ahead of them, sideways and placed to block the road between two clumps of wiry bushes. Tom would have stopped even if he could have gotten past. After all, it was his car blocking the road. The car he'd left on his driveway when he walked to work this morning, he saw the bright blue paint and the wonky mirror from where Timmy Darnell hit it with his soccer ball.

Tom frowned. 'Well, if this isn't just a fly in the soup of a quiet, easy night.'

Kimberly placed her palm against her holstered gun and nodded grimly, she had his back like she always did. Tom switched off the engine, the light inside the car also turned off and darkness swept into take its place. They could soon see clearly enough as their eyes adjusted. Tom and Kimberly opened their doors with matching timing that paid tribute to their years of partnership and established synergy. Inquiries, traffic stops, death notices, and everything in-between. All the corners of darkness they found in their town and tried to flash a little light into.

'The wife not out tonight, taking your car by any chance?' Kimberly

asked.

She had hesitated to put the question out loud into the void, as if her wondering might make it more of a possibility. The car looked unscathed beyond Timmy's previous attack, but the reality of an accident was never far from an officer's mind. The doors slamming shut seemed to resonate in the silence they were just outside of town with reaching grass fields and a starry sky.

'Not to my eternally limited knowledge,' Tom answered. 'Taking in her shows and some wine tonight, wearing away our couch.'

The two of them moved around each side of his car, the grains of dirt under their feet cascading and spilling around under their carefully placed steps. They crept around until reuniting on the other side, there was nothing. The vehicle was dark and empty like a sinner's prayer.

'Sorry for the theatrics, Sheriff.'

Tom turned to meet the voice which he already knew well. Russ Halden the town's mechanic walked into view and he wasn't alone. A ring of silhouettes against the blackness came into focus, emerging from the mist like ghosts in a play. Tom knew every shape, each of them were good townsfolk he saw every day. All of them on the back of a tough two years, eyes a little dimmer, their smiles a little more painted on with crude theatrical makeup, smeared and macabre.

Tom took his hand from his holster, empty and open. 'Evening, Russ. Folks. This maybe the strangest way to get me to a town meeting.'

Russ smiled ruefully and Ben Draper, the journalist from the town newspaper, appeared beside him. Russ once towed him into town when Tom had forgotten to refill the tank, he'd bought him a few whiskeys to swear him into silence afterwards. Ben was the one who wrote Tom's campaign speeches when running for Sheriff, late nights and takeaways as they scribbled away in an office.

'Tom, we're here to help.' Ben said.

'Thanking you,' Tom replied. 'Though I must be mis-remembering what I asked for your help with?'

'We'll take it from here, Tom.' said Russ.

Tom's chest tightened and every bit of moisture fled from his throat. He took a slow breath; Kim was glancing about, all the time with her hand still to her service weapon.

'That's not how the law works,' Tom said.

Russ spat on the ground, 'You still think the law works?'

'It's not perfect but it's the best we can do,' Tom replied.

Footsteps crunched all around him with a dozen shuffling and sheepish figures surrounding the cops. Tom glanced back to his patrol car, the dark shape of his prisoner's head craning in the back, his expression hidden.

'It's not good enough,' Courtney's voice pierced the night.

Her voice clamped onto Tom's heart with vicious familiarity and emotion she had tried to bury away in a tomb of cigar ash and whiskey. Courtney Tan, her husband Andrew had his arms wrapped around her. Their eyes were set in red and their skin as pale as the moon above them. Tom couldn't remember seeing them any other way.

'He took her, Tom,' Courtney strained.

'We got her back, Courtney. You have her back,' Tom failed to meet her gaze.

'Did we? Have you seen her? How she is now? We'll never get her back.'

'It's not enough, Tom' Andrew said with glassy vision. 'I mean, of course she's enough. We can't let him leave though. The punishment isn't right.'

'It ain't even punishment,' Russ snapped. 'You seen what these folk went through, Tom? This is our town; they are our people.'

'Derek was our people too,' Abe Pickering spoke up now.

Abe and Tom spent many nights knocking back beers and watching sports that involved any kind of ball. Tom had helped Abe carry his wife's casket when she'd passed; she had knitted Tom his favourite winter gloves that sat in the dash of his patrol car even now.

Tom looked back to the vehicle, Derek Merson was in the back still chained and helpless. Scared and alone, convicted and damned. Awaiting his



judgment all over again.

'Derek is all of our fault, Tom' Abe said. 'I lived two doors down from him and I never suspected, never knew. How could that be?'

'Not your fault, Abe.' Tom heard his voice crack like ice under foot. 'None of us knew.'

Russ wiped the sweat chilling on his forehead on the night and pointed at Courtney and Andrew Tan.

'Their daughter, Sally, is one of us. That thing in your car was once too, Tom. It's our responsibility.'

'That's the law's job,' Tom stated.

'Well it ain't cut out for it,' Russ snarled, 'The law can't do nothin', you couldn't do nothin', Tom.'

Russ caught himself and looked away, Tom had said these sentiments to himself every night and they still had bite. The venom of the truth still coursed in his veins.

*It took me two years and a lucky break to find a little girl. Our little girl in our town.*

Tom swallowed and hoped the thought went with it, he blinked hard.

'Our guilt won't help anyone,' Tom said. 'None of us can control what Derek did, some things are beyond us.'

'I fixed Derek's car,' Russ said. 'The car he took her in, Tom. The week before it happened.'

Harmony was crying to Tom's left, the tall doctor with her grey hair falling across her face. 'I treated her after, Tom. Tried to. No training can help with what I saw.'

Sidney, Sally's teacher wrung his hands and glared at Tom. 'I saw her getting texts in class, Tom. Why didn't I check? I knew something wasn't right.'

Courtney and Andrew Tan were embracing now, shaking with the tears as they probably did every single day that the light brought in and forced them to endure.

Tom let the moment hang for a while, 'There's no end to that tale, friends. No medicine we can take for what we are feeling. And one thing

I can swear is that what you think you want right now, will not help, it will only keep breaking what we can't mend.'

Andrew looked up, 'It's not about fixing anything, Tom. It's about breaking the person who deserves it most.'

Tom's heart sank, every one of the people here were bound together by pain, they wound together in the shape of a noose for the one they could target their loathing at.

'How did you get my car? Debbie wouldn't give it to you?' Tom asked.

Russ gave him a sympathetic look, 'No giving required, Tom.'

Debbie stepped into view, she was shaking and weeping, a sodden handkerchief held to her face.

'I'm sorry, Tom. We need this, I think you do too.'

Tom felt the energy leave his every fibre, 'Debs, no. This isn't right.'

'Right ain't here no more darlin'. Just what we need to do.' Debbie held out her hands as if this logic were the best she could muster.

Tom knew they had grown distant. From a past of hauling in drunks and Debbie selling houses, vivid blackness had gripped their lives and not let go. Tom had seen the downward spiral in his marriage. Late nights home, sleepless nights cleaning his gun on the porch, the thrown plates and sharp words when she tried to share his burden. Tom had seen himself lose the townsfolk every day, the sideways glances and hushed conversations that ended when he arrived. He'd shut himself off, even from the one he needed the most.

'You brought my wife into this?' Tom asked Russ.

'She came into this herself,' Russ answered. 'She's hurtin' like us all. And maybe she caught onto your late shifts with Kimberly.'

'Shut up, Russ!' Debbie snapped.

Kimberly looked on from nearby with no comment. Tom held his reaction in his chest tightly.

Tom looked back to Russ wearily, 'I won't give him to you. I can't.'

'Don't need you to,' Russ said and nodded.

He'd nodded to Kimberly; the officer's lip shook and she looked

ruefully at Tom.

‘Sorry, boss.’ Kimberly walked towards the patrol car. Her keys jingling in her fumbling fingers.

‘No,’ Tom moved towards her.

Ben surprised Tom with his eagerness to step in, this was obviously something the group had expected. He lunged at the Sheriff but Tom stepped aside and thrust his hand into Ben’s ribs while tripping him. The journalist staggered forward and hit the dirt with a grunt, a cloud of filth kicked up from the ground. Russ grabbed Tom’s collar roughly, Tom thrust his elbow back into the stocky mechanic’s gut. He heard the wheeze of struggling breath as arms wrapped around him. Tom struggled before Russ clambered back to him and threw a hefty right into Tom’s cheeks. A flash of light and Tom slumped to his knees, a few years back the punch would have merely spurred him on to fight harder, now his body and mind were all out of gas and running on fumes. Tom heard Debbie scream and people scrambled to calm her down.

‘You said you wouldn’t hurt him,’ his wife screeched.

‘Sorry, Tom. We both gotta do what we think is right.’ Russ heaved in gulps of air and clapped Tom on the shoulder. ‘I didn’t want this.’

Russ took the gun from Tom’s holster, the gun he knew about, and threw it into the nearby bushes. ‘You can get it later, while you’re thinking of a way to explain this away. You tell us all the story and we’ll back you up.’

Tom spat blood on the ground as the arms of Andrew and Sidney held him up and tightly in place.

‘You want me to help you get away with this?’ Tom asked.

‘We have to stick together, after this is done. This would tear our town apart.’

Tom’s eyes darted around, ‘Looks like it already has, friend.’

Russ sighed and paced away. Kimberly was dragging a panicking Derek from the rear seat of the patrol car.

‘No, please. You can’t do this.’ Derek hit the floor hard and writhed in the dust as Kimberly and Russ hauled him to his feet.

Courtney screamed and ran over; she pummelled the prisoner with

the balls of his fist. Her blows were furious, flimsy, and aimlessly.

'You scum, you'll burn in hell you monster!' Courtney rained down strikes until a weary Andrew pulled her away.

'Noticed you didn't keep my gun,' Tom panted. 'Not a quick death ahead for Derek then. What have you got planned for him?'

A pause and then Ben's voice, 'It won't do you any good to know, Tom. Trust me.'

Abe shifted from Tom's other side, 'It's not worse than what he did.'

Derek's chained hands covered his face as Russ grabbed a handful of the young man's hair and hauled him up. Derek yelped and Kimberly winced, lifting him and pushing him along.

'Don't do this' Tom said again. 'You can't take back what this will do.'

'We have to do something chief.' Kimberly replied.

'No one else will,' wept Courtney.

Russ and Kimberly moved a screaming Derek along, the captive sobbing and pleading with muddling words lost in his choked emotion. Tom didn't know what lay in store for the boy but it was worse than prison, worse than a quick death. Tom didn't even know what he believed Derek deserved. Some things the mind didn't delve into, explore. He pushed away such memories, he clung to the law so he didn't have to decide these things, didn't have to try and understand. He remembered Sally Tan's eyes when he finally found her, remembered Derek's twisted reasoning in that grimy interrogation. Tom had listened back to the tapes, ground his teeth and stayed in a motel that night. He had felt tainted. He was stuck trying to wash the darkness off him, staying safely away from the family he didn't want to take the knowledge back to. But this, what they wanted to do, his friends, his neighbours, he couldn't let them pollute themselves. Plus, he wasn't supposed to let harm come this wretched man in his custody. Was he? Even this wayward, soulless, shell of a being.

'We'll just stay here, Tom' Abe muttered.

'You two don't have the stomach to watch the judgement part?' said Tom.

'Someone has to stay with you until...until it's done.' Ben's voice

trembled.

‘Can we at least sit in the car?’ Tom asked as he rose to one knee.

He knew Abe would say no but Ben hesitated and that moment was all Tom needed. The sheriff flung up and elbow and felt Ben’s face crunch nastily underneath. Tom’s arm was free now and he swung it around, Abe shouted angrily just before the fist glanced against his cheek. Tom hadn’t boxed for a few decades but he knew how to throw a hit when needed, Abe slumped back. Tom heard Russ shout; the sheriff groped at his own ankle for the personal revolver he kept there. The gun they didn’t know about. Weapon in hand he spun around, the townsfolk yelled at him to stop and backed off, Tom strode towards Derek. Russ shouted at Tom to ‘think’ as if that was a thing this mob was open to. Kimberly held her hand on her holster while telling him this ‘wasn’t worth it’. Tom didn’t have time to say how he was planning to save them from themselves. He took aim as he walked still, Tom heard steps behind him, soon Abe and Ben would be on him once more. Tom had never fired his gun in life and wanted to be sure when he finally did. The barrel focused and trained at the head of Derek. The young man had fallen to his knees, head down and blubbing prayers to a god he had surely lost any claim to with his actions. The repentant monster with clarity that only death can bring.

‘No, Tom.’ Russ bellowed. ‘Don’t take this from us, you can’t do this.’

Russ charged at Tom, long rangy steps. More footsteps now from behind as they closed in on all sides. Tom inhaled; the gun was rattling as he shook. Derek’s head hung as if waiting for the axe to fall. This was the only way, surely the right way. Tom had to save Derek from his fate, save the town from the abyss they sought, he had to become the darkness for them.

*I can’t.*

Arms flew out stretched towards Tom. No more duty, mercy, right or wrong. Tom felt hands close in on him. Tomorrow he would see these townsfolk, everything changed and something precious lost. He heard Derek crying still, or was he laughing now? Bereaved parent’s sobbing and never stopping. Tom saw the knife at Russ’s belt, not meant for him.

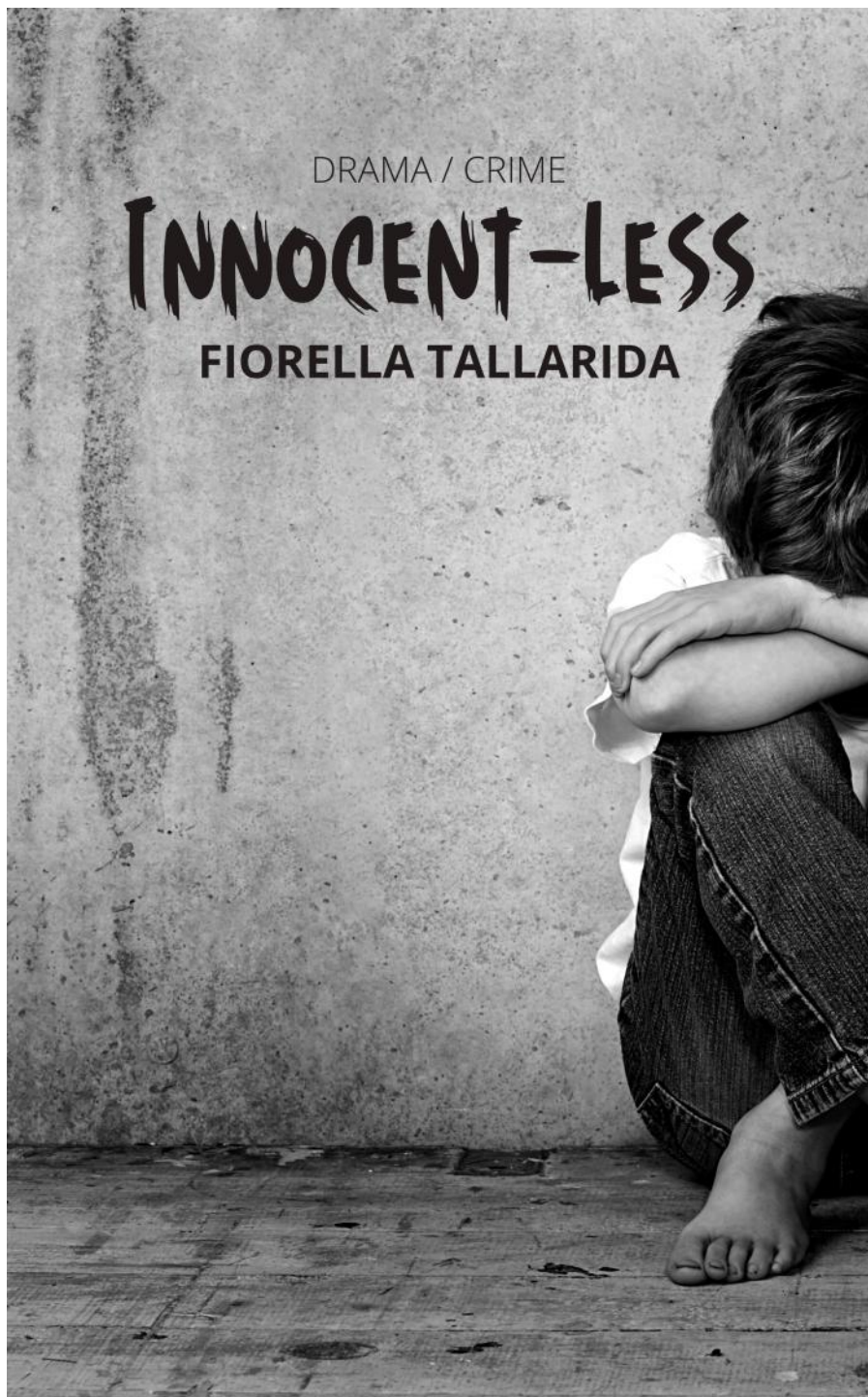
The Sheriff began to close his eyes; he knew what his town needed.

SIMON LONSDALE is an author from Sheffield, England and works as a support worker for adults and children with learning disabilities. Particularly a writer of fiction, Simon is passionate about exploring how we process events in the world through our imagination. He also enjoys looking at our connections with each other, how we experience common emotions in unique and personal ways.

DRAMA / CRIME

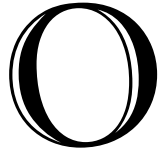
# INNOCENT-LESS

FIGURELLA TALLARIDA







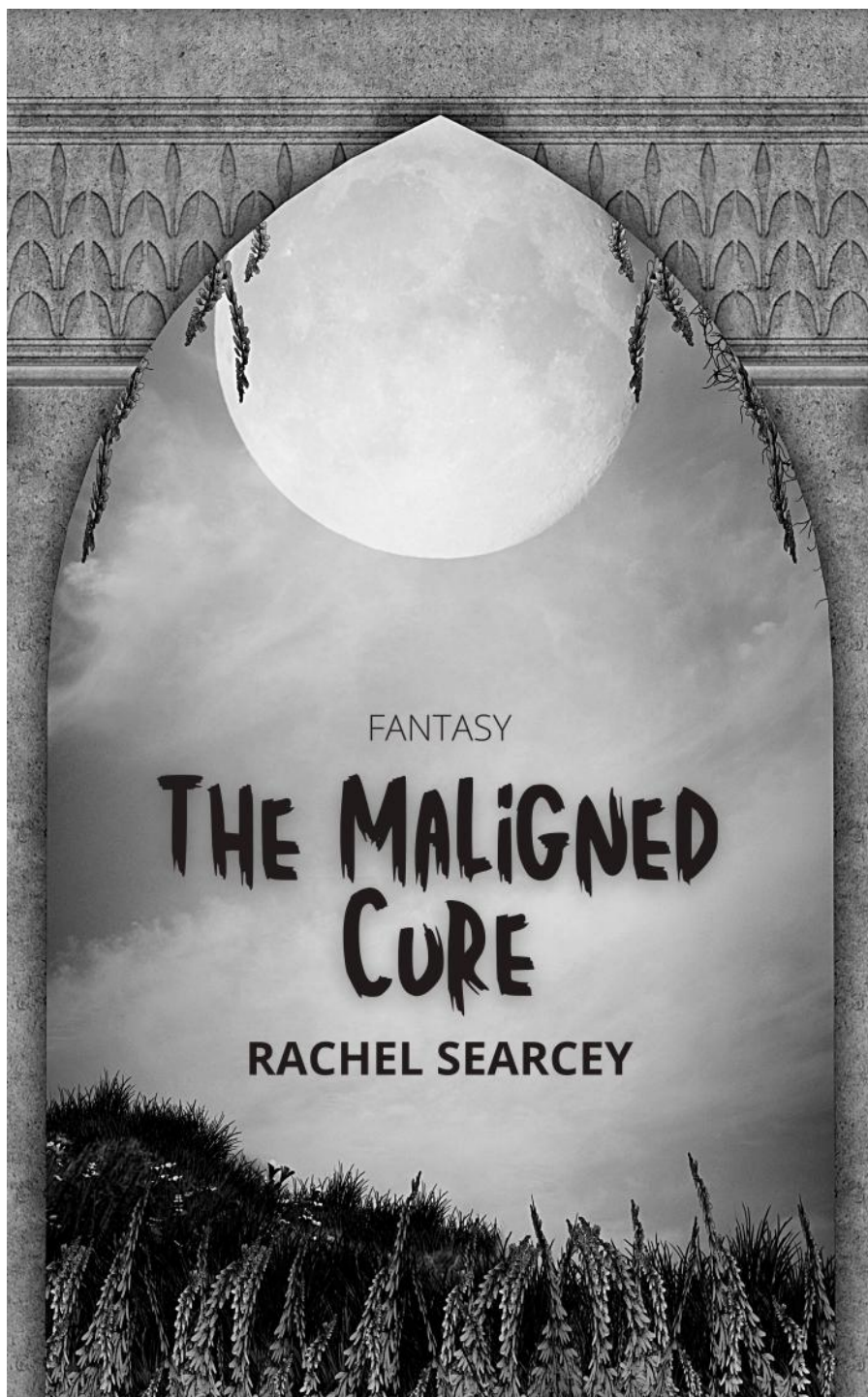


Once a man came to this child. Humid, his envy to come closer to the child. Too close. Too envious. Too humid, his pulse. Maybe he wanted to help him. Maybe he was a good man. That's what the child thought. Why would you offer him a roof if it wasn't to do good. But why does someone do good ? We know why they do bad. He told him he wouldn't have to beg anymore - in a manner of speaking. The child smiled. The man opened his arms. The child ran in the man's arms. 'Can I call you daddy ? Can I call you daddy', said the child and the man laughed. He opened his arms and he laughed.

The man kept laughing. The child never laughed nor smiled again.

FIGURELLA TALLARIDA's writing background is in theatre. Her first play was selected to be part of the Royal National Theatre's New Writing Festival. After her adaptation of Thomas Hardy received critical praise in the National press, she was commissioned to write for Film and TV. Her film *Finding Grace* is in pre-production. Fiorella has also just finished her first novel, *WOW*, a caustic, irreverent novel exploring what it means to be a woman in your forties.





FANTASY

# THE MALIGNED CURE

RACHEL SEARCEY



Daveed opened the door to his Apothecary to find an eviction notice from the Baron stuck to the wood with thick paste. It decreed that he vacate the premises within a fortnight or be jailed without trial. His crime: failing to save the Baron's stillborn heir. He'd been the official physician to the Baroness until he was accused of malpractice. Lies conjured by that witch Marisa, who was brought in to replace him as the "midwife." Gossip spread—his reputation was at stake.

He had abandoned a promising Apothecary fellowship in the capital city of Vallinsgrad—at the personal request of the Queen—to serve the Baron and his growing family in Arrondale. It was a privilege that few of his peers ever accomplished and he basked in the glory that accompanied his new station.

He scratched at the paper but it was stuck fast. Merchants' voices and the bustle of the crowd traveled up the mud-spattered street in front of his shop, coming from the local market where townspeople hawked their wares. No customers stopped into Daveed's Apothecary, a magnificent building he'd been rewarded upon taking this position. It had since fallen into ruin, along with his reputation. If he'd taken the fellowship, he would've been one of many working under a Master but his standing would've been secure.

He refused to be run out of town by a threatening note and pea-brained townspeople. They had been a thorn in his side long before the dreadful business with the Baroness, for which he bore no guilt. Along with the noble family, they were ignorant of the scientifically based methods of his work. It might as well be magic and sorcery to the ignorant fools. To be driven out by these cattle was an insult to his practice, his training. He couldn't appear before the Queen, his title stripped, training flushed like waste into the gutter. Daveed grimaced, taking careful note which former

customers passed him by without even a glance. He had a plan to recover his business; they would regret their ignorance.

He was about to slam the door on the ungrateful village, when Marisa sauntered through the filthy street followed by several boys pushing a brightly painted caravan embellished with banners. Along the sides were painted the words “Lady Marisa’s Midwifery and Cure-Alls.”

He scowled at her, his face framed by a thick black robe like Death himself. “Away with you, witch.”

She answered him with a self-satisfied smile. “Morning, Apothecary! Do you fare well this Market Day?”

“Hag! You’ve stolen my business with your womanly nonsense.”

Marisa threw her head back, laughing at him. “No fault of mine. You are the master of your own unmaking. Call me what you will, but my treatments *work*. I hear you’re on the way out.”

She gestured with a flick of her graceful hand to the notice pasted to his door. Daveed spit at her but missed, the phlegm landing in a nearby puddle. One of the boys moved towards him with fists clenched but Marisa held him back with a hand on his shoulder.

“We’ll be on our way, Apothecary. I’m needed in the town square.” Marisa turned on her heel towards the market.

Jealousy squirmed in his stomach like an eel. Females weren’t permitted to study the medical arts. Whatever she was doing was akin to witchcraft. Likely she’d take a couple of those boys to bed—show them a good time for carrying her goods. He felt his gorge rising at the ugly thought. Marisa began her campaign to eclipse his Apothecary long before the Baroness’s miscarriage. She took the opportunity to sop up after Daveed, playing on the townspeople’s fears and superstitions. He suspected she was the one behind the riot that destroyed the shop front.

He rubbed his stiff shoulders with calloused hands—burned from years of experiments, accidents when concocting potions for the locals.

*Damn her, he thought, Soon I will reverse my fortune. I’ll not be put out on the streets like a beggar.*

He latched the door behind him, putting the eviction notice out of

sight.

Inside, the shop was cramped with every kind of potion, oil, and powder. Cobwebs clogged the corners since his char woman had left after the scandal, refusing to work under him any longer. He tripped over a broken floorboard, his foot slipping in the rotted timber. Rats squeaked in protest as Daveed trampled their nest, overflowing with squirming young. Slamming his foot down, he smashed the baby rats into a pink paste.

Carrying the lantern from his work area, he examined the hole. He had boarded up the windows long ago, refusing to replace the costly glass broken by disgruntled townspeople, making the Apothecary as dark as a tomb. The lantern light glinted on rancid pools in the crawlspace that never drained after the last flood. The odor was atrocious, wafting up through the floorboards on hot days. Throwing a heavy rug over the gap, he weighed it down with heavy books to prevent the rats coming through.

Unlike the rest of his shop, Daveed kept his desk clean and bright. An ornate silver box gleamed under the lanterns. He'd been scrubbing packed earth from the exterior for weeks to reveal the intricate design hammered into the metal, and an equally complex lock that proved difficult to crack. With the right tools, it soon opened to reveal a red velvet padded interior, still pristine despite the centuries it had been buried in ancient ruins.

In the center of the velvet nest, there lay a fleshy lump that fit in the palm of his hand, light as a feather. A fringe of black hair—eye lashes—curled from one side. On the other was a puckered gash, dimpled like a closed mouth. He ran his fingers over it but felt no openings or other indentations. There was no smell he could detect.

He took a scalpel and sharpened it, the slick sound of the blade against the stone swallowed by the cramped room. Placing the lump under the spying glass, it magnified the thing's dimpled skin in disturbing detail. He sliced a sliver off the bottom. The interior was flesh colored yet the slice was dry to the touch. He placed it on his tongue, savoring the salty flavor, and swallowed.

He felt no different, despite the promise of a “miracle cure” in his many books of lore. He'd obtained the lump from a black-market merchant

who claimed to have found it in the Southern Continents. The price was steep, but Daveed had faith it was the cure he sought for so long.

Daveed filled a small dish with water, placing the thing in the center, and watched for any change. The vermilion surface immediately swelled, glistened. A small mouth opened, revealing a handful of jagged teeth split by a fleshy tongue that lapped at the water.

Daveed gasped as the fringe of eye lashes raised, revealing a crystal blue iris with a deep black pupil that focused on him. He stared, wide eyed as it blinked, the lid sliding across the glassy eye.

Spots of blood colored the water where Daveed had sliced the flesh. The wound healed over with delicate pink skin, puckered into a small scar. He prodded the spot with his finger; it felt soft like baby skin. He lifted it from the water, holding it in his palm.

A sharp pain made him cry out. The thing buried its teeth into the fleshy mound of his palm. Pain ricocheted up his arm like lightning. His arm went cold as blood erupted from his hand, down his forearm, landing on the ground in fat drops. He tried to pull the thing off but it was stuck fast. Gritting his teeth, he wrapped his fist around the lump. Disengaging with a sound like an animal being skinned, it pulled off a chunk of Daveed's flesh with it. The lump fell to the floor; the teeth grinding as it chewed the fresh meat.

Daveed, gasping through the pain, wrapped a bandage around the open wound on his palm, the blood soaking through the fabric. His head swam as black spots floated in his vision. He held his hand with the other in a firm grip to staunch the flow. The thing looked up at him from where it had fallen, innocent as a babe. When he removed the bandage from his arm to wash the stinging wound, he was amazed to find the bite had healed completely, raised with scarred flesh.

He had eaten a slice of the thing's skin, experiencing the miraculous effects as were promised. The healing process left something to be desired; it had left a noticeable scar. Daveed used tweezers to pick the lump off the floor, placing it in a glass cloche where it stared at him as if asking for more, its mouth smeared with Daveed's blood.



#

Daveed caught one of the rodents that roamed at night, keeping it in a wire cage, and feeding it a quarter slice of the thing a day for observation. The rat developed swollen welts along its body that stretched from tail to nose. None of the Apothecary's creams or poultices would stop its spread. Besides that, the benefits were all positive.

He'd committed every manner of atrocity against the rodent—drowning, burning, crushing its spine—and the small creature always recovered. It performed the simple tricks it was taught with no difficulty. He euthanized the rat, keeping it in a jar nearby to remind himself of what he'd accomplished. Satisfied with the results, Daveed took to experimenting on himself.

Over several days, the lump grew twice as large on a hearty diet of goat's milk and jerky. Daveed would take off a slice, consume it, and record the changes in his body. The welts appeared at the end of the first day. Daveed soaked himself in salves with no result, only flaking skin that itched. Another day passed; the rash spread across his buttocks, back, and down his legs. He covered himself with layered clothing, to hide his affliction the few times he ventured out to the market for food. His appetite was growing by the day; his stomach twisted into knots every few hours. Soon his scant funds would run dry. He took to catching and breeding his own rats to sate his ever-present hunger.

Leaving his house was becoming dangerous as he approached the eviction date as posted by the Baron. The Sheriff had done nothing as the townspeople pelted him with rotten produce; the children threw rocks that cut his skin. But Daveed healed every time, as he did from the various tortures he carried out on himself. Vivid scars lined his body in branching rivulets despite the creams he slathered on himself. But he always healed, no matter how deep or traumatizing the wound.

When he dug into the rash of welts that covered him, a thick gelatinous substance leaked from it, only to scab over. The narcotic became necessary as his experiments became more extreme. He must stay awake despite the pain—to observe the effects. If he could alleviate the rash

symptom, the Baron would be begging him for the miracle cure, restoring his standing with the town. He was almost ready to present his findings.

#

Daveed broke into the Baron's mansion in the dead of night. He knew they wouldn't agree to meet him in the daylight. This was the only way to show the noble family what he'd achieved.

He had made a copy of the key to the underground passageway that he had used when tending the Baroness during her failed pregnancy. Daveed covered himself with his robe, hidden beneath layers of clothing so only his red-rimmed eyes showed. But it served as camouflage while traversing the Baron's dimly lit mansion. He flitted through shadows like a specter, making his way to the Baron's bedchamber, dodging the few guards.

Daveed waited for the guard in the hall to pass, then tried the doorknob to the Baron's quarters; it was unlocked. He slipped inside, locked the door behind him, and melted into the corner shadows as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The room was unchanged since his last visit, except for Marisa's signature concoctions on the bedside table, sitting pretty in multi-colored glass. He resisted the urge to smash them.

There were two figures in the bed—the Baroness was not in her quarters but here beside her husband. Daveed rubbed his hands together, massaging the itching welts. Skin flaked off onto the carpet in a shower of white strips. The Baroness shifted and Daveed saw the swell of her belly in the moonlight. She was well into a new pregnancy—six or seven months along. An excellent development; he could observe the effects of his treatment on a still developing fetus.

He'd concocted a paralytic to be injected intravenously. They both woke as he pricked their arms, but by then the venom had done its work.

Taking a sturdy rope from his belt, he secured it around the Baron and Baroness's wrists and the headboard. They moaned, realizing they were unable to move, forcing Daveed to gag them. He lit a lantern and dimmed the flare; he couldn't risk the guards discovering him until he was done. Their eyes widened with panic upon seeing the hated man in their bed chambers. Daveed's heart hammered in his chest. Overcome with

excitement, he was grinning like a mad fool.

Daveed brought out the lump, cradled in his palm, careful to keep it from biting him. The tumor was as large as his fist, swollen like an overripe tomato. The eye blinked at them. Its skin was a mess of rosy scars that shone in the candlelight. Tears streamed down the Baroness's rounded cheeks. Attempting to console her, Daveed wiped them away with his rough hands.

"Shush now. I've brought you something." Daveed stroked the Baroness's beautiful hair. He was momentarily lost within those lovely strands, soft against the pillow. She smelled of flowers.

Daveed smiled, feeling the welts that had spread to his face pull uncomfortably. His features were distorted by scarred and swollen flesh. He cut a slice from the lump, holding it before the Baron for his inspection.

"My miracle cure," Daveed said. "Stay quiet or I'll kill your unborn babe and its mother."

Pressing the scalpel to the Baroness's neck with one hand, he removed the Baron's gag with the other.

"I'll have you drawn and quartered," the Baron said, fighting the paralytic that seized his vocal cords.

"Shhhh." Daveed pressed the knife against the Baroness's neck, drawing blood. "Eat it."

The Baron frowned at the thin slice of flesh dangling before him. His eyes swiveled to his wife, her swollen belly, to the knife pointed at her throat. Daveed caught the acrid scent of urine as the Baroness wet the bed out of fear. The Baron opened his mouth and ate the thing, grimacing as it went down. Daveed's mouth watered; he craved his own dosage. Soon enough.

"Let us go. For my wife's sake, for the baby." The Baron said, "We'll tell no one of this. Please leave."

Daveed replaced the gag, bringing the scalpel to the Baron's face where he sliced into his cheek. It healed over as Daveed knew it would, leaving a crimson discoloration. "Baroness, your family would become invincible under my care. Perhaps immortal."

