

CRIME FACTORY

JAN 2010

CRIME FACTORY

**For
David
Honey-
bone**

THE LINE UP

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**"It be-
gan
with a
shat-
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dream."**

-Goodis

CRIME SCENE

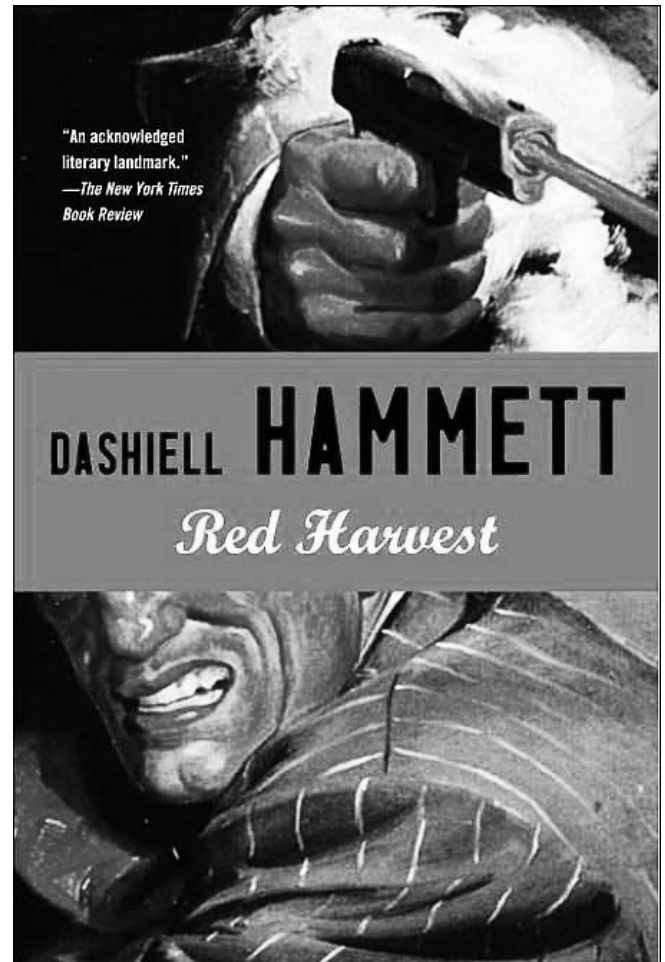
by Gordon Harries

1. RED HARVEST

This article was originally featured at Gordon's needlescratch-static.com but he's with us full-time and you can expect new goodness from him each and every issue

Raymond Chandler is considered to be the principal architect of the modern Private Investigator novel, but he wasn't the first to be compelled to walk down 'these mean streets'. There were others. One of whom, Dashiell Hammett, inspired Chandler to comment 'gave murder back to the people who commit it for reasons.'

Samuel Dashiell Hammett was born to Richard and Annie Hammett in May of 1894. His early life was relatively nomadic as the family moved periodically from city to city in order that his father, a failed politician who had once attempted to gain popularity by switching from the Democratic to the



Republican Party, could find work. This restlessness followed Hammett into early adulthood as he travelled the country working largely in unsatisfying industrial environments. In 1915 he answered a job advertisement in a Baltimore newspaper and joined the Pinkerton Detective Agency

where he would work for eight years in many locales, including an extended stay in San Francisco, the setting of many of his subsequent short stories.

In 1918 Hammett took a leave of absence from the Pinkertons to enlist in the Army. Despite being domestically based during the First World War he contracted tuberculosis, a condition which would impede his health for the rest of his life. During convalescence he began a romance with, and eventually proposed to, his nurse Josie Dolan, intending to provide for her financially by returning to work for the Pinkertons full time. Subsequently, however, Hammett found that, due to his ill health, he could only manage intermittent periods of work, which he would eventually have to give up altogether. It was at this point, whilst trying to provide for his wife and infant daughter, that Hammett began to write for the short story market, most famously *Black Mask Magazine*. Always keen to exploit his past as a private detective, Hammett utilized material from cases he had worked, such as his period as a strike breaker in Anaconda, which would inform both his notable 1924 short story 'Nightmare Town' and his 1928 debut Novel *Red Harvest*.

Whilst Hammett's novels were always critical successes, his sales would be continuously modest. However, because the structure of his novels was inherently filmic Paramount Pictures would offer him a \$300 a week screenwriting position in 1930. Having a significant amount of money for the first time would prove to be harmful for Hammett who was convinced that his screenwriting was harming his literary output. This depression was further exacerbated by his capacity for vice which included a nascent alcohol problem and relationships with several different women. It was during this period of debauchery that biographer Joan Mellen claims Hammett was plagued by the 'emptiness of a life devoid of convictions'. Despite the fact that several of Hammett's novels, most notably *Red Harvest* and later *The Glass Key*, had been embraced by America's left wing, the first sign that Hammett showed of political activism was in March 1937, when he and the playwright Lillian Hellman, with whom he had become involved, donated money to the loyalists in the Spanish civil war. More famously however, Hammett would be called before the 1951 United District Court to explain his dual positions as both President and Trustee of The New York Civil Rights

Congress. The organization's purpose was to give citizens the chance to anonymously provide bail for civilians convicted of being communists before Joseph McCarthy's House of Un-American Affairs committee.

Due to the fact that several communists had left the country whilst on paroles provided by The New York Civil Rights Congress, the district court was demanding the names of the contributors as, in their view, the fact that the communists had been provided with bail aided their escape from justice. Refusing to name names, Hammett was judged to be an uncooperative witness and sentenced to six months in a federal prison. Released just three months later, Hammett found that his income had been attacked by the Federal Government who he now owed \$111,008.60 in back taxes. Worse still Hammett, who had effectively retired from writing in 1934, found that royalties from the sales of his backlist had been suspended pending a senate subcommittee hearing.

Effectively blacklisted, Hammett lost a teaching position at the prestigious Jefferson School of Social Science. No longer able to afford his own accommodation, he would eventually move into

the gatehouse of his friend Dr Samuel Rosen. His life would continue to be tied up by legal proceedings, ill health and suspended royalties until his death in 1961.

Set in a rural mining town called Personville, the narrative of *Red Harvest* follows the 1927 investigation of its anonymous protagonist, a private detective from San Francisco.

“This depression was further exacerbated by his capacity for vice...”

'The Continental Op', as he comes to be known, has been hired by Donald Willsson who is killed the night that the Op arrives in town. Unsure of the reason he was hired the Op begins to investigate his would-be client and the web of relationships he had involved himself in, particularly with the disreputable Dinah Brand. Willisson, who had been living abroad for many years, had returned as the town's newspaper editor which he had begun to use as a forum through which to express his disgust at the collusion between the town's police and criminal elements. The narrative gains the air of a

familial tragedy when it becomes apparent that Donald Willisson's father, Elihu, who either owns or has an interest in the overwhelming majority of the town's businesses, is effectively responsible for the criminal element that has earned Personville the colloquialism 'Poisonville'. The Op learns that during a pronounced period of labour unrest, Elihu hired out-of-town criminals to act as strike breakers. Subsequent to the settling of the strike that brought them to town many of the thugs, with colorful prohibition-era nicknames such as 'Whisper' Thaler, chose to stay and exploit the situation which Elihu Willisson, now old and infirm could do nothing about. Following an attempt upon his life made by a low level assassin, Elihu Willisson employs the Op to remove the criminal element from Poisonville. Which the Op then attempts, by setting the various factions of Personville on a collision course, each gang wiping the other out in a civil war that threatens to destroy the town.

Red Harvest is very much a novel about the connection between several different kinds of corruption; the corruption of public office, of business and, ultimately, a form of spiritual corruption, all of which are

facilitated by the town's uneasy collusion between business, crime and the law. Whilst primarily utilizing the Op to illustrate the inter-dependency of these seemingly disparate strands of corruption, Hammett would also use secondary characters such as Dinah Brand, 'Whisper' Thaler, Elihu Willisson and Police chief Noonan.

In order to offset the confusion that such a complex plot could potentially fall prey to, Hammett employs both a conventional three-act structure and the Op's first person narration in order to guide the reader through the narrative. Unconventional, however, is the analytical tone of the narration which neither indulges in the kind of wry humor so often found in crime fiction, nor offers any moral judgments within the context of the narrative. Thus, the reading experience becomes participatory as both the reader and the protagonist observe events unfolding at the same time. Another entry point is provided in that each chapter's content is foreshadowed in the preceding chapter, such as the chapter entitled 'Dinah Brand', during the course of which, having learned of Brand's affair with Donald Willisson, The Continental Op questions a number of people about Brand.



From Police Chief Noonan the reader learns that she is 'a big league gold-digger', whilst her ex-boyfriend says of her that she had 'everybody she wanted' thus, when the reader meets Brand in the succeeding chapter they feel, as the Op does, that they are equipped to assess her.

The narrative, however, is keen to dispel some of the more sexist assumptions made during the course of the previous chapter, by providing us with a Dinah Brand who is not quite the conventional femme fatale that she has previously been presented as. The reader is told that she has 'the face of a girl of twenty-five already showing signs of wear' and is therefore introduced to another permutation of

corruption, this can be read as either being simply a statement on the ageing process or the physical wear and tear that the life of a 'good time girl' has bestowed upon this character. The Op aside, Dinah Brand is the most significant character in *Red Harvest* usually trading a 'good time' with a man for money, with Willsson however, she was trading information on the connections between Personvilles' various corrupt enterprises for money. This is the relationship which she falls into with the protagonist, enabling him to further unsettle the already uneasy collusion between the legitimate and illegitimate aspects of Personvilles' economy.

It's notable that the first act of *Red Harvest* has Dinah Brand at its centre, chiefly because she is the one character who maintains relationships with all the characters central to the plot, including the gambler 'Whisper' Thaler. So named because of his tendency to speak softly, 'Whisper' is one of the thugs Elihu Willsson had previously employed to strike break during the course of the conflict between the mining company and its labourers, The International Workers Of The World (IWW). Subsequent to the assassination

attempt upon Elihu Willsson, and the Op's hiring, he and Brand exchange places in the narrative with the Op becoming the focal point, now that his time as a mere observer has concluded. Additionally, his relationships with the police, the gangsters and Elihu Willsson are all based on the information that the Op has obtained from Brand, which he freely barterers for further information.

"Hammett was judged to be an uncooperative witness and sentenced to six months in a federal prison."

As the novel moves into its second act, the reader becomes increasingly aware of the Op's relative ambivalence about the merits of right and wrong.

Another aspect of the corruption within the text is the character of Elihu Willsson, who despite only having a handful of scenes remains a lingering presence throughout. Willsson is the owner of the mining company, the towns' press, the bank and a significant investor in many of the local businesses. It is because of this that

he feels he owns the town, a sense of entitlement which sickens the Op. Whilst many commentators chose to ascribe the fractious relationship between Elihu and the Op as being fundamentally about the distinction in the outlook of management and labour it would be an erroneous conclusion to draw, as just as Willsson has hired the Op to 'fight his battles for him' the Op is simply stirring up a bloodbath between the gangs rather than confronting them head on or taking an active part in the carnage. This comparison parallels two characters who are fundamentally similar at different stages in life, where neither likes what the other sees.

The most shocking act to occur in *Red Harvest*, which also raises the issue of the novel's moral ambivalence, is the murder of Dinah Brand, who, after being ostracised by Personville's criminal community, is found dead with an ice pick in her chest. The reason she has been murdered, of course, is the manner in which the Op has deployed the information she sold him - in one notable instance information that only she could have provided. He then uses her death, as well as her relationship with 'Whisper' Thaler to create further discordance amongst the

criminal fraternities of Personville. One of Hammett's strengths as a writer was that whilst his own sense of morality was never overt in his work, his work frequently dealt with relative notions of morality. One of the ways he achieved this in *Red Harvest* was to remove the moral dimension implicit in much crime fiction, in order to further engage the audience and in so doing ask them to think about what was morally correct in a situation where all of the characters in the narrative are presented as being morally compromised. This is largely achieved through the analytical tone of the Continental Op's first person narrative, which has little time for self-reflection or justification, rendering him an unsympathetic protagonist.

The final character then, who illustrates corruption in Hammett's novel, is the Continental Op, who having lost the objectivity which defined the novel's first act admits to Dinah, shortly before her death, that 'this damned burg's getting to me. If I don't get away soon I'll be going blood simple like the natives' before further confessing that he's 'getting a rear' from facilitating murder. Whilst 'getting a rear' is obviously an outdated colloquialism

of the 1920s it's reasonable to assume that it means obtaining excitement of some sort. The Op is ultimately hired to break the gangs in the same way that the Personville's thug's were initially hired to break the unions and the Op's journey from analytical observer to someone trying to cope with his own lust



for blood, possibly mirrors the journey that took the strike breakers from being thugs to gangsters.

Red Harvest is in some respects very much a product of its time. The concerns it expresses;

moral ambivalence, the capacity of man to contain his urges being a staple of much fiction published between the Wars. More obviously, however, it is set during Prohibition when all manner of links between officials who appreciated alcohol and the bootleggers who provided it were formed. Because of the criminals relative immunity during Prohibition, it also became the era of the flamboyant gangster, which doubtless informed the creation of Hammett's gang leaders.

Whilst *Red Harvest* has traditionally been viewed as a left wing book, it is my contention that this is largely coloured by the political activism of Hammett's later years. It is significant, for example, that the Continental Op is first hired by a newspaper editor, which is in and of itself a respectable white collar profession, before being further employed by the town's main benefactor, albeit in a manner which resonates with the initial purpose of Personville's criminal element. Nor are there any representatives of the politically disenfranchised in *Red Harvest*, in fact the novel seems to be entirely unconcerned with the potential loss of the lives of 'ordinary' citizens during the course of the Op's vendetta. This coupled with the fact that, at the

novel's conclusion, Elihu Willson is once again the undisputed 'Tsar of Poisonville', would appear to me to make it hard to say that 'Red Harvest' is purely a left wing piece of fiction.

Instead, I suspect that any message Hammett may have wished to have made with his debut novel would be less about politics and

“What was morally correct in a situation where all of the characters are morally compromised?”

more to do with the fact that corruption is endemic to the human condition, and that the acceptance of that corruption simply enables it to spread ever farther ●

"For human beings finally were each as alone as dead stars."

·Thornburg

THE SCORE

AN EXCERPT FROM THE FORTHCOMING NOVEL *KILLER* BY KEN BRUEN

He'd written

.....Fail

.....Fail better

.....Fail happiest.

So,

So they sent him to the school's social worker.

A very earnest twenty and change young lady.

Gung ho and ready to save the world.

Especially its youth.

She had a photo of Bono on her desk.

Tells you all you need to know really.

She felt she had buckets of empathy.

Buckets of something.

The young man standing before her was dressed in a long black

coat.

She knew

'Duster'

They called them.

She'd read her Columbine stuff.

And he had the requisite scowl.

She checked all her notes

Combat pantsyes.

Attitude.....oh Lord, yes.

Anger.....he exuded it.

And she just knew, intuitive she supposed, that he listened to that death metal music.

Wrong.

He loved country and western.

But what the hell, she was way ahead already, knew exactly how to handle him, said

'John, please be seated.'

See?

No chastisement, in fact, a friendly overture and the use of his first name, she'd learned the value of that in her first year.

He sat, still scowling.

She was thrilled.

Just like her lecturers had promised.

She took a moment to apparently read his essay, the above three lines on failure he'd submitted

Said

'John, I've amended your essay.'

Paused

Let that hover for a moment, let him know who was the boss then moved the paper across the desk,

Asked

'How does it read now?'

She'd written

.....Feel

.....Feel better

.....Feel happiest.

She'd shown it to her roommate, perhaps, breaking protocol a

tad but she was so pleased with it, she had to.....

to share.

Loved it.

He read it slowly and then in a very quite voice, asked

'May I borrow your pen?'

Took her a little off guard but she knew, roll with the flow, feel the bonding.

She took out her prized Cross fountain pen, a graduation present from her proud dad,

Handed it over.

John looked at the pen and then he smiled.

It un-nerved her a little but she re-grouped, possibly she should have kept it less personal

But he was writing, so all was good.

She wasn't entirely sure, her short range vision had been giving her some trouble but it looked like he was wearing..... surgical gloves?

Maybe it was a new fashion trend and she did try to keep right up there with the young uns.

He finished, pushed the paper back to her.

She thought, if he has dotted his I's with little hearts, she would just die!

She picked up the paper, read

.....Kill

.....Kill better

.....Kill happiest.

She looked up.

Into the barrel of a small caliber handgun.

He said

'You're right, I do feel...better.'

Shot her precisely between her two astonished eyes.

Debated on a second shot but no, she was done.

He thought

'That's all she wrote.'

He stood up, debated only briefly if he should return the pen, thought

'Naw, what would they do? Bury it with her?'

He knew they'd never buy this as a suicide but what the hell, worth a shot

Nearly laughed at his outrageous pun.

Took her right hand, folded the fingers around the still smoking gun, and pushed her head back then ruffled her hair, said

'Good talking with yah.'

Any cop worth his badge would see it as a staged scene but c'mon, it was Irish cops, get real.

He carefully cut the note to leave her writing, and left that on her desk.

Nice ambiguous note. He put the remainder in his coat, he didn't need to worry about prints, the gloves took care of that.

He moved round her appointment book and there he was, scheduled to meet her at noon.

High noon for her as it turned out, he took his razor, the old style model and expertly removed the whole page.

He'd been very careful not to be seen entering her office or even the school.

Now, he put on the baseball cap, the dark shades and took a deep breath.

Fuck, it was a rush all in

itself.

He closed her door gently and put the

'Do not disturb'

sign on the glass front, which was about as deep and transparent as she thought she'd been.

She probably need some down time.

He moved unhurriedly down the corridor and his timing was ace, everyone in class and not a soul around.

Out on the street, he moved briskly towards the town centre, maybe pick up some sounds.

He could of course download any shit he liked but shoplifting was a minor riff and he liked to keep his skills honed.

Why pay when you could simply steal them.

Now he just needed to call his chosen partner, have her confirm, if asked, that yes, he'd, as the Americans say, cut class.

She'd swear through forty cows that oh yes, indeed, he'd been with her all the time.

Was it airtight?

Was it fuck.

But therein lay the beauty, keep the edge riff going.

SOME ARE BORN

TO

ENDLESS NIGHT.

Ex-detective Dylan Norton summed up his life in D's

Depression

Debilitated

Disgust.

He'd been with The Garda for twenty years. He'd been on the fast track. Having done nigh on ten hard years as a street Guard, he'd managed to gain detective rank and straight away, he was assigned to two spectacular cases.

I.E.....the ones the papers write about and the TV pundits bleat on.

He was way down the food chain with the hard bitten detectives but he solved both cases.

One was a brazen arts theft from the National Museum and he'd followed his instinct and checked out a young girl whose

father had bestowed the precious artifacts.

She confessed as soon as he went to see her.

It didn't make him many friends in the department.

And what should have been glory.

A 2nd major case, the kidnapping of a prominent business man's daughter, was on the TV, constantly.

Paramilitaries were blamed.

Dylan felt different and purely on a hunch, went to see the man's wife, he was left out by the other detectives as they followed down the leads on dissidents, telling him

'Wonder boy, man the phones.'
Simply put

'Fuck off.'

He'd barely introduced himself to the wife when she started crying, said

'She's upstairs, I'm so sorry, it was all a stupid mistake.'

He was in clover.

Sort of.

Twice he'd delivered and big and the other guys, they were

seriously pissed.

While the papers lauded him, his colleagues ignored him, apart from muttering

'Bollix'.

As they passed him in the corridors.

He took his pension when his twenty were done and he was still a young forty.

He had no idea what to do next so he set up as a Private Detective.

Sign of the new Ireland when he checked the yellow pages and saw there were nineteen other P.I.s

In business.

In Galway!

There were of course stories of the first P.I.

A drunk named Taylor. Dylan discarded them as the work of fiction.

Dylan was tall, with a slender frame, and what women called sad eyes.

He called depression.

