Fiction

# Jane Doe #112

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Shadows of lives unlived, as milky as opal glass, moved through the French Quarter that night. And one begged leave, and separated from the group to see an old friend.

Bourbon Street was only minimally less chaotic than usual. It was two days till the Spring Break deluge of horny fraternity boys and young women seemingly unable to keep their t-shirts on.

The queue outside Chris Owens's club moved swiftly for the last show. Inside, the entertainer was just starting the third chorus of “Rescue Me” when she looked out into the audience and saw the pale shadow of a face she hadn't seen in twenty years.

For a moment she faltered, but no one noticed. She had been a star on Bourbon Street for twenty years; they wouldn't know that

the face staring up palely at her was that of a woman who had been dead for two decades.

Doris Burton sat in the smoky center of a cheering mob half-smashed on Hurricanes; and she stared up at Chris Owens with eyes as quietly gray and distant as the surface of the moon. The last time Chris had seen those eyes, they had been looking out of a newspaper article about the car crash over in Haskell County, when Doris had been killed.

Her parents wouldn't let her go over to the funeral. It was a piece of Texas distance, from Jones County over to Haskell. She had never forgotten Doris, and she had always felt guilty that she'd never gotten to say goodbye.

Now she felt the past worming its way into her present. It couldn't possibly be. She danced to the edge of the stage and looked directly at her. It *was* Doris. As she had been twenty years ago.

The woman in the audience was almost transparent in the bleed of light from the baby spots and pinlights washing Chris as she worked. Trying to keep up with the beat, Chris could swear she

could see the table full of Kiwanis behind Doris. It threw her off ... but no one would notice.

Doris moved her lips. *Hello, Chris.*

Then she smiled. That same gentle smile of an awkward young woman that had first bound them together as friends.

Chris felt her heart squeeze, and tears threatened to run her makeup. She fought back the sorrow, and smiled at her dead friend. Then Doris rose, made a tiny goodbye movement with her left hand, and left the club.

Chris Owens did not disappoint her audience that night. She never disappointed them. But she was only working at half the energy. Even so, they would never know.

That night, the Orleans Parish Morgue logged in its one hundred and twelfth unknown female subject. The toe was tagged JANE DOE #112 and she was laid on the cold tile floor in the hallway. As usual, the refrigerators were full.

* * * *

Ben Laborde took his foot off the accelerator as he barreled north on the I-10 past St. Charles Parish, and kicked the goddammed air conditioner one last time. It was dead. The mechanism on the ’78 Corollas had been lemons when they were fresh off the showroom floor, and twelve years of inept service had not bettered the condition. Now it had given out totally; and Ben could feel the sweat beginning to form a *tsunami* at his hairline. He cranked down the window and was rewarded with a blast of mugginess off the elevated expressway that made him blink and painfully exhale hot breath. Off to his left the Bonnet Carré Spillway—actually seventeen miles of fetid swamp with a name far too high above its station—stretched behind him as an appropriate farewell to New Orleans, to Louisiana, to twenty-two years of an existence he was now in the process of chucking. The blue Toyota gathered speed again as he punched the

accelerator, and he thought, *So long, N'wallins; I give you back to the 'gators*.

Somewhere north lay Chicago, and a fresh start.

When he thought back across the years, when he paused to contemplate how fast and how complexly he had lived, he sometimes thought he had been through half a dozen different existences. Half a dozen different lives, as memorable and filled with events as might have been endured by a basketball team with one extra guy waiting on the bench.

Now he was chucking it all. Again. For the half-dozenth time in his forty-one years.

Ben Laborde had run off when he was ten, had worked the crops across the bread basket of America, had schooled himself, had run with gangs of itinerant farm laborers, had gone into the army at nineteen, had become an MP, had mustered out and been accepted

to the FBI, had packed that in after four years and become a harness bull in the St. Bernard Parish Sheriff's Department, had been promoted to Detective, and had had his tin pulled two years ago for throwing a pimp through the show window of an antique shop on Rue Toulouse. The pimp had been on the muscle with someone in the Department, and that was that for Detective Benjamin Paul Laborde.

He had become a repairman for ATMs, but two years fixing the bank teller machines had driven him most of the way into total craziness. And then, there was that group of pale gray people that kept following him...

He looked in the rearview. The expressway was nearly empty behind him. If he was being tracked, they had to be very good; and very far behind him. But the thought had impinged, and he cranked up the speed.

There had been six of them for the last year. Six men and women, as pale as the juice at the bottom of a bucket of steamed clams. But when he had seen them out of the corner of his eye the night before last, moving through the crowd on Bourbon Street, there had only been five.

He couldn't understand why he was so frightened of them.

