

**Hard Rain at the Fortean Café**  
**Lavie Tidhar**

*“I’ve never been to America, which is why I rarely set stories there. It’s a lapse in my itinerary, I know. I would dearly love to taste a Philly cheesesteak one day. I saw it on Wikipedia, which entirely justifies its existence. For obvious reasons, though, this story doesn’t take place in America. Rather, it’s set in a pop culture version of America—the one known to millions of people around the world who, like me, have never been to the place but know the streets are paved with gold there and people eat only super-sized meals. Oh, and there are numerous alien abductions. Of course. So this is that story. You might like to read it while listening to Kinky Friedman’s ‘Sold American’, but then again, you might not. There’s nothing really very strange about a Jewish cowboy—and all alien abduction stories are true.*

*This one is no exception.”*

THE DINER STOOD off the highway outside a small town optimistically called Hope. Hope was being stuck in the middle of the Northwest and wishing you were someplace, anyplace else. And Hope was also the name on the tag pinned to the dead woman in waitress uniform that was currently lying against the wall inside the *Barbie-Q Roadhouse*. I had to stop myself from worrying at the connection: looking for patterns when sometimes there are none at all.

I wasn’t worried about Hope (the waitress, not the town). I didn’t get called down here for a murder: shit, murder is an honest-to-God American pastime. Just look at the statistics. No, I got called in because of the Marilyn.

The Marilyn was also dead. All in all, there were five dead people in the *Barbie-Q*: two waitresses; a balding man who—from his bag full of cheaply-printed catalogs—was some sort of a general salesman; the diner’s manager; and Marilyn. They had been shot by a machine gun, probably an Uzi. Marilyn’s head left a red smear against the glass of the booth she sat in. She was there alone.

What the hell was a Marilyn doing out here?

It rained when I got out of the car. The diner was sheathed in rain, its artificial light glaring through the windows, only some of which were broken. Inside, Forensics had come and gone, and I had gone in more to get out of the rain than for any hope of discovering what had happened. Also, I wanted to take a look at Marilyn.

The blonde hair was matted dark, and her eyes stared at the ceiling with a slightly surprised look. She was twenty-five, give or take, and dressed in a long winter coat that had two new holes in it.

“Who the hell are you?” He was tall and bulky and looked unused to dead bodies. Local cop. I flashed him a smile and a badge. “Amelia Hart, FBI.”

He looked at the badge closely, nodded reluctantly. “What do you want?”

“I’m here about her,” I said, pointing at the Marilyn.

He stared. “Her? What’s so special about her?”

He was too young. I guessed he didn’t watch too many old movies. That was good. “Nothing for you to worry about, bud,” I said. I was no longer smiling.

He shrugged. “Whatever you say, lady. Happy to leave this mess to you Feds.” He went out, slammed the door on his way. He didn’t seem at all happy. I couldn’t care less.

It continued to rain.

America is the land of baseball, Coca-Cola, and gun crime; the land of the free and the brave and the exotically insane; of DiMaggio and Kinky Friedman and Elvis. It is the home of alien abductees, Bigfoot, and Charles Fort. Everything is bigger here. Things happen in America that are just not possible in the rest of the world. It takes a special mentality to see the hidden patterns in a rain of fish, or to seek out meaning in the work of serial killers. Fort saw it: that weird shit just kind of *happens* in America. It’s a happening kind of place.

I examined the Marilyn. She looked just like all the others I've seen, over the years: always hiding out in little towns on the edge of nowhere, hair veering wildly between mousy-brown and dyed-hardcore-blonde. Driver's licenses with variations on Norma Jeane.

Hiding.

There was someone out there who didn't like Marylins.

The first one washed up in Oregon over five years before. Since then I'd gone over half the states, Arizona, Texas, Wyoming, Kentucky, North Carolina.... If there was a pattern to it I couldn't see it. We were still trying to figure out where the Marylins came from in the first place. There was some sick asshole out there, serial-killing Marilyn Monroe.