Even had it checked out.

The doctor telling him

'You have clinical depression.'

And prescribed various medications.

None worked.

So, he figured

'Live with the bad bastard.'

He always knew when it was about to hit and ensured he'd be busy as a banshee during those episodes.

Business was brisk.

The new Ireland, now in deep recession had multiple cases of husbands disputing divorces.

Companies going to the wall and wanting scapegoats.

Missing pets.

Mad as that sounds, it paid well and he had to hire a secretary.

A girl in her late twenties with real attitude and a mouth like a fish wife.

Named Kaitlin. She was a looker, no doubt.

Knew it too.

A degree in economics.

So why on God's Holy Ground would she want to be a secretary for a P.I.

Which is what he asked.

She had long dark hair, hazel eyes, a figure she knew you'd kill for and was dressed like she could give a toss.

In a Clash t-shirt, tight, (very) black skinny jeans, and pink Converse trainers.

She said

'Do I look like a babe who is going to work for some bollix?'

He thought

'Jesus wept, of all the women out there looking for work, I get the mouth.'

He asked

'How do you know I'm not ...am...a ...one of those guys?'

She laughed out loud and Lord, she had one of those great laughs, didn't care how she looked, just went with the merriment.

She said

'I could get near most jobs I wanted, I'm smart, look hot... right?' Waited for his response

He hadn't any, least none this side of decency, so she continued

'I figured it would be fun to be a private dick, sorry, that's you in theory but I'm the glamorous

sidekick you fall secretly in love with but never can have.'

The hell was wrong with him, he felt his heart sink when she said...Never.

There and then he decided not to hire her, Christ, who needed this shite.

She said

'I'll start Monday, don't worry about references, you'd be too mortified to read how amazing I am.'

She was at the door, added

'Salary...you'll do the right thing, you poor thing.'

He'd envisaged a Mannix type gig, where like mostly, he shouted

'Peggy, coffee.'

And the poor dumb bitch in that series always brought him his coffee with worship in her eyes.

He cringed even now as he thought, did he actually mention Mannix to her.

He did. She'd given him the blank stare.

And she'd asked

'Who?'

Fuck, age was a bastard.

Dylan, unfashionably, didn't have a whole load of baggage or angst or whatever they were calling it.

He had his depression, and that was enough freight on it's own self.

One thing he tried not to think about ...was the time he'd been shot.

Fifteen years in, seen his share of ugly fights, violence, the awful remains of murder victims and worse, the telling of a family about a deceased family member.

He'd never been good at that but then, how could you?

It wasn't even the weekend when most of the heavy stuff went down and the drunks went bananas.

It was a quiet Monday.

The call came in about a man behaving strangely in his home in Newcastle.

You had to tread careful there.

The University, the hospital, rich families, old money and all that nonsense. He'd gotten the call and took a raw young Ban Garda named Ridge with him

Upper Newcastle, near where the Franciscan Priory was.

Class.

He's said to Ridge, who was so eager, it damn near broke his heart and kept calling him Sir.

He'd cautioned

'I'll do the talking and just follow my lead.'

Her agreement was more than he could actually face.

They knocked on the door and it was answered by a portly man, dressed in silk pajamas.

Dylan had said

'Sorry to disturb you sir but we've had a report of some shouting from your house?'

The man was civility personified, said

'Please come in and oh, it's Professor, I'm at the University.'

At least explained the silk pajamas if ever such could be rationalized.

Ok.

They went in.

A large comfortable room lined with books and the man asked 'Might you be allowed some refreshments, I know you're on duty but it's late and we all break protocol sometime,

am I correct Miss? Is that the right PC term, I don't want to break any rules here'

Dylan had nodded at Ridge and she said

'That would be lovely.'

The Professor had that acquired Collegiate accent that was loosely termed West Brit.

Mainly it said.....you're a peasant and I'm a complete bollix.

Dylan was playing for time, see if maybe the poor bastard's wife was lying dead in the kitchen or something.

The man poured Ridge a dry sherry in a very impressive crystal glass, handed it to her, said

'Chin chin.'

Then added

'You must excuse me, I've been teaching those morons some Evelyn Waugh, they still think Waugh was a woman.'

Dylan should have been more alert, he knew that now but back then, he'd been literally listening to the sounds of the house, and what he heard, was

Nothing. He was about to ask when the man said

'Inspector?...or have you even attained that rank, did they send the dregs of the barrel to a man of my standing, I have something more belly warming than dry sherry.'

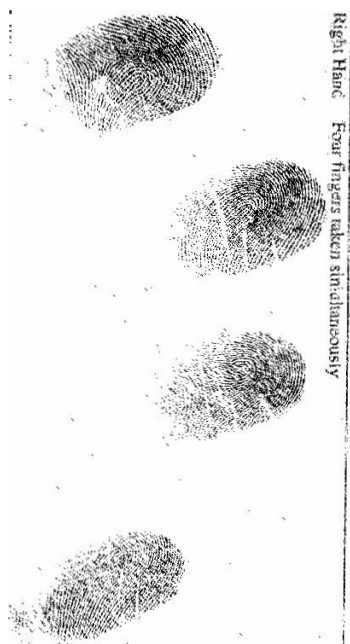
And up came the shotgun, both barrels at point blank range in Dylan's stomach.

He was re-loading, muttering about the decline in The Booker Prize quality when Ridge cold cocked him with the dry sherry bottle.

Twice in fact.

They say nothing on God's earth hurts more than a gut shot.

They're right ●



KEN BRUEN

It's most likely that long-time friend of the Factory, Ken Bruen, needs no introduction to anyone reading this. The prolific Shamus-winning, Edgar-nominated writer from Galway is responsible for the Inspector Brant series, the Jack Taylor series, the Angela and Max trilogy co-written with Jason Starr, *American Skin*, *Once Were Cops*, and much, much more. *Killer* is due sometime late 2010, as are the film adaptations of his *Blitz* and *London Boulevard* and the TV adaptation of the Jack Taylor books. Our sincere thanks for Ken for this whopping exclusive.



**"Baby,
I don't
care."**

**-Mainwa-
ring**

NERD OF NOIR'S CRIME SLEEP- ER DOUBLE FEATURE

by Peter Dragovich

1978

I've got your Friday night all planned out for your ass, dear reader, and it involves two kick-ass flicks from the year 1978. Hopefully you haven't heard of them and watching them back-to-back will be so overwhelmingly awesome that you will shit your pants and not even care. If you've already drunk in their glory before, you'll probably at least pee a little on a repeat viewing.

First up is Daryl Duke's *The Silent Partner*, adapted from an Anders Bodelsen novel by Curtis Hanson, who nearly two decades later would direct the modern crime classic *L.A. Confidential*.

The Silent Partner plays like one of Elmore Leonard's novels from the seventies or early eighties – it's fast-paced, funny, off-beat, and extremely menacing.

Elliot Gould is in peak-form as Miles Cullen, a good-looking but awkward teller in a Toronto bank. In an extremely sly scene, Cullen uncovers a plot to hold up the bank. Thing is, instead of alerting the bank manager, Cullen sets it up so that when the bank is held up, he can walk away with bulk of the money while the robber just takes a few thousand.

The plan goes off without a

hitch and Cullen becomes a minor celebrity from all the TV coverage of the robbery. Next thing you know, the bank manager's hot mistress (Susannah York) wants to fuck him and the gunman from the robbery (Christopher Plummer) wants the fifty thousand dollars Cullen stole from him.

Thus begins a very clever game of cat-and-mouse that threw even a hardened crime movie vet like the Nerd for a fucking loop more than once. Plummer is both sadistic and rational, making for one of the more surprising villains in film history. You're with Gould at every turn, believing and relishing his transformation from fish-collecting dork to quick-thinking criminal and charming playboy. The two are a great match up for this high-stakes game, their scenes together are intense and totally fucking thrilling (especially in the beautifully handled phone scenes).

Like I said, the plot goes in some crazy directions, finally paying off in a final scene that is hilarious, creepy, clever and, no-shit, fucking clap-worthy. For this double feature, *The Silent Partner* is the "let's just have a fucking blast" portion of the bill. Taking the evening into bleaker, grittier

(but no less thrilling) territory is our second feature, Ulu Grosbard's *Straight Time*, adapted from the Edward Bunker novel *No Beast So Fierce*.

Dustin Hoffman plays Max Dembo, a thief just out on parole. We follow him as he tries to make shit work – get a straight job and meet a nice girl – only to see him get fucked by the system and his ex-con status in general. Eventually he starts running with his thief pals again, Willy Darin (a young Gary Busey) and Jerry Schue (the great Harry Dean Stanton), robbing banks and raising hell.

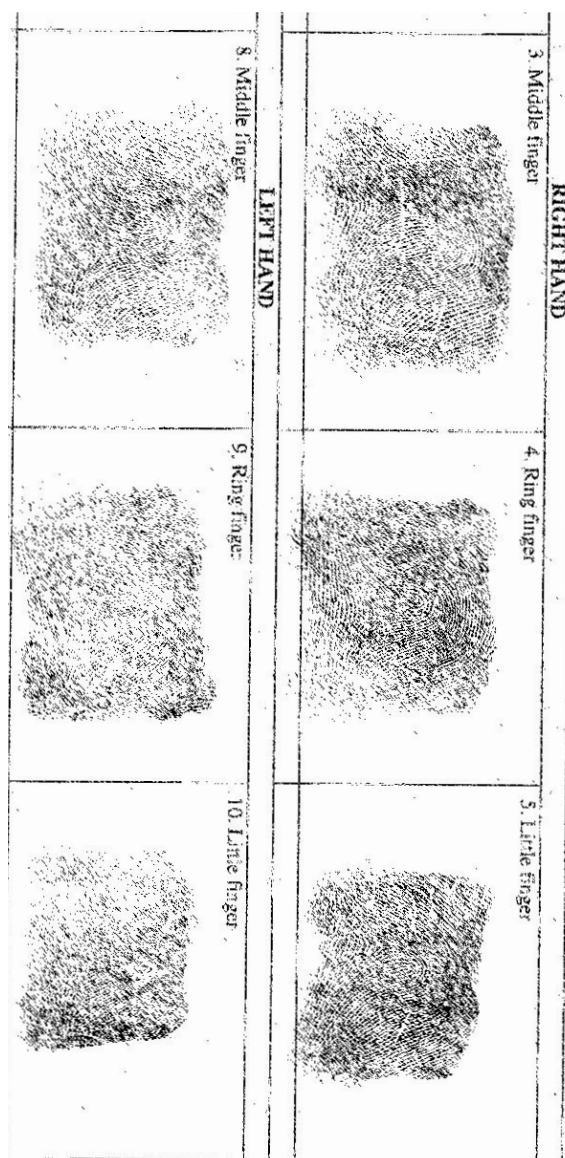
What makes *Straight Time* really stand out are the smaller scenes, the authentic-seeming little details that make up this stark, realistic portrait of criminal life. The way Dembo's parole officer (M. Emmett Walsh's best performance...if *Blood Simple* didn't exist) sadistically relishes his power over Max, while trying to play it off like "Hey, I'm just doing my job, here." The way Darin's wife (a young Kathy Bates) in no uncertain terms demands that Max, who has just enjoyed a cordial dinner at their house, stay the fuck away from her family while Willy puts their son to bed. The difference between the Darin's modest

shit-shack and Jerry Schue's middle class dream home. The painful process of a job interview, or of keeping up chit-chat on a date when, in the back of your mind, you know your criminal record is going to come up. These minor agonies are all subtly portrayed throughout the runtime of *Straight Time*.

But all that good smart hoity-toity shit said, *Straight Time* is also a great heist movie. The bank and jewelry store robberies in this movie just kick the living shit out of damn near every hold-up you've ever seen. These old pros move fast and hit hard, and when shit goes wrong, you feel the tension something fucking fierce. When Max tries to get more than they'd planned in the jewelry store robbery, you'll tear your fucking hair out with worry.

So find your pile of nasty weak pot and roll some fat doobs, pull the ring on a few beers (What? What other allusions to the seventies could I have made? Have...unprotected sex?), put your feet up because it's fucking movie night at your place. Let *The Silent Partner* get the blood pumping and then allow *Straight Time* to kick you in the gut and send you off to bed dazed and depressed. Just remember

to shower first, seeing how you shit your pants and all ●



**"So here's
Tonya Harding
and her
boy Gillooly
and that
whole group
of mooks sit-
ting around
in a room
somewhere
formulat-
ing this 'bril-
liant' plan."**

-McNaughton

UNDER THE IN- FLUENCE

Douchebags, assholes and various other forms of human wreckage:

Scott Phillips on Charles Willeford

1. "Do you know the world is a foul sty? Do you know, if you rip off the fronts of houses, you'd find swine? The world's a hell. What does it matter what happens in it? Wake up, Charlie. Use your wits. Learn something!"

-- Joseph Cotten as Uncle Charlie in "Shadow of a Doubt,"
written by Thornton Wilder and directed by Alfred Hitchcock

Charles Willeford is the funniest writer I ever read. Sometime in 1992 or '93 Chas Hansen Dennis McMillan's paperback edition of the beautifully titled *Kiss Your Ass Goodbye*, a discrete section of the novel *The Shark-Infested Custard*, wherein Willeford took a group of narcissistic divorced guys living in a singles complex in Miami in the seventies and turned their sleazy stories into something epic. What really grabbed me at the time was the fact that he never stooped to making any of them sympathetic or likeable; these

guys were jerk-offs, through and through. Somebody (can't remember who, sorry) once said that Willeford's specialty was the asshole protagonist, and with a couple of exceptions—Hoke Moseley of *Miami Blues* and its three sequels, and the narrator of *Pick-Up*—his main characters are a pretty nasty lot. (Willeford never wanted to write a series, and the original sequel to *Miami Blues* featured a very different, murderous picture of Hoke; his agent declined to send it to St. Martin's).

2. "Immature artists imitate; mature artists steal."

-- Lionel Trilling

My second novel featured a character named Wayne Ogden, a crooked army supply sergeant and pimp gone AWOL from occupied Japan, returned to his native Wichita to rob and possibly kill his estranged wife, and Willeford's gleefully amoral protagonists were foremost in my mind as I wrote him. I actually started asking myself "what would Willeford do?" whenever I came to a moral crossroad for the character. There were other characters in that book that I liked better, but none that I had more fun writing.

A couple of years later Dennis McMillan was publishing *Measures of Poison*, an anthology featuring almost all of the writers he'd published over the years, and he asked me to contribute a story set in the 1930s. I wrote a story called 'Sockdolager,' featuring Wayne as a seventeen year old seducing and eventually sodomizing the alcoholic mother of a classmate, who then spurns him for an older, richer man. Later another short story solicitation from Dennis resulted in another teenage Wayne episode, one in which he kills a bald eagle and lusts after a

friend's pregnant sister. Both stories were informed in style and content by Willeford to the point that I could be accused of slavish imitation.

I don't care. Some years later, when I'd hit a brick wall trying to publish a science fiction novel nobody seemed to want, my agent told me she'd been getting requests for another short, pulpy, nasty book like my first one. All right, I thought, and I went back to Wayne and came up with a whole novel in which Wayne returns to Wichita after World War II, finds that he hates being a civilian, and abandons his pregnant wife to rejoin the army in occupied Japan, setting up the events of *The Walkaway*. In it Wayne cheats, lies and blackmails. He pimps, he steals, he bullies. He sets up a minister who's engaged to a woman he fancies, arranging for unspeakably foul pornography to be sent to the pastor's church in the pastor's name. By the time the book is over he's metamorphosed from the merely unethical Wayne of the short stories to the full-fledged psychopath of *The Walkaway*; I've never had so much fun writing anything in my life.

I never met Willeford, who died in 1988, but I have enough friends who knew him well that I can state with some certainty that he was a stand-up guy. I suspect that the utterly convincing, gleeful amorality of Russell Haxby/Richard Hudson, the used-car salesman protagonists of *High Priest of California* and *The Woman Chaser*, respectively (they may have been the same character—the author himself gave conflicting accounts), were as amusing for Willeford to write as they still are to read.



“He sets up a minister who’s engaged to a woman he fancies, arranging for unspeakably foul pornography to be sent to the pastor’s church in the pastor’s name.”

3. “I don’t like this guy Willeford’s character. I don’t like this guy Willeford’s novel. In fact I don’t like this guy Willeford. Don’t send me any more of his stuff.”

—an editor at Fawcett Gold Medal, to Willeford’s agent, circa 1960

The other thing about Willeford’s characters is that despite it all you can’t help but like them. Toward the end of Robinson Devore’s beautiful adaptation of *The Woman Chaser*, the car salesman/film director Richard Hudson punches his pregnant girlfriend in the belly to induce an abortion (a

shot sadly cut from the release version by a squeamish distributor). Watching the uncut version on VHS with my wife, I turned to her at that point and said “he’s lost you, hasn’t he?”

“No! I’m with him!” she said. High praise ●

SCOTT PHILLIPS

Scott Phillips is the author of *The Ice Harvest*, *The Walkaway*, *Cottonwood* and the upcoming *Pussy Raffle*. He was born in Wichita, Kansas and lived for years in France and Southern California. He now lives in St. Louis with his wife and daughter.



**"Do I re-
ally look
like I
need
your
money?"**

-Starr

RETURN TO THE SCENE

SPOILER ALERT:

RETURN TO THE SCENE functions as a "commentary track" for books, where various creative types choose one of their works and take us behind the scenes in its construction in any manner they see fit. As such, they may spoil plots or details, unearth creative processes you may not want to know about and generally ruin your reading experience if you're not familiar with the work. The aim is, of course, the opposite, so CF advises you pick up the books in question before proceeding.

FIFTY GRAND

By Adrian McKinty

INTRO

I got the idea for *Fifty Grand* on a trip to Cuba. I went to Cuba with somewhat naive expectations of what it would be like there. I suppose as a loyal Guardian reader I had thought it would be a happy go lucky Caribbean island under a rather benign cigar chomping leader, a leader who had survived numerous, comical assassination attempts by the CIA which endeared him even more to his people.

Cuba wasn't like that at all. Instead I found a clumsy dictatorship run by callously

brutal secret police that was both corrupt and utterly incompetent. Havana after dark (when all the cruise passengers return to their ships) was filled with child prostitutes, pimps and hundreds of European and Canadian sex tourists. Indeed after a week there it seemed to me that the sex trade provides maybe the biggest whack of Cuba's hard currency.

After witnessing the DGI (the secret police) beat up a male prostitute and take his money I knew I had to write something about Cuba. Later the same day

I had an incident at Ernest Hemingway's house which I wrote about [HERE](#)

and that more or less sealed the deal. I knew there was a novel in this material somewhere.

On my last day in Havana I went to the Ambos Mundos hotel where Ernest Hemingway famously wrote *For Whom The Bell Tolls* and brought along a legal pad and a pencil.

After a couple of mojitos the juices started to flow and before I really knew what was happening I had written in long hand the first five chapters of *Fifty Grand*.

CHAPTER 1

The previous winter I had been driving up in Wyoming by myself and I found this isolated little frozen lake. I took some pictures of it and more or less forgot about it until I found myself "there" with my protagonist in chapter 1. I wasn't sure why she was there or who was with her and what exactly was going on, but I knew if I kept writing it all would become clear.

CHAPTER 2

Much to my surprise, Chapter 2 went back in time a week

or two before the incident on the ice and I found myself in a "coyote" van crossing the Texas-Mexico border with a bunch of illegals. It did not, however, surprise me when the van got robbed by good old boys. Hundreds of illegals die in that crossing every year and very seldom does it ever become news.

CHAPTER 3

Now I knew who my character was in chapters 1 and 2. Her name was "Maria" (Actually, we never find out her real name in the novel) and she was a detective in the PNR (the Cuban national police). This chapter sets up what happened that made her want to go to America. (Her father had been killed there in a hit and run and nobody gave a shit about it except for her and her brother Ricky).