He had thought more than once, more than a hundred times in the past year, that he should simply step into a doorway, wait for them to catch up, then brace them. But every time he started to do just that ... the fear grabbed him.

So he had decided to chuck it all. Again. And go.

He wasn't at all certain if not having the Police Positive on his hip made any difference.

The nagging thought kept chewing on him: would a bullet stop them?

He ran, but the Corolla didn't have anything more to give. He thought grimly, *even if I could go ten times as fast it probably wouldn't be fast enough*.

* * * *

Chicago was dark. Perhaps a brownout. The city lay around him as ugly and desperate as he felt. The trip north had been uneventful, but nonetheless dismaying. Stopping only briefly for food and gas, he had driven straight through. Now he had to find a place to live, a new job of some menial sort till he could get his hooks set, and then ... perhaps ... he could decide what he wanted to be when he grew up.

As best he could discern, he hadn't been followed. (Yet when he had pulled in at a bar in Bloomington, Indiana, and had been sitting there nursing the Cutty and water, he had seen, in the backbar

mirror, the street outside. And for a moment, five sickly white faces peering in at him.)

(But when he had swiveled for a direct look, only the empty street lay beyond the window. He had paid up and left quickly.)

Laborde had never spent much time in Chicago. He barely knew the city. A few nights around Rush Street, some drinking with buddies in an apartment in a debutante's condo facing out on the Shore Drive, dinner one night in Old Town. But he had the sense that staying in the center of the city was not smart. He didn't know why, but he felt the push to keep going; and he did. Out the other side and into Evanston.

It was quieter here. Northwestern University, old homes lining Dempster Street, the headquarters of The Women's Christian Temperance Union. Maybe he'd take night courses. Get a job in a

printing plant. Sell cars. Plenty of action and danger in those choices.

He drove through to Skokie and found a rooming house. It had been years since he'd stayed in a rooming house. Motels, that was the story now. Had been for forty years. He tried to remember where he'd last lived, in which town, in which life, that had provided rooming houses. He couldn't recall. Any more than he could recall when he'd owned a Studebaker Commander, the car that Raymond Loewy had designed. Or the last time he had heard The Green Hornet on the radio.

He was putting his underwear in the bureau drawer as these thoughts wafted through his mind. Studebaker? The Green Hornet? That was over when he'd been a kid. He was forty-one, not sixty. How the hell did he remember that stuff?

He heard footsteps in the hall. They weren't the halting steps of the woman who owned the hostel. She had been happy to get a boarder. But not even a need to accommodate her new tenant could have eliminated the arthritic pace she had set as she climbed the stairs ahead of him.

He stood with his hands on the drawer, listening.

The footsteps neared, then stopped outside his door. There was no lock on the door. It was a rooming house, not a motel. No chain, no double-latch, no security bolt. It was an old wooden door, and all the person on the other side had to do was turn the knob and enter.

He barely heard the tapping.

It was the rapping at a portal of something composed of mist and soft winds.

Laborde felt a sharp pain as he realized he had been clenching his teeth. His jaw muscles were rigid. His face hurt. Whatever he wanted to do, it was not to go over and open that door to the visitor.

He watched, without breathing, as the knob slowly turned, and the door opened, a sliver of light at a time.

The door opened of its own weight after a moment, and Laborde saw a woman standing in the dimly-lit hallway. She looked as if she were made of isinglass. He could see through her, see the hallway through her dim, pale shape. She stared at him with eyes the color of an infirmary nurse's uniform.

Isinglass? How could he remember something like that? They had used isinglass before they'd started putting real glass in car windows.

The woman said, “Jessie passed through in New Orleans. She was the oldest of us. She was the one wanted to find you the most.”

His mouth was dry. His hands, still on the dresser drawer, were trembling.

“I don't know any Jessie,” he said. The voice seemed to belong to someone else, someone far away on a mountainside, speaking into the wind.

“You knew her.”

“No, I never, I've *never* known anyone named Jessie.”

“You knew her better than anyone. Better than her mother or her father or any of us who traveled with her. You knew the best part of her. But she never got to tell you that.”

He managed to close the drawer on his underwear. He found it *very* important, somehow, just to be able to close the drawer.

“I think you'd better let the landlady know you're here,” he said, feeling ridiculous. How she had gotten in, he didn't know. Perhaps

the old woman had let her in. Perhaps she had asked for him by name. How could she know his name?

She didn't answer. He had the awful desire to go to the door and *touch* her. It was continuing strange, the way the light shone through her. Not as if there were kliegs set off in the distance, with radiance projected toward her, but rather, as if she were generating light from within. But what he saw as he looked at her, in that plain, shapeless dress, her hair hanging limp and milky around her shoulders, was a human being made of tracing paper, the image of the drawing behind shadowing through. He took a step toward her, hoping she would move.

