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We found the poor old guy lying in garbage and quite a lot of his own blood in the alley next to the Midnight Mission. His shoes had been stolen—no way of knowing if he'd been wearing socks—and whatever had been in the empty, dirty paper bag he was clutching. But his fingernails were immaculate, and he had no beard stubble. Maybe sixty, maybe older. No way of telling at a cold appraisal.

There were three young women down on their knees, weeping and flailing toward the darkening sky. It was going to rain, a brick-mean rain. Bag ladies in an alley like that, yeah, no big surprise ... but these weren't gap-toothed old scraggy harridans. I recognized two of them from commercials; I think the precise term is *supermodel*. Their voices outshone the traffic hissing past the alley mouth. They were obviously very broken up at the demise of this old bum.

We strung the yellow tape; and we started assembling whatever was going to pass for witnesses; and then, without any further notice, the sky ruptured and in an instant we were all drenched. The old man's blood sluiced away in seconds, and the alley was that slick, pretty, shiny black again. So much for ambient clues.

We moved inside.

The smell of Lysol and sour mash was charming. I remember once, when I was a little kid, I shinnied up an old maple tree and found a bird nest that had recently been occupied by, I don't know, maybe robins, maybe crows, or something, and it had a smell that was both nasty and disturbing. The inside of the room they let us use for our interrogation smelled not much the same, but it had the same two qualities: nasty, and unsettling.

“Lieutenant,” one of the uniforms said, behind me; and I turned and answered, “Yeah?” Not the way I usually speak, but this was about as weird a venue, as troubling a set of circumstances as any I'd handled since I'd been promoted to Homicide. “Uh, excuse me, Lieutenant, but what do you want us to do with these three ladies?”

I looked over at them, huddling near the door, and for a moment I hated them. They were taller than I, they were prettier than I, they were certainly wealthier than I, they had no hips and their asses were smaller than mine, and they dressed a lot better. I won't compare cup size: at least I had them beat in that capacity.

“Keep them from talking to each other, but be easy with ‘em. I think they're famous, and we've got enough problems in the Department this week.” I was talking, of course, about the serial hooker-slayer who had been leaving bits of unrecognizable meat all over town for the preceding six months. Then I went to work. Bird nest smell. Not nice.

* * * *

The first half dozen were either too wetbrain or demented even to grasp what I was asking them. Clearly, none of them had been out in that alley. But someone *had* been; the old man probably didn't cut his own throat. I'd say definitely, not even possibly.

The first bit of remark that bore any relation to a lead was the ramble of a guy in his thirties, broke-down like the rest of them, but apparently not as long in the life as his peers. He had been an aerospace worker, laid off at Boeing a few years earlier in one of the periodic “downsizing” ploys.

His name was Richard. He mumbled his last name and I wrote it on my pad, but I paid less attention than I might've, had he been a real suspect, when he said, “Wull, I seen the green light.”

“Green light?”

“Richard. Muh name's Richard.”

“Yeah, I got that part. You said ‘a green light.’”

“Uh-huh. It was a light, out there, with him, y'know, the dead guy?”

I said, yeah, I know the dead guy. “And there was this light. And it was green.”

“Uh-huh.”

I contemplated a career in orthodonture, as I was already pulling teeth. “Well, look, Richard, you can be of great help to us in solving this murder, if you could just tell me *exactly* what you saw. Out there. In the alley. The green light. Okay?”

He nodded, the poor sonofabitch; and I confess I felt my heart go out to him. He actually was doing the

best he could, and I didn't want to push him any more fiercely than common decency would permit. It is probably toasty warm inclinations of a similar sort that will forever block me from becoming one of the Bosses. Oh, well, Lieutenant is a perfectly decent rank to die with.

"I wuz, er, uh..." I read embarrassment.

"Go ahead, Richard, just tell me. Don't be embarrassed."

