

Leaving Death Behind

Part 1 – Death

Vergenne, Vermont's oldest city, had, as the rest of Vermont did, a varying climate. For the last few weeks it had been cold in Vergenne, the wind whipped through the old town with a ferocious gusto, causing the temperature to drop almost twenty degrees.

So many things were to blame for the tragic events of that night. Yet so many things that can happen, usually don't, and most of the time it's the things that are easily controlled that cause the greatest grief. Especially when they go wrong.

Henry Marcus had been married for fifteen years to his wife Maggy. They had three children, Tommy, Lisa, and Jonny.

The Marcus' were a happy family. They went to church every Sunday and attended bible study every Wednesday. Maggy was heavily involved with the PTA at her oldest son's school and was on the town committee. Henry was known as one of the nicest people in Vergenne.

The Marcus' were coming from one of Tommy's school choir events one night and they had to cross over Otter Creek Bridge to get to their house. Unfortunately, they would be crossing the bridge at almost the same exact time Stan Busso was coming home from a long day at work.

Stan Busso was an attorney who worked for the largest lawyer's office in the next town over. Lately he had been working long days, on top of short nights, and with two young children, there was not much time for sleep.

It was an hour into his trip when Stan came to the bridge. His head dipped, and the car in front of him swerved, but by the time he realized that he was running head on into the Marcus' car, it was too late.

Henry saw Stan's car coming, and when it swerved into his lane, he pulled the wheel hard to the left, hoping to avoid the car. It was the only thing he could do.

He was a second too late, clipped Stan's car, and drove head first into the railing of the bridge, breaking through. At the last second the car stopped and teetered on the edge of the bridge.

Upon contact with the Marcus' car Stan awoke with a jolt. He stomped on the brakes and his car hit the railing on the opposite side of the bridge, and came to a stop.

Stan shook his head and looked around, wondering to himself, 'what did I hit?'

He looked in his rearview mirror and saw the Marcus' car behind him. It was halfway over the edge of the bridge and looked as if any second would fall into the river below.

Henry lay dazed and confused, bent over the steering wheel. He could feel the car moving, swaying up and down in the wind, and it was not until he looked down that he started to panic.

He heard the three children screaming. He looked beside him and saw his wife, blood coming from a gash in her head. She was unconscious and sat bent over the dashboard. He wanted to reach out and touch her but feared that any movement would send the car into the river below.

The three children in the back were frantic. Henry could hear their screams for help but was unable to risk moving, for fear of plunging to an almost certain death into the cold raging waters of the rushing river beneath him.

The oldest boy was moving around behind Henry. Henry called to him, told him not to move too much, they needed to stay still. But the young child, who was in as much of a panic as his two siblings, did not understand his father's demands.

Then, over Henry's right shoulder, he heard his son.

"I am here Dad," he told his father. "Let me help you."

As his son reached over and unbuckled his seatbelt, Henry cried out, but was too late. The belt came undone and Henry was thrown onto the dashboard and felt the car start to tip forward.

On the other side of the bridge, Stan climbed out of his car, no longer tired. He pulled out his cell phone and called the police.

Stan started toward the other vehicle, then stopped, watching as the car started to slide off the bridge, knowing he was already too late.

Inside the car, Henry tried desperately to orient himself. His head pounded from the impact of the fall, yet even in his confusion, he still saw the river rushing up at him.

The car hit the river and the force of the impact threw Henry into the windshield again. The windshield splintered but did not give way. He could feel the water start to seep in and the car begin to sink. Worst of all he could feel his whole life slipping away.

He still heard the children's screams. The two youngest children were stuck in their seats, unable to get out of the bindings which were meant to save their lives, but now would almost certainly ensure their death.

Henry saw the oldest son and could not help but stare into the lifeless eyes of the young boy who had tried to save his father's life.

Henry made himself move. He hoped he could save the youngest two. He still had time.

But as he propped himself up on his palms, the windshield which had supported his weight so far, gave out and he was sucked helplessly down the river.

The last thing he saw before his head slammed into a rock was the vehicle getting farther and farther away.

When Henry awoke his head throbbed but he forced his eyes open anyway.

He saw lights and heard sounds. People talking, machines running, and very faint in the background, sirens sounding.

He was in a hospital bed. When he tried to sit up he felt a soft hand on his shoulder, “You had a pretty hard knock on the head Mr. Marcus. You should lie still.”

