

As Simple Lies

Hanging pensive and alone, exposed, an anomaly on the gray cinder stacked wall, the clock with dark hands wrapped in the pale color of the blue sky, tersely proclaimed the arrival of one o'clock to the audience of eight nervous, wide and gawking eyes clustered tightly together marking the center of the colorless room.

"I just knew it," said Most. "I knew it wouldn't work, it couldn't work. Why, didn't I just—"

"What? What are you talking about? What's that chatter? What're you going on for?" said More.

"I knew it. We all knew it. Tell me you didn't know it. Look me in the eye, and tell me, you didn't know it like yesterday's headlines."

"See here, what's the matter with you? No one knows nothing. You hear me? No one knows nothing, least of all you. Stop your muttering, will ya?"

"Deny it, sure. For all the good it'll do you now. What does it matter? Go ahead, what do I care? I know the truth just like I knew it then. I knew it, and I know you knew it. We all knew it, but we did it anyway. Why'd we go ahead—"

"Shut up. You're talking nonsense. Always talking, talking, talking. *Nonsense*. Do us all a favor—do yourself a favor, and just shut up."

"Stop it. Just stop it—the both of you. What are we, animals? Simpletons?" said Less. "Are we all just amateurs running some vain game? Mindless frauds ripping off old ladies for spare dimes? Shut up—now, you hear? Let me think. Let's all think. Now for once—just for one bloody time—let's all just think."

"Thinking is fine, but we need to *do*. We need to act. What can we do?" said More. "What's the plan?"

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"Let's see here," said Less. "What've we got, and what've we got to work with? What do we know?"

"Well, it's a few minutes past one just now. It was supposed to happen already, and there's no word. There's always a word of something, one way or the other, but there's no word."

"That's what I'm saying," said Most. "Don't you understand? That's what I'm saying right there. This isn't right, and it's never been right from the very beginning, and we all knew it. Oh hell, we all knew it."

"We've all been here before. Haven't we?" said Less. "There's no use in losing our cools over it. So what if there's no word? What does that mean to us?"

"Who's been here before? Someone, yes. Not us. Not me—not you," said Most. "Listen, the job goes or the job doesn't go, and when the job doesn't go, they start to get nervous, you see. Sure, someone's been here before. Someone's been everywhere you want or don't want to be, and I don't want to be here. You know why? Cause where's that someone who's been here before us? Where are they at now? Huh? I tell you, this wasn't right from the beginning, and it's certainly not right now."

"Just cool it, I say," said Less. "Cut this nonsense out. You're not helping anything going on like this. We're getting nowhere at all. Why certainly, we haven't been here, but we were in tight spaces before, all of us. You—why, you were the runner; the lead man in Barcelona last summer—weren't you? With the politician and his mistress. That certainly didn't start pretty and the media had a field day, but it all got cleaned up real nice, didn't it? And, just last month, I was in the Belarus fiasco. It was a mess, I can tell you that

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much, but it came out in the end. We all came out in the end. Now, this is no different. We'll all come out here in the end."

"Yeah, and I was in Paris in the fall. That dreadful Paris job. This isn't even as bad as all that," said More.

"Paris, Barcelona, Belarus... London. Yeah, I was in London on the late delivery," said Least. "*And?* I'm not there—we aren't there, now. We are here. Where's the pony?"

"Listen, we all know where we are, we were just saying—"

"And, now, I'm just saying: where's the pony?"

"Now, you think I know? You think I've got some magic ball to conjure him up here? I know as much as you know, and that's nothing. Nothing at all."

"Maybe you do, maybe you don't. All I know is that this isn't Paris, Barcelona, Belarus, or London, and it's eight after one and there's no pony. That's eight minutes past red, and red means you're dead. He's nearly forty minutes late. In Paris, there was a drop guy. In Barcelona, in Belarus, London—a drop guy. Maybe late, maybe not, but always a pony. Always a drop guy."

"So he got caught up," said More. "Maybe someone saw something they weren't supposed to. Perhaps, there was a little extra to account for, a little more to clean up. He's coming, though. They never send out just one, anyhow. Maybe someone got the first guy, but there's always a second, a third, and so on. So, they're late—"

"He's not late. He was late forty minutes ago. At red, you're no longer late, you're not coming."

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"You see, and where does that leave us?" said Most. "We're the bagmen holding the empty bag. There's no pony, there's no one out there. There's just us, here and now. Listen; like I was trying to tell you, something's not right, something's not been right from the first get go. They always send more than one. They couldn't have gotten all of them—"

"Now, let's just cool it, you hear?" said Less. "There's still time. There's always still—"

BRRRRRRNNNGG, BRNG, BRNG, BRRRRRRNNNNGGGGG

Abruptly making its presence known, the blood red phone, sitting dejected, unaccompanied by clutter or acquaintance, on the solitary metal table, yelled out its alarm as eight wearied, troubled eyes, turned abruptly, full of dread, as if feverishly enamored, towards the source of the vexing, piercing cry.

"What, what's—why now?" said Most.

"Answer it," said Less.

"Who?" said More.

"You. *Now*. Answer it."