CHAPTER 4

Now I knew we had to get back into the narrative, so chapter 4 continues on from chapter 2. "Maria" arrives in the rich ski town of Fairview, Colorado (where her father died). Ostensibly she's there to work as a maid. Only one person from the van ends up in Fairview with her, a kid from the van called Paco. I liked this scene, especially the way the illegals get

treated like cattle at a stock show.

CHAPTER 5

Man I had fun with this chapter. I wanted Maria's first job to be helping out at a Hollywood pot party. I got to have Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Kevin Spacey and a few other people make cameos at an up and coming actor's party. (For legal reasons some of these people did not make the cut in the British version of the book).

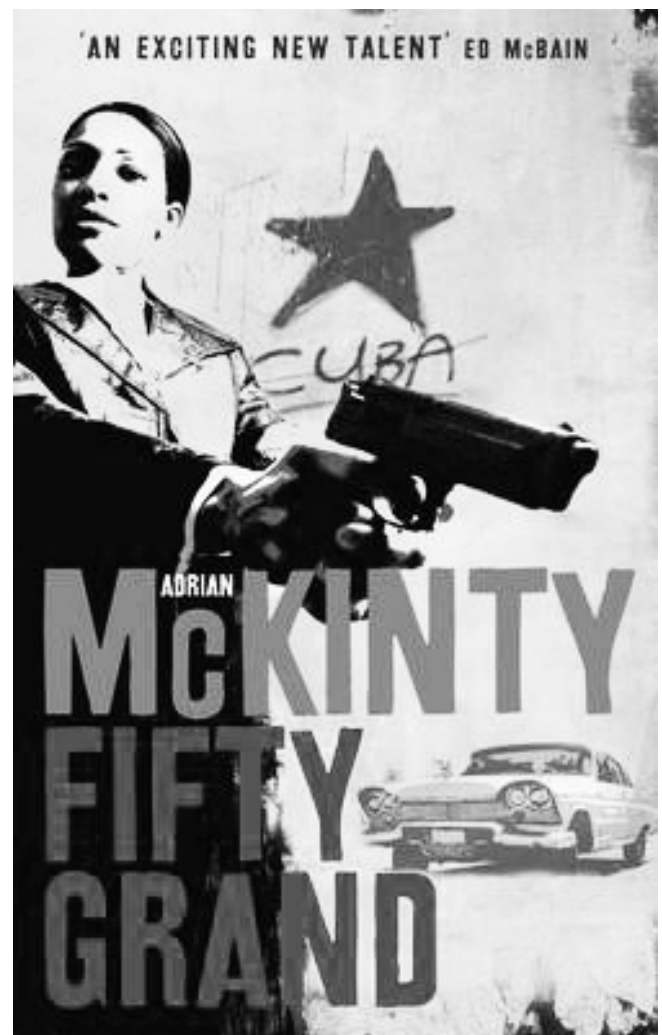
CHAPTER 6

Chapter 6 takes us back to Cuba to explain exactly what is at stake in the novel. If Maria doesn't go back to Cuba but defects to America (the authorities think she is Mexican) her boss will get fired and her brother and mother will lose their jobs and accommodation. Maria therefore has to solve this case and get back to Havana within a week before the authorities get suspicious. I really like the idea of putting my characters under a lot of pressure and deadlines are good for compressing the action.

CHAPTER 7-11

These chapters were the fairly standard police procedural parts of the story. We had

to have a few red herrings in here and some good, creative, observant police work. I also wanted some "fish out of water" stuff. How was it to be in America for Maria and what was it like to be in this odd place - a very, very rich ski town catering only to America's elite. The town was based on Telluride, Colorado (with a bit of Vail, CO thrown in) where Tom Cruise has his lair and a lot of scientologists have moved



in, so I knew I could have some fun with that too. I also wanted to explore issues of America's treatment of Mexicans and the whole notion of immigration politics. To lighten some of this heavy stuff I also had a few gags in these chapters too.

CHAPTER 12

Ok we're reaching the denouement of the book. Maria has figured out who killed her father, but she's under a shit load of pressure. The local Sheriff is dubious about her, she might be being followed by an INS agent from the incident on the border in chapter 2, her little pal Paco is acting strangely and she's fallen abit for one of the suspects in the case, a minor Hollywood film star called Jack Tyrone.

CHAPTER 13-14

Maria procures a weapon and reluctantly goes to see her father's old girlfriend. She screws up the interview with the girlfriend, setting off her (the girlfriend's) alarm bells. Maria knows she's screwed it up and knows the girlfriend is going to run. She waits in the woods and sure enough the girlfriend bolts out of there with a hastily packed car. This is where I introduce

the idea that Maria's father is not all she thinks he is. If she had more time she could have figured who and what he actually was (supposedly he's a defector and traitor) but again, she didn't have the time as I had put her really under the gun time wise.

CHAPTER 15-17

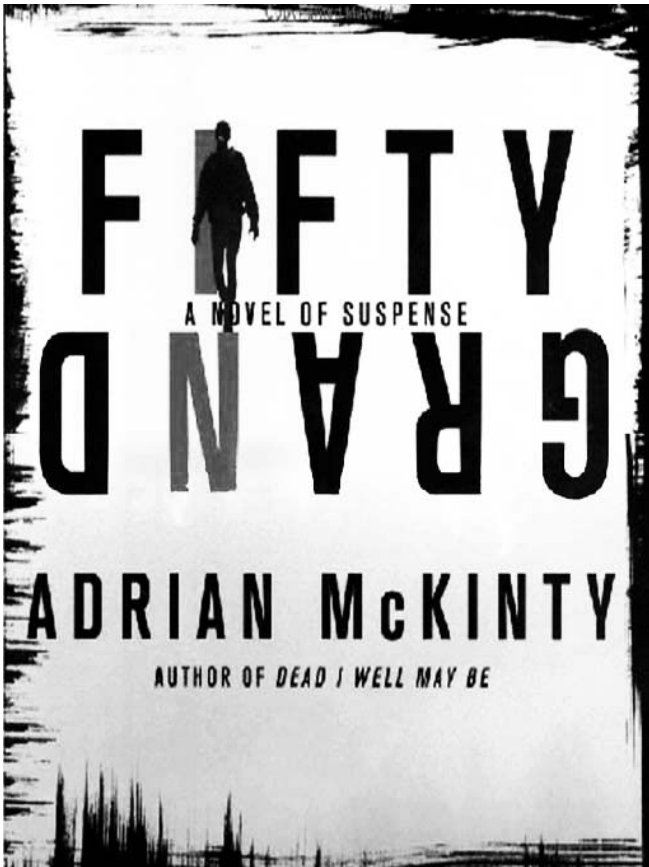
She needs to interrogate her suspect and get this bloody thing over with. She kidnaps him and drives him up to the lake, bringing us full circle back to chapter 1. I wanted her really conflicted about this. Actually I think I failed here. I would have like to have her spend more time on a Hamlet moment before committing to the somewhat crazy plan of interrogating her suspect Youkilis (Jack Tyrone's manager) in Wyoming, but I was worried about making her too weak and the book too flabby.

Up on the lake Youkilis tells her the truth. It was Jack drunkenly driving the car who killed her father and he, Youkilis, covered it up for her. Oh yeah, I forgot to mention that in chapter 1 Maria doesn't notice that she's been followed, so the whole book we know something she doesn't: that men with guns have followed her to the lake and are going to save Youkilis and shoot her, which they

do. (I really liked that bit).

CHAPTER 18

Maria gets winged by a low caliber bullet, crashes to the ice and has a nice flashback to the night her father left the family for the US. This chapter was originally twice as long and really explored 1990's Cuba and had a lot of good stuff between Maria and her brother and her rather more fancy cousins.



On the first edit of the book I realised the chapter was interesting but it slowed down the story so I cut the hell out of it. I think if I had more courage I would have cut it out

completely but I was very reluctant to lose a lot of this good stuff.

CHAPTER 19

This was my favourite chapter. We have an epic gun battle on the frozen lake, something - hopefully - the reader's been waiting for since chapter 1. All the bad guys die and, tired of revenge, Maria decides to let Jack live. Her ass gets saved by Paco who followed her up to Wyoming from Fairview. This was important to me because in chapter 20 we find out that Maria has been manipulated right from the start by the DGI, Cuban intelligence.

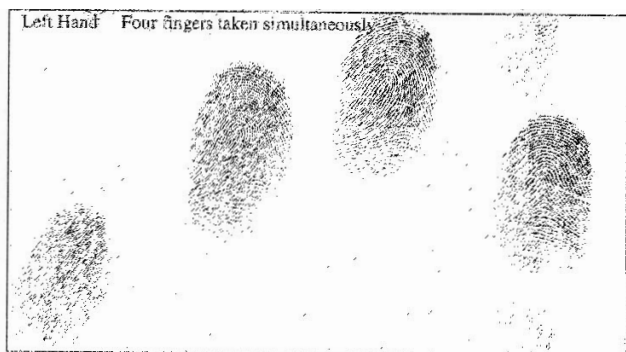
CHAPTER 20-21

Maria gets back to Cuba and is immediately arrested. She gets taken to Raul Castro (head of the DGI and about to become Cuban President) who info dumps a whole bucketload of unpleasant shit on her: Paco was working for the DGI keeping an eye on her, her whole mission was compromised from the start by her boss in the police, the Cubans allowed her to go to America to find out who killed her father only because he too was a Cuban agent who had gone rogue.

She feels like a puppet on a string completely outwitted by the

state.

Utterly confounded by this information she goes back to her job and of course discovers second hand the DGI have killed Jack because sparing his life was not her call to make. From this whole thing she's gotten nothing but unpleasantness and heartbreak. All she has at the end of the book is her life and her dignity, but in contemporary Cuba at least that's something. I didn't want it to be a happy ending, but I did want it to be to give Maria and the reader and me a little hope, so at the very end we see her still going with her imagination and pride still more or less intact. As Borges says "humiliation, unhappiness, discord, are the ancient foods of heroes." That in a nutshell is what I wanted readers to take from *Fifty Grand* ●



ADRIAN MCKINTY

Adrian McKinty is an Irish novelist. He was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1968 and grew up in Carrickfergus, County Antrim. He read law at the University of Warwick and politics and philosophy at the University of Oxford. He moved to the United States in the early 1990s, living first in Harlem, New York and from 2001 onwards Denver, Colorado where he began writing fiction. He and his family currently live in Melbourne, Australia. His books include *THE DEAD TRILOGY*, *HIDDEN RIVER* and, of course, *FIFTY GRAND*. His excellent blog can be found here: <http://adrianmckinty.blogspot.com/>



**“Don’t
give me
that! It
was you
who shot
him!”**

-Chase

TEMP WORK

SHORT STORIES

Trespassing Between Heaven & Hell

By Frank Bill

There are evils in people that make little if any sense and trying to figure them out sometimes makes even less sense.

-Harrison County Deputy Sheriff
Pat Daniels

Everything exploded like flash bulbs across the top of an old Polaroid camera in Everett's mind as he stood scrubbing the red from within the cracks of his hand's lifeline and squeezed his eyes closed. Fighting the voices of the dead as he remembered what he'd done only moments ago:

Driving home with his headlights cutting holes through the gravel road's darkness as he rounded the wall of trees that lined each side of the road dividing the land on one side and the river on the other until the frail outline of

color attached to a small frame disappeared into a thud beneath his truck.

His tires threw gravel as Hank Williams Sr. blared *I Dreamed About Mama Last Night* from his truck's cassette player. He opened the door, inhaling the gravel dust that polluted the darkness like steam from a boiling kettle of water and tossed his empty can of Pabst Blue Ribbon into the bushes.

Behind his truck he kneeled to the gravel. Palmed the neck that was trading it's warmth for cold as the screams of Private Dubious echoed throughout his mind, "Stop the pain! Stop the fucking pain!" Everett closed his eyes and thought how he couldn't separate the voices and the memories from his everyday living.

He opened his eyes. Took in the outline of the boy on the gravel and thought about the .45 caliber Colt he carried under his front seat. If this were a dog or a deer he'd use it but it wasn't.

Instead he lifted the boy's

outline that glowed red with his truck's tail lights. Carried him to the river bank that ran alongside the gravel road, listening to the water's current. He thought of how the boy's mother was an eyesore in his valley with her lifestyle of drugs and probation. The home she lived in had once been a well-maintained white wood-sided cottage with blue shutters.

A shiny tin roof. The previous owner gave it a fresh coat of paint every Spring. The blue shutters were now a rotted frame outlining the cardboard that replaced the broken glass. Now it was nothing more than a dilapidating tool shed with flaking paint that exposed the graying wood grain beneath. And she'd let the boy run rampant in the valley like a leper in search of shelter from his mother's incurable addiction.

Everett told his self he was doing the world a favor cause the boy would turn out like his mother; useless. Then an explosion rang through his mind and out of his ears. He could smell the smoke and feel the flecks of hot earth pelt his face and that vision of Private Dubious was no more.

Everett heaved the boy's outline

into the darkness. Listened to the splashing of the body. He started to turn to the idling engine behind him but noticed the stringer of fish lying in the gravel.

He picked them up knowing they belonged to him. He threw them into the bed of his truck. Got in. Grabbed a cold beer from his cooler on the floor. Put his truck into drive.

Now, with the thick black-rimmed glasses that framed his blood sprayed eyes and a complexion as rough as old cinder, Everett rinsed the powered Clorox from his hands that started out white but had turned a pink foam. He shut off the steaming water. Grabbed a towel from the stove. Thought of the war he'd served. The men he'd watched die.

He hung the towel from the stove door. Knelt down and pulled a cast iron skillet from the stove's bottom drawer. Thought he'd fry up the crappie he'd skinned and gutted when he'd got home. Cause unlike the war he couldn't forget, what he'd done down the road was already forgotten.

Deputy Sheriff Pat Daniels stood shaking his head as he watched the boy being pulled from the

green fish scented river. He wondered why God sometimes took the simple and innocent and let the other unexplained evils of the world live on.

The boy's body resembled an overcast day devoid of light with its foggy hue of gray and opal flesh with lost milky eyes and violet lips as they loaded him onto the gurney.

The night before Pat had been working late at the station when dispatch connected him with Stace Anderson. She filed a missing persons on her boy Matthew. He hadn't come home from fishing. She'd walked the valley road looking for him and asking anyone in the valley with a house light on if they'd seen him. But no one had.

At first Pat thought the boy had been wade fishing. Fallen in. Drowned. But after County Coroner Owen and Detective Mitchell took in the details of major trauma; the broken ribs and broken femur bone, they concluded it wasn't a drowning but instead was foul play.

"We gotta keep a short leash on this Pat."

"Mitchell, I aim to keep this hound in her pin, media gets a hold of this, it'll get ugly."

"How the Galloway interviews go?"

When Pat first arrived on the scene he'd interviewed Needle Galloway and his son Beady.

They'd been crappie fishing after church this morning when they come up on the body.

"They're innocent as the Virgin Mary."

"You ready to break the news to the mother?"

"Just as soon as Chaplin Pip gets here."

"Surprised the mother ain't down here wondering what we're up to, you say she just lives up the road?"

"About a mile and a half in the widow Ruth's old place. I take it you ain't heard much about the mother?"

"Don't know a thing, this is your neck of the woods, why?"

"She's been in and out of rehab, skipped from the hospital once after a meth lab exploded into a house fire."

"The one down off of Lickford Road a while back?"

"That'd be the one and when she was caught Judge Miller gave

her community service and probation."

"Figures. Well I done contacted the Sheriff, let him know it looks like foul play. Think she could've killed the boy?"

"If I had to guess I'd say no, aside from being a meth addict she did try to be a good mother."

"What about insurance money?"

"Gal like that, can't hold a job any longer than she can stay clean, she's lucky if she can keep her light bill paid."

"What about the father?"

"Nelson ain't been the same since Stace got hooked on that shit and divorced her. To be honest that boy was all he had left."

"See how she reacts when you and Chaplin Pip give her the news."

"What's your theory on the boy's death?"

"He's hit by a vehicle sometime last night and for whatever reason someone decided to dump him in the river."

"Well, Stace'd be lucky if she could hold a Whopper from Burger King with two hands. Let alone carry a body."

"Telling me she's frail?"

"Frail would describe her as muscular, last time I seen her she was P.O.W. thin."

"What about a boyfriend?"

"None that I know of."

"Speaking of P.O.W.s I guess you ain't been down here to visit lately?"

"Been a while."

"He seems hard to talk to sometimes when I see him in town."

"More like all the time, he's gotten worse."

"It's probably like being a cop, see some bad shit that stays with you no matter how much time passes."

Everett emptied the beer. Closed his eyes. But couldn't remember the words from Preston's lips as he shook a cigarette from his pack that morning. He remembered how the cigarette was dry. Unbroken. How Preston's stubble complexion was mapped by the heat of the jungle with beads of moisture. How the platoon stood in early morning silence with everyone's eyes keeping watch. Preston's green helmet tilted on his head as his eyes looked

itchy with hay fever but it was a lack of sleep as he sparked a match. Brought an orange heat to the cigarette's end. Preston led the men through the silence of morning with the cigarette smoke clouding into the air above him when the explosion of gunfire dropped everyone to the ground for cover. Only Preston dropped cause he'd found his end.

"Ready for another Pabst, Everett?"

He opened his eyes hoping Poe's question would offer an answer to the memory as he followed the folds of flesh up Poe's neck to his worn leather jaw line that molded around his parched lips with a hint of chalk white spittle in the corners. But there was none.

"A what?"

"Pabst? You wanna another one or you switching back to Natural Light?"

"Yeah, give me another Pabst."

Poe was a lanky man with faded rebel flags and green skulls that used to be black tattooed up and down each arm. He spoke with a smokers cough as he bartended at The Dock, a local bar that sat down along the Ohio River. A place Everett drove to be alone with himself and this hell

that had plagued his mind for thirty years.

Behind Everett, Nelson Anderson sat off in the far corner with his rusted porcelain complexion and cherry-stained cellophane eyes. He stared out the tinted glass window just like he did on every visit, sulking over the wife he'd lost to a meth addiction sometime ago as he muttered, "How much worse can my life get?"

Nelson and Everett were the only regulars until the bar's entrance door opened. Flamed the bar with sunlight as Everett watched the shadow's reflection approach him through the mirror in front of him until the shadow sat down on the barstool beside him.

"There was a mess of police and an ambulance down your way, Everett."

"So what are you telling me Merritt, that maybe I should the take long way home?"

Merritt Rainbolt was the grandson of Fenton Rainbolt, a friend that Everett had coon hunted with since Merritt could remember until his grandmother died of cancer and his grandfather committed suicide. Merritt frequented The Dock several times a week just as he did the valley

of Blue River Village where Everett lived and gave Merritt permission to fish across from his place down on the river. In return Merritt allowed Everett to hunt, day or night, on the wooded farmland his grandparents had left him after passing.

Poe opened the chrome mirrored cooler. Pulled out a can of Budweiser and Pabst. Popped them open. Sat one in front of Everett. The other in front of Merritt.

"Shit boy, don't keep us in suspense, what's going on?"

"All I heard is Needle and Beady Galloway was fishing this morning. Found a boy's body in the river."

There was the scraping of a chair across the floor followed by the voice of Nelson Anderson, "You say a boy's body?"

Merritt had gotten his first swallow of Budweiser. Turned to Nelson's already reddened stubble, green eyes hazed by bloodshot and recessed by the color of an eggplant. And fought back the bubbles that would become tears when he arrived at his ex-wife's place.

A numbness stole Merritt's spine as he'd not noticed Nelson when he entered and he remembered

that Nelson's ex-wife lived down in the valley of Blue River Village where Everett lived. That they'd a boy that they shared custody of.

"That's just what I heard from Virgil MacCullum."

Setting his Budweiser back on the bar, Merritt inhaled smoke from the orange end of his Camel as he watched Nelson rush out of the bar like a kamikaze pilot flying toward his target.

And he'd discover it miles down the road where it'd explode into the answer as to how much worse his life could get.

Merritt shook his head.

"Shit, I didn't even see Nelson when I come in here or I'd have maybe thought before I started yapping my jaws, his ex-old lady lives down by you Everett with that boy of theirs."