He laid back and stared at the nurse.

“How are you feeling?” The nurse asked.

“Where is my family?” Henry blurted out. The finality in his own voice scared him and the look of the nurse only added to the grief that welled up inside.

“Your wife did not make it to the hospital alive. Neither did your oldest son. The youngest two made it out of the car but the youngest one died on the way here and the other died just an hour ago.”

The nurse told him about the death of his family with tears in her eyes.

His heart broke: he could feel it shatter inside his chest, like someone had taken a hammer to it. He was paralyzed, couldn't breathe, and then the coldness filled him. It started from within and soon he was cold all over.

The nurse left him. He laid crying and mourning the death of his family. His thoughts raced and he was left with his search for new meaning. Already he was filled with questions. The one which filled him most was: 'What now?'

He contemplated what to do without his family. He had three options as he saw it. First would be to kill himself. As he thought about it he questioned God. Why would God take his family and not him? Suicide would be against everything he believed in and although his hate started to turn on God he still was unwilling to end his own life.

Next he thought of revenge. Could he kill someone else? He didn't believe he could.

Then finally he came upon it and knew it was what he would do. He could not stand to bear the memories of his family. The town would only become a constant reminder of what he lost, therefore he knew he must leave the town and never look back.

It took him a week to recover. When he was released from the hospital he went back to his house and packed a single bag, containing clothes, his identifications, and nothing else.

He called a cab, which took him to the airport, and he left on the first flight out of town.

As his plane lifted off the ground, Henry stayed still in his seat. He was leaving the place which to him now contained only memories of loss. A cold, dark, and uncomfortable feeling filled the place and he could not bear to look back. As he left the town behind, he began to feel a calming emptiness inside.

Part 2 – Alone

The first letter arrived many years after he had left Vergenne.

Henry had finally settled down in Bayfield Wisconsin, a very small town, and he was comfortable knowing nobody. He found a job at the only middle school in town and was content working as a janitor.

Many of his nights were spent outside in the cold, sitting in a chair in his backyard, staring up at the stars.

The cold soothed him, made him feel empty, which was the feeling he liked. The cold outside helped the cold inside. The same cold and heavy feeling that he had been filled with in the hospital had remained like a constant reminder of the night he lost his family.

He thought about nothing in the cold. Let his mind just sit through cold nights and wait for death to come. One day it would come and take him away from the merciless world that now offered him nothing, showed promise of nothing, and gave hope for nothing.

But when the first letter arrived it awakened something in him, a warm feeling inside that he did not like. He sat out in the cold much more after the first letter, trying to drown the warmth in cold, hoping it would go away.

It was the location of the letters that had jolted him. A feeling like lightning in his body, sparking his nerves, sending warm currents up and down his spine. He left the letter on the table for a week while he sat outside in the cold trying to make the warmth go away.

Finally the day came and he picked up the letter from the table and flipped it over in his hands a couple of times. The warmth coursed up and down his back and finally he slid a finger under the lip of the envelope and ripped it open.

He pulled out the single sheet of paper and read the dainty hand writing that was clearly female.

It begged him to return. Return to the town that had pushed him away. As the thought reached his mind he threw the letter across the room as if it was electrified. He could not go back. What would happen if he went back he could not bear and could not stop. If he went back to that town he knew he would not come back alive.

Later that night, instead of throwing the letter away, he surprised himself by picking it up and putting it into a drawer in his room. Not being able to throw it away only confused him more and in his confusion he grew even more reclusive. He started missing days at work and finally was fired.

His days were now filled with cold. The cold enveloped him, kept him safe in its icy grip. He let it overtake him, let it calm and soothe him. Let it take every fiber of his being.

Then again, another letter came. It was from the same woman, written in the same dainty scrawl, with the same begging question.

He once again felt the warmth cascade up and down his spine. Felt the same unwanted fear of going back. Felt the drawing feeling of it, heard the town now calling his name.

He threw the second letter on top of the first and closed the drawer.

After the second letter he spent every waking hour outside in the cold. Sat naked in it, almost froze to death in it time and time again, but yet every day followed the same routine.

But what he couldn't rid himself of was the doubt in his conviction. He could still see the words on the letter, the familiar drone of it. The singular question that racked his mind was: should he go back?