He held up the scalpel, revealing his welt-and-scar-covered arm. He

ignored the Baroness crying through her gag. He drew the knife through his own flesh, hot blood cascading down his forearm onto the floor. He felt woozy, but the opiates did their work. The Baroness screamed through the gag as Daveed brought his arm over their faces as the blood splashed onto their bed clothes, but there was nowhere for them to go.

Daveed wiped the blood away with his hand, revealing healed skin. With bloody hands, he forced the Baron and Baroness to look at him.

“Baron, I want to share this miracle with you in exchange for your grace.”

The couple exchanged nervous glances. Daveed frowned, unsure of why they were not convinced by his impressive display.

“I’ll show you the extent of the cure.” Daveed took one of Marisa’s potions, some sort of oil, and doused his arm with it. The slick potion stunk but was adequate for what he wanted.

He removed the glass covering from the lantern to reveal the naked flame, and held it to his arm. It went up in a blaze of light, spewing smoke as his skin crackled from the immense heat. The Baron and Baroness screamed through their gags, loud enough to summon the guards. They pounded on the door, calling for their master.

Daveed laughed, the pain from his burns sending mixed signals to his nervous system. He twirled around the room like a drunken marionette, bringing his arm down into a wash basin where it went out in a cloud of black smoke that filled the room.

He rushed to the bedside, presenting his arm to the couple as if it were a prize. The black skin crackled, oozing with fluids. He dug his fingers into the blackened flesh, clawing away the dead layer. The sheddings fell in a wet clump on the Baron’s chest.

Daveed ran his hand over the healed skin again and again, pushing his arm in their faces.

“See what I have done. A slice a day will grant you and the Baroness the same power.” Daveed coughed, the smoke from the experiment invading his lungs.

The guards broke down the door, releasing the smoke into the

hallway. They rushed Daveed, forcing him from the room.

As the rough men dragged Daveed from the grounds, he hoped the Baron would tell the guards what he saw, the miracles Daveed performed for them. He would reopen his shop and regain his standing in the town.

#

The guards dragged Daveed into the street outside the Mansion walls. Townspeople from the nearby tavern began to gather, drawn by Daveed's screaming. He could see the mad looks on their faces as they crowded around him. Some ran to their homes, returning with family members and neighbors to share in the late-night spectacle.

Daveed was forced to his knees, his head and wrists thrust into the wooden stocks in the center of town. A rock stung Daveed's cheek, drawing a bloody gash that immediately healed over.

"Witch!" a woman yelled. The crowd took up the cry, jostling each other to get a better look.

"What's wrong with his face?" an old man said, disgusted by the fat welts that coated Daveed's neck, cheeks, forehead.

The Sheriff, smirking, pushed through the crowd to stand over Daveed.

"Let us have him," a man shouted.

The Sheriff smiled, disappearing into the throng of townspeople as they surged forward, carrying him to the stables. He couldn't feel anything as they released him from the stocks; the townspeople's angry voices were muffled, far away. He heard someone call for the horses.

Daveed let the darkness take him, feeling the lump against his chest, safely tucked inside an inner pocket. He was left in the woods for wolves to devour the remains.

#

Daveed opened his eyes to see the full moon glaring overhead. His head felt cold where it lay nestled in the muddy river bank. Freezing water numbed his aching body. His clothes were left in tatters but he could feel the lump there, still warm in his pocket. In a clumsy attempt to roll over, he found he was missing an arm and both legs. Welts like ripe plums covered

what should have been bloody stumps; oozing pus from a scab that ran down the center of each one. They covered his face, under his hair, even his groin and buttocks.

His attackers left him for dead, unaware the flesh he'd been ingesting for weeks would keep him alive. He'd watched the rat in its jar—drown, then revive. It scrabbled against the glass, only to die again. He'd hidden it in a drawer when he tired of watching the spectacle, but sometimes at night he could hear it.

The pain lacing his body created rivulets of lightning in his blood, making it hard to think. How did he end up here? His memories from before were hazy, vague. The townspeople's angry faces flashed before him, the whinnying of the horses driven forward relentlessly until they rent him limb from limb.

With his one arm, he crawled out of the water to lay gasping on the bank. His stomach growled with hunger; he was starving. The lump pulsed against his chest, its tiny teeth worried a hole in the cloth until it reached his skin. He worked his hand under the torn robe, pulling the thing into the moonlight before it could bite him again. He was aching for another slice but he had no way to cut it. He dug his teeth into it, but it was tough, impenetrable. The skin broke with a gush of blood, coating his tongue. He lapped at it like a cat but it wasn't enough. He needed its flesh.

Daveed placed it on his tongue, enjoying the weight of it in his mouth. He bit down with his molars but it wouldn't give. He felt the eyelashes brush against the inside of his cheek as if it were blinking. Its dagger-sharp teeth clicked against his when he bit down, hot blood tickling his throat. It convulsed, forcing itself deeper in. Daveed gagged, attempting to vomit but it fought its way down, clogging his esophagus. He thrust his fingers in his mouth to dig it out but the thing was lodged too deep, making it hard to breathe.

The pressure as it moved past his collarbone towards his sternum brought tears to his eyes. He wailed, his cries echoing through the silent trees. Daveed felt it beneath his sternum, working towards his stomach. A stab of burning pain lanced through his side. He spasmed violently, every

nerve in his body on fire. Before he blacked out, the welts on his body slit open into a thousand eyes that roved in their sockets, buried in his flesh.

#

Daveed's skin was on fire, alive with roving eyes that took in the entirety of his surroundings. The moon flooded the forest with a wash of light that threatened to blind him. He could smell the creatures wriggling in the dirt beneath him, hear them clawing their ways through the treetops, hiding in their burrows, driven to silence by his abominable presence.

His body had mutated into a corpulent mass that oozed with every movement. Brushing against a tree was agony as the rough surface tore at his exposed eyes. He sped through the woods, pushing through blindly, the branches slapping against his disfigured flesh like whips. He was disoriented, losing his way amongst the thick, dark trees.

He came upon a cottage, settled in a clearing. Marisa's market caravan lay against one side, the glossy paint reflecting moonlight. Driven by hunger and pain, his movements were clumsy. Falling against the cabin wall, he awakened the inhabitants.

Warm light flooded the window as it was flung open by a young man—one of the boys from town. Daveed melted into the shadows, silencing his heavy breathing.

"What is it, Bastien?" Marisa's sleepy voice came muffled from under bed sheets. Daveed could smell her, an intoxicating scent of herbs and incense.

"I heard something." The boy leaned out. He was naked from the waist up and Daveed found him irresistible. Hunger pangs wracking his stomach; his mouth watered at the thought of tasting the sweaty flesh.

Daveed shifted; his eyes shining in the dark caught the boy's attention. Daveed fell upon him, crashing through the window to the cottage floor and extinguishing the lamp.

A thousand eyes like mirrors reflected the dim light in the cottage as Daveed's jaws, lined with hundreds of teeth, tore into the boy's body. The intestines slid down his gullet as he ripped them from the boy's abdomen. He felt his skin expand, stretching with each morsel. His hunched form

brushed the ceiling as he turned on Marisa.

There was nowhere for her to run to as he cornered her against the bed that reeked of lovemaking. He fell upon her, devouring her as easily as he did the boy. Daveed's vermilion flesh swelled with freshly gorged blood as his body mutated, growing new limbs that ended in grasping claws.

Daveed tore his way from the cabin, leaving a path of destruction through the forest as his mind awakened with a new awareness. He found his bearings, heading for the town.

#

A simple wooden fence secured the boundaries of Arrondale. Daveed ambushed the sleeping guard in his watchtower, using his new found strength and agility to climb the wall. He slithered toward the ground in a slippery mass.

He could smell the people in the tavern ahead, their bodies reeking with sweat and ale that set him quivering. Surging forward down the main road, he was drawn to the bawdy jubilation. They never heard him coming until he burst through the window, falling upon the screaming townspeople, cornering them in the kitchen. The more he ate, the more his awareness expanded—the more he could see. Eyes swiveled in his skin, erupting as he expanded and grew, fed by the flesh he devoured in great bloody chunks.

The gore-splattered tavern grew quiet as he silenced the last of them. His corpulent body had swollen to an enormous degree and his hunger grew with it. Forcing himself through the broken window, he shuffled from the now uncomfortably small tavern.

The dead men had families, asleep in their beds. Daveed drooled, thick drops of saliva mixed with blood trailing from his mouth.

Breaking into cottages, he snuffled out the beds with babes and swallowed them whole. Mothers awoke to his monstrous form lunging towards them with no time to scream or raise an alarm.

Daveed slithered up the hill to the Baron's mansion, remembering the Baroness and her swollen belly. She was his.

His arms snaked from the darkness—snatching up the door guards, crushing their skulls in his jaws. Their screams woke the Baron's cadre of



guards who greeted him in the foyer with firearms. The Baron stood behind them, on the stairs.

#

Daveed's enormous bulk almost reached the ceiling. Several of the guardsmen visibly shivered; their weapons unsteady in their shaking hands. Daveed laughed, daring them to shoot him. What could they do?

The Baroness was hidden away in another room. Daveed could smell her still.

The guards fired; the barrage of bullets pelting Daveed's multitude of eyes. The burning pellets struck him, bursting the orbs—blinding him, enraging him.

He fell upon the guards.

The Baron escaped upstairs, reloading and firing his weapon all the while, trying to draw Daveed away from the Baroness.

Daveed turned away, following the woman's alluring scent. He filled the hallway, leaving a trail of blood and broken limbs behind him. She was in the rum cellar.

He forced himself down the narrow steps, to where it was cool and damp. His eyes scraped across the unfinished masonry, bursting under the pressure. The Baroness was so close he could taste her. He pushed aside barrels of rum; they crashed to the floor in a wash of alcohol, filling the cellar with a heady aroma. The Baron had given chase, pelting down the cellar's stairs with a torch in hand like a weapon. Daveed smiled with a mouth full of too many teeth. The Baron couldn't stop him.

Daveed found the Baroness in the far corner of the rum cellar, huddled with her back to him, unguarded and vulnerable—her face hidden. He snatched her up, his mouth gaping open as the woman screamed.

But it was a pregnant serving girl in the Baroness's dressing gown. He'd been deceived. Daveed crushed her in his claws, her belly bursting under the pressure. He drank her blood, feeding on her flesh mixed with her unborn child.

A rum bottle smashed into Daveed's back, blinding him with broken glass. Eyes oozed with cuts, their blue irises red with broken blood

vessels. Rum coated the cellar floor, pooling around Daveed, clogging his senses. He lurched forward, his claws digging into the cellar walls as he tore towards the Baron.

The man brought his arm back and hurled the torch at Daveed. He batted it away, only for it to land in the pool of rum. It ignited in a burst of flame, spreading quickly across the room to Daveed's alcohol-soaked flesh. His bulk pressed against the walls as he forced himself towards the stairs. He couldn't move.

His skin crackled and burned, peeling off in black strips as his body struggled to rejuvenate itself. But the growing flames fed by shattered barrels of rum, grew hotter. The walls blackened with heat as the barrels turned to ash, each one exploding as it was consumed by flames. He dragged himself forward, his claws reaching into the stairwell. The Baron leapt out of reach, meeting the Baroness at the doorway. Together, they latched the heavy steel door, abandoning Daveed to the inferno.

His eyes poached like eggs, dribbling onto the floor in a steaming mess. Daveed shrieked, blinded with pain. He surged upwards, climbing the stairs. He could smell fat burning, crackling in the immense heat. He slumped against the cellar door. His body devolved into an ever-regenerating mass of dead skin and misshapen tumors, only to be reduced to ash by the unceasing fire.

In his death throes, he rent his own body to pieces in a vain attempt to put out the fire that burned for days. The Baron fled with his wife, evacuating the few surviving townspeople as Daveed's dying moans echoed through the empty streets of Arrondale.

RACHEL SEARCEY is a filmmaker, writer, and artist living in the Florida panhandle with her husband, two children, and two black cats. She's bi-racial—Indian and Caucasian—and has recently ventured into prose after over two decades of producing indie horror films. Rachel loves directing, editing, screenwriting, and cinematography and likes to assemble miniature DIY dollhouses and jigsaw puzzles with her kids, when she's not tending to her garden. To view Rachel's films, visit [agirlandhergoldfish.com](http://agirlandhergoldfish.com)

DRAMA / THRILLER

# THE ICE MAN

GARY BECK





Christopher Herter guessed it was a typical early December lunchtime crowd at the Bryant Park ice skating rink, mostly tourists, shoppers and the occasional nearby office escapee. He waited with the others behind the rail for the Zamboni to complete its last circuit and for the next session to begin. He cursed under his breath in disgust, still fuming at recently being banned from the Rockefeller Center Rink, for what they called offensive behavior. In a scene of mortifying humiliation, the manager had announced over the public address system that the ushers were to alert him immediately if Chris ever reappeared. The manager also blared that he would have Chris banned from the Wollman rink in Central Park and other rinks in the city. All the regulars watched avidly as the police escorted him out, which insured that they wouldn't be inviting him to their parties anymore. This was particularly galling, since it meant the end of free meals and cut off a social setting where he sometimes collected an unwary woman, a newcomer to skating circles, unused to encountering an extremely cunning sexual predator, who could be deceptively charming.

With his constant attitude of never being in the wrong, Chris refused to admit to himself that he was to blame for the incident that had resulted in his banishment. After all, how was he supposed to know the girl was only thirteen? She looked like she was at least eighteen or nineteen. When she told him she was a college student he had no reason to doubt her. It had started as it always did. He was displaying himself in the center of the rink, doing jumps and spins, attracting attention to his verve and skill. He was in his early thirties, a bit over six feet, with dark curly hair and dark eyes, set off by his pale skin. His taut, muscular body was outlined in a tight, form-fitting white turtleneck and snug black pants. He peripherally observed the girl admiring him and after briefly assessing the other skaters, he selected her as the optimum choice of the day.

He prepared her with his usual thoroughness. First he verified that she was definitely interested, then he made sure she was watching when he executed a particularly dynamic move. After several brief eye exchanges, he flashed a low-medium wattage smile that caught her attention and provoked a smile in response. He skated to her and the rest was a matter of technique. "My name's Chris. What's yours?" "Lottie." "That's a nice name. I never heard of it before." "I was named for a German opera singer," she replied nervously. He was used to that. She was young, lush and ripe for the picking. He confidently put his arm around her waist and said: "Let's skate." As they glided around the oval he was just beginning to explore her body when someone abruptly yanked his arm, pulling him off balance. He started to turn and swing at the intruder, but confronted a big, red faced, angry older man, who yelled loudly: "Take your filthy hands off my daughter." The rest was inevitable.

So here he was, exiled from the land of milk and honey, reduced to scavenging in a lesser arena that in the three days he had been going there had been completely unproductive, adding to his feelings of disgrace and frustration. He doubted that the manager at the Rockefeller Center rink could actually get him banned from other rinks, but that didn't make him feel any better. His appetites, normally kept under rigid control until he could exercise them, were becoming increasingly urgent. It wasn't that he wanted to hurt women, he just needed the thrill of their fear and pain for his own arousal and fulfillment. So he indulged in rough sex. So he gave them a few scrapes and bruises. So what? He didn't do any real damage and he provided a unique learning experience. He only used them once and never bothered them again, so no lasting harm was done. He even took perverse pride in thinking they would never forget him.

Aah. He rolled the bitter pill of scorn under his tongue and half-heartedly scanned the skaters as they made their way onto the ice. Whoa. His eyes clicked like a raptor on a young woman who stumbled out of the gate and desperately clung to the railing, as she tried to make her feet do what they were reluctant to do. He looked her over closely. She was short, slightly plump, but curved in the right places, with blonde hair and a

roseate complexion. She looked corn fed, straight out of the farm and susceptible to the nice guy trying to be helpful act. He watched her hobble around the rink twice before he concluded that she was alone, then begrudgingly decided that there were no other candidates and selected a reassuring, non-threatening approach.

He timed his arrival just as she stumbled, easily accomplished since that was all she was doing. "Hold on there, miss. I've got you," and he carefully took her arm, steadying her. He used a low-wattage, sincere smile, meant to generate trust. "With just a little help you'll be zipping around the ice easily." She blushed and said with a laugh: "I'm afraid not. My feet slip rather than zip on ice," and she giggled at her attempt at wit. "I wasn't doing much better than you a few weeks ago," he offered. "Then this nice older lady helped me around the rink and gave me some pointers. Now I'm really enjoying the ice." He gave her his most sincere, I am a trustworthy fellow look and urged gently: "Why don't you give it a try?" "I don't want to bother you." "It's no bother. It's my way of repaying a kindness." He extended his arm and she slowly took it. "Now stop whenever I become a burden," she insisted. "Don't worry about it. Just enjoy yourself and learn to skate."

Chris assisted her courteously, making sure that he didn't reveal any appearance other than the skating Samaritan. They made their way around the rink slowly and she gradually relaxed and actually began to skate. "I don't believe it," she gushed. "I'm really skating." He gave her another low-wattage, manly forthright smile. "You're not quite ready to do a figure eight yet, but with a few small adjustments you could skate by yourself and decide if you like it. Would you like me to help you?" "Oh, yes. If it's not too much trouble. I don't want you to give up your skating time." "There's plenty of time for me to skate and in just a few minutes you'll be off on your own." "You're very nice. Thank you."

He showed her how to control her balance and movements, handling her very respectfully and after a few minutes she stopped worrying about falling or looking foolish. He quickly caught and supported her when she stumbled, making sure he didn't touch her in any way that might be considered intrusive. And lo and behold, in just a short time she was skating

on her own. Her eyes shone and her face was flushed with excitement. "This is wonderful. You're a great teacher." "Not really," he replied, projecting modesty. "You're a good athlete. I just helped a little." "Yeah. Right. You don't know how clumsy I am." This time he offered a medium-wattage smile, designed to make her realize how attractive he was. "I think with a bit more self-confidence and some practice you could do a lot of things that you were afraid to try." He injected a small hint of suggestiveness. "You look like a very capable young woman." She flushed and didn't respond, but he knew she got the message.

A pang of annoyance stabbed through him, part from wanting to possess her, part from resentment that she was just an ordinary country mouse, not scoring very high on the desirable scale, and bitterest thought of all; right now she was the best he could do. He masked all signs of violent emotion that if perceived would send her scurrying for safety. He watchfully escorted her several times around the oval, noting the rapid improvement in her ability to skate freely. She gave him frequent looks of 'how am I doing?', seeking approval from the handsome stranger who had unexpectedly befriended her. She was really beginning to have fun, when a p.a. announcement said: "In a salute to the past, the next session will be for couples only. The regular session will resume in ten minutes. Thank you."

Skaters began to make their way off the ice and the girl turned to Chris with a pouty look. "Darn. I was just starting to do well. I'll probably forget everything by the time I get on the ice again." Chris shook his head and smiled at her sympathetically. "You won't forget. You're doing fine. A lot of guys would be glad to skate couples with you." He coldly watched her gather her courage, then she asked shyly: "Would you?" She was so pathetically easy that he almost said no, but a quick survey of the rink convinced him that there were no better prospects. The tension he was so scrupulously concealing reminded him that he needed to vent his built-up frustrations, and at the moment she was probably the best that an exile from Rockefeller Center could find.

Chris flashed a medium-high wattage smile and showed her the position they would skate in. Once he had his arm around her he leaned



closer, adding another level to her awareness of him. "Since we're suddenly so close, it's time for introductions. I'm Chris." He could feel the heat emanating from her body wherever he was touching her; arm, back, hip, leg, and he made sure she felt his heat, all the while presenting a courteous façade that was disarming. She was blushing non-stop and he could see that she was already beginning to fantasize about a romantic encounter. "I'm Maryann. It's nice to meet you." "It's my pleasure, Miss Maryann," he addressed her on an impulse, and smirked to himself as she devoured what seemed like good manners. He figuratively patted himself on the back for being clever enough not to have shown off his skating skill at the Bryant Park rink, which might have drawn the wrong kind of attention. After all, he hadn't decided whether to come back here, or go somewhere else..

He took masterful control of her and she let herself be swept away in his arms, completely oblivious to his voracious appetite lurking just beneath the surface. The feeling of his body moving against her produced tingles of excitement in her that were alien to her sensibilities. Her last titillation had been in anticipating her first open-mouthed kiss, which didn't live up to expectations. After that, sex had been more of a peer-group obligation, rather than the burning passions of chick-lit books, or the steamy joinings of R-rated movies. It wasn't that she didn't have desires. It was more like the boys she met just didn't turn her on. The three boyfriends she had experimented with had ranged from limp, to sweaty, to clumsy, and in their different ways had left her sexually tense and remote. She was a little afraid of the stirrings she was feeling for Chris, but so far he was a perfect gentleman.

By the time the couples session ended, Chris knew that Maryann was ripe for the plucking. This made him despise her for being so trusting and he became angrier, although he camouflaged it even more thoroughly with surface charm. He saw that she was slightly fatigued from the unaccustomed exercise and had been sufficiently exposed to stimulating physical contact. He politely took her arm and guided her off the ice. "I don't think you should overdo it the first time out. Why don't you sit down for a few and I'll get you a hot chocolate." He led her to a nearby

table, held her chair as she sat, then said: "I'll only be a minute. Then I'll say goodbye and you can decide whether or not you want to skate anymore." He walked away before she could respond, but he was certain that she was hooked and wouldn't let him go.

The hot chocolate affected her almost as much as if it had been an aphrodisiac. She showed all the symptoms of infatuation; doting glances, flushed cheeks, rapid breathing and she babbled away like mad. All he had to do was nod encouragingly as she gushed about her home in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the family tradition of working in a furniture factory, and playing in the local symphony orchestra. Music was apparently the only way for her family to express individuality, because she described how each one played a different instrument. He listened attentively as she described her studies at the state agricultural school where she was a junior, preparing for a career as a veterinarian. He silently nicknamed her 'Doctor Bovina', and had to catch himself before he snickered derisively. She finally wound down a bit and said: "Here I've been running on about myself and you've just sat there like the strong, silent type. Tell me about yourself. Where are you from? What do you do? Who is this prince charming who rescued me?"

He instantly decided to tell her as intriguing a tale as possible and smiled modestly. "I'm no prince charming. I'm just a struggling artist. My father was a diplomat and I was born in Paris. We moved every few years, mostly to African countries, but sometimes Japan, or China. My mom died when I was two, so I don't remember her. I went to American schools wherever we were stationed, but they were different from the schools back in the states, more sheltered from the harsh realities of life. Dad wanted me to follow in his footsteps, but diplomacy wasn't for me. When I decided to go to art school in California he disowned me and we haven't spoken since. A gallery in L.A. started showing my work a few years ago and actually sold a few paintings, so I took a chance and came to New York. I'm getting some paintings ready so I can try to find a gallery to represent me here. Until then, I'm just another starving artist. That's it. That's my story." He didn't even have to look at her to know she believed every word.

"What an exciting life," she enthused. "Not like my drab existence."

"It's not as interesting as all that. It's been a real struggle to survive on my own and paint, hoping that someday I'll be a known artist, with my work in museums." He stared wistfully across the park, as if gazing into the future at his paintings hanging on a wall in the Whitney Museum, looking past the leafless, sickly sycamore trees and not seeing the graceless Grace building across 42<sup>nd</sup> street. "How can you say that?" she demanded mock indignantly. "You've been everywhere, seen everything and you're making it on your own. This is my first time out of Iowa and except for meeting you, it's been like I had my nose pressed against a restaurant window, watching people eat while I was starving. The only person I talked to in the last two days was the desk clerk at the hotel. I actually stopped someone on the street and asked directions, just to hear another voice."

He knew, as he always did, that the moment had come. He stood up slowly. "I didn't mean to monopolize your time. I'll just say goodbye and leave you to your skating." "You can't go," she blurted, then tried to cover up her growing fascination with him. "You launched my career as a skater and now you want to abandon me? How about you skate with me for a little while longer, then I'll buy you dinner as a way of repaying you for what's become a real fun trip." He gave her the medium-low wattage, too proud to accept charity smile. "I'll be glad to skate with you for a while, but I couldn't accept dinner." "Why not?" "I wouldn't want to take advantage of your generous nature." "That's silly," she said. "I've been taking advantage of you. It's the least I can do." He emitted the medium wattage sweet smile. "I'll skate with you and we'll see about dinner later." "No. It's settled." He shrugged helplessly, then led her to the ice.

Maryann was having the time of her life. She was still feeling the aftereffects of being alone in the fabled city, and she transferred all her emotions to the good-looking guy who came out of nowhere and had transformed her vacation from empty to full. She kept glancing at him as they skated, fervently hoping he wouldn't disappear as suddenly as he had arrived. "Could we skate as a couple again?" she asked shyly. "It really helped me before." "Sure." His arm slipped around her and she immediately felt a wave of pleasure engulf her, followed by unaccustomed surges of desire for

the hard, masculine body that held her so securely. She lost track of time as they went round and round and noticed nothing else but the man beside her, wishing that these delicious moments would never end.

When the p.a. system announced the end of the session and requested the skaters to leave the ice so it could be cleaned, Chris was disgusted with himself for wasting so much energy on a dumb rube. Without the challenge of winning someone over and enforcing his will on the victim, there was no thrill of conquest. His greatest satisfaction had come when he humbled a haughty ice princess, reducing her formerly unobtainable body to a quivering mass, as she pleaded with him not to hurt her anymore. It wasn't the infliction of pain that aroused him. It was the burning sensation of power, while he compelled a woman who was used to being in charge to obey him. He looked Maryann over once more and concluded she wasn't worth the effort. He decided to return the rental skates that cost \$8.75, grumbling to himself mentally for not bringing his own skates, then dump this dreary girl before she really angered him.

He headed for the exit, not even bothering to say goodbye, then he heard her calling him: "Chris. Chris. Wait for me." He didn't want to be remembered by anyone, so he suppressed his impulse to strike her and turned with an abashed smile. "I didn't want to obligate you," he said softly. "You're not getting away from me that easily," she asserted. "I insist on taking you to dinner." He felt a surge of rage, but he masked it, not wanting to attract attention. "That's very nice of you, but I don't want to impose. Besides, I need a shower. I'll get one at my studio and call you later." "I can go with you. I'd love to see your paintings." He thought quickly. "My studio is way out in Brooklyn and I share it with another artist. We're not allowed to bring anyone there." Then she had the most daring impulse of her life. "You can shower at my hotel." He mentally gritted his teeth, beginning to regret that he had tried to spare her. "Let's go," he said and offered her his arm.

They walked north on the Avenue of the Americas, both lost in their own thoughts, hers much gentler than his, until they passed Radio City Music Hall. "I always wanted to see the Rockettes," she said. "Did you ever

see them?" "No," he muttered, aggravated further by her sweet simplicity. A few minutes later they reached her hotel, a non-descript pile of brick and concrete without any redeeming architectural value. The doorman nodded politely and opened the door for them. As they passed through the lobby, the desk clerk called: "Good afternoon, Ms. Jensen," and Maryann cheerfully replied: "Hi, there." Chris knew that if he did anything to her he might be identified later, so when they got to the elevator he said coldly: "I can't do this. I've got to go." He turned and walked away, and behind him he heard her start to cry. His last thought about her as he obliterated her from his mind was that she'd never know how lucky she was that she had only shed tears, rather than blood.

GARY BECK has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger and a salvage diver. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and his published books include 35 poetry collections, 14 novels, 3 short story collections, 1 collection of essays and 7 books of plays. Gary lives in New York City.





HORROR

# PROFESSOR AWFUL'S MANSION OF MADNESS

HARRIS COVERLEY





Stephen Kennedy stood on the veranda of his attraction, staring blearily off into the distance between the opposing stalls to the blue-orange glow of the nearby town's light pollution. He pulled his top hat tighter to his head and levelled it straight, before looking around, tapping his red cane on the platform. It was purely for show as he could walk perfectly well at the cusp of sixty, but he liked the relative grandiosity it gave him—plus it was a central facet of the whole act.

At just past nine on a Thursday evening the fairground was almost deserted. The families had long cleared off and the remaining solitary punters, typically weirdos desperate not to go home to an empty flat or maybe a gnawing relation, had thinned out to the odd straggler in the stinging cold. Kennedy took a deep and punishing breath of that cold and lifted his head to check the name of the racket he had been running for nearly five years, just to remind himself of his self-imposed fate: in green neon there was his persona and its possessive in italics, *Professor Awful's*, followed underneath in block blood red capitals the true title of the multi-coloured monstrosity: MANSION OF MADNESS!

Kennedy grimaced at how crummy it all was. Technically, he *rented* the attraction from the fairground management, paying for the privilege of using it to scrounge a meagre profit which the same management then garnished severely. He had taken to sleeping on a pop-up bed in the booth in the front rather than hand over even more money to rent space in one of their communal caravans—he could not let the bastards get any more flesh from him than they already had.

He truly missed the military—mostly the certainty and the order. If he could have joined back up then and there he would have, but it was now in the past and he was spent as a fighting unit. He had dropped out too soon to advance up the hierarchy, and had instead done other things, unfavourable things...

Even at this time in the fairground there had to be one more customer, one more “sucker” as his American cousins in the industry would have said.

Just then he spied a target: an old man, about seventy it would seem, with a cane of his own, dressed in a brown corduroy suit with a matching fedora.

Very *old school*, Kennedy thought, charmed by the whole assemblage.

Kennedy waited for a moment, until the old man, not particularly limber, was almost equal to him on the pathway between the attractions, before he made his move.

He struck his own cane sharply on the platform, pointed to the man like a prosecutor in an exceptionally heinous murder trial, and bellowed out: “*You sir!*”

The old man stumbled and stopped. He turned to Kennedy and pointed at himself with an odd grin. Kennedy was a little unnerved by this, but he made sure this did not show on his surface.

“Yes, you sir!” he continued at the same level. “Could you bear to stand the torments of?”—he lifted his cane up to the glowing signage—“Professor Awful’s Mansion of Madness?!”

The old man looked at the sign and chuckled: “I don’t know...I don’t believe it is my kind of thing.”

Kennedy detected a strangely German inflection to the voice—and Germans he *knew* enjoyed the macabre more than most. The old man was playing with him, so he would play back.

“Oh come now sir,” Kennedy said, letting the character of Professor Awful take him fully. “A man of your age and experience ought to be at least a *little* curious...unless you are”—he leaned forward with a bold grin—“perhaps *afraid?*”

The old man chuckled again, shaking his head softly: “I don’t think so my boy...what do you have to *offer me?*”

Kennedy leant off the platform and put his hand on the man’s shoulder, guiding him up the steps to join him.

“Sir, I am talking *terrors* from the five corners of the globe!”

"*Five* corners?"

"Yes! *Five*! For the fifth corner is the one we see the least..."

Kennedy brought the old man to the entrance and said more quietly into his ear: "For a small nominal fee, you may experience a whole host of sheer horrors..."

Kennedy drew back and returned to a bellow: "But beware! The objects inside have brought their ghosts and spirits with them, so many a-hauntings are permanently afoot beyond these doors!"

The old man smiled, and Kennedy was able to lever a ten pound note out of a firm grey hand, a condition the showman found somewhat vile, but also reminded him that if he did not look after his own health such a similar malady would be soon upon him. He had been drinking far less in recent weeks, but his reputation amongst the managers and other showmen was still poor in this regard.

Pocketing the money, Kennedy announced: "I cannot guarantee sir that you will *survive* the visit—but we will hope for the best!"

He cackled in the Vincent Price mould, but could not sustain it for long and violently coughed, apologising before ushering the old man on. Still chuckling, the latter entered the "mansion", with Kennedy leading him from behind, purple cape fluttering...

#

In the first hallway Kennedy stopped the old man and in the full light took a better stock of him: in his musty suit, he was exceptionally stiff it seemed, with no stiffer area than his face, which moved only in small twitches; even his smile was but a tiny item. His hair under the hat was a thick platinum blonde—an obvious wig for a particular vanity.

Kennedy contained his revulsion, and restarted his schtick: "That is it sir! Once you have entered there is no escape from the journey you are about to begin!"

Kennedy led the old man over to the first exhibit on the crooked wall. The rooms of the "Mansion" where thin and long, winding about the

structure in a one way system, whereas the practice of personally touring punters around had come about because too much theft and vandalism had occurred otherwise.

“We will start off, dare I say, *lightly*—you sir would not believe what you can find if you go far enough north!” Kennedy exclaimed, and waived his hand to the display. “Consider the furred trout of the high Yukon!”

Indeed, glued into place on wooden boards were three large trout, who, with the exceptions of face and tail tips, were fully *furred*, two in stark white, one more as though it was a grey-and-black Husky dog.

“Now thought to be extinct, to own a furred trout was considered a badge of honour amongst the miners of the Canadian Gold Rush.”

The old man sniggered: “You cannot seriously expect me to believe this nonsense.”

Resistance from clientele was not uncommon, but Kennedy still found himself irked that people could not just allow their suspensions of disbelief to stretch *a little* so they could have a fun time for once.

“I ask you not to *believe* sir,” Kennedy said with confidence, “only to *listen* and make up your own mind.”

“But of course,” replied the old man with his stiff smile. “I’ve *already* made up my mind...the, erm, fur on the one on the left there is peeling back.”

Kennedy involuntarily let a shuddering cheek of irritation show, but he quickly turned away and led the old man into the next room.

The wall was filled with several shelves, each with half-a-dozen shrunken heads, grey, green, and russet faces of quiet misery, with individual labels.

“When I spoke of ghosts at the start sir, *this* is what I meant,” said Kennedy, shaking his head. “These poor men...each of them a European or American man who ventured *too far* into the tribal bloodlands of northern Peru.”

The old man was nonplussed: “Nothing I did not see during my time in Africa.”

Something within Kennedy stirred and piqued his interest against

his better judgement.

"You sir?" he asked. "In Africa?"

The old man nodded: "Many years ago now...but it still numbs the senses to that which many others consider horrid or unbearable."

Kennedy suppressed his curiosity, and became defensive again: "Well sir, many others *without* your experience would disagree, and you have to yield to the sense of wonder of the masses."

The old man shrugged his shoulders, and moved onto the next room without Kennedy, which annoyed the showman the most—he was supposed to be the one *in charge*! He was supposed to be *the one who led*! He was the *Professor of the Mansion*!

