

JOHN M. HARRISON

THE NEON HEART MURDERS

ALL DOWN THE WEST COAST of the island at night glitter the lights of a city five miles long, its towers like black and gold cigarette packs standing on end. In the malls fluorescent light skids off the surfaces of hard and soft designer goods: matte plastics, foams of lace and oyster satin, the precise curves of cars and shoes and shoulder pads. This city is well known for the scent of Anais in its streets; stacked video screens in the cocktail lounges; and, down by the ocean front -- where men push past you smelling of sweat and seafood, and you can hear the soundtrack of your own life playing from the dashboard of a white car -- neon of green, red or frosty blue. Music pulses from the amusement arcades, clears its throat in the night clubs. In the jazz bars they serve only "Black Heart" rum, and you can hear the intricate bass lines twenty miles out to sea.

The best of the bars is the Long Bar at the Cafe Surf, with its decor of strained contrasts. Marble pillars and designer blinds with thin aerodynamic slats. Cane tables and salt-blistered chrome bar taps. Forgotten movie stars crowd the walls in brushed aluminium frames. Exotic beers glitter from the shelves of the cooler. While under the red neon sign "Live Music Nightly," the Cafe Surf two-piece -- piano and tenor saxophone ambles its way through the evening's middle set.

The pianist, a young man with a mobile mouth, plays the house Kawai with one hand while with the other he coaxes from a piano-top synthesizer the sound of a deceptively relaxed bass. Just now he is Relaxin' in Camarillo. He picked this tune up from a Spanish bootleg CD so cheap its cover showed not Charlie Parker but Johnny Hodges. The rhythms flick and rip across one another, tangle and separate.

The saxophonist is an older man. White face, black rollneck, white hands. Years of music have tightened the muscles round his mouth into two deep grooves. Every so often he stops to watch the pianist take a solo. At these times his expression is one of puzzled admiration, as if he heard someone this good once before but -- because he has played so much music since -- now forgets who or where. (It was in a bar much like this one, somewhere less relaxed, on some bigger mass of land perhaps. Perhaps it wasn't in a bar at all.) This is the sole acknowledgement the old can give the young. Anything more would be too bitter; but so would anything less. He nods his head in time, pulls sharply on his cigarette, glances down at the saxophone in front of him.

Possibilities cascade.

A middle-aged man who looked like Albert Einstein used to come in during the middle set and buy a drink. He would stare round helplessly for a moment, then smile and light his pipe. He would sit down in a corner in his raincoats get up

again to put a match carefully into an ashtray on the corner of the bar; sit down again. He used to do all this with a kind of meticulous politeness, as if he was in someone's front room; or as if, at home, his wife required of him an unflagging formal acknowledgement of her efforts. He would stare at his pipe. He

would start a conversation with a girl old enough to be his granddaughter, getting out his wallet to show her -- and her friend, who wore torn black net tights and industrial shoes something which looked in the undependable Long Bar light like a business card; which they would admire.

In fact he was not as old as he looked; he and his wife lived apart; and he was a detective.

His name was Aschemann.

Though he loved the city, Aschemann often complained to himself:

"Phony music, cheap neon, streets which reek of bad money. Hands which make a big gun look small. All the burned-down rooms and lists of suspects. Crimes you might commit yourself, after a late night call. Those suburbs, you have to solve them like a labyrinth. And always some half empty hotel! Always someone luring the innocent down the curve of the street, but before you can investigate, before you can earn a blind dime, you have to find out what's behind that door.

"The true detective," he used to warn his assistants (mainly local young men and women on one-month trials from the uniformed branch, neat and ambitious, fluent in three Pacific Rim languages), "starts in the center of the maze. Crimes make their way through to him. Never forget: you uncover your own heart at the heart of it."

HIS ORIGINAL VISITS to the Long Bar were made during the investigation of a series of crimes against women. First on the scene of the original killing, he had discovered two lines of a poem tattooed in the shaven armpit of the victim:

Send me a neon heart Unarmed with a walk like a girl

She was a fourteen-year-old prostitute from the Rim to a grown-up girl in box-fresh Minnie Mouse shoes. Forensic investigation proved the tattoo to have been made after the heart stopped beating, in the style of a Carmody tattooist now dead but popular a year or two before.

"Find out how this is possible," he told his assistant.

When Aschemann first walked through the door of the Cafe Surf, it was not night:

it was late morning. The bar was full of sunlight and bright air. Taupe sand blew across the floor tiles, and a toddler was crawling about between the cane tables, wearing only a T-shirt with the legend SURF NOIR. Meanings -- all incongruous -- splashed off this like drops of water, as the dead metaphors trapped inside the live one collided and reverberated endlessly and

elastically,
taking up new positions relative to one another. SURF NOIR, which is a whole new
existence; which is a "world" implied in two words, dispelled in an instant;
which is foam on the appalling multitextual sea we drift on.

