



051
October '07

down in the dirt
revealing all your
dirty little secrets

Table of contents

10/07, Down in the Dirt, volume 051

David McLean	1
Pat Dixon	2
Mel Waldman	7
Jordan M. Atcheson	20
Kimberly J. Erickson	29
David Siegel Bernstein	39
G.A. Scheinoha	40
Janet Kuypers	41

Scars art, pages 42, 44. Cover art of a row of motorcycles in Highland Park.

the truth of fire — Amanda's haiku (1)

David McLean

the ending comes first -
for ash is the truth of fire
and death love's answer

Good Day

Pat Dixon

As Lorna Chalker begins to thumb through Kate Shaughnessy's file folder, a crisp rapping on the frame of her open door makes her glance up.

"Busy, Lorna? Becky started my training a couple minutes early today, which means, logically, that Becky ended our session a couple minutes early."

"Hi, Kate. Come in. So—how did it go today?"

"Pretty well." Kate wipes her face on a small towel she is carrying and hands Lorna her food diary for the previous week. "No new personal bests with any of your Nautilus machines, but no backsliding either. It was a good workout—plus I think I got something very, very useful out of it, too."

"That's the way it should be when you come here. Want to jump up on the scales first?"

"No—but I will. I already know I'm going to be about two more pounds heavier this week, but I know what I need to do about it."

Kate closes the door and tosses her towel on the floor between the "client chair" and Lorna's desk. Then she slides the two weights along the top of the medical scale to register 142 pounds and steps onto the square platform at its base. She taps the smaller weight a tiny bit to the left, waits for the balance to settle, and steps off.

"Yup—141 and three-fourths libs. That'd be just about 137 libs without these heavy sneaks and all these heavy, sweaty gym clothes—and my heavy watch and keys."

Lorna carefully records the weight information on Kate's food diary and looks up.

"Want to be measured and calipered and have your Body Fat Index graphed?"

"Nope—definitely not this time. I'm fat, fat, fat, Lorna, and I don't even want you touching my fat fat—or even *looking* at my fat fat. Maybe next week—or the next—or the one after that. And, by the way, *thank* you for never being pushy about my weight—or judgmental about how I look—whatever you privately think. Not everyone is so tactful."

Lorna blinks and frowns slightly: "Like who?"

"Like my friggin' doctor is who. Yesterday I had my annual physical, an' when we're looking over my chest X-rays, he points and gratuitously says, 'Hmm—your left *boob* is lower than your right one.'"

"He said *that*—and pointed right at you?!"

"Well, actually he said 'breast' and was pointing at the front-view X-ray, but he majorly pissed me off. For one thing, it's a normal womanly fact—and for another, I've been self-conscious about it for the past twenty years."

"What did you say?"

"I couldn't think of a thing. I was too friggin' *mad* at him. Normally I have

snappy comebacks without end, but not yesterday.”

“Well—you *could* have said, ‘Hmm—your left *ball* is lower than your right ball—Doctor.’ And you could be looking right at his crotch while you said it.”

“Ha! That’s great, Lorna! Really great. Did you just make that up?”

“Well, not really. My Aunt Janine said that once to her doctor about—oh—thirty or forty years ago—way before I was born. I’ve heard her tell it maybe fifty, sixty times. My mom and her—and even my dad and Uncle Harley—they none of ’em ever get tired of hearing Aunt Janine telling it over again every time there’s any sort of a get-together.”

“Well—that’s a *really* great line—and I *will* plagiarize it someday—one way or another.”

Lorna smiles and glances at Kate’s latest food diary for half a minute.

“I see here, Kate, you’re chowing down an awful lot of oatmeal cookies in your afternoon snacks on—um—four of the last seven days. That’s 600 to 800 extra calories each afternoon, which is more than you’re going to burn up by grading and teaching or climbing stairs—or even working out here twice a week.”

“Self-medication. Not a good thing, but much better than two or three Tom Collinses, especially when I have to drive thirty miles to get home afterwards. The traffic is wild enough to kill me every time I make the trip—without me being loopy and impaired and a menace to others.”

“How is you mom?”

“Declining—failing—slipping—sliding. Chiefly mentally, but physically, too.”

“So, it’s putting stress on you, and you react by eating too much when you’re there? How ’bout, instead of having cookies with refined sugar in them, you take a little bag of Granny Smith apples to eat while you visit her? They’re only about eighty calories each, and three of those would be way better for you than six or eight cookies, right? You can cut them up into little pieces to munch on. Or, for variety, you could take a little bag of rice cakes, like these here on my display table. They only have forty-five calories each.”

“Apples—even green tarty tartlette apples—sound okay, but, at least for me, the rice cakes would taste too much like friggin’ cardboard.”

“Well, they also come in flavors—apple-cinnamon rice cakes only have five more calories each than the plain ones. That’s still just half what one oatmeal cookie has.”

“Okay, those sound like good suggestions. I guess I can take my own little goody bag of low-cal oral gratification with me next time I drive down to New Haven to see her.”

Kate frowns for five seconds, then deliberately relaxes her face and glances around the edges of the ceiling of Lorna’s small office. Looking into Lorna’s face, she continues.

“I love that woman, of course, but she and her apartment drive me, well, fifty-seven varieties of bat-shit after just five minutes. I think I’ve mentioned that she usually sets her heat up way too high—on 85 or worse—and forgets to rehy-

drate—or else she chooses not to drink anything 'cause it'll make her pee more, and she's been soaking her sofa a lot in spite of double-diapering. I've been going over there more and more lately, and I'm afraid I may have to stay overnight with her two or three times a week pretty soon."

"What about home health aides? Have you tried looking into that?"

"Of course. I've got something called 'cluster care' set up for her, where somebody pokes a head in to check on her every few hours, day and night, but it won't be enough for much longer. But the *good* news is my mom still knows who I am—most of the time. And I've been getting a lot of—mmm—handy material from this experience."

"Handy—material?"

"Details and stuff I can write about in some way—partly as a way to digest—and absorb—and excrete—that part of my life—and partly to do what I do well: make up short stories."

"Hmm. Like what kind? I didn't know you're writer. I thought you just taught."

"Oh—I've written all different kinds: murder mysteries, sci-fi stories, war stories, 'realistic daily life' tales, even a couple romance fantasies. Lately, a high percentage of 'em have dealt with—or been 'inspired' by—elder care problems. Basically I do all different sorts."

"Hmm—very interesting. Have any ever been—like—published?"

"Mmm—several dozen, but just in places where only a chosen few will ever read them, including some of the other authors—about ten in college or university magazines—and about forty in so-called 'little magazines'—mostly in low circulation places—some as low as a hundred copies. Nearly all are mags that seldom pay a cent—or a nickel, let alone a dime."

"No? Why do you do—it—like that, then?"

"Well—partly for me: I enjoy writing—and like what I write—and want to share what I've written with one or two other folks who might also enjoy it—or get something out of it—even if they're strangers, and I never even know a thing about them. And—partly because I'm pretending that someday I'll get recognized by some of the big-paying mags—and then eventually I'll write a best-selling book or two—or thirty. Also, professionally, each time I write anything that's accepted, it's 'one more line on my résumé,' as we say in the college teaching game."

She pauses to make a wry face and wrinkle her nose, then continues.

"At good ol' Witherspoon Academy, we're expected to be 'professionally productive outside of the classroom,' which basically means getting some things published that are scholarly and/or creative—which leads to greater job security and sometimes to promotions and pay increases in these dicy-icy times. But don't get me started—because the game ain't often an honest one—any more than pouring our money into lottery tickets or the slots in Atlantic City is going to work for most of us."

Lorna frowns slightly.

"People shouldn't gamble—unless they can afford to do it for fun. My

boyfriend and I drive down to A.C. in Jersey maybe twice a year and set ourselves a limit on what we can afford to lose—and never go beyond it—never.”

“I guess I made a bad analogy. I was thinking of our whole lives being like an array of gambles—taking jobs that we don’t know will pan out—or that have downsides we never thought about in advance—or—well, a ton of other things. Anyway, shifting gears an’ driving back over to the sunny side of life: today, during my workout, I got lucky and thought up a nutty idea for a whole new story I can write when I get back home to my ’puter—and it has nothing whatsoever to do with a single aspect of elder care, which is sort of a majorly huge plus for me this week.”

“A story about a woman having a gym workout? Cool.”

“Well, actually I thought up *two* kinds of stories, and one of them *is* about a person—a woman—at a gym. She’s a writer, and *she* comes up with an idea for a story *during* my story about her—while she’s working out. Of course, when I write it, I might just give her a sex change an’ make her a man so nobody will think it’s autobiographical or anything. But the other story is one I’m thinking I’ll combine with this one—a story inside another story, so to speak.”

She smiled and drew a line in the air with both index fingers and then cupped her hands at either end of it like a set of parentheses.

“It’ll be the idea that *she*, the writer, will come up with—and she’ll work it out in her mind—during her—workout. And that was the first story I thought up today—sort of a science-fiction thing with a goofy premise that’s kept hidden until the very end. It came to me while I was doing my leg presses and overheard ol’ Professor Swingle telling his trainer, Hunky Larry, that he happened to see himself in the mirror yesterday morning, while he was getting dressed, and suddenly he noticed how thin his legs are now that he’s seventy-one. He was working on the leg-lift machine and told Hunky that his legs are stronger now than when he was sixty or even fifty, despite them being a hell of a lot skinnier, and he couldn’t figure out why. So I’m sitting there doing my presses, with Becky keeping count for me, and I start thinking about legs being different thicknesses at different ages—and the nutty idea for my story comes to me almost out of nowhere. It’s about a planet in, maybe, another galaxy where nearly everyone has had both their legs amputated. I thought of the reason for it first, and then I started thinking about ways to keep readers in the dark about that reason until the very ending—sort of like a *Twilight Zone* type of story, if you know what I mean. And I decided to make all the amputees descendants of a ship full of French astronauts that crash-landed there—oh—several generations ago.”

“Sounds pretty unpleasant to me,” says Lorna. “I never like hearing about stuff like injuries that are permanent—or even temporary—though sometimes I’ve got to deal with people here who are rehabbing, you know, from injuries—or they’ve had strokes and stuff.”

Kate looks at Lorna in silence for eight seconds.

“I guess I can respect your feelings about that. I’m a bit sensitive, too, and even get squeamish when I hear about people having paper cuts—especially on

the tips of their tongues—from licking an envelope, say. Let me change the subject again, to something sunnier. Some of my stories are, well, happy-ending stories where people are able to overcome some major problem—like having a victory over a person who is hassling them or bullying them. Would you like me to print off a copy of one of those and bring it to you next week? One of my latest sci-fi stories ends happily that way. Definitely, not every kind of story appeals to every kind of person—as I know very well from my daily experience.”

“Well—I guess you could—though I can’t promise I’ll get to reading it right away. I’m not much of a fiction reader. I—you could say I’m more of an article reader—like health and diet stuff mainly. My boyfriend, though—he reads sci-fi sometimes—and watches a lot of it on TV. I could see if maybe he’d like to read it—even if I don’t get to it, myself, like right away.”

Kate looks at Lorna in silence for another seven seconds. Lorna puts Kate’s latest food diary into her file folder and opens the file drawer of her metal desk. Taking this as a hint that her time is up, Kate makes a tiny shrug and directs a brief, mirthless smile toward the large round clock between the door and the scales. She reaches for her towel, then stands.