I listened to the rain for a while. It seemed almost peaceful. Then I heard another car, coming to a halt, breaking. A door opening. Low voices. Footsteps. The door swinging open.

I smelled him before I saw him: expensive, understated aftershave. Soft footsteps: he wore expensive, understated trainers. I was glad to see they were now covered in mud.

He was around thirty, long warm coat, a pleasant face that told me nothing.

"Joe Johnson," he said. "I got a call."

"I know who you are, Mr. Johnson," I said. "What I *don't* know is what the hell you're doing here."

He smiled. "I grew up around here. Been visiting my dad. Then I got a call saying Marilyn Monroe was spotted in the local diner."

"Oh? Can I ask who called you?"

His smile grew wider. "The same person who employs you, Ms. Earhart."

I didn't like that. I didn't like that at all. "My name's Hart," I said. "Just Hart."

His smile said he knew I was lying. "Look," he said. "We might as well

try and get along if we're going to work together. The police and FBI's job is to figure out who killed all these people. I'm not police, and I'm not Bureau. And neither are you."

I didn't argue. There was no point. He said, "Your job is to figure who's killing the Marilyns, right? And mine is to make sure people only read about stuff like this is in the *National Enquirer* or *alt.conspiracy*. That's the way it is." He put his hand forward for a shake. "Please."

I shook his hand. I didn't like it, but he was right. And I was outranked. His hand was warm and dry, though I noticed his nails were bitten. He followed my eyes and shrugged. "Old habit. Can I buy you a coffee?"

I looked over the diner and he followed me there too—over the blood-soaked floor, the shot-up counter—and laughed. He had an easy laugh. Comfortable. "Not here, obviously. But there's an all-night place in Hope. We could compare notes."

I shrugged. A coffee was a coffee, regardless of the company. "Lead the way, Mr. Johnson."

We stepped out together into the rain.

There was a Starbucks but it was closed, and we wound up at a truck stop on the edge of town. We were the only customers. The waitress had long red fingernails and a bleached hairdo left over from the 80s.

"Hi, Joe," she said.

"Hey, Jude." She smiled when he said her name; I got a sudden sense of some long-forgotten history between them. I don't know; maybe he took her to the prom once.

We sat by the window that overlooked the highway and the rain. Could have been the *Barbie-Q*. Could have been anywhere.

"So tell me," I said. "What's your interest in all this? No bullshit."

He smiled. He was the kind of guy who smiled easy. "It's good to talk to someone who *knows*," he said. "Do you know I read about you as a kid? *20 Hrs., 40 Min., The Fun of It, Last Flight...*"

“That was published after...” I said, then stopped. I shook my head and drank the coffee. Noticed Jude put on a fresh pot, especially for us. Or for Joe.

“After you disappeared. I know. Amelia, I *know*.”

“Shit.” There didn’t seem much more to say. I never got on very well with other abductees. And this one was coming over a *fan*. “Joe fucking Johnson,” I said. “Grays Special Liaison. What *are* you doing here?”

He turned his head away, watched the rain for a little while. Headlights along the road looked like the lights of UFOs. “This is where they took me,” he said at last, and he wasn’t smiling. “Grew up here. My dad still finds his cattle mutilated every winter. I tried to stop it, but it’s like dealing with children...” he sighed. “They like the small towns. The farmlands. This is *their* patch. Do you understand?”

Realization came like static on the radio. “They think it’s a warning.”

“Marilyn Monroe’s been dead for a long, long time,” Joe said, and it made him sound old. “She shouldn’t be turning up *anywhere*, and definitely not here.”

“She’s been turning up all over the place,” I said. He grimaced.

“So you think someone’s trying to draw attention...”

“Yes.”

“And that’s why you’re getting involved.”

He nodded. Finished his coffee. Stared into the rain. He had that look, of the long-distance pilot. Alone in the storm, the Pacific below you...you see strange lights, start looking out for them.

It doesn’t lead to anything good. I should know.