Everett watched Merritt pull his Camel from his lips as the smoke trailed like a smoldering fire, deliberate and ghostly and Preston's outline took its form in-between he and Merritt.

Everett pushed his thick black framed glasses up his nose. Turned his head oddly. Stared at the smoking Camel while his cracked lips constructed a smile.

He remembered Preston's words and in a sad raspy tone he muttered, "It ain't wet and it ain't broken, brother."

"What ain't wet or broken?"

"Preston's cigarette."

"Who the hell's Preston? I'm Merritt."

Everett's eyes were like portals of time as they carried him back to a bar where he sat drinking beers with Preston.

"It's what Preston and I used to say when we was over in the jungles of Nam and had a dry smoke, ain't that right Preston?"

Confusion wrinkled Merritt's cheeks into his eyes.

"Preston? You okay Everett?"

Everett just turned away. Waved his right hand up into the air and mumbled something incoherent.

"Everett? Merritt was talking about Nelson and his ex-old lady's boy, a body was found down your way floating like a piece of driftwood in Blue River."

"Wouldn't surprise me none, that boy was slow as an inch worm, probably still

shitting yellow, everyone in the valley warned that boy and his mother repeatedly about his fishing from our land without permission, probably for the best. Just turn out like his mother."

Merritt and Poe glanced at one another and Poe said, "Being kind of harsh ain't you Everett, hell you know Nelson."

"That woman and boy have been an eye sore in the valley since Nelson sent her ass a foul and she somehow bought the widow Ruth's place and in no time at all it's become like the mother; a dilapidated structure."

Poe cleared his throat. Started wiping his way down the bar away from Everett. Merritt stubbed his Camel out only to light another as he sat in a confessional silence sipping his beer.

Neither felt comfortable discussing what had happened any further.

Tapping his hollow can on the bar Everett yells, "I'm ready for another Pabst down here and while you're at it get another Budweiser for Merritt and my old buddy Preston, it's on me."

Why would a person run over an innocent child and toss them

into the river just like the empty chicken liver containers with the unseen black blood and Burger King French Fry boxes with piss ants feasting about the spots of grease that decorated the weeds along the side of the road? And Pat thought, there are evils in people that make little if any sense and trying to figure them out sometimes makes even less sense.

Nelson had showed up at Stace's place in a haze of booze after nursing his failed existence at the Dock when Merritt Rainbolt came in talking about a boy being found floating in Blue River.

He showed up while Pat questioned Stace about their boy and took in her tears combined with body tremors. He knew she had nothing to do with the boy's death. While the booze staining Nelson's demeanor eliminated him as a suspect.

Now, Pat's tires crunched down the mosquito infested gravel road wondering where the boy had been ran over. Stace had asked Pat if he had found her son's fishing rod and tackle box or the blue stringer he always brought home weighted down by fish as the boy knew where all the fishing holes was.

Pat told her no. He didn't even know where the boy had been fishing. But if he found his stuff he'd return it. Pat's best guess was since the boy hadn't made it home there was only two miles to the end of the valley and somewhere between the end and where Stace lived was the scene of the crime.

Pat rounded the wall of trees as a swarm of dog pecker gnats peppered the air above the gravel when the outline of a boy raced across the road.

Pat stomped his brakes.

"The hell boy, you trying get yourself run over?"

He put his cruiser into park. Got out. The boy disappeared into the weeds on the river side of the road.

"This is Harrison County Deputy Sheriff Pat Daniels and I got a good mind to tan your ass, come on up out of them weeds."

Glancing into the weeds with his cruiser idling behind him and the river's current flowing below there was no sign of the boy and that's when he seen it sticking up out of the weeds.

"Well I'll be damn."

It was a scuffed black and red

Ugly Stick fishing rod. The reel was busted. A few of the eyelets were bent. Then he heard the shaking within the weeds like seeds in a gourd to the left of where he picked up the fishing rod. He stepped in deeper and his boot thudded against something.

"Well shit."

He reached into the weeds and picked up a black tackle box.

Here was the starting point to the crime.

There was no blood in the gravel. Pat surveyed the weeds like he did during deer season when he'd shoot one and it'd keep going on adrenaline. Leaving behind drops of blood he'd use to track it until it's adrenaline ran out. But unlike the deer he found nothing.

He popped the trunk of his cruiser. Dropped the fishing rod. Tackle box. Closed the trunk. Pat glanced back into the weeds, wondering where that boy was hiding.

"You got one more chance to come on up out of them weeds, boy."

And what he heard was nothing more than the flow of the river below him.

He got back into his cruiser with the window rolled down and tapped his fingers atop of the steering wheel wondering where that damn boy had ran off to. He went to shift his cruiser into drive when he seen movement out of the corner of his eye and the boy yelled, "Over here old man."

"Little shit."

Pat stepped to the gravel. Watched the boy's outline disappear back into the weeds where he'd found the tackle box.

"Look, I ain't playing games, now come on up out of there."

The boy didn't respond but Pat stepped into the weeds, figuring he was kneeled down when he heard a crunch. Looked down. It was an empty can of Pabst Blue Ribbon. He picked it up. Took in its white glistening hue along with its red and blue emblem. The colors were fresh.

Not faded. He put his nose to its opening. The scent was warm beer not soured. The can was new. Not old.

He glanced around in the weeds for more cans but just like the boy he couldn't find a trace.

Pat stepped from the weeds holding the empty can. Played a

familiar scenario in his mind; out on a Saturday night drinking and driving on a country road. But which direction were they headed? He glanced down the road from the direction that he'd just traveled. Took in the wall of trees where he almost ran over the boy. Thought, they seen the Anderson boy too late. Felt him even quicker. A thud beneath the vehicle. A cold shiver shook Pat's frame. They got out. Threw the can into the weeds. Seen what they'd done. Panicked. Threw the boy into the river.

He knew who lived at this end of the valley. They drank Natural Light not Pabst Blue Ribbon. He glanced down that direction toward the end of the valley and seen how the weeds obstructed the view if traveling from that direction. Add the darkness of night. The booze. The boy could have been hit from either direction. It was a thin scenario. But it was all he had.

Pat glanced back down into the weeds. Down at the river but he saw no trace of the boy.

Maybe he was losing his mind. Seeing that boy. Hearing him yell at him.

He got back into the cruiser. Laid the empty Pabst in the seat. Thought it wouldn't

hurt to visit the few people who lived in the valley of Blue River Village. Question them. See what kind of beer they kept in their refrigerators, see if anyone had a son unaccounted for. And seeing as how he was almost to the end of the valley he might as well visit the last house first.

He could still feel Poe and Merritt's eyes engraving their pity for Nelson into his right temple as his right hand fished another Pabst Blue Ribbon from the ice of his cooler. Everett popped the Pabst open. Offered Preston one.

"Don't want one? Suit yourself."

Everett tilted the can to his lips. Navigated the truck down the road. Sucked the icy foam from his beer as anger took on an acidic form and traveled throughout his frame like cod liver oil cleaning a Walker hound's insides.

"Whose Poe think he is any damn way?" Everett asked Preston. "Being kind of harsh ain't you? That's what he said to me, you heard him. Poe don't know harsh."

Everett's truck tires tossed gravel as he turned down his

driveway and he looked over at Preston in his green sweat stained fatigues. His face painted by red crusted blood from the exposed black opening in his face and told him, "Sure it was an accident, hitting that boy but I did everyone in the valley a favor. And if I had it to do over, I wouldn't change a damn thing."

Lifting his Pabst to his lips panic consumed his features when he seen Pat's cruiser up by his house. Then he saw Pat coming from inside of his tool shed. Everett slammed his truck's steering column transmission into park and he saw Pat holding the blue stringer he'd left hanging from the rusted nail in the paint flaking door after skinning those crappie last night.

Everett sat his Pabst on the dash. Reached beneath his seat not knowing how Pat had figured it out but he had cause Everett seen it written all over his face.

"See that Preston, Pat always did have all the smarts of the family."

Pat stepped from the tool shed in shock after what he'd felt and discovered when he heard

the crunching driveway gravel as he held the blue nylon stringer. Then he heard the scalding lead explosion of pain that entered his body just like the boy's outline. Then he blacked out.

When he opened his eyes a chill had already started to tremor through his veins as perspiration bled from his pores and his heart slammed like a maul turning stone to gravel.

Everett stood above him with a Pabst Blue Ribbon in one hand and a Colt .45 handgun in the other as he hollered incoherently. "Don't know how he figured it was me and I don't care."

And in his ear, just before his eyes rolled into the back of his head Pat heard the boy whisper,

"That's him."

Pat remembered pulling up and Everett's truck was gone. Thought he'd wait. He reached for his radio to let dispatch know where he was when that frail outline of the boy run in front of his cruiser and up to Everett's rust stained tool shed hollering "Up here, up here!" And he went inside. Pat got out believing he was losing his mind as he had gotten to the tool shed's door and seen the blue fishing stringer hanging from a rusted nail

and the fish guts and the buzzing flies on the ground off to the side of the shed.

He remembered what Stace had told him about the boy as he pulled the blue stringer from the rusted nail. He opened the shed door to an orderly room the color of fresh tar filled with chainsaws, axes, shovels, hammers, wrenches, sickles and machetes. The air was stained with the scents of oil, gasoline and smashed but soured Pabst Blue Ribbon beer cans in a clear plastic bag under a battered workbench to the right where the boy's outline stood saying, "It's him, he's the one."

The entrance and exit was one in the same as Pat blocked it standing in disbelief, taking in the boy's outline; part shadow, part bruised, bloody and pallid flesh. And Pat realized the outline was the Anderson boy and taking in the bag of beer cans Pat said, "Everett switched brands of beer." And then the boy yelled, "He's here, he's here!" And he ran towards Pat, who kneeled down to catch the boy. But Pat's body felt an explosion of pain as the boy's outline passed through his body and out the door.

Now Pat lay on the cold hard soil listening to the fly's buzz somewhere off beside him with

the scent of rotted fish guts coating the insides of his nose. Everett came from the tool shed stepping over top of Pat. Then Pat's vision turned gray as the air exploded like construction paper being wadded up and Everett laid the tarp ovetop of Pat.

"He might be my brother but I ain't going to jail for running over that damn boy. We'll put him some place where even the devil won't find him."

Everett's hands tucked the tarp beneath Pat as he talked to someone.

"Give me a hand here." Then he rolled Pat into the tarp as tightly as the old timer's rolled their loose leaf tobacco into their rolling papers for cigarettes.

Pat's lungs wheezed with pain while the moisture of his breath was suffocating against the plastic mildewed tarp that tightened around his body like lamination to paper.

Pat felt a cold black void absorbing his frame like frost-bite in negative weather as the boy's voice whispered, "I'll get help."

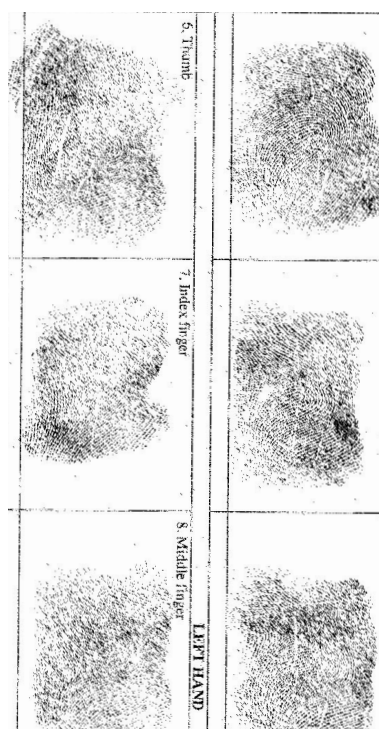
He thought about the boy. How he must've felt that night,

lying on the gravel road fighting the cold blackness that was stealing his existence until his body hit the river's current. And for whatever reason Pat thought the boy was a lost soul trespassing somewhere between heaven and hell. And he thought if the boy could lead him here, he could lead another.

Heat was taking a detour from Pat's body. He knew it was his blood. He felt the blue nylon stringer in his hand and used it to focus as he squeezed. Creating a spark of heat from within.

Trying to build a fire to replace the heat he was losing as he yelled at the boy from inside of himself.

"Run boy! Run! Run!" ●



Nothing Personal

By Steve Weddle

I turned out the light and saw the three of them through the window. They were spreading out, one staying in the front of the house and one going to each side.

Splitting up was the second bad idea they'd had. The first was interrupting my evening. I picked up my glass from the piano and reached behind the Kierkegaard on the bookshelf. I've been trying to get the new girlfriend to borrow *Either/Or*, but so far she's too busy redecorating my house. I pulled out the carry gun that I stuck here when I got in last night. The rest of my guns were locked up in the basement.

One of the .357s would work better. The two-inch barrel on this piece wasn't going to offer me much from here. I had the feeling that these three punks weren't just going to wait in the yard for me to come out.

Someone had given me up. Someone was coming after me. Coming after me with three guys. Three guys that I could see. I would have sent more. Of course, I would have just sent me. Which is what I should have done last night.

I took the last swig of the whiskey and, with one hand, grabbed a blanket off a chair next to the bookshelf. I put the tumbler into the blanket and popped it close and quick with the butt of the pistol. Then I walked to the hall and shook the glass pieces all over the floor behind me. I moved the pistol back and forth in my hands as I walked to the back of the house. The Smith & Wesson was light, an Airweight .38, and had cost me nothing more than a quick night's work helping a friend on an easy job a couple of years ago. Not like last night's job.

I could see one of them in the backyard, standing next to the house. He was looking back into the yard, checking things over.

Nothing but woods. He wasn't wearing a ski mask, just a dark baseball cap. I saw a little of him from the moonlight. Light hair. Kinda frosty. A nose. A chin. Ok. I couldn't see much of him. No mask means they weren't worried about being identified because they weren't planning to leave little old me alive. Fine. I wasn't going to put a mask on, either.

With the one in the front, that left one unaccounted for, the little sneaky bastard. That's fine, too. Someone has to die last.

I kneeled down behind the kitchen counter, the one that looks out over the back yard. Frosty was still there. The other one was still missing. Wouldn't be long now.

I was still a little tired from the night before.

Jimmy Talley had been asked to take care of Mike "Mallet" Hawkins, a nasty piece of trash from the west side who was staying at a friend's house after his wife had kicked him out for sleeping with her sister. You can't help who you fall in love with.

So Mallet was open for a night

until he found a new place to stay. His friend was gone and the place was all his for the night. Mallet had made a few people angry, maybe as many as I had. But he was still in the business. I had been playing it low, keeping off the radar.

He needed my help on the Mallet deal. Couldn't do it alone. I had to help him. I owed him. Yeah. Right. I owed him. I saved his ass so many times I shoulda put in for hazard pay just talking to the guy. But he had run into some trouble, found himself on the wrong side of things. He was trying to get back in the good graces with the folks in charge. So this was his shot. His chance. I'd helped train the little punk, but he still needed my help. Fine. I hadn't had to do any heavy lifting in about a year, not since the Richardson heist had ended my career. Helping Jimmy pop Mallet would be a nice little workout for me and a nice way to get him back into folks' good graces.

Jimmy and I had parked about ten houses up from Mallet's friend's and walked down the block and a half. The guy lived in a nice neighborhood, the kind with new Buicks and assistant principals. The plan was for Jimmy to toss a bottle of gasoline

through the front window. Mallet sees it, smells it, figures the place is gonna blow and comes out the front or the back, probably firing every gun he has.

We got to the front of the house. Jimmy forgot the bottle of gas. Always was his problem. Couldn't get the little things right. Back in the car. Sorry. Yeah. He's sorry. He says if I want to walk back he'll keep an eye on Mallet. I just walked down here. I'm not walking back because of his screw-up. Sorry, he says. Really sorry. Fine, I say. Just hurry. He does. Sorry guy.

He doesn't make it fifty yards down the road before there's a big crash in his direction. Breaking glass. Maybe someone up the road is trying Jimmy's gas bottle trick. The curtains move in the house. He's seen us. Me. He knows we're coming.

Upstairs, a window breaking in my house. Damn. He got onto my roof and I didn't even hear him. Sounded like it was from the south side, the master suite. The lower part of the roof. He could have come up there and then pulled himself up on a ledge, broken the window. I didn't hear him land. That would have put him in the bathtub. But I

didn't hear any crash from the eleven potted plants my new girlfriend, Marcie, had put around the bathtub. If the sneaky bastard knew what was good for him, he would have jumped clear over the bathtub. She'd kill him herself if he scratched up the bottom of the tub. Of course, if he knew what was good for him, he wouldn't be here.

I could hear the back door opening. Either I had left it unlocked or he picked it. Didn't matter. He was in the house. When he opened the door, he let in a little moonlight, which reflected off the microwave above where I was kneeling. He was coming in with his arms up, elbows bent, ready to drop the gun right on my nose if I stood up. I reached up the counter and grabbed a dishtowel, which was still damp. Wouldn't be damp if I could still hang them from the cabinet door knobs. But the new girlfriend doesn't like that. Doesn't like cabinet door knobs either. Now they're smooth. Clean. Modern. Small price to pay, I guess.

I slid around the corner so I could see the guy clearly. He was big. Forehead sliding down into a ridge of eyebrow. Didn't look comfortable with a gun. The kind of guy who spends five hours in the gym and five minutes on the shooting

range. Breaking into my house. I wanted to take him at the knee-cap first, then have a little chat with the cripple. But couldn't trust my little ankle gun. I had to drop him right away and move. The others wouldn't be far behind.

After the crash last night, Mallet had moved to the back of the house, to a dark room. I could see the silhouette of his fat head for a quick second. Jimmy wasn't back, but I couldn't wait. I went to the side of the house, then into the backyard. The sliding glass door was open a few inches. It opened a few more. Mallet was backing out and turned his face right into the barrel of my new Taurus 809B-9mm, a tight little pistol I'd picked up from a friend in law enforcement. Mallet and I exchanged pleasantries. He didn't seem surprised to see me. I told him to take it slowly and drop to his knees.

"You drop to your knees," a voice from behind me.

Jimmy. Damn it. Jimmy. You have to be frickin kidding me. "Gimme the gun, Oscar," he said.

"What are you doing, Jimmy?"

"Nothing personal, boss," he said to me. "Just business."

"The hell just business," I said, gauging how he had his weight distributed from his reflection in the sliding glass door. "What the hell, Jimmy? What the hell?"

"I bring you in, they take me back. Clean. Like nothing ever happened," he said, looking away. "I'm sorry."

"Jimmy," I said, "you screwed up. You really did."

Kneeling in my kitchen, I got ready to throw the dishtowel across to Frosty. I was going to lead him away from me, let him shoot the cabinets or something. Just not the liquor cabinet. I had a feeling I was going to need another drink after I killed these jackasses.

Just then I heard crackling from the front hall. Tweedledum had stepped onto the broken glass. Good. By what passes for instinct, I guess, Frosty raised the gun that direction.

I put a round through his chest and one in the side of his head for good measure. He got off a shot that went through the ceiling as he was

falling. Great. That would have to be spackled. Marcie wouldn't be happy.

The two pops from my .38 and the one shot from whatever he was carrying had no doubt alerted the entire region that something was going on. All I cared about at the moment were the two guys unaccounted for in my house. The guys with guns. The guys who were trying to kill me. Like Jimmy.

"I didn't mess up," Jimmy had said last night. "You're the one who messed up."

"I'm going to stand over here," Mallet said, moving my gun away from his head and stepping to the side. He took the gun out of my hand and then took a few steps to my right. Then another. Then one more.

"How did I mess up, Jimmy?"

"The Richardson thing," he said. "The money."

"What about it? I took what was mine." I was watching Jimmy's reflection, getting things lined up.

"You shoulda shared, Oscar. You shoulda been honest with us." He had one hand on his gun and the other scratching

the back of his head, like a dog trying to get rid of something nasty.

I don't know how he found out, how he thought it was any of his business. I'd paid good money for plans to an old man's house, an old man who made his fortune selling Asian kids to small town sex rings. Nobody was going to miss him. I paid major cash for those plans. So what if I found a little extra that wasn't in the plans. How the hell did anyone know out what I found? I hadn't told anyone.