"Wull, I wuz takin' a leak out back. Around the corner in the alley, but back around the corner, y'know? Back behind where the dumpsters are. An' I wasn't watchin' nothin' else but my own business, an' I heard these girls singing and laughin', and I wuz 'fraid they might come over 'round the back corner an' see me wit' my di ... with my pants unzipped..."

"The green light, Richard? Remember: the green light?"

"Uh-huh, I wuz gettin' to that. I zipped up so fast I kinda wet myself, an' I turned around to the back over there, an' all of a sudden there was this green light, big green light, an' I heard the girls screamin' and there was some kinda music, I guess it wuz, an' then allmigawd it was really loud, the girls' screamin', an' I ducked outta there, and went around the dumpsters onna other side, and went over to the fence an' crawled over and come back to the Mission, b'cuz I din't want to get involved, cuz..."

He stopped talking. I had dropped my pencil. I bent to pick it up where it had rolled, next to his right foot. I saw his shoes. When I straightened, I looked him in the eye and said, "But you went out there afterward, didn't you, Richard?"

"Nuh- uh!" He shook his head violently, but I was looking him right in the eye.

"Before the police came, you went out again, didn't you, Richard?"

His lower lip started to tremble. I felt sorry as hell for the poor slob. He was somebody's son, somebody's brother, maybe even somebody's husband, once upon a layoff; and he was soaked to the skin with cheap wine; and he was scared.

"C'mon, Richard ... I *know* you went back, so you might as well tell me what else you remember."

He murmured something so softly, and with such embarrassment, that I had to ask him gently to repeat: "I found the big knife."

"And you took it?"

"Yes'm."

"When you took his shoes?"

"Yes'm."

"And anything else?"

"No'mum. I'm sorry."

"That's all right, Richard. Now I want you to go and get me the big knife, and bring it right straight back

to this room, and give it to me. I'll have one of the officers go with you.”

“Yes'm.”

I called for Napoli, and told him to take Richard out to the common room, to retrieve “the big knife.” As they started for the door of the smelly little room, Richard turned back to me and started to say, “You gonna take...”

And I stopped him. “No, Richard, no I'm not going to take back those nice shiny new shoes. They look very comfortable, and they're yours. In exchange for the big knife.”

He smiled weakly, like a child who knows he's done wrong, is truly abject about it, but is grateful for being let off with just a reprimand.

When he came back, Napoli was carrying “the big knife.” I'd expected a grav-knife or a butterfly, something street standard. This was a rusty machete. A big, wide-bladed, cut-down-the-sugar-cane machete. The blood that was dried on the blade, all the way up to the handle, was—for certain—some of the same that had been, until recently, billeted in the carotid artery of that old man.

I took the machete gingerly. Napoli had tied a string around the base of the haft, to preserve Richard's—and any others'—prints. I lowered the killing weapon to the table using only the string noose. Then I went back to questioning Richard.

He'd thought he could sell it for some sneaky pete. That's all there was to it. The shoes, because he needed them; and the knife, because it had been left lying there next to the body.

He tried to tell me the story a dozen different ways, but it was always the same. Taking a leak, seeing the green light, running away, coming back and taking the old man's shoes (and socks, as it turned out), swiping the machete while the three women bawled and screamed.

And he went on. For some long while. I gave him a five dollar bill, and told him to get a good dinner over at The Pantry. I'm not ready for this line of work. It's only eleven years; I'm not ready.

* * * *

Days or weeks or millennia later, or maybe it only seemed as quick as that, I was back at the Precinct. I turned the big knife over to Forensics. My feet hurt, and there was a patina of Post-Its all over my desk ... and faxes ... and memos enough to choke a Coke machine. But the only urgent one was from the M.E. So I handed all the others off to Napoli, and told him to get them squared away, while I went downtown and had a chat with dear Old Doc Death, our coroner. The Boss saw me heading out, and he put those two fingers in his mouth and whistled me to a halt, and yelled across the squadroom, “Have you eaten?”