I thought about what he said. Maybe the person killing the Marilyn’s didn’t even care. If it was a way of drawing attention to the little gray guys in the skies.... I had to admit it was kind of effective. So far no one in the Fortean press has latched on to anything, but it was only a matter of time. And these days, they could run DNA tests. If it matched—and it would—the story would go into *syndication*.

“You have any idea who’s doing this? Or where the Marilyn’s came from?”

I shook my head. “The only ones we found were already dead, and they weren’t talking.” I sighed, repeating long worn-out data over coffee steam. “The first one was twenty years old, the last one twenty-five. I figure someone in the early Eighties got hold of some Gray tech, a DNA sample...you can get this stuff from specialist dealers, you know. Celebrity hair. These days, you could get it on *eBay*.”

He suddenly smiled. “I know. I think that’s why everyone keeps seeing Elvis.”

I shrugged. “Well,” I said, “Elvis is still alive. It’s Marilyn Monroe I’m worried about.”

“Right.”

The rain beat against the glass.

At the local station I went over Marilyn’s possessions. She didn’t have many. No purse. I had to admit the diner looked like a clean-cut armed robbery. She had car keys in her pocket and the techs had already gone over the car. Found a driver’s license and an expired credit card, both under the name Jane Norman. A makeup bag. A pair of dark sunglasses. The car was a sensible blue-gray Toyota. No house keys. No cell phone. Not even a personal photo anywhere, of a lover or a puppy, or something.

Well, not quite.

“You won’t believe this.” The guy who came through was thin and sounded like he had a cold. “We found a digital camera in the boot of the car. I’ve just had the photos printed. Here.”

His hand shook when he passed the prints over. Could have been excitement. I had a bad feeling in my stomach, and it intensified when I saw the photos. Beside me Joe groaned.

“Who else saw this?” He demanded.

“Just me, so far. And you two. It’s strange, isn’t it? She looks almost

like..."

"A lot of girls do."

The tech smiled. "No," he said. "A lot of girls *try* to, Joe."

"Give me the camera," Joe said. There was an intensity in his voice that wasn't there before. "I want you to delete the files from your computer."

"I didn't copy them..."

"Now, Mark. I don't want this circulating. Do you understand?"

The tech nodded. He didn't look happy. "Yes, Joe."

I stared at the photos. Norma Jeane, body circa 1948. The lighting was harsh. This was not photography for the sake of art.

At the bottom of each photo was a red time-stamp, and the file name.

"Looks like you got your message," I said.

The rain fell hard against the windscreen. It felt like it was never going to stop. I figured Joe's dad's cattle would be safe for another day—you couldn't picture anyone mutilating cows in this weather. Not even little gray aliens.

The file names contained a reference to a place. The Fortean Café. Half an hour later, we figured it wasn't a place at all: it was a file server, and it was located only a two-hours drive away, in Hope's nearest neighbour, Arlington. From what we could figure out it offered "Fortean Celebrity Hardcore." You know the type: Hitler's Secret Sex Tapes, footage of Lindbergh being anal-probed by Grays (this one true, for all I know), recordings of Monroe's rumored casting couch sessions.

"Strange," Joe said. "It's been offline since nine o'clock last night."

"I didn't know you guys had computers," I said as we drove. Joe was in the passenger seat. He had a laptop open on his knees.

"You'd be surprised," he said. "Second biggest employer in Arlington is a software development company. Made a lot of money floating on the

stock exchange a couple of years back.”

“Whatever.”

He smiled. “You don’t like it much around here, do you?”

“I’ve seen worse,” I said. “Not *much* worse, though.”

The truth was more complicated. It always is. I grew up in a place much like this, when the whole country looked like it. I’ve travelled a lot since then. Things change. I guess, in some places, they change slower than others.

I drove without speaking for a while. Then, “Don’t you think it’s a bit strange?”

“What?”

“The photos, the camera left in the car? Why would anyone want to leave us a message? Assuming it’s not for the Grays’ benefit.”

He thought about it. “I take it this hasn’t happened before.”