“Okay, then. Sounds like a plan, then. I’ll try to remember to copy or print some upbeat story and bring it in—and if I forget next week, then please just keep after me till I do it. As I said, I’m at my mom’s place a gawd-awful lot these days, and—well, you remember I said it’s getting to me. It ties me in knots sometimes—and can sometimes make me forget some things I mean to do. I could even forget my two story ideas I had—and your aunt’s great—great rejoinder. And just those three things have made this into one of my ‘good days.’”

“Yeah—getting old—like your mom—that’s a thing that sort of creeps me out, too—just a little bit—but I always try and think about happier things.”

Kate tilts her head slightly and takes a deep breath, slowly exhaling before speaking again.

“Oh—before I take off, Lorna: have you done anything yet with my idea—suggesting to the gym’s big management how it would be a smart, good, and useful thing to enter your clients’ data into computers—and then prepare individual charts or graphs showing each person’s weight and strength progress over a period of time? It could be for three months or six months—or a year—or all sorts of time periods. And I bet you a shiny penny that your clients here would grub up that sort of thing—and management might give you some kind of a bonus just for suggesting it—even if nobody ever follows through and actually does it.”

“I—I haven’t gotten to that yet. It’s a really good idea, probably, Kate, but I’ve just been so busy here lately. I just haven’t gotten to it yet—but I will. Well, then—I’ll—see you next Saturday—same time, then.”

“Maybe—if I survive three or four more visits to my mom’s—plus the drives there and back.”

“You will. Just remember: take those goody bags with you—with some nice Granny Smith apples—and rice cakes!”

DEAD EYES

Mel Waldman

Detective Ray Knight of the 61st precinct had been losin' it in the past six months. Most of it was gone. Waves of paranoia swept out to sea. And a long swim in Brighton Beach or Coney Island purified his brain too. Dr. John Ross told him he was almost cured. He'd be able to return to active duty soon. Unfortunately, the kingpin he had testified against last year was being sentenced today. And Ray was freakin' out again. Flooded with terror and drownin' in an ocean of paranoia.

"He'll be away for a very long time, Ray."

"But Doc, he's got boys on the streets. Could kill me from inside."

"Could have killed you a year ago, Ray. But he didn't."

"He's waitin'..."

"Waiting for Godot?"

"Doc, I know he's watchin' me. Feel his eyes burnin' my flesh. Watchin' and waitin'."

"Stop it, Ray! Thought you were almost cured. You sound paranoid again. Remember, Ray, if the kingpin's watching, he's looking with dead eyes. Almost legally blind."

"Yeah. But..."

"So what do you want, Ray? A new face? New identity? New location?"

"Just some medication-to calm my nerves for a few weeks."

"Well, I'm a psychologist. I don't prescribe medication. Of course, I know a psychiatrist who does. Her office faces the Promenade in Brooklyn Heights."

"A lady shrink?"

"She's the best and..."

"Okay. I'd like an emergency appointment today."

"Maybe. Still, I've got to tell you... You'll have to lie on a couch-none of this face to face stuff. Can you handle it?"

"Yeah. What's she gonna do? Blow my brains out while I'm tellin' her my Freudian dreams?"

At noon, 1010 WINS announced that the kingpin was gonna do long, hard time. Ray was shakin' all over-even though he had an appointment with Dr. Miriam Madden at 3 o'clock.

At 2:30, Ray walked on the Promenade, his eyes dartin', shootin', searchin', huntin', for the hunter. No hunter! Only mothers and children and old folks. Well, it was almost time for Ray to get his head shrunk once more.

Upstairs, in the brownstone, Dr. Madden waited for Ray.

“Come in, Detective Knight,” the elegant blonde doctor said seductively. She turned and sashayed into her rectangular office, her long, slender legs fitted into spiked high heels and a delicious rump clingin’ to a tight mini.

Loose as a goose, he lay on her black couch and spilled the beans. Told all what he knew about the kingpin and others-old stuff which was public knowledge and new stuff-a Death Sentence for a few more rats. Yeah. Just a raincheck for a rainy day. A sweet insurance policy-including the name of a P.I. pal of his who had some V.I.P. info in a safe deposit box-just in case Ray got iced.

“Jack Hood’s the best-has an office on Kings Highway. Can find him almost every night in Dunkin’ Donuts. Guy’s got a sweet tooth.”

“How interesting. But it’s time to stop.”

“One more thing, Doc-the medication! I need it!”

“Didn’t forget, Ray. Yet there is-one more thing!”

Imperceptibly, her right hand pressed the buzzer as she repeated: “Relax. It’s almost over.”

Clutchin’ the camera, he entered the waitin’ room and sauntered to the inside door. Opened it and entered the office where Ray lay on the couch.

Ray jumped up. Looking quizzically, he said: “Dr. Ross, whatya doin’ here?”

“I’m into photography these days. Gonna take a few pictures.”

“Pictures?”

“Of you, Ray!”

“Are you nuts, Doc?”

“I suppose so. But the kingpin doesn’t mind. He’s eager to see...”

“See what?”

Dr. Ross ignored Ray’s question as he videotaped Ray’s anguished face.

“What’s goin’ on here?” Ray begged Dr. Ross, oblivious of Dr. Madden behind him.

“What’s goin’ on, Ray? Don’t you remember? You told me this morning! You figured it out!”

“What did I figure out?”

“That Dr. Madden’s gonna blow your brains out while I videotape the whole thing! Just an ol’ fashioned snuff film for Dead Eyes, before he’s pronounced 100% blind!”

“No!” Ray cried out, staring blankly at Dr. Ross. Paralyzed by terror, he couldn’t turn around to look Death straight in the eye.

“Yes, Ray,” Dr. Madden whispered soothingly as she caressed the black Executioner’s Mask ensconced in a gold box below her chair. “Oh, yes!”

“No!”

“But it’s time, Ray.” Ecstatically, Dr. Madden put on the black mask and reached for the .357 Magnum hidden behind the black couch.

"Please... I'll do anythin'... Anythin'! Cause I ain't ready to die!" Now, Ray's body shook violently and his blank eyes became frenzied, leapin' across the room but never seein' Dr. Ross and never turnin' around to see...

Slowly, Dr. Madden moved toward Ray, her lethal hands clutching the slick weapon and her taloned fingers around the trigger.

"Please... I ain't ready! Need more time!"

"Oh, sweet baby!" she whispered as she bent down and kissed Ray on his forehead. "Baby needs more time!"

She rubbed the .357 Magnum against his cheeks and smiled at him. But Ray's feverish eyes were shut tight. She hugged Ray and let him smell her exotic perfume-Eternity! "Oh, baby! Open your eyes and remember this moment forever!"

Ray's eyes were sealed in a private tomb.

"Baby, open your eyes for Mama!" she commanded. And she clawed his face.

Suddenly, Ray's fiery eyes opened wide and leaped into the Omniscient Camera, fleein' from the killin' claws of the Lion. And the Camera captured his personal terror-pure evil-the anguished, cutting Look into dark space and the Howling-his howling into the Void...

Softly, imperceptibly, she moved away, backwards, until she felt the distant heat of the Camera, until the fire at the center of her being beckoned her, until she heard the final shriek...

"No!"

And she pulled the trigger, blowin' off half of Ray's head as Dr. Ross filmed the end of the snuff film.

"A lovely execution, Miriam!"

"Thanks, John. By the way, Ray ratted on a P.I. named Jack Hood. Hood's got a safe deposit box with some lethal info."

"Splendid. We'll get the box. Then I'll kill Hood. I must! Remember, you promised the next one's mine?"

"Didn't forget, honey."

"Just love playing executioner."

"Yes, darling. It's pure fun-filled with tons of adrenalin."

"All in all, Miriam. It's been one helluva afternoon."

"Dead Eyes will be pleased, John."

"Especially after he sees the film, Miriam. I'll mail it express mail. The Authorities are deaf and dumb. They'll let it through."

"Of course. And Dead Eyes will be real proud."

"Bet he shows it to the inmates-as the Saturday Night Special."

"I hope so."

"And maybe they'll nominate you for an Oscar, Miriam."

"The almost perfect ending, John, to a perfect end!"

“Almost perfect? Don’t be modest, Miriam.”

“Not I!”

“Then...?”

“Ray was a freakin’ paranoid, John.”

“Of course. That’s why he was seeing me.”

“He didn’t trust you, John.”

“Ray didn’t trust no one, Miriam.”

“Yes. But you were his shrink. So he checked you out. Followed you. Did some B & E. Probed deep. And discovered...”

“You’re looking at me strange, Miriam.”

“You sound paranoid, John. Or guilty!”

“Guilty?”

“Yes, darling. Guilty of betraying Dead Eyes. Ray saw you with Rockin’ Iron Rocco, Joe the Spider, Jimmy, the Red Scorpion, and... A bunch of Dead Eyes’ enemies.”

“No!”

“Yes, love. And here’s the sweet twist! Once he saw you consorting with the enemy, he trusted you. If you were with them, you were against Dead Eyes.”

“It’s a lie!”

“But, honey. He wasn’t ratting on you. He was boasting, toasting, revealing how you really cured him!”

“He was delusional!”

“No, dear.”

“I never...!”

Smiling sardonically, Miriam grabbed the .357 Magnum ensconced on the black couch and pointed it at John.

“Before we say goodbye, darling, could you look up at the ceiling and smile at Dead Eyes?”

“What?”

“Smile, John. You’re on Candid Camera!”

His quizzical eyes looked up and found the Camera which recorded his anguished face. He never heard the sound of Miriam’s taloned fingers pull the trigger. And the roar of the exploding bullet vanished inside the eternal howl.

THE THIRD WOMAN

Mel Waldman

I

Only a woman can commit the perfect murder. The recipe for success is smart chemistry: intelligence, creativity, inspiration, an object of murder both arrogant and stupid, and law enforcers equally macho and simple-minded.

Mrs. Mary Wisdom returned from the party at the Wolf mansion at 1 AM. Intoxicated, she was accompanied by her friend Jennifer who had driven her three blocks south to the Wisdom mansion. Jennifer steadied Mary as they climbed the stairs. Several times she grabbed Mary's right arm and lifted her body, for Mary's legs couldn't hold her up. With Jennifer's help, Mary opened the front door and entered.

"Thanks," Mary said, momentarily wearing a big smile.

Inside, they slowly climbed another three flights of stairs. On the third floor landing, they turned left and approached Richard's study. Richard C. Wisdom was Mary's husband and a millionaire mystery writer. Often, he avoided crowds and parties. Richard preferred to lock himself in his study and work on a novel.

"Richard, it's Mary. Open us."

He did not answer. Jennifer tried to open the door. But it was locked from the inside.

"Richard, please open up. I'm a bit under the weather. Jennifer's with me. You've got to let her out."

He did not answer.

"Richard, this is Jennifer. Please come out and say hello, darling. Haven't seen you in ages."

Silence.

"Please open up, darling and let me out. Mary's indisposed and can't climb those dreadful stairs again."

Silence.

"Just three minutes to let me out and you can return to your magnificent book."

Silence.

"Mary, darling. I think it's time to call the police."

Jennifer helped Mary to her bedroom and put her into bed. Then she called the police.

II

When the police broke down the door, Richard C. Wisdom was not inside. Yet the door had been locked and bolted from the inside. And there were no windows in the room. No apparent means of escape. How did he get out? In

what condition? Alive or dead?