“Since what time?” I answered.

“Since ever. Go get some dinner.”

“I got to go downtown to see Dear Old Doc Death.”

“Jacobs,” he said, without room for argument, “do as I tell you.” I said, yessir, and I went to The Pantry and had a T-bone. Richard of the green light was there, having a meal. He looked happy in his new shoes. I felt a lot better about the universe after that. In your heart of hearts, you think a Richard kind of

rummy is going to stoke up on some sweet Lucy or a tankard of muscatel, and so you just don't dip into the wallet for somebody like that. But every once in a while they fool you. This Richard was eating well, so I told the guy behind the cash register not to take his money, that I was paying for it, and Richard could maybe have a second meal, or buy a hat, or get a life. It was easier, after that, to go downtown.

* * * *

“Not only has his throat been cut literally from ear to ear practically excising his head from his neck, not only was the rip strong and deep enough to sever the carotid, the jugular *and* the trachea—we're talking someone with heavy-duty *power*!—but I put his age at something over a hundred, maybe a hundred and two, a hundred and ten, maybe a hundred fifty, there's no way of judging something like this, I've never seen anything like it in all my years; but I have to *tell* you that this one-hundred-and-two-year-old corpse, this old man lying here all blue and empty, this old man ... is pregnant.”

Dear Old Doc Death had hair growing out of his ears. He had a gimp on his starboard side. He did tend to drool and spit a mite when he was deep in conversation or silent communication with (I supposed) the spirits of the departed. But he was an award-winning sawbones. He could smell decay before the milk went sour, before the rot started to manifest itself. If he said this headless horseman was over a hundred years old, I might wrinkle my brow—and have to lave myself with vitamin E moisturizer later that night—but I'd make book he was dead on. Not a good choice of phrase, dead on. Right. I'd bet he was right. Correct.

“What're we talking here, Doc, some kind of artificial insemination?”

He shook his head. “No, not that easy.” He breathed heavily, as if he didn't want to move forward with the story. But I caught a whiff of dinner-breath, anyway. Then he spoke very softly, sort of motioning me in closer. Fettucine Alfredo. “Look, Francine, I've been at this forever. But with all I've seen, all I've known of the variety of the human condition ... never anything like this. The man has two complete sets of internal organs. Two hearts. Two livers, kidneys, alimentary canals, sixteen sinuses, two complete nervous systems—interlocked and twisting around each other like some insane roller coasters—and one of those sets is female, and the other is male. What we have here is—”

“Hermaphrodite?”

“*No*, goddamit!” He actually snapped at me. “Not some freak of nature, not some flunked transvestism exercise. What I'm describing to you, Francine, is two complete bodies jammed neatly and working well into one carcass. And the woman in there is about three months gone with child. I'd say it would have been a perfectly normal—but how am I to know, really—a perfectly normal little girl. Now, all three of them are dead.”

We talked for a lot longer. It never got any clearer. It never got any easier to believe. If it had come from anyone but Dear Old Doc Death, I'd've had the teller of the tale wrapped in the big Band-Aid. But who could doubt a man with that much moss coming out of his earholes?

* * * *

One of the supermodels was Hypatia. Like Iman or Paulina or Vendela. One name. Maybe before the advent of blusher she was something additional, something Polish or Trinidadian, but to eyes that rested on glossy pages of fashion magazines, she was one name. Hypatia.

Candor: I wanted to kill her. No one of the same sex is supposed to look that good after wallowing in an alley, on her knees, in the rain and garbage, amid blood and failure.

“Care to tell me about it?”

She stared back at me across a vast, windy emptiness. I sighed softly. Just once, lord, I thought, just once give me Edna St. Vincent Millay to interrogate, and not Betty Boop.

“I don't know what you mean,” she said. Gently. I almost believed she didn't have a clue.