"Which is probably," Aschemann noted, "the name of an aftershave."

In his search for the tattoo murderer, Aschemann had himself driven about the city in an unmarked car. He sat alertly in the front passenger seat as the rose-red Cadillac descended each steep dogleg curve of Maricachel Hill, down through the Moneytown palms and white designer duplexes to the Corniche. He stood trying to light his pipe in the strong salt winds which scraped the harbor
mole in the middle of the day. He watched from Suicide Point the late-afternoon
sunbathers on Three Mile Beach, the evening windsurfers in the bay.

Less in a search for clues than a search for himself -- for a detective capable
of understanding the crime -- he visited his estranged wife, a thirty-six-year-old agoraphobe living in squalor in the "suicide suburbs" up the
coast. When he arrived, boys in long gray shorts and singlets were skateboarding
the concrete service road between her house and the beach. They looked tired and
blank. Sand blew into Aschemann's face as he raised his hand to knock on the door. Before she could answer, he went back and sat in the car on the passenger
side of the front bench-seat and explained to his driver:

"There are kinds of agoraphobes to whom even the arrival of a letter or a telephone call is too much of the outside world. Someone else has to answer it for them. Yet as soon as you step into their houses they become monsters. It is
less that they are uncomfortable in public than that they only feel in control on their own ground. Agoraphobia can be a very aggressive territorial strategy:
refusal to go out is a way of forcing the outside to come in to where it is manageable. On the agoraphobe's home ground you must walk through the agoraphobe's maze."

In his wife's rooms every inch of floor and furniture space was filled up, so that you didn't quite know how to get from the door to the sofa; and once you had got there you couldn't get up and move about except with extreme caution. All quick movement was damped by this labyrinth, where there was even a code
--
three or four quick pulls on the cord--to get the lavatory light to go on. Therapy only confused her, her friends no longer came to see her, and she had retreated into a further labyrinth, of drink, fuddled political principles and old emotional entanglements. At Christmas he bought her a perfume she liked called Ashes of Roses. The rest of the time he tried to stay away.

"Come over," she would encourage him. "I'll get the Black Heart Rum you like so
much." She phoned him two or three times a week to talk about their lives together, to find out what the weather was like where he was, discuss the view from her window. "You see that boat out in the Bay? Do you see it too? The blue

one? What sort of boat is that?" But when he visited he rarely had the courage or energy to make himself go in, because if he did she would soon sigh and say,

"We had such times together, before you took up with that whore from Carmody."

"Even though it is over between us," Aschemann told his driver as the Cadillac slipped away between the rag-mop palms and peeling pastel-colored beach houses on either side of Suntory Boulevard, "I sometimes seem to be the person who cares most about her. I am no longer in a position to look after her, yet no one

else will. Because of this I feel not only guilt but an increasing sense of irritation with people I once thought of as 'more her friends than mine.' They have abandoned her as completely as I have. This makes them no better than me."

Thinking he heard the rumble of skateboard wheels on concrete, he turned to look

out the rear window. Sand was blowing across the road in the purple light. "Go back," he said.

The murders took him all over the island. The first evening he walked into the Cafe Surf and sat down, Aschemann noticed this

The band was placed at the end of the Long Bar, near the lavatory door. People kept coming out of the lavatory while the band was playing, pushing between the

piano and the bar. There were very fat women in jeans, very tall men wearing raincoats, thin boys like camp inmates with shaven heads, people crippled in small and grotesque ways. For a moment, as each of these figures appeared in the

weird orange light, it seemed as if the music was squeezing them into existence;

as if there was some sort of unformed darkness out there at the back of the Cafe

Surf, and the band was squashing it like a fistful of wet mud into these shapes.

It was that sort of music.

While Aschemann was drinking his first glass of rum, the band squeezed out two or three thin boys in singlets, earrings and studded leather belts. As he ordered his second, and drank that more slowly, in little sips that coated his mouth with the taste of burnt sugar, it squeezed out some boots with pointed steel tips, and an old lady in a print dress; it squeezed out a suede cowboy hat. It began squeezing out people young and old, and people middle-aged. Surprisingly few of them were middle-aged.

"Get back," whispered the saxophone, "get back. Get back to where you once belonged."

But they never did. They bought drinks at the bar and then, laughing and shouting, wandered out into the lighted street. Were they in themselves a kind of surf or spray, brought into being where the powerful tidal forces of the music came into rhythmic contact with the fixed land of the Long Bar?