In the center of the room was a pool of blood. And one bloody letter sprawled across the room: M. A locked room. No corpse. Only the bloody accusations of a missing victim.

III

Detective Phil Black, a short muscular man with a goatee and bifocals, paced back and forth. "There must be a secret chamber!" he announced. "Let's find it!"

Detective Black and his team of officers searched the study for several hours. They found nothing. In the meantime, the lab boys came and took samples of the blood. They finished early and left.

At 4 AM, Detective Black said good night to Mary Wisdom and Jennifer. "We'll be back in the morning. Detective Carr will be across the street in an unmarked car. Detective Dickson will stay downstairs in the living room, if you please."

"Yes," Mary Wisdom agreed. "Richard gave the servants the night off. He wanted complete solitude. I don't want to be alone."

"Of course not."

"Jennifer's staying with me tonight. Still, my nerves are shot."

"I understand. He'll be downstairs. No one will harm you. No one."

IV

I killed Richard. Of course, I did. No one else could have committed the perfect crime. No one but a former circus queen. Queen of the flying trapeze. No one but the architect of Richard's study.

Yes, I killed Richard because he betrayed me. He deserved to die. So I shot him in the heart (although he was heartless). I should have killed her too. Perhaps, in time.

But where is my dearest Richard? Where is my beloved corpse? There's been foul play. I'll get to the heart of this matter. Trust me.

V

The following morning, Detective Black and his team returned. Detectives Carr and Dickson remained to assist the others. As the servants weren't expected for another hour, Jennifer went downstairs and made coffee for everyone. Soon Teresa, Mary's twin sister, arrived. Teresa helped Jennifer in the kitchen. Mary lay in bed for she still had a hangover. Although Detective Black and the others searched relentlessly, the team could not find a secret chamber.

VI

Such foolish men searching for a secret chamber. There is no secret chamber. Not in the usual sense. But... You can't fit a square into a circle. Or vice versa. Detective Black and his boys have no creativity. They must go beyond

their narrow thoughts-stretch their imagination and fly. Yes, they must fly!

VII

“Ladies, I must confess. I can’t tell who’s who.”

“Well, we are identical twins, Detective Black.”

“Yes, Ms....?”

“Mrs. Wisdom.”

“But how do people tell you apart?”

“I’ve got a mole on my left buttock,” Mary Wisdom announced.

Detective Black grinned sardonically. “That distinguishing feature would help only in very special circumstances.”

“The naked truth, Detective Black.”

“Yes. Of course. But is there any other means of distinguishing the two of you?”

“I am left handed. Teresa is right handed.”

“Anything else?”

“My legs are muscular and strong. Hers are skinny and weak.”

“Yes. But...”

“I have a beautiful singing voice. She does not.”

“How interesting but...”

“I have a narrow, crooked smile. Teresa’s is straight and full.”

The twins smiled wickedly at Detective Black.

“It’s true! At last, I can tell who’s who. Yes!”

VIII

Detective Black kept looking for the secret chamber but to no avail. And although he questioned Mary and Jennifer again, he could not find a hidden clue to Richard’s disappearance and possible murder. Yet he returned to the mansion even after the case was considered inactive. Human blood had not been spilled in Richard’s study. Something mysterious had occurred, indeed, but it was beyond human comprehension. So it seemed.

In any case, Detective Black craved for Mary. And Mary did not discourage his advances. How unfortunate!

IX

One night, at Detective Black’s request, Mary and Phil locked themselves in Richard’s study.

“Phil, you are a strange man. And you make me feel stranger than I’ve ever been.”

They drank white wine and made love. And later, Mary serenaded Phil. When she sang “Fly Me to The Moon,” the high ceiling opened up.

“Look!” Phil cried out.

“Oh, yes, it’s modular and voice activated.”

“We never looked up there.”

“Of course not. You were looking for a secret chamber in the wall.”

“So it was you?”

“Yes.”

“But you were ill that night. Jennifer took you home.”

“Stupid man! She took Teresa home. Teresa went to the party in my place. I stayed behind to...”

“You were a circus queen. Queen of the flying trapeze! I read the articles. Yet I never figured...”

“Yes, I was the Queen! But Richard betrayed me for Teresa. And he betrayed Teresa for another woman. We never figured out who she was. In any case, Richard did not deserve to live.”

“You killed him?”

“I thought I did. Until he disappeared.”

Mary sang “Fly Me to The Moon” again and the open ceiling closed.

“What do you intend to do, Phil?”

“Nothing. There’s no corpse. No human blood. Seems Richard played a grotesque joke on you and Teresa. He wanted out. And he’s out!”

“So what now?”

“I’m in!”

X

Perhaps, the third woman was Jennifer Miles, a tall, slender blonde with penetrating green eyes. Cat eyes. Richard nicknamed her Miles. She was Mary’s friend. Family. And an avid reader of mysteries, especially a Richard C. Wisdom murder mystery. Had she betrayed Mary? If so, was it really betrayal or an act of intimacy?

Of course, there was Maria Borges, Richard’s agent. At times, she seemed to control Richard’s mind. The long-haired brunette with azure eyes possessed “a dark beauty and mystical, occult powers,” according to the Times. She had guided and shaped Richard into a successful writer. Was she the mysterious third woman?

We can’t forget Martha Jacobs, Richard’s editor. Articulate, creative, commanding, and seductive. Martha was a brainy slut with the weird rep of getting down with her male writers. According to rumor, she claimed she empowered “her boys” by sleeping with them. Way to go Martha!

The list of candidates seems infinite. Our recluse was not shy with women, although he was forced into isolation by his brutal drive and insatiable need for recognition and greatness. So be it! Richard C. Wisdom was a man of extremes. Loved and hated, he evoked extreme responses in others.

XI

Richard was alive. His beloved wife Mary had saved his life when she talked in her sleep three nights before the attempted murder. Her unconscious mind

had confessed. And as for the musical code to the locked room, Mary had revealed it last summer. But then, the revelation meant nothing to Richard.

In any case, Richard bought a bullet-proof vest and got three plastic bags of canine blood from Barbara Stone, a vet, former consultant and mistress. Even with the bullet-proof vest, Richard could have died. Had Mary shot him in the head rather than the heart, he'd be dead. But since she had a poetic sense of justice, she shot him in the heart. When the bullet struck the plastic bag hidden beneath his shirt, canine blood gushed out. He fell to the floor, pretending to be dead. Mary saw the blood saturating his shirt and flooding the floor. She believed he was dead.

Mary climbed the rope suspended from the opening in the ceiling and attached to a metal cabinet on the next floor. She sang "Fly Me to The Moon" and flew off. Richard rose, removed his bloody shirt, and watched a cornucopia of blood rush to the floor. Then he opened the other two plastic bags of blood and spelled the letter M. He stripped naked, cleaned his body, opened the door, and went to his bedroom where he found the hidden rope. Then he went upstairs, sang "Fly me to The Moon," attached the rope to the metal cabinet and dropped it through the opening in the ceiling. He went downstairs, entered his study, and locked the door.

Richard collected his bloody clothes, bullet-proof vest, and packed them in a black traveling bag which had contained a change of clothes. He got dressed, attached the traveling bag to his belt and climbed the rope. He sang "Fly Me to The Moon," slipped out of the house by the back entrance and vanished.

XII

Richard waited for me on the other side of town. I was late. Yet he was there when I arrived.

"I was worried something happened to you."

"Worried? But you almost got me killed."

"I was careless. Mary followed me that night. I never suspected..."

"Mary's crazy! She could have murdered us!"

"Well, she almost shot me dead!"

"You were lucky. She warned you in her sleep. You had time to..."

"Yeah."

"I was less fortunate. She broke into my place. Terrified me. Yet in the end, she let me go."

"Why?"

"Why not? She was obsessed with other matters."

I smiled wickedly at Richard. He misunderstood. He glanced at my hands covered with black leather gloves.

"Let's go inside. I've missed you."

"Yes, I suppose you have."

I removed Mary's .38 from my purse. "I'll miss you, Richard. Goodbye."

And I shot Richard in the forehead at point blank range. Wearing a quizzical look, he died instantly.

XIII

Mary had followed Richard to Barbara Stone's place two nights before the attempted murder. That night she figured out that Barbara was the third woman. She had suspected that they were having an affair two years ago. But she thought the affair was over. Obviously, Richard was a womanizer and con man of the highest order. Miraculously, he was still alive. He had escaped. Yet tonight, Barbara Stone would die.

Before leaving, she made one call. Then she rushed into the beguiling night.

I made one call. I didn't rush. If my calculations were correct, it would all be over by the time I arrived.

XIV

When I arrived, they were dead. Phil stood over the bodies.

"I was too late. Mary had already murdered Barbara Stone. Then she tried to kill me."

"But..."

"Guess it was nothin' personal. A desperate woman does desperate things. She was fast. I was faster. Sorry."

XV

Mary called me before she went on her mission. Guess she trusted me. Or perhaps, she wanted me to stop her. I didn't. I wanted her to kill and be killed. So I called Phil. Told him I was worried about Mary. I begged him to stop her from killing Barbara Stone. He believed me as Mary had believed me about the third woman.

Barbara Stone wasn't the third woman. The third woman never existed. Only Teresa, Mary's twin. Not Mother Teresa but Teresa Faustus, the twin of Mary Wisdom born Mary Faustus. Our Father was a famous doctor. And we were his precious girls.

Tonight, I hid Mary's .38 in the Wisdom mansion. Tomorrow, I'll give Phil a call. He's kinda cute. A bit macho and simple-minded and certainly, a lousy detective. But a simple woman must be realistic. Can't shoot for the stars. A good man's hard to find. But so easy-so very easy to kill.

Diamonds In My DANG Chain

Tanisha Lee (AKA Phenomenally)

Dang, Am I sick of hearing about Diamonds

Every Rapper got diamond

Teeth

Chains

Socks

Shirts

Glasses

Negro what about a 401K

IRA

What about a College Fund

For your children

What about paying your bills on time

Tell me about that

But Naw, Somebody gave Yo stupid ass a mic

And you use it

To boost about how much money

You make

Seems a little fake

Stop telling me what type of rims I need

And how I should shake my booty

To your beats

If you got a mic

Can you at least

try to

Uplift our community

Instead of trying to teach our youth

How to waste their money on

A whole lot of Bling

Jacob the jeweler
Is laughing all the way to the bank
Because he knows
We'll be anything shiny

So why don't you
Tell us
About how hard you had to work
In order to get your status

Tell us
About how important our credit scores are

Tell us
How important it is to keep our backgrounds clean
And not how you got shot 9 times
Wanting to be glorified

Can someone please
Tell me who gave these rappers a mic
Please?

See they multi-million dollar
Caucasian owned rap label
Got you promoting
African American
Propaganda

I'm tired
So tired
Of the same ol videos
With the same ol hoes
And I'm not talking about the girls

The industry is pimping
Our hip-hop artists
Trying to make them cross over
With generic hip hop lyrics

Got us all wondering
About what Nas said

Yo is Hip Hop really dead?