She stood her ground, unblinking.

“Why have you been following me, all of you ... there are six of you, aren't there?”

“No,” she said, softly, “now there are only five. Jessie passed through.” She paused, seemed to gather strength to speak, and added, “Very soon now, we'll *all* pass through. And then you'll be alone.”

He felt an instant spike of anger. “I've *always* been alone!”

She shook her head. “You stole from us, but you've never been without us.”

He touched her. He reached out and laid his fingertips on her cheek. She was cool to the touch, like a china bowl. But she was real, substantial. He had been thinking ghost, but that was ridiculous; he'd *known* it was ridiculous all along. From the first time he had seen them following him in New Orleans. Passersby had bumped into them, had acknowledged their existence, had moved aside for them. They weren't ghosts, whatever they were. And

whatever it was, he was terrified of them ... even though he knew they would not harm him. And, yes, a bullet would have done them.

“I'm leaving. Get out of my way.”

“Aren't you curious?”

“Not enough to let you keep making me crazy. I'm going out of here, and you'd better not try to stop me.”

She looked at him sadly; as a child looks at the last day of summer; as the sun goes down; as the street lights come on before bedtime; one beat before it all ends and the fun days retreat into memory. He thought that, in just that way, as she looked at him. It was the ending of a cycle, but he had no idea how that could be, or what cycle was done.

He moved a step closer to her. She stood in the doorway and did not move. “Get out of my way.”

“I haven't the strength to stop you. You know that.”

He pushed her, and she went back. He kept his hand on her sternum, pressing her back into the hall. She offered no resistance. It was like touching cool eggshell.

“This time you leave even your clothes behind?” she asked.

“This time I shake you clowns,” he said, going down the hall, descending the stairs, opening the curtained front door, stepping out into the Illinois night, and seeing his car parked across the street. Surrounded by the other four.

As fragile as whispers, leaning against the car. Waiting for him.

*Oh, Christ*, he thought, *this isn't happening*.

“What the hell do you *want* off me?” he screamed. They said nothing, just watched. Three men and another woman. He could see the dark outline of his car through them.

He turned right and began running. He wasn't afraid, he was just frightened. It wasn't terror, it was only fear.

Abandon the underwear in the drawer. Lose the past life. Jettison the car. Get out of this existence. Forget the deposit on the room. Run away. Just ... run away.

When he reached the end of the block, he saw the lights of a mini-mall. He rushed toward the light. Dark things have no shadows in sodium vapor lights.

Behind him, the milky figure of the fifth one emerged from the rooming house and joined her traveling companions.

* * * *

They caught up with him only three times in the next year. The first time in Cleveland. There were four of them. Three months later, he stepped off a Greyhound Scenicruiser at the Port Authority Terminal in Manhattan, and they were coming up the escalator to

meet the bus. Two of them, a man and the woman who had confronted him in the rooming house in Skokie.

And finally, he came full circle. He went home.

Not to Chicago, not to New Orleans, not as far back as he could remember, but as far back as he had come. Seven miles south of Cedar Falls, Iowa—on the thin road out of Waterloo—back to Hudson. And it hadn't changed. Flat cornfield land, late in September after the oppressive heat had passed, into the time of jackets and zipping up.

Where his house had stood, now there was a weed-overgrown basement into which the upper floors had fallen as the fire had burned itself out. One wall remained, the salt box slats gray and weathered.

He sat down on what had been the stone steps leading up to the front porch, and he laid down the cheap plastic shoulder bag that

now contained all he owned in the world. And it was there that the last two of those who had dogged him came to have their talk.

He saw them coming down the dirt road between the fields of freshly-harvested corn, the stalks creaking in the breeze, and he gave it up. Packed it in. No more getting in the flow, chasing the wind. No more. He sat and watched them coming up the road, tiny puffs of dust at each step. The day was on the wane, and he could see clouds through them, the horizon line, birds reaching for more sky.

They came up and stood staring at him, and he said, “Sit down, take a load off.”

The man seemed to be a hundred years old. He smiled at Ben Laborde and said, “Thanks. It's been a hard trip.” He slumped onto the stone step below. He wiped his forehead, but he wasn't perspiring.

The woman stood in front of him, and her expression was neither kind nor hard. It was simply the face of someone who had been traveling a long time, and was relieved to have reached her destination.

“Who are you?”

The woman looked at the old man and said, “We were never a high school girl named Doris Burton, who was supposed to've died in a car accident in West Texas, but didn't. We were never an asthmatic named Milford Sterbank, who worked for fifty years as a reweaver. And we never got to be Henry Cheatham, who drove a cab in Pittsburgh.”

He watched them, looking from the man to the woman, and back. “And which ones are you?”

