

*Crime Scene*

After I got out of prison I got a job cleaning up crime scenes. Murders and suicides and the like. I had to wear a haz-mat suit with rubber gloves taped to my wrists and these floppy shit-kickers that made it look like I was brand new to walking. Then, last thing, sometimes I had to put on a respirator that covered my whole face so in toto I looked like a bug-eyed ghost from World War I. Boo! The Yanks are coming.

The first job was a home suicide. I went with my supervisor Matt. He said he guessed some guy got himself in trouble with the IRS. He said suicides are usually about money. Murders, he said, are about love. Anyway, a guy kicked back in his La-Z-Boy and blew his head off with a .12 gauge. Bam! Splat! That's what we were walking into.

"Last chance," Matt said, "You're okay with blood and brains and all that? You sure?"

"I'm okay with it," I said.

"Because once you step into that living room, you can't un-see it."

"I've been to prison. I've seen some shit." Actually, most of prison was pretty banal. I saw a few guys fight in the yard but the guards broke all that up quick. The worst thing I saw was when a guy broke another guy's nose. Blood poured down the guy's chin and chest and he kept shouting, "I'm gonna get you motherfucker!" while they hauled him away.

Matt said, "I don't know what kind of shit you saw in prison, but this kind of thing can be pretty scary. Not scary, but, you know—"

"I can handle it," I said.

"Okay. Good. What kind of shit did you see in prison anyway?"

So I told him some stories about beat-downs and shower rapes and shankings.

“In prison we say shank,” I said, “Nobody says shiv. Everybody thinks we say shiv. ‘I shivved this punk, I shivved that punk.’ No. It’s shank. ‘I shanked this punk, I shanked that punk.’”

“Got it,” Matt said, “Shank.”

We rode awhile in silence after that, just the rattle of the van’s engine, the clicking of the turn signal now and then, the equipment banging and jangling around in the back. When we got to the house and went inside, I had to cover up a gasp with a fake cough. Horrible stuff. Matt said, “I don’t think he made it,” and laughed and walked over to inspect the mess.

With a point blank shotgun, there’s nothing left of the head. Of course the coroner had taken the actual body, but most of the guy’s head was in bits and pieces stuck to the wall behind the La-Z-Boy. The bigger pieces had slid down the wall to the baseboards leaving thick orangey-brown trails like the way slugs leave a slime trail when they creep.

The big chair had a dark brown blotch on the headrest, almost black—a wide stain shaped like a starfish. Matt said sometimes the furniture can be cleaned and salvaged and given back to the family but why would a family want suicide furniture? This La-Z-Boy was done for. One human victim: suicide. One easy chair victim: collateral damage.

“Pretty standard suicide cleanup,” Matt said, “Get the chemicals out, get suited up, and get started. Don’t worry about your mask. I have to make a phone call, and then I’ll be in. We can knock this whole thing out today. Six hours if we hustle.”

I went back to the truck and pulled out the gear, really taking my time. I lined it all up like Matt showed me—the chemicals and disinfectant, brushes, scrapers, sponges, buckets, the fat, red biohazard bucket. Matt told me the key to this business is organization.

“Keep your shit squared away at all times and you’ll do fine.” I think Matt was a Marine.

After I got the gear organized and double-checked and got the suit on, I stepped back inside the house and sucked up a big lungful of air. It hit me: there was no ungodly stink of death. I thought all these places—where the sad sacks do themselves in or where the vaunted crimes of passion occur—were filled to the ceilings with reek. But in this place, all there was? A whiff of something musty and then a barely detectable food smell. Cooked meat maybe, hamburgers, casserole. Fleeting evidence that people used to live here. You sure as hell wouldn’t know it now, but I bet there was a time when the wall simply held up the roof and the La-Z-Boy was just a spot for catnaps.

Matt smoked a square in the front yard while he talked on the phone. I watched him pace back and forth on the lawn and cut the air with his free hand like he was demonstrating karate moves. He’s got an ex-wife and some kids. “I don’t give a shit about her anymore.” He’s said that more than a few times, but she calls him all the time and once she came to the office with his kids. He hugged them and stroked their hair and said, “Daddy loves you,” and when he kissed them goodbye, he also leaned in and kissed his ex on the cheek. She kissed him back, but not on the cheek. She dropped that kiss in the air, an inch or so from his actual face.