Thoughtfully, the man who looked like Einstein watched them go.

OTHER CRIMES came and went, but the murders continued, each one publishing new lines of the verse. There was nothing to connect the victims but their shaven armpit and Carmody-style tattoo. "And, of course," as Aschemann would remind his

latest assistant, "the investigation itself." Aschemann had forbidden the detective branch to work the case. Track record as well as seniority allowed

him

to do that, sheer weight of cases solved, paperwork successfully filed. Word went out that it was his crime. "He can keep it," was most people's opinion.

After perhaps six months, his own wife became a victim.

Alerted by a neighbor, they found her sprawled among the broken furniture, boxes of clothes, the piles of local ad-sheets, fashion magazines and old record albums, which had divided the floor of the room into the narrow waist-high alleys of the maze. It was hot in there. Up from all the yellowed pages, stronger than the smell of the body, came a stifling odor of dust and salt. It got in your mouth as well as your nose. A rich yellow light filtered through the wafer-thin slats of the wooden blinds. She had fallen awkwardly, wedged sideways with one arm trapped beneath her and the other draped across a copy of Harpers & Queen, her left hand clutching an empty tumbler, her cheap sun-faded print dress disarranged to show a yellow thigh: but not one of those piles of stuff, the uniformed men remarked, had been disturbed by her fall. There were no signs of a struggle. It was as if her murderer had been as constrained in here as anyone else. Tattooed in her armpit were the lines:

Send me a neon heart Send it with love Seek me inside

When they turned her over, they found her other hand clutching a letter Aschemann had sent her when they were still young. Called to the scene by a reluctant junior investigator, Aschemann examined this letter for a moment -- giving less attention, it seemed, to what he had written than to the cheap airmail-quality paper he had written it on all those years ago -- then went and stood puzzledly in the center of the maze. The assembled police, sweating into their uniforms, spoke in low voices and avoided his eyes. He understood all this -- the coming and going, the flickering glare of the forensic cameras -- but it was as if he was seeing it for the first time. Outside, the afternoon skateboarders in their SURF NOIR shirts rumbled to and fro on the corrugated concrete of the beach road. If he peered between the slats of the blind, he knew, he would be able to see Carmody, Moneytown, the Harbor Mole, the whole city tattooed stark and clear in strong violet light into the armpit of the Bay. After a moment or two, he said, "Bring me the details in my office later."

He said: "Do a good job here."

Later, he found himself looking out from Suicide Point in the twilight. Behind him, a new driver sat in the rose-colored Cadillac, talking quietly into the dash radio. There was a tender hazy light, a warm wind at the edge of the cliff, the whisper of the tide far below. A few eroded bristle-cone pines, a patch of red earth bared and compacted by tourists' feet. An extraordinary sense of freedom. He walked back to the car in the soft wind.

"I was only in their way there," he said. "Tell them I know they'll do a good job."

That evening he visited the Surf again.

He sat at the Long Bar and watched the band stroll through their second set of the evening. They were as amused, as meditative -- as guilty, Aschemann thought -- as ever.

The pianist must always be setting one thing against another. Every piece he played was a turn against -- a joke upon -- some other piece, some other pianist, some other instrument. He cloaked this obsession with a cleverness which made it amusing. But even his generously cut summer suit, which sometimes hung from its own massive shoulder pads as if it was empty, was a joke on the old jazz-men; and you could tell that when he was alone in his room at night he was compelled to play one hand against the other. If no one else was there, he would play against himself, and then against the self thus created, and then against the next: until all fixed notion of self had leaked away into this infinite slippage and he could relax for a second in the sharp light and cigarette smoke, like someone caught fleetingly in a black and white photograph
by Herman Leonard.

The saxophonist, meanwhile, nodded his head in time, pulled sharply on his cigarette, glanced down at the saxophone in front of him. Possibilities cascaded: the saxophonist entertained each one with an almost oriental patience. Long ago he came to some understanding of things incommunicable to the young, the obsessed, the energetic, because to them it would seem bland and seamlessly self-evident: "That which is the most complex is the most simple," perhaps; or "It is only because no music is possible that any music at all is possible." The universe now remade itself for him continually, out of a metaphor, two or three invariable rules, and a musical instrument called -- for some reason known only to God -- the saxophone.

That night the band squeezed out two dock-boys with dyed brushcuts, arm in arm with an emaciated blonde who kept wiping her nose on her pliable white forearm. Bebop golems, Aschemann thought, as he followed them along the Corniche in the soft warm scented darkness, then up Moneytown into Carmody: bebop golems. In Carmody, he lost them among the bars and transsexual brothels, the streets that stank of perspiration, oil products and lemon grass. One minute they were still distinguishable, the next they had merged with the life around them. They were gone, and all he could see was life. He could not really take in his wife's death, because all he could see around him was life.