Marcie? Couldn't be. Jimmy was trying to get me rattled, off my game. Like I'd taught him. But I trusted her. In my old life I couldn't trust anyone. Well, except Jimmy. Yeah, real funny.

"You need to pick your girlfriends a little better," Jimmy said, shifting his weight back and forth.

"And my friends."

"Oscar, it's nothing personal, man. This is just what I have to do." He lowered the gun to the back of my head and put his other hand on my shoulder.

"Do it," Mallet whispered. "Get him out of here. Take him to them."

And now they had sent three guys. In my house. The guy from the front door had tired of waiting. He came along the hall with two pistols on fire. I had put two rounds into Frosty. I had three left. Tweedledum missed me, because I was lying behind Frosty. He took one right in the gut, but kept shooting at nothing. It was dark. He was hurt. I kinda felt sorry for him.

When he went down, I stepped over Frosty put a steel toe into Tweedledum's chin, snapping his head back. His arms were hanging lifeless at his side as he dropped to his knees. I took the pistol from his right hand, a heavy .357, aimed it at his forehead and sent pieces of his head across my living room wall.

"Give me the .38," Jimmy said.

He knew I carried a .38 wrapped around my ankle. Mallet didn't know that, so if Jimmy was letting that little piece of information out, I knew he was too far gone for me to bring him back. He'd turned. Gone with the other side to save himself. I couldn't save him. Not now.

"Ok," I said. "I'm gonna get it nice and slow like. Then

we'll go have a talk with whoever."

"That's right," Jimmy said. "Nice and slow like."

His weight was all wrong. He was leaning over me like he wanted to fall on me.

"Slow," he said.

"Slow," I repeated, reaching my left hand to my right inside ankle, dropping my shoulder, giving me the perfect angle, if I could pull it off.

In my kitchen, something hit me from behind. Something heavy. A baseball bat. A rolling pin. A pistol butt. I staggered, spinning around and falling back, dropping to a knee and looking at Frosty. Everything went kind of wavy and cloudy for a minute.

Last night, as I was pulling the .38 from my ankle holster, I pushed off with my left foot, up and put my shoulder into Jimmy. I had to do this just right or it wouldn't work. I caught his right wrist with my right hand and his elbow with my left hand. Mallet had moved right where I needed him to be. I grabbed Jimmy's

hand and sent some lead into Mallet. He flew back against the outside wall of the house, spraying his blood all over the nice bay window there. His friend was not going to like that at all. I jerked the pistol straight down to the ground and Jimmy flipped right over me, just like if we were in some judo class. I ripped the gun out his hand and landed on top of him, my knee at his throat.

"Tell me who it was," I hissed. "Tell me." I didn't want to know.

"Marcie," he said. "Marcie told the chief."

"The hell she did," I said. "I been thinking. I never told her crap about crap."

"She must have figured it out."

"Or you're lying." I leaned into his throat, putting the gun against his temple. "Who told?"

She was my chance at a real life, my shot at getting out of this other life. She sang in the choir, volunteered at some old folks home. This was normal life. This was the life I wanted. I'd met her soon after the Richardson heist, at a jazz concert. She'd had a flat tire in the parking lot and I'd given her a ride home. We talked.

Drinks. She was a nice gal. She was helping me back into a normal life, back into a softness I hadn't known in years.

"That's all I know," he said. "That's why I was supposed to bring you here. Get you back to the chief. He gets what you swiped and then he takes me back."

"You weren't going to kill me?"

"No, man," he said. "It wasn't like that. Try to get you to cooperate. Business. Nothing personal."

"Right," I said, helping him stand up. When he could stand, I kneed him right in the nuts.

"Tell them to leave me alone. I'm done with it. I'm done." Then as he was on the ground coughing up blood and whining about how I'd busted his marbles, I put the back of my hand across his cheek as hard as I could.

"That's for lying to me about Marcie." Some people have no respect for ladies.

On my way out of the backyard, I collected my pistol and put a couple of bullets through Mallet's eyes. I didn't know what his connection to all of this was, but I didn't need any more complications in my life.

I was lying on my kitchen floor. "Give me the .38," Jimmy said, taking a step back this time.

No wonder I couldn't find him. Jimmy, the little sneaky bastard, knew this house almost as well as I did. Jimmy. I should have known it would be Jimmy.

I handed him the .38.

"So what now?" I asked. "Talking over?"

"Yeah," he said. "You shoulda come with me last night."

"I shoulda done a lot of things," I said. "Maybe I shoulda killed you last night."

"That's not very nice," he said. "I'm trying to get my life back. Set everything right."

"Right," I said. "So am I."

"You're the one who had to go and mess everything up by taking what isn't yours," he said.

Taking what isn't yours. That was a nice one.

"Jimmy, the whole job was done. What I took wasn't part of the original deal."

"Deals change."

"Yeah," I said. "A lot of

things change." He was behind me, but I couldn't hear his feet shifting, couldn't see his reflection anywhere.

"Look," he said. "I'm sorry I said it was Marcie. I just thought that would make you talk. I didn't mean nothing by it."

"It's OK, kid," I said. "Just tell me who it was."

"I can't. You can think of it. Just think."

I couldn't think of who it could be. The job was tight. Air-tight. It couldn't be anyone. No one.

He put the pistol to the back of my head. I could feel the end of the barrel on the skin of my skull, cold and solid.

"Look, Oscar," he said. "I'm really sorry about this. I just want you to know this was Plan B. Nobody wanted this."

"Plan A was to kill me last night?"

"No, Marcie was Plan A."

"Marcie?" I tried to turn around, but he pushed the pistol hard against my head.

"Shirley is her real name. Shirley Perkins. Used to dance at Hardwick's. Now she does this."

My teeth didn't move when I talked. "Why are you still trying to blame her?"

"She's a plant, Oscar. From day one. She was hired to find out stuff. Soften you up."

I'd sure softened up. A year ago, these three twerps would have been dead before they got inside my house. A year ago I wouldn't have cared about the house, about anyone. I would have let them get in the house and then blown it up from across the street. But the Richardson heist changed that. Gave me financial security. Took that need away. Then Marcie took away all my other needs. And we were settled. This was me. This was home.

"Tell ya what, Jimmy," I said. "When Marcie gets back from choir practice, we'll ask her."

"She's not at choir practice," he said. "She's probably with the chief, doing their debriefing thing."

They were meanings there I didn't want to think about.

"Jimmy, you're cheat and a liar. I don't know why you're telling me these stories, but you need to stop."

"No, you need to know the truth. It was her. You left us all. For her."

She's in on it. You gave it all up for her. For *nothing*. You need to know that before you die."

"Jimmy," I said, "you don't have to do this. Nobody has to die tonight."

"Yeah," he said, "someone does."

He was getting misty. About to kill his former boss, his coach, his teacher. And he was getting all misty on me. That was all I needed.

I spun around to my left, knocking his gun hand away from me and twisting his arm back on his body until the tendons snapped. Then I brought a hammer fist down on his shoulder and separated the bone. He screamed, really more like a squeal.

I was holding onto his arm and put a boot into his gut, nearly pulling him apart. He raised up his left hand and put a knife in my side. A knife I hadn't seen. Careless. I was getting old. The knife burned, cold metal, I could feel the bits scraping against my skin. I couldn't move with the knife in me and if I took it out, my guts might spill all over the floor, which was probably going to upset Marcie.

I pulled out the knife, grabbed the dishrag off the counter,

and pressed it to my side while Jimmy was trying to regain his balance.

He'd found my .38. I caught his hand before he could raise it. Bent his arm and put a round right into his thigh. He hit the ground, dropping the gun. I picked it up with my right hand, holding the dishtowel to my side with the left. I put another one into his other thigh.

He shook. Whimpered. Cried.

"Kid, tell me who it was."

"Marcie."

"Why?"

"They tailed you. That movie. Concert. Whatever. Shirley, Marcie, she picked you up there."

How did he know that? Had I told him how Marcie and I met? I put the pistol against the bridge of his nose.

"Jimmy, you need to tell me."

"I did. She was supposed to report back. Find out what you took from Richardson. What you did with it. Think about it. What do you know about her?"

What do I know? That she's exactly what I wanted. That I'm in love with her. That I've learned to

eat sushi for her. That I change the sheets on the bed every weekend for her. That she's exactly what I need, to move on with my life.

"She was never supposed to stay this long," he said. "Things just got out of control. Lost. She was hired to get personal with you. Part of the business. Maybe she got too personal. Got caught up. But it was supposed to be just business."

"Yeah," I said, then pulled the trigger. "Just business."

I took the bodies out to the shed behind the house, set them on a tarp. I could deal with them later. I went back into the house and had a drink.

I called Marcie to tell her to stay away from the house. Tell her it wasn't safe. And I had some thinking to do.

She didn't answer her cell phone. Voice mailbox full.

I called information for Spring Creek Methodist in Greenwood.

No listing.

"Try the Shreveport area," I said.

No listing.

I know she'd said Spring Creek. My mother was born in Spring Creek, Kentucky. When I told Marcie that, she'd said it showed we were meant to be together.

No church.

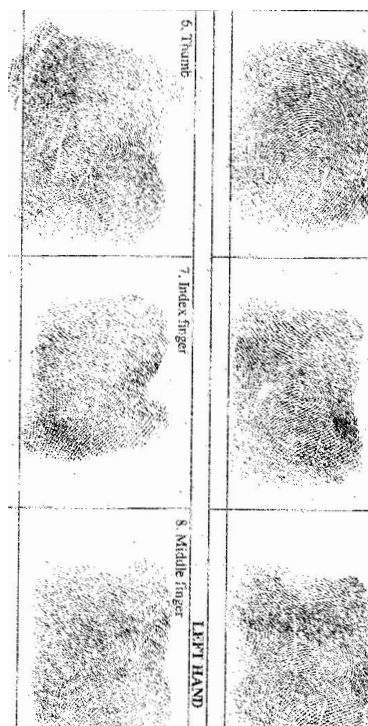
Maybe it just meant she'd done her homework.

I pulled the phone book out of the drawer. Nothing close.

I had another drink. I reloaded the .38.

Marcie had gone for dinner with friends and choir practice a few hours ago.

Shirley Perkins would be here any minute ●





The Suitcase

By Dave White

The state trooper was on his back, arms akimbo. The nameplate above the cop's shirt pocket read JONES. A gurgle emanated from the mouth as Eddie leaned over to check if he was breathing.

Blood oozed from the hole where his eye used to be. Smoke too. Or maybe it was steam from the cold air. Eddie didn't know.

Eddie didn't care.

"Oh God. Oh God. Oh God," he said aloud, but whispering, as if he was in a library. His eyes burned. They were wet.

He knew the gun was smoking in his hand, and he felt the heat off the barrel when he put his

free hand near it. He'd never shot it before. He wasn't even supposed to have it with him.

He turned and looked through the back window at the steel suitcase. It rested on the backseat, laying flat. The dome light reflected off the metal. That was a good thing.

Please don't stop me.

Those words were the last thing he remembered. When he'd looked in the rearview mirror, saw the flashing lights and prayed the trooper wanted to pass him. The cop didn't. The lights went on, Eddie pulled over, and the cop asked why he'd been pulled over. Then he heard the fizzling and, as if he'd done too many whiskey shots, his memory blacked out. A movie reel was missing.

He came to and saw the trooper dead. The cop car was still parked in the shoulder, red lights flashing. His own car, an old Toyota Tercel was directly in front of it. The driver's door was open and he could hear a pinging sound letting him know the keys were still in the ignition.

A fire erupted in his stomach and spread up through his esophagus and then down his arms. His fingers tingled and he nearly

dropped the gun. He felt his eyes widen. Standing up and turning from the body, he rushed back to his car. He tossed the gun on to the passenger seat and then leaned in, looking into the backseat.

Eddie reached over to undo the hasps, make sure everything was okay. He'd opened one, but stopped.

The man said, "Do not open the package. It is . . . very powerful."

Triceps tensed under his leather jacket and despite the cold winter air, sweat formed behind his ears. Eddie realized his chest was tight, nostrils flared, and mouth was wide open gasping for air. He heard the faint sound of a computer warming up, a high pitched whine crossed with static electricity crackling.

After backing all the way out of the car, Eddie made sure to check the road. It was empty, no headlights coming from either direction. What was a state trooper doing in this area anyway? He was somewhere off the Turnpike, in the middle of cornfields on his way to Philadelphia. Taking the back roads, staying out of sight.

Didn't work.

He looked at the corpse. Steam was still rising from the eye. The guy's skin has started to turn pale.

The shakes came. Hard shivers that ran up his arms and down his legs. He leaned back against the car and closed his eyes. He fought for his breath, but it felt like the air was getting stuck in his throat. His elbows bumped off the driver's side window.

Jesus Christ, what'd I do?

Before he could try to trace back through the blind-spot in his mind, his cell phone rang. It was in the console between the seats of his car, and at first he thought it was a bird chirping. Once he realized what it was, he got back to the car and tried to answer. The shakes caused him to miss the "call" button a few times. On the fourth ring, he got it.

"Where are you?"

The voice was strong and steady. Eddie's shaking stopped.

I have no fucking clue, he wanted to say.

Instead: "South Jersey."

"You're late," the man said. "You were supposed to be here

half an hour ago. Is there a problem?"

Eddie looked at the body on the ground. The steaming seemed to have stopped. He looked in the rearview mirror. Beyond the red lights of the police cruiser, he saw no other headlights. The same ahead of him.

"I got pulled over," he said.

A sigh on the other end of the phone. "Did they find anything?"

Eddie shut his eyes tight. Eileen appeared in his mind, her smile and wink. Then his imagination panned out and showed her round belly. His wished he could rub it right now, feel the baby kick.

"No."

"Why did he pull you over?"

Eddie tried to remember, tried to push away the image of Eileen and focus on what happened after he pulled over. Nothing.

"I don't know."

Another sigh.

"He didn't say," Eddie tried.

"You didn't open the suitcase, did you?"

Did he? Something nagged at

the back of his skull, like a rat nibbling at his hairline. The voice had given him strict instructions not to open the case. He must not have. That was against the rules. He didn't care what was inside. He only cared about the money.

"No."

The voice didn't respond. Instead, Eddie could hear the soft whistle of air through a nose on the other end of the line.

"No," Eddie repeated. "He's gone now. I'm on my way."

"Hurry, you're on a deadline."

Eddie hung up and swung his legs back out, planting his feet on the pavement. Could he just leave the body here? What about the car? The gun wasn't his, the man on the other end of the phone line had given it to him. Eddie didn't know if it could be traced back to him. There weren't fingerprints on the bullet, at least not his. He could leave the body here. Just pull out and go and forget about everything. Drop the suitcase off and get back to Eileen a lot richer.

But according to those CSI shows, couldn't they track tire treads? The Tercel was his. Not loaned. Not stolen. Maybe a piece of

hair had fallen from his head, a bit of spittle. Something a guy with a pair of rubber gloves could find, analyze, and then use to track him down.

He had to do something about the body. Make it so they'd never find it. And then take the car.

If he did that he'd have to leave his own car here, at least for the time being. And leave the suitcase. Damn thing was too heavy to carry.

He reached around the steering column, grasped the key and turned, shutting the Tercel off. The keys jingled as he pulled them from the ignition and placed them in his pocket.

He stood up, took a deep breath and grabbed the trooper by the wrists and pulled. The body barely moved an inch. The tendons and ligaments in Eddie's elbows strained. He gritted his teeth. His lower back muscles tightened. Nothing happened. He gave one more hard tug and heard the body scratch along the asphalt.

He stopped and tried to catch his breath.

You know why I pulled you over?

The words came to him like an

echo out the cornfields, almost a hiss, but the voice was familiar. Deep and raspy like a guy who smoked too much.

Do you know?

He dropped the trooper's wrists and heard his hands hit the pavement, the watch clicking against the ground. Eddie felt his face flush. Water formed at the corner of his eyes.

"Who's there?" he called out.

No response. Eddie waited, took a few more deep breaths, and felt his heart rate slow. He had to do this for Eileen. She was going to have the baby, she'd told him that, and he was going to be there for it. Support her. With whatever money he could get his hands on.

And he was not going away.

Bending at the knees, he grabbed the wrists and pulled. The body slid easier this time. Eddie tried not to look at the gash in the eye. Tried not to look at the blood. He just pulled and the body went with him.

Nearly a minute later, he felt cornstalks tickle at his back. He wondered how far into the stalks would he have to drag. How far was far enough?

License and registration, please.

The voice was clearer now, the hiss gone. It sounded as if his dad had adjusted rabbit ears on a television, like when he was a kid, before they got cable. Phil Rizzuto would fade out mid-Holy Cow, and his dad would get up and go to the TV. He'd reach his left hand, the gnarled one, out and twist the antenna until the picture came back into focus and The Scooter's voice cleared.

Eddie blinked. And snapped back to reality.

The memory was so clear. Not even like he'd been seeing it. No, he'd been living it. He was a kid again, three or four, thoughts garbled in his head confused about the sound on the TV. Wondering why Daddy's hand was so twisted and scarred.

"Keep moving," he said aloud.

The cornstalks seemed to part around him. He pulled for another foot or two and watched the roadway disappear as the vegetables closed again, like a curtain. Eddie tried to ignore it. Tried to not notice that his shirt was nearly soaked through, that a steel ball had formed in his stomach, and his

lungs still wouldn't work right.

He pulled further. The corn had grown too high and he couldn't gauge how far he'd come. With each step he expected to trip over a root, but nothing hit his foot.

He'd take another ten steps and leave the cop there. Worry about the car next.

Do you know how fast you were going?

"Stop it!" Eddie screamed and looked back at the trooper. The blood had started to congeal now, and was more like curdled red milk. "Shut up! I'm just trying to do my job. You weren't supposed to be here!"

He was fifteen, standing on the track outside the middle school. Bobby Pasculli was on the ground rolling and grabbing his arm. He'd tried to run across the track while Eddie was practicing the fifty-yard dash. Eddie crashed right into him, like a base runner trying to knock the ball out of the catcher's hand. All the air went out of Eddie's chest. Bobby was yelling his arm was broken. Eddie yelled that Bobby wasn't supposed to be there.

He didn't run again after that.

College scholarship down the tubes. College acceptance sailed away.

Eddie felt the winter air on his face and snapped completely back. In the cornfields again. The ache in his shoulder, where he'd hit Pasculli, faded away.

Leave the body here.

What was going on? He sucked in as much as he could get, as if he'd just had the wind knocked from his lungs. As he breathed, he wheezed forcing the air down into his lungs.

He let go of the trooper's body and started to sprint back toward the road. The stalks didn't move for him as before, branches and leaf edges slapping him in the face. He felt some of his skin tear as if he'd cut himself shaving. His chin felt warm and wet. He wiped at it as he kept running forward. Threading the last two stalks, he hit pavement and expected to find three more cruisers waiting for him.

Nothing.

The road was still empty. Not another headlight to be seen. That wasn't right. There should be cars on this road. New Jersey was the most densely populated states in the nation and people had to get places. They'd take

any road possible.

He was damned lucky they didn't have to get anywhere right now. His cell phone chirped again. Eddie got to his car and answered it on the third ring.

The voice said, "Are you closer?"

"Yes, I'm getting there. There's traffic."

"Bullshit. I'm listening to the traffic on the radio. It's two a.m. There isn't any. What is the hold up?"

How long had he been in the cornfields? It wasn't two a.m. when he got pulled over, it was at the latest twelve-thirty. He was supposed to be in Philly by two. Now he still had to get rid of the car.

And he still had to figure out what was going on with his head. He couldn't remember half an hour ago, but he could remember smells and ambient noise from twenty years ago. His own thoughts didn't make sense back then.

"All right," he said. "I got fucking lost, okay? I got pulled over, so I went a little out of my way. Then I got lost."

The voice got very quiet. "Are

you still fucking lost, Edward?"