“No.” We’d never had a lead on the Marilyn murders. This was...odd.

“Think about it,” I said. “Why would Jane Norman have the pictures in the first place? She’d hardly want them as a souvenir.”

He shrugged in the seat. “You never know.”

“No,” I said. A thought was forming in my head. It wasn’t a nice thought.

He looked at me sideways, kind of like he was thinking the same thing I was. I thought he was. We didn’t speak after that.

Arlington was a pleasant enough town. The man we came to see—Milton Palmer, thirty-three, an employee of previously-mentioned software company—lived in a suburban house that looked like it came out of a ‘50s TV ad. A white van was parked in the driveway. It had blacked-out windows.

When we got out of the car we both had guns. I guess Joe was thinking the same as me.



There were no lights on, and no answer to my knock. I tried the door, and it was locked.

That was the point when we were supposed to call the local cops. Instead, we went to have a look around the back, found the door.

Joe kicked it in.

“Mr. Palmer?”

We found him in a large, windowless room. Joe had flicked on the light. There was a tripod, a camera, two computers, an open wardrobe with latex uniforms hanging neatly inside, a couch large enough to sit three, two lighting stands.

And Milton Palmer.

He was short, wore a stubble like a disused field of corn, a grin carved in his face like a crop circle.

He didn't ask to see a badge. He didn't ask anything at all. He was lying on the sofa with a neat little hole between his eyes and a hell of a mess between his legs and he was so very, very dead. From the smell, he'd been like this for a while.

Joe and I sat in yet another diner, on the edge of Arlington. It was lunch-time, though neither of us felt much like eating. We waited for Forensics to finish the official examination, but I could see in Joe's eyes he already knew what they'd tell us.

Somebody did a thorough cleaning job on Mr. Palmer's little pad. Computer hard-drives, wiped clean. Cameras emptied of film. Missing flash-cards. No sign of prints, pictures, or scans. No sign Mr. Palmer had ever taken a dirty picture.

That someone didn't do such a good job on the van. It could have been carelessness, but I didn't think so. I thought the killer wanted us to find the van just as it was.

There were traces of old blood in the back of the van. Another tripod. In a hidden compartment, a couple of guns, serial numbers filed off.

Joe's cell phone rang. He listened for several moments, killed the connection.

He looked at me, gave me a small nod. A nod that said, you were right.

"The bullets from the guns in the van matched the ones found in two of the most recent Marilyn murders," he said. "The blood in the van—it was AB."

I said, "Marilyn's was AB."

"The DNA matches, too." He shrugged. "Looks like we got your serial killer."

"Yeah," I said. It sure looked that way. It was perfect, watertight, but for one thing: if Milton Palmer was the Marilyn killer—then who killed Jane Norman only last night? And for that matter—though I wasn't going to lose sleep over it—who killed Palmer?

I had some ideas about that. I preferred them to remain private. "Come on," I said. "Let's get back. We've got a funeral to go to tomorrow."

Joe had rushed the funeral through. Not a funeral, really. The body was to be cremated: standard procedure in a case like this, though all I ever dealt with on that front were the Marylins, thankfully. They were people who weren't supposed to exist. Like me, for that matter, but I still wasn't dead. I guess that's a good thing.

I dropped Joe off at the police station and drove away. The rain started to fall again as we left Arlington and by now it was getting dark and the rain wasn't going away.

I stayed in a motel on the outskirts of Hope. I had a long bath, then sat up in bed and switched on the TV. It came on to show Monroe singing *River of no Return*.

Patterns in the rain.... I switched it off and killed the lights. Goodbye Marilyn Monroe.

Sleep came swift and without warning. Like a flying saucer.

The phone woke me up. It was dark outside. The rain lashed against the windows.

“Amelia? It’s Joe.”

I fumbled for the light. Hit the TV remote. An expanding square of light opened on CNN. I was half afraid it would be Marilyn again. You never know with cable.

“What time is it?”

“Five a.m.”