Every evening after that he visited the Long Bar. The band squeezed out its golems. After his second glass of rum Aschemann shadowed them into the warm air and black heart of the city. He could smell the guilt and excitement that came up out of the gratings to meet them. He could smell their excitement at being newly alive there, in Carmody among the sights! One night, standing momentarily

thoughtful at 10th and Miramar, he was picked up by a Marilyn Monroe lookalike in a white wrap-bodice evening dress and tomato red stilt-heel shoes. She was thirty, beautiful. She only needed a brushed aluminum frame. She took him to her room in a fourth-floor walk up behind the bottled-milk dairy at Tiger Shore.

It was bare: gray board floor, bare bulb, a single bentwood chair. On the wall opposite the window, the shadow of the slatted blind falling across a poster. SURF NOIR. "Hey," she said. "Why don't you sit here --?" When she bent forward from the waist to undo his raincoat, the white dress presented her breasts to him in a flickering light. She knelt, and he could hear her breathing. It was placid, rather catarrhal. Later she lifted the hem of the dress and positioned herself astride him. So close, he saw that her gait, the shadows round her eyes, the foundation caked in the downy hairs by the corners of her mouth, had conspired beneath the undependable Carmody neon to make her seem older than she was. She whispered when he came: "There. There now." She was young enough for that act of generosity. She was a victim. With or without costume, she was one of the city's highwire artists. He had no idea what she was. He paid her. He returned to the Long Bar, and, resting in the music and light as he drank a third glass of rum, he thought:

Does it matter who she is, when every night here the world is somehow touched?

Eventually, Aschemann too was murdered.

No one knew what happened. Two of his staff, called to the Cafe Surf at three o'clock in the morning, found him not inside but out at the back on the wet sand beneath the pier. The air was warm and soft. Aschemann had squeezed some of the wet sand up into a kind of fist near his face. Had he been close to a killer? Or had he simply come down to look at the shallow water lapping almost tentatively at the base of each rusty pillar, the water a tepid purple color fluorescing suddenly in little flickers and glimmers as a response to the headlights sweeping along the Corniche above?

When they found him, Aschemann was alive but unspeaking. Unsure about procedure, his latest driver had alerted the uniform police. They walked about on the beach with torches. They called an ambulance and tried to make him comfortable while they waited for it to arrive. But the ambulance was held up on 14th and warbled its way down through Moneytown too late. Aschemann raised himself suddenly and said, "Someone must tell my wife." After that, he was silent again. The detective branch arrived.

"Can you hear us?" they asked. "Can you tell us who did this?"

They advised one another tiredly, "Forget it, Jack."

In fact he was conscious until he died. He listened to all their soft talk. He smelled the smell of their cigarette smoke. But he made no attempt to impart the secret he knew. Instead, he thought about the band at the Cafe Surf. He thought

about the black surf along the island's beaches at night, black surf with an oily violet sheen on the swell as it mounts. Wave after wave of new inhabitants.

"Life in the breaks," he thought of saying to the assembled detectives.

"That's

what surfers call them. Look there, in the breaks." He thought of the poem. He thought about his crime. He thought about his wife waiting for everyone to come

to her in her minotaur's cave; and the Carmody whore, who went out along the highwire from her room to everyone.

"We can never see the truth," he thought: "But does that matter at this level of

things, when all that counts is sight itself?" Even though he was dying and could barely lift his head, he looked out across the bay at the lights on the other side and thought, "For instance: I've been here and seen this."

What if the city is itself a surf, of buildings and people and consumer goods? What if the motives that power it are tidal? What if unpredictable winds play against masses of water, currents too complex to understand? What if crimes are

whipped off the crest of events like spray, with no more cause than that?

At this time of night, halfway through the middle set, the lights of the Cafe Surf go dim. There is a smell of food and, between numbers, laughter and shouting. But the tables closest to the musicians are empty, as if an arc of fallout has cleared them. These tables are cluttered with empty Giraffe Beer bottles and crumpled serviettes. At the Long Bar they serve a cocktail called "Ninety Percent Neon." Marilyn Monroe leans out of a brushed aluminum frame, upper body bent forward a little from the waist, head tilted back to laugh, so that her breasts are offered to the paying customers wrapped in silk, jazz, red

light from the neon sign. It's a life, the saxophonist often thinks, with a sagging twist of lemon left at the bottom, like an empty glass.

But what does he know?