Eddie's grip around the phone tightened. "No," he said.

"Then tell me where you are."

Eddie looked at his GPS. "State highway 57, near Jockeytown Road."

"Get driving."

"I'll be there within the hour."

"You'd better be," the voice said. "Because after that, I'm going to start docking you money."

He hung up.

The police cruiser's light blinded him for an instant, like being surprised by strobe lights in a dance club. He took a step toward the car, but he was overwhelmed by the thump of techno music. He was no longer in the street.

In front of him Eileen danced. Her eyes were closed and her lips were curved, smiling to herself. She ran a hand through her hair as she bent her knees and swayed her hips. Eddie moved toward her, feeling the rhythm of the music vibrate through his body. He closed his hands into fists and stepped around her,

admiring her swaying ass. People danced around him, but he hardly noticed. To him there were only two people in the room that mattered.

He stepped closer to her, and a rush of electricity went through him. As he got a little hard, he took a deep breath and put both his hands on her waist and fell into time with her. She opened her eyes wide, and looked over her shoulder.

The smell of strawberry shampoo enveloped him as he leaned closer to her ear. He got hard.

"I'm sorry," he said above the music. "I couldn't resist."

She didn't say anything. They left the club, bought beer in a corner store and walked the New York streets for two hours talking about everything. At four in the morning, he got her back to her apartment, and they made love. Supposed to be just a one-night stand. He found out she was pregnant three weeks later. They started to date a week after that.

His erection went limp. The scene faded, only to change directly to another one. Changing out of his UPS overalls in the locker room, looking left and

seeing his boss waiting for him. He was getting his pink slip. He squeezed his eyes shut.

Eddie took another step toward the police cruiser, and felt his knees give out. He felt gravel cut through his jeans and dig into his skin as he knelt. It felt as if his face was boiling. He curled his fingers into fists and tried to stop the shaking.

Now, Eileen was standing in front of him, saying, "I got laid off today. We're out of money. How are we going to afford a child?"

A strong gust of wind blew up the road, shocking him back into reality. The road was still empty, save his car and the cop's. He turned back toward his. A low fizzle was emanating from it. The sound reminded him of putting a hot pan under cold running water. He got back to his feet.

The fizzle got louder, now resembling rain off a metal canopy. The car was rocking on its suspensions. Eddie ran toward it.

Looking through the back window, he could see that the suitcase was no longer on its side. It was upright, standing straight, not leaning on the seat. Both hasps were unlocked now. Eddie opened the back door and the

suitcase flopped open.

What the fuck was going on tonight?

And then he was standing in front of the man with the deep voice. The man who'd called him twice today. The man who'd offered him the job in a loft apartment in New York City. He sat behind a desk, his face covered in shadow. When he put a hand on the desk it, Eddie could see the skin was olive colored.

Heat from a radiator pounded his skin. Beads of sweat formed on his forearms.

"This piece of equipment," the voice was saying, "is very important."

"Why me? You don't even know me."

The voice said, "You come very highly recommended. You were tested, actually. At your old job."

Eddie's head hurt, a stabbing pain that ran from the center of his forehead straight through his brain to the base of his skull.

"Tested?"

The man nodded. Why couldn't Eddie see him? He didn't remember the shadows when this

originally happened. Why couldn't he remember the man with the voice?

"You've shipped many items for me. Scientific items. Forbidden items. Your boss selected you. Gave you the packages to send. Put them on your itinerary. Loaded them on to your truck himself. You think you were actually laid off? In a way, the day you got your pink slip was the day you were hired." The man tapped his hand on the desk. "What is being transported has been created by a scientist to use in psychological tests. The power of suggestion on the mind."

Eddie thought about the money, twenty thousand dollars. Enough to get him started.

The call did about this job come from his boss, weeks later. Rich was apologetic. It wasn't his fault Eddie had to be laid off, it was numbers. But he knew a guy, a businessman in the city. He'll pay a lot for a simple job. A delivery actually.

"The item will be waiting for you there. Pick it up. Bring it here." The man with the voice slipped a piece of paper across the desk. On it was an address in Philadelphia.

"You have four hours," the man said. "Do not open the package. It is . . . very powerful."

"What is it? I don't want to do anything—"

The man waved a hand and shut Eddie up.

"You don't need to worry. Not much, at least. But take this, just in case."

A gun slid across the desk much like the piece of paper.

Eddie squeezed his eyes shut as if he was trying use tears to get something out of his eyes. He wanted to clear his vision. He opened them again to see a long clear tube inside the suitcase. It was glowing a faint yellow color.

Eddie felt his hand move—against his will—toward the front door of the car. He tensed his muscles to try and stop it, but he couldn't. He opened the door and got in the car. Eddie sat down and fastened his seatbelt.

And looked out the side window.

The state trooper was standing there. Eddie rolled down the window.

"Do you know why I pulled you over?"

Eddie shook his head. He'd tried to speak but no sound came out.

The state trooper nodded once. "License and registration please."

Eddie reached over, opened the glove compartment. He saw the gun resting against the driver's manual as he got the information. When he handed the registration over, he noticed the cop's free hand rested on the butt of his own sidearm.

The cop looked at the information and then leaned in closer. His eyes were on the backseat.

"What's in the suitcase?"

Eddie could only shrug.

"Open it," the cop said. His hand was now wrapped around the butt of the weapon. It was still in the holster.

Eddie leaned between the seats and clicked one of the hasps open. He heard a soft fizzle, like bubbles in soda. He clicked the other one and the fizzle got louder. He opened the suitcase. The fizzle sounded like white noise on a TV.

Eddie's body went stiff.

"What is that?" he heard the cop say.

Slowly, he felt his body move back toward the front seat. It was as if he were outside the body, watching it. He knew what was happening, but couldn't control it.

Hand in the glove compartment, wrapped around the butt of the gun. The cop was still staring in the backseat.

Finding his voice, Eddie said, "No. No. No."

Eddie aimed the gun at the cop, who looked up. Eddie pulled the trigger. The retort of the gun was louder than the white noise.

The cop's head snapped back and blood shot up into the air. Some of the drops beat the body to the ground.

Again he shut his eyes. The muscles in his cheeks tightened when he did.

It felt like Eddie woke up from a deep sleep. He looked in his lap and saw the gun there. Behind him the white noise was deafening. Looking left, he saw the cop wasn't there. He looked to the right and saw the cornstalk he'd snapped in half returning from the field.

He picked up the gun.

No. I. Will. Not.

He forced himself to look up and out the windshield. Two headlights were coming in his direction. Fast.

The gun was heavy, a lot heavier than the last few times he lifted it. It was working. He was fighting against it. His entire body was shaking, but he was fighting against it.

Whatever it was.

The two headlights belonged to a van. It skidded to a halt right next to his car. Eddie forced himself to look. In the passenger seat was the man with the voice. His boss sat in the driver's seat.

"Is it working?" his boss said over the roar of the white noise.

The gun was at the level of Eddie's chest. What were they talking about?

The voice, "Just wait. I want proof."

"Too bad you had to let Jones go. He'd have loved this."

Now the gun was at the height of his throat. Sweat coursed down Eddie's face. He had to stop this. He didn't want to die. What was in the suitcase? What

was making him do this? The barrel started to turn, away from the windshield. Toward him.

"He did what was necessary. We all will. America will fear us."

Eddie pressed the gun to his temple. His index finger slid off the trigger guard and on to the trigger. He gritted his teeth and spittle dripped off his chin. He shut his eyes.

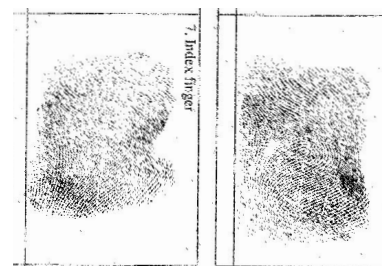
That's how I make it go away. Close my eyes. When I open them the gun will be in my lap again.

Eileen stood in front of him. She caressed her stomach.

"It's a girl," she said. "I found out today."

More sweat dripped from his forehead. Tears from his eyes. He opened them. The gun was still aimed at his temple.

Eddie pulled the trigger. The bullet burned ●





Good Bones

By Hilary Davidson

Even before Tom found the baby's bones, he'd seen omens that the old house was a death trap. There was that little fire in the kitchen that revealed ancient knob-and-tube wiring. Next, a pipe burst in the second-story bathroom, warping the floor and damaging the kitchen ceiling. *Which element will strike next?* Tom joked to his wife. Earth, it turned out: one spring morning they found a dead cat in their backyard, its tail protruding from under the rickety wooden stoop, which turned out to be infested with termites.

Tom wanted to sue the previous owners, who must have bribed the house inspector to give the place a pass. *We can get out of*

this, he told his wife. But Monica hadn't wanted out. She was the one who'd been seduced by the Victorian house in the first place. Tom had watched her fall in love as the real estate agent first walked them through. Monica was entranced by the faded glamour whispered by the high ceilings and decorative moldings and lead-glass windows. *It has good bones*, she said, as if that answered everything. For a time, it had, while they were still living in the condo and the house was their weekend project. Tom almost got used to the knot of nerves that tightened in his stomach as they uncovered more defects in it. But finding the bones inside the wall was too much.

All Tom had wanted was to hang a picture in the first-floor hallway. It was Monica's idea, of course. Her to-do list was filled with tasks Tom considered unnecessary luxuries: fill vases with orchids, cover walls with oil paintings, load rooms with antiques. She talked about setting up a photo shoot for *House & Home* magazine. Tom wanted a working shower. But since Monica considered the claw-foot porcelain bathtub romantic, it was staying put – and Tom was standing, at ten o'clock on a Friday night, in the hallway with

a hammer in one hand and a nail in the other. "Here?" he asked.

"A bit lower. I said a *bit*." Monica wasn't trying to hide her exasperation. Tom slid the nail up a hair's breadth and got another sigh. "That'll do," Monica mumbled through a mouthful of shiraz.

For a split second, Tom pictured his boss's head on the wall, shriveled to the size of the nail. That was a mistake, he realized, as he brought the hammer down. He'd used too much force. Instead of the nail sinking into the plaster, the wall crumbled beneath it.

"I can't believe you did that!" Monica screeched. "You moron!"

Something in Tom snapped. He hated the house, wished he'd never set eyes on it. Dropping the hammer, he kicked the wall, coughing hard as plaster dust filled the air. There was a yawning hole now, big enough for a dwarf to step through. Maybe it was a black hole that would suck them all in, Tom thought. That was what the house was: a gaping void that made money vanish.

Monica gasped and clutched her glass to her chest. She was staring into the hole, her lips, purplish from the wine, hanging

apart. Tom followed her gaze and saw gleaming white just inside.

"That's a hand," Monica whispered.

Tom crouched to touch it. It was delicate, like the skeleton of a tiny monkey he'd seen at the museum when he was a kid. The index finger pointed accusingly while the other digits were curled into a fist. Everything else was hidden inside crumpled newspaper. Tom reached for the bundle and set it on the floor, drawing back the powdery pages. Inside was a blanket that might once have been white. The little skeleton wore a powder-blue pair of sleepers with snaps up one side. There was no sign of flesh or blood and no smell other than the dank mold of the rambling old house.

Monica knelt opposite Tom. "A baby," she said. They stared at it for a moment. "We have to call the police."

"Look at the date on the paper." Tom pointed to the top of the page, close to a photograph of Joseph Stalin. *July 19, 1945.*

"This fucking house is cursed." Monica stood and finished her wine. "What a nightmare."

"We can call the police tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's Saturday. In case you've forgotten, I'm working this weekend." Monica turned and headed for the kitchen. Tom watched her silhouette pouring more wine. Since she'd lost her job as a magazine editor, she was angry all the time. Tom worked weekends, too, but at least he hadn't been laid off. Not yet, anyway. He'd worked at the same TV station for a decade, but over the past six months, he felt like he'd just started there. He couldn't even get his reports on the air. His new boss, Richard, treated him like an errand boy. They'd competed for years as reporters, and Richard had always been a snotty bastard. Now that he was a big-shot producer, he sent Tom after stories that were fool's errands, then forced him to edit other reporters' tapes.

"Sorry, honey," said Tom. "I forgot. At least you're going to a spa."

"I have to *write* about that fucking spa, you know. It's not like I'm going there for fun. If you had any balls at all, you'd get me into TV." She'd been freelancing since she'd been laid off, working long hours for virtually no money. Tom's income supported them, just barely. They didn't have money for dinners out anymore, or health-club

memberships, or vacations. Any discretionary income went straight into that money-pit of a house.

"I'm sure it'll be a great story," Tom said brightly. "Who's it for again?"

"Why? Are you going to start pitching women's magazines? Maybe you should. Maybe that's your *real* vocation."

She was always so hostile, acting like everything was his fault. Moving into this house was supposed to be a dream come true for them. Sure, it was in The Junction, a Toronto neighborhood named for its proximity to multiple train tracks. But the area was better than it used to be, and the bones of the house hinted at its potential: big windows, a sweeping staircase, enough bedrooms for the kids they'd talked about having.

"I'm taking the train at one," Monica added. "Get it out of my sight in the meantime."

"Where should I put it?"

"I don't care. Maybe the basement." The basement was the nastiest part of the house, with a dirt floor that a previous owner had dug up but never filled in. Tom and Monica didn't even use

it for storage.

"Yikes. What if there are more down there?" Tom said.

"More what?"

"Skeletons."

"You are disgusting," Monica said. "Sometimes it makes me sick just to listen to you."

Tom spent Saturday trailing after a reality-show contestant who'd blown out his vocal cords on TV. But that had happened a year ago and no one would remember the guy's name now, except Richard, who seemed to be scraping some particularly foul assignment barrel. Tom knew the segment would never air, and felt guilty for putting the rasping ex-singer through it. That evening, he cracked open a beer and called Ramsay, a cop he'd met when he was a student reporter on the crime beat. Ramsay was retired now, and complained about having too much time on his hands.

"What, the wife abandoned you again?" Ramsay asked in his gravelly voice when Tom swung open the front door. He squinted at the terrible squeal. "Where's she at this time?"

"At a spa. It's for some magazine."

"Thought I was doing well when Maureen passed on," Ramsay said. "Three years now, God rest her wicked soul. Thought I'd like the peace and quiet. But it makes you daft after a bit, being alone, you know?"

"Monica's been going away as much as she can since we had to move into the house. Can't say I blame her."

"Ingrate. Look at that fancy molding," said Ramsay. "Real craftsmanship, putting the like of that in. Don't see that kind of work anymore."

"I'll sell it to you. Please. Take it off my hands."

"Too bad the market sank like a stone. Otherwise you could've flipped it, made some serious coin." Ramsay's pale blue eyes zeroed in on the massive hole in the hallway wall. "Your handiwork?"

"Yep." Tom led him back to the kitchen and opened another beer. "I didn't think it could go any further downhill. But things keep breaking."

Ramsay stared at the sagging, waterlogged ceiling. "It's falling down around your ears, lad."

"Monica wanted this house."

"Sure, once it's fixed up. Then it'll be a showpiece. When you're ninety." Ramsay took a long drink. "How'd you end up moving in so fast? I thought the plan was to do the work first."

Tom shrugged. What could he say? When the real-estate market had started to tank, they'd gotten a great offer for his condo, which Tom had bought long before he'd met Monica. *Take the deal!* his agent had screamed. *The market is going into the toilet!* That agent had been right, and they'd been lucky to sell the condo when they had. But they'd moved into a house that was essentially uninhabitable.

"I could help you get this pile straightened out," Ramsay offered. "I miss doing all that tinkering since my house was sold. I'm a dab hand with all that. I know plenty of boys in construction. I love working in the garden. Such a green yard we had."

"Thanks, Ramsay. I'll get around to it one day."

"No rush. It's only June, mind."

Then he took Ramsay to the basement, opening the door from the kitchen and padding down the cold

metal steps. Something midway between damp and rotten made him wince. A 60-watt bulb dangled from a wire, casting low shadows and making the dug-up dirt floor look like a bottomless pit. The bundle of bones and broadsheets was on the bottom step, where he'd left it.

"Poor wee thing." Ramsay lifted it as gently as he would have a live infant. "A sin, whoever did the like of this."

"The couple who sold us the house had it for thirty years. Going by the date on the paper," Tom pointed to *July 19, 1945*, "this goes back way before them."

"I was born in '42," Ramsay said. "Back then, if a girl got knocked up, she went away to a home."

"I was wondering about that. If a girl gave birth in the house, and the baby was stillborn or died just after, why not bury it properly?"

"Maybe it wasn't a girl. Maybe it was a woman with a husband over in Europe. The war was ending then. It was over in Europe, almost over in Asia."

"But to give birth and..."

"It doesn't make logical sense," said Ramsay. "Most crimes don't.

But I'll tell you one thing. Whoever put this child in the wall was hiding more than a dead body."

When Monica came home Sunday night, she asked Tom if the bones were gone. *Good. I don't want to even think about it again,* she said, disappearing upstairs and taking a bottle of shiraz into the bath with her. But on Monday, she called him at work, clearly agitated. "What did you do with the dead baby?"

"Ramsay took it," Tom said.

"You just let him take the bones?"

"He's bringing them in to the lab. It's not a big priority for the police, but they're going to investigate and later they'll bury..."

"Did it ever occur to you that finding the bones was a great story? No wonder you're such a failure as a reporter. You don't even know when you have a good story under your nose."

She hung up. Tom stared at the receiver. Was Monica having lunch with one of her editors, and mentioned their sad discovery? He glanced towards his boss's office, but the door was

closed and the light was off. Tom was relieved. He didn't want to see that superior smirk on Richard's face, the one that said *I know you're clinging by your fingernails, errand boy.*

Tom called Ramsay, who gave him the name of the investigating officer. "But don't be expecting DNA results," Ramsay cautioned. "They're backed up over there with rape kits. The poor wee thing has waited this long. He'll just have to wait a little longer."

When Richard returned to the office, he called Tom in for a meeting. As Richard sat back, long legs stretched out, Tom went over his developing stories. Richard tossed a baseball in the air and kept his eyes on it. He was barely listening.

"I'm calling this piece Toxic City," said Tom, describing a series of health reports that showed that Toronto was becoming increasingly polluted.

Richard laughed and shook his head. "Why're you coming to me with this stuff, Tommy?" he said. "You trying to bore the pants off me?"

Tom was five foot nine, three inches shorter than Richard, and he hated it when Richard called

him *Tommy*. "It's an important story. One we should be covering."

"Such an earnest boy." Richard smirked. "Got anything else?"

Tom thought about what Monica had said about the dead child. "Human-interest piece about a couple who renovate a house and find a baby's skeleton inside the walls."

Richard looked at him directly for the first time since Tom had walked in. "Is the couple tele-genic?"

"Monica and I found the bones in our house."

"Whoa." Richard tossed the baseball in the air a few times. "Okay," he said finally. "Run with that. And gimme your research on the Toxic City thing."

It was only at the end of the day that Tom heard, from another reporter at the station, that they were doing the Toxic City story. It had just been assigned to her.

Tom had no time to research his story that week. On Tuesday, Richard sent him to cover the story of a hiker who'd been found in Algonquin Park. The man

had disappeared in March, and his defrosted body had just been discovered. There was no reason to be up there for days, but Richard insisted. "Don't come back till you got something unique. Gimme an angle." By the time Tom came home Friday, he was glad to collapse into his own bed, even if he was worried about the floor under it. Early Saturday morning, his cell phone woke him up.

"Having a bit of a lie-in on the weekend, are we?" Ramsay chuckled. "'Course, you've got a pretty wife, so there's incentive."

Tom stretched out. Monica's side of the bed was cold. She'd left on Friday to visit her mother in Montreal, and he was alone again. "She's away right now. What's up?"

"Fuck me, she's off again? Pardon my French. How can she do that?"

Tom was annoyed, but he wasn't going into it with Ramsay. Monica had said her mother wasn't feeling well. As a peace offering, she'd left a big bouquet of red roses in their bedroom. Tom didn't care much for flowers, but he appreciated the thought. "Forget it, Ramsay. Tell me what's new."