I shook my head, trying to clear away the cobwebs. “What’s happened?”

His voice sounded like it came from a galaxy far far away. “They caught the guy who did the diner last night. Three previous convictions for armed robbery. The police caught him drunk-driving and pulled him over. Found the Uzi, some of the cash. That salesman in the diner, remember him? Guy had his wallet on him. Pictures of the salesman’s family still inside.”

I switched channels. All I could find was *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy poured water over the wicked witch, and she was melting.

Joe said, “It’s an open and shut case.”

And I started to laugh.

“So Palmer finds himself another Marilyn, this one close to home, he takes some dirty pictures, then tries to finish her off...they fight, she kills him. She cleans up his pad, makes a runner. Stops at the *Barbie-Q* on the way out of the state...ends up shot by accident.”

“Right.”

Another day, another coffee. “Does it ever stop raining?” I said.

Joe smiled. "Would you believe me if I said yes?"

"I'd believe that sooner than I'd believe that fairy-tale you just told me."

"I don't really care who killed Palmer," he said. "This way it's neat. Life's one big fucked up series of coincidences, that's all. Fort knew that. The Grays are happy with it. No one needs to go looking for patterns in the rain."

"Right."

"Amelia..." he sounded tired. I wondered if he got any sleep at all last night. By the dark smudges under his eyes I'd have said no.

"I can buy Jane Norman as a victim," I said. "I can even see her as an impulse killer, sure. Self-defense, no argument there. But she wouldn't shut down the server and professionally wipe out everything our favorite pervert had stored in his studio. If she was that good she wouldn't have been posing for those pictures for him in the first place."

"You don't know that. Even when she did things she didn't like, Monroe was never a victim, Amelia. She was tough. Did you know she was the first woman in Hollywood to form her own production company?"

"No shit."

"I'm just saying."

"Look," I said. "You're happy, the little guys upstairs are happy, everyone is happy. Let's forget about it." I looked out of the window, at the gray world outside. "Let's go to the funeral."

It was an open and shut case. Milton Palmer was a bona fide psycho. Someone, somewhere, twenty-five years ago, set out to make a whole set of baby Marilyn Monroes. And Milton Palmer, nineteen, twenty years later, figured it out, and set out to kill them, one by one. Kill them and take pictures.

We couldn't find the pictures. They were gone for good, and I wasn't sorry. The only set was on the cheap digital camera found in Jane Norman's car, and Joe had the camera destroyed. Prints too. The last

remains of Jane Norman were in a vase. Her ash was being scattered into the rain. It seemed as good a way as any to go.

She was the...seventh? Eighth? That I saw cremated over the last five years. Maybe Palmer didn't work alone. There was no way to be sure, but I thought he did.

I didn't want to know who killed him. By the time the ashes were gone and the vase was empty, I already knew.

She was standing away from the small group. She wore a long, black coat with a hood lined in fur. She looked a little like she did in *Niagara*, only older. But she still looked like she meant business. And I thought, someone else was looking for the killer all those years, besides me. Someone else who followed the pattern of the rain.

I don't think anyone else saw her. She turned, once, and looked at me, and she nodded. And that was that. When I next looked she was gone, and there was nothing to testify she had ever been there.

Nothing but the rain, and it wasn't telling.

Joe drove me to the airport as the rain fell. It felt like it had never stopped, and now I thought that it had a purpose. It was irrational, a little fanciful, but it's what I thought, wired on coffee and lack of sleep and an overabundance of death: I thought that the skies were crying. They were crying now, crying for Marilyn, crying for all the Norma Jeanes. They were mourning America itself, where legends are made of celluloid and print, of flammable material, and are so easily reduced to ashes.

I sometimes think like this, but it passes.

We got to the small airport and I got on the plane. I used to fly the bloody things. Now I was a passenger. Things change.

Joe was standing in the downpour. He waved, and his lips moved. I think he said, "Goodbye, Amelia Earhart."

The plane took off; and Hope disappeared through the rain.