Kennedy's annoyance was not to lessen. Over the next quarter of an hour nothing impressed or pleased the old man's sense of the macabre:

The display of the Three Headed Men of Katanga did little for him, for he claimed to, of all things, have *met them in person*.

The various torture implements and gruesome methodologies of the Spanish Inquisition merely drew from him a yawn.

Even the images and model of the Skinless Boy of the Yucatan failed to change his expression much, an exhibit that made even Kennedy himself queasy after half a decade of displaying it.

In the final large room where multiple horrors were displayed, Kennedy made a concluding effort to make the old man even just a little uncomfortable or awe-inspired.

Wax models of human grotesques were lined up and explained. Mary Madison, the Six Breasted Woman of Missouri was summarily dismissed, as was Jon Brower Minnoch, the Fattest Man Who Ever Lived.

"So he had a fluid build-up?" complained the old man. "Who cares, *really*?"

Kennedy had been discreetly bubbling with rage, and was barely able to keep his lid on to show the old man his ultimate exhibit, the one he was most proud of.

Before the exit was a young woman, a mixed look of extreme distaste and anger on her face, dressed in a *fin de siècle* dress with a giant

matching hat.

"This sir is no model," Kennedy confessed to the old man. "It is a true human being—Miss Edith Turnsbill, of Norwich, discovered her fiancée with the chambermaid in, shall we say, a *compromising position*, and the shock turned her *solid*. I am the fifth in a line of guardians to care for this poor woman, who *may* one day return to the world of the living."

Kennedy grinned to himself and admired the model while stood at its side. Unlike the others it was in fact well-done and exceptionally lifelike, and was the probably most expensive piece in the attraction's entire inventory.

"It's a model," said the old man without any consideration.

Kennedy nearly blew up, but repressed it down yet again, and was instead firmly adamant: "Seriously sir—'tis no model, but a life *paralysed utterly* since 1902."

"It's not even very good wax," said the old man. "Look!"

The old man suddenly raised his cane, narrowly missing Kennedy, and smashed it into the model's left cheek with a nasty crunch.

"See!" he exclaimed. "No resilience at all!"

For a brief moment Kennedy stared at the damage—an infinitely black hole, flakes of wax hanging from the top edge like fragile stalactites—in total silence, his mouth open, his tongue dry.

It was ruined...and the old man clearly desired to ruin *him*.

"You bastard!" he suddenly screamed, and turned to the old man, the latter flush with impudent joy.

Kennedy grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him as the vandal laughed.

"I'm going to kill you, you vicious, miserable, senile old shit!" Kennedy shouted, his mouth foaming at the edges.

"If only you knew how *ironic* that was Kennedy," replied the old man, still amused.

Kennedy stopped shaking him and withdrew. The voice of the old man had just been...different. More English, *very English* in fact, an Old Etonian. Familiar also. And then he realised: the old man had addressed him

by his *real name*.

"Who the hell are you?" Kennedy asked, timorous.

"You want to see a *proper* wax face Kennedy?" the old man asked.

Before Kennedy could answer, the old man dropped his cane, put his stiff hands against the sides of his face, and pulled inwards and out.

The skin beneath the nose split across with a snap like a chocolate bar segment—but it was not skin, but *wax*.

The old man let the mouth piece fall to the floor with a clunk, revealing the bottom of a dark grey face with shrivelled black lips. He then pulled off the hat with the wig, showing his true hair, a short brown crewcut.

At last, still stuck to him, the old man removed the upper half of his fake visage, and Kennedy, who stood in soundless terror, his eyes wide and watering, at last saw the face of a man he had not seen for more than two decades, a man whom he had followed from Port Stanley to the Persian Gulf and around into the Congo, recognisable still through the distortion of bodily decay.

"Hello Stephen," said the grim-looking yet pleased being before him.

"Jawh..." Kennedy began, but stuttered, and grabbed his left wrist to stop his whole arm from trembling.

"Nearly there my son," smiled the man.

"John Mallard," Kennedy whispered, looking down. "But you're dead! I...I..."

Mallard lifted a thin finger to his forehead, and gently circled the small purple hole, not a centimetre wide, that was in the middle of it.

".32 Smith & Wesson Long," Mallard smirked, almost with glee. "What did you say in Kabale immediately before you pulled the trigger Stephen?"

"I...I..." Kennedy mumbled, beginning to judder.

"I'll remind you—you said: 'With all that chaos just south of the border, who's going to give a rat's arse about the death of a disgraced ex-Royal Marine?'"

Kennedy tried to be defensive, as he had been during the tour, but it

petered out—no inner resolve was going to help him now.

“You couldn’t just share the cash we stole from Colonel Ubugome,” Mallard continued. “You *had* to have it all for *yourself*, didn’t you?”

He wagged the same circling finger at Kennedy: “*Not nice!*”

Kennedy shook his head, not to deny anything Mallard had said—it was indeed, all true—but more to try to deny the situation, as impossible as that was.

“Bu-bu-but how?” Kennedy managed to ask through chattering teeth.

“The Bantoid peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa share a strong common magic,” Mallard answered succinctly. “It’s just a question of directing things from *the other side* in a manner that gives one a decent and workable result.”

Mallard cracked undead knuckles and carried on his righteous speech: “Now, it took a long time to find you, and that \$50,000 obviously hasn’t gone very far, you sad old git...but, that doesn’t matter anymore. What matters is what might be termed *adequate retribution*.”

Mallard’s arms shot forward and grabbed Kennedy by the neck so fast that he had no time to respond. The skills of the retired soldier had been dormant for so long they could not save him.

Mallard was unnaturally vigorous with whatever black magic had allowed him life after death, and he held Kennedy in place as the life drained from him.

Kennedy struggled valiantly, at one point even managing to tear his way with a desperate hand through Mallard’s corduroy suit and into his rib cage.

As Kennedy pulled out a blackened, rotted organ, Mallard only laughed and told his increasingly blue face, “What do I care? *Keep it if you like!*”

#

Ned Redgrave had worked as the site manager for the fairground for three years, and had hated every minute of it. Any childhood memories of



fun had been swept away by the harsh realities of physical stress, crippling injuries, drunkenness, and drug addiction that actually made up fairground life.

All the attractions on the left flank had been shut for the night, and he checked the time on his smartphone: 22:05. Everyone should be done.

Walking down the right flank he was confronted with darkness except for the lights of one attraction: *Professor Awful's* MANSION OF MADNESS!

"Kennedy," he groaned. "The drunken shite...what is he up to?"

He walked onto the platform and shouted into the corridor, but no one answered. Kennedy was not in the booth, so the only thing was to go through it.

Redgrave hated the Mansion—everything in there creeped him out, not to mention Kennedy always aggravating him with his over-the-top theatrics.

He threaded through the attraction quickly, calling Kennedy's name ever louder and angrier, until he reached the large end room.

"Where is the bastard?" he asked himself. "Probably soused somewhere out the back..."

He stepped over a dark wet patch on the carpeted floor, and was going through the exit when he noticed that a new item had been added to a shelf: a very large pinkish jar with something inside it.

Redgrave leaned in to get a better look. Through the discoloured fluid, he could see it was a head—fake of course, but still unnerving, and he shuddered. The funny thing was, even though it was distorted in the blue light, it kind of looked *a bit* like Kennedy, although he figured that was down to his own sense of wish fulfilment.

He finally got out the exit and through the emergency door onto the back platform, where in the distance he could see an obscure figure in a hat making its way across the scrubland.

"Oi, Kennedy!" he shouted. "You stupid git! You 'aven't locked up!"

The figure, stumbling, clearly intoxicated in some fashion, did not

look back, but carried on into the neighbouring woods and in seconds was gone from sight.

“Bastard!” grumbled Redgrave. He would have to shut Kennedy’s attraction down for him. But still, it could’ve been worse, he thought. What if something “awful” had happened at Professor Awful’s?

He smiled at his own stupid private joke and went back inside to lock up.

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DRAMA / CRIME

# THE MEASURE OF A GOOD HUSBAND

SIMON BERRY





**T**he measure of a good husband is proficiency in disposing of inconvenient corpses. “But, really? What else were we supposed to do. You know how these things work. We’d get a bad rating and –”

“I get it, dear. Perfectly reasonable.”

Sally was talking to the face in the mirror. The one with embryonic crow’s feet she didn’t like to admit were hers. There wasn’t anyone else to talk to because her husband was out and he was taking too long. Seriously, all John had to do was put the boat in the water, go out to sea, dump the inconvenient corpse and come back. How hard could it be?

Wrinkling her nose, Sally opened the windows as wide as they would go to help the scent of bleach dissipate. She could smell the salt-tinged night air pushing its way past the acrid odour of chemicals. A little rain splashed across the sill.

A post-covid get away. Just the two of us. We can catch up with our few friends. Spend time on the beach. Walk across the rocks at high tide to the headland. From there we would overlook Omaha beach and the neat lines of holiday homes priced at least one zero too many for a family lawyer more years away from retirement than he would like. Unfortunately there were only so many ways to pilfer money from clients’ trust accounts before someone would notice. And then there was the whole business of concealing what the bloodhounds at the IRD call ‘unearned income’. Discretion was required ... It didn’t bear thinking about; all the money flushed down the toilet bowl of bad and worse investments. Poor but dishonest described John perfectly. Utterly clueless when it came to investing the sums he’d pilfered over the years – every few months the ‘opportunity of a lifetime’ would come along and deliver nothing but, well, nothing. A run of misfortune that made the Auckland Marathon look like a hundred-metre dash. An ostrich farm in Namibia was the latest scam he’d fallen for. Sally

told herself to focus on the positive; a husband who spent his days in the office and nights on barstools was not spending them at home with her.

There was a marine reserve too. The snorkeling was supposed to be magnificent.

“Omaha’s just the thing,” she’d decided and told John to book an Airbnb within walking distance of the beach.

John had been happy to oblige and talked about going fishing. Sally was quick to express disapproval of blood sports (too messy), but she was quite happy to consume the end result of the same (pan fried with capers and lemon). She’d ordered snapper and John had promised to put her request on the end of his line. “I’m sure the fish will cooperate,” he’d said while searching for an idyllic holiday home.

The listing had promised the sun, the moon, the stars and the sand. Barbeque and spa pool. Only an hour’s drive north of Auckland (depending on traffic conditions). There was a golf course nearby. It sounded perfect – while John was hacking his way around the fairways, she could to put in some quality time on the 19th. The ad for the Airbnb had said the owner’s boat (on a trailer beside the garage) and diving equipment (also in the garage) wasn’t part of the deal. If they wanted to go out on the water, they’d have to hire a boat separately or do the tourist thing and join a fishing charter where beers were limited and orange life vests mandatory. Apart from that, John had actually picked a good one.

It was a minimum four week stay but who would want to live like a multi-millionaire (or a successful lawyer) for a shorter time? John had done as he’d been told and booked for a month. Shoulder season rates and the estate of somebody or other’s great-aunt Mildred had covered the cost. There’d be the weekend hoards escaping from Auckland after work on Fridays to contend with but the affluent crowds and their friends and hangers on would retreat to the city on Sunday evening leaving behind a reduced population of locals who more or less called Omaha home.

While John finished diddling Mildred’s heirs out of the fruits of her frugality, Sally had told him she would go up on Wednesday. “To make sure you didn’t rent a dump,” she’d told him. “To check out the local scene,”

she'd added. "For the usual reason," she hadn't said. And things had gone sideways rather rapidly, leaving her sweating until the weekend. John had filed his last fictitious timesheet for the week and spent Friday evening entertaining Mildred's heirs on expense account before driving up to join her on Saturday morning. Before dawn so he could watch whatever game was 'the game' live.

Sally screamed. And again to make sure John heard over the noise of whatever crap was playing on the 72 inch screen. She was ready to go for three when she heard the heavy thumping of John hauling his arse up the stairs. He hurried through the master bedroom, as much as a desk bound solicitor who spent more time in wine bars than fitness centres could be said to hurry. The floorboards creaked with each footstep. He charged into the bathroom with an exasperated look on his face and a bottle of beer in hand. Expecting to have a cockroach to deal with, he found his wife standing over a corpse. The hair band made her look like a refugee from an Eighties aerobics video.

Sally was wearing nothing but a bath towel which she strategically dropped as soon as John rushed through the open door. She was disappointed when the man lying in the tub with a steel spear sticking out of his chest captured more of John's attention than she did. She'd put the shower on for effect and water was raining down on the body, mingling with the dried blood and splashing onto the tiles and bathmat.

Conscious that she smelled like she'd used toilet cleaner for deodorant, Sally eyed John's flared nostrils, hoped he'd attribute the stink to Bob and asked what he was going to do about it. When John regained his breath, he suggested there was nothing to be gained by not calling the police. He'd been firmly overridden. "I'm not having my holiday interrupted. Not for something as silly as this." She'd then demanded (again) to know how he was going to deal with the problem and told him he was utterly useless in a crisis.

"Guys don't seem to be able to do more than drink beer and scratch their armpits," she sniffed, still not reaching for the towel. It had fallen on

top of the spear gun and she wasn't sure how she felt about that.

"You married me for money not my skills as an undertaker."

Sally expected her husband to be more functional than a swiss army knife and told him so. "I spread my legs for you. What else do you expect from me? It's your job to deal with everything else. You satisfy me in bed," she lied. "Just for once you can satisfy me out of it."

He baulked.

"I gave you a pass on leaving the toilet seat up last Christmas. Now get rid of this thing."

John finished his beer and placed the empty bottle on the windowsill next to the Wella Warm Brown.

Neither of them was a forensic pathologist but cause of death wasn't much of a mystery; a metallic spear projecting from his chest. The flanged point had torn through the left nipple on its way out. He'd bled a lot. Someone had shot him through the back with a spear gun. Moving a dead body was harder than it looked and looking was all Sally intended contributing to the physical aspects of the project. She saw herself best suited to act in an advisory capacity. The pool of water spreading across the tiled floor was a shade of pink too pale to be pleasant and too red to be ignored. Slipping on the mix of dried blood and water, John turned off the shower and got to work. "This is no good," John said as the long end of the spear caught in the shower curtain. Watching him huffing and puffing Sally wondered if he needed his inhaler but even John's dodgy lungs realised this was no time to malfunction. Rolling the corpse onto its side John got as far as draping the arms and head over the side of the tub before acknowledging the difficulty of moving a body with a steel shaft projecting out of both front and back. Placing one foot against the man's broad back, John first pushed the spear far enough through to grip the other end and then pulled the shaft until it came free. It clattered across the tiles as he tossed it in the general direction of the spear gun.

"Could you give me a hand, dear?"

"Can't you carry Bob yourself?" Sally demanded when John repeated



his request for help lifting the corpse out of the bathtub.

His tufty eyebrows went up. "Bob?"

"Well, he looks like a Bob and we have to call him something, don't we?" Bob was in fact the stiff's name, though she didn't think John needed to know that.

"Where are Bob's clothes?"

"How on Earth should I know?" That was quite literally a true statement. Garbage collection had been on Thursday and Sally had no idea where the local tip was. Everything bar the cash in his wallet should be buried under a pile of other non-recyclables by now.

The corpse rolled out of the tub, hitting the wet tiles head first with a dull thud. John grabbed Bob's clean-shaven legs by the ankles and started dragging the body across the bathroom tiles and through the carpeted master bedroom.

As she watched John awkwardly bumping Bob's body down the stairs, Sally drew up a mental checklist for the next person to put a decent-sized rock on her finger. Someone more practical. Maybe a builder. Or go the other way, get a lighter lover she could dispose of herself when it was time for a trade in.

"This would be a lot easier if he weighed less. A lot less."

"Or if you used that gym membership I gave you for your birthday."

Once down stairs in the open-plan living room, John got his breath back. After a moment, he opened the ranch doors, stepped outside and removed the cover from the spa pool. Dragging Bob to the edge he levered the body until he was able to tip it into the water.

"I was going to use that," Sally said as she watched him put the cover back on.

"Nothing stopping you," John replied without looking up. "I'm sure Bob would enjoy the company."

"Gloves, dear. You really should be wearing gloves." He really was clueless. "And don't swear at me."

They didn't have any gloves. Or any of the supplies one would expect

to have on hand for removing corpses. So John drove them back to Matakana to buy cleaning equipment and wine and up to Whangarei to buy more cleaning equipment and more wine and back to Warkworth to buy addition cleaning equipment and scotch. Somewhere along the way they picked up a set of sheets and pillow cases. Only one sheet was needed but it was all about appearing normal. The scenery was green, the sky blue and the Saturday morning traffic shit. They were going to need the drink as much as the sanitation products. John paid with the folding stuff each time. Maybe that made them stand out in the nearly cashless economy but it wasn't so unusual as to attract comment.

As they drove back over the causeway to Omaha, she 'reminded' John that she'd invited Terry and Sue for dinner. "I told them to bring swimsuits."

"And you couldn't have mentioned that a bit sooner?"

Back in the bach, Sally repeated her criticism. "What did you put it in the spa pool for? You knew we'd be using that."

"Well, where should I have put it?"

"Shove Bob in the boat. No one will see him there."

"It's daylight and the boat's in full view of the road and the neighbours," he explained the obvious.

"Just do it when they're not looking," was Sally's advice.

"And when would that be, dear?"

"Don't you give me lip when I'm trying to be helpful!"

Beach ready her husband's body was not and hadn't been for decades. The dead man was a different proposition altogether. Tall, tanned, a full head of black hair and plenty of muscle. Lips a little thin and the blue eyes were closed. There were some tattoos there as well, including one on his left butt-cheek. A post-coital discussion piece that had run its course after all of one discussion. She'd been more interested in other parts of his anatomy.

John's phone rang while he was pulling Bob out of the spa pool and Sally was telling him (again) that he'd need to mop the floor before their guests arrived. It was the default ring tone announcing that someone not in his contact list was calling. He ignored it. And ignored it when it rang again.

On the third time he figured it might be someone from the office asking questions about the depleted trust account. Letting go of Bob's legs, he took the call. It was the overly helpful owner – calling to see if everything was okay.

But the owner wasn't done with a single call. Each time the phone rang, Sally would say "you should get that, dear" and John would stop lugging Bob and oblige. The owner was new to AirBnB and nervous about letting strangers stay in his prize waterfront bach. The same questions on each call. "You're not touching my boat are you?" "And the home brew kit in the basement? Help yourself to the ones in the fridge. Let me know what you think? Too much yeast? Just leave the lot in the basement alone, will you. Still fermenting." "Have you tried the local restaurant? You'll definitely need to book if you want to get in on weekends." "I asked the neighbor to drop in. Tell Angie I said 'hi'." Impatient with the consequent delays in shifting the corpse, Sally took the owner's next call and placated him while her husband got back to the business of dragging the body through the living room. "You're dripping blood on the carpet," she told the corpse carrier after ending the last call. "We could lose our deposit."

John gave that all the reply it deserved; none.

Sally sat down and poured herself a generous glass while her husband worked at rolling Bob up in one of the sheets they'd just bought. Paisley colour so stains would be less noticeable. John wasn't all that attractive anymore, middle-aged and pear shaped, so she looked past the wooden patio with the built in spa pool. A rolling line of sand dunes dotted with tussock grass was all that separated the bach from the beach. "You could bury him there. It's only sand. Easy to dig a hole and fill it in."

"Easy to dig up as well. Too easy. One overly enthusiastic pooch and it's prime time." He tore the second sheet into strips and used it to tie up the bundle.

"Then why don't you come up with a plan? Why do you always expect me to do everything around here?"

Taking a break, he poured the last of the bottle into Sally's glass. The

stuff was shite, cat piss with notes of litter box and an aftertaste of hairball. He'd give the owner's homebrew a go when it was all over.

"They'll be here soon."

John had his head in the fridge. 'When it was all over' sounded too far away.

"You'll have to move Bob now. Can't leave him lying around the living room."

After the reminder about the gloves, John did it all in the nude to avoid getting DNA or more blood on his clothes. He placed his wallet and phone on the counter and tossed his clothes, including the belt, into the washing machine before shifting the unwanted house guest. John tipped the recycling bin on its side, shoved the corpse inside and then righted the bin, grunting with the effort. He dropped the lid and wheeled the improvised coffin into the back corner of the garage.

Even with Bob relocated to the recycling bin, the water in the spa remained stubbornly pink. Hearing the sound of a car turning into the shared driveway, John put a screw top bottle of red, the cheap stuff (not the Coleraine) next to the pool. There'd be a little accident as soon as their friends arrived for brunch.

While Sue talked about traffic and how good it was to get away for a bit and Terry nodded at the right points, Sally worried about Bob. Three days. Even in the coolness of early autumn he'd been pretty fragrant. By the time she'd come back and staged the scene, decomposition had started. Worried that Terry and Sue might smell something off, she excused herself and sprayed the shroud with Dior perfume. Realizing that that was too distinctive she added a generous amount of fly spray. On the way back, she flushed the toilet to provide a pretext for leaving and then discovered she needed to pee. No one would notice if she went in the spa pool.

And, of course, after the spa came the mandatory barbeque. Some decent steaks, buttered corn in tinfoil and a salad. All simple stuff but neither of them was big on cooking. To be more accurate, John's cooking skills were limited by incompetence and Sally's non-existent due to apathy.

In spite of which, dinner was fine. John poured the drinks and fired up the barbeque for his wife's sister and her latest husband. Said husband was the designated driver for their late night drive back to Auckland and was told that his allowance was zero. So it was the good stuff for the ladies, cheap stuff for John and no-alcohol beer for Terry.

John's eyesight wasn't so poor that he failed to notice the blackened clasp among the ashes when he was preparing the barbeque.

After Terry and Sue had bid farewell he pointed out that it would be helpful to let him know in advance next time she needed to dispose of one of her lovers. "Trust me, honey; there are far easier ways to deal with these situations."

"And when did you become an expert?"

"Today."

"I'm sure it will be easier for you next time."

There was a long pause while Sally poured herself another and John did some thinking.

"Well, how are you going to get rid of him? Can't leave Bob there forever. It's not sanitary."

"Boot of the car? Dump it in one of the national parks on the way back to Auckland."

That was a dumb idea and Sally told him so. "One blood stain and we're looking at a murder charge." More to the point, she'd done that last time and nearly been caught.

He had the good sense not to tell her there was no 'we' involved in Bob's demise.

John decided to take Bob out in the owner's tinnie and give him a Viking style sendoff (minus the fires and everything else but a trip to the bottom). Ironically, it was the owner's repeated instructions not to touch the boat which had given John the idea. Said owner had left it out in the driveway with a cover on it. John took photos so he could put it back exactly where it was and then hooked it up to the tow bar on his SUV. Then Googled 'how to launch a boat' and 'how to drive a boat' using the VPN for

Internet access and didn't Google how to dispose of bodies or watch movies where killers disposed of their handiwork.

Beaches were all very well but small boats in the small hours were not her thing. Besides which it looked like it might rain. So Sally told John to go out on his own and decided he should go tonight. During the day the neighbors would be more likely to see them take the owner's boat and there was the threat of a visit from 'Angie' hanging over them. Watching *Weekend at Bernie's* on TV while drinking a bottle of rosé, Sally wondered what was taking the useless bugger so long.

"How do you start this thing?" The useless bugger was talking to himself as there was no one else around if you discounted the tuxedo cat looking on from the top of the hard.

John had been on boats before. Nobody grows up in Auckland without getting their feet wet at some point but he'd never operated one. John told himself that if he could navigate the confusing mish-mash of lane closures, bus lanes, cycle lanes, transit lanes, endless lines of orange cones and road closures that defined and tormented Auckland transport without losing his license or his sanity he could get a twelve foot aluminum runabout into the water and start the bloody engine.

Launching the boat wasn't too hard. Reverse down the ramp until the trailer was wheel deep. A tinnie. Is that an Australian thing?

He pressed the red button. The boat floated clear of the trailer and he wondered what would stop the wretched thing from floating away. So it was perhaps a good thing that the night breeze was blowing into the shore. Even so he had to wade out until he was chest deep in the estuary before scrambling awkwardly into the unstable boat. The nor-easterly breeze pushed the boat back ashore as soon as he was aboard but he didn't trust the wind to keep the boat where it was supposed to be while he parked the car somewhere more appropriate. So he left the SUV and the trailer on the ramp. At three a.m. on a heavily overcast morning he reasoned nobody would be around to give a fuck.

The outboard grated on the concrete slipway when he lowered the

engine into the water. When he started the engine, it sounded far too loud but rowing wasn't an option. A bit of a bump, a couple more bumps and he was underway. John was in the channel and heading towards open ocean before he realized the water sloshing around the bottom of the boat was getting deeper. There was a little rubber plug that belonged in the hole in the bottom of the boat instead of hanging by a piece of string next to the hole. He spent the rest of the trip ankle deep in water.

Bob was starting to stink something funny or maybe that was just the way fishing boats were supposed to smell; like cleaner mingled with something floral. He imagined flies laying eggs and thought about all the lives he was taking by disposing of the body. "But that's the world isn't it," he asked Bob's shrouded form. Bob didn't express a view one way or the other, so John continued the conversation on his own. "I could be fish food too if I change my will. Can I do that? Ask to be buried at sea? Not like Uncle Mel did; had his ashes scattered over his favourite fishing ground." It had been blowing a gale  $\neg$ — force 4 the boaties called it — and half the mourners were sea sick and they all ended up inhaling the dear departed's dust when the wind blew it all back into their faces. Sally had sworn black and blue that if she got cystic fibrosis from inhaling all the particles it would be grounds for divorce. And she definitely didn't appreciate his jokes about how Uncle Mel would have laughed at the thought of the few relatives he'd still been on speaking terms with being cannibals by inhalation. A wave slapping against the side of the tinnie sent a few drops of water splashing over John. It was refreshing but reminded him it was time to get back. He was far enough out, the beach a scattering of lights several kilometers behind him. It had to be too deep for recreational divers. Bob wasn't going to blow anywhere. Or drift off with the ocean currents. Twenty feet of 10 mm chain would take Bob to the bottom and make sure he stayed there. How long before the fish have done their job? John hoped he'd never find out.

It started raining. He welcomed the water dripping down from the heavens, helping to wash away any evidence and discouraging people from going for nocturnal walks. Even the cat would have sought shelter.

"Fuck." He'd come all the way out here and forgotten the bloody

spear gun.

When he came back the trailer was mostly underwater and the car's rear wheels were getting rinsed in brine. Still, he managed to get enough traction to get the whole thing out of the rising tide without mishap. He even remembered to remove the bung so the boat would drain by the time he got back to the bach. John thought he'd busted a rotator cuff doing it but eventually got the boat off the tow bar and back into its original position. Top up the petrol? Yeah, he'd have to do that before they relinquished occupancy. And replace the anchor chain. He cleaned the boat with bleach and water and then hosed it down. "Be thorough, dear and don't forget to wash the spear gun. In CSI they always find something." Sally (in her night dress with a glass of scotch in hand) watched him as he worked and then went back to bed when her glass was empty. It was still dark and his shoulder was aching by the time he finished.

When her husband didn't follow she came back downstairs, John had his butt on the sofa and feet up, watching some kind of ball game on the television with a cold beer in hand. Men and their vices. It all seemed a bit pointless to her but this time he'd earned it so she'd leave off reminding him to book the restaurant for tomorrow night until half time. The night was all but over but he didn't seem inclined to move in the direction of the bedroom.

"Have a scotch, dear," she said when overpaid boys running around an English football pitch were replaced by an advertisement for funeral insurance.

He accepted the offered drink, three fat fingers worth with a single ice cube and muted the television. It was time for confessional.

"I value my marriage, you know I do, dear. God knows why, but I do. And Bob kept banging on about me leaving my husband, that's you, to be with him. For fuck's sake, the selfish bastard was prattling on about having a baby. Yeah, so I've still got a few eggs in the chute but as far as kids are concerned the factory's closed." Her reproductive facilities had never been open but she'd told John the problem was at his end and never mentioned



that she'd had her tubes tied. Children were not part of the ten-year plan, not since she'd seduced her music teacher to get the part of the Virgin Mary in the Christmas pageant. That experience had given her an awareness that sex was for recreation not procreation. Bob had been possessed of all the cognitive restraint of a rabbit in the breeding season. Following her around like a mongrel after a Crufts prize bitch in heat, the attention (and sex) had been welcome until he'd pestered her about permanence once too often. Robert Edward Miles (Bob to his friends) hadn't known when to move on. Sally had.

“What else was I supposed to do?”

“Perfectly reasonable, dear,” he said, unmuting the television as the teams returned to the field.

Originally from New Zealand, SIMON BERRY is a recovering lawyer who now calls Hong Kong home. After stepping down from full time legal practice, Simon completed an MFA in creative writing and a PhD in English literature at City University. His short stories have been published in several Hong Kong Writers Circle anthologies, one has been translated into Chinese and published in *Resonate* and two have been included in university curricula. Simon's first novel *A Wasting Asset* is available on Amazon and his second novel will be published later this year.



THRILLER / FANTASY

# EURYDICE IN THE FLOWS

a.l. DAWSON





Eurydice crouched on the spongy earth, heart racing. Slowly she turned her slender body. In the twilight she could not tell if she had been followed. The man would come for her, she knew that much. She kept peering into the strange half-light that enveloped the bog land, straining to see anything moving from where she had fled. Nothing. But he would come. That was certain.

She pulled her long auburn hair back over her shoulders and tried to slow her breathing. Her medication for panic attacks would help. She reached in her pocket for the pill. Not there. She had dropped everything when she had jumped off the train. No medication. No wallet, no phone. All gone. Swallowed by the Highland Flows.

At 5'7" she lost several inches when she stood up in the muck of the bog. It crawled up over her ankles. With her medication gone, she wondered how she would keep it together. Shivering in the cool, June night air she checked her other pocket. *Still there.* She pulled out the precious thumb drive. Unlike her sweater and jeans, it remained dry. Something like a sigh of relief escaped from her.

Eurydice strained to listen. Silence. No bird calls. No wind. Nothing at all but the sucking growl of the muck as she struggled to lift her foot to take a step. Oozing mud penetrated her canvas sneakers and settled between her toes, sending more shivers throughout her body.

She wondered where to go and how to get to the nearest Scottish village. The Flows seemed to keep her rooted in one place, but she knew she had to move.

She looked west toward the last of the twilight. Thousands of tiny ponds reflected the fading light in blood orange patterns. She then looked north and made out the vague outline of a small hill in the distance. She moved toward it hoping for drier land. As she took her first steps, she heard the whistle. Faint but hanging in the air. It was the man's signal that the hunt

had begun.

The man stared at the setting sun. He knew she was out there running like a scared rabbit. Maybe less than a mile away. Her footprints in the bog meant she headed west, deeper into the Flows. He'd been in worse places, but he bet she hadn't. Her jumping from the train was a big mistake. She would be alone and lost. A smile took over his face.

He was a big hulk of a man. He prided himself on his stamina for what lay ahead. He still had what it takes at 55. The man checked all his gear. Fishing tackle box, wellies, rubber gloves, binoculars. He usually tracked with a hunting party but not this time. On his own. It was meant to be. He tried to grasp another thought that was forming in his brain. Finally, it came to him. There was a type of purity to what needed to be done. The hunt was more than getting that thumb drive with the names of all the girls his company had trafficked. No, this hunt was much more, almost sacred and very personal.

He moved forward with a newfound energy. After only seven strides he stopped. Next to her footprints lay a mobile phone. He thought to himself, *This is the good life*. He whistled as he headed into the night.

The pain was constant. Eurydice did not think she had broken her arm. Likely a bad sprain. At least the walking was easier. The closer she moved to the bluff the drier the land became. Her feet no longer sank into the earth. The spongy heather had turned into a coarser grass. That was good.

She looked back to see if there was a shape moving toward her. In the moonlight she saw only the eerie contours of an undulating shapes in the mist shrouded night sky. She listened again for sounds, Only a slight breeze rippling the surface of the bog ponds. She wondered if she would survive the night. He'd stop at nothing to get the thumb drive. Then he would do things to her. That was what men like him did. Her body shuddered at the thought.

The hill meant refuge. She didn't know why. It's not that she knew the Flows. It seemed like another planet compared to the city streets of her neighborhood on Chicago's northside. She was familiar with much of the

Highlands, but this was uncharted territory. Maybe the hill was a beacon of hope. Maybe a hiding place. She looked over her shoulder. A shape moved. *Or did it?*

She began to run, but the pain in her arm shot through her body, forcing her to slow down to jog and to a walk. She walked as fast as the pain let her.

He saw the girl. The man adjusted his binoculars to gauge the distance. He figured he'd reach her in thirty minutes max. *Maybe a mile away. Hard to tell.*

He bent down and opened up the fishing tackle box. Five knives were fitted into velvet sheathes, and each sheath was housed in a separate compartment along the bottom of the box. He removed the smallest of the knives from its sheath and held it close to his face, marveling at the razor-sharp blade and the feel of the ebony handle in his hand. He so loved his babies. Each of the five had a special place in a hunt like this. Rather than return the knife to its sheath he decided to hold on to it.

The man bent down again without letting go of the knife and closed the tackle box. Binoculars around his neck, backpack in place, and knife securely in hand, he headed for the girl. He whistled as he walked, his knife slicing the air in expanding arcs..

Eurydice reached the base of a low lying hill. She leaned forward and made her way to the top of the bluff. As she climbed, her arm began to throb. She tried to push the pain into a far corner of her mind. She had nowhere to put her thirst though. Her throat was parched. Her water bottle was somewhere on the train heading to Thurso on the Northern Highland Coast.

As she dragged herself to the top of the bluff, she paused. She heard new sounds that made her catch her breath. She quickly flattened her body against the damp earth and slithered a few more feet to peer over the edge. *Bleating.* A flock of sheep meandered through what looked like broken shards of rocks sticking up from the earth. Eurydice wiped her eyes, wondering if the thirst and exhaustion had affected her vision. It was a cemetery. A small cemetery in the middle of a vast bog-land. Sheep wandered between the

gravestones.

Eurydice stood up and entered the cemetery. The sheep ignored her as she walked among the tombstones and toward a dilapidated wooden and pebbledash building on the other side of the graveyard. It looked as if it had been abandoned decades ago. She scanned the area and spotted a small boulder at the edge of the cemetery. A copper sign inlaid into the rock read, *Bean-nighe Hunting Lodge, 1905*. She tried to connect the lodge and the cemetery and why they were together in the middle of nowhere. Her brain stalled from the effort.