“Well, how about this for a place to begin: you are a pretty famous celebrity, make many hundreds of thousands of dollars just to smile at a camera for a few hours, and you're wearing a Halston suit I'd price at maybe six-five or seven thousand dollars. And you were on Skid Row, outside the Midnight Mission—where the name Donna Karan has never been spoken—kneeling in a pool of blood spilled by an old, old man, and you're crying as if you'd lost your one great love.”

“I did.”

* * * *

The other two were equally as helpful. Camilla DelFerro was brave, but barely coherent. She was so wacked, she kept mixing her genders, sometimes calling him “her.” Angie Rose just kept bawling. They were no help. They just kept claiming they'd loved the old guy, that they couldn't go on without him, and that if they could be permitted, if it wasn't an inconvenience, they would all three like to be buried with him. Dead or alive, our option. Wacked; we're talking wacked here.

And they mentioned, in passing, the green light.

Don't ask.

When I turned in my prelim, the Boss gave me one of his looks. Not the one that suggests you're about to be recycled, or the one that says it's all over for you ... the one that says if I had a single wish, it would be that you hadn't put these pages in front of me. He sighed, shoved back his chair, and took off his glasses, rubbing those two red spots on the wings of his nose where the frames pinched. “No one saw anything else? No one with a grudge, a score to settle, a fight over a bottle of wine, a pedestrian pissed off the old guy tried to brace him for loose change?”

I spread my hands. “You've got it there, all of it. The women are of no earthly help. They just keep saying they loved him, and that they can't live without him. In fact, we've got two of them on suicide watch. They might just *not* want to live without him. Boss, I'm at a total loss on this one.”

He shoved back from the desk, slid down the chair till his upper weight was resting on his coccyx, and stared at me.

“What?”

He waggled his head, as if to say *nothing, nothing at all*. He reached out an enormous catcher's mitt of a hand and tore a little square off his notepad, wadded it, and began to chew it. Never understood that: kids in home-room with spit-wads, office workers with their minds elsewhere, people chewing paper. Never could figure that out.

“So, if it's nothing, Boss, why d'you keep staring at me like I just fell off the moon or something?”

“When was the last time you got laid, Jacobs?”

I was truly and genuinely shocked. The man was twice, maybe three or four times my age; he walked with a bad limp from having taken an off-duty slug delivered by a kid messing with a 7-Eleven; he was married, with great-grandchildren stacked in egg-crates; and he was Eastern Orthodox Catholic; and he bit his nails. And he chewed paper. I was truly, even genuinely, shocked.

“Hey, don't we have enough crap flying loose in this house without me having to haul your tired old ass up on sexual *hare* -assment?”

“You wish.” He spat soggy paper into the waste basket. “So? Gimme a date, I'll settle for a ballpark figure. Round it off to the nearest decade.”

I didn't think this was amusing. “I live the way I like.”

“You live like shit.”

I could feel the heat in my cheeks. “I don't have to—”

“No; you don't. But I've watched you for a long time, Francine. I knew your step-father, and I knew Andy...”

“Leave Andy out of it. What's done is done.”

“Whatever. Andy's gone, a long time now he's been gone, and I don't see you moving along. You live like an old lady, not even with the cat thing; and one of these days they'll find your desiccated corpse stinking up the building you live in, and they'll bust open the door, and there you'll be, all leathery and oozing parts, in rooms filled with old Sunday newspaper sections, like those two creepy brothers...”

“The Collyer Brothers.”

“Yeah. The Collyer Brothers.”

“I don't think that'll happen.”

“Right. And I never thought we'd elect some half-assed actor for President.”

“Clinton wasn't an actor.”

“Tell that to Bob Dole.”

I was wearing thin. I wanted out of there. For some reason all this sidebar crap had wearied me more than I could say. I felt like shit again, the way I'd felt before dinner. “Are you done beating up on me?” He shook his head slowly, wearily.