The woman looked away for a moment. Laborde saw the setting sun through her chest. She said, “I would have been Barbara Lamartini. You passed through St. Louis in 1943.”

“I was born in ’49.”

The old man shook his head. “Much earlier. If you hadn't fought with the 2nd Division at Belleau Wood, I would have been Howard Strausser. We shared a trench for five minutes, June 1st, 1918.”

“This is crazy.”

“No,” the woman said wearily, “this is just the end of it.”

“The end of what?”

“The end of the last of us whose lives you've been using. The last soft gray man or woman left on a doorstep by your passing.”

Laborde shook his head. It was gibberish. He knew he was at final moments with them, but what it all meant he could not fathom.

“For godsakes,” he pleaded, “hasn't this gone on long enough? Haven't you sent me running long enough? What the hell have I ever done to you ... any of you? I don't even know you!”

The old man, Howard Strausser, smiled sadly and said, “You never meant to be a thief. It isn't your fault, any more than it's our fault for finally coming after you, to get our lives back. But you did, you stole, and you left us behind. We've been husks. I'm the oldest left. Barbara is somewhere in the middle. You've been doing it for several hundred years, best we've been able to tell. When we found one another, there was a man who said he'd been panning gold at Sutter's Mill when you came by. I don't know as I believe him; his name was Chickie Moldanado, and he was something of a liar. It was the only memorable thing about him.”

The woman added, “There's nothing much memorable about any of us.”

“That's the key, do you see?” Howard Strausser said.

“No, I *don't* see,” Laborde said.

“We were never *any*thing. None of us.”

Laborde let his hands move helplessly in the air in front of them. “I don't know what any of this means. I just know I'm tired of ... not of running ... tired of, just, I don't know, tired of being *me*.”

“You've never been you.” Howard Strausser smiled kindly.

“Perhaps you can be you now,” Barbara Lamartini said.

Laborde put his hands over his face. “Can't you just tell it simply? Please, for godsakes, just *simply*.”

The woman nodded to the old man, who looked to be a hundred years old, and he said, “There are just some people who live life more fully than others. Take, oh, I don't know, take Scott Fitzgerald or Hemingway or Winston Churchill or Amelia Earhart. Everybody's heard their names, but how many people have read much

Hemingway or Fitzgerald, or even Churchill's—" He stopped. The woman was giving him that look. He grinned sheepishly.

"There are just some people who *live* their lives at a fuller pace. And it's as if they've lived two or three lifetimes in the same time it takes others to get through just one mild, meager, colorless life, one sad and sorry—"

He stopped again.

"Barbara, you'd better do it. I've waited too long. I'm just running off at the mouth like an old fart."

She put a hand on his thin shoulder to comfort him, and said, "You were one of the passionate ones. You lived at a hotter level. And every now and then, every once in a while, you just leached off someone's life who wasn't up to the living of it. You're a magpie. You came by, whenever it was, 1492, 1756, 1889, 1943 ... we don't know how far back you go ... but you passed by, and someone was

wearing a life so loosely, so unused, that it just came off; and you wore it away, and added it on, and you just kept going, which way it didn't matter, without looking back, not even knowing.

“And finally, the last of us followed the thread that was never broken, the umbilicus of each of us, and we came and found you, to try and get back what was left.”

“Because it's clear,” said Howard Strausser, “that you're tired of it. And don't know how to get out of it. But—”

They sighed almost as one, and Barbara Lamartini said, “There isn't enough of either of us left to take back. We'll be gone, passed through very soon.”

“Then you're on your own,” Howard Strausser said.

“You'll be living what portion has been allotted to you,” the woman said, and he could see through the holes where her milky eyes had been.

And they sat there into the deepening twilight, in Hudson, Iowa; and they talked; and there was nothing he could do for them; and finally, the woman said, “We don't blame you. It was our own damned fault. We just weren't up to the doing of it, the living of our own lives.” What was left of her shrugged, and Laborde asked her to tell him all she could of the others they had known, so he could try to remember them and fit to their memories the parts of his own life that he had taken.

And by midnight, he was sitting there alone.

And he fell asleep, arms wrapped around himself, in the chilly September night, knowing that when he arose the next day, the first day of a fresh life, he would retrace his steps in many ways; and that one of the things he would do would be to return to New Orleans.

To go to the Parish Coroner, and to have exhumed the body of JANE DOE #112; to have it dug out of the black loam of Potter's Field near City Park and to carry it back to West Texas; to bury the child who had never been allowed to be Doris Burton where she would have lived her life. Pale as opal glass, she had passed through and whispered away, on the last night of the poor thing that had been her existence; seeking out the only friend she had been allowed to have, on a noisy street in the French Quarter.

The least he could do was to be her last friend, to carry her home; by way of cheap restitution.

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