The only thing her brain cared about: water. She was tempted to lick the dew off the moss wrapped around the lodge, but her eye caught the movement of a lamb separated from the flock. It strayed behind the building. Unsure why, she willed herself to follow the animal. As she rounded the corner of the lodge, she saw the gift. She dropped to her knees in tears. The lamb was slowly making its way to a small stream to drink. Eurydice ran, almost stumbling over her tired feet, to the flowing water. She plunged her head into the stream and drank.

Lifting her head out of the water she saw the lamb staring at her. Once their eyes met the creature turned and scampered back to the flock. Eurydice lowered her face to the stream to take another gulp but recoiled. A familiar face appeared beneath the surface of the water. Eurydice froze, eyes widening, as the young girl's eyes opened beneath the ripples. The childhood memory of Cleo drowning in the quarry and her not being able to swim out to her best friend returned once again. Now Cleo's image appeared in this stream, and Eurydice could hear her silent cries for help. The same scream she had heard thousands of times over the years. She slapped her cheeks and shook her head. Cleo's face vanished. For now.

A damp, cool breeze blew off the stream, bringing with it a semblance of clarity to her mind. She blinked a few times, and then she heard it. Her head shot up like a deer's when sensing a predator about to strike. It was him. He was part humming, part whistling a familiar tune that turned into a voice mouthing the words she could hear. As the faint noise got closer, the whistling became a voice. She could hear the lyrics floating over



to where she knelt at the water...

*My Eurydice lies over the ocean...*

*My Eurydice lies over the sea...*

*Oh bring back, oh bring back my Eurydice to me.*

Eurydice wanted to run. But she was frozen. Her legs refused to work. Her mind had turned to clay Eurydice wanted to run. But she was frozen. Her legs refused to work. Her mind had turned to clay. Her heart thudding so hard to the rhythm of the song.

*My Eurydice lies...*

A black beret rose over the edge of the bluff. Then his face appeared. Dead, gray eyes and sharp teeth that gleamed in the moonlight. Then she ran.

The man stood with one foot on a broken gravestone. He looked around the graveyard, surveying the site, then walked over gravesites, kicking shards of shale and stone out of his way, until he reached the front of the lodge. He stopped and looked down at the sign. He muttered, "A hunting lodge is it? The inn keepers must have known I was coming." He coughed up a smoker's throaty laugh.

He scanned the abandoned lodge. He was about to turn toward the stream when he heard the on and off again patter from behind the front door. *Had to be her.* He paused a moment to savor what he had accomplished. *I'll save the family the fallout from that bloody thumb drive. Not to say anything about major prison time. Courts don't not fancy human traffickers.*

He shook the thought from his mind and instead focused on what awaited him behind the lodge's rotting door. The man bent down and placed the fishing tackle box, on the ground, then opened it and gently retrieved another knife. This one larger than the one he already clutched in his hand. In what look like a choreographed performance, he began to swish both knives back and forth in crisscrossing patterns. Faster and faster.

Slightly winded, he stopped and shouted, "Checked in have you? Mind getting a roommate for the evening?" He waited, hoping to hear a plea. Instead, only the sounds of footsteps could be heard.

“Cat got your tongue? No matter. Here I come ready or not my love.” He looked at the knives in his hands and whispered, “My sweet, sweet babies.” He walked toward the front door, ready to begin his work.

Eurydice squatted behind the rear of the building. She could see the man’s torso through the lodge’s rear window. The dust-laden and cracked window refracted the moonlight, making the man appear as a marionette hanging from strings as he swung his knives back and forth. *Run*, instinct screamed at her, the kind of instinct a rabbit has when a fox was closing in on its prey, but another part of her brain said, “No, wait.” He was bigger and stronger, and once he spotted her he would be upon her in no time.

The man had stopped his taunts. She peered over the window’s ledge. No sight of him, only an ewe and several lambs wandering through one of the rooms. She’d forgotten the sheep. New sounds now... There was movement coming from other rooms. *More sheep?*

A sound of cracking wood reverberated through the air as the front door came crashing down. Instinctively, Eurydice stood up, both poised and paralyzed. The man tore through the threshold toward her—just as the ewe and her lambs ran into and around him. His curses were drowned out by the sheep’s bleating wails, and the man fell backward in the melee.

This was her moment. Only one direction to run. To the west and deeper into the Flows. She looked back as she ran. The man was rolling on the ground surrounded by what now seemed like a flock of sheep. Eurydice whispered a silent thank you as she fled into the heart of the Flows.

The man flailed wildly on the ground, as he swung his knives every which way at the stupid beasts rushing around him. He couldn’t even cut a lamb. A few seconds later the tumult was over, the sheep having gone back to roaming about the graveyard. He then saw the girl flee past the far end of the lodge.

The man’s chest constricted. Heat rose through his body, turning his face red. He could barely think, barely see past his white-hot rage. He couldn’t believe it. He had lost control of the situation...something that had

never happened before. Filaments of moss hung from his mouth as he picked himself up. He spat out the moss along with some dirt and howled out his anger. He wiped what filth he could from his body, but he couldn't get rid of the barnyard smell. It seemed inside of him.

A sudden jolt of panic raced through his body. *My knives? Where are they?*

He spun around, searching the trodden earth. A gleam of silver caught his eye beneath the excrement from the sheep. He dug both knives out and wiped them off on his pant leg. The dumb beasts just kept ambling about, oblivious to the humiliation they had caused him. *And the girl got away.*

The man walked over to where he had left his fishing tackle box and shoulder bag. He took out a flask of whiskey and swallowed slowly. The warm burn of the alcohol re-energized him and lifted his mood. He knew exactly what to do now. He bent down and opened the tackle box. He thought for a moment before he took a knife from the fifth sheath. The largest one. He held it up for inspection. *This will get the job done.* It never failed him in time of need. Not nearly the length of a machete, but it sure felt like one and was just as powerful. He placed the knife in the leather holder on his belt.

The man went back to his shoulder bag and took out a coiled rope and slung it over his arm. He took one more swig of whisky, which warmed his breath in the cool night air. His powerful chest rose and fell. He felt like a bull grunting and snorting. He liked that feeling.

The girl was nowhere in sight. She had run west, deeper into the Flows. That was swamp country for sure. Her tracks would be easy to follow. That thought was enough for him to strike up a tune. Confident once more, he whistled as he strode back into the night.

The Flows wouldn't let her run. Winded and fighting back the pain in her arm Eurydice watched her feet sink into the bog with each step. She paused, studying the land around her in the wan light. The lodge and graveyard were now far behind her. She did not see or hear the man. But she knew that would change.

*Only a matter of time.*

The nocturnal terrain was featureless except for the pools of water that caught the moonlight. Only the color of a grayish-black sheet rippled all around her. And then there was that faint but distinct smell. Like sulfur but not quite. A smell that came deep from within the earth. Ancient and before time.

Eurydice shook her head to rid herself of self-pity. She took a deep breath, willed her heart to stop drumming, and began her labored trek once more. She hoped to see some kind of marker announcing higher ground or a tree line. She saw nothing useful, but what she heard made her freeze. She gasped and spun. No one behind her. Ahead, maybe 30 feet or so she heard a sucking sound. It seemed like the Flows were breathing in and out.

A pair of red eyes greeted her. She stood immobile as a creature moved. It was a fawn caught in a sinkhole. The more it struggled the deeper it sank. Eurydice stared in horror at the deer's plight. Its mouth was moving, but she could hear nothing. She could do nothing to save the animal. Then a familiar memory came rushing back.

*Not now.* Cleo was drowning and calling for her, but Eurydice had only froze.

A louder sucking sound brought her back to the fawn. Dark sludge enveloped most of its body. Only the neck and head could be seen now.

Eurydice moved closer to the animal so it would know she was with it, so it wouldn't be alone in its final moments. Her own feet began to sink into the muck, not too deep but over her ankles. She was glued to the bog, face to face with the deer.

The fawn's head moved forward, and its body undulated a little, as if it was trying to make its way to her. The bog would not have it. A moan rose up from the sinkhole. The muck wrapped around its head. That was all. The Flows had claimed it.

. The air was still. Not even a breeze. No bird calls. No buzz of insects. The only noise was Eurydice lifting her sunken foot out of the wet earth. The pressure of the muck ripped off her shoe. She lifted up her other foot, but with her bad arm she couldn't steady herself. She fell backward.

Eurydice lay immobile at the edge of the sinkhole. *Is this the end?*

Luckily, her body weight was evenly distributed along the surface of the bog. The upper part of her back fell on firmer ground, giving her just enough traction to inch out of the bog's grip.

Once free of the muck, she rolled over on her side, inhaling and exhaling. Exhausted once again. Without even looking or hearing she sensed the presence of the man approaching. Turning her head to the side she thought she saw shadows move. She didn't have much time.

She managed to slow her breathing. She visualized the sheep bleating and swarming over the man. They had bought her precious time to get away. Now, the deer. She was not much of a believer in signs or omens, but it struck her that maybe the death of the deer could do more than buy her time. A plan, or more of a possibility, began to crystallize in her mind. She would have to be quick if it had any chance of working. She could barely stand. Muck hung on her body and weighed her down. A voice echoed in the darkness.

"I see you. Everything will be fine. Come to Daddy." Laughter sliced through the night.

The man saw the girl lying on the ground. She looked injured. *Good. That will make things easier.* He would tie her up and drag her back to the lodge. Then he could take his time with his two little babies. He clutched the hilts of his two knives, smiling with anticipation. *Close now.* He could see the girl crawling. *How pathetic.* The man quickened his pace as best he could. The long blade swished violently through the night air. He was eager, and what needed to be done was long overdue.

Eurydice crawled to the other side of the sinkhole. She could see the man now. He was walking quickly but swaying a little like a drunk animal, fighting through the muck.

She wanted him to see her crawl. It would excite him. Eurydice only hoped that would make him come straight to her. Into the sinkhole.

*Fifty feet away now.* He lumbered like a clumsy bear on its hind legs. *Forty feet.* She saw that sickening grin on a bloated face. *Thirty feet.* She saw a

rope slung over his shoulder and a long knife in his hand. *Twenty feet.* He was almost at the spot where she had first seen the deer. *Keep coming you bastard.* Then he stopped.

The man was just standing there. Looking at her. *Did he suspect?*

She propped herself up on her elbows as she lay on her back and gazed up at him, doing did her best to look forlorn. "Please," she whined. "I'll give you what you want."

"I know you will." His eyes moved from her eyes down her body." My, what a mess you made of yourself."

That was her cue. She rubbed her eyes as if to wipe away tears and made her body shiver, doing all that she could to put her fear and helplessness on full display.

Her actions energized the man. He charged. Two long strides and he was up to his knees in sludge. Enraged, he tried to move forward, grunting and growling from the effort. He sank further. The muck was up to his waist.

Eurydice stood up. It was her turn to smile. "I wouldn't do that if I were you. But I'm not you. Go ahead, move all you want."

The man's huffing and puffing stopped. So did his thrashing. He looked baffled, as if he didn't quite understand what had happened. He had never been in a situation like this. Helpless and out of control. It took him a few seconds to grasp the meaning of his predicament. His lips twitched.

Eurydice stood impassively at the sinkhole's edge. Coated in a sheath of black muck that made her appear as the figure of death itself.

The man cried out, "Look, let's forget this whole business. Call it even. What do you say? Keep the goddam thumb drive." He shook his arms in the air while still holding his knife and the rope. A mistake. The mud climbed halfway up his chest.

"Nothing can be forgotten. Nothing is even." Her words floated in the air as if a hanging judge was delivering a verdict to a condemned man. She wanted to watch him go under, begging for his life. She enjoyed his terror. That bothered her. *Watching him die like this.*

She wiped strands of peat moss from her eyes. A spectral presence

rose up next to the man, though he didn't seem to notice it. He just kept staring at Eurydice with furious, panicked eyes. But she no longer met his gaze. She now just watched, mouth parted in shock, as the presence began to take a familiar form. Covered in a coat of greenish and black slime a head appeared. Cleo. The mouth opened, attempting to speak. No words came out. The eyes remained shut. The head moved back and forth, as if in a warning or an admonition. Then it returned below.

Eurydice rubbed her eyes. The image was gone. She wondered if she had a fever.

"Please, I beg you."

His voice brought back to the man's plight. "Shut up. Throw me the rope."

The man took the cord off his shoulder. He tried to throw it to her, but the muck hampered his efforts. The cord fell a foot short. The muck moved further up his chest.

She bent down and stuck her hand into the slime. She couldn't quite reach the cord. She got down on her stomach and moved her body to the edge of the hole. *Why am I doing this?* She knew why... or at least she thought she did. She didn't want to become like him.

*Yet, why him and not Cleo? Her first real friend. Why should he live?* She didn't know why. She willed herself to reach for the rope. She sat up and wrapped the cord around her stronger arm and pulled with all her might.

The man had the other end of the cord in his hand. For a moment an expression of childlike hope glimmered in his eyes.

She kept pulling, but she could only use one arm. And he was heavy. It seemed as if the bog had its own will. The pressure of the muck on the man's body created a suction that pulled the rope out of her hands.

The cord went slack. The muck was now up to his chin. He tried to speak, but the bog flowed into his mouth. His eyes saw the night air one last time as his head went under. Only the hand with the knife was above the surface, and it sliced one more time at the air. Then, a final slurping noise.

Eurydice sat the edge of the sinkhole, staring at the area in which he had just vanished, but only a gelatinous darkpool devoid of life could be

seen. Ancient and primordial.

. She had to survive the night. She had to find her way back to the lodge. *Shelter. Water. Rest.* Eurydice made an effort to stand. Her shoes were gone. She had a cut on the bottom of her left foot. In all the drama she had not noticed it. Both her foot and arm sang out in pain. She would have walk barefoot through the Flows. She thought she heard the sheep bleating. *My imagination?* She walked toward the sound, hoping it was real.

Her earlier footprints were gone, sucked beneath the bog. All she had to go on was the memory of what she thought were the sheep calling out from the east. As she zigzagged across the wet turf, she stopped at a stream. Eurydice didn't remember crossing it in her flight from the lodge.

She dropped to her knees at the edge of the water...but it wasn't water. It was a slow-moving current of viscous, dark liquid. She could not tell how deep it was. The moonlight could not penetrate its blackish surface. She dipped her swollen foot into the water. It felt cold and thick against her skin. She tried to test the depth with her foot. The water rose almost to her knee as her foot reached the bottom. The bottom did not hold, and her foot sank further into the ooze. She tried to pull it back out, but the muck wouldn't let go. Eurydice fell backwards once more. The motion of her fall was enough to yank her foot from the streambed's grip.

Exhausted and dizzy she lay on her back gazing at the half-moon. She sat up, but something did not feel right. She patted her pocket. Empty. Her hand shoved its way through the caked mud of her pant leg pocket to grab the thumb drive. Gone.

Panic set in and overrode the physical pain in her body. Her eyes searched the land around her. A mounting dread began to surge through her. The Flows had it. She fell to her knees again, overwhelmed with a sense of failure. She stared at the murky stream again Her fevered brain thought maybe it would be best to fall in and let the current take her away.

Cleo's face appeared on the surface of the slow moving, oily current. Eurydice didn't have the strength to push the image away. Cleo opened her



eyes this time. She tried to speak but not to plea for help this time. Something else.

*What were her lips saying?* Eurydice imagined the words.

*Leave, leave it behind.*

Eurydice thought maybe she was meant to die now and leave this world behind. *I must be near the end.* Her face dipped closer to the surface of the stream. The hallucination seemed so real.

She was about to crawl into the stream when the sound of a dog barking stopped her. It kept barking and would not stop. She raised her head and looked across the stream. A large black and white dog sat on its haunches barking at her. *Was it real?*

The last thing she heard was the voice of what she thought was a young woman shouting, “What is it Cerberus? Who be there?”

“Drink this.”

Eurydice looked up at the voice. A girl with long dark hair and deep green eyes stared back down at her.

“Just drink. Don’t try to speak.”

And Eurydice did. It was cold and good. It brought life back into her. She took two more sips from the leather flask and handed it back to the girl.

“Thanks. Did you bring me across the stream?”

The girl answered with her own questions. “What are you doing here? You do not belong in this place?”

Eurydice responded. “I was chased by a man who wanted something very important. I jumped from a train and ended up here, totally lost. He died in a sinkhole and what he wanted is probably there with him.” Eurydice looked back and pointed in the direction of the sinkhole.

The girl’s response unnerved her. “There’s nothing back there for you. Look the other way. What you need is there.” The girl pointed toward the east.

The fever hadn’t left Eurydice. She had a hard time trying understanding why the girl spoke the way she did. She also dressed in what seemed to be a frock or tunic from another era. Everything about her was a

bit strange.

The girl continued. "You are lucky Cerberus saw you." The dog was by the girl's side now. Its coal black eyes lit up upon hearing its name. His eyes stayed fixed on Eurydice.

"You would've been trapped. We never see people this far into the Flows. Now that you are across you best get to where you need to be by sunrise."

Eurydice said, "I'm not sure what you mean. I lost this thumb drive. I need to find it. Maybe you could help me." Eurydice began to turn back toward the sinkhole but froze when she heard the dog snarl.

"I told you not to look back. Whatever you lost is behind you now. You should be thankful."

Eurydice mumbled, "My head's spinning could you please just..." She couldn't finish her words.

Everything went dark.

When Eurydice woke again, the moon was gone. A man in a brown jacket stood over her.

"Good to see you awake. Please lie still. The helo should be here soon. It'll bring you to hospital in Wick. I'm an EMS attached to the RSPB for the Flows."

Eurydice didn't understand what he was saying, but out of the corner of her eye she could see the lodge. She asked, "Did the girl bring me here?"

"Sorry? What girl?"

"The girl and her dog. She called him Cerberus I think. They saved me at the stream back a ways."

She thought the man smiled. "No, no girl or dog. A local farmer found you lying here among his sheep."

"You aren't from around here. How did you end up in the Flow country?" Before she could answer he said "Never mind. Conserve your energy."

She heard a distant whooshing sound coming from the east. She could see the faint outline of a helicopter silhouetted against the early morning sun.

She wanted to look back toward the stream where the girl and dog had been, but she stopped herself. They were gone now. She wondered if they had ever been there.

The nice man said something to her, but she only saw his lips moving against the racket of the whirling blades. She felt lightheaded. Maybe not lightheaded but a feeling of lightness, as if she had shed unwanted baggage. The thumb drive was gone. *With the man in the sinkhole? And Cleo? Left in the dark stream?* She lifted her head to look at the rising sun. Eurydice had to squint, but she wanted light, even if it hurt.

The blades stopped whirling. Now she could hear the man speak. “We’re ready for you. Time to go.”

The helicopter rose into the morning air, turning its nose eastward. Eurydice looked out the window and saw hundreds of tiny ponds sparkling in the morning sun. In the distance she saw a herd of deer making their way across the bog scape. Running among them were two figures. They might have been a girl and a dog.

a.l. DAWSON honed his fiction writing skills at Grub Street Writers’ workshops. Dawson’s short stories, *Sacred Ground* and *The Keeper*, were published in 2020 in *Aphelion*. *The Crossing* was published in the anthology, *Bloodroot: Best New England Crime Stories 2021* and *Call Me Mathias* will be published in *Deadly Nightshade: Best New England Crime Stories 2022*. His non-fiction writing has been published in *Mother Jones* magazine. Dawson received a BA from Duke University, a Post Graduate Diploma in African Studies from the University of Edinburgh, and a doctorate in Education from the University of Massachusetts, Boston.



A black and white photograph of a hand hovering over a piece of meat on a wooden cutting board. The hand is positioned in the upper left, with fingers slightly curled. The meat is in the lower center, appearing to be a thick cut, possibly brisket or a large steak, with a thick layer of coarse salt crystals on top. The background is dark and out of focus.

THRILLER

# Like HEMOGLOBIN FOR HONEY

MICHAEL ANTHONY  
DIOGUARDI



**J**anuary

### **Three Meat Meatballs and Sauce**

#### **INGREDIENTS**

- 1 lb of ground human belly
- ½ lb of ground veal
- ½ lb Sweet Italian Sausage (no fennel)
- 1 Egg
- 6 oz. Tomato paste
- 8 oz. Tomato sauce
- 3 Whole peeled plum tomatoes (Can use crushed tomatoes in tomato puree - 28 oz.)
- 1 Sweet onion (small)
- 1 Garlic (one for each pot)
- Parley
- Oregano
- Olive Oil
- Italian seasoned bread crumbs
- Grated Romano cheese

#### **PREPARATION**

Start the sauce before anything else. Balls come next. Use a blender for the tomato products. Get them nice and fine. Place the tomato sauce and crushed tomatoes into a pot. Contrary to Mediterranean culinary customs, the average diner prefers a finer tomato sauce with fewer chunks. Add 12 oz. of water to the pot. Add your spices and boil to a simmer. Cap the pot slightly off-center to ensure you don't have a mess on your stovetop from overflowing tomato sauce. Fry minced onions for five minutes then add

garlic. Use a mini chopper for onion. Push down on garlic to crush it down—the easiest way to peel. Add ingredients and stir frequently to prevent sticking to the bottom of the pot. Cast-iron works well for this.

Time for the meat! Squeeze out the sausage from the lining. Make sure you don't have any fennel seeds. They taste like licorice and are generally unappealing in the dish. Take your human belly cut and grind in a meat grinder. If you have a particularly absent-minded butcher, they can grind it for you, but I wouldn't take a chance with it. Regarding the quality of the cut, as a surgeon, I am privy to a variety of different human specimens to choose from. In my experiences, the fatter the subject, the more flavorful the meat.

A general caveat though; a naturally heavy-set individual is much more desirable as opposed to a morbidly obese individual, fattened by their own insatiable appetite. *You are what you eat.* And humans are indeed, corn-fed and free range. So, look for more able-bodied but nonetheless rotund individuals. Combine the three meats with Italian seasoned bread crumbs and grated Romano cheese to make your meatballs. Brown them in olive oil, then add to the sauce mix. Eyeball the sauce mixture until you feel it is ready. Cut open a meatball and taste test to make sure.

I sent that recipe to Rachel Ray. The producer must have had a morbid sense of humor. He wrote me back, explaining how he found my recipe amusing. I guess that's a win, but a part of me feels bad for Rachel; she'll never taste a truly superb meatball.

#

Ever since I was a little boy, I was always fascinated with the prospect of becoming a chef. I envied the European masters, envisioning myself mildly overweight, mustachioed, and clad in that overzealous hat.

But alas, God granted me with unique manual dexterity, unparalleled intelligence, and a debilitating but relatively dormant obsession with the macabre. Can you believe it took me over a decade of peeling into people to realize that humans are the tastiest meat?

I'll share my amusing tale of how I developed this unique taste for *chair glacée*. It happened by accident, of course, I would never willingly ingest



any human particle or fluid, but nonetheless, there I was, delivering the first slice of a typical Tuesday afternoon naval incision.

Suzie handed me the scapula then relaxed her hands at her sides. Her eyes darted from the tools to my hand to the patient. I'd caught her ogling at me twice before, but I've always fancied saving face, so I refrained from commenting. Rumors spread like wildfire in most hospitals, and I didn't want my name chatted next to hers in the next soupy workplace sex scandal. Regardless, I've always found the cliché to be so dreary. Poor Suzie, I bludgeoned her daydream romance in an instant.

This patient, Robert McAfrey, (for some reason I always remembered the names), was a particularly plump fellow. With my finger pressed on the handle of the blade, I cut into his flesh and incised just enough to insert the cannula (the liposuction sucker). I must have been distracted—thinking about how much I despised Suzie—irrespective of my decision, Mr. McAfrey greeted my intrusion by ejecting a blood-covered loogie at considerable velocity onto my facemask.

Ordinarily, this would be a dreadful experience for anyone involved. But for some reason, the vile act had awakened an indescribable feeling within me. Blame it on my bad manners, but as soon as the scent tickled my nostrils, I subconsciously unfurled the string connecting my facemask to my ears and tongued the liquid that pooled on the tip of my Cupid's bow (upper lip for you facially unlearned types). If only I had a napkin.

I pursed my lips and pondered the taste. Unfortunately, the savory moment was cut short by Suzie's unsavory mug, with all her wrinkles emerging beneath her mask. She covered her mouth—as if that would help—and retreated to the opposite end of the operating room. I couldn't have been happier to see all her romantic interest vanish before my eyes.

I didn't sleep that night, not for embarrassment or anticipating the difficult explanations I'd inevitably have to give in the morning, but more so because I just couldn't stop thinking about my discovery. It dawned on me, however, as I tossed and turned in bed, that perhaps this newfound palate was too unconventional. Besides, the acquisition of such a commodity would involve sedation at the very least, and murder at its most extreme.

With the abundance of airheaded assistants bumbling around the operating table, it wouldn't be conspicuous to perpetuate the demise of one or two patients. After all, people died in hospitals every day.

There was only one way to test it out my new ingredient: Cooking contests.

#

Chili, a most American dish. One can find contests far and wide with a bit of Internet savvy. I toiled with my recipe for weeks beforehand, perfecting its various intricacies to eventually obtain an unparalleled taste. Retrieving Mr. McAfrey's lipid detritus proved simpler than I anticipated. The unquestioned authority of being a surgeon had its perks I suppose—no really—it was as easy as walking into the biohazard depository, smiling at the clerk, and waltzing right into the aisles. With a bit of finesse, I stuffed the bag through my collar, though I must admit, it did give off the illusion of mild obesity. And I walked out, no questions asked.

As I stirred my pot mere hours before the event, I couldn't help but think that the dish was lacking, that perhaps, a bit of ground flesh would do the trick. There was no time. The fat would do; as I mentioned earlier: *fat is flavor*.

As soon as I entered the convention center, I knew the competition would be fierce. The zesty aromas filled the air stirring my olfactory senses into overdrive. I passed table after table, each one outfitted with their own crockpot, steaming from the russet roux bubbling within their ceramic confines. The hunters would be worthy adversaries; it's hard to compete with the earthy tones of wild game. And how could I forget the Southern Mamas? They always knew what was best with their recipes dating back to frontier times. No one expected a lowly surgeon to bring along such a unique dish.

I could read the judges' faces like a book. No one had any idea what they were tasting. The gruel they shoveled into their troughs was coated in the best fat money could buy (average cost of liposuction was about \$3,500 at the time), so a bit pricier than unsalted Land O'Lakes. Fat Irishmen roamed the earth not knowing their greatest function. Something about the rich Guinness flavored belly fat mixed with whiskey did wonders to the chili.

First judge...a thumbs-up; I got his vote. The second? She's fancied another dish. Odd. I had her pegged as one of mine. And the third?

Second place felt like a gut punch. I could empathize with poor ol' Suzie when she saw me taste the Irishman's spilled-gut; I was robbed, beaten, embarrassed. I'd been so fixated on my own creation that I hardly noticed the worthiest contender of them all.

An old woman hobbled up the ramp onto the stage, one hand on her cane, the other holding the elbow of an obese girl hooked up to a nasal cannula (one of those tube-in-nostrils apparatuses). Her granddaughter, by the looks of her, in an unfortunate state.

The crowd clapped and whistled; I realized they were regular contributors to this competition, and that I'd have to up my game to best with them. The announcer identified my dish and scanned the crowd for the runner up. My shirt stuck to my neck with sweat. I clenched my fists, turned around and marched out the way I came. The commotion created a minor scene. Surely, it would be crass of me to attend again next year. A different city would have to do for now, a different competition, under a different name. And hopefully, Grandma and her little chubster would take the day off.

#

## **February**

### ***Morcilla Asturiana* – Traditional Spanish Blood Sausage.**

#### **INGREDIENTS**

- ¼ cup of human lard
- 2 cups of Vidalia onions (minced)
- 8 garlic cloves (minced)
- 3 tablespoons of paprika
- 1 teaspoon of salt
- 4 cups of cooked yellow-rice
- 1 ½ lbs of human buttocks or thigh
- 6 cups of strained human blood

1 human small intestine (casing)

1 tablespoon of olive oil

### **PREPARATION**

Oh, how I miss those Spanish nights, cooped up in an inn off the Camino de Santiago, pecking at the simpler arrangements an innkeeper could offer. Spanish morcilla would ordinarily repulse the average foreigner. I blame it on the name, I mean, who would voluntarily eat something with blood in it? It seemed barbaric to me the first time I tried it too. But a well-prepared blood sausage can really hit the spot.

Due to my lack of access to Spanish hogs, human—as is tradition with my dishes—became my go-to meat. In fact, obtaining any of the ingredients listed here will be challenging; you will have to be working in an environment with unlimited supply, ie. hospitals, morgues, coroners, etc. Again, seek out large individuals with radiance; who are robust and healthy; avoid the sickly or fast-food addicted.

Simmer your fat in a cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat. With a bit of Mr. McAfrey's leftovers, I was able to get along just fine. Mince your onions and garlic then add them to the pan, stirring until caramelized (about 8-10 minutes). Cook, remove, and let cool, then add to a bowl with the human buttocks or thigh. Time for the blood bath!

Blood type selection is not too important. Most blood banks are so under-staffed, you can practically walk in and grab whatever you see. Be careful though, avoid using blood with any of the nasty stuff. I won't go into too much detail, but I find an O-positive to be rich and creamy and most similar to the consistency of pig blood. It does, however, contain a bit of gamey flavor similar to that of bovine blood, which is surprising considering the average human diet.

The small intestines make ideal casings for your sausage. Out of all the ingredients on the list, this will be the most challenging to obtain. With enough cash though, even the most ethical morticians can become corrupted. Hit up your local funeral home, or better yet, take a coroner out to drink. You could always break in as well, but I would advise against petty

crime. Be sure to run the casings through water thoroughly beforehand, and scrutinize their inner wall, keeping an eye out for any tangles or holes. Tie an end knot on one end, (a figure eight will do, *take Eddy, strangle 'em, and poke 'em in the eye*), then place a funnel at the opposite end.

Spoon feed the casings and poke them down using a handle; you'll want everything packed in there tightly. Once the casings are filled, tie off the other end. Bring a pot of water to a simmer, (around 160°F, avoid overcooking, 175°F or above, or the blood will curdle). Add your sausages to water and cook for fifteen minutes. Remove from the pot and let it cool for at least eight hours.

#

I believe I mentioned before how being a doctor has its benefits. With access to a majority of the world's health records, researching that old lady was easier than I'd thought. Melinda Rodriguez, from El Paso, eighty-six years old. Granny's had her fair share of expected geriatric problems and has sought logical solutions, nothing terribly interesting. I did not, however, find anything about the girl.

Ms. Rodriguez's name popped up with a simple Google search. She was one of those sage cooks that had entered three dozen or so cooking contests to date, winning nearly half of them. There was only one problem, for the last five years, she'd been entering under two names, Melinda and Conchi.

Concepción "Conchi" Rodriguez-Bogo, an eleven-year-old, had managed to make bank with her "entries," always taking the stage linked arm and arm with her grandmother, Melinda Rodriguez. An unintentional, albeit, adequate response to my unfair advantage, I suppose. The results from my databases after searching Conchi's name were lackluster at best; it did not appear that her condition was being treated with any discernible financial vigor. Hoping for her passing would be too much of a gamble, not to mention that I'm an impatient person as well. I had a solution in mind.

People are afraid of moving. Among divorce and Disney, it completes the trifecta of the most stressful acts. The layman, so burdened with debt, would rather live in misery than compromise their livelihood. But for a

surgeon of my caliber, such a move would be but a few phone calls and a plane ticket at most. I packed my bags and headed to El Paso.

It was jarring at first, walking around the Mexican-Americans with my skin a blinding alabaster, wretched Eastern European genes. My neighbors were warm and welcoming, very American, very caring, an otherwise ideal place to raise a family. I had no interest in the matter. My motivations were different, with the move just being the start of some of my more *extreme* measures. I needed to beat Ms. Rodriguez through any means necessary.

#

My morcilla would have its chance to dazzle the competition at the Houston German Festival. I knew Grandma would enter, most likely under two names to increase her chances of winning again. In all fairness, she was an adept cook. I imagined her before a sepia-tinted backdrop, taming and raising feral hogs from piglets to impressive beasts, ripe for butchering, their muscles toned to perfection among the Sierra Madre's vast steppe. She'd procure a most exquisite meat, yet another advantage I'd never have.

But I also had a secret weapon. I scoured the records for little Conchi. She'd have to receive some degree of annual maintenance for her ailment, or better yet, maybe she'd have an accident. After a laughably easy interview at UMC El Paso, I was hired and began that same week. I checked each day for Concepción's name to appear in our pediatric unit until at last the day arrived.

Because she was not on my floor, I'd have to go on a midnight mission to access her. The night crews always asked fewer questions than the day crews, and they were easily manipulated, being composed mostly of the fresh-out-of-college types. She was sound asleep when I entered her room. But just to make certain she wouldn't come to, I applied a mild sedative that would knock her out cold for at least the next few hours. My years of watching the anesthesiologists paid off; I didn't want to kill the poor child; I just needed her blood.

After retrieving my secret ingredient, I prepared my blood sausage following my own recipe *to a "t."* I skipped out on sending this one to Rachel Ray, opting for Paula Deen instead. I figured she could use some positive publicity, maybe she'd write back too.

The Houston German Festival was simply a delight. Throngs of lederhosen-clad attendees hooted and hollered in unfamiliar words. German was spoken from corner to corner. Bavarian beer sloshed from their mugs and dampened the floor so much that my shoes would stick after each step. With the abundance of authenticity, I was beginning to think that I'd have no shot at all. Nonetheless, I remained hopeful my homemade morcilla would woo the judges with its impeccable flavor, gushing with the zesty aromas of fatty, youthful blood.

Five judges sat on the panel this time. They could have all been siblings for all I knew; their European features bore striking resemblance to my own. I chuckled at the prospect of their potential vampiric tendencies, the irony of Black forest-dwelling, blood eating barbarians feasting on cleverly-disguised sanguine fluid.

I watched the first judge drop a thin slice onto his tongue. His eyes rolled to the back of his head. He puckered his lips and blinked repeatedly. One done, four to go.

The next judge was less forthcoming in her response. She rattled her head back and forth eventually choosing the right choice—my choice—before squinting her eyes at the next judge to her left. I wiggled my toes and scrunched the fabric above my pants pockets. Judge number three, how will you vote?