Well, Did u notice that Hip Hop is dying?
Loosing its life to diamonds?
Or were you too busy
Bobbing your head
To “Diamonds in my Damn Chain”

Naw Hip hop isn't totally dead
It's just doesn't breathe it's life
In
Fabulous
Young Jeezy
Or
Trick Daddy's
Club beats

Some hip-hop artist
Have just turned into
Rap artist
That are marketed like a product
Advertising
Ignorance
With a glossy cover
For their bull shit CD

So keep bobbing your head to beats
That holds empty words
And turn up the volume
On that new
Hit
DIAMONDS IN MY DAMN CHAIN

Because that's what the hell I call a chain reaction

“And this is my ‘Soul Hole,’” Cassie said. She stood in the golden spotlight of a late summer’s late afternoon sun that shyly shone in through her attic’s solitary window. She lifted up her baby-blue T-shirt, taking care to conceal a lacy-white bra, to reveal a small, oval hole in her flesh just below her sternum.

“Do they always look like that?” Shid said with a gulp, “I mean, I’ve never seen one before; I have seen all sorts of birth defects but . . . does it hurt?”

“No, it doesn’t hurt,” the slender-faced girl giggled. She rubbed her finger around the hole’s rim and wiped some residue off on her blue jeans. The inside of the hole contained a gaping blackness that seized his attention. “Mine’s the only one I’ve ever seen; and I don’t think very many people share my eating habits.” She lowered her shirt back down over her thin frame.

The sight of a mouth-sized hole tucked into a girl’s chest did not, to a great degree, unnerve Shid; but yet the murmur of unease in his stomach betrayed the well-collected guise he fronted in front of his new neighbor. This was awkward; he had only moved to Ehren Valley—into Cassie’s neighborhood—two days ago, after all. Today was officially day two of their ambiguous and potential-filled relationship that, at this moment, had turned in an unforeseen direction. He had hardly situated his room in his new home across the street, yet already he was in this girl’s house, in her attic, and watching her undress. In a way, he felt like he had trespassed. She seemed to be one to get attached easily, and Shid could see how a vagina-like hole in your chest could scare people away. . . .

Starting tomorrow, he would be attending Cassie’s high school.

This girl’s given a birth defect a name, Shid thought, and she’s proud of it. “Have you shown it to a doctor?”

“Yeah. My parents made me go.”

“I bet.”

“He wanted to take pictures of it and sew it up—but I wouldn’t let him.”

“What, you said ‘no’ and he said ‘okay,’ just like that? I think a doctor would be more aggressive with something like this.”

Cassie’s mood turned humorless, she lowered her head, blonde bangs dangled before her face, and a peculiar grin grew out of her pouty lips. She read his face: his bronze eyebrows arched with a blank anticipation above round eyes with their heavy lids; his narrow mouth and its paunchy lower lip. Shid was a seemingly tractable boy.

“You’re right, he was relentless. Do you want to know how I shut him up?” she said.

“Huh, what?”

A grumble came from Cassie’s stomach, then with a snicker, she said: “I made his itsy-bitsy soul . . .” She pulled up her shirt again, this time taking no measure to hide her bra, “. . . go into this itsy-bitsy hole,” as she pointed to the lightly wrinkled orifice, followed by a perky giggle.

“What?” Shid said, confused. The only image his mind could conceive to

best understand her statement was sexual. This Cassie was bold, all right. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” she sauntered up to him, “that I snuffed’m, and all those nurses and guards who tried to hold me down.” Her demeanor darkened, she became preoccupied as if a mental recital was rehashing the instance. When the scene was over, she twitched.

Shid became sober. He did not know her well enough to tell if he could take her seriously.

“You’re joking, right?”

She turned her head to look at him.

“I have power, Shid,” she pointed to her chest with her fingers, “They tried to take it from me, but I made them regret it.”

“Why’re you telling me this? You could get into trouble for talking like that.”

“But you’re the only soul I’ve told about this. You wouldn’t turn me in, would you?”

“N-no.”

She stepped up squarely in front of him, she half a head taller than he.

“Do you want to know how I take someone’s soul?”

He began to shake his head.

“Cassie, I don’t—” Shid was silenced by her gentle cooing in his ears. Her fingers began to move over his buzzed bronze scalp. As adverse as the situation felt and as much as he wanted to, he didn’t want to move. What did her theatrics mean? Her hands wrapped around his head and smoothly pulled it to her chest, just over the misplaced orifice. She pulled up her shirt and gently pressed his head against her warm Soul Hole.

Shid, fear and curiosity aroused, kept still while his breathing grew heavier.

Cassie became rigid and gripped Shid firmly. Everything went still and silent. She released a slow, deep-set sigh, then she immediately tensed and Shid was jolted with never-before-felt sensations.

Shid could feel suction from Cassie’s Soul Hole—but somehow, he knew it wasn’t a physical suction. It was pulling at something: something that could never be uncovered in an autopsy.

Shid’s conscious faded, multiplied, and stretched. Tremors coursed through his body. He began to have visions, then he began to feel pain. He listened to himself scream.

Then, with something that felt like a cosmic hiccup, reverberating from his head to his toes, the suction stopped, and all of the sensations faded. Cassie released her grip on him and let him sink to the floor. She let out a weakened sigh herself.

Shid, wide-eyed, pale, and shaking; looked off into space—which was located in the darkest corner of the attic. White noise ricocheted in his ears.

Cassie squatted down in front of him and glared into his hollow eyes, she put a hand on each of his shoulders. Upon doing so, he jumped.

“Look at me,” she said. Shid’s eyes looped around a few times before they focused on Cassie. Fear swelled in him as he looked into her face. She was serious. He whimpered.

“I’m hungry, Shid. Ever since that day in the hospital, I’ve been starving. That one day made me fuller than I have ever been, and I’ve been famished ever since. I need an opportunity to binge on souls again. I want you to feed me.”

##

“Okay. What we’re going to do is you wait here until I can distract him and—” Shid whispered.

“It would be best for you to catch him from behind. Off guard. If you can do that and hold him down well, then it’s smooth sucking,” Cassie said.

“Okay, then what you’re going to have to do is distract him until I can get behind him and hold him down so you can grab hold of his head and do your thing,” he whispered.

Conspiratorially, they peeked over Cassie’s backyard planked fence, surveying a brawny man with a tan cap over short, sandy-brown hair; he wore a navy EHREN VALLEY UNIVERSITY sweater and carpenter jeans with tan utility boots, squatting at the side of his orangeish 1961 Ford Econoline truck changing a rear tire. He was a handyman; his truck full of DIY tools and tackle.

Presently, today was Day One of *Operation Soul Food*. The burly man hunched over a tire across the street: Victim One. His nomination as Victim One was purely by chance: he was conveniently across the street from Cassie’s house, and he fit into the *Specifications of Eligible Victims Register* that the two of them had outlined. As they searched for victims, they were to classify people by the SEVR parameters—the more parameters a person meets, easier prey they will be. This man fit into parameters 03 (busy or preoccupied in something) and 12 (in an easily subjugable position); but, unfortunately, he was exactly the opposite of parameter 07 (physically weak and/or defenseless).

Two was not a bad number, despite.

Shid and Cassie had spent the past few days planning, plotting, and preparing. Meeting after school up in Cassie’s attic, they discussed tactics and scenarios, exercised, and drew out maps. Cassie knew that it took about two minutes to finish off a victim—and that was too long. It jeopardized their chances of getting away. People would be suspicious about some teen sticking a stranger’s head under her shirt, to be sure. She thought that with some practice, she could make the process faster and efficient. But there was no way of practicing other than in the real world. Four days before, Cassie had experimented on a neighborhood cat. She had clenched its frisky little head against her chest, sucked its soul out through its skull, and collapsed to the ground vomiting.

“Wait till he puts the tire iron down, then go over there and talk with him until I can make my way to the other side of the block and sneak up on him,” Shid whispered.

Cassie licked her lips.

Shid ran around the block and he had to make it fast. Cutting across grassy front yards and driveways, he made his way around the rectangular block. True, any guy would talk to a girl like Cassie to no end, but Cassie and Shid had a schedule to keep.

Shid was having trouble taking in how, being seemingly cute and callow, Cassie could be able to single-handedly clear out a room full of nurses and guards (although she never actually said how many). There is just no way she could seize each of their souls and fight them off at the same time. What kind of hospital puts guards around their patients, anyway? Surely they didn't stand in line for her to feed off of (or did they?).

Maybe she had a little unmentioned help, he thought. *Now, should I hit handy-man over the head with the tire iron, or strangle him with one of his extension cables?*

Shid rounded the final corner and eyeballed Cassie and her prey. Six houses away—across green lawns from which grew pines and various broad-leaf shade trees; juniper and holly-bordered driveways in front of brick oppidian houses—behind a saffron Econoline stood Cassie over her quarry. His head was barely visible over the rear of his truck, and from what Shid could see, was not very animated. Yet Cassie remained nonchalantly focused on the handyman, equally unanimated. Then she looked straight at Shid . . .

. . . and gave him a thumbs up.

Why'd she do that? he thought, and slowed down to a hot-footed walk.

She waved him over.

What? Did she already do it herself? He thought about nurses and guards, and ran faster.

He rounded the back of the pick-up to find the man slouched and lifeless. Shid could swear he saw traces of white smoke rising off of the body.

"New record," said Cassie.

Shid was completely dumbfounded. Wide-eyed, his lip quivered and his brain's speech mechanism went out of order. He could only stare at calm little Cassie.

"Maybe guys would be easier targets," she said straightforwardly.

"Cassie, why didn't— How'd— Why?"

"I don't think women would be as eager to have me rub my tits in their face."

##

Cassie became better at it—feeding faster than before with each victim. After Victim One, for the following few days they maintained a one to three victims-a-day schedule. Dealing with the bodies was their greatest problem. With Shid and Cassie being the runty sizes that they were, the best option for hiding their kill was by arranging them into reclined, sleeping positions. They had snuffed people like: sunbathers in the park, movie-goers (executed only during the boisterous action scenes), bench-sitters waiting for the bus, a homeless man (but Cassie admitted that his soul tasted like spoiled fast food burgers), two preteens playing a racing game in an arcade, and a single lady painting with watercolors on one of the more historic streets. All executed without a hitch. Sure, each of them gave

a start upon being seized, but were soon silenced when the suction started.

Too many dead bodies with the same symptoms would start raising suspicions eventually, they knew. While the evidence they left with the bodies was nonexistent—besides a teeny bit of Soul Hole residue on the scalp—witnesses posed the greatest threat. Could they be effective bandits at their age?

“Maybe we should make you a special shirt with a hole, front and center, just to make things quicker,” said Shid, looking out of Cassie’s attic’s window. Shid began to look off into space, which was located on a distant sheet of altostratus clouds, then said: “I just had a thought, you probably don’t go out wearing bikinis too often, do you?”

Cassie, who was sitting on the floor perusing a phone book, stood up, walked over to Shid and . . .

. . . Shid got slapped.

“Get ready. I want to go to the Ehren Valley Hospital,” she said, “I see a world of opportunity there.”

The hospital. . . .

##

“VictimTwenty!” Cassie emerged from the third room from the end of the third-story hall of Ehren Valley Intensive Care Unit. She was drooling, breathing heavily, with an air of wildness to her—frighfully enveloped in shadows, even under the halogen lights of the short hall. Yet despite her elation, her soul-sucking spree on the terminally ill, the comatose, and trauma patients of EVICU was nearing its end—for they had been found out.