The letter begged him to come back. Said that there was something he needed to know. The woman said she was dying and had been for years now. She had kept a secret that she so dearly needed to tell him.

He wondered what it was and could not find an answer. He knew the name, a young girl when he had known her, but they had been in love. Her parents had been against him and the girl's relationship and had ended up forbidding the two to meet again.

The woman held a secret which she felt compelled to tell him. As she neared her death bed she felt that it was necessary that he should know.

When the third letter came it sent him into a state of frenzy. Once again it was filled with the same begging question and now he could hear the town yelling for him. He could hear its crazy high pitched squeal of desire. Its wanting and loathed sound filled his dreams. It cursed every step that he made and continued to haunt his days.

The decision was upon him and once finally decided upon the screaming stopped. The town now had its wish.

He wrote a single letter back to the woman - telling her that he would be there soon.

He packed a small suitcase, a couple of day's clothes, and threw the three letters on top. He made it to the airport and came to the terminal and was soon aboard the plane. He sat, thoughts now filled with questions.

He watched from the window as the plane lifted from the ground and felt elated. It was a new feeling and he could not bear to infer its meaning. As he looked out the window, watching the ground below grow farther and farther away, he knew one thing was true.

He would never return to the town of Bayfield.

Part 3 – The Return

The plane touched down in Vermont hours later and Henry departed, finding a young girl, appearing to be in her mid-twenties, waiting for him with a sign in hand.

He walked over to her and she smiled.

“Are you Henry?” She asked.

Henry nodded.

“I have a car waiting outside. Do you have any other bags?”

Henry shook his head.

“Then follow me.”

He followed silently behind her as they made their way from the airport to the car outside.

The young woman tried to start many conversations but was greeted by silence from her companion. It was not until they crossed Otter Creek Bridge that suddenly Henry spoke.

“Stop!” Henry blurted out.

The young woman, startled, stomped on the brakes and put her hand to her chest.

“What’s wrong?” She asked casting a worried glance at Henry.

Henry got out of the car, without a word, and made his way over to the railing.

Meanwhile the young woman stayed in the car, watching Henry intently.

Even though there was a warm breeze in the air Henry once again felt the cold permeate through him. It started from his feet and soon filled his entire body.

The place where they had replaced the six or seven feet of missing railing was a slightly different color.

Henry reached out and rubbed the newer wood. He could feel the tears come to his eyes and remembered everything from that night. He remembered the children screaming, saw the lifeless look in his oldest son's eyes, felt the freezing water rush in through the broken windows, and felt his wife's body beside him.

He fell to his knees, still holding on to the rail, and heard a car door open behind him.

He was startled when he felt the warm hand of the young girl on his shoulder. He sprang to his feet and looked at her through wet eyes.

"Are you okay?" She asked.

Henry nodded, walking past her and making his way back to the car.

The girl stood for a couple of minutes, alone, looking out on the river.

Finally she made her way back to the car and got in.

"You are the one who lost his family in that accident a couple years ago weren't you?"

The girl asked.

Henry nodded.

The car was silent for the rest of the ride and finally they pulled up to the small house where the girl and her mother lived.

Henry got out, grabbed his bag, and made his way to the house.

He was greeted at the door by the familiar face of a woman he had known many years before. She had been much younger then, although older now, he could still see the innocent face of the girl he had fell in love with long ago.

She smiled at him as he made his way up to the front door. The warm feeling returned and for once he did not want to get rid of it.

"I am glad you could make it," The woman told Henry as he opened the screen door.

She hugged him and he did not resist. He took delight in the warmth of her body. Smelled the light flowery smell of her perfume.

Muriel's daughter came up the walk and smiled at her mother.

"Henry, I want you to meet Violet. She is twenty five and will be going out on her own next year."

Violet made her way past him and into the house.

"Would you like some tea?" Muriel asked.

Henry nodded and followed her into the kitchen.

Sitting at the small dinner table he watched Muriel as she made the tea.

His thoughts wandered back to his teenage years. He and Muriel had been good friends and had turned into lovers.

Muriel's father, a strict Catholic, did not approve of their sexual choices and told his daughter she was no longer allowed to see Henry.

He had forgotten her among the daily happenings of his own life. After her he married and had kids of his own. But for some reason he was brought back to her.

When she was done she set the steaming cup of tea in front of him.