After a moment of hesitation, he made up his mind; my sausage had taken its first loss. I could accept that, *to each their own*. The next two judges decided quickly, and not in my favor. I felt my pulse beneath my temples. I gritted my teeth so hard that my jaw began to tire.

Ms. Rodriguez had done it again, but in earnest; there was no granddaughter in sight. I'd been so caught up in the judges' reaction that I'd forgotten Conchi was not in attendance, and that Grandma's entry had been her only one.

Two large fellows helped her onto the stage to receive her award. Her face drooped underneath her unkempt hair. She hobbled slowly to the center of the stage, maintaining her gaze fixed on the floorboards. She wore a frown that she couldn't muster into a grin.

I didn't storm out this time, but I did manage to make a scene. I smiled and began to laugh through my clenched teeth, saliva seeping through the gaps between my incisors (bottom front teeth). I folded my hands across my chest and laughed so hard I began to hyperventilate. I drew the attention of the small crowd gathered before the stage, their faces flush with concern. Above them all, the frail Ms. Rodriguez quivered, trophy in hand.

#

## **March**

### **Honey-glazed thigh**

#### **INGREDIENTS**

1 bone-in slice human thigh (10-11 lbs.) (Curing process detailed below)

1 cup of hemoglobin-infused honey

½ cup brown sugar

1 teaspoon of ginger

1 teaspoon of ground mustard

½ teaspoon of ground cinnamon

#### **PREPARATION**

This recipe seems a bit too easy at first glance, after all, its preparation only consists of glazing and baking. The real *leg-work* involves obtaining an actually human leg fit for consumption. Again, I pity those who would need to go to extreme measures to acquire such a commodity. Availability is understandably scarce and depends wholly on illicit trading. If murder is not in your purview, I'd recommend finding a reliable distributor before attempting any homicide; they're generally gruesome affairs, not to mention mishandling during proper disposal is rife with potential evidence.

The curing process consisted of much trial and error. I started out using regular uncured pork cuts, attempting to perfect my technique before transitioning to the human cut. Unlike the rest of my recipes, the curing mixture was entirely random, a flavorful hodge-podge of common spices



thrown into a bucket with my thigh. Salt, pepper, nutmeg, bay, garlic, juniper—all the good stuff. After thoroughly rubbing the blend into every nook and cranny, place the meat in a sealable container and chill for a week.

After the week has passed, remove the cut and rinse in the sink. Place the meat in muslin (just ask your local butcher, they'll be happy to provide you with a whole bundle), then hang for at least a week, although I'd recommend longer.

Once you've cured your thigh to your picking, slice thinly, then place atop a baking sheet. Preheat the oven to 325°F.

Mix the ingredients for your honey-glaze in a bowl. A note on hemoglobin: Chemical separation of blood can be a cumbersome procedure. In short, one must already be well-versed in at least college-level chemistry in order to complete the process. One must first transform red blood cells into carbonyl hemoglobin, by adding carbon monoxide. After that, the solution must be washed through centrifugation to eliminate the other plasma proteins. This process will not yield pure hemoglobin; the likelihood of achieving such a feat would merit serious approval from the scientific community, so, naturally, the final solution will contain additional proteins even after hemolysis.

Returning to the honey-mixture, the concoction will render itself a deep amber-color, not far-off from any store-bought commercial honey. The added hemoglobin gives the solution a spicy taste, nearly indescribable, with a slight metallic after-taste.

Brush the honey onto the thigh, wrap in foil, then bake for an hour. Remove the foil and bake for 45 more minutes.

#

As if the stars aligned, Houston was yet again slated to host another festival, this time for Easter. And the fiercest competition would be for the tastiest spiral ham. I knew what I needed to do; it was just a matter of time.

Conchi's been diagnosed with myelofibrosis, a very rare blood disease that I, admittedly, knew very little about. What I did know, however, was that whatever she had—coupled with both type 1 and 2 diabetes—had thrust her into making a decision about her lower-half, namely, whether or

not to amputate.

I was honored to be selected for the procedure, although I must say that my manual dexterity had deteriorated slightly. My hands have been less-than steady for the last month or so, most likely due to my increased consumption of human flesh, a side effect I had greatly underestimated. Regardless, sitting down with *abuela* was a treat I never thought I'd have. I could tell she recognized me, but she wasn't certain.

It would only be her right leg, just above the knee, but I convinced the team to go just a tab bit higher, just for safe measure.

Most people don't know what happens to limbs once they're chopped off. They're usually sent to a biohazard crematorium, and in rare cases—and usually for smaller stuff—the patients may be permitted to bring home their chunks, like a souvenir.

I broke my own rule to obtain it following the procedure. I will admit, it did feel exhilarating to break into the compound and take back the leg, after all, I had some degree of ownership over it now. It was miraculous I did not get caught.

Whether Ms. Rodriguez showed up or not at the ham fest, I knew this time, my dish would win hands down.

#

Busloads of families offloaded their spiral cuts and hauled them into the convention center. I'd never witnessed so many entries for the competition. My stomach tied itself into a knot. What if my creation wasn't enough?

I spotted Grandma among the crowd standing in front of the stage. I couldn't help but feel a sensation of *déjà vu*; this would be the third time I'd found myself awaiting the appraisal of one of my signature dishes. I bet the old bag used the same ham she used in her sausage. This was going to be close.

Three judges this time. One repeating from last time. The first judge lowered his head so it was level with the table. He raised one eyebrow and lifted his chin, scrutinizing the cut with a professional eye. He cocked his head back and cut a sliver from the oddly shaped "spiral ham." He bit down

and chewed slowly, blowing out his cheeks before swallowing. I feared the worst.

He muttered on about its unique shape and unfamiliar taste, a tenderness he'd never felt in a pork product. After casting his vote, he raised his hand and excused himself from the judges' table. He walked off stage, much to the concern of his colleagues. The two other judges leaned over my dish. Each tried a forkful. They nodded their heads slowly, their faces stuck in silent uncertainty.

The vote was unanimous. Finally, my day had arrived. The festival-goers devoured the remains of my tender cut, even Ms. Rodriguez—sour as she was from her defeat—tried a morsel. Our eyes met as she swallowed. I walked to where she stood and smiled. She recognized me from the surgery and thanked me dearly. I retrieved the last remaining bite of the thigh on the plate and shared it with Grandma. She perked up and patted me on the shoulder.

The moment was cut short by the announcer declaring my victory to the crowd. I raised my hand and waved amid scattered applause. The announcer transitioned to talking about Conchi and her grandmother, mentioning the girl's ailments, and wishing her a speedy recovery, and that her absence weighed on the festival. Several people around us golf-clapped and embraced the old woman from behind.

I couldn't help but start daydreaming of what I could cook up next, now that I had accomplished my goal. Maybe I'll step it up and go for a "beef" wellington, or perhaps some barbecue ribs. The possibilities were endless. I always wanted to be a chef, maybe I could quit my job as a surgeon and use whatever money I'd have left to go to culinary school.

One thing I knew for sure is that I'd be sending this recipe to Rachel Ray. And if she fancied my handiwork, I knew exactly where I could get another leg.

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DRAMA / CRIME

# CLEAN

EJ SUN



John Doe (for that is his name in this story and in all stories where names of the wicked and the damned are anonymised for fear of reprisal —pecuniary or otherwise) was curled up on the floor in foetal position. He wanted to close his eyes but was afraid that if he kept them closed for too long, the blood flow from his head would perhaps eventually slow down, thicken, find its way into his eye sockets, and form a seal that would prevent him from seeing what was going on in the final moments of his life. For the past few years, John lived in fear of losing his sight without which he could not enjoy life's pleasures. Given a choice he would rather lose his other senses before sight, except perhaps touch.

He had always taken pride in having near perfect vision and it was only in the last few months that he had needed reading glasses, which he only used to net, which was something he rarely did these days. Everyone who knew him agreed that John was a fine specimen for an octogenarian. His family doctor had recently commented on how rare it was for someone born before the war, to be so free of the usual ailments that plagued the elderly.

John opened his eyes slightly to see that his mobile phone was only a few feet away on the armchair. He remembered placing it there only moments before as he had planned on calling his daughter Daisy to wish her a Happy Mother's Day when someone knocked on the door. He usually ignored people when Betty, his wife for almost sixty-years, was out shopping out with her girlfriends. There were just so people trying to save everyone's soul these days, the Jehovahs, the Scientologists, the Mormons, and all the new churches whose names he couldn't remember. John only answered the door on this occasion because he had assumed that it was Betty returning home from the shopping center a little earlier than usual and had forgotten her keys. She was a woman of habit and rarely skipped a beat in her routine

but lately had been rather absent-minded. The other day, for example, she had left her wallet at home when she went out with her girlfriends for high tea at the new cafe down the road.

He knew he shouldn't have opened the security door the man claimed that he was a courier from FedEx—no one used FedEx in this part of the world. The wore a Bintang beer singlet top, which revealed his translucent skin, and his beige flat cap was pulled over his eyes. He had a very thick neck, but there was no way the man would have overpowered him had John been a few years younger. Even now John, though not tall, was a strong man, and had developed his own thick muscular neck through years of hard work on the family farm. The man at the door probably got his from months of working out at the gym, lifting weights, drinking protein shakes and injecting steroids. That's what young men did these days. They knew nothing of the rewards of hard work and sacrifice. *Give them a decade on my father's farm, John sometimes thought, lift some pig feed, carry an animal to their slaughter...they wouldn't last half a day.* John never understood why people wanted to give the impression that they worked the fields when in fact, they had spent their days indoors in front of a computer screen. There was a time for recreation and time for hard work, and back when John was more hard work than play. Nothing irritated John more than overfed and underworked young people who took everything for granted. All his children were like this, Daisy a little less so, but his sons Dennis and Pete certainly were. Both had thin necks and smooth hands. At least Dennis, the oldest, still took his family to church at Easter and Christmas, and he got married in a church. Pete disregarded his parents, their traditions and the church. John knew some of the refugee families who attended his church and both he and Betty agreed that the young Sudanese were very polite and pious their elders. He liked that they always called him "teacher" even though it had been years since he taught. They said, "Once a teacher, always a teacher". How he wished Pete were more like the Sudanese. Respectful.

There was no doubt in John's mind that the assailant was a professional. It had happened so quickly. The man at the door knew his name. He had said, "Mr Doe?" before he made his move. The only suspect



he could come up with was Pete's wife, his daughter-in-law. The accountant.

How John had wished his younger son Pete had joined the priesthood. For a long time, John thought that Pete was headed that way. When he was in high school, he had expressed an interest in joining Father John's mission to refugee camps in Africa. Pete had gone as far as getting a passport, but then decided not to go when getting a visa proved too challenging. Pete always gave up too easily and never made the most of his opportunities. John remembered that when Pete was nineteen, he was offered some work as a model for a telecommunications company, but he declined. Even though Pete was a very handsome man, *like a young John Doe*, but never seemed to like girls the way his Dennis did. When Dennis was living at home, he was always sneaking girls into his bedroom. "Boys will be boys," John would say to Betty when they saw the girls, mainly long legged blondes, climb out of Dennis' room and scuttle down the driveway. Parents always knew what their children were up to. How could they not? Their children were part of them. These days, Dennis was married to a good-natured woman but they had not yet been blessed with children. John was hoping that Dennis would one day have a son who would carry on the Doe name. Pete had two sons and their mother had insisted that they carry the maternal name instead, since she was the only child in her family and Pete had agreed to it.

Pete had probably spent too much time with his sister Daisy when he was a child. John would often take both his sons on hunting trips up north, but Pete would refuse to shoot the animals even when he was told that they were pests that needed to be culled. He did not have the bloodthirstiness that a man needed to survive in the world and was now married to that Indonesian or was she Malaysian, somewhere from that part of the world. She had a Muslim father, which is why she sometimes wore that scarf around her head. There were so many of them in the world, surely another one of them could have preserved their family's name.

"I miss seeing my beautiful daughter-in-law," Betty bemoaned, but she never once blamed John or this predicament. "I know young people are busy but I miss our little chats and I miss seeing my grandsons."

Betty had convinced herself that the reason Pete rarely came home these days was because he was too busy playing maître-de in his father-in-law's restaurant. John had eaten at that restaurant once, before Pete's wife stopped visiting with the kids, and had found the food too oily.

It had to be Pete's wife. It was her fault that they never saw the children and it was her fault that he was laying on the dusty linoleum floor. John was grateful that when he had the living room re-floored, he had insisted on placing a layer of foam underneath the flooring. Betty had said she would mop the floors when she got home. She was always cleaning up after other people. When the kids were still living at home, she used to mop the floors of all the rooms every day, although recently she had dropped back to twice a week, since they rarely received guests these days.

It must have been the ungrateful daughter-in-law, who had seemed so agreeable to begin with and even attended all the Doe family dinners. Of course, it was plausible that the man who had attacked John, was one of the men who had assaulted poor Mrs Kratz from down the road earlier on in the year. Betty had said Mrs Kratz had woken up in the middle of the night to find burglars rummaging through her underwear drawer. This was a little different though. The man had known his name and even though he had avoided eye contact, he was not afraid to show his face. The men who attacked Mrs Kratz only did so because they were afraid of being caught. But surely Pete would not have allowed his wife to order this. No matter what had happened, John was Pete's father and the grandfather of his boys. Pete would have to forgive his father one day. After all, Daisy had forgiven him.

Sweet Daisy. It would be her thirty-fourth birthday in a few days' time. He thought he had lost her when she left home on her sixteenth birthday, but a few years ago he and Betty had received an invitation in the mail to her daughter Toni's fifth birthday party. He had known that Daisy had given birth to a little girl, but never thought that he would have the opportunity to see her, let alone develop a relationship with her. If Daisy could forgive him, then no one else had cause to hold a grudge against him.

John recalled meeting little Toni for the first time and how careful he had been not to stand too close to her. He had also been very careful not to

hug Daisy too tightly. If people had not been looking, he would have avoided it all together, but there was the expectation that fathers embrace their daughters when they meet. Daisy had grown into a rotund woman with wide hips, much like Betty and his own mother who was also called Daisy. Motherhood had made Daisy look less afraid of the world. He had decided not to make physical contact with either Daisy or Toni at the birthday party, still Betty insisted that Toni sit on his lap and Daisy put her arms around her father for their long-awaited family portrait. Pete had been there too, holding his sister's hand.

"I prayed that this day would come," Betty had said, her bright blue eyes brimming with tears. "God always answers my prayers." Then she lost Pete.

How could Pete have married such a woman? The women in the family had always been gentle, sweet natured and softly spoken ladies. Betty never had a bad word to say about anyone, not even the woman who had denied her access to her grandchildren. She went about cooking and caring for everyone regardless. How could Pete have chosen a woman who was so unlike his own mother? John's mother had also been a kind woman who never spoke harshly to anyone. How he wished to be soothed in her arms now.

"If I treat them with kindness, there is no way they can cut us out of their lives," Betty would often say of Pete and that woman.

Every Saturday morning, Betty would go to the city and buy a gift for Pete and his family with money from John's hard earned but now dwindling superannuation fund. Every Monday she would head off to the post office to post the parcel, even though Pete lived five minutes away. She'd do this today after the shopping.

"I got his wife a little doily," she said before leaving, "I hope she'll like it. I don't know if she would appreciate it. People in her culture seem to ask for money at every birthday, wedding and even at *funerals*." Today, like every other Monday, she had asked John to sign the little card accompanying the parcel. John always refused.

"Little Jarvis likes frogs," she said as she wrote in a card of a little

green frog sitting on a lily pad. "At least he did the last time I saw him. I wonder if he still does?"

Betty had bought unique gift-wrap for each member of Pete's family.

"I know they like red. Funny. Pete never liked red when he was a child. Blue was his favorite color."

Betty's messages were always the same.

*We hope to be part of your life again...Our home is always your home...We miss you so much...Tell your mummy and daddy that we miss seeing you...Although we never see you, we still love you lots and lots....Pretend this little frog is Pop, jumping from leaf to leaf to visit you...One day we hope to be part of your lives again.*

Whilst Betty rummaged and shuffled around the kitchen, John would retreat into his study. He found it very difficult watching his wife go to such lengths to connect with that woman who would not give them the time of day.

"I love you," Betty would reassure him when she knew that he felt guilty for putting her in this situation, "God loves you. God has forgiven you." John longed for Betty to kiss him gently on the nose, the way his mother used to. "You are also a victim here," Betty would remind him.

Where was Pete's wife compassion? Who was she to deny an old man from seeing his own grandchildren? Without him, she would not have her handsome husband and her beautiful children. John knew how much the other grandparents doted upon his grandchildren, and they owed it all to him.

John managed to lift his right hand to his lips. Heavy bloodstained tears fell to the floor. *Betty will have to mop up this mess after I'm gone.* It was not her fault and it wasn't his fault. He punched his fist into the tiles and felt nothing.

Pete's wife had seen what was on his computer and no doubt Pete had filled her in on the past. In a way, it was John's own fault for entrusting her with his computer, but everyone in his family used to call on her when they had problems with their computers because she was Asian. He thought he had covered his tracks by telling her that Dennis sometimes used the

computer on weekends to surf for websites that were blocked on his home computer. Everyone knew what Dennis was like. Yet Pete's wife had guessed from the beginning it was him. In their only confrontation and conversation since the discovery, she said that she had found the images when she was browsing through his temporary download files.

"I was just curious," he had explained to her when she confronted him.

"There's no need for you to be curious," she had said, "you've been there."

"I was just looking," he said, but she wouldn't listen.

He had expected her to call the police, but she didn't. Pete must have told her not too. He remembered what it was to be compassionate.

Not that the police could have done very much. He had asked an officer, in his capacity as a Neighborhood Watch volunteer, whether they arrested many people for viewing child pornography on the internet.

"We can't arrest everyone who watches porn," the police had said. "We don't have resources to get every pervert in the community. We don't know every website that's out there. We don't know if they're using real children or just adults pretending to be children."

Betty had pointed out to Pete's wife that her children were boys and that John would never do anything to boys. What had happened in the past had already been dealt with, yet the wife kept saying, "You need to get help. You both need serious help. I can't let you near my children until you do."

John's mind was floating above the pain now. It was something he had taught himself to do when he was a young child. The trick was to imagine yourself on the ceiling looking down at yourself, as if you were someone else. It was one of the only things that his own father had taught him, and he had taught this to his own children. You need to be above it all. He knew that he had been a much better father than his own father had been. No matter his faults, his sins and what had happened between him and Daisy, he had been the perfect father to his sons. He had loved them, never said a harsh word to them and given them the best chance at life. He had sent them to the best schools in the area and never made them lift a

finger at home. If Pete was too stubborn to see this, then he would have to live with the guilt of never having made peace with his father. People today were too earnest, they didn't understand that there were no absolutes in life and that evil surfaced in the best of human kind, sooner or later. That did not mean that people were beyond redemption.

The clock struck twelve. Betty was not due back for another half hour. He was not sure what the assailant had hit him with, or how deep the wound was. It was best not to think about it and imagine instead that his head was immersed in a pool of warm water: a second baptism. God was looking down upon him.

Betty would be fine if he died. She had the cat, her friends, the church and some of her children. Little Jarvis and his brother Joshua would be allowed to visit her. He could see the life they would have without him; adults would speak freely with each other, as the children gathered around the Christmas tree. Betty would be at the shops many weeks before, buying thoughtful gifts for everyone. In this house, new memories would replace old ones. John would leave his children all his savings, even Pete. John would forgive his own father when he met him, wherever that was. He was sure they would end up in the same place, as he had done no worse than his own father. John was a strong man; however, he would not hold on. It would be better for everyone that way. He thought about his mother, her green blue eyes. Maybe he wouldn't see her again, but maybe he would, and perhaps up there, he could begin again. He would have the courage to stand up to his own father. He would also be kinder to Daisy. As he thought about Daisy, he remembered watching the fuzzy video clip of an elderly man moving in and out of a young girl who was dressed in a white shirt and blue tartan skirt. He tried to stop recalling this image, but he simply couldn't. As he replayed the image repeatedly in his mind, he thought about the times he and Daisy had spent together when she a young girl and wondered if he would be able to spend time with little Toni in the same way. He wanted to push these images and thoughts out of his mind, but he could not because even now, it made him feel alive.

The clock struck one. A car pulled up into the driveway, the door

opened and then the familiar shuffle down the asphalt driveway.

Betty.

Sweet Betty.

He breathed heavily and closed his eyes.

“Oh, my goodness. Who would do such a thing?” Betty gasped.

She dropped her shopping bags and ran to him.

“Why can’t they just let us old folks live our lives out in peace? Some people just refuse to leave the past in the past, where it should be. Interfering busy bodies,” she muttered as she felt for a pulse around his neck. “Don’t worry about a thing. Everything will be okay. I’m home now.”

He half opened his eyes and saw her reach for the mobile phone.

“Hurry. There’s been a violent break and entry at my house. Someone’s attacked my husband. He’s losing a lot of blood.”

She told the police their address, rang off and then calmly ran over to the unused fireplace, grabbed the poker and shattered the living room window.

“You’ll be okay,” she repeated, “I will take care of everything. Don’t worry about the mess you’ve made.”

John knew that everything would wash out in the end.







SCIENCE FICTION / CRIME

# THE TRIAL TRANSCRIPT

**CHRISTOPHER T. DABROWSKI**  
Translated by JULIA MRACZNY



**Y**our Honour, it was rape!  
- What rape? You can't rape an android! - defendant  
laughed.  
- It was my synthetic clone.  
- Exactly! Synthetic one! Just because it looks like her doesn't mean it  
is her.  
- It had my personality!  
- It's just a program!  
- But I am connected to it! And at that moment, I jumped between  
bodies to see how it was doing in my work!  
- You should've jumped out!  
- I froze out of fear, and now I'm traumatised!  
- Your honour, if she left that body, she wouldn't have experienced  
that, and I would have hacked her mind to delete this incident.

CHRISTOPHER T. DABROWSKI is a widely published author from Kraków, Poland who has published books and has been part of anthologies in USA, England, Australia, Poland, Russia, Germany & India as well as magazines in Slovakia, Czech Republic, Russia, Brasil, Spain, Argentina, Italy, Hungary, Mexico, Albania & Nigeria.



A black and white photograph of a woman from the chest down to the thighs. She is wearing a dark, pinstriped blazer with a V-neckline. Her hair is long and dark, and she is wearing a large hoop earring. Her hands are clasped in her lap. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

DRAMA / CRIME

# THE ONLY AMATEUR

ALBERT TUCHER



I never looked at the jury.  
My lawyer goaded me about it. "You've got to relate to them. Make them think you're human."  
"Think. I like that."

"You know what I mean."

But I couldn't make myself do it. I worried that I would smile at the wrong moment, and the jurors would recoil and send me to Trenton for life.

I remember part of my lawyer's closing argument.

"And what was it that the Medical Examiner said about the bruises on the deceased's throat? 'Not inconsistent with the size and shape of the defendant's hands.' Do we deprive a man of life and liberty over a phrase like 'not inconsistent?' No, we call that reasonable doubt."

His arguments sounded weak even to me, and I wondered what kept the jury out for a week. When they returned, the foreman said the last thing I expected to hear.

"Not guilty."

I did have a perfect view of the judge and his obvious disgust.

"The defendant is discharged."

I didn't move.

"That means you can go, Mr. Labuda."

I turned and came face to face with my father-in-law.

"This isn't over," he said.

Tears started from his eyes. A sheriff's deputy led him away.

I went home for the first time in over a year. In jail I had dreamed about doing what I felt like doing, but now my imagination failed me. I assumed the default position of the American male on my sofa, facing the television set. On the screen an unfamiliar woman explained why she had argued for acquittal.

"I don't think they proved it. What was the motive?"

That was generous of her, or very dense. I would now inherit this house, worth over a million dollars, and even more in life insurance. My wife had been the breadwinner.

“And so what if she was cheating with her boss? I cheated, and I lived to tell about it.”

She fascinated me, and not because she told the world her secrets, nor even because her understanding of human nature seemed to come from an alternate universe. She looked so much like my late wife that my thumb hovered over the Off button on the remote.

“I believed him about the intruder. There was that twenty-minute period when anyone could have entered the house. Those smudges looked like footprints to me.”

No, I didn’t think my wife had come back to life. But this woman and Alice could have been sisters. I wondered why my lawyer had never mentioned the resemblance. He probably thought I had noticed it, and he didn’t want to be the first to bring it up.

The camera panned back to the reporter, who said, “That was juror Amy Heckman, explaining why she refused to convict novelist Robert Anton Labuda of murdering his wife.”

Then another reporter appeared. He introduced the foreman of the jury, a man who resembled a sixty-ish professor of Romance languages. The camera closed in on him.

“One juror was very persuasive. That’s all I can say.”

His expression said it all. He looked like a man just released from a hostage situation. As he reconnected with real life, he would consider and reconsider his thoughts and actions in the pressure cooker, and he would not like his conclusions.

Someone from my lawyer’s office had stocked the house with enough groceries for a week. I spent the time hiding from the world. I had such a good time that I added two days to my impromptu vacation, but that was poor planning. I ate nothing for the last full day, and the next morning I woke up too hungry to go grocery shopping. First I would have to sit down in a restaurant.



Alice and I ate out a lot. The only local place that wouldn't know me was a no-name diner on Route 206. I had passed it hundreds of times but had never tried it. It had never looked like my kind of place, but I might have to make some changes.

My car keys had spent a year on the kitchen counter. The car itself awaited me in the garage. I worried about the battery, but the engine turned over and caught.

The rush hour had ended, and the trip to the diner took minutes. I climbed onto a stool at the counter and plucked a menu from the clip. The waitress raised a coffee pot. I nodded. We were getting along well.

It didn't last.

"No. No way. Out."

The voice was male, and it came from an obese, balding man behind the cash register. I didn't need to look to know he meant me. By the time I did look, I had weighed all the factors and decided that I had no choice but to go.

But just then someone slid onto the stool to my right.

"Oh, lighten up," said a woman's voice.

It sounded familiar.

"Don't tell me to lighten up. This is my business, and I say he goes."

"He's not guilty. The jury said so."

"I wouldn't let O.J. Simpson in here, and I'm not feeding this one, either."

"Then you can do without my business."

"Who the hell are you?"

"Okay, fine." The woman slid off her stool. "Let's go."

She took my elbow. I let her guide me outside into the parking lot.

"Where's your car?" she said.

"Where's yours?"

"I'll get it later."

"What have you got in mind?"

"I'm going to take you to my house and feed you, for starters. You look starved."

"You want to get in a car with me?"

I almost added, "Do you know what they say I did?" But of course, she did. She had heard all the evidence and still voted to acquit me.

She stood waiting. I opened my passenger door and helped her into the car. My wife had always expected the gesture, no matter how much acrimony flowed between us. Amy Heckman seemed to want it too.

"Which way?"

"Go south."

We rode in silence for several minutes.

"Okay," I said. "You've never been to that place before."

She let my words dangle.

"So the only conclusion I can come to is, you expected to meet me there."

"You're right."

"What made you think that? I've never been in there until today."

"I figured you would find cooking too much of a drag, on top of everything else. And where else were you going to go?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you want to meet me?"

"Somebody owes you something. You weren't going to get it unless I took steps."

I thought about that one.

She directed me down 206 into an older development in Lakeview. It had stayed nearly intact. Only two of the lots had second-generation McMansions on them.

"This neighborhood belongs in the Smithsonian," I said.

She laughed, and I wasn't sure I liked it. I hadn't expected Amy to follow my train of thought. My wife Alice had always been able to leap across the ellipses in my conversation, but no one else I had ever met could match her.

Amy Heckman's house was a two-bedroom ranch. I parked in the driveway and looked at her. She understood the question.

“There’s too much junk in the garage. Anyway, who cares what the neighbors think?”

I walked around and helped her out of the car. She led me to the front door.

I couldn’t detect a masculine presence in the house.

“Is there a Mr. Heckman?”

“There’s a Mr. Primdahl. I went back to Heckman after the divorce. Come.”

We went to the kitchen.

“Omelets okay? I don’t have much besides eggs.”

Omelets were okay. With peppers, onions and Swiss cheese they were more than okay. And it was okay when she stood, took my hand, and led me into her bedroom.

It wasn’t like making love to my wife. Amy was Amy, and unlike my wife, she craved me. Alice had sometimes given me sloppy seconds when she wanted even more than her boss could give her, but I knew the difference.

And yes, I had been pathetic enough to accept anything from her.

Amy lay with her leg over mine and her head on my chest. I stroked her hair.

“What was Alice like?”

“Kind of like you, only different.”

“That’s not much help.”

“It’s the best I can do.”

“Come on, you’re a writer.”

“Not anymore.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I haven’t given writing a thought in over a year.”

“That’s understandable.”

“No, I think it will always seem silly to me now.”

“You might surprise yourself. I mean, look at 9/11. A month afterwards, would you have imagined you’d ever think about anything else? Now it’s history. People go on living.”

"I wrote on 9/11, and the day after. This is different."

"Maybe you need someone around."

"You volunteering?"

"I might."

The words turned into a kiss and another round of not-Alice. This time Amy was both more and less like Alice—more because Amy had become more familiar to me, and less because Alice had started to recede into memory. Could Amy make that happen? A year in jail hadn't done it.

"I understand," said Amy a while later.

I had only thought about getting up to go. Was she reading my mind?

"We're already going fast enough. Go on home. I know where you live."

I wish I had thought more about those words. And I wish I had looked behind me on the way home. I would have noticed the elderly Taurus tailing me home.

I climbed out of my Lexus and bent over to lift the garage door. The automatic opener had stopped working some time during my year in jail. A pair of feet in plain black oxfords appeared in my peripheral vision.

"Detective Berenger."

"You even know my feet."

"How many people have arrested me?"

"Probably not enough. Got a minute?"

"For you, Detective, anything."

He didn't react.

"That was sarcasm, Detective."

"I remember. You're good at it."

"It's a good thing for a writer to know."

"For a suspect, not so good."

"I know. You made a special project out of me."

"I would have done that anyway. I like putting guys like you away."

"All that work gone to waste."

"I did my job."

"Then what is this about?"

“My next case.”

“Which is?”

“That’s up to you.”

“Meaning?”

“I followed you home just now. You didn’t make me.”

He was right, but I refused to admit that I hadn’t noticed him.

“Think about that. Whatever you have in mind for Ms. Heckman, I just might be there to see it.”

“What would I have in mind?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A brunette with a nice, compact figure. Just your type.”

He leaned in close. I fought my urge to back away from him.

“And we know what happens to trim brunettes who get close to you.”

“Somebody knows. My lawyer is not going to be happy with this conversation.”

He gave me his cop stare.

“That’s your cue to go.”

He went. As I watched him, I remembered that I hadn’t accomplished my mission. There was still nothing to eat in the house. I got back in the car and drove out to the superstore on 206. I had to pass the no-name diner again. Amy’s car was gone. I wondered how she had retrieved it. She had looked so comfortable staying behind in bed that I hadn’t thought to offer her a ride back.

The next morning she called me.

“This time you can treat. You know Enrico’s?”

I liked the idea. Enrico’s had opened in Mendham just before my arrest. It was expensive and private—the kind of place where disgraced politicians and CEO’s could go without fear of harassment. Maybe I could do the same.

“Pick me up at seven.”

I put on a blazer and gray slacks. Wearing one of my suits would have reminded me of court. Amy was ready right on time. Alice had always been late.

In Enrico's we attracted a few glances, but no one looked twice. I don't remember the food, which would horrify the management if they knew. We lingered over coffee.

"Why do you live here?" said Amy.

"As opposed to where?"

"Well, New York. Where else does a writer live?"

"I grew up here."

"Sounds like a reason to get out."

"I did. Williams College, then Oxford."

"And?"

"And I found out that I could only write here. Suburbia gives me my material. Gave, anyway."

"Your wife commuted to Manhattan."

"And she wasn't happy about it."

Amy had heard hours of testimony on our fights about living in Witherspoon.

I paid the waiter and pulled Amy's chair back for her. We left the restaurant.

Only a couple of lights over the entrance illuminated the parking lot. The rich can afford the security that allows them to enjoy darkness.

I started the car. The air conditioning blew blessed cold air. The interior lights went out. I could barely see Amy.

"So," she said. "Why don't you ever tell me you didn't kill her?"

"You're the one who said I didn't."

"That's my point. Why don't you?"

I thought about it.

"I think it has to do with what I learned about the system. It's a game. Only amateurs cared whether I killed her. I didn't want to be the only amateur in the room. Not when I was the one who stood to lose everything."

"You know what I keep thinking about? You made love right before she was killed. She had minutes to live. What was that like?"

"It was like making love to my wife."

Sex had always worked between my wife and me, but “making love” didn’t describe it. The more relentless the hostilities, the more sweat had drenched our sheets. Then she would go to her boss without showering. She told me he liked that.

“Come on. You must have sensed something.”

“How does that follow?”

“I think you both knew she was about to die. That must have made it the ultimate.”

“The ultimate what?”

“Experience. The only thing you can do just once in a lifetime.”

“How could we know? You’re sounding as if you think I did it.”

“Did you?”

“Amy, are you wearing a wire?”

“What difference would it make? You’re not guilty.”

“Remember O.J.? There’s always a civil case. And maybe Federal charges, for all I know.”

“Why would I help them?”

“Suppose you and Detective Berenger had a bet. You say I didn’t do it; he says I did. If I confess to you, he wins, and you have to testify.”

I heard her clothes rustling.

“What are you doing?”

She took my hands and ran them over her body. Her blouse was open and her bra pushed up to her neck. She had pulled her full skirt up and her pantyhose down.

“Do you feel anything? Anything but me?”

She leaned over and kissed me. Her hands went to my belt and undid it. She unbuttoned and unzipped my trousers more deftly than I could have done it myself. I arched my back to help her pull everything down to my knees.

Amy leaned over farther and took me in her mouth. I was ready. I think the car setting made me feel young. Anyone would have had me writhing in minutes, but Amy wasn’t just anyone. She made me spurt in seconds. She kept teasing me with her lips and tongue. I rebounded like a

high school boy. In a few minutes I was on the verge again.

Amy paused.

"Tell me you did it. Tell me you killed her."

Her voice was the one she would use to sing her last aria.