Upon their arrival at EVICU, a resolute three-story palladian building that could be mistaken for a 17th century English garrison, they developed a spur-of-the-moment plan as they scanned the interior. The sterile white walls of the building were visibly aged; the agitated flouescence of the ceiling lights illuminated a calm setting: not a single nurse in their black scrubs was in a rush; receptionists spoke in relaxed voices; and no emergencies barged in. That is the way it was in Ehren Valley, though: the citizens just did not get hurt as much here (But it did not mean that they didn’t die just as easily . . .). Shid wondered if this was the same hospital in which Cassie’s aforementioned tussle had transpired.

They had navigated the ICU’s corridors and evaded the doctors and nurses. Cassie killed two patients on the second floor; the resultant flatline duet resounded throughout the placid halls.

“Help, I think someone’s dying down here!” Shid cried out from a window-lit stairwell between the second and third stories, attempting to grab the attention of the third-story nurses—to summon them to the second, where Cassie’s two decoys laid.

Two young nurses, probably college students, who were watching the third floor exchanged some words, then hurried down the stairs, past an uneasy Shid and one eager Cassie. A clamor quickly grew from the lower floor, and Cassie knew that she had the third floor in her possession. Still, no time to waste.

“I don’t think we’ll be interrupted here,” she said as she surveyed the hall,

“I’ll start at the end of the hall, you start opening doors and removing any obstacles so that I can get in and out faster. And distract anyone who comes by—and no fingerprints!” then she coasted down the hall. Shid watched in awe. A tinge of uselessness dipped in his gut, but he quickly hardened up, pulled on some surgical gloves, and started propping open doors, throwing privacy curtains open while disregarding the patients, and pushing tables and such out of the way. He did this out of fear of Cassie. She had sucked his soul halfway out of him once already, after all. He was still unsure if that half had returned.

Cassie gambolled from room to room, almost maniacally, giggling as she went. The hall began to fill with the drone of flatlines; but the still-living patients had ears, and they could hear the approaching laughter, the flatlines, and the distant commotion. One of them called for her nurse, one pressed his intercom call button while another tried to get out of his bed.

Shid, again out of fear and frustrated with adrenaline, scrambled to silence them by knocking call buttons out of their hands and punching the more vocal ones in the mouth. Becoming wild and edgy, he began to throw stainless steel dishes and tissue boxes when the patients began to shout or cry. He was shaking, sweating. He shut a door on one stout old man who had detached himself from his bed and made it vocal that he was hell-bent on returning the blow he had received from scared little Shid. The man was a veteran and he’d be damned if he’d let some ungrateful young punk cold-cock him and get away with it. Cassie’s treasure trove of souls would soon trap them. Surely Cassie was having trouble killing these obstinate victims on her own.

Shid was running down the hall to find Cassie when he heard it: “there’s flatlines coming from upstairs, too!” “I saw two children go up there!”

A rumble of footsteps up a narrow staircase emerged over a quintuplet of flatlines and the wailing patients. They had not been quiet enough; they did not plan well enough, they just weren’t experienced enough to be . . . bad.

“Cassie! Cassie! We have to go!” he shouted as he ran away from the rumblings and wailings; toward the beeping. He found himself on the dead-end side of the hall, surrounded by . . . it took a second to set in, and it set in to his entire body—surrounded by the stillness of Death . . . and the drone of flatlines. Somehow he had passed her.

He heard her giggle—that confident, ascending three-syllable chirp which was unmistakably her when she knew she was at the top of her game.

A brief gust of wind; a new beep joined in the chorus. . . .

Then, returning to the present:

Shid did a double take at her when she appeared in the hall. The sight of her rendered him tame. What was happening to her? What kind of metamorphosis came from the consumption of souls? What kind of human could *stomach* the consumption of souls?

The two young nurses had come into sight on the stairwell, their faces glowing with perspiration. Cassie stood with her back to them. The nurses shouted

something at the two of them, which they failed to apprehend.

“Cassie, they’re coming!”

She giggled—an affirmative giggle, but she did nothing.

Shid shifted stance. “Cassie?”

Presently, various other hospital faculty, including a security guard, were behind the two young nurses, shouting in a seemingly foreign tongue, close enough to grab hold of Cassie’s shirt tail.

Within an instant, Cassie was in Shid’s face. She had crossed the hall in a single stride. He could feel heat radiating from her and he asked himself: was he next? To be sure, there was little he could do to stop her.

She put an arm around him and together they rushed to the window behind Shid, opened it, jumped out the third-story window (Shid reluctantly, and not without screams) and floated to the ground.

From the window, hospital employees bawled and bellowed at them.

Then, for the first time in their young lives, they ran for their lives.

##

Shid had been a bad boy. He had hurt many people in the hospital and he could not justify why. They had gone on a week-long killing rampage, and within that week they had already been debunked and wanted by police. With multiple positive identifications at the hospital and the trail of victims with the same symptoms, their spree would soon be over. But why did they think it would be easy? They had officially become serial killers—amateur serial killers.

In the attic, Shid sat pallid in front of a 12-inch television watching news coverage of their bumbling at the hospital: police sketches, eye-witness accounts—including the angry old man, still threatening to beat the shit out of Shid, and a debate over the relationship between two teens and the string of such natural-looking deaths. How long would it be until his parents found out? And what would they do once they found out?

“Relax,” Cassie said as she walked up to him. The faint light in the attic presented her in dramatic shadows, her eyes aglow. “Anyone who comes close to us is as good as dead.”

Shid looked away and put his head on his folded arms. *Maybe she can read my thoughts, too*, he thought. But he could not reply to her.

“I’m hungry,” she said, still looking down at him.

Shid’s stomach twisted and he became pale and apprehensive. He stared up at Cassie in disbelief. She wore a lofty smirk—almost daring Shid to decline.

“Cassie, we really shouldn’t—” he began.

“Hey, it’s either them or you.”

There it was: the trump card. Deep down, Shid knew she had it hidden up her sleeve. Shid knew she would throw it out some day—he was the one if none other could be found.

“I want to go here,” she handed him a newspaper clipping. Shid looked at it, his brow furrowed in puzzlement, “A magic show?”

They sat among a crowd of chattering grade-school children and their mothers, with the occasional dedicated father here and there, at the Ehren Valley Convention Hall. The majestic venue resembled the inside of a capsized ship, packed with quite a large crowd ready to see a pretty famous magician.

Cassie had not said much about her plans here since they left her house. Laying low as they walked through town to the show, they did their best to disguise themselves: Cassie sporting braided pig-tails and pink-rimmed shades with a brick-red plaid button-up shirt with the collar flipped up to cover her neck; Shid donned a black cap with his newly purchased black and burgundy EHREN VALLEY HIGH jacket.

Presently, the two of them sat in folding chairs in the middle of a few hundred people who hardly gave them a second glance. Any attempt on any one of these people would bring bedlam—no element of surprise here. What was Cassie planning? To go out with a bang? Her big finale?

Shid imagined Cassie performing some sort of super soul-suck. He visioned her, arms out-stretched and floating over the stage, a tumultuous whirlwind enveloping the room, debris, screaming and commotion, and the entire population of the auditorium de-souled in one fell suck.

Shid returned to reality. His daydream lasting only for a second, but potentially prophetic.

“What are we doing here?” Shid whispered to an aspirant Cassie.

“Wait. You’ll see,” she said with her eyes fastened on the stage. His seat creaked as he sat back, he felt as helpless as ever. In his vision, even he was unspared.

A sharply dressed announcer came on stage, made an enthusiastic introduction followed by applause. Then appearing on stage, there he was: Calder, they called him; Calder the Magician. He was simply presented in a fog-colored beanie, sideburns, drowsy eyelids on a poker face, black, knee-length leather jacket, baggy jeans and combat boots. But for such a seemingly rigid character, he was very animated—cracking jokes and making faces as sparks and holograms flickered around him—captivating the children.

The routine progressed from tame card tricks to object manipulation to more extravagant props and illusions. When he asked for an assistant from the audience, Cassie jumped up with such a howl that Shid thought she was making her move then and there. Her arm-flailing enthusiasm paid off: Calder took notice and nominated her to come up to the stage. She turned to Shid endearingly, “I won’t need your help with this one,” then made her way to the stage.

The magician talked with the conspicuously buoyant Cassie for a moment, during which Shid felt compelled to get the hell out of the auditorium, so he calmly squeezed past people, stepping over their knees as they sat in their seats, hiding his face as he moved. He made it to the door at the back of the room, looked toward the stage—looked toward Cassie, who was looking straight at him. She smiled and gave him a thumbs up. He turned and walked out the door.

##

There was no massacre at the magic show. Cassie, the soul sniper, fired a single shot so gracefully that the audience never caught on—that is, until Cassie was long gone and they realized that Calder would not be waking from the ‘trance’ that he had surrendered into, as only his head stuck out of the casket that he made Cassie lock him into. By the time of realization, Cassie had already meandered off the stage and left the building.

To Shid’s surprise, she found him in the afternoon—faster than expected—sitting under a dense willow tree in the park near their neighborhood. She had unraveled her pigtails.

Shid did not know what to expect, ignorant as he was of the outcome at the magic show. She sauntered up to him; arms swaying, thin lips slightly parted. She squatted across from him, folded her arms over her knees and rested her chin on her arms. She slowly sighed and stared at Shid.

Time passed. The sunny weather seemed to slow things down. She was calm; yet Shid knew hers was not a calming calmness, and he sat there tensely.

Her face began to twitch, then her face puckered. Her head reared back, and she sneezed. Concurrently, Shid jumped with a start, possibly letting out an imperceptible squeal.

She sniffled and wiped her nose. “We have at least one day until they pinpoint our school and identify us, then even our homes become untouchable. Hell, it’ll be impossible to leave the city once we’re identified.”

“Are you serious?”

“Believe me, I’m an Ehren Valley native. You’re not, and because of that, they’ll be harder on you.”

“What—jail? Death?”

She shook her head dismissively.

Time passed; as did Shid’s thoughts. The park had a smell as if the sun were cooking the grass. Cassie looked past Shid, pointed a finger at something, to which Shid’s gaze turned. Roughly eighty meters away, a man was sitting on a bench with his back turned to them.

Shid turned to Cassie.

“Victim Twenty-Two,” she whispered with her mischievous grin.

He nodded.

The two of them got up and casually made their way to Victim Twenty-Two. He was a slender young man; mid-twenties; center-parted, a jawline beard with medium-length dirty-blond hair that glistened in the sun; casually dressed and busy writing away on a pad of paper: parameters 3 and 9.

They loomed directly over him. They were in no rush. Shid walked around in front of him, seized Victim Twenty-Two’s arms and—

The End.

Chapter 1 of the novel
Blood Is Like Wine

Kim Erickson

The old man hurried along the side of the deserted street trying to avoid the large rain puddles. Rain pounded like fists violently upon his balding head. His clothes although tattered and torn were drenched and sagging on his rotund frame from the weight of the soaked in rain droplets. His boots sloshed on the inside with rainwater from the unavoidable puddles, but nothing was going to stop him. He had to get to the tavern; he had waited very impatiently all day to frequent his favorite establishment. How he longed for a drink of strong whiskey and to feel the closeness of one of the warm lush female forms of one of the whores that worked there. He yearned to feel their large heaving breasts pressed up against his chest; maybe he would even get lucky and arrange a business deal of his own. He rounded the corner of the street and could barely make out the lights shining in the tavern's windows, the rain pounded harder and hail was beginning to fall, thunder roared like an enraged beast and lightning streaked flashes of silvery fire, igniting the night's darkened sky. He grabbed the corners of his collar on his over coat and pulled the soaked garment up tightly around his stubbly cheeks. He ran faster trying to get out of the tormenting weather. As he stepped up to the first step of the tavern's entrance, his foot slipped on the slick wet wooden boards and he fell to his hands and knees. His nose missed smashing into the steps by only a hair. Suddenly a hand from out of no-where grabbed the back of his overcoat and jerked him up to his feet effortlessly. The old man turned and looked to see who had given him such an uplifting helping hand. All he could see through rain soaked eyelashes was a darkened shadow of a hooded caped figure.