"It has been hard the last year," She told Henry. "I was diagnosed with cancer and now have been given only six months to live."

Henry instinctively reached out a hand towards her and then in fear pulled it back. He was not willing to be hurt again and yet was drawn in by her pain.

She seemed not to notice his reaction to her news and carried on with her story.

"So I have something that you need to know and felt that I should tell you before I die."

Violet entered the dining room. "I just came to get a drink," She said, making her way to the fridge.

"Will you be joining us for dinner Violet?" Muriel asked and Violet nodded her head.

Muriel looked down at her watch, "Dinner will be in a couple of hours."

Turning back to Henry she asked, "You will stay for dinner won't you?"

Henry smiled and said, "Sure I will."

Violet left the room and Henry asked, "So what did you want to tell me?"

"I don't want to spoil the surprise. Maybe you could get settled into wherever you are staying and we could meet here in a couple of hours."

"I don't have a vehicle," he told her.

Muriel walked over to the counter and grabbed a set of keys.

"I have two cars; you can take the one in the driveway."

Henry was about to object but the look in her eyes stopped him.

He walked over and took the keys from her hand.

"I will be back in a couple of hours."

When Henry returned to the house at five dinner was waiting.

When they finished eating Violet cleared the table while Muriel and Henry drank tea.

Violet walked in a little bit later and Muriel told her, "Sit down. I want to talk to the both of you."

Violet sat down across from Henry and Muriel.

"I knew Henry from a long time ago," Muriel told Violet, "and we were well acquainted. It was because of my father that we broke up. I did not want to and there was good reason."

Muriel turned to Henry and said, "I did not want us to break up, and for reasons unknown I let my father have his way. But something else came out of our relationship. Something that was more permanent than my love for you."

Henry sat, dazed and confused, unable to figure out what she was trying to say.

"What are you trying to tell me?" Henry finally asked.

"I am trying to tell you that when our relationship ended there was a tie between us more permanent," Muriel told him.

"You were pregnant?" he asked.

Violet leaned forward and with a look of astonishment on her face told her mother, "You gave birth to me at eighteen."

Henry jumped to his feet and cried out, "Violet is my daughter!"

Muriel was clearly disturbed by Henry's sudden outburst and looked from Henry to Violet not knowing which to answer first.

"He is my father isn't he?" Violet asked.

"My father," Muriel told them, "wanted to keep it quiet because he did not want to be embarrassed. So he told no one. The town never knew and that included Henry. It wasn't until I learned that I was dying that I knew he had to know."

"So I am Violet's father?" Henry asked again.

"Yes," Muriel said.

Henry made his way to the door and Muriel reached out for him as he passed.

"I know about your family Henry," She cried out. "I am sorry to bring up bad memories but you had to know."

Henry slammed the front door as he left and ran to the car. He jumped into the front seat and tore out of the drive way toward his hotel.

He was so confused. God had taken away his family and now he learned he still had a family? How could God be so cruel? He could not replace the memories of his old family with memories of a new one.

Once in his hotel room he sat on the edge of the bed, head in his hands, weeping.

Finally he went to the computer in his room and brought up an old newspaper article about the accident.

“The cause of the accident,” The first paragraph began, “is still unknown, but there is one explanation that continues to be the most likely reason for this tragic crash.”

Henry felt the cold coming back. This time it started from the inside and reverberated through his body. His veins felt like they were filled with ice.

“Although police have not been able to prove any of the allegations,” the article continued, “it is believed that Stan Busso may have fallen asleep at the wheel, causing his car to veer into the Marcus’ family vehicle. Mr. Busso declines to comment on these rumors and police think that this is the most likely explanation.”

He felt angry now. He remembered the idea of revenge and although he still thought he was incapable of murder he needed answers. He needed Stan Busso to admit the truth of what happened that night, what happened to his family. He would get the truth out of Stan Busso no matter the cost.

Part 4 – Revenge

Paul Groiner was the owner of the only gun shop in town and when he saw Henry he immediately recognized him.

“Hey Henry,” Paul greeted, “I didn’t know you were back in town.”

“I need a gun Paul,” Henry said.

“You aren’t planning to kill someone are you?” Paul asked.

“Which one would you recommend?” Henry asked without answering his question.

Paul, uncomfortable now, asked, “What are you planning to use it for?”