I know what happens at the end of the opera, and I didn't feel like it. I pushed her upright against the passenger door and arched again to pull my pants up. I didn't bother with the zipper. I just needed my wallet.

I reached up and turned the courtesy light on to verify that the bill between my fingers was a twenty. I dropped it in her naked lap.

"Get a cab."

She looked at me with nothing in her eyes—no hurt, no anger, no embarrassment.

"Do you need help getting out?"

"That story of yours?" she said. "About person or persons unknown picking those twenty minutes to break in and kill her? Just how stupid do you think people are?"

She put herself together and got out. I put the car in gear and drove away. As I left her in the dark, I remembered that she had called me at my unlisted home number. That's not such an impressive trick—unlisted numbers are for sale all over the internet. But it showed planning and a tenacity that I didn't like. It was also obvious that she had followed me to the diner the day before. Her story about guessing that I would go there was impossible.

When I got home, the time was still short of ten o'clock. I needed answers. I tried to remember what Amy had told me.

Primdahl was her married name. It didn't sound common. Amy had had never mentioned living anywhere else but New Jersey. I turned my computer on and opened Google. A search of local Primdahls gave me seven hits. The nearest was a Stephen Primdahl, who lived in Morristown. He had a listed phone number.

Somehow I knew he was the right one.

I decided to risk calling after ten. The man who answered admitted to being Stephen Primdahl.



"I'm calling about your ex-wife, Amy."

"Not interested. I'm not responsible for her anymore."

I could tell I had almost lost him.

"You can help me stop her from doing a number on another guy."

"Who's that?"

"Me."

"That's your problem. You fell for her line, whatever it is at the moment."

"I'm guessing you did too. Cut me a break here. You know how it can happen."

He breathed.

"Talk."

How much should I tell him? Maybe his impatience would help me. I could give him the short version, and if my indictment ever came up, I could say I hadn't wanted to bore him with my whole life story.

"We had a short fling, but I broke it off. I think she's starting to stalk me. Does that sound plausible?"

"Hell, yeah."

"How bad does it get?"

"Shit, don't ask me. Ask the guy she cheated on me with. I never bothered to go looking for him. He got the full Amy treatment. Beats anything I could do to him."

"Who was he?"

"A guy at work."

"Whose job—hers or yours?"

"Hers."

"What does she do?"

"You don't know?"

"No." I felt stupid admitting it.

"A little advice. Don't screw anybody you don't even know that much about. I mean, isn't that the first thing you generally talk about?"

"Not in this case."

"She teaches high school English. In Driscoll."

That was bad. Driscoll was a hardscrabble older town to the north. If Amy could fight Driscoll teenagers to a draw, she could handle me.

"When did she stop seeing him? I assume she did."

"Probably June. She called a few times, trying to mend fences with me. Then she disappeared again, which meant she had a new obsession."

I started to get the idea.

"What's his name?"

"Hird. Joe Hird."

We hung up, and I went back to Google. It was what I had expected. Joe Hird had several domestic violence incidents in his past.

Jury selection had started in June. Amy had seen me and decided that I met her needs better than Hird.

Sometime after midnight the phone rang.

"It's not over," said Amy. "Not until I say so."

I hung up and waited.

Five minutes later the phone rang again.

"Hi," said Amy brightly. "Listen—can I apologize?"

"Amy, you can say anything you want, but it won't do any good. I know about Joe Hird."

"Who?"

"Don't even try it."

I could hear her breathing.

"Amy, have you ever talked to anyone about the things you do to yourself?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"What is it about men who will hurt you? Do you want that to happen?"

"That's ridiculous."

"Please. You never gave Joe Hird a thought until you heard that he had beaten two wives. Then you found me, and Joe was off the hook. Why get beaten up, when you could get killed?"

"Is that a confession?"

Damn.

"We're talking about you."

"You make me sound like some kind of sicko."

"You're not a sicko. You have a sickness."

"You would know."

"You don't have to listen to me. But you do have to leave me alone."

"Or what happens?"

"You know," I said, "you don't really need me."

"I don't?"

"There's something you might try. It's called autoerotic asphyxiation."

"It's overrated," she said.

"Okay, why don't you find a nice pen pal in prison someplace? That should meet your needs."

Silence, this time from her.

"No, it won't," she said in her operatic voice. "That won't do it at all."

She hung up.

Sometime in the small hours, I woke up with that hollow dread that comes from knowing I have missed something. Then I heard the footsteps of large men trying to move quietly. They were on the stairs up to my bedroom. I climbed out of bed and ran for the closet, where I kept the remnants of old enthusiasms. I grabbed one of my golf clubs—a three-iron, I think. As I hefted the club and took a batter's stance with it, the bedroom door banged open, and a powerful beam of light caught me in the face.

"Golfing naked is a felony," said Detective Berenger. "Or if it isn't, it should be."

The room light went on overhead. A uniformed officer turned his flashlight off and stepped back. Berenger appeared in the doorway. As I dropped the club, Berenger entered the bedroom and approached me.

"You have a warrant?" I said.

"Where is she?"

"Where is who?"

"Ms. Heckman."

"Not here. That's all I care about."

"911 got a call about a woman screaming in this house. The term is

‘exigent circumstances.’”

“Convenient.”

“Nothing convenient about it. It was a real call.”

“I would like to hear that call. I can identify her voice.”

“I already asked. The operator said it was a male voice.”

It was probably true. I could imagine Amy picking some loser up and promising him all kinds of delights, if he did her a small favor. I wondered whether she had kept her word.

“Look around,” said Berenger. “Make sure.”

More uniforms had crowded in behind Berenger. They looked everywhere a human body could have hidden, and some places where it couldn’t. When they had finished, everything I owned lay out for scrutiny. The cops even checked inside the clothes washer and dryer in the basement.

“Like I told you, she’s not here.”

“As’ I told you,” said Berenger. “Not, ‘Like.’ You’re supposed to be a writer.”

“Is that what you really have against me?”

I didn’t expect an answer.

“Let’s go,” he said to the uniformed officers.

The nearest bar to my house was Keenan’s, just across the town line in Lakeview. It was just after two when I drove into the parking lot. Amy must have recruited some moron to make the 911 call for her. That spelled barfly. She would have wanted to get as close to the fun as she could. That meant Keenan’s.

She was unlocking her car. I had arrived at closing time.

When I said her name, she showed no surprise. She turned toward me and smiled.

“Hi,” she said, as if we were lovers meeting after long hours apart.

“Congratulations. That was pretty annoying. I don’t think it will work again, though. The cops were also pissed. You don’t want them to make a project of you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t,” I said. “Just don’t.”

She watched me.

"It stops here, Amy. I'm warning you, ..."

"You're warning me. Good. Now we're getting somewhere."

"No, we're not. I'm warning that you're wasting your time. I'm not what you're looking for, any more than Joe Hird was."

She took a step toward me, which left me unprepared for what she did next.

"Get away from me," she shrieked. "Get away! Help!"

The door to Keenan's banged open, and a half dozen men spilled out. Barflies, I thought. I was right.

I raised the golf club I had been holding at my side. For a moment Amy's mouth fell open. She hadn't noticed the club. For once I felt a step ahead of her.

But only for a moment. She smiled in anticipation.

The two most enthusiastic of her protectors had almost reached me. I swung the club and rapped one of them on the wrist. I didn't swing hard, but the head of the club still had some nasty momentum. The man screamed and held his wrist under his belly, which hung over his belt. The other men stopped. One of them, bringing up the rear, ran into the man ahead of him, who fell forward at my feet. I feinted toward him with the club. He scrambled backwards on his hands and knees.

"Gentlemen," I said, "do I have your attention? I'm not here for trouble. I'm just here to talk to the lady. Privately. Nobody needs to get hurt."

They didn't like my suggestion, but there were no real fighters in the group. After some glaring and muttering they dispersed to their cars. I took Amy by the elbow and guided her toward my car.

We had to go somewhere. When I ruin my life, I don't do it in a parking lot.

I stowed Amy in the passenger seat and tossed the golf club onto the floor in the back. I walked quickly around the back of the car to the driver's door.

"Seat belt," I told her as I climbed into the car.

She ignored me. I shrugged and started the car.

“Where are we going?”

It was a good question, which I didn’t answer. I drove and tried to think.

“That was impressive back there.”

“Amy, shut up.”

“You impressed me from the beginning. The first moment I saw you, I knew you could be great.”

I recognized the route I had chosen. Her house was the worst place I could think of, but it was also the only one. I kept going until I parked in her driveway.

“Hungry?”

“No.”

“It’s no trouble. I’m told I make a good omelet.”

“That’s true, but I’m not hungry.”

“Okay.”

“Amy, it stops. Here.”

“Okay.”

I looked at her closely. How could I believe her?

“On one condition.”

That voice. It promised nothing good. How could I resist?

I climbed out, circled the car, and opened her door. She stood in her driveway and unbuttoned her belted wraparound dress. She let it fall and showed me she was wearing nothing underneath it. Amy held her hand out to me. I took it and allowed her to lead me into the house.

In her bedroom she kicked her shoes away. She threw the bedspread, blankets and top sheet aside with one motion. Amy lay back on the bed and spread her legs. She began to play with her clitoris. I had never seen anyone so utterly exposed, but her face told me nothing. I undressed. Every button and zipper yielded instantly. I climbed onto her and into her and began thrusting.

I was only half on the bed. Amy reached up as if to smooth her hair. Instead, she jabbed her index fingers into my eyes. I closed them just in time.

Lights exploded behind my eyelids. I caught her wrists and pressed them down into the mattress. My erection seemed to grow. As I thrust, my strokes felt a foot long. She shredded her throat with hoarse screams, as if I were disemboweling her.

Amy jerked her head forward several times, trying to break my nose. I turned my face left and then right. She battered my cheeks with her forehead. I would be one large bruise tomorrow, but I could take her punishment, if she could take mine.

She jerked her right hand free and reached under one of the pillows.

"I have a gun," she said.

I tried to grab her wrist, but I left myself open for another head butt. My eye started to swell. In moments it would close.

I could reach nothing but her throat. I leaned on it with my right forearm. I wedged my other arm under the back of her neck and gripped my right elbow with my left hand. I squeezed

"I have a gun."

It was the last thing she said. She had no chance, but she wanted none. I watched her eyes as they died.

Then I was standing and looking down at her. The urgency of a minute earlier might never have been.

Someone pounded on the door several times. I heard the screech of wood giving way and then the familiar sounds of large men running.

"Exigent circumstances," I said without turning around.

My whole defense was the gun under Amy's pillow, but there was no gun.

A month after the verdict Detective Berenger visited me here in Trenton. He told me about a burglary suspect he had just questioned. The suspect had gone on a confession jag. He told Berenger about the time he entered a house and came face to face with a woman.

"I don't know what got into me," he said. "Up to then, I always ran when I met someone. I did this time too, but after I strangled her."

The suspect agreed to point out the house, which was mine. Berenger showed him a picture of my wife.

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“How’s this sound?” I said to Berenger. “I’ll take his life sentence, and he can have mine. It’s no fun doing time for something I actually did.”

“Wish I could help.”

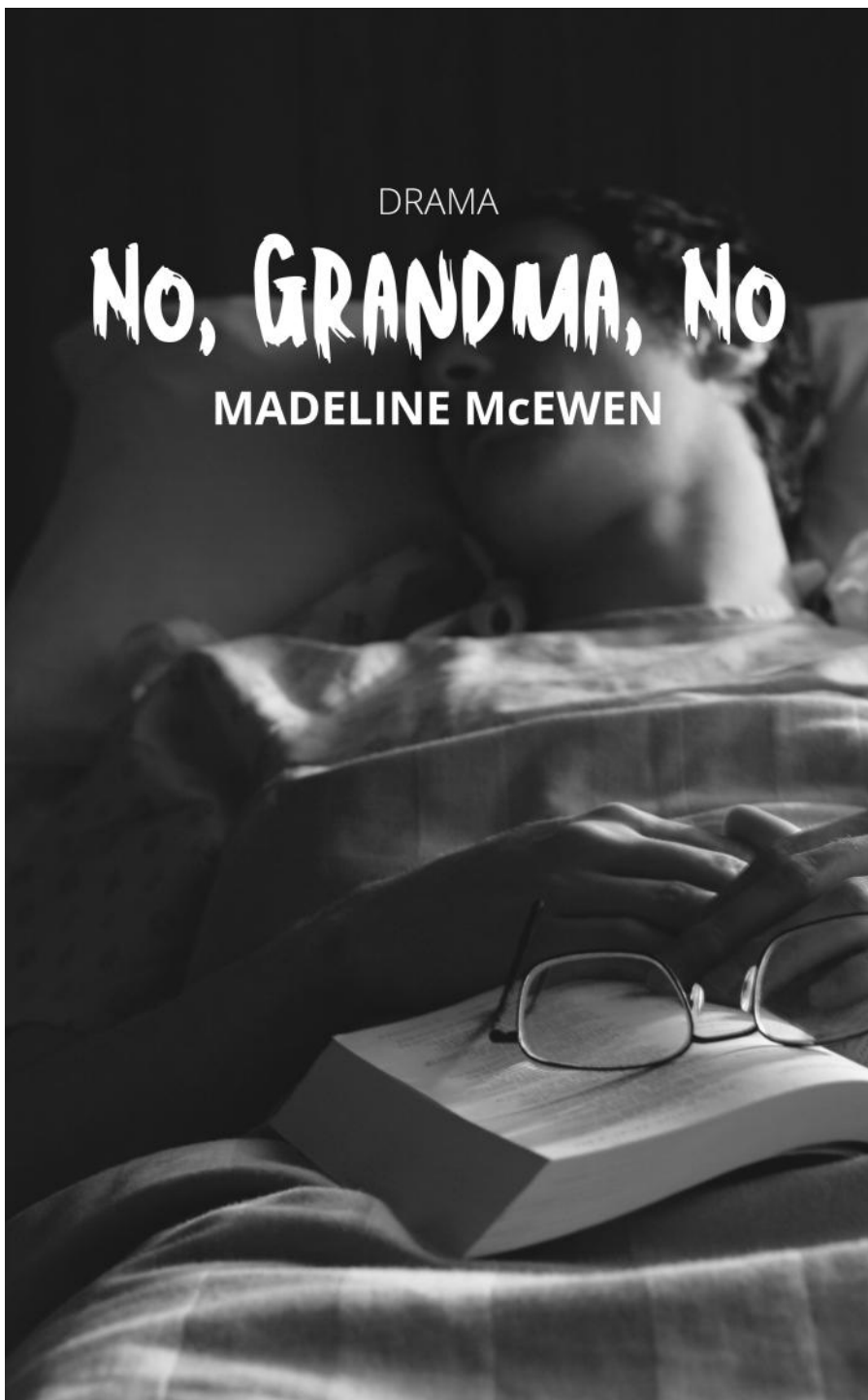
ALBERT TUCHER is the creator of prostitute Diana Andrews, who has appeared in more than a hundred hardboiled stories in venues including *The Best American Mystery Stories 2010*. In 2017 he launched a series of police procedural novels set on the Big Island of Hawaii, in which *Blood Like Rain* is the most recent entry. He lives in New Jersey, USA.



DRAMA

# NO, GRANDMA, NO

MADELINE MCEWEN





**M**om had me conserved just after my eighteenth birthday, which meant she got the final word on any big decisions like housing, I lived at home, money, she kept my money in a bank account, and food, I'm on a strict diet.

But that doesn't mean I don't have choices. I choose short hair cos I don't like it in my eyes or tickling the tops of my ears. Mom gives my head a wet shave cos I hate the noise of a buzz cut. I choose cleanliness every time cos I hate germs, bacteria, and mold even though I can't see them cos they're too small and I'm visually impaired. I chose my glasses frames. They're green, my favorite color.

I listened to her explain.

"You see, Eoghan, my love, there's all kinds of extra parts in a human body that are superfluous. In fact, often, we're better off without them. They're called vestigial remnants, which means leftovers. We don't need them. Like when your tonsils gave you sore throats every year or when your appendix ruptured. You were fine after, better, weren't you?"

I have a big decision to make soon, my decision, when we visit the doctor. Doctors are our friends. I've learned what I need to say and, more importantly, what not to say. I'm gonna ace this test.

Mom said the operation won't hurt cos I'll be asleep, drugged, but with good drugs, medical drugs, stronger than my regular medication. Also, its keyhole surgery M-i-n-i-m-a-l-l-y I-n-v-a-s-i-v-e, which must mean no knives. After the procedure, I get to rest in bed for a few days and I can play video games in bed too. In bed! I am so lucky.

Plus, I can skip the diet when I'm in bed, if I stay in bed. Mom'll give me all my favorite foods so I'll get better faster.

#

When I was younger and didn't talk much, Mom allowed me to keep the stray cat I found. The cat chose me. That time, Mom didn't have a

choice either. I was bad, maybe the baddest ever. Tears jumped from my eyes. I screamed and screamed and screamed. The cat needed a home, a proper home, somewhere safe where's she'd be loved, and no one loves like I do.

Mom had said she'd take the cat to the Humane Society, but I knew some of those shelters killed the cats and dogs if no one adopted them pretty quick. Who else would adopt a cat with three legs other than me?

"Sure," Mom had said, "someone will adopt her. She's got pretty markings. Make a good breeder perhaps."

I watched Mom think. A couple of creases appeared between her eyebrows and split her face in two. Sometimes if I gave her enough time to think, she changed her mind. I waited, gulping air. Emotions made my skin fizz and all the little hairs on my arms stood up.

"Then," Mom said, tapping her bottom lip, "if she has pretty kitties, someone could sell them."

Holding my breath, I tried not to move or annoy her.

"Okay," she said, "you can keep her, but on one condition."

"What?"

"You pay for her food from your allowance."

"Yes."

"And any other stuff she needs. I can't afford any extravagances if you're going to be living with me for the rest of your life."

"I'll pay. I promise."

And I kept my promise as I always do.

When my dad was alive, he used to say, "Never mess around with promises or they'll come back and bite you in the butt." He used his werewolf voice when he wanted me to listen, when he wanted me to remember, when it was important not to forget. I hadn't forgotten.

I gave the stray cat a secret name, Kokopilau, after the Native American trickster god of plenty, second chances, and mischief. Everyone else called her Hoppy. That was a little joke from me. Not Hoppy, but Hopi.

#

Although doctors are our friends, veterinarians are better, like

Doctor Singh. When Hopi was sick, I took her to Dr. Singh. Mom hated going because Dr. Singh was expensive and we didn't have pet insurance. Dr. Singh gave me a long list of instructions on how to care for Hopi p-o-s-t o-p-e-r-a-t-i-v-e-l-y. No more kittens for Hopi, which made me sad. I wished we'd kept at least one.

Mom had put a sign up in the window, "Free To Good Home."

That was a choice, her choice, not a good choice.

The adopter, a man with dirty fingernails and too many words, left the house with the first kitten a week before Halloween.

"You can't tell just by looking at them," Mom said. "You, of all people, shouldn't judge a book by its cover. You're a terrible judge of character, far too gullible."

"If they pay money," I said, "that means they really want them."

"Yes, but the kittens were supposed to be pretty with beautiful marking. These are sooty little monsters, like lumps of charcoal. Don't worry, for the next litter I'll make sure she goes with another tabby, then you can sell those."

"I'll take her to Dr. Singh."

"Who?"

"The veterinarian doctor who checked Hopi over after I found her. Dr. Singh said Hopi needs spaying when she's gained enough weight."

"Out in the west," Mom said, "my grandmother drowned them, much cheaper, so think yourself lucky."

I hated that story even before Hopi came to live with us. Mom often spoke of her childhood on some ranch, long before she left her real family, came to live in San Jose and met my Dad at middle school.

"City kids, like you, know nothing. You're soft. Without our protective safety blanket, you'd face some harsh realities."

#

After Hopi's surgery, I took her back to Dr. Singh and she talked to me like a regular person and told me I'd done a good job keeping the surgery site clean. I watched her busy, gentle, purple-gloved hands so I didn't have to look at her face or get embarrassed or stutter. I turned my back away from

the red garbage container where they put special waste products like blood, it made my nose crinkle and stomach churn.

Dr. Singh never asked the easy questions: how do you spell your name? E-o-g-h-a-n, its Irish for Owen or American for John. Where do you work? I don't. When's your next vacation? Never.

After the easy questions people don't ask anything else because I'm too boring.

I like quiet time better, so does Dad.

"If you could be any animal," Dr. Singh said, pulling a shiny tray of instruments closer to Hopi, "alive or extinct. What would you be and why?"

"An echidna because they're rare mammals that lay eggs, and curl into a ball, and their spines protect them from enemies, and I'd like to live in Australia because I can do their accents, Australians not echidnas."

"Huh! I wonder if animals have accents? Do cats meow differently in other countries? Anyway," she snapped off her gloves, turned them inside-out, and tossed them onto the over-full trash bin, "Hopi is good to go. You can pay up front at reception, while we put Hopi back in her carry-case."

"Okay. Do you want me to take the trash out for you? You can trust me. I'm good at chores, and the dumpster's on my way?"

"That's right, you don't drive, you walk, right?"

"Yes, healthier, cheaper, safer."

"You don't miss much."

"I miss a lot because my eyes are bad."

"Maybe, but they don't stop you from working, earning a living. What is it you do?"

A flush of heat raced up my neck and bloomed on my face. She'd never asked the easy questions before. I wasn't sure what to say. Dr. Singh wasn't someone I would only meet once like most other people who ask the same first questions.

"I work at home. I help my mom."

"Oh, that's nice. Nice for her to have some help. Is she retired?"

"She's always tired."

"I see." She yanked the trash bag out of the bin, pulled the

drawstring closed, and spun the bag. "If you help your Mom, maybe you could help other people too."

"My visual impairment and associated intellectual disabilities make me ineligible for full-time employment opportunities."

The doctor dropped the bag at her feet. Her eyes were big and staring so I knew I was word perfect.

"Well," she said. She tapped her toe on the tile floor. "There's jobs and jobs, aren't there?"

"Yes, that's what I said. Many jobs, many openings, and many help-wanted's. I see the signs all the time when I'm outside not at home."

"What I meant was, there's paid work and unpaid work. The latter wouldn't affect your benefits."

I picked up the bag and made a move toward reception.

"You could work in the community, volunteer somewhere locally, walking distance. There are tons of charitable organizations begging for help."

"I'm no charity case. We don't take nothing from no one."

#

I thought about bigger things when I was old enough for pimple cream. Mostly I asked Dad my questions because he had the right answers, but sometimes I asked Mom. I never wanted to make her mad, but often I did make her mad.

Dad made her mad too.

Mom and Dad had what-if-fights. I didn't listen, but I heard anyway because they shouted. I counted the ifs.

"I can't bear the responsibility," Mom yelled. "What if something happened? What if their parents sue us for sexual assault? He's nearly an adult now, we've got years of this. What if I'm on my own by then if I'm widowed. It'll just be me and him. He's bound to meet someone, isn't he? What if everyone blames me!"

Five. I worried when they used more than ten ifs. A bad sign.

So I tried hard to pick the right moment, when Mom was in a good mood, not reading a book, watching TV, or cooking, and asked her if I could

have a brother, someone to play with?

"You don't need siblings. You're more than a handful."

This was partly true because Mom couldn't lift me anymore.

"Besides," she said, "most kids play with their friends, other kids from school. Your Dad always had tons of friends, mega-popular. Everybody loved him."

She glanced at the ceiling where Dad lay asleep upstairs after working another night shift.

"Once upon a time," Mom said, "a lifetime ago, he was a real catch before anyone knew about his gene pool."

Did she mean a baseball catcher? Dad was a good swimmer too.

"What about a sister?"

"Too risky. I couldn't cope with two."

"I'd help." Generally, I neither liked nor disliked kids, but they liked me. I loved their directness and pure emotions before they learned to lie and say mean things. "I'm good with little kids."

"You're not wrong there. Why do they flock to you? Like flies to rotten meat. I can't understand it."

"They trust me."

"Madness! You couldn't keep a goldfish alive, let alone a baby. Plus, what if it was a girl, which would be even worse."

"Worse?"

"It's different with girls. I'd be worried sick. Especially if they're pretty when they grow up."

"Am I ... handsome?"

"Handsome enough to cause me a lot of trouble. I'm no fortune-teller, but I'm sure there are no kids in your future, not if I have anything to do with it. I'll never be a grandmother, and that's no bad thing."

I only understood half of what she said, but I knew right then that she was half wrong.

#

I saw Dad in hospital for a quick visit before his operation. I had reminded Mom I had to do the right thing, which forced her to give me



permission.

"Fine!" she had said, "but you'll have to get there by bus. I don't have time to ferry you about like some peak-capped flunky. I'm not your personal chauffeur."

I had to get home before dark, or Mom would be mad. She worried when I was away. That's why the visit was quick: a thirty-two-minute walk from the bus stop, and two bus changes to arrive at the hospital.

Most people hate hospitals, their smell, bright lights, and unfamiliar noises. Me too, for those reasons, but I liked hospitals--clean, germ-free, and the people are kindly.

Going to the hospital as a visitor felt weird. This wasn't about me this time, but Dad. Whenever I'd gone at other times, a nurse or a technician asked Mom to leave the room before my examination. Then, they always asked the same question, after name, address, date of birth, height, and weight. I know all those. I've learned to answer the most important one correctly.

"Do you feel safe at home? Is anyone mistreating you?"

"No," I always said, "I'm happy at home." I'd pat my jelly belly and make it wobble, "And nobody ever gives me any treats." That last bit was my joke. Sometimes they laughed.

Back to Dad. He made me laugh. He wasn't fat anymore, but skinny and boney because he was sick and old. He knew lots of accents and copied people too, but he was better than me, he was the best.

"You know me, son, who needs a parrot when you're a mimic? Hear it once, and I'm word perfect. You're good at parroting too."

He was good at stories and even better at jokes, funny jokes. Sometimes I couldn't tell if they were true.

"You'll never guess what happened here today!"

"What?"

"One of the doctors, the surgeon, came to examine me in bed. He was pushing and prodding me. Reminded me of Hopi kneading her bed. And then, guess what?"

"What?"

"He gets out his pen from the top pocket of his white coat and writes his autograph on my belly."

"He wrote on you? On your bare skin?"

"Yes, but that's not the half of it. Believe it or not, the Doc wrote in purple ink, something they call gentian violet. You can look it up on the computer when you get home and find out all about it. I'll never know how you can stuff anything more into that head of yours. Talking of writing, don't forget to tell your Mom I signed the DNR form for her."

"What's a DNR?"

"Nothing for you to worry about. It just means that if something goes wrong, I won't be a burden and I ain't never gonna be a charity case."

He reached out and ruffled my hair. He knew I loved and hated it. He did it anyway because he was my dad even though I was already taller than him by then, twenty centimeters taller. The metric system is more accurate than the imperial.

"Anyway, Eoghan, I know you've not got long, but if for any reason I don't come home again soon, know that I love you. Being a dad is the best thing in my life, and one day you might be one too."

"Me?"

"Sure, but only if you meet the right person. You'll make a great dad cos you have all the qualities that count most. You're a nurturer."

He tapped his nose, sign language for "keep it a secret." He wasn't using his werewolf voice, and his eyes were leaking.

"Although, don't tell your mom."

My legs quaked even though I was sitting down. I hadn't walked that far. My heart rate had returned to its resting rate, but my ribcage felt too tight.

We both looked at the clock on the wall.

"Death and dying isn't so bad, " he said, his werewolf voice scratching the edge of his words. "It's the lingering part that's grim. But, don't worry about anything, Eoghan. In the next life, I'll come back as a cat or maybe an echidna. Maybe you can too. Off you go now, hurry or you'll miss the bus."

I did as he asked, but I walked backward, facing him, to look at him for the longest time.

Once I was home, I was worried, and Mom was mad because it was dark. What if Dad didn't come home? Just me and Mom forever with no jokes, parrots, and secrets?

Ten days later, he was home, but the jokes, parrots, and secrets didn't come too. Dad never spoke again, but we were very happy for three and a half years.

Mom was mad about the DNR, which was weird because he told me he'd signed it and told me to tell her he'd signed it. What difference did it make? I meant to check online, but I forgot. Do not rest, do not read, do not return. Did Mom want Dad to stay in the hospital forever? I didn't know and didn't care. Dad was home, and that was all that mattered.

The palliative care nurses were great. 24/7. Sometimes they let me help: comb his hair, clean his glasses, clip his nails. Who needed talking? We didn't.

Mom was unhappy at home, "I'm too tired for all this. I've aged too soon. I look worse than a cadaver." The house was depressing for her, "Like a morgue with you two permanent silent ghosts." She left us in peace.

I would have read to Dad, but that's not my thing. We played hangman. I did the writing. Dad did the tapping with his index finger A, B, C, D, until he got tired or I got bored. Then, we'd listen to audiobooks. I knew what he liked, history and biographies. We listened together in the quiet of the house. Sometimes I'd squeeze in some zoology. I think he liked them too. Animals don't speak either, but they talk in other ways. Dad said more to me with his one working finger than Mom did with all her shouty words.

#

Mom met with the surgeon first and did all the paperwork as she always did. My writing wasn't too bad, but my hand cramps after a few lines, and reading was hard on my eyes.

Afterward, I came into the doctor's office and sat next to Mom to answer his questions.

"So," he said, clearing his throat. "Your Mom's explained the procedure?"

"Yes."

"And this is what you want?"

"Yes."

"Are there any questions you have for me?"

"No."

"No lingering doubts? You're certain? Sterility is the way ahead for you."

Mom hadn't used that word. She used a different word. I checked it out. "Ectomy" words meant the removal of a part of the body. Mom said they'd remove the vas deferens, which meant a duct or tube. Once it was out, like my appendectomy and tonsillectomy when I was little, my life would be better and trouble-free. But sterile was also good because that meant extra clean and definitely germ-free. Bonus!"

The following week I turned up for my early morning appointment on time thanks to the new app on my phone. I ordered the taxi and then left my phone on the kitchen table to charge. Mom didn't want it stolen while I was in hospital. I even remembered to tip the driver with cash from my wallet.

Once I was in the lobby, I didn't need to use my cane because the receptionist guy said he'd walk me up.

A nurse, Maria, showed me to a big room with the same kind of electric bed Dad had. She explained what I had to do and where to put my clothes.

I didn't have to wait long until the intake tech guy sped into the room, pushing a mobile pedestal with a laptop.

"Hi, I'm Mike. I'll be going over your paperwork today with you."

I saw no papers but said nothing.

Mike typed fast, and he used all his fingers on the keyboard.

"Any outstanding questions about the procedure?"

"Nope."

"You're opting for general anesthesia, correct?"

"Yes."

"It's not too late to just have a local anesthetic. That's the usual choice for a vasectomy."

"No, I want to be asleep."

"And you've been fasting for at least eight hours?"

"I'm not sure."

"What did you eat last, and about what time?"

Who knew that kind of thing? Food was just around, then it was eaten, and then it was gone. Mom had dumped my favorite cereal and milk in the waste disposal unit this morning before she drove me to the hospital.

"It was dark. I last ate last night."

Mike frowned as he peered at the screen.

He turned the laptop around to face me.

"Is that your signature on the DNR?"

"I don't know. It's too small."

Mike enlarged the section of the screen.

"Yes, that's my writing."

Was Mike upset about the DNR too? Why have them if no one liked them? I remembered all the fuss about Dad's DNR. How mad Mom was. How hard it was for her. How living like Dad for three and a half years would never work for her. She needed a different future. Better to die in a hospital, right then and there, and join Dad. Far better than living in Limbo, wherever that was?

Mike twisted a button on his shirt between his left thumb and index finger. His other hand flipped through a series of screens.

"So you signed the DNR and you're opting for full general and you're aware of the inherent—although slight—risks, right?"

"Right."

"I'll be back in a minute," he said. "I just need to check on something."

Mike grabbed the laptop and ran from the room, leaving the pedestal behind.

Hospitals are always busy and hurried, never peaceful.

Seconds later, Maria popped her head around the door.

"All done already?" she said. "Did you bring a book with you?"

"A book?" Nobody told me I needed to bring a book. It wasn't on the pre-surgical checklist. "What book?"

"Any book." Maria smiled. "Something to read to pass the time."

"I don't read, but I like audiobooks."

"Me too. Did you bring some? On your phone?"

"Mom's keeping my phone safe at home."

"That's a shame. Maybe we can fix you up with something else. The hospital lends tablets. I just have to remember to jot it down on a post-it, or I'll forget."

"I forget stuff too."

She giggled. "Don't worry, I don't forget important stuff, like my medical training," she said over her shoulder as she left the room, "but sometimes little things slip my mind."

#

Would the nurse remember? Had she written on a post-it note to remind her? How long would I wait in the hospital in silence without a story to fill the time? My dad's voice growled into my ear, "Better safe than sorry." I uncapped the acrid-smelling Sharpie and pulled up the paper robe. Where would the doctor stand, to my left or my right? Would he face my head and body or be angled toward my toes? My fingers splayed the skin on my tummy, holding it stretched tight. I wrote in large block capitals, big enough for anyone, even me. DNR, the D over my belly button. Would the doctor understand? Would the nurses? Did the nurses talk to each other? I added a line of dashes from the end of the R tracking up my body to the middle of my chest. There, the dotted line divided into two and traveled up right and left with an arrow pointing at each ear. Was that good enough? I was about to cap the pen, when I remembered playing Hangman. I wrote letters on the dashes to spell out my message so everyone would understand—DOES NOT READ. I drew the gallows, the stickman, and the noose; would they get my little joke?

When I woke later, not sure when, Mom sat in a chair at my bedside

while a nurse took my blood pressure.

“How are you feeling, my love?”

“Woozy, and my throat is dry.”

The nurse poured water into a tumbler, “that’s the after effect from the anesthetic. Now you’re awake, and your Mom’s here; the doctor would like a word before you’re discharged, so get dressed, then please wait here awhile.”

After she’d left me to dress, Mom leaned in and whispered through the curtain, “not too sore?”

“I don’t feel different.” Ripping off the paper robe and throwing back the bedclothes, I looked at my naked body: no holes, no Band-aids, no stitches. I felt fine and started pulling on my clothes. Mom kept talking, but I tuned her out to focus. A few moments later, I zipped up my hoodie, drew back the curtain, and sat on the bed.

“Ah, there you are,” said the doctor, sweeping into the room. “Did you check out your graffiti or wash it off?”