The old man blinked several times trying to make out who the silhouetted image might happen to be, "Thank you, kindly."

The hooded figure replied in a deep rich tone, "Don't mention it, I try to help a friend in need. Let's get out of this horrendous weather and have a drink."

"Yes, indeed let's do that!" the old man said, cheerfully.

The stranger walked up the steps and opened the door for the old man. The old man didn't know what to think of such generosity. Most people in the town avoided him; they shunned him, and called him horrid names. Children would even taunt him by throwing rocks at him and then run away laughing. The old man walked slowly up to the door and nodded to the stranger for his kindness. The stranger motioned with a regal sweep of his hand for the old man to enter first, so the old man cordially accepted. The two men walked in the door and the stranger lowered his hood from his head. The old man looked up at him and realized he was definitely a stranger, he knew everyone in the area and he had never seen this man

before. The tavern had only a few customers, two men were sitting at the bar talking to two whores that worked at the tavern and three men were sitting at a table together in the far corner drinking whiskey and talking in loud slurs.

The old man looked at the stranger and said with a sorrowful sigh, "Not many people out tonight, I guess it is this despicable weather."

"You are probably correct, but I would not know. I am just passing through and I will be leaving in the early hours. I just wanted a good drink of whiskey and some companionship." the stranger said.

The stranger removed his thick black cape and hung it on a hook to dry by the door, and then he turned to the old man, "Let's get a drink. Would you care to join me?"

The old man looked at the tall stranger, actually he was at least a head taller than him, and his hair was long below his shoulders and shimmered like the ebony of raven's feathers. His piercing eyes were dark as coal, and his face was sculpted with firmness. His flawless skin appeared very pale almost translucent in appearance, tiny bluish colored veins appeared so close to the skin's surface. Dressed in a white shirt, black leggings and black soft leather boots; he looked to be twenty and some years of age. The old man instantly knew by his regal statuesque appearance that he was a gentleman of great wealth. The stranger eyed the old man cautiously; he had beady little brown eyes, and a sagging middle-aged wrinkled face that displayed an aura of untrustworthiness about him. His back was slightly hunched and his body odor was foul from days of not bathing.

"Yes, let's get a drink!" excitement beaming from the old man's eyes.

The stranger looked around the tavern, the establishment was repugnant, the walls were stained and yellowed, the long wooden bar was disgustingly filthy from spilled whiskey and ale and the whole establishment smelled of cheap whiskey, smoke, vomit, and unclean whores. He felt his stomach begin to churn from the strong rancid odors that inflamed his nostrils.

"Let's sit at that table in the corner." The old man suggested as he pointed in the direction with his bony frail finger.

"Very well," the stranger headed walking over to the table.

The stranger sat down at the table with his back to the wall while scanning the large open room with few tables and chairs.

The old man took off his dripping overcoat and hung it on the back of his chair, then clumsily sat in a chair across from him and yelled to the bar keeper, "How about some service?" while rapping his fist down on the tabletop repeatedly.

The bar keeper started to yell something obscene back to the disgusting little old man, whom he despised, and noticed the distinguished stranger sitting along with him and decided not to do so, "I will be right over." He replied.

Suddenly one of the whores that were lounging seductively against the bar came sauntering over to the table. Her eyes were very bloodshot from too much drinking; however she locked them upon the stranger's eyes only. The stranger gazed deeply into her eyes as she moved ever closer to him. She looked to be forty and some odd years of age, with dyed fiery red hair, and a lot of pale powdery make-up,

somewhat trying to diminish the lines and wrinkles of all her troublesome years of living. When she reached him, she ran her fingertips across the back of his shoulder up to his neck, while bending over slightly and positioning her large heaving breasts into his view. Her dress was so tight and her flabby sagging breasts pushed up so high by her corset, the stranger could actually see the brown outer edge of her areola showing. The stranger instantly became overwhelmed by her body odor; she reeked of whiskey, cheap perfume, and the sex of several partners.

She leaned over and whispered seductively into his ear, “How about if I join you now, we can have a few drinks, some laughs, and then I can take care of you upstairs, later?” then with her other hand she slowly reached down and gently stroked his crotch.

The stranger grabbed her by the wrist aggressively, almost crushing her fragile bones and removed her hand from his crotch, while glaring deep into her eyes, “You are too old and too worn out for my taste.”

She was so appalled by his comments and actions; she turned and fled the room in tears, clasping her injured wrist to her bosom.

“You could have given her to me,” the old man chuckled.

The stranger ignored the old man’s comment, then yelled to the barkeeper, “Bring us a bottle of your finest whiskey now, I am getting very impatient!” Although he preferred wine in an establishment as such he decided to order the whiskey.

The barkeeper ran over to the table with a full bottle of rye whiskey and two silver plated mugs and filled both mugs quickly. “Sorry, Sir... can I get you anything else?”

The old man sat there scratching his grayish balding head in bewilderment and blinked several times, he could have sworn he saw the stranger’s eyes turn a flaming shade of red for a brief moment when he yelled to the barkeeper. Then he dismissed the thought thinking he had just imagined the incident and began to drink his warm whiskey, the alcohol quickly spread throughout his being, warming his chilled flesh and bones.

“That will be all,” the stranger said casually and tossed two gold coins on to the table to the barkeeper.

“Thank you, Sir, if you need anything at all let me know.” The barkeeper eagerly said while scooping up the gold coins and then walking away eyeing the generous amount preciously.

The stranger picked up his mug and took a huge swallow, “Well, I have had better whiskey, but at least this will knock the chill off.”

“True... that it will,” the old man stated. “That it will!”

Suddenly one of the men that were sitting at the bar came staggering over to the table, his whiskey sloshing over the sides of his mug. He had long grayish hair, a crooked pointy nose and several teeth missing from the looks of his drunken smile. His clothing was worn and tattered and smelled from several days of wear.

He bumped into the table and leaned over to the old man and whispered loudly, “I am going to get some silver coins tomorrow, for work I have been doing. Do you think I can come over and pay your lovely daughter a visit, she was so

delectable the last time?" he then made a low groan deep in his throat. "I have been saving my coins up to pay for another visit."

The old man looked around cautiously not wanting anyone to hear the old drunk. The stranger acted like he was not paying attention to what the drunk had to say.

The old man whispered quietly to the drunk, "Come by my house tomorrow night and we will see if we can work something out."

"I will be by there, right after our evening meal. I need to go for now, you know my wife is expecting to have another baby any day now. Thank you so much!" the drunkard spat out and staggered out the door into the storm.

The stranger sat quietly and finished off his mug of whiskey then poured himself another mug and refilled the old man's mug also.

The stranger looked at the old man and spoke softly, "I am a traveling man and I get very lonely sometimes, however I detest the women in this establishment. I guess you could say I like females of a purer nature."

"A purer nature?" the old man finished off his second mug of whiskey and refilled it again.

The stranger leaned closer to the old man and whispered; "I guess you could say I like them very young and beautiful, not having known the touch of many, at least of marrying age. Do you think you might be able to help a friend in need, considering you are local folk?"

The old man's eyes lit up, "Well I think I can be of assistance. However, it will cost you."

The stranger said, "I like them young not over the age of ten and seven years of age! No older! What is your price?"

"I know of someone." The old man beamed with pride from his scratchy voice. "Ten pieces of silver is the price and she is ten and four years."

"Do you know her personally? Is this person perhaps near by, you are talking about?" the stranger asked.

"Yes, she just happens to be my daughter, she is not a virgin, do not expect one. I took that from her about a year ago, but she is very lovely and very enjoyable." The old man said boastfully.

"I will pay the price you are asking. It doesn't matter to me if she is not a virgin, and if she is that lovely she must surely have taken after her mother!" the stranger said snidely.

It took a moment for the old man to realize what the stranger meant by what he had said, and then he just shrugged it off quickly, thinking of the silver he was going to get paid, since he was asking twice as much from the stranger as he normally asked.

The stranger emptied his mug and refilled it and filled the old man's mug again, "After we finish these drinks I will be ready to meet your daughter. For your sake, your daughter better be lovely. I know you wouldn't waste my precious valuable time. It could be lethal for you if you did."

The old man's eyes widened with fear and he swallowed hard, "I am sure you'll be pleased." He sputtered out hopefully.

“We can take my carriage to the location, it waits outside.” The stranger stated. “That would be good, it’s not fit outside tonight for man or beast.” The old man smiled.

They quickly finished their drinks and the old man grabbed up his soggy over coat as they left the table. The stranger stopped momentarily at the doorway and donned his cape and the two men raced out into the violent storm to the six-team carriage. Simon, the coachman, helped them inside, then swung up to his seat, cracked his whip, and the coach lunged forward into the cold stormy darkness.

The weather raged on, pounding fists of rain and hail on the rooftops, as lightning streaked continuously across the sky. The wind howled like a pack of wolves baying to the full moon in the night’s sky. For most of the night the storm had raged on with mighty fury.

The young girl shrivelled down deep in her bed; drawing the covers up to her tear filled eyes. How she wished that her mother were still alive to protect her from all the evil that lurked around her. But her mother would never return and the young girl knew this truth. One long agonizing year had passed since her death. At ten and four years of age she had come to grips with the reality, but the pain was as fresh and raw as if it happened yesterday. Tears flowed from her bloodshot eyes, she felt desperate and alone in an abandoned world; with only a father that humiliated and used her... she had no one to turn too. She then closed her eyes and began to pray, that the storm would cease its madness and her drunken father would not return home tonight.

Suddenly she heard a loud noise from down stairs. She cringed to think about what was going to happen, but she knew, it had happened many times since her mother’s death. She heard the door to the front of the house slam shut. Two very male voices were talking loudly as if in a drunken stupor, she could hear them bumping into furniture and laughing. She could hear her father’s loud drunken voice over the other man’s voice, she cringed again, and she then grabbed her blanket and ran to her closet. Darkness filled the closet, the fear of the storm was nothing compared to the horror she knew she would soon face. Shriveling into the far back corner of the closet she slid down the wall pulling the blanket up to her tear stained cheeks, peaking out for the horror that she knew would come. Feeling her frail body trembling violently with fear, she drew her knees up to her chest and prayed again.

Hearing the footsteps on the stairs she knew her father had not forgotten about her tonight, he never would forget about her. Each footstep on the stairs echoed in her ears, the tears flowed even more rapidly, her eyes wide with pure terror. Closer and closer the footsteps came, louder and louder they echoed throughout the house as well as in her mind. The thunder continued to roll with the storm. The footsteps were now just outside her bedroom door. Trying to be very quiet she wiped her tears away from her face with her hand, in hopes that her father would not find her hiding place, although deep down inside she knew

he would always find her.

The door creaked open and the two men entered her room. "I want my ten pieces of silver now." The old man bellowed.

The man replied, "Not until I see the girl first."