“Protection.”

“Well then a nice little side arm will do well for you. I would recommend this one right here.”

Paul pulled from his case of weapons a simple 8 chamber handgun and handed it to Henry.

“And how much would this cost me?” Henry asked still not looking up.

Paul scratched his chin and said, “That one right there would cost you three hundred.”

“I’ll take it.” Henry said.

Henry left the gun shop and sat in the car, unable to take his eyes off the gun.

Henry was still sitting in the car, staring at the gun in his lap, when he was startled by a knock on the car window.

He looked up to see the slightly worried face of Paul Groiner.

Henry put the car in drive and sped off.

Henry pulled up to the house of Stan Busso and turned off the car.

After a few minutes he opened the car door and stepped out into the night.

His knock seemed dead and hollow, and only made the cold inside of him worse.

The door opened a minute later and he saw that it was Stan's wife. She must not have recognized him at first and then finally a look came across her face when Henry asked, "Is Stan home?"

"Henry Marcus, is that you?" She asked and smiled at him.

Henry smiled back, almost without thinking, and asked, "May I come in Mrs. Busso?"

Stepping aside and opening the door said "Sure."

"So is Stan home?" Henry asked again.

She hesitated, "You came to see him?"

"I need to talk with him about something," Henry said.

"Who is it honey?" Henry heard someone call from the other room and he could tell it was Stan.

When Henry started to walk towards the voice, Stan's wife followed, startled by his sudden rise to action.

"It's Henry Marcus dear. He has come to see you."

Henry arrived at the door to Stan's office and saw him sitting in the chair behind his desk.

Stan looked up when Henry walked in and a look of fear crept into his face.

His wife arrived seconds later. She stood in the doorway and saw the look on her husband's face first and then looked to Henry and saw the gun in his hand.

"Honey..." His wife said hesitantly.

Stan put a hand up and said, "You can leave, we just need to have a talk."

His wife opened her mouth to speak but instead of speaking she left without a word.

"We don't have much time do we Stan?" Henry said.

"I suppose we don't."

Henry raised the gun. "You killed my whole family."

Stan stood and put his hands up.

"I'm sorry," Stan said. "I never meant for it to happen. I never got the chance to tell you how sorry I was."

"But you killed my whole family," Henry replied. "They are all dead because of you."

"I know," Stan said, tears coming to his eyes. "I said..."

"I know what you said Stan," Henry told him, "Or at least I know what you told the papers."

Stan said nothing, only cowered in fear behind his desk.

"Something has to be done," Henry told him.

"Please don't kill me," Stan pleaded, sobs racking his body.

"I have to make you pay, there is no other way."

Stan stood still and looked at Henry waiting for his execution.

"Put the gun down Mr. Marcus," Henry heard from behind him.

"We want this to end well Henry," Another voice said. "So why don't you put down the gun."

The two uniformed officers crept into the room, guns raised, pointed at Henry.

"What is going on here Mr. Busso?" The first officer asked.

"I was just talking to my friend here," Stan said.

“One more time Mr. Marcus,” The second officer warned. “Put the gun down.”

“We want this to end well, so put the gun down and we can talk like men,” The first officer said again.

Henry kept the gun pointed at Stan and shook his head. “He killed my whole family.”

“We can sort all that out after you put the gun down.”

“I can’t let him get away with it,” Henry said.

“You need to put the gun down Mr. Marcus.”

“Tell them,” Henry said to Stan. “Tell them all how you were responsible for killing my whole family. You fell asleep at the wheel didn’t you?”

Stan stared at Henry and did not answer.

“Tell them,” Henry shouted.

“All right, all right. I fell asleep at the wheel, that’s why your family is dead,” Stan shouted.

“That’s all I needed to hear,” Henry said and pulled the trigger.

A shot rang out, then two, and finally a third.

Stan and Henry both fell to the floor and the two officers exchanged quick glances. One of the officers advanced on Henry while the other stood where he was, gun still raised.

Stan’s wife rushed to her husband and found him lying on the floor sobbing, but alive.

“Is he dead?” The officer who still had his gun raised asked.

The officer kneeling over Henry said, “He’s dead,” and picked up the gun and spun open the barrel.

“What is it Hal?” The first officer asked, seeing the look on his partners face.

Hal showed his partner the gun and said, “It wasn’t loaded.”