"Got the autopsy report on that baby. It was murder."

Tom sat up, his heart racing. "How can they tell? You said they wouldn't know anything for a while..."

"I forgot what sick bastards they are at the lab," Ramsay said. "Give 'em a mystery that's older than they are and they're pissing themselves to get at it. They found a cranial fracture. Poor wee thing was only a few weeks old."

"Who would do that?"

"That's where we hit a dead end. A fire gutted the house in '44. The owners moved west, to Vancouver. The house was uninhabited till April '47."

"I'm on it," Tom said.

It had been a long time since Tom had worked on a story he cared about. He interviewed his neighbors and tracked down those who'd moved away. He found people who'd known the different owners of the house. He reviewed the ownership records in a musty municipal office. He turned up nothing.

Monica quickly lost interest. "Seriously, all you can talk

about is a dead baby," she pointed out one night. "You need a life."

"You should come back from Montreal," Tom said. "Obviously I'm going crazy alone in this house."

There was a long pause.

"I could come visit on the weekend," Tom added.

"My mom is having problems. It wouldn't be a good time for you to come out. Anyway, you've got your dead baby story to work on."

Monica made light of it, but Tom was serious. There was a raw sense of justice in him that was repulsed by the murder. It made it hard to think about anything else.

Tom knocked on the door of a small house in Toronto's Cabbagetown. It was a simple worker's cottage, built when Irish laborers dominated the neighborhood, yet it had elegant lines and big windows. The front garden teemed with ferns and Bleeding Hearts and Queen Anne's Lace.

"Hello," said the woman who answered the door. She was seventy, judging by the lines in

her face, and there was something disarmingly sweet about her smile. She wore a pink dress with a pattern of white flowers, and she twirled a pink necklace of beads at her throat. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks," said Tom, surprised by her warmth. "I'm looking for..."

"Marie, did you answer the door?" demanded another woman. As she came closer, moving cautiously, Tom saw that she was a decade older than Marie, with an expression twisted by anger or pain, or some combination of the two. She wore a plain navy dress, sensible navy shoes and a gold cross. "What do you want?" she barked.

"My name is Tom Lee. I work for a television show called..."

"I don't watch television and I don't like people who do," the woman announced.

"I was hoping to talk to someone who knew Donald O'Neill."

"What for?" snapped the woman.

"He was our father," said Marie, smiling shyly.

"Go back to your room. I'll handle this."

"But he was our father, Suzy!"

Marie looked stricken.

"Donald O'Neill ran a construction business," Tom said. "O'Neill and Sons. He did construction work in 1945 on a house on Clendenan Avenue in The Junction."

Suzy's mouth froze in a grim line. "Get away from my door, do you hear me? If you come back, I'll call the police." She pulled her sister back and slammed the door in Tom's face.

"Found any new skeletons in your closet?" Richard asked him the next morning. He was looking very pleased with himself these days, and Tom wished he knew why. It was as if he had uncovered a secret and was letting it melt in his mouth like a chocolate. "I think you're spending too much time with dead people, Tommy."

"I've got leads," Tom mumbled. He was on hold with a structural engineers' association, and he cradled the phone between his ear and shoulder.

"Well, I've waited long enough for something to pan out," Richard announced. "I've got a piece about spas that cater to couples that needs to be filmed. You're on it, Tommy."

"You've got to be kidding. I don't do spas."

"Really? Too good for that, huh?" Richard pressed a button on Tom's phone, ending the call. He slapped a blue Post-It note on Tom's monitor. *HealthWinds*. Tom knew nothing about spas, yet the name seemed familiar. "Be there at two today, or you're out on your ass."

At two that afternoon, Tom was still sitting in front of the little house in Cabbagetown. It was how he wished his own house looked, he realized. Tidy and clean and inviting.

The O'Neill sisters weren't at home. Tom had rung the bell several times, then let himself through the little gate at the side of the house and peered through the windows.

"Can I help you?" called a neighbor out an open window. The man had a cordless phone in his hand, probably had already dialed 911.

"Process server," said Tom. He'd spent enough time climbing around places he wasn't supposed to be, and he was a good liar. "Looking for Suzy O'Neill."

"Oh." The neighbor put the phone

down and wandered away. Tom went back to the front of the house, leaning against the fence. At two-thirty a taxi pulled up in front of the house.

"Hello, how are you?" said Marie as she stepped out. She was wearing a green blouse and slacks.

"Hi, Marie," said Tom. "Where have you been?"

"Swimming," answered Marie. "My sister takes me to a big pool to swim. I really like it but she won't get in the water. Then we go for ice-cream afterwards." She smiled. "Do you like to swim?"

"What are you doing here?" demanded Suzy, exiting the taxi with difficulty. "I told you not to come back."

"We need to talk," said Tom. "About your brother."

Both sisters immediately tensed. Marie's eyes looked watery; Suzy's were angry and hard. "Why can't you leave us alone?" Suzy snapped.

"I live in that house on Clendenan," said Tom. "We opened up a wall on the first floor, and inside..."

"Let's go in the house," Suzy announced. Marie and Tom followed her to the door. "Go get the

iced tea, Marie," she ordered once they were inside. "Use the yellow glasses with the big flowers on them."

"I like those glasses," said Marie. "They're pretty. Yellow is my favorite color, after pink."

Suzy watched Marie walk down the hallway, then gestured for Tom to follow her into a starchy room that looked like an old-fashioned parlor. "What do you want?" she whispered. "We don't have much money."

"I'm not blackmailing you. I found a child's bones in my house and I want to know what happened. It wasn't the owners' child. So I started to look at who else had access to the house. Donald O'Neill was hired to do the repair work, and it was an extensive job."

"The house was gutted by that fire," Suzy sighed. "It took father ages."

"He was working on it for more than two years. That's a long time."

"It was a big job. Father had plenty of work, and some other jobs were more pressing."

"The bones I found were wrapped in newspaper from July 1945. That was while he was working on

it."

Suzy sighed grimly, and her chin slumped. "It sounds like you already know what happened," she said, closing her eyes. "What more do you need to hear?"

"Your mother had a child, a baby boy, that May," said Tom. "Donald Alan O'Neill, Junior. There's a birth record but no death record. What happened to him?"

Marie came into the room, walking slowly. She'd filled the glasses to the brim and she watched them with wide eyes, clearly worried they might spill. "Careful now," she said to herself. "Careful." She smiled at them as she handed over the glasses.

"That's a good girl," said Suzy. "Thank you, Marie. Do you think you could check how many tins of fruit we have in the larder? I think we might make a fruit salad this afternoon."

"Oh, I love fruit salad!" Marie rushed out of the parlor.

"What happened to your brother?" Tom repeated.

Suzy took a sip of iced tea. "You can see that something's not quite right about my sister, can't you?"

"Yes," Tom said.

"She's been like that since she was born. She was fifteen before she could dress herself, and she still can't tie her own shoes." Suzy set her glass down. "It's been my job, my life, taking care of her. Our parents never wanted to put her in an institution. You can't imagine what a nightmare that would have been. The way they treated the retar... the way they treated people like Marie."

"I understand. But what about your brother?"

Suzy stared at the rug. "My brother was a colicky baby. Everyone tried to soothe him. Including Marie."

A picture was starting to form in Tom's mind. "What happened?"

"It was an accident," Suzy said. "He just slid out of her arms. It happened so fast." For a moment, the only sound was Marie's voice from the kitchen, counting in a singsong tone.

"My parents were grief-stricken. They knew if anyone found out, Marie would be put into an institution. They couldn't let that happen."

"So your father took your brother's body and put it in the house."

"All I knew for certain was that he took Donny away. We were never allowed to talk about my brother, but sometimes I would listen at my parents' door, and I heard them talk about him."

"Someone could have found the body years before this."

Suzy shook her head. "But they didn't."

Tom was preoccupied when he got to the spa. Richard had said to be there at two, and it was almost four when Tom arrived. *What am I doing here?* he thought, walking towards its glass doors. *This is bullshit. Richard knows it.* Tom was already narrating the O'Neill sisters' story in his mind. They wouldn't want to do it, of course, but there was no reason for them not to. No one was going to put Marie in an institution for an accident that happened decades ago.

Tom was so focused on his story that he didn't recognize the woman who stepped out of the spa's front door. She was wearing a sundress and a pink cardigan and flip-flops, with she was still pulling her dark hair back in a ponytail. She stopped dead. "Tom?"

"Monica? What are you doing

here? You're supposed to be in Montreal."

She fished in her bag for her sunglasses and put them on. "I came back this morning. I was going to surprise you. So much for that." Without kissing or touching him, she walked away.

Monica was in the bathroom, splashing around the clawfoot tub, when Tom came home that evening. He raised his fist to bang on the door. *What the hell is going on?* he wanted to demand. But he had little to go on except her inconsistent stories and a feeling of dread. He lowered his hand, and walked into her office.

The room, with its pale green walls and antique desk, was off-limits to Tom. *I need space to work and I can't have you invading my space*, Monica had told him. Her laptop was sitting on her desk and she'd left her e-mail logged on. He clicked on a message with the subject *Can't wait*.

Got the champagne. Can't wait to see you.

Tom's eyes burned. He clicked through a series of older messages from the same sender, a bundle of random letters and

numbers at a Hotmail account. What hit Tom hardest was a message Monica had written a couple of weeks earlier.

The cat's away, it read. Come on over to play.

Tom stared at the time stamp. He'd had been away then, out of town covering some stupid comic-book conference. While he was gone, had Monica slept with another man in his own house?

"What are you doing?" snapped Monica from the doorway. She was wearing a short satin robe, and her hair was in a pink cotton towel swirled into a turban.

Tom stared at her. "You're having an affair."

It wasn't a question. The words hung between them for a moment, until Monica shrugged. "What the fuck did you expect?"

Later, when Tom tried to remember how things had turned out the way they had, all he could picture was Monica, standing there defiantly, not remorseful or sad. She was, if anything, angry at him. She'd stormed off to the bedroom, pulling on jeans and a T-shirt while Tom asked her why, why, why? He had stood there, tears welling, while she

threw some clothing and jewelry into a bag. Then she'd grabbed her computer and stormed downstairs.

Just tell me, Tom had begged, grabbing her arm. How did it happen?

Easy, Monica had answered. Her eyes were shiny and her mouth was curled up at the corners, ready to shoot out something that would cut him to the quick. I met a real man who's not a pussy.

She tried to shove Tom away, but when he wouldn't let go, she scratched at his face, barely missing his eye. He shoved her back. Down she went, through the open doorway to the basement, the thudding of her body reverberating against the metal steps. Tom ran down after her, but she was gone, her empty eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Long into the night, Tom sat in the basement, picturing the house ablaze. He'd crossed Monica's arms over her chest. He should get her some flowers, he thought. He looked out the tiny casement window into the bleak backyard. It could have been beautiful if someone just planted flowers and took care of it. Now it was too

late.

Early in the morning, Tom left a message on Richard's voice mail, saying he had to go to Vancouver because his mother was sick. His mother had died when he was a teenager, but Richard wouldn't know that. Then Tom went to the basement and started to dig. It was hard work, turning the earth, even though someone else had started the job. Tears and sweat stung his eyes. He thought about Marie O'Neill. How horrified she must have been when she realized she'd accidentally killed her baby brother. Somehow she'd lived with the pain, but Tom knew he couldn't.

After he buried his wife, Tom sat on the metal steps above her grave. He thought about staying there forever. Starving to death would be a painful way to go, exactly what he deserved. What would he tell Monica's mother? He was too ashamed to face anyone. He rested his forehead on the cool step and willed his heart to stop.

Instead, the doorbell rang. There was a pause and the bell sounded again. *Go to hell*, Tom thought, but next he heard the heavy front door swing open with its horrible squeal.

Tom moved up the stairs, into

the kitchen. No one was there. He looked down the hallway and saw the front door was closed. Had he imagined it? No: there were footsteps above. Whoever it was that had broken into the house was upstairs. Tom pulled a serrated knife out of the wooden block on the counter. The footsteps were loud and heavy, pacing from room to room.

How many unexpected guests was he dealing with? Tom looked for a place to watch from, but the rooms on the first floor were virtually empty. There hadn't been money for the furniture Monica wanted. There weren't even drapes to hide behind. When he heard the heavy footsteps on the landing above the stairs, Tom ducked into the hole in the wall. The stink of mildew and mold hit him hard. Footfalls were coming down the stairs now. Someone passed in front of him and Tom saw black leather wingtips and black trousers. A bouquet of red roses obscured the face.

Roses? he thought. Had the man been pretending to deliver flowers when he broke in? But he was relieved that there was only one man. He'd take him on. It was as good a way to go as any.

He stepped out of the wall and padded down the hallway, glad he was barefoot. The intruder was

peering into the basement, but he looked around when a floorboard squeaked under Tom's foot.

"Where are you hiding, you naughty little..." The words died on Richard's lips.

"I guess you're looking for my wife," Tom said. There was a feeling of calm that had come over him, as if this moment was suspended in time. The pieces of the puzzle suddenly fit. Monica had wanted to work in television, and Richard was a big-shot producer. Of course they'd been fucking around behind his back.

"You've got it all wrong," Richard said, his face pale and his eyes darted around the room.

"It's alright. Tell her I said hello." Tom thrust the knife up into the hollow of Richard's throat. Suddenly everything was slick and red: Richard's neck, Tom's arm, and the blade that connected them. Richard gurgled bloody bubbles and his eyes went wide. Tom shoved him hard and Richard sailed through the air. As he crashed down the metal steps, the red roses scattered and followed him into the dirt.

After Tom dug a grave for Richard, he washed in the clawfoot tub. Then he found Richard's

car parked on the street, put the keys into the ignition and left the doors unlocked. Even with the gentrification of The Junction, it wouldn't take ten minutes for that car to be on the road, piloted by a kid who wouldn't believe his luck.

Back at the house, Tom picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hello?" The voice on the other end was suspicious.

"Suzy, it's Tom Lee again. We spoke yesterday."

"I wish you would stop hounding me, young man. We don't want any trouble."

"I wanted to tell you that I won't be bothering you again. What you told me was in confidence, and I intend to keep it between us."

"Well," said Suzy, her tone sharp. And then, softly, "Well, then."

"I apologize for bothering you in the first place," Tom said. "I'm sorry for making you rehash the past."

After he hung up, he sat lost in thought. He remembered how he and Monica used to stay up nights talking about how perfect they would make the house.

It would never be what they had dreamed. It was a place of misery, where a fire had raged, a baby had been entombed, and his own wife had died. Yet, when he turned it over in his mind, he couldn't escape the conclusion that Monica had gotten what she deserved. Maybe he could've forgiven her if she'd been screwing someone else, but Richard? Never. For a moment, he wondered how the cellar door had opened just before she fell down the stairs. He didn't remember opening it. Had Monica turned the handle? Everything had happened so fast. Was it possible that it was some shift in the old bones of the house that caused the door to spring open? The house had its own secrets. It had kept the confidence of the O'Neill family for decades. How long would it take for...

The ringing phone made him jump.

"No one can make heads or tails of that poor wee babe you found," said Ramsay.

"Still going in circles?" asked Tom.

"I think they're giving up on it. Sorry about that."

"It's okay. Monica thought it would be a good story, but I'd

just as soon leave it alone."

"Is she back yet?"

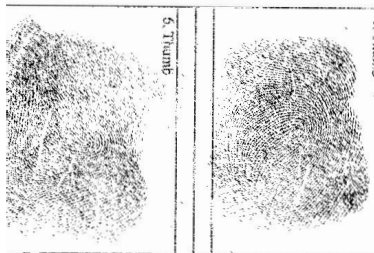
"No."

"Aww, chin up, lad. Look, she's being a spoiled little minx, wanting you to fix up the house for her. When you do, she'll be back."

"You think so?"

"I know so. Look, it's a big job, but you've got to start somewhere."

"The basement," said Tom. "Do you know anyone who could pour a concrete floor?" ●





TEMPS



FRANK BILL is a Southern Indiana writer of gritty crime. Stories published in *Plots With Guns*, *Pulp Pusher*, *Beat to a Pulp*, *Hardboiled*, *Darkest Before the Dawn* and *Thuglit*. Currently working on his second novel. He lives in Indiana with his beautiful wife and two dogs.



STEVE WEDDLE is a former English professor, Steve Weddle has an MFA in poetry and hates guns. Every Monday, he takes a break from being a complete sissy to blog about crime fiction at [DoSomeDamage](http://DoSomeDamage.com)



DAVE WHITE is the author of two novels: *WHEN ONE MAN DIES* and *THE EVIL THAT MEN DO*. They were published by Three Rivers Press. Both novels were nominated for Shamus Awards.



HILARY DAVIDSON'S first novel, *THE DAMAGE DONE*, will be published by Forge in October 2010. Her story "Anniversary" is included in *A PRISONERY OF MEMORY & 24 OF THE YEAR'S FINEST CRIME & MYSTERY STORIES*, and her "Son of So Many Tears" will be in *Thuglit's* 2010 anthology. When she's not writing about murder and mayhem, she's on the road as a travel writer. Visit her online at www.hilarydavidson.com.

**"A gun
and a
smoke.
Ask for
more,
you're a
greedy
bas-
tard."**

-Houston

PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

Performance Evaluation is a necessary and beneficial process, which provides bi-monthly feedback to investors about job effectiveness and career guidance. The performance review is intended to be a fair and balanced assessment of a subject's performance. To assist supervisors and department heads in conducting performance reviews, the Factory Office has introduced new Performance Review forms and procedures for use in this official periodical.

TOP SHELF

Featured Book

CRIME

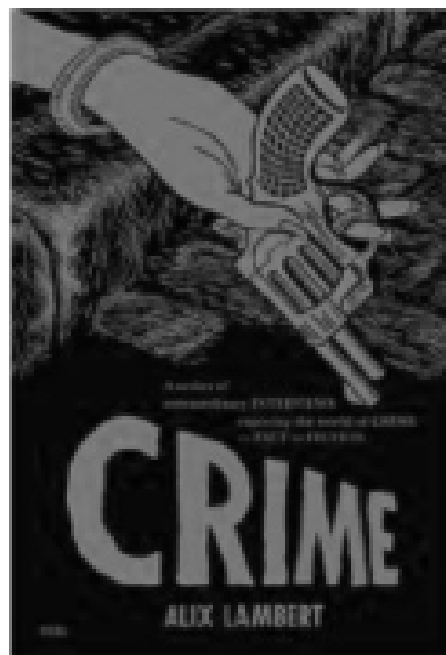
Alix Lambert

Fuel

\$49.95 (US)

Published 2008

With its red-edged pages, old-school layout, gorgeous photography and pulpy EC Comics-styled cover design and logo, Alix Lambert's *Crime* is worth admission price for its sheer handsomeness alone. However, comprised of over fifty interviews with



writers, directors, actors, prisoners, forensic scientists, thugs, ex-cops, bank robbers, victims, murderers and more, *Crime* is the most compelling book I've read in some time. It's also the perfect antidote for much of the crass, exploitative trash that, in my view, seriously mars the True Crime genre.

Lambert's subjects are all remarkably, equally, candid; whether it's David Cronenberg discussing crime as genre, or Russian prisoner Semyon Dyachenko describing how he severed the heads of the gypsies who murdered his mother and stuck them on fence posts, there is a remarkable intimacy on display here. It's seemingly borne from the fact that Lambert, a former *Deadwood* writer, lets her subjects roll, and roll they do, all with a storytelling ease that leaves me wondering where the editing begins and ends.

Lambert, embedded in the nebulous space where real crimes and their artistic contrivances overlap, has produced an out-an-out classic that can be read with an eye towards either challenging your conceptions of the genre we all love so well or simply to read Takeshi Kitano's childhood recollections of the Yakuza and his hatred of Die Hard.

With its eclectic cast in fine form, *Crime* is easily the most readably comprehensive map into the minds of those who do the deed, those who investigate it, those who imagine it being done, and those who recreate it. The headspaces are bumpy, murky terrain, but completely worth the trip. *Crime* is both essential reading and the sexiest tome you'll shelve in a while. Purchase this amazing artifact at your earliest opportunity.