“Go home. Get some sleep. Tomorrow we'll start all over.” I thanked him, and I went home. Tomorrow, we'll start all over. Right at the level of glistening black alleys. I felt like shit.

* * * *

I was dead asleep, dreaming about black birds circling a garbage-filled alley. The phone made that phlegm-ugly electronic sound its designers thought was reassuring to the human spirit, and I grabbed it on the third. “Yeah?” I wasn't as charming as I might otherwise have been. The voice on the other end was Razzia down at the house. “The three women ... them models...?”

“Yeah, what about them?”

“They're gone.”

“So big deal. They were material witnesses, that's all. We know where to find ‘em.”

“No, you don't understand. They're *really* gone. As in ‘vanished.’ Poof! Green light ... and gone.”

I sat up, turned on the bed lamp. “Green light?”

“Urey had ‘em in tow, he was takin’ ‘em down the front steps, and there was this green light, and Urey's standin’ there with his dick in his mitt.” He coughed nervously. “In a manner'a speakin'.”

I was silent.

“So, uh, Lootenant, they're, uh, like no longer wit' us.”

“I got it. They're gone. Poof.”

I hung up on him, and I went back to sleep. Not immediately, but I managed. Why not. There was a big knife with a tag on it, in a brown bag, waiting for me; and some blood simples I already knew; there were three supermodels drunk with love who now had vanished in front of everyone's eyes; and we still had an old dead man with his head hanging by a thread

The Boss had no right to talk to me like that.

I didn't collect old newspapers. I had a subscription to *Time* . And the J. Crew catalogue.

* * * *

And it was that night, in dreams, that the one real love of my life came to me.

As I lay there, turning and whispering to myself, a woman in her very early forties, tired as hell but quite proud of herself, only eleven years on the force and already a Lieutenant of Homicide, virtually unheard-of, I dreamed the dream of true love.

She appeared in a green light. I understood that ... it was part of the dream, from the things the bum Richard had said, that the women had said. In a green light, she appeared, and she spoke to me, and she made me understand how beautiful I really was. She assured me that Angie Rose and Hypatia and Camilla had told her how lovely I was, and how lonely I was, and how scared I was ... and we made love.

If there is an end to it all, I have seen it; I have been there, and I can go softly, sweetly. The one true love of my life appeared to me, like a goddess, and I was fulfilled. The water was cool and clear and I drank deeply.

I realized, as I had not even suspected, that I was tired. I was exhausted from serving time in my own life. And she asked me if I wanted to go away with her, to a place where the winds were cinnamon-scented, where we would revel in each other's adoration till the last ticking moment of eternity.

I said: take me away.

And she did. We went away from there, from that sweaty bedroom in the three-room apartment, before dawn of the next day when I had to go back to death and gristle and puzzles that could only be solved by apprehending monsters. And we went away, yes, we did.

* * * *

I am very old now. Soon I will no doubt close my eyes in a sleep even more profound than the one in which I lay when she came to release me from a life that was barely worth living. I have been in this cinnamon-scented place for a very long time. I suppose time is herniated in this venue, otherwise she would not have been able to live as long as she did, nor would she have been able to move forward and backward with such alacrity and ease. Nor would the twisted eugenics that formed her have borne such elegant fruit.

I could have sustained any indignity. The other women, the deterioration of our love, the going-away and the coming back, knowing that she ... or he, sometimes ... had lived whole lives in other times and other lands. With other women. With other men.

But what I could not bear was knowing the child was not mine. I gave her the best eternity of my life, yet she carried that damned thing inside her with more love than *ever* she had shown me. As it grew, as *it* became the inevitable love-object, I withered.

Let her travel with them, whatever love-objects she could satisfy, with whatever was in that dirty paper bag, and let them wail if they choose ... but from this dream neither he nor she will ever rise. I am in the green light now, with the machete. It may rain, but I won't be there to see it.

Not this time.

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