Her father staggered to the bed pulling at the covers that were piled into a heap on the bed. He called out to her, "Come to me, you brat!"

She knew not to answer him.

He then got down on all fours and looked under the bed, "I said, come to me, you little tramp!"

Still no reply.

Her father became very agitated, "Damned child!"

The other man said, "I think you are lying about having a daughter, I am going to leave."

Her father replied, "No wait, I will find her."

He got up off the floor and staggered to the closet. Her heart was pounding in her chest, echoing through out her body, as if it might explode. The door suddenly was jerked open. Reaching in and groping in to darkness he finally made contact with his target. He grabbed her by her long blonde hair and dragged her out, her back sliding against the cold hard floor. Grabbing her by her frail arms, he stood her up in front of the man so he could look her over.

The man walked over to her, grabbed her chin and tilted it up so he could see her face from the light that came in from the outside of the bedroom door. His eyes intensely locked with hers and he saw familiar eyes staring back at his.

She could smell the foul scent of whiskey on his breath. He looked into her teary eyes and saw the fragile innocence of a young frightened and abused girl, pain shot like bullets through his heart at what she has had to endure from this molesting animal, known as her father.

He let go of her chin and turned to her father and said, "She will do very nicely." while shoving a brown leather pouch full of silver at her father's hands, and telling her father to leave the room.

Her father then told the man, "No Sir, I am not leaving, when you are finished; I am going to get mine."

The man very quietly spoke, "Very well, but do not interfere with my business with her."

"I will not interfere it arouses me more to watch first."

Hearing this conversation between the two men the young girl's knees began to give way. These kinds of situations had happened many times since her mother's death, so many times now she could not remember the number any more. But to her, every time was as horrid as the first time. Sometimes her father would bring one or two men to her bedroom; this would go on all night sometimes. Then at times it would just be her father paying her nightly visits. But the visits from her father were beginning to become more frequent, sometimes twice in a night's time. The pain and the tears were always present.

As her legs began to tremble and give way, the man caught her and picked her up and gently placed her petite body cross ways on the bed. He leaned over her, his breath was rank with whiskey as he breathed heavily in her face.

“This will not be so bad, my young one. “ He whispered to her.

Her father turned and sat down in his usual chair for these kinds of gatherings. The young girl bit her lower lip wishing that she were somewhere else, in the rose garden maybe with her mother like she used to do, before this nightmare began. The man then picked up a strand of her hair and gently rubbed it between his fingers savoring the feel of her silky tendrils and stared deeply into her eyes. She turned her head and closed her eyes tightly. He then grabbed her chin and turned her face toward him and told her to look into his eyes the whole time not to turn away. She agreed out of sheer terror. He then touched her cheek with his fingertips; her skin was smooth as the finest of silks. She knew the pain would come soon.

He stepped away from her for a moment running his fingers through his long black strands of hair and turned to her father and said, “She is very lovely, I know I will be paying you another visit soon.” as he grinned sadistically at him.

Her father stated, “I think we will have a good business future together when you are in the area.” Then he took another sip of his whiskey while adjusting his crotch to get more comfortable in his chair.

The man turned to her and stood looking down at her. She noticed he was a nicely dressed man, not ragged and nasty looking like the others her father had brought to her before. He wore black leggings with a white full-sleeved button up the front shirt, with out a collar, a thick black cape and knee high black boots. His eyes were very dark brown and very sinister looking, an evil in them that couldn’t be expressed, he had such a piercing gaze which held her transfixed to him. His hair was black and long below his shoulders. He then took something out of his pocket and tied his hair back; he quickly removed his cape and tossed it to the old man. Looking down at her he noticed that she would become a very beautiful woman. She had waist length blonde hair, jade green eyes, and creamy soft skin, but if she continued the abuse by her father she would one day be sold into prostitution permanently or end her life by her own hands. He had worked to hard for far too many years to find her, and then to find her living in such horrid conditions. But now the time had come to make things right; however he could not take her with him now. So he had to do the unthinkable.

He leaned over her and whispered to her, “Mikayla, I know who you are, my name is Darius, and I have come for you, to remove you from this hell you are living in. But I can’t take you with me now, I must do certain things first, after tonight no one else will hurt you or I will rip out their heart. Just remember I will come back for you! Do you understand?”

Mikayla nodded in agreement too frightened to whimper a word. Suddenly Darius stopped speaking with his mouth and started speaking to Mikayla with his mind. At first Mikayla thought she was dreaming a nightmare, but she realized what was happening was real. He told her he was going to do things to her but

she would not remember them. That she would have dreams of sitting in the rose garden and reading to her mother like she used to do, but she would always remember that he would come for her one day. Mikayla nodded in agreement again. Darius arose and looked into Mikayla's frightened tearful eyes and then he grabbed her white cotton nightgown, ripping it to expose her shoulder. He leaned over and kissed her shoulder. Mikayla gritted her teeth hard and a tear escaped from the corner of her eye. Darius lowered his head slightly he could feel the beast overtaking him and did not want Mikayla or her father to witness this act; his eyes ignited into flames of crimson red; as he felt his incisors lengthen with his tongue, salvia began to steadily drip from them. Suddenly she felt a sharp pinch as Darius's teeth sank deep into her shoulder. Mikayla cringed as his teeth penetrated her flesh, a cry of fear passed between her lips. He sucked the sweet juices of life from her frail being taking only enough to bind them together, so he would have contact with her mind no matter where they were.

Darius spoke in a gentle manner to her mind, "*It is time for you to dream of your mother and the rose garden.*" As he spoke the words ever so softly those visions appeared in Mikayla's mind and she drifted into a deep hypnotic state, oblivious to her surroundings. Just what Darius had wanted. He then stopped his feeding ritual and licked the two pinpricks closed on Mikayla's shoulder, healing them with his saliva.

Mikayla's father stirred in his chair and said, "Hurry up and get on with this."

Darius rose up and gave her father an evil intimidating glare and grabbed Mikayla's nightgown raising it to her waist he slid his hands up her petite thighs. Detesting what he was going to have to do, but knew it had to be done. He ripped her under garments from her body with one gesture of his hand, exposing her silky tight curls of blonde and creamy flesh so silky and smooth, parting her knees very widely and stepping in between them. Mikayla's father sat up in his chair to get a better view of what was about to take place, sloshing whiskey over the side of his container, while licking his dry vulgar lips with his tongue.

Darius then brought his fingers to his lips and spit salvia on to the tips of three of them, and then he touched them to Mikayla's soft young gathers between her thighs delving his fingers in and out. Then he reached down and adjusted his leggings exposing his hardened mass. Sweat beaded his forehead hoping that he would not injure her badly but he knew the salvia he inserted into her would have her totally healed by morning. Even though Mikayla was old enough to wed, Darius had wanted her to be a fully mature woman for their first encounter. Placing her in a trance like state was the only option he had to end her pain and suffering, once and for all. He closed his eyes and entered deeply into his very young life mate, hating himself for this horrid action he had to do. He grabbed her hips and thrust into her several times. He didn't want this to prolong, so closed his eyes as he dumped his seed very quickly into her somewhat virgin like tightness. Feeling like he could destroy himself for what he had done he pulled out of her quickly and readjusted his leggings.

Mikayla's father jumped up from his chair already exposing his genitalia, he

was hard and throbbing from molesting lust and was ready to mount her.

Darius said, "Not now old man, we have to talk."

Mikayla's Father scowled, "You got yours, I want my turn." Trying to shove past Darius.

Darius grabbed her father by the neck with one hand and picked him up and slammed him into the wall, a good two feet over Darius's head.

"I told you not now, we have to talk!" Darius slid him down the wall until his feet touched the floor and shoved him out the door.

The old man quickly readjusted his leggings. Darius went over to the bed and picked Mikayla up and laid her head gently on a pillow and covered her body with blankets. He reached down and kissed her forehead softly and whispered he would come back for her and for her to sleep peacefully. He took Mikayla out of her hypnotic state, but left pleasant dreams implanted into her mind for a restful slumber. Darius then left the room shutting the door behind him.

Pushing the old man down the steps in front of him, Darius saw the kitchen and pushed him into the room. The kitchen was littered with old whiskey bottles, rotten food and dirty pots and pans, the walls were stained with food as if someone had thrown plates of food against the wall, and the smell was grotesquely stifling of mold and filth. The old man staggered and fell into the table knocking a whiskey bottle to the floor. Darius reached down and scooped it up gracefully, took the cork out and gulped down three huge swallows. He sat down in a chair and told the old man to sit down also. The old man groaned low in his throat but obeyed. Darius looked around the kitchen it was dirty and filthy and a rat was eating left over food on the counter. It was not even frightened off when they had entered the room.

The old man grabbed the whiskey bottle and poured himself another drink and asked Darius, "What is the meaning of this?"

Darius got up from his chair and went over to the counter and grabbed the rat with one graceful motion, the rat hissed at him and wiggled violently in his hand. Darius reached down and bit the rat's head off; he held the convulsing body over his head and let the blood drain into his mouth. The old man was so shaken by what he was visioning that he fell out of his chair. He scrambled to his feet and sat back down quickly, staring at Darius with wide-eyed horror. Darius threw the rat into the corner of the room, licked his lips, and wiped his mouth off with the back of his hand while throwing his head back laughing wickedly.

The old man grabbed the goblet of whiskey and swallowed the contents in one huge gulp, with his watery eyes he stared at Darius and spoke softly, "Jesus Christ, you are a demon from Hell." Making the sign of the cross, across his chest with his hand.

Darius laughed, "I am not a demon, but keep in mind, I am one never to be crossed, or you will suffer unimaginably. I wanted to prove my capabilities to you. However, I am a man just like any other. I always get what I want, when I want it."

Swiftly Darius grabbed a chair, turned it around backwards, straddled it, and

sat down. He stared at the old man for a moment, "I want to purchase your daughter... name a price!"

The old man about choked on his whiskey he was drinking. Then his evil mind started churning with signs of silver coins. "How much are you willing to pay for her? She is very delectable. With a very tight sheath I might add!"

Upon hearing this, Darius wanted to kill him! Rip his heart right out and hold it in front of his eyes so he could see it beating before he died. However, Darius knew he had to keep somewhat calm for now. "I will give you one thousand pieces of silver for the girl!" Darius would give a million but he knew the old man was desperate.

"Why do you want to buy my daughter?" The old man wanted to know.

"It is none of your business old man; I just want her is all. She will have a very good life, but I do not think you would much care anyway, seeing how you have turned her into a prostitute, you are lucky she has not cut your throat in your sleep." Darius leaned back and stared at him with deathlike eyes.

The old man lowered his head trying to avoid Darius's uncomfortable gaze, running his hands through his greasy hair and sweat beading on his forehead.

"I don't really care what happens to her anyway. Been a pain in my arse every since her mother died, I will take two thousand pieces for the snot nose whore." The old man spat out. Hoping the whole time he was not asking too much for the little wench.

"There is one thing though; I cannot take her with me now. However, no man, and I mean no man, is ever to lay a finger on her from this day forward, until I return to get her. Is that understood? If I find out you or any other man has touched her in anyway I will make you wish you had never been born, what I did to that rat a moment ago will be nothing compared to what I will do to you! Understand me?"

The old man swallowed hard and shook his head in a terrified agreement, and asked, "When will you be returning for her?"

Darius hated to reveal this, "It is undetermined at this time; however, I will know if any harm comes to her, and for your sake it better not!"