“Graffiti?” Mom said.

“Yes. Your son wrote all over his body, left us a message.”

“What kind of message?”

“His opinions. And after I conferred with the rest of the team, the technicians, the intake staff, the nurses, and his paperwork, we received his message loud and clear.”

“What do you mean?” Mom said.

One of the nurses handed me a present, gift-wrapped in cat paper. I unwrapped it while the doctor talked to Mom.

“I mean,” the doctor said, “that we aborted the procedure.”

“You had no right. It’s imperative that the procedure goes ahead. Lives depend upon it, believe you me.”

“We’re not convinced that we’re complying the patient’s wishes.”

“That what he wants. His wishes. He signed his consent.”

“Therefore,” the doctor continued, “until we ascertain his intentions and preferences, we cannot proceed with surgery.”

“But its for the best, the best for him, long term.”

"I understand the temptation to intervene, take control, and manage outcomes. Your actions come from a place of love. But there's a darker side."

I heard the doctor flick the clicker on the pen in his pocket. The wrapping paper fell to the floor, and I smiled at the tablet in my hands. To keep or borrow?

"The other night," the doctor said, "I watched an old movie, black and white, about a man who made a will. He put all his money and considerable wealth into a trust fund for his adult, middle-aged children and told them about his decision. They murdered him, of course, a great whodunnit, but that's not the point. I learned from that movie that we can't control the lives of others regardless of our motivations, either in this life or from beyond the grave. You, as his mother, have no say in the outcome. Only Eoghan determines his future. His body, his rights."

I scrolled through the choices of pre-loaded stories on the tablet. I'd seen a few of them before. I picked one, stuck an earbud in my left ear, and touched play.

"Isn't that right, Eoghan?" asked the doctor.

"Yes," I said, focused on the screen, not meeting his eye. "You made good choices, and I have too."

#

*\*Rest assured that a parent or guardian must gain permission from the court before subjecting the conservatee to such a medical procedure ... in an ideal world.*

MADELINE McEWEN [she/her] has enjoyed publication in a variety of different outlets both online and in traditional print. Her fiction and non-fiction focuses primarily on whodunnits and humor. She has numerous short stories and a few stand-alone novelettes. Her latest short story, *Stepping On Snakes*, appears in the *Me Too Anthology* edited by Elizabeth Zelvin published by Level Best Books, and *Benevolent Dictatorship* published in *Low Down Dirty Vote Volume II* edited by Mysti Berry.





DRAMA

# WHAT I DID

RUSS BICKERSTAFF



Everybody's looking at me like I did something. And I did. I mean...I *know* I did *something*. I just...y'know...I do a lot of things. And it just feels weird is all. Everyone looking at me like they're looking at me and I'm just here doing whatever it is that I'm doing. And I'm fine with it. I mean...I like to think that I'm getting along with everyone, but I keep seeing the way that everyone's looking at me and I just keep thinking that...I mean...I wish I knew what I did. That's all. Because I don't know. That's what I'm saying.

This guy is looking at me right now. He and I are both on the same side of the street waiting for the walk signal. He glances over at me and we briefly make eye contact. And he just looks away in disgust shaking his head silently as he does so. I wish I could say I felt a little uncomfortable about the situation. And I guess I *should* given that the guy is a police officer, but I mean...he's not exactly doing anything, so I guess I'm okay to keep walking to work.

The light turns green. The glowing red hand above the crosswalk disappears, replaced by the white silhouette of a walking figure. I can't help but get the feeling that like...even the walk signal just wants to get away from me, but I'm pretty sure it's all in my head. Not that my overall guilt is really in question. I mean...clearly I've done something. I was even arrested for it by a police officer not entirely unlike the one I'm currently crossing the street with. It was kind of a weird thing...getting arrested like that.

It's starting to rain. I smile at the police officer as he walks on North. (My workplace is a couple of blocks west.) I watch him nod and roll his eyes as he walks on. It was weird. I think I had the exact same response when I was asked what I had been doing that day they brought me in. It was like...a FEW people who introduced themselves to me...some of them by name. They all asked me what I'd been doing that day and I told them. And they just...looked at me. After a few hours and half a dozen different

interviews, they told me that I was free to go home. And I did. And I think that everybody's been looking at me ever since.

A stranger passes by me. She's on the phone talking...smiling. She's laughing. And then she sees me and look of physical disgust crosses her face. And she's whispering into the phone. Something about "that person," or whatever. I mean...I guess I'm getting familiar with that much. I don't know...I mean...I can't even remember how long it's been since I did whatever the hell it was I did to make everyone so disgusted with me. I only know that I feel like I should probably be a lot more upset about it than I am.

I scan my badge. A red light turns green and I'm into the lobby of the building that I work in. The security guard at the front desk knows when I come-in every morning. He knows not to look as I walk-in to the building. I figure that it's probably the case that everyone else is...I mean...a lot more uncomfortable about this whole thing than I am right now. I don't even really know why it is that I'm thinking about it on my way out to work. I guess that...if I'm going to think about it at all, I'm going to be thinking about it on the way to work, but that doesn't...I don't know.

There's someone waiting for an elevator there. She's attractive. I've seen her around the office before. I don't know that we've ever been formally introduced or anything like that. I want to try to say hello, but she's lost in her phone. Probably trying not to make eye contact with me or whatever. I smile in her general direction, though. And the elevator doors open-up.

I gesture for her to go into the elevator first, but she's staring into her phone. She walks into the elevator before me anyway. We both turn around...both going to the same floor, so there's no need for me to press the eleventh floor call button. She's already got it lit-up. And she's looking into her phone...not even glancing anywhere else as we go up half a dozen floors. I feel like I might be staring at her a bit too closely when she steps forward and pulls the emergency stop. The elevator lurches into motionlessness somewhere between the sixth and seventh floors. She turns to me and looks deeply into my eyes.

“Why did you do it?” She asks. There’s no malice in her voice. No anger. No emotion. She’s just looking into my eyes and asking me why I did it. And I shrug.

“I’m not...sure.” I say. She nods into the silence between us. “I’m not sure...” I repeat. Her eyes gaze deeply into the center of everything I am. “I’m not sure.” I shrug. I want to ask her...well...I want to ask her a lot of things, but she turns to the panel, pushes the elevator back into action and it return to its ascent. I take a deep breath and smile as she shivers in disgust.

I walk to my desk. I hadn’t really had a chance to ask anybody what I’d done. Just for a moment there in the elevator...but I didn’t. And now I have the day ahead of me. A lot of appointments and things like that. Whatever it was that I did...it’ll wash away in the day. It always does.

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THRILLER / DRAMA

# ABDUCTION

DENIS CAMDEN







**A**va was locked in a box. She slowly regained consciousness with a pounding headache and an overwhelming sense of dread. She struggled to open her eyes, the light was dim, and she didn't trust what she could see. She reached out with shaking fingers and felt soft padding on either side and underneath. She was naked. She sat up and almost vomited. She kicked out with her feet and connected with an empty metal bucket. Beyond that, she could feel the same gauzy material she was lying on. She closed her eyes again. Thoughts like confetti flickered through her grasp and faded away. This must be a bad dream.

She woke again after a time. She had no idea how long. Her head still hurt. She was still imprisoned in this hot padded box. It was no dream. She rolled over and looked around with fuzzy eyes. She was in a small square space, the walls, floor, and ceiling were covered in thick padding. It was not quite big enough to stand up in. She cried out as her head hit the padded ceiling. There was a small door at one end, where a tiny amount of light penetrated the gap between the top of the door and the ceiling. In front of the door the bucket had been placed upright and next to it there was a bowl of rice and a bottle of water. Fleeting slices of memory flashed in her head like strobes. She had been at the market with her friends Neymar and Messi and the other children. Playing football and then chasing the one-legged chicken across the cobblestones. She remembered the big black car and the burly men. Then a blow to her head, and aching unconsciousness. She cried out again. She yelled, "Neymar! Messi! help!" But her little voice was absorbed by the padded box. She screamed and screamed again then collapsed sobbing on the floor.

She cried for a while and then she got angry, angry at herself for getting caught. Stupid fucking chicken. She kicked out and punched the walls until her hands hurt, she got anxious and scared again. This wasn't a police cell. The thugs that abducted her were not police. Street kids disappeared all

the time, most of them were forced into slavery or worse, but she never thought it would happen to her. She was young, but she knew of the horrible things people do to each other, she knew she was still alive because they wanted to do horrible things to her. She ate her rice and drank the water, she tried to get her fingernails in the gap at the top of the door, but it was too small. She felt vulnerable, they had taken her clothes and her favourite Nike trainers. There was a bright light shining outside and she yelled at it a few times, she tried her best football kicks on the door, but it did not budge. Something moved behind the door and blocked out the light. She screamed and kicked the door with even more vigour as a foul-smelling gas poured into the little room through the gap. She tried to hold her breath but soon fell unconscious to the floor.

She woke up in a different place. Cold steel underneath. Her head was heavy, she couldn't open her eyes and her arms and legs were dead. She could hear people talking in the background. Muffled voices, adult voices, male voices.

“How old is Lago?”

“I don't know, there are rumours he's close to one hundred years old, but he looks like a healthy fifty-year-old thanks to the anti-aging treatments we provide. His obsession with life-extending therapies is infamous.”

“I doubt that anything we take from this filthy little street rat can help Lago, but I guess no-one is going to miss her. Isn't it a waste giving her anaesthetics? She probably won't survive.”

“Yes, but it's so much easier when they're unconscious. You can't operate when they're kicking and screaming.”

Sharp chemical smells filled Ava's nostrils. Her eyes stayed closed, but there was a burning bright light above her. Red circles under her eyelids, hot like the Sun. Some feeling returned to her limbs. She became aware of her body and flexed against the restraints. She was naked, strapped to a table. Her arms, legs and neck were firmly bound to cold hard metal beneath. The voices came closer. A cold gloved hand touched Ava's stomach.

“Doctor Kerobokan, if she's not going to survive, why not take her heart and lungs as well as the kidneys?”

“They have to be used within six hours so the logistics can be difficult. Kidneys last twenty-four hours or longer with the right transportation. We try to keep them alive so we can operate on them again. Some customers also want to see the donor before the operation.”

“What about their blood?”

“Yes we can drain their blood. It’s not worth anything though, especially from grubby little urchins like this one.”

Ava couldn’t wake up properly, she couldn’t open her eyes and her arms and legs were weak. The bright light burned everything red behind her eyelids. She was beginning to realise something horrible was about to happen. They were talking about her. Her blood. Her kidneys. She forced an eye to open and was instantly blinded by the hot white light above.

“Doctor Kerobokan, why does Lago want the pineal gland?”

Ava could feel the man’s breath on her face as he stooped over her. It smelled like chicken and garlic as he spoke. “Lago believes the pineal has powerful metaphysical properties. It has long been associated with the idea of the third eye, which is a spiritual symbol of all-knowing and often perceived as a gateway to a higher state of consciousness. He thinks ingesting pineal glands from children on the verge of puberty can prolong his life. It’s a myth, of course. Mystical rubbish. Just another fantasy that wealthy people looking for eternal youth want to believe.”

Ava didn’t understand these words. But she knew they were talking about her. Panic started to build inside her screaming dread and danger, screaming get the fuck out of there, but her body could not respond. She couldn’t even move her limbs. There was a cold sharp pain in her arm, then she didn’t care, she was numb, she only wanted to sink into delicious sleep. The hot bright Sun began to dim. The last thing she could see before her flickering eyes went dark was a gloved hand holding a little metal bone cutting saw.

She woke up. Everything hurt. Her body was tender and sore all over. She didn’t know where she was, she didn’t know who she was. She didn’t even have enough energy to cry. She was detached from reality, maybe she was dead.

She woke up again. She could remember her name but not much else. She was in the box. She was still too weak to move, and the pain had condensed to her head and belly. She was alive and conscious enough to know she was still a prisoner. She was still in trouble. She tried to kick but her legs were too weak. In the dark, she could feel an ugly scar on the back of her head that was wet with congealing blood and throbbed with pain. There was another wound across her abdomen. She gently touched the stitches and cried herself back to sleep.

She woke up again. It was horrible to wake up in this claustrophobic nightmare. Ava lost count of the days. She would wake up, head thick with fog, delirious and disorientated, remembering where she was. The bucket was always empty and there was always a bowl of rice and a bottle of water placed in front of the door. And her wounds had been cleaned. They were keeping her alive. She couldn't seem to focus her thoughts, she would go through the same range of emotions, fear, anger, and misery before they all started blending into one. She tried to keep count of how many water bottles, how many bowls of rice and how many sleeps but she soon lost the numbers. She couldn't concentrate on anything. There was something missing in her head. She could feel the absence, the missing link. Visions of her friends Neymar and Messi flickered in front of her, she recognised them, but she couldn't quite remember who they were. They scolded her for not catching the chicken. She would see the stupid one-legged chicken in the corner of the box, looking at her sideways, pecking at her feet. The chicken began to talk to her, taunting her, telling her she was too slow and shit at football. She would shit and piss in the bucket. She began to use her own shit to draw the faces of her friends on the padded walls in the dark. She couldn't remember what they looked like, but it was much better having some company, someone to talk to.

Ava knew that she was being kept alive for a reason. They must want more from her. More organs or bits of her brain. She suspected she had been drugged but she couldn't be sure. She couldn't be sure about anything. The drugs sucked the life and the will to fight out of her. When the drugs wore off, she was achy, itchy, feverish, and nauseous. She welcomed the

numbness, but she knew she had to try and escape, she had to get out of this horrible shitty hot box with that bastard chicken.

It was so hard to formulate her thoughts. There was a missing link in her head. She lived in a cycle of anxious pain then numb oblivion with only her shit friends and the taunting chicken for company. She didn't know how many days this went on for, she had lost any sense of time, but in rare moments of lucidity, she knew she could not live like this. They would come for her again and cut her open, it was only a matter of when. She had to do something.

She dreamed of the Sun. Directly above her, close enough to touch. It's scalding, caustic light exposing her, cooking her. Ava woke up on the operating table. Under the harsh, burning light. She was naked. She tried to concentrate through her drugged haze, attempting to understand her surroundings and look for an opportunity. She had no idea what, but she had to do something or die trying. She kept her eyes closed and pretended to be unconscious, listening to the voices.

"Half a million dollars for this little liver. Hard to believe." Ava felt a soft hand on her arm and could sense someone standing over her. She couldn't feel any restraints. A surge of adrenalin rushed through her. This was her chance.

"He needs a new one quickly. His liver is riddled with disease." Ava vaguely recognised another voice close by. "It's a routine operation Lago, I have done hundreds of them. I appreciate you taking the time to come down here and supervise but it's really not necessary. I'm sure you have more important things to do."

A terrifying sense of urgency galvanised Ava. She risked opening one eyelid a fraction to see two men standing next to the gurney she was lying on. One of them put down a syringe and went to fasten her restraints. Next to her there was a table with equipment. Shining steel forceps, swabs and several scalpels. She flexed her limbs. She had to act now.

"Yes, Kerobokan. I always have important business to attend to. But I enjoyed her pineal gland and I want to try the adrenal. I believe the hormones and steroids will be beneficial. And I want to see where it comes

from.”

The man talking stooped over Ava, inspecting the scar on her abdomen. He stroked her belly tenderly and smiled. A surge of revulsion swept through Ava, and her limbs moved instinctively. Just as the other man was beginning to tie the restraints, she snapped her knee into his head and felt a satisfying crack. At the same time, as his head swayed towards her, she rose up and bit down hard on the man’s ear. She tasted his blood, salty and metallic.

“Aah fuck! You fucking bitch!” The man rocked back holding his ear, leaking blood down the side of his face.

Ava spat out a piece of the man’s ear and rolled over, grabbing at the scalpels on the table. He turned and focused on her. Ava looked into his rage-filled eyes. His hands were round her throat and he was screaming. “You fucking little bitch!” She tried to kick out as he choked her, and the other man struggled to restrain her legs. His eyes were bloodshot and demented, huge black pupils dilating his entire eyeball. Blood ran down the side of his face, dripping into his bared teeth and into his black beard. Her hand clasped a scalpel, and she swung it around blindly, hoping to connect with anything solid. She was terrified and already exhausted, but she didn’t have time to think. Her body was moving faster than her brain as she tried to stab at the man’s face.

Her arms were weak and there was no power behind her lunge, but the scalpel connected and cut a thin bloody line from his chin, through his beard to his right cheek. The scalpel stayed embedded in his cheek as he drew back in horrified shock, a look of stunned disbelief on his face. He seemed to forget about Ava as she wriggled underneath him trying to escape. The scalpel hung from his face but fell to the floor as he screamed again. Ava rolled off the table and fell to the cold hard floor. She slipped in his blood as he staggered back but she found the scalpel and managed to stand up on shaking limbs. The man that had been strangling her had both hands to his face trying to stop the bleeding. He was screaming and swearing. The other man in a white smock was cowering in front of another operating table. On the table, an old fat man lay prone and unconscious. Something

primal and angry inside Ava took over. She screamed, high-pitched and bloodcurdling and swung the bloody scalpel at the man in the smock who staggered backwards, knocking the table over and sending the unconscious patient sprawling across the floor. At the same time Ava spied the door and ran for it. The man she had cut tried to stop her, but the limp body of the patient tripped him up. She was out the door and running down a corridor. Naked and bloody.

She didn't have time to think. The primal rage still fuelled her, like a wild animal had taken over. She screamed again as she raced down the corridor. Voices shouted behind her. The man she had cut was giving chase. She crashed through some double doors and out into a loading bay. Below her, two black vehicles were parked with a group of burly men gathered around smoking. They all looked startled as Ava screamed at them and brandished the scalpel. She leapt on top of one of the vehicles as the bleeding man burst through the double doors and screamed. "Get her!" Ava was too fast. She raced across the roof and bounced off the bonnet of the vehicle and she was out on the street. It was dark and she had no idea where she was, but she just ran. The men gave chase. She scampered down the middle of the road, still screaming for help but her legs were weakening, her strength was draining away. The men were gaining on her. She came to a bridge and ran to the middle. She couldn't see what was below, it was too dark. They were almost on her. There was only one option. She threw the scalpel at them, clambered over the concrete fence and tumbled over the edge, only just avoiding the grasping arms of her pursuers. She screamed again as she fell, not knowing what was beneath her, then she hit the water hard.

Ava couldn't swim. She had only ever had the occasional bath. She flapped around, splashing and swallowing mouthfuls of foul-tasting water. She went under several times as she was swept away. Just as she was about to be overcome by the dark watery oblivion, she felt mud and rocks beneath her feet. Just enough solidity to stand up and breathe properly. She pushed off the bottom and floated down the river, closer to the shallow edge. She crawled through the shallows for hours. Through the rubbish and thousands

of plastic bottles, determined to get as far away as possible from the nightmare behind her. Eventually she collapsed in the warm mud and let herself succumb to exhaustion.

She woke up in daylight. The hot Sun beat down on her. She was sore all over and it was the pain that eventually galvanized her, forcing her to move, to do something. Anything to take her mind off the aching and get her out of the scorching gaze of the Sun. Her whole body was slick and slippery, covered with wet, stinking mud. She raised her head and looked around at the buildings close by. Some ramshackle huts next to the water. She was in the muddy foreshore of a tidal estuary, washed up with the rest of the rubbish. She tried to crawl, but she was too weak. Her rage had disappeared and with it all her energy. She tried to cry but it hurt terribly. The stitches across her belly had burst and fluids were leaking out. The back of her head throbbed terribly; it was a raw open wound. She forced herself to crawl through the mud, one arm wrapped around her bloody, muddy, stomach, holding her intestines in, but it was too hard. She collapsed several times and lay there choking. Just as she drifted into unconsciousness again, she heard cries of alarm and could feel hands lifting her up out of the mud.

She woke up again and this time it was even more surreal. Blinding white lights blazing down on her, faces she didn't recognise staring at her and saying comforting words. Acrid smells assaulting her nostrils, an acid burn in her stomach and a throbbing pain in her head. She had a surge of panic, thinking she was back in the operating room. And it was all too much for her twelve-year-old brain, she slipped back into the sanctuary of unconsciousness.

When she emerged from the darkness again her eyes were stuck together, and her body was numb and alien, as if it wasn't hers. She forced her eyes open and took in the surroundings. She was in a bed with scratchy sheets, one of many beds lined up in a row against a wall that went all the way down to a grimy window at the end of a long room. She had no idea how long she had been there. She had lost all sense of time and her memories were in pieces. There were gauzy bandages wrapped around her middle, tubes attached to her nose and another tube taped to her arm. Her



head was also bound tightly. A man was sitting in another bed next to hers, he smiled and waved. He had a black beard. Ava panicked, screamed, fell out of the bed, ripping the tubes out and hitting her head on the floor.

She was woken up again, not knowing where she was, not knowing who she was, wondering if she was alive or dead. She would rather not wake up at all. Hands were gently holding her shoulders. Someone was shining a bright light in her eye. She overheard a conversation; people wondering who would do this to a young girl and describing how strong she was. She wouldn't answer the doctor's questions, she didn't know what to tell them. She never had a proper conversation with an adult in her entire life, and after her ordeal she was terrified of any male with facial hair. She couldn't put the pieces back together. When they finally left her alone, and as soon as she was strong enough, she limped out of the hospital in her gown. No one tried to stop her, no one gave her a second glance.

She walked all the way back to the crib in bare feet. She got lost many times, but some homing instinct guided her. She remembered her Nike trainers, she wished she still had them. Her head ached, she was empty, but she wasn't hungry, just thirsty but too weak to steal any water. The bandages wrapped around her torso were tight, the only thing holding her together. Her head was also bound with bandages and throbbed constantly. Most people passing by avoided her. Some tried to stop her and offer help, but she just kept moving, trying to stay out of the Sun. She didn't trust any grown-ups. She spied a big black car surrounded by burly men scanning the crowd. Ava panicked and ran, luckily avoiding their attentions. During her walk she kept seeing the stupid one-legged chicken, stalking her, standing on street corners, staring at her with demented eyes. Eventually she made it back to the crib, crawling over the trash, her body weak and starting to feel feverish. It was the middle of the day so Neymar and Messi would be out foraging. She collapsed on the dirty mattress and finally felt safe.

DENIS CAMDEN lives in Auckland, New Zealand. Denis works outdoors doing environmental restoration. Denis' work was initially the inspiration for writing until it turned into this out-of-control monster. Denis has completed two self-published science fiction stories, 'Hemi' and 'Dreams of Sun'. Both out there on Amazon and Smashwords.



CRIME / PSYCHOLOGICAL

# THE SHOOTER

ROBERT LEVIN





**A** Emerging from the john with her coat draped over her arm and carrying her overnight bag, Sharon tossed a gift-wrapped box onto the living room couch where I'd been dozing. "I would have given you this tonight," she said. "Happy fucking birthday, Steve. You've traveled around the sun thirty-five times now and you still haven't seen the fucking light. Enjoy the rest of the fucking weekend."

And then, slamming the apartment door behind her with a force that knocked a picture from the wall, she was gone.

For several minutes afterwards I stayed put on the couch, processing my reaction to what was clearly her permanent departure. Yes, it disturbed me that her decampment had come on the afternoon of this particular birthday. And I did experience an uneasiness about the void her absence from my life would leave. (Although we'd maintained separate Greenwich Village residences she'd been my steady girlfriend for nearly six months and slept at my bigger place a lot.) But these concerns were quickly dissolved in a wash of relief, a relief succeeded by what was close to apathy.

Not to say that I'd stopped liking Sharon. I still had an affection for her. The issue was that I couldn't fully love her. And her persistent demands, especially in the last weeks, to move in, to marry, to have a baby, had become oppressive. (She was just months younger than me and the alarm on her biological clock had been sounding long before our hookup.) Of course, the strain I'd been made to feel in this period wasn't all about Sharon specifically. It was rooted in the fact that the depth of emotion required to respond to such entreaties had always been off my spectrum. I was more than capable of lust and, occasionally, of infatuation. But love, certainly of the kind that she wanted, was something alien to me.

Indeed, what transpired with Sharon had merely perpetuated a lifelong pattern. It had happened, in one manner or another, with every "serious"

relationship with a woman I'd been in.

The pattern I'm referring to would invariably begin in the early stages of routine intimacy. And it didn't take much to trigger it, I'd hear the sounds they made in the bathroom, or suddenly notice a simple mole or dimpled hollow on a breast, and instantly suffer a spasm of revulsion that was accompanied by a heart jolt of fear—it was as though I'd caught a glimpse of the grim reaper himself. If the intensity of that reflex passed quickly there was an insidious aftereffect. An emotional distancing would be left in its wake, a distancing which was beyond me to repair. Try as I might, I couldn't shake my perception of their bodies as things that decayed and ultimately vanished. They were, their bodies, an atrocious and ephemeral concoction of pipes, wiring and nasty liquids that nature had fiendishly devised and then camouflaged by, at best, a pretty face or figure. Any ardor I may initially have felt would fade, and sex would become merely obligatory and mechanical. In the aftermath of the ensuing split-up, that could take place anywhere from weeks to months later, I would feel only a listlessness in the company of any new women I met. My torpor would last until my libido necessarily reawakened—it represented, after all, a biological imperative. Then, not counting one-nighters, I would once again enter a familiar scenario.

Sharon had attributed my resistance to her wishes to what she called "commitment-phobia" and I should acknowledge that I'd led her on a bit. That was because I was afflicted with an ambivalence which hadn't been a problem in previous failing liaisons. I was approaching middle age with no significant couplings to show for it, and given that she was comely, personable and intelligent, I thought I ought to want her. As a result, I couldn't bring myself to thoroughly discourage her aspirations. Despite her constant complaints about the noise that extended into the early morning hours from the nightclub across the street and just four floors below, she'd remained adamant about taking occupancy (with getting hitched and becoming a mother to follow on its heels). And I'd more than intimated that when I turned thirty-five I'd be ready. If, all along, I knew that my readiness wasn't very likely in the cards, I did live with the hope that something would at one point rescue me from my condition. But when the time came it remained too

far for me to go.

“So, are you prepared to take the next steps?” She’d asked me in bed that morning, snuggling behind me.

“Shit,” I grunted. “I can’t.”

Sharon’s parting critique of me, let it be said, had been off by 180 degrees. My dilemma wasn’t that I hadn’t seen the light, but that I’d seen too clearly what it illuminated.

My mother told me once that when I was born the obstetrician had remarked that I was “high-strung.” Since no further details were recalled by her, I can only imagine that I evacuated the womb trembling with terror. When I think of this, I’m reminded of another ghastly aspect of women’s bodies. This one involves nature’s design of the female anatomy and it makes perfect sense of my trepidation. A freshman at Pratt, for Christ’s sake, would know better than to locate the portal to the world in such close proximity to the anus. On the order of something my plumber might try to get away with, this arrangement made the moment of one’s birth comparable to exiting a subway station in pre-gentrified Jersey City.

Now that’s not just a joke. As it occurred to me later, the doctor’s comment had predicted a handicap to which I’d been sentenced. The crucial repression and denial mechanisms intended to insulate us against too keen an awareness of the deeper and uglier realities of existence, and belonging, it seemed, to most everyone else, were in my case missing.

And the consequences of this flaw were hardly confined to my inability to deeply connect with the women in my life. In fact, that was only a relatively small piece of it. I was also, and *most* devastatingly, consigned to a chronic anxiety and disconsolation about my own physical composition and fate (which, I suppose, the women simply mirrored). The sinister underside of nature being so evident to me, I lived with a dread that would fluctuate from low to high, but which was unremittingly there. The horror of the inevitability and the agony of death that I knew their beauty disguised and distracted us from, a bright spring day or magnificent landscape were not, for example, phenomena to rejoice in, but ominous and disquieting.

My state of mind, however, was a secret that, with one exception back in my twenties, I never revealed, not to the women it affected or to anyone else. More than a little embarrassed by it, and my socializing being minimal anyway (I had friends but none with whom I was very tight), I was loathe to discuss it. And inasmuch as I was functional, decent looking, educated and with a well-paying, if unrewarding, job, no one I came into contact with would suspect that something might be wrong. To my knowledge, the most negative thing ever expressed about me (apart from “commitment-phobia,” whatever the fuck that actually is) was that I tended to be “sullen.”

“Sullen.” I could summon no argument against that description. Veiled as my inner wretchedness may have been by a determination to appear as together as possible, I was still, and much too often, visibly tense and morose.

That exception I mentioned above was a psychiatrist who I saw twice a week for the better part of a year. I told him my story and he diagnosed the symptoms I presented as depression, which he interpreted as a chemical imbalance. In the course of my treatment, I went through an array of psychotropics, none of which had any effect whatsoever on my thoughts or moods. (The few times I’d tried street drugs like cocaine and speed they’d worked to appreciably lift my spirits, but as good as they’d made me feel the gratifications they afforded would dissipate rapidly.) My depression, this shrink said one day, was “refractory,” impervious, that is, to medication, and he was talking about alternatives like electric shock therapy (as a means with which to rearrange my chemistry???) when I abruptly upped and left. What he didn’t grasp was that depression (whether or not it’s recognized or conceptualized in this way by those who are cursed by it) was caused by seeing the world as it is.

I’d pretty much understood at this juncture that, notwithstanding the perpetual yearning that a miracle would happen to eradicate the quandary I was in, nothing figured to release me from my consciousness and fear of the evil that nature embodied. The cruelty of nature (watch those shows on the animal channels for a demonstration of how it doesn’t give an antelope’s ass about the so-called “sanctity” of life) was too starkly discernible to me. As



I've said, the mechanisms—I mean the illusions and mental manipulations—other people were able to employ in order to live with some measure of interior peace in respect to the unacceptable reality nature posed were not available to me. I'm speaking of, say, religion and the immortality it promised (or the justification for suffering it provided). I'm also speaking of an immersion in social or political missions to absorb the attention. And, to be sure, I'm speaking of profound romantic love which, from what I've observed, is a method people subconsciously use to transform the body from a source of apprehension into something quite the opposite—a vessel of transcendent pleasure. (This is probably the fundamental reason the termination of romantic attachments seems to be so shattering for most of mankind.)

A bitterly cold midwinter month of dragging myself through the rounds of my days had passed since Sharon took off and I was walking into the laundry room of my building's basement when I felt a hard crunch under my foot. Looking down I saw that I'd stepped on a large water bug and that its crushed remains were oozing from under my shoe. In the same instant I also saw a second bug right next to my shoe. Apparently in reaction to the event, it had jumped at least six inches straight up and, upon landing, scurried away. I felt no guilt or remorse about what had happened. But I wasn't indifferent either. No, what I felt was something like a thrill that made me want to repeat the experience. Compelled to chase after the companion bug, I cornered it behind a trash can where I dug my heel into it and watched it break apart, its lifeless tentacles still gently waving. With this act I felt another thrill akin to the high from a line or two of blow. But this one was joined by a revelation that had the impact of an epiphany. *I could end my difficulty with nature by becoming one with its heinousness.*

Before I was back upstairs I knew exactly what I was going to do.

How I acquired the weapon—an AR-15 with a 16-inch barrel and iron sights, or the half-dozen 30-round magazines that came with it—is nobody's business. *I will* report that I found it, in its design and craftsmanship, to be a stunningly beautiful instrument and that, immediately in its thrall, when I first held it in my arms—it weighed maybe six or seven pounds—it seemed to pulsate as if it was possessed of a beating heart. Was I, at that moment,

projecting the excitement of my own wildly beating heart onto it? The gun was also, considering it was second-hand, remarkably clean. All the preparation it needed was a quick tidying.

Per the previous owner's instructions, I removed the rear takedown pin and took out the bolt carrier group and charging handle. With that done, I wiped these components with a rag to rid them of small bits of black sludge that was dirty oil. Then, using a nylon bristle brush, I scoured the inside of the upper and lower receiver. Next, I ran a bore snake through the barrel to make sure it was completely clear. Finally, I added fresh oil to the outer three flanks of the charging handle and, returning to the bolt carrier group, put several more drops of oil into the holes on the side.

And that was it.

With the gun all set, I became feverish and agitated. Anxious to get moving, I was unable to sleep that night. In the morning I left a voice mail for my boss to tell him I was sick. After that I did nothing but pace the breadth of the apartment over and over again, pausing periodically to glance out the window at the shuttered night club below. Then, when darkness eventually fell, and wearing a thick parka with the loaded gun clutched against my chest and extra clips in a backpack, I climbed the two flights of stairs to the roof. Once there, I slid the long dead bolt rod and opened the creaking metal door to a blast of icy air, which made me wish I'd thought to bring gloves. Maybe twenty patrons, most of them young, were queued now in front of the club when I got to the roof's five-foot high concrete wall overlooking the street some thirty yards from the door. Pulling the parka's hood tighter around my head and laying the gun at my feet, I crouched and wedged myself between a skylight and a fireplace chimney and, peering over the wall, watched them. I could hear some in the group laughing. They were anticipating a good time.

I didn't wait to start. My target clearly illuminated by street lamps and the club's neon sign and decorative lights, I picked up the gun and began firing right away, moving my aim from the back of the line to the front. Having had no prior experience with this rifle, the crackles and pops of the reports were much louder than I'd thought they'd be. And the force of the

recoil against my armpit was stronger than I'd expected. It would doubtless leave a bruise, but I felt no pain. The thing was I couldn't really feel my body. I wasn't even cold. From the moment I'd started shooting I was liberated from my body and, by extension, from all the grief that it generated for me. I wasn't scared anymore. On the contrary, I was ecstatically happy. In the process of killing you kill your own death, at least your anxiety about it. Feeling far greater than anything I'd ever felt on coke or amphetamines, I realized what being truly "high" meant and why people coveted it. It meant to be outside of and *above* the body that will ultimately destroy you. I'd mimicked nature—given it what it obviously relished—and I'd been rewarded by euphoria. The vivid red blood that was erupting like a fountain of mini geysers all along the line was glorious to behold. I heard muffled cries, but no screaming. It was happening too quickly for that. One guy, who I'd hit in the torso, looked in my direction with a quizzical expression before falling. Even with the wind up the smell of sulfur was thick in the air. Shell casings were scattered all around me. And in short order sirens began to wail.

I think I got most all of them.