--Cameron Ashley

BOOKS

THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION

Michael Chabon
Harper Perennial
\$15.95 (US)

If you will it, it is no dream.

After the independent state of Israel dissolved in 1948, the Jewish people found new refuge in the frozen wasteland of Alaska. Amongst the snow and the Indians, the Jewish culture strove ahead, as undaunted by this wilderness as it was by the one Moses had them wandering around until they plotzed.

But there's still crime in these streets, and there are still hard-boiled gumshoes willing to work the overtime to close these cases. Meyer Landsman is drunk, divorced, and still a detective, even though the future of the settlement of Sitka remains unclear sixty years after its founding. Then some mug has to go and louse up things for him further by going and getting himself murdered in the fleabag hotel he calls home. Landsman

takes on this case despite the best efforts of his boss, Bina Gelbfish (also the former Mrs. Landsman), and his cousin, Berko Shemets, the hulking half-Jew, half-Tlingit who is also Landsman's partner.

In the tradition of the hard-boiled detective story, the case of the dead schlub leads our hero further and further into the deeper and seamier recesses of urban life, the charcoal-gray are where politics and crime aren't such strange bedfellows. Although Chabon's book has won every science-fiction/alternative history award known to man or beast, make no mistake that this is a crime novel, more hard-boiled than the eggs you get with your lox and bagels. The fact that the Coen brothers are adapting this to film should prove that the story is a terrific blend of snappy dialogue, noir elements, and American Jewish culture. Chabon can be a wordy dude, and that's no lie, but fortunately for him and the rest of us, it simply never gets old.

--Jimmy Callaway

THE GOOD SON

Russel D. McLean

Minotaur Books

\$24.95 (US)

I'm pretty fucking picky when it comes to private eye novels. There's too many traps a writer can fall into when tackling the genre. With his debut novel, *The Good Son*, Russel D. McLean dodges all of them - fucking handily so.

It's the story of Scottish private investigator McNee, an ex-cop widower with enough guilt and self-loathing to give Ken Bruen's Jack Taylor a run for his money. James Robertson, a local farmer who recently discovered his long-estranged brother dead by suicide, asks McNee to look into his brother's past, to help him get some insight into why he would do such a thing. McNee takes on the case to quickly find out that Daniel Robertson had been a nasty hard man down in London for the past three decades, involved with a legendary gangster named Gordon Egg. But McNee's inquiries soon bring on visitors from jolly-old Londontown, the kind that carry guns and like to shoot motherfuckers with them.

What first let me know that

Russel D. McLean was a smart bastard was that McNee initially does what no fucking private eye ever seems to do in novels - he used a fucking phone. Instead of traipsing off to London a million fucking miles away (like any other private eye character since Marlowe would do), McNee makes some calls, figures some shit out from the comfort of his office. Instead of a thousand scenes of McNee going from one shady bar or one shit-hole flat to another at who knows how much of an expense, McNee gets practical about it and just calls up contacts. It may not initially seem like a big thing, but think about it. It's kind of a revelation.

And from there the bad men head north and the bodies start piling up in Dundee, but McLean keeps the plotting simple, not over-stuffing the novel with all kinds of extraneous crap. It becomes clear what happened fairly quickly and instead of wasting our time with red herrings and other boring mystery bullshit, McLean just lays out what we need to know to get us to the final confrontation. When I say this shit is tightly plotted, I'm not fucking exaggerating in the slightest.

But that's not to say that McLean skimps on story,

because while the actual crime plot may be fairly simple, McNee's ground and character arc are very specific and slyly laid out. You see, *The Good Son* is McNee's personal journey first and the case second. The case just ends up being a way that McNee can enact his death wish. He's in so much pain from the death of his wife and his guilt surrounding the event that he just needs to fucking hit someone, and if that leads to his own death, so fucking be it.

And that's another important distinction as well - the reasoning behind McNee's willingness to throw himself into a case that involves people that are strangers to him. Too many private dick novels have their detective get wrapped up in a case, getting shot at and shooting back or whatever, for unclear reasons. You're sitting there reading, and wondering, unless this guy is fucking invincible, why would he risk so much for this person he's just met in the last week? McNee's reasons are complex, disturbing and fresh in a genre that often settles for stale or simply unexplained.

But don't let all my high-minded bullshit-talk scare you off, dear reader. *The Good Son* is smart and innovative but it

delivers all the thrills and violence that you want from a good detective novel. The action sequences are visceral and the dialogue and prose are tight, just as you would hope. It's just that, like in all my favorite crime novels, you're more invested in the arc of the character than whatever unbelievable acrobatics the author can do with a convoluted plot.

To wrap this shit up, *The Good Son* is the rare PI novel that is dark, character-driven, and organically told while also as exciting, fast-paced and violent as any good thriller. It's nice, ennit? Having your cake and eating it too?

-- Nerd of Noir

THE GROVE

John Rector

Amazon Kindle

\$0.99 (US)

The Grove is the story of small family farmer Dexter McCary, a shattered man who is separated from his wife, grieving over the death of his daughter, and slowly drinking himself to death out at his remote farm house. On top of all of his other problems, good old Dex also suffers

from paranoid schizophrenia and occasional blackouts. He's usually fine as long he keeps up on his medication; the major problem is that Dex has let his meds lapse since his wife left.

After one of his blackouts Dex awakens to discover that he's gotten his tractor stuck on a muddy embankment in the middle of his cornfield and while he's attempting to get the machine unstuck, he injures his hand and goes wandering to a grove in the middle of his fields and discovers the body of a young high school girl.

Since Dex suffered from a blackout the previous night, he panics and believes he may have killed the girl for trespassing on his property.

After the discovery of the body, Dexter's broken mind really starts to rev up as he begins to haphazardly investigate the girl's death on the behest of the girl's "ghost" and preserve the rapidly decaying corpse, and to complicated matters, a piece of pure d white trash discovers Dexter's dead girlfriend and decides to lean on our mentally incapacitated protagonist.

The Grove is tightly written pure dose of noir. Rector's writing is as spare and stripped down

in the same tradition as such hard-boiled silver age masters as Goodis and Thompson—with a strong dose of modern country noir influence—the major difference being that Rector creates real rapport between Dexter and the reader. You can't help but feel for Dexter's ten car pile up of a life and the author keeps the emotional tension running high from page one to it's shocking—albeit understated—conclusion.

If you're new to Kindle or one its many platform friendly incarnations, you're going to have a lot of choices on what to download, but make sure to pick up *The Grove* first for a sure fire, fast paced read.

-- Keith Rawson

IN THE HAND OF DANTE

Nick Tosches

Back Bay Books

\$13.95 (US)

Nick Tosches, writing about his first novel, *Cut Numbers*, says the trouble he had in selling the book derived from how it seemed to defy easy categorization: "Was it a crime novel or was it, God forbid, literature?"

Can you imagine how much worse this problem became with the quasi-follow up, *In the Hand of Dante*, wherein Tosches seeks to blend crime, high lit, and non-fiction? Well, you don't really have to imagine, because Nicky the writer tells you all about it.

The simple synopsis of the book is this: the New York mob discovers a first-draft of Dante's *La Divina Commedia* and sets about to acquire it for its own, in its own imitable way. The story shifts back and forth between present day and the early 14th century as Dante struggled with his muse. Tosches is one of those living juxtapositions of a street guy who's also book smart, able to quote Homer as freely as he can Dean Martin, so this double perspective is maintained beautifully, and the only jarring thing about the back-and-forth is how badly it's always been handled before.

But the real star of the show is Tosches himself, even though he may disagree. Known more for his work as a biographer than as a fiction writer, Tosches makes himself a character in the story. Beginning by interspersing his thoughts on diabetes (with which he's been diagnosed), a rant on the sorry state of the publishing industry (worth the

price of admission alone), and a reflection upon the murdered daughter he barely knew, Tosches then begins to interact with his own creations, including the psychopathic Louis of *Cut Numbers*. From there, Tosches effectively mixes the classics with the noir, while defying the reality of the whole enterprise.

In the Hand of Dante defies easy categorization, but if they had a "Better Than You'll Ever Write" section at the bookstore, you'd find this under "T".

--Jimmy Callaway

AMERICAN SALVAGE

Bonnie Jo Campbell

Wayne State University Press

\$19.95 (US)

American Salvage, by Bonnie Jo Campbell has been nominated for a National Book Award, quite a feat for a slim book of short stories published by a university press (Wayne State University). The world Ms. Campbell describes in her stories is as noirish, brutal, true, and as heart-breaking as any collection of crime stories ever published. She portrays this world so convincingly, you never for

a moment step out of the story. She is a master of the small detail:

"Propane tanks reclined like rows of swollen white bellies behind the chain link, e a c h tank emblazoned with the Pur-Gas smiling cat logo, one of the boss's idiotic conceptions—he'd apparently forgotten that "p-u-r" was meant to be pronounced "pure."

Hers is a world of salvage yards, cars, bars, auto shops, trailers, drug-addiction, alcoholism, unemployment: rural southwestern Michigan over the last decade. "The Yard Man" details the attempts of a hapless yard man to hold onto his wife despite their residence in a salvage yard where she feels unsafe from invasions by snakes, bats, and ermines. "The Solutions to Brian's Problems" lists the possible ways, some drastic, the protagonist might deal with his drug-addicted wife. My favorite story in the collection is "THE INVENTOR, 1972". A man, unable to kill a buck as a child, tragically hits a teenage girl with his car. The story ends with a scene from his childhood. During a snowball fight, a friend hollers out to him, "You couldn't hit the side of a barn, man."

Bonnie Jo Campbell is the

author of another collection of stories, *Women & Other Animals*, and a novel, *Q Road*. She is the winner of a Pushcart Prize, the AWP Award for Short Fiction, and the Southern Review's 2008 Eudora Welty Prize for "The Inventor, 1972," which is also included in this collection.

--Patti Abbott

THIS WICKED WORLD

Richard Lange

Little, Brown & Company

\$23.99 (US)

This Wicked World is the story of ex-con turned bartender, Jimmy Boone. Boone is a no nonsense ex-marine and former bodyguard who's trying his best to keep his life simple and nose clean after serving 8 years in prison for assault. But like so many crime novel protagonists, trouble simply has a way of finding Boone no matter how hard he tries to dodge it.

One night, Robo, the bouncer of the bar Boone works at, asks Boone to pose as a police officer in a hero for hire job he's been brought into by the grandfather of a young Guatemalan immigrant who was found dead from infected dog bites on a L.A.

city bus. The pair begins to dig into the case and start questioning the people in the young man's life and learn that he was working out in the desert with animals. After tracking down the boys last know address, Robo abandons the case feeling that he can't go any further with it, but Boone becomes obsessed with the boy's death after buying his toothless pit-bull, Joto, from the boy's former roommates.

As the case further progresses, Boone becomes entrenched in the underground massacre of dogfighting and runs afoul low level—but viciously sociopathic—high desert crime boss, Taggert.

I'll be blunt with my assessment of *This Wicked World*; the novel was one of my favorites from 2009 and Lange is a confidently a writer to watch in the coming years. Lange is an effortless stylist much in the same vein as Scott Wolven and Donald Ray Pollock; his prose is bare bones and makes the surreal environs of L.A. and its surrounding areas as much of a character as Boone and Taggert. No, *This Wicked World* is not a flawless novel by any means (Mostly due to Boone's motivations in pursuing the murder case and a slight plot hole near the end of the novel.) but the author more than makes up for it

with the artistry of his prose.

--Keith Rawson

COMICS

TRASHMAN LIVES!

Spain Rodriguez

Fantagraphics Books

When I first entered my troublesome teen years, I was a big fan of Public Enemy, the militant afrocentric rap group, and thusly channeled a lot of my adolescent rage towards issues of social concern. As I got older, I remained a P.E. fan, but discovered that I hated people, myself very much included. This last mostly because I was, to put it simply, a giant pussy, and I began to notice this self-loathing helping to drive me towards tough-guy fiction, wherein I could live vicariously through guys who smoked a lot and took no shit off anyone.

Spain Rodriguez is the bridge between these two no-man lands. His seminal character of the Trashman is the baddest motherfucker to come down the pike, but not unlike the great blaxploitation heroes of the '70s, he's also out to put a foot up

the Man's ass while simultaneously stealing all his women. Set in the not-too-distant future, the world of the Trashman is overrun by a vaguely defined but overtly threatening corporation/government. The Trashman, agent of the Sixth International, takes to the streets on his chopper, leading the people by offing the pigs. These are very broad strokes, but that's what Spain works well in all around: starkly delineated good or bad guys to root or hiss for, and big bold swatches of the pen with lots of shading. Dark all over.

Though this collection by Fantagraphics is long out of print, it shouldn't be too hard to get your mitts on a copy. I got mine just a month or so ago for about seven bucks on Amazon. Whatever you do, just get your hands on as much of Spain's stuff as you can.

Fight the power.

--Jimmy Callaway

DAYTRIPPER #1 - 2

Gabriel Bá and Fábio Moon

Vertigo Comics

\$2.99 (US)

The national cocktail of Brazil is the *caipirinha*, a delicious

and devastating concoction made with cachaca liquor, sugar, and limes. Similar to the overplayed mojito it is far more potent and magical due to the liquor's pure sugarcane kick. This new comic is something like the caipirinha and unlike anything you've ever encountered. Brainy nerd-warrens will carry it, and if you are writer you will be addicted to the twists in the story instantly.

Enter Brás, an obituary scribe of questionable talent and shambled confidence, hacking through his pointless days wondering what life is all about and all the wrong turns that have brought him to his present circumstances. Through the graphic prism of senseless tragedy and sudden violence we are launched backwards in time into the seemingly dreamy randomness of Brás' life and the lives of those around him. Evocative of the magical realism that swarms through Latin America's long lyrical tradition, think Borges and Cortázar then take a knife to your safety knot and embrace a freefall. All of our lives are but a sliver away from different destinies embraced, betrayed, or possibly even forgotten. Seems this comic will be a finite run of ten issues. Smart and challenging.

-- Kieran Shea

MOVIES

HARRY BROWN

Dir: Daniel Barber

Scrn: Gary Young

Harry Brown, the first film from Matthew Vaughn's production company Marv Films that Vaughn did not direct himself, does its best to be a gritty, hardcore revenge thriller. Daniel Barber, making his feature debut, has style to spare, and uses it to dizzying effect for the first third of the film. The restraint he shows early on as we watch the titular Harry Brown (Michael Caine) go about his daily routine is breath taking; each tiny movement of the camera and every nuance of performance feels soaked with dread. The sound design is exceptional in these sequences, with the non-stop buzz of technology becoming the white noise soundtrack to the existential hell Harry lives in.

As a recent widower, Harry finds himself increasingly disconnected with the world around him, which is dominated by gangs of Youth-Out-Of-Control due to Hard-Drugs. A former marine (which is revealed through

some clunky exposition), Harry hasn't killed for a long time, and doesn't have the need to, until his only friend in the world is brutally murdered by a Gang-Of-Hoodlums. And then Harry Goes-Old-School-On-Them.

If it sounds a bit clichéd and tired, that's because it is.

It is, however, wonderful to see Michael Caine reignite his former bad-ass and seamlessly merge it with his current dignified gentleman persona. Honestly, he is the best thing about the film.

Throughout its runtime *Harry Brown* seems so desperate to show how horrible these kids are that it loses itself in a sea of grotesque caricatures that neither resonate, nor feel authentic. Which would be fine if the film weren't so dour and puffed about the whole affair. In the end it feels like you've spent two hours having someone hopelessly out of touch try to prove to you how Edgy they are. In one unfortunate scene Harry visits a drug dealer's house, and the film feels like an unintended homage to *Reefer Madness*.

That's not to say that the film is terrible. It is wonderfully paced, beautifully designed and

shot, and terrifically acted. But the screenplay is, unfortunately, muddled, illogical and, too often, painfully stupid. Which is too bad, considering it has so many wonderful scenes hidden between those. It's one of those movies that has so much going for it, yet misses its mark, making it more frustrating to watch than an out and out failure.

--Liam José

PONTYPOOL

Dir: Bruce MacDonald

Scrn: Tony Burgess

Pontypool is the name of a village in Ontario. It has a food store, a Chinese restaurant, a community center, a church, a post office, and in the film bearing its name, a radio station. It's the kind of place that requires inner resources to get through the cold, bleak gray winter.

In the film *Pontypool*, an extremely low-budget film directed by Bruce MacDonald and written by Tony Burgess (based on his book), a new shock jock, Grant

Mazzy (Stephen McHattie) comes to town as nighttime host of Pontypool's radio station. He and a female producer, Sydney, (Lisa Houle) and a young technician, Laurel Ann (Georgina Reilly) are on the air when they begin to get news of a disturbing nature. Bloody violent incidents are popping up in town, many of them reported by the station's reporter in his so-called Sunshine Chopper, which turns out to be a Dodge Dart parked on the highest hill.

As the incidents move closer to the radio station, a doctor joins the group of three and they try to sort things out, finally reasoning the zombie-like behavior has its origins in speech. (Director MacDonald in an interview claimed the townspeople were not "zombies" but "conversationalists.") The disease begins with an inability to repeat a word and quickly morphs into the desire to chew on the mouth of an uninfected person. The station's four-some meet the challenge of the entire population's hunt for them with varying degrees of success, especially after the military enters the fray.

An interesting aspect of the movie is what it says about language. Our hero makes his living with language and language

is both the source of the virus and the means of escape from it. Also in play is the claustrophobic nature of living in an isolated town, of being holed up in a tiny radio station in a blizzard, where the frenzy is as close to you as the nearest door. This was an interesting little film. The horror will not overwhelm you but its ideas about the nature of language may.

--Patti Abbott

**BAD LIEUTENANT: PORT OF CALL
NEW ORLEANS**

Dir: Werner Herzog

Scrn: William M. Finkelstein

There's no way around it – this is a bizarre movie.

Promoted and titled in reference to Abel Ferrara's 1992 film *Bad Lieutenant*, this film is neither a sequel nor a remake, but more like an odd relative.

Unlike the earlier film, this one is a lot of fun. Nicolas Cage stars as a Lieutenant in post-hurricane New Orleans, whose constant back-pain causes him to spiral into substance abuse. And we're taken along for the

– surprisingly – wacky ride.

Director Herzog blends a straightforward police procedural with the wildcard of Nicolas Cage and a go-for-broke directing style. And the results are ambiguous. The movie is nearly critic-proof. It functions as a self-reflexive parody of other movies of its ilk, and, oddly, of itself. Cage and Herzog both seem aware of the baggage they carry – Cage as the bug-eyed idiot-savant from the *Wicker Man* remake, and Herzog as the scary bullet-resistant, shoe-eating 'European'.

The movie seems prepared to counter any problems someone might level at it ("You think the camera work is boring? Fuck you – I'm going to film from the perspective of hallucinated iguanas!") Herzog has made a film that doesn't fit comfortably within any particular genre – it is comedic without being a comedy; it is dramatic without being a drama; it is thrilling without being... well, you get the point.

Herzog treats the US crime film as a nature documentary – not just by frequently filming animals, and bringing to the forefront their more terrifying elements (the alien, terrifying and unfeeling side of nature)

but by treating the humans no differently. Herzog's clinical eye mutes the drama of the over-the-top elements, and makes the more unpalatable moments hilarious.

Cage's performance channels his recent hammy work and twists it into something rather brilliant. The supporting cast is fantastic, but sadly underutilized. Val Kilmer in particular seems wasted — it's as though he gave a great performance that they just kept forgetting to film.

And while it would be nice to think that Herzog hit all the notes he was aiming for, it doesn't seem to be the case. The film's inconsistency produces a lot of its energy, but also jars with some of the more conventional elements. Herzog seems to clash with the script as often as he's inspired by it.

The end result is a tremendously good time that while flawed, always entertains.

-- Liam José



**“Time
to go.”**

-Bruen