"Very well, no harm will come to her, I promise you as a gentleman."

"Believe me Sir, No gentleman prostitutes his daughter and then sells them to a stranger." Darius smirked.

The old man replied with a haughty attitude, "No gentleman purchases a slave for two thousand pieces of silver for some child tight piece of arse either."

Darius had to control his temper with all his being at this point, "So true old man, so true. I have had enough of this meeting our business is concluded. All I need to do is pay you and I will be on my way. I have the means to pay you in my carriage."

Darius stood up, "Follow me out to my carriage."

The old man nodded in agreement and they walked out into the darkness.

Darius looked up into the night's sky, the storm had ceased its madness, the clouds had started to drift away and he could see the full moon glowing with splendor through the cloud breaks. Darius walked up to the carriage and the coachman handed him a large leather pouch.

“Thank you, Simon” Darius stated as he took the leather pouch from his coachman.

“Your welcome, Sir” The coachman replied.

Darius reached for the leather pouch and tossed it to the old man. “I would have paid a lot more.” Darius told him and laughed again, “Remember! I will be back for her one day; remember your promise to me. If you value your life you will remember daily.”

The old man nodded nervously in agreement.

The coachman swung down from the carriage and opened the door for Darius to climb in. Darius got in and the coachmen shut the door, then he swung back up into the seat and struck his riding whip and the six-team carriage lunged forward and out of sight.

The old man stood there staring in the direction they left, swearing under his breath that he should have asked for more silver. He then turned towards the house counting his pieces and dreaming of all the gambling he was going to do and all the whores he could purchase.

Electric Wasteland

David Siegel Bernstein

I stare at the television with vacant eyes
and witness a nation's
creative ideas subverted;
interesting themes perverted;
radical minds sterilized
for viewing pleasure.

A population in media confusion
allow mechanical maniacal leaders
to lead us and bleed us
by wars marketed in a blue rhapsody of vengeance
for sins yet to be delivered.

Desired change,
purchased from shame,
washed bare
by tear soaked dreams
and May sweeps.

RANDOM FEAST:

Not Just Another Bump

G.A. Scheinoha

Quick! Grab your silver bullets. Lycanthropy is alive in our midst, right here in Wisconsin.

You've seen all those blood and gore horror flicks. So mywarning doesn't send shivers straight up to the follicles. Exactly the way the black and white Wolfman movies did when I was a kid.

Hey, I admit it doesn't even have the same ring as Warren Zevron's song, The Werewolves of London. But that isn't just another bump in the night. We've got a beast afoot in the Midwest.

Seems a woman invited a gentleman to sleep over on her sofa. In the wee hours, he broke through the locked bedroom door and attacked her. When the police arrived, he confessed he's one of them.

You know, the fellows who grow hair all over their face and a nasty set of dentures. No, not the shaggy DA, a (gasp) werewolf. Okay, so he isn't Lon Chaney, Jr. walking with the Queen. Probably not even the durable, wash'n wear type.

By now you're probably throwing glances at the calendar. Is it Halloween already? Or muttering: must be a full moon.

The story doesn't end there. The woman is defending her assailant. She says he isn't the monster everyone thinks he is.

What kind is he? A zombie? A vampire? And where is Van Helsing when we really need him?

Dunno about you but, just in case something howling this way comes, I'm falling back on the Bill Cosby smear the kitchen floor with jello so when he comes in for a bite, he slides right back out again trick. Ohh shoot, that won't work. In all the excitement, completely forgot. My place is carpeted.

on an airplane with a frequent flyer

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

"I was once on a flight to Hawaii and I was waiting in line for the lavatory. There was always a line for a flight this long, you know, it seemed the washrooms were always on demand on a flight this long. So I finally got into the washroom, you know, and I looked into the toilet, and someone, well, lost the battle against a very healthy digestive system and left the "spoils" in the toilet, stuck. Maybe it didn't want to go down into the sewage tank where all the other waste from this long trip went to. Can you imagine all the stuff this airplane had to carry across the ocean?

Well, anyway, so I saw this stuck in the toilet, and I went to the washroom, and when I was done it still wouldn't budge, and so I opened the door and walked out into the aisle of the plane again. And there was this long line of people waiting to use this cramped little washroom, and I just wanted to tell them all, 'you know, I didn't do that.' And then it occurred to me that everyone, when they leave the bathroom on that plane, will think the exact same thing."

wedding lost

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

And she sees herself in the passenger seat at night, her fiancé beside her, and the lights seem all too bright, and the rain seems all too loud, like the thunder of soldiers running across a field to war, swept with the drunken feeling of patriotism, charging toward their unknown enemy. And so it happened that night, the lights got brighter, the car started to spin, and then she started to dream.

And she sees herself at the end of the church, the bridesmaids have just walked down the aisle, the music changes for her. She feels swept with the euphoria of love, and she begins to walk, but she falls, the bouquet falling from her hand. And in slow motion, white roses and lilies scatter along the aisle. And she looks up, and the groom is gone, and the ground is the ashes of the house they bought together after they were married. She sits up, and she's at the desk at the bank, trying to get the loan for the house. His job is secure, we're young, nothing could go wrong. Good thing

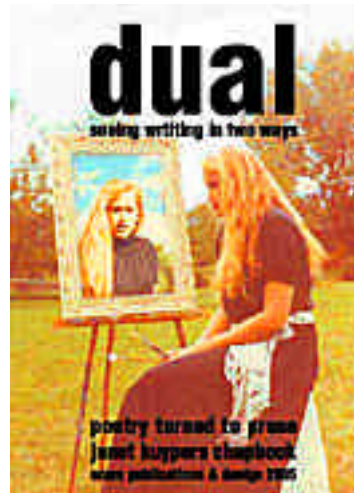
he wore the blue tie to the bank, and not the red one. And she sees herself waking up from sleep, the oxygen pipe still under her nose, her husband there, tie in hand, asking if she'd like to hold their baby. But she could have sworn she heard the baby stop crying. And she panics.

And then she wakes up, her head is bobbing, but now she's back, back at the hospital, looking at the tubes running out of her fiance's arm.

farmer

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

And just north of his corn field there is a college, the university has bought up the property right to the edge of his land. And at that university there is a man studying plant biology, he wants to do research in food genetics, create the perfect ear of corn. And the farmer knows this. All he wanted was to be able to make a living, maybe save up enough so his kid could walk over to campus every morning, maybe meet some new kids. The government assistance has run out, the state wants to push the school south an extra mile, put up a research lab, another dormitory. The drought has done nothing good for his field anyway. And the doctors say the lump under his shoulder is from the sun. All of these years he would wake up early Sundays to work, and he would find tire tracks from souped up cars digging in his property edge. Kids leaving beer cans, junk food wrappers, condoms. And he would pick up what he could. In the upcoming years, would his little boy do this to someone else? And this was his labor: he had sewn the seeds; the plants running, hurdling the rolling hills, sprinters uniform in a marathon. And all the way to the street at the edge of his property, the green sign reading "1800 S", all the way to the end is his life, his little earth, in straight rows, like the peas on his son's plate when he plays with his food. And now the rows of corn are less straight, as if in recent years he didn't care. This year it's the worst yet, he didn't bother with the right chemicals, and there are weeds in between the rows. The grass next to his house is almost up to his waist. And he's awake now, it's four in the morning, and he's wandering out in it all, and he's almost crazy. The grass waves, almost staggers, like him. And he thinks: let the weeds grow.



this is my burden

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"& the book
"Duality"

I managed to find a seat on the el train, for once, I was going to work early enough so that it wasn't very crowded. And the ride was the same as the el train always is: some people reading a paper, a woman putting on her make-up, most just staring out the window at the aging, rattling tracks, the smattering of gang graffiti on the nearby buildings. Ordinary day in Chicago, slightly overcast. I wear my sunglasses just to avoid eye contact with other train members. We all know this code: we know we have to somehow keep our sense of personal space, our sense of selves.

I hear a bit of a scuffle behind me, more the moving of people than an argument; nothing to ponder over. Then a gunshot rings out. I turn around and catch a glimpse of two men struggling. Instantly I duck down, as most others do.

I crawl down to the floor in front of my seat, trying to protect myself, having no idea who has the gun or which direction the gun is pointing. I don't even know if this seat in front of me could protect me from a bullet. There are screams everywhere; the gun occasionally going off. I try to look to see if anyone was shot, but am afraid of being in the line of fire. Another few men jump in the fight, in an effort to stop the gunman. Why is this happening? Was it an argument, or just someone on a shooting spree?

The el comes to a screeching halt at a stop, and now comes the question: do we make a run for it, and risk death, or will the gunman try to escape out the doors? The train ride to here seemed an eternity, and now none of us even knows if we should try to get off the train.

The doors don't open.

I hear a few gunshots; two men scream. The doors finally open. A barrage of policemen cover the doorways. I could glance up and see them. Many more screams. They don't seem to end. The policemen rush the gunman, shoot him before he could shoot anybody else. It was over.

The next two hours were spent on the train and platform answering questions. I had nothing to offer them; I barely saw what happened. They informed me that it was not an argument but a man trying to stop a man about to go on a shooting spree. Then the man that survived the struggle walked up to me, and when no one was listening told me that the gun-

man walked down the aisle, stopped four chairs short of mine, and aimed for my head. That was when he jumped up to stop him.

That man was out to kill me.

But I've never met him before, I said, and the man said he didn't need to know my reply, just wanted to let me know why all this happened.

This man's intentions were to kill me. But why? Did he think I was someone else?

And now I think of this every day, the answers still not coming to me. And I still have this burden to carry with me, that all these people died, all of these people witnessed this event, and in a way I couldn't explain or justify, it was all because of me.

And this is my burden. All this pain. All this guilt. All these unanswered questions.

bizarre sexual stories in the news



Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

from the los angeles times: two gay men, during sexual activity, decide to push a live hamper into the anal cavity of one of the men. however, after they realized they couldn't get the hamper out, they tried to figure out what to do. the man without the hamper inside him decided to light a match to see if he could see where the hamper was. so man-without-hamper is perched underneath man-with-hamper, and lights a match right under man-with-hamper's anus. at that time man-with-hamper passes wind, and it causes a small streak of fire to jump out and singe the man-without-hamper's eye-brows and facial hair. however, because there was gas in the anal cavity, the fireball then shot into the man-with-hamper, circled around the hamper, burning the inside of the man-with-hamper. Furthermore, the gas change and pressure shot the hamper out of the man-with-hamper's anus and into the man-without-hamper's face, breaking his nose.

• **Down in the Dirt** is published by **Scars Publications and Design**, 829 Brian Court, Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA; attn: Alexandria Rand. Contact us via snail-mail or e-mail (AlexRand@scars.tv) for subscription rates or prices for annual collection books.

• To contributors: No racist, sexist or blatantly homophobic material. No originals; if mailed, include SASE & bio. Work sent on disks or through e-mail preferred. Previously published work accepted. Authors always retain rights to their own work. All magazine rights reserved. Reproduction of **Down in the Dirt** without publisher permission is forbidden. Copyright © 2000-2007 **Scars Publications and Design, Down in the Dirt**, Alexandria Rand. All rights of pieces remain with their authors.

Down in the Dirt
Alexandria Rand, editor
AlexRand@scars.tv
<http://scars.tv>

Scars Publications and Design
829 Brian Court
Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA

ISSN 1554-9666