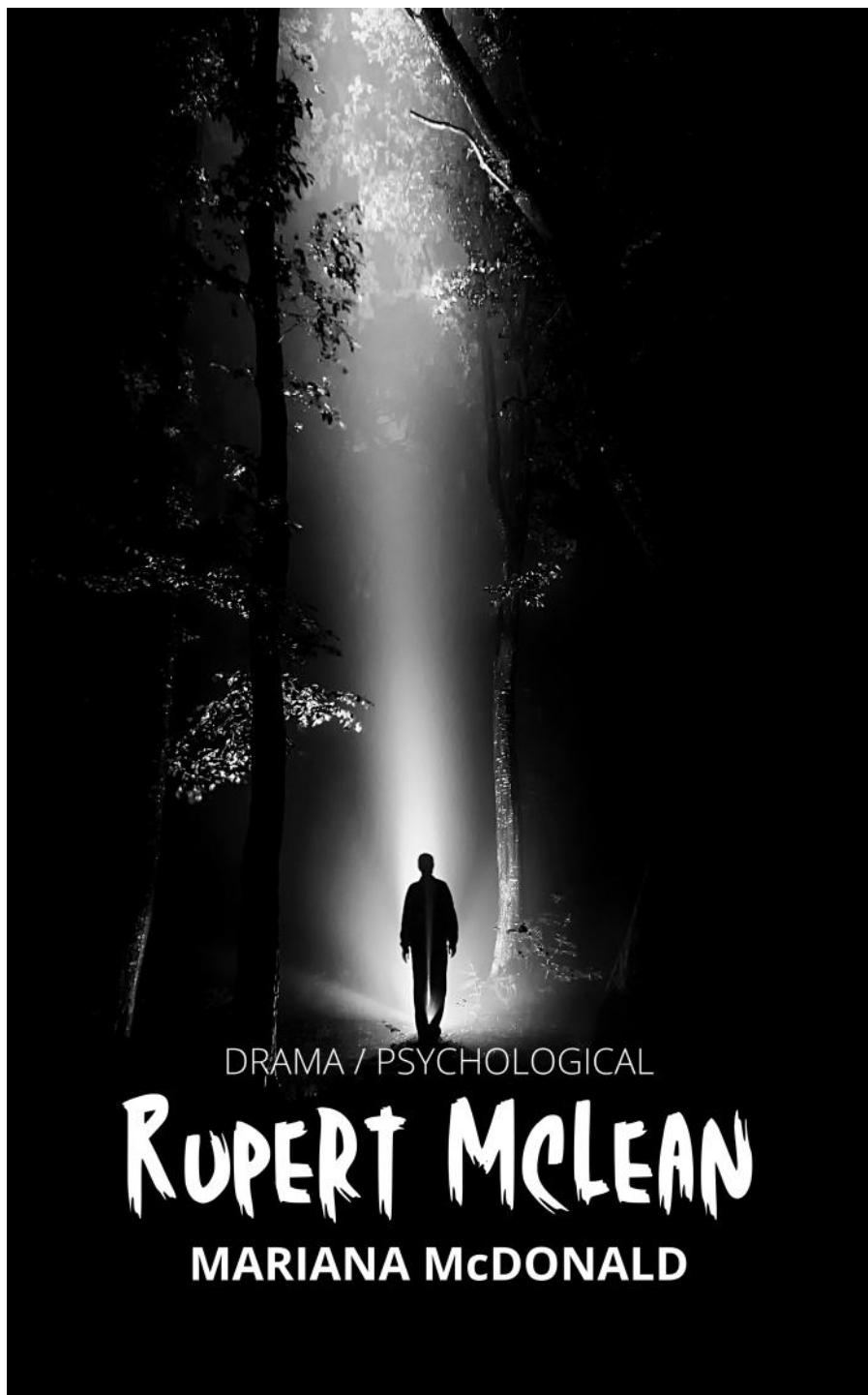
Since I'd always eschewed social media and had given no hint of my intentions to anyone, I knew there'd be puzzlement about my purpose. Had I come from some twisted ideology? A grudge against the club? People would look for a rationale that, however demented they'd deem it, was comprehensible to them. What could my motive have been? Well, I'll tell you. Self-defense. I was defending myself against my crippling terror of death. But no, they won't get it. This explanation will willfully mystify them because to understand it would oblige them to examine the devices they use to protect and sustain themselves and would, in turn, undermine those devices.

It was at this point that, separated from my body and with the prospect of my own death no longer frightening me, I thought to turn the gun on myself. If death or permanent incarceration were all that was left for me—and not knowing how long my exaltation (which might have made a life in prison tolerable if it continued) would last, I wanted to take advantage of a moment in which my demise would be near to painless. That was when I heard a slight grating sound at the rooftop door. The first responders had

showed up. They'd knocked out the stairwell bulbs, but there was still sufficient light from the windows of the surrounding and taller buildings to see the door, which I'd left slightly ajar, slowly opening wider. They were cautiously pushing against it with their weapons. Then they egressed, dropping to their stomachs on the tarred roof floor and crawling military-style along it. Although they were helmeted and heavily armored, it still, I thought, took courage to do what they were doing. Unlike me they had normal lives to lose. Almost simultaneously though, I also flashed on the possibility that, perhaps burdened with a problem similar to mine, at least some part of them had picked this job precisely for a chance to get a taste of the sensation I'd arrived at. But why they'd chosen to be here didn't really matter. Either of those reasons was enough to move me. Out of admiration for their heroism, if heroism was what it was, or empathy, if a private misery was what it was, came a swelling of generosity and a better idea.

Standing fully upright and facing them, I emptied a clip in their direction, careful to aim above them. There followed a crackling fusillade of hail-like metal, the impact of which lifted my feet and hurled me backwards and, in its deafening volume, so all-consuming of my senses as to further reduce my capacity to know any pain to a slight burning in my chest. With that, as the blood spilled from my ripped heart into the cavities of my body, I entered a sweet oblivion.

A former contributor to *The Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone*, ROBERT LEVIN is the author of "When Pacino's Hot, I'm Hot, a Miscellany of Stories and Commentary" (The Drill Press), "Against Mental Health: Short Stories" (Cyberwit), and "A Robert Levin Reader: Fiction • Commentary • Jazz" (Cyberwit). He is also the coauthor and coeditor, respectively, of two collections of essays about jazz and rock in the '60s: "Music & Politics," with John Sinclair (World Publishing) and "Giants of Black Music," with Pauline Rivelli (Da Capo Press).



DRAMA / PSYCHOLOGICAL

# RUPERT MCLEAN

MARIANA McDONALD



Rupert McLean did not grow up in poverty. Indeed, his upbringing was that of the privileged. Not once did he worry about food for dinner or, for that matter, lunch.

The only thing young McLean found challenging was his baby sister Sarah, whose talents included ballet steps done with brio, and a cuteness that all seemed obliged to comment on. This irked Rupert no end. Every time his parents scurried off to one of Sarah's recitals, Rupert seethed with indignation.

Some might eventually say that while Rupert had a pleasant enough face (unlike his cousin, born with a cleft lip and palate that resulted in a series of surgeries), there was something wrong with his brain. Or his brain chemistry, to be more precise. Something that made infinitesimal his ability to empathize while making his sense of importance enormous.

His brain was superb in the cognitive realm; he always did well academically. Well enough, in fact, to get into a prestigious college, one his well-heeled parents could afford. This raised Rupert's status substantially in the family and the community. He and his parents were always sure to bring up the name of the college he attended in the conversation, even if it were about the price of thumbtacks at the five and dime.

The crowning moment of his academic achievement was his college graduation. The entire family—parents, grandparents, Sarah, and the dogs—piled into the station wagon and drove the long distance to the ceremony.

The whole family stood at attention when Rupert's name was called. But Rupert was not to be seen crossing the stage to receive his diploma. His parents, alarmed, worried that something terrible had befallen Rupert. They yanked the family from the graduation tent and rushed to campus security, where a lone worker accompanied them to Rupert's dorm.

After a series of unanswered knocks, the worker hesitatingly unlocked

Rupert's door and let them in. They held their breath. Rupert, dressed in a sweatshirt and cut-off jeans, was passed out on the floor, reeking of liquor.

As he grew older, Rupert's questionable behavior was held in check for several years by a liaison with a pleasant young woman who had been awed by his brains and charm. She consistently compensated for his rudeness and selfishness with friends and family alike, until she could tolerate it no longer.

She was the first to point out the irony that while Rupert's cousin could be considered disabled—his speech and self-confidence were damaged by his condition—it was Rupert who had the handicap. He simply could not be kind.

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As he aged, the examples of Rupert's questionable behavior grew in number and scope, depending on which family member was queried. His sister Sarah would mark the tipping point as the time she visited the family home with her newborn, and needed to wash the baby's clothes one afternoon. Rupert, home for a visit, would have nothing of it. The noise from the dryer disturbed his afternoon nap, so he went to the laundry room and turned the machine off. Sarah, dismayed and maternal, turned it back on within moments. Rupert, enraged, stomped into the laundry room and tore the dryer hose and plumbing fixtures from the wall.

After his father died, Rupert insisted on being put in charge of his mother's will, arguing that his legal training—his inelegant showing at commencement did not keep him from law school—made him well-suited to the task. His ever-doting mother agreed without pause, having made compelling excuses in her mind for each and every one of her son's egregious actions.

When she passed away a few years later, Rupert gave up all pretense at employment (his legal practice was more a hobby than a profession) and ensconced himself in the family home for a period of several years, while legatees went ignored, and asset after asset disappeared.



Sarah was extremely concerned. Rupert had simply taken over the family home, and their cousin's share of the estate was yet to be paid. When she sought legal removal of her brother as executor, Rupert threatened "a bloodbath." Sarah lodged a complaint, and at the legal proceedings in probate court, all those who entered were electronically checked with a wand by the guards.

Rupert was removed as executor, and when the new lawyer came on, Sarah learned of the hundreds of thousands of dollars in assets and property Rupert had spent, hidden, or walked off with. A suit filed against him was decided in Sarah and her cousin's favor, but no one in law enforcement was able to locate the former executor. Like the valuables he took, he had simply disappeared.

The end of control over his late mother's riches plunged Rupert into disarray. His fury at having been challenged and deposed fueled sleepless nights with systematic plans to right the wrong, as he saw it. He wanted to go after his sister and cousin and do them physical harm, but knew that would be unwise as then he would have to deal with the court, lose what he had, and find a job. That was a terror he could not face.

Instead, he began to fashion random acts of unkindness for revenge. Small things, at first, like flushing sanitary napkins down public toilets, an action that reflected his fierce commitment, in that he had to purchase the sanitary napkins. He soon discovered the limitation of this form of revenge, however, as the only way he could witness the consequences was to hang out near the restroom, an activity that was bound to raise suspicions.

For a period of time he would steal people's mail, driving in his late mother's car by the mailboxes of neighbors he knew would be at work. The act of taking the mail from the box gave him a thrill, but like the sanitary napkins scheme, left him without the chance to see the results.

His idea for what would become his favorite revengeful action came about by chance. He was watching a television show where an accident had caused a car to roll over, and its driver was suspended upside-down, held sloth-like by the seatbelt. Emergency responders were quick to pry open the crushed door and cut the seat belt, allowing the driver to be pulled out like a

newborn.

That made Rupert think. People were unnecessarily sloppy about their seatbelts, either not using them at all—so ignorant!—or letting them hang out like skin tags or bits of intestine when they parked their cars. They should be corrected and, ultimately, punished.

So it began. Rupert started off in parking garages, going from floor to floor looking for cars with seat belts that stuck out at the bottom of the door. Glancing around first to make sure no one was watching, he took bolt cutters out from under his jacket and sliced apart the first hernia-like seat belt, then the next. One day he would do driver's-side seat belts, and the next day passenger-side. His glee mounted until he realized the old albatross was there with this approach: he knew his actions would enrage and infuriate people, but he wouldn't get to see it.

He decided to move to open parking lots, ones near shopping malls or grocery stores. He planned it so that he would have his own bag of groceries with him, to ward off the doubts of passers-by. The thrill was greater in these lots, both because of the inherent danger of being caught, and because he could now observe the exasperated drivers once they saw the surgery that had taken place. "What the?!" he heard time and again. It was soothing to his ears.

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That day at the superstore parking lot everything was going as usual. It was a passenger-side day. Rupert identified four different cars for cutting, and decided to begin with the Japanese-made sedan with a "Baby on Board" sign. The sign annoyed him immensely. It doesn't matter that a baby is on board, you idiot, if you can't even close and lock your door properly, he grunted.

A quick glance around, bag of groceries in arms, he rested his hip on the car to the right of the sedan, and feigned checking something in the bag as he pulled the bolt cutters from under his jacket and quickly cut the protruding seatbelt in two. He smiled. Now it looked like a big fat fringe.

His next car was at the other end of the lot—a security precaution. He walked there slowly and deliberately. He looked forward to the feeling of the thick dense fabric fighting the bolt cutters as it was dissected.

Rupert was standing next to the target car, a white van, when he felt it. A dagger of pain in his left shoulder, then a wave of something between pain and pressure that went from his neck to his stomach and made it impossible to breathe. He had learned the signs of stroke; he preferred when there were pneumatic devices in acronyms or rhyming phrases, like stop, drop, roll. This wasn't a stroke, or at least he couldn't tell, because he wasn't talking and didn't know if his speech was slurred.

He dropped the groceries and the bolt cutters and moved as quickly as he could to the exit road, waving his hands in the air.

*Help me!* he tried to say, but wasn't sure the words came out. He thought he was probably looking pale or blue, and frantic. He faced the oncoming traffic, hoping someone would stop.

A car slowed down and the woman driving called out, "Are you okay? You look awful. Let me take you to the hospital," as she clicked the door lock with her hand.

He got in, gasping. She told him she would take him to the emergency room a few minutes away.

"Just hold on," she said. "You're going to be all right."

They rode in silence for a moment, when she realized it might calm him down if she talked. "I love that superstore, you know, they always have everything. I went looking for dress for my daughter and sure enough found a bunch, it was hard to decide! Then of course I found a cute little pair of shoes and a purse and..."

A dog appeared out of nowhere and was suddenly in the path of the car. The driver slammed on the brakes to avoid the dog, only to be rear-ended by a pickup truck.

The back of the car was crunched like an accordion. The airbag absorbed the impact for the driver, but Rupert flew through the windshield, soaring into the air above everyone in a way that might have, under other circumstances, suited his sense of himself.

The driver, stunned, looked to make sure her toddler was unhurt. Relieved she was crying but safe, she glanced at the passenger seat, its only occupant the airbag.

Her thoughts raced. She'd forgotten to ask him to fasten his seat belt.

She looked around as she heard the screams of onlookers, who watched as the projectile person landed on the pavement with a cracking sound, his skull breaking into pieces before their eyes.

MARIANA McDONALD is a poet, writer, and activist. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including fiction in *About Place Journal*, *So to Speak*, *Libretto*, *UpDo: Flash Fiction by Women Writers*, and *Cobalt*; poetry in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *The New Verse News*, and *Poesía en Vuelo*; and creative nonfiction in *InMotion*. McDonald was granted a Black Earth Institute fellowship in 2022, serving in dual roles as Scholar Advisor and Fellow for 2022-2025. She lives in Atlanta.



DRAMA / CRIME

# THE AUDACITY

JAY CHAKRAVARTI



**T**oday no one is sure where the name of the river came from. According to local lore, a group of Hindus came to settle near the river after being fed up with the tyranny of a local king, Vallabh Chandra, in the twilight of the 16th century. From then on, civilization began to spread throughout the area around the river called Krishna. No one in this village is aware of the origin of the river, although they agree that it is not the Ganges. To them, it is the Krishna. In this village, no one is motivated to bother with trivial things like names. They are truly free from the shackles of human language. The language of traditional education is not essential for the spiritual progress of mankind. There are many types of languages. People can learn the greatest lessons from random, unrelated things, which are completely incomprehensible to us educated folks. In such cases, we are the ones liable to be labelled 'illiterate'.

Take Shivnath for example. Shivnath has no formal education. His little world is submerged in the dark sea of ignorance. People like him are not aware of things like human psychology, but since I am, it must be said that it was her young daughter's beauty that made Shivnath's mother hate her so much. The children's father was a monster. A representative of the dark matter that seems to maintain universal balance. Not only did he cause unspeakable physical and mental abuse to his wife and children, he even attempted to rape his daughter once. That terrible night was the night of *ShamshanKali\** puja. It was as if the devil himself had possessed Shivnath's father in the intoxication of the eternal war with the divine. The father first overpowered his daughter by covering her mouth and arresting her hands, then he seated himself on the torso of his daughter of fourteen. The devil crossed all limits of atrocity and dared to strip his daughter and prepare to stroke her burgeoning bosom. It was then that the devil realized that someone was watching him in secret.

Whether or not any kind of light can survive inside the pitch darkness of a *Krishnagabhar\** is, perhaps forever, beyond the reach of human knowledge. Shivnath's father, however, cannot be called pitch dark in the literal sense. The real truth is that despite his monstrous personality, he was still a human being, and, being human, there were obvious loopholes in his demonic persona. A dim light soon emerged from his darkness when the devil realized that Shivnath had not fallen asleep and the little boy of ten was now looking up at his father with fearful, unblinking eyes.

Shivnath's father released his daughter. With trembling hands, he pulled the curtain over the girl's bare chest. Shivnath's father had then stumbled out of their modest hut like the drunkard that he was. Shivnath could not sleep that night. His father did not come back home either Shivnath had shut the door after him and lay sleepless beside his sister, hugging her in a tight cocoon of protection all night. His sister didn't sleep that night either. Only their mother slept. But was she really asleep? Shivnath could swear that he did not hear his mother breathe even once during the entire night.

However, there is no reasonable cause to believe Shivnath's assessment. She had stood up from her sleeping mat instinctively when someone knocked on their door the next morning. It seemed that she had woken up a long time ago.

Two fellow village men, Bishe Halder and Mohan Garai, were knocking on their door. Shivnath's mother lost her consciousness after hearing the news that they had brought. Shivnath was neither sad nor afraid after hearing the news. Instead, he bowed to *ShamshanKali* and thanked her several times in his heart. The Goddess had slaughtered the devil last night.

The body of Shivnath's father was found at Panchami ghat\* of the Krishna. The local village folk are also unaware of the history of how this ghat came to be named. I collected the story from a sailor who lived on the opposite bank of the river. A teenage girl named Panchami sacrificed her life to save the local kingdom and her honor from the Bargi\* bandits. She had single handedly organized a ragtag army to fend off the attack of the Bargis. They fought fiercely. The bandits could not save themselves even after



slaughtering the untrained army led by a woman. Panchami, even after losing her life, reappeared in the form of a goddess. She fulfilled her promise by miraculously obliterating the Bargi army in the blink of an eye. After that unprecedented incident which took place at this ghat, it was named after the lady of the legend.

History, be it fact or mere fiction, serves as a reference for mankind. It is usually written or retold to spread religious ideas in society and in many cases, they are a simple means of imparting moral education. Although it is the fatal flaw of mankind to refuse to learn from history and instead, forget it, it is also true that we are somewhat civilized today because of the weight of history. Those among us who are educated begin to shed this weight when we invest our imagination in dreams of the present and near-future, while we begin to deviate slowly from the solid roots of history.

Shivnath is illiterate. He does not value history. He understands the concept of time, days, weeks, but he understands the past to be the time that he has spent on this earth since his birth till yesterday; or maybe the time his parents have lived till now since their births. Shivnath does not understand that the past fifty, or even a hundred years, is all but a droplet in the sea of time. Shivnath lives in the present.

The severed head of Shivnath's father was found at the *Mahashamshan\** near the Goddess' temple, again on the bank of river Krishna. Panchami ghat is a long way from this place, but for what reason the decapitated head was brought so far, neither the villagers nor the law enforcers could surmise. Only Shivnath could understand. To him the whole matter was as clear as day. On the night of the *ShamshanKali* puja, the ferocious Goddess who wears a garland of severed heads, slaughtered the devil by cutting off his head. Then took the head and went back to the riverside crematorium. The ShamshanKali had returned to the place where she was being worshipped, after vanquishing the demon of the village.

People did wonder whether someone had developed a fondness for skewed ritualistic traditions and sacrificed Shivnath's father to the Goddess on the night of this sacred and terrible puja, where sacrifices were common but, among the civilized, were limited to young, healthy goats. However, in

the cremation ghat where his severed head was found, there was no evidence that any such crime had taken place. Besides, several enforcers of the law had participated in yesterday's puja. They had waited for a long time, craving the mutton offerings which would be distributed post-Puja. The animals were cut down in the wee hours amidst raucous cheers and drums, bells, conch shells. Shivnath's father had been cut down long before all that.

Shivnath never discussed all this with his sister. Neither did his sister raise this topic after the death of their father. Shivnath used to think that his sister had forgotten all about that night. At the Panchami Ghat the next day, she was crying as balefully as their mother, clinging to their father's headless corpse.

"Oh God... oh father, how could this happen to you! What will we do now? How will we survive? Father...", she had been saying through her tears.

Shivnath had wished he could laugh out loud. He found his sister's crying unbearable. He was angry with himself. Why did he wake up last night? If he hadn't woken up, he too could have cried this morning while clinging to his father's body. But.. would he really have been able to cry?

Their father was a fiend even before the devil took over him that night. Was there really any reason to waste one's tears on that monster? So why were mother and sister acting like this? They should be happier than Shivnath on this glorious day! Being helpless women, they suffered the brunt of father's tyranny.

It took several years for Shivnath's anger to subside. In the daily struggle for survival, Shivnath started agricultural work in the summer of his childhood. Mother continued to dislike and mistreat his sister. Although she was now at the ripe old age of twenty-two, his mother had not made any efforts to marry off her daughter, and neither did Shivnath expect his mother to make any such efforts in the future. The villagers ridiculed Shivnath and his mother often enough about their lackadaisical attitude when it came to the marriageable girl in their house. Nothing changed. On the other hand, by the twisted grace of God, the fearful daughter became more beautiful every day. It was as if mother nature had conspired to endow

her with all the beauty there is at her disposal. As she became more gorgeous than ever, like the envious stepmother of folk tales, Shivnath's mother became more and more vindictive towards her daughter.

Shivnath could not understand his mother's behavior. At some point, he gave up trying to understand. His mother began to share a portion of the accumulated hatred Shivnath harboured towards his dead father.

Shivnath had never felt anything but pity for his sister before. The first exception occurred when he saw her crying over their father's dead body. He was angry. But that anger had dissipated over time.

Shivnath was not angry after the second incident, but greatly annoyed. It was the afternoon of *Chaitra Sankranti*\*, and Shivnath was supposed to go to the fairgrounds with his sister later. As late afternoon rolled by, mother suddenly ordered Shivnath's sister to clean the cattle shed again. Just yesterday, the young calf was suffering due to some infection which caused the poor animal to vomit and shit all over the place. Shivnath's sister had cleaned the shed early in the morning after the calf had begun to recover. However, in the afternoon, mother felt that the shed was not cleaned properly, so even though Shivnath's sister had already taken a bath, it was recommended that she clean the cattle shed again. Right now!

Shivnath's sister did not object. When Shivnath had tried to protest, she held him back by grabbing his hand. Her big and beautiful, naturally kohl-rimmed eyes pleaded for him to keep quiet. That is why Shivnath could not speak up against his mother's orders. He angrily removed his sister's soft but overworked hands off his own. Then he took off towards the fairgrounds.

What Shivnath did that evening at the fairgrounds, he didn't remember anymore. On that evening, however, Shivnath had finally come face to face with a cruel truth after tearing down the blinding shackles of compassion and love. That day, he felt that his sister's worldly suffering was perhaps her own creation. If there was even a single spark of anger, a spark of protest that existed in her sister's frightened heart which could voice, could father or mother have oppressed her like this for years? So why should Shivnath's mother and father only be at fault? Taking a beating silently is even more contemptible.

Shivnath had never felt too attached to this world. Now, he began to look at the world with an immeasurable scorn. I cannot say where this contempt originates, in which cavity of the human mind. Perhaps its import is from the same hidden nook whose chief inhabitant is fear. Fear of the unknown.

The murder of Shivnath's father was never solved. Even though some important information was obtained on the morning of his death, none was hopeful that the investigation would go anywhere. Kartik Jaldas's boat had been stolen on the night of *ShamshanKali* Puja. One of the boat's oars was recovered from the jetty next to the Panchami ghat. A strange incident had also happened at the temple in the crematorium late at night. A village madman came running and fell unconscious at the feet of the divine and benevolent Goddess. Although the people present at the Puja that night had regarded it as yet another shenanigan of the madman, it was noticed the next morning that he had lost his power of speech in the space of one night.

The speculations of a bored mind can even uncover the secrets behind the universe's creation. However, even though the flow of these villagers' solitary lives can be considered slow, it does have enough speed to make them forget old mysteries or lose interest eventually. Though that happens a bit later in these people compared to city folks, the whispered speculations about the incident ended after a point. In reality, nothing ends in this creation, only their form changes. The death of Shivnath's father and the mystery surrounding it was naturally replaced by some other object of speculation.

The same didn't hold true for Shivnath. Only Shivnath took no recourse to imagination because he thought he knew the truth all along. However, a year after the *Sankranti* incident, Shivnath progressed a little further down his stream of thought. There was no doubt in his mind that Goddess Kali had killed his father. But there was one question in the corner of Shivnath's mind that began eating at him: Did his father really do something so heinous that he should die such a horrible death?

So why is the merciless moneylender Shashank Kayal still alive today? He used his mercenary goons to beat up the poor Bhattacharya Brahmin

before driving him and his family out of the village. No one shed a single drop of tear in the river Krishna, even after seeing the desperate condition of such a venerated scholar. Did the all-seeing Mother Goddess not get to see that scene? Or did she also make the same mistake as the foolish villagers and consider the Bhattacharya family guilty? Is she blind?

Modern knowledge is fixated on information. This knowledge has no value in the eternal scope of time. However, human beings can sometimes derive universal truths from information. Those who are able to extract truth from mere information may be regarded as true humans. The rest aren't that different from dumb beasts.

Shivnath is a human being. That is why he was able to extract knowledge from a piece of information he had overheard a long time ago.

"That must have happened some twenty years ago. They weren't caught, you see. They escaped soon after finishing the sacrifice."

"Was it a grown-up?"

"Of course not! There is no use sacrificing a grown-up, is there? It was a baby they had sacrificed. I don't remember if it was a boy or a girl. I did not even understand what was happening then. I just remember that the place was flowing with blood..."

At that time, Shivnath had been at the cremation ghat, while his father's severed head and body, placed side by side, were burning on a funeral pyre. During the ceremonial *mukhagni*\*, Shivnath had pressed down hard on his father's face with the burning wicker sticks. He seemed to forget for a moment that he was setting fire to a dead man's face. However, a lot of time has elapsed since that incident. Memory can be a funny thing. It may also happen that at the age of fifteen, Shivnath had overheard the above conversation between two of his friends while trying *beedi*\* with his pals for the first time. Whenever he may have heard it, he was no longer a child but a young man when he gleaned knowledge from that snippet of old information.

Shivnath was thinking of two possibilities, apart from the truth. It was the *ShamshanKali* who had beheaded his father, that was the incontrovertible truth. Therefore, the first possibility that came to his mind was: there was

inconsistency in the judicial diktats of the divine mother. She is compassionate towards some and at the same time, cruel and stone-hearted towards other sinners. She is supposed to fight darkness with weapons of darkness itself. Yet, she seems to not see or ignore many injustices caused by evil human beings. Given a chance, she can even drink a baby's blood without hesitation. What sort of a mother is that? What explains this behavior?

The second possibility was simple enough: the divine mother did whatever she was supposed to. Only Shivnath was not able to figure out the reasoning behind her divine plan.

Scholars, scientists, sages and philosophers of this country and beyond are lost in this game of understanding the divine plan. Some do so out of spiritual pursuit, some do it as a hobby, some for money while some only pretend to figure it out.

Shivnath kept his calm and carved out a little plan of his own. In order to simplify the calculation like a diligent student of science, Shivnath excluded all peripheral information from his calculation. Despite the unaddressed injustices that he had seen, there were countless stories of divine glory too, some of which Shivnath had been hearing since childhood. It is because of those divine miracles that one is compelled to bow their head in front of the Goddess. Thus, he must focus only on his father to find the reason why the Goddess meted out the punishment that she did.

It can be assumed that on the night of *ShamshanKali* Puja, the powerful mother Goddess of their village becomes even more powerful. Maybe if someone commits a sin on the night of her Puja, the sinner is punished by the mother herself. But Shivnath's father had only thought about committing a sin. He didn't actually commit it, did he?

Although Shivnath could not fully understand as a boy, he now understands perfectly what his father's intentions were. Shivnath's sister was now a fully grown young woman, way more beautiful than she was as a teenager. Her beauty and unmarried virginity would be discussed in racy tones by the village youth. His father too, had stumbled for a moment. Being a human, he was far from perfect.

Then why? Why did his father have to die? Why did he get the Goddess' maximum punishment? If he had gone all the way and really raped his daughter, even then the penalty would have been his death. So why was there such inconsistency in the Goddess' judicial standards? Was Shivnath unable to grasp the Goddess' divine plan? Or was her divine plan flawed?

Man is a strange animal. We fear the unknown. Again, we are the ones who end up doing something impossible in order to illuminate the unknown. Sometimes we make great medicinal discoveries in our pursuit of answers to a disease, and sometimes we compose atomic monsters while trying to understand the micro-engineering of existence. We are kindness embodied, we are godlike in our capacity for loving birds, plants, nature, life itself. Again, we can be cruel, we can sacrifice babies for our vested self-interests; we do not spare a thought before sacrificing innocent rodents at the futuristic altar of scientific research.

With a calm mind, after giving it a lot of thought, Shivnath raped his sister on the night of *ShamshanKali* Puja, eight years since the night of his father's demise. He did not do it for his father, nor his mother, his sister, not even to satiate his own sexual appetite. Shivnath's distorted hunger for knowledge was the reason behind his madness. While committing the crime, he could not look at the wide open eyes of his devastated sister. The hand with which he was pressing down on his sister's mouth was awash with her warm tears. Their mother slept away and did not wake up during her daughter's ordeal, just like last time.

Having successfully completed the first stage of his divine experiment, Shivnath walked out of the hut with restless footsteps. Even though it was the night of worship, public gathering was mostly limited to the temple by the crematorium, the seat of the *ShamshanKali*. The streets of the village were dark and empty. Shivnath walked over to the lifeless Panchami ghat. The Krishna's cold tears looked gray in the starlight. There were no tears in Shivnath's eyes. Now he would simply wait for the judgment of the Goddess. Before she lopped his head off, he had a question for the divine mother.

Shivnath had no idea how long he would have to wait. He was sure that it would all be over before dawn. That is why he felt a grave trembling in his chest when he saw the soft light of dawn illuminate the eastern sky as night drew to a close. This was not supposed to happen.

The sun rose in the sky just like every other morning. Yet, Goddess Kali did not descend upon Shivnath to deliver her divine justice. Shivnath waited for a long time. He saw Hari Samanta's aging aunt visit the ghat for her morning ablutions. She was a notoriously early riser. After that, Shailenda, a government employee, appeared on the scene with a toothbrush made from the bark of the *neem*. He had to catch the 6:30 a.m. bus every morning to reach his office in the nearest town. Surely the Goddess wouldn't show up in front of *these* people to deliver her deadly justice? What will she do, kill him with her signature falchion and take his severed head back to the crematorium in front of their eyes? Shivnath can't say about the aging lady, maybe she had accumulated enough blessings in her lifetime to witness the Goddess' bloody justice, but Shivnath knew for sure that the blind materialist Shailenda was not as virtuous.

Humans are great at making mistakes, Shivnath thought as he made his way back home. There must be a mistake in his interpretation of the divine plan. There must be some reason for the no-show which Shivnath cannot fathom with his limited knowledge of the divine.

Considering all the facts, a third possibility occurred to Shivnath. His demonic father had led a sinful life. The number of sins he may have been permitted was exhausted when he desired to rape his own daughter that night. But his hesitation at the last moment, turning from a monster into a human just before the act - was that meaningless to the Goddess? No, that cannot be. This was not compatible with Shivnath's concept of the benevolent, motherly nature of the ferocious *ShamshanKali*.

Shivnath got the answer to his question as he got closer to his home. In an instant, Shivnath realized that his father had not been punished by the Goddess. Instead, he had been rewarded. It was Shivnath who was being punished. After all, he was the one who had committed the sin.

Of course! How did Shivnath not realise this all along?



Shivnath's father had left the house in shame. The shame of being caught by not one, but two of his children at the lowest point of his life as a father. Even a monster like him could not return home with the burden of that shame again. *ShamshanKali*, the benevolent mother Goddess, had saved him, simply because he had finally experienced shame for a sin that he was poised to commit.

The light of knowledge illuminated Shivnath's fearful eyes. He realized that he had turned into a monster far worse than his father. Thus, he had been punished. He didn't balk at the thought of being beheaded by the Goddess, but he hadn't thought about the consequences in case he survived. His punishment was to go back home and face his sister once more. His divine punishment was to live.

Shivnath felt dizzy. Somehow he sat down on the ground and looked towards the closed doors of his home with tearful eyes. Then he screamed like a madman and lost his consciousness. His tired body collapsed to the ground. Shivnath had finally received his education.

### \*TRANSLATIONS

***ShamshanKali*** - Considered to be one the most powerful and destructive forms of Goddess Kali, her black form typically represents the primordial darkness before the creation of the universe. Her sword represents divine knowledge while the severed heads signify slain ego, a prerequisite in order to attain moksha.

***Krishnagahvar*** - Black hole

**Ghat** - Stone embankment with a flight of steps leading down to the river.

**Bargi** - Mercenary group sent by the Maratha Empire who indulged in large scale plundering of the countryside of Bengal for about ten years (1741–1751)

**Mahashamshan** - A great cremation ground, typically by the side of a river.

**Chaitra Sankranti** - The auspicious final day of the Bengali calendar year. The last day of the 12th month "Chaitra".

**Mukhagni** - The ritual of touching the dead's face with burning wicker sticks during a funeral ceremony. This ritual is typically performed by the male descendant of the deceased.

**Beedi** - A beedi is a thin cigarette or mini-cigar filled with tobacco flake and commonly wrapped in a tendu or *Piliostigma racemosum* leaf and tied with a string.





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