In those knee-high shit kickers, I stepped over to the scene. But something I didn’t notice at first. Holes. Up above the top of the chair where the wall meets the ceiling. I reached up and ran my gloved fingertips over the holes and tiny specks of drywall flaked off. Somewhere way in

there, lodged in the studs or maybe clear through into the attic were the pellets. I imagined them ripping the wall apart on the inside.

I finally got to work. The brown dried blood turned into streaky red blood when the chemicals hit it. It took a sponge and swimming pool's worth of cleaner just to get a third of the way through. I chipped at the brain chunks with my scraper—scratch, scratch, hack—and while brains might normally be wet and slimy, after they've been up on the wall for a couple days, they turn into hard little knobs. Like chunks of concrete superglued to the wall. Matt said when I'm scraping not to worry about the paint or wallpaper.

“They don't care if the living room is eggshell white anymore. They hardly ever come back,” Matt told me, “Who'd want to stay, right?”

After we get done with our part, he said, the bank re-sells the houses. I wonder if they tell you when somebody killed himself inside. “Here we have the spot where the previous owner blew his head off. Lovely natural lighting.” Being locked up was the worst thing that ever happened to me. I couldn't wait to get the fuck out. What would I do next? Get a job and make a lot of money? Get married and have kids? I don't get why a free man—who could shit and eat and go buy cigarettes anytime he wanted—would kill himself. I tried to quit thinking about it.

I was sponging the wall again when I heard footsteps behind me. Figuring Matt had finally come back inside, I turned around. But it wasn't Matt. It was an old lady. In her 50's or 60's. Little whorls of gray hair plastered to her forehead. Pink shirt and blue jeans. Buggy blue eyes behind thick lenses.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said.

The first words out of my mouth? “Fucking shit, lady.” My heart was going wild.

“I didn’t mean to scare you.” She pointed to the partially cleaned up mess behind me and said, “That was my husband.”

“Are you kidding me?” I said, “You shouldn’t be here. You can’t be here.”

“Can’t be where? In my own home?”

“No, I mean... you don’t want to see this shit, why do you want to see this shit?” I tried to puff myself up to block her view but I’m not a big guy and she already saw anyway. “You don’t want to see this.” I waved my hand, my whole arm at the wall and the chair. I felt my shoulders slump.

“How do you know what I don’t want to see?” she said, “It was me who found him like this in the first place.”

“You found him?”

“You bet.”

“Why’d he do it?” The first words that slid off my tongue.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“I’m sorry. What a dumbass thing to say.”

“Nobody has asked me that yet, believe it or not. Why’d he do it? I wonder too.” Her voice was quiet and she chewed on the inside of her cheek.

“But,” she finally said, “I don’t know and I never will and that’s what I’m left with for the rest of my life. A big fat question mark. I didn’t even know he owned a shotgun.”

So there I stood like a goon with a bloody sponge in my hand. I tried to say what I thought a normal person would say in this god-awfully horrible situation. I said the word, “I’m,” planning to say, “I’m sorry,” again but she pointed to the La-Z-boy and said, “May I?” and without any thought or consideration I said, “Yes.”

She walked past me straight for the chair in an old lady toddle, like her legs were half-asleep. Before I could even move, let alone say a single word, she was running her hand over the armrest and I swear I could feel the rough, velvety material on the palm of my hand. Then she sat down with a huge sigh.

She crossed her legs at the ankles and plopped them down on the footrest and closed her eyes. Her forehead wrinkled and unwrinkled. Tension drained from her neck and she let her head fall back onto the huge bloodstain, her husband’s black blood. I wondered how many times his heart pumped after he squeezed the trigger, how much blood, how much of his life it took to make that stain. I hoped that the blood on the chair was flowing through the part of his brain where he held memories of her. Poetic.

Of course right in the middle of this moment she was having, this delicate little reverie, Matt walked in. The first thing he said, and he said it to me and not to the old lady, was, “Now what the fuck is this?”

“It’s a wake. Just without the body.” That’s what I saw, anyway.

The lady’s eyes popped open. She sat up and the chair closed with a “k-chunk.”

Then Matt turned to her. “Okay, you’re sitting on a big patch of biohazard. You can’t stay, ma’am. Beat it.” But the lady kicked back in the chair again (k-chunk!) and gave Matt the finger. So he turned to me again and said, “Who the fuck is this?”

“It was her husband, the guy we’re cleaning up,” I said.

“Oh shit,” Matt said in a kind of shouted whisper.

“She just came in and sat down.” I matched the volume of my voice to his.

“Okay, so what do we do?” he said.

“You haven’t seen kind of thing this before?”

“Hell no.”

“Maybe we should give her a minute.”

He looked at me like he thought I was crazy, but then he flicked his head toward the front door and said, “Come on.”

We sat on the porch in the blinding sun, so bright I had to squint the whole time we were sitting there. Matt got out some cigarettes and handed me one. I’d started smoking when I was locked up and, at times like that one, I was really glad I’d taken up the habit. We smoked and sat there like a pair of lizards on a rock until Matt said, “As soon as this cigarette is gone, I’m going back in.” He was half way through.

“Who were you talking to?” I said.

“What? When?”

“You were on the phone.”

Matt sucked in some smoke and breathed it out in a slow stream of rippled gray.

“The ex,” he said.

“The old ball and chain.” I didn’t exactly know how to talk about love.

“Don’t call her that. Things are really, really complicated.”

“Sorry.”

Matt jumped up and flicked his cigarette butt into the patch of hostas next to the front porch. “Come on, let’s kill this job off and get the fuck out of here.”

I followed him inside but the lady was gone. We stood there a few seconds just cocking our heads at different angles the way birds do when they’re listening for worms. Finally, Matt said, “She’s gone.”

“How? She didn’t go past us.”

“Houses have back doors.”

Matt grabbed a picture in a frame off the end table, looked at it, and handed it to me. There was our old lady and the late husband on vacation, dressed in modest swimsuits, smiling up at the camera from the sand. Planted in the sand a little way behind them, a couple of beach umbrellas—bright blue and bright green—stood at cockeyed angles in the sand. The lady and the husband looked happy.

“There he is. Our guy.” I handed the picture back to Matt.

“I wonder why he did it.” Matt’s voice came out barely above a whisper. I don’t think he was really talking to me. He plopped down on the couch with the picture in his hands and pulled out his phone and started swiping through it.

I crept out of the living room and into the kitchen. I opened all the cabinets. They had way more plates and cups, dishes and mugs, silverware and chamomile tea than any two people

would ever need. I snuck up the stairs and found the bathroom. I pulled open the medicine cabinet door and found a few prescription bottles, all half full. All for ‘Martin Miller.’ Martin Miller. Marty Miller. Marty Miller Killer Diller.

In the bedroom, by the side of the bed that had to have been his, there were Marlboros and matches in the nightstand drawer. Night Tracks too, that relaxing CD of Beethoven and Bach and all. And a blister pack of Benadryl. Only one pill left. And old condoms. Not used, just like they’d been in there awhile. And there was a flask too, a flat silver flask with a picture etched into the side, this old timey picture of cowboys and Indians fighting each other. I unscrewed the cap and took a big whiff and my eyes watered. Moonshine? It didn’t smell like any booze I’d ever smelled before.

In her nightstand drawer, there was an old Bible and that was it. I pulled the Bible out and sat on the edge of their bed and riffled through it. I loved the leather cover, how it bent and flexed, how it smelled. A little like a baseball glove, a little like being a kid again for an instant. Then from somewhere near the back of the Bible—maybe out of Revelations—a folded up piece of paper fell out. It had been wadded up into a ball before she’d folded it neatly and stuck it in the Bible. Thousands of spidery little lines in the paper where creases had once been.

Of course I opened it.

“Dear Annie, How can I tell you what I need to tell you other than to simply say it. Our friends and family would certainly say that I’ve had a good life but for reasons unknown to me and certainly unknown to you, I feel differently. Sometimes I sit and wonder if I really am alive or if, perhaps, a colony of nanobots has infested my bloodstream and

forces me daily to eat, speak, breathe, sleep. Be gone, bots! For once, for all time, be gone. I love you, Annie.

With much love and sorrow,

Marty.

P.S. I don't really believe I'm infested with nanobots. You know what I mean."

I read through it a hundred times and after the last time, I folded it along the same creases Annie had folded it when she'd taken it out of the trash and put it in her Bible. I pictured her bending over to pull it out of the trashcan, un-wadding it, reading it. Her face warping into expressions of grief, fear, disbelief. I folded it like she'd folded it and unzipped my suit and shoved it into my shirt pocket.

When I got downstairs, Matt was still on the couch. His head was in his hands and his phone rested on the cushion next to him. When he heard me, he looked up and wiped his eyes, but it was too late. I'd caught him crying.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yep," he said, "Yep. We're done with this job. Let's get the fuck out of here."