"But, what should I say? What can I—"

BRRRRRRNNNGG, BRNG, BRNG, BRRRRRRNNNNGGGGG

"I want to know—why now? Why should they call now?" said Most. "You know what I think? I say to hell with them, to hell with them all. This is what they wanted. *Us*. They tell *us* to make it, to work it out, and now they just can't—"

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"It doesn't matter *why*?" said Less. "To hell with your *why* and your *why now*. It doesn't matter. They are calling, and they are calling now, and someone has to answer it. *Now.*"

"I'll answer it," said Least. "Hello . . . Yes . . . Uh-huh . . . I understand . . . Well, I don't suppose you could, no . . . Yes . . . Sure, if we must, we must, what other option is there . . . Yes . . . Listen, we all knew the risks from the beginning—all of us. None of us has lost the nerve . . . You asked us to secure the product. Give us the time. Trust us. That's all we want . . . Yes . . . No, I hear you. I understand . . . Yes . . . Okay . . . I've got it . . . No, that's clear . . . "

"What'd they say?" said Most.

"You know what they said," said More. "The same thing they always say. Get the job done, or they will wipe the slate clean."

"Now, you stop your talking. You hear me?" said Most. "Listen here—I'm not your pusher—I'm not your dummy to slap around. I want to know what they said. We're all equal here. Simple, right? We're all here, all part of the same team, running together. They wanted me just as much as they wanted you. You're no better than I am—"

"No, tough guy? I'm not any better than you, am I?"

"For all that is holy, just settle it down, will you?" said Less.

"No, No—I demand to know," said Most. "What did the man on the phone say? What did they say?"

"They said to get the job done," said Least. "They said that they weren't sure they could trust us anymore. They said that if we didn't come through, if we couldn't come through, they would have to make other arrangements."

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"Other arrangements? *Other arrangements?*" said Most. "I knew it. I knew it all along, and now it's here staring me in the face, staring me down—cold, fierce, and hard. I can see it—"

"Just let up, will you? Give it all a rest," said More. "Say, what is this anyways? They aren't sure 'they can trust us anymore.' What the hell does that mean? Just one thing goes wrong, and all of a sudden we're on the out? Who's to say what happened to the drop guy? So what? Maybe, we send out one of us, then? Maybe one of us goes and makes the hit?"

"Yeah, is that so? Maybe one of us just goes and does it, just like that?" said Less. "And you know the hit, then? Be my guest. Listen, we're all here because we're specialists. We come in the backdoor; we don't blow in through the front. We do the clean up after the lights go down, the party closes up. Our job starts here with the drop guy."

"So what is it to us, then? You said it yourself: our job starts here. No drop guy—no job. We could just walk away. What the hell does it matter? We all just leave, and leave it all behind. Let them make their *other arrangements*, and leave us out of it."

"Oh, I knew it, it just goes from bad to worse. *Just walk away?* How are we to just walk away?" said Most. "They'll know. They'll find us, and they will wrap up the loose ends. Maybe there's no drop guy, but what do they care? That's not their business. Their business is to collect. This is us. Don't you see? You see it—you all see it. The drop guy doesn't answer to them. We do."

"He's right," said Least. "It's all on us. They made that much clear. We get the job done, or they wipe it all clean. They'll just erase and start over."

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"Then that leaves us little choice, I'd say. What else can we do?" said More. "We have to make the hit ourselves. Surely, they told one of us who it was."

"They didn't tell me," said Most. "I knew nothing, just to show up here. I didn't even know you all would be called in, too. Oh, I knew it then. It was so different. I knew it when I got here and you were all here, too. It wasn't right, then, and it's not right now. I tell you, it's just—"

"*Listen*," said More. "Someone's got to know. They didn't tell me. They had to tell someone. Which one of you knows?"

"Oh hell, what does it matter?" said Less. "Like I was saying, we all have a very precise set of skills and, as far as I know, none of us possess . . . none of *our* skills includes the precision to make the hit, to make the kill—"

The head, concealed beneath the wide brim of the blackened hat, set atop the long dark figure nestled neatly in the far corner, lifted, as the long shuttered eyes encased within slowing opened as if beacons bringing new light to a darkened landscape, both movements combining to signal an arrival, a subtle change in the room, barely perceptible, if at all.

"I know who the target is," said Just.

"I was wondering when you would chime in," said More. "Perfect—just what we needed, too. Something from this hack—all washed up. You know, I don't even know why you're here—"

"I'm here for the same reason you are," said Just. "Just like the man said: we all possess a quite particular and valuable skill set. We all have *something* to contribute."

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"Oh yeah," said More. "And what's a no good, washed up runner like you have to contribute, anyhow? I had taken you for dead before you showed up here today. After that job two years' ago—Hong Kong in the summer—what a disaster. Twelve people dead and all for nothing. Twelve dead, no product, and, yet, you're still standing here. *Unbelievable.*"

"Quite right you are, and what a particularly fitting word choice—*unbelievable*," said Just. "Though, one could also say—everything's not always as simple as it might seem."

"And what's that?" said More. "Some kind of riddle? What a piece of work. I oughta—"

"Shove it," said Less. "The both of you. Forget Hong Kong and riddles. Let's get back to the here and now. For Christ's sake, it's a quarter past one. *Jesus.*"

"You're right," said Least. "Let's get back to the matter at hand: that missing pony, but more importantly—our mystery target. Talk. *Now*. Who's the target?"

"Oh, you all are hopeless," said Most. "That's just it, though, we're all hopeless. Why are you asking him who the target is? Come on, just look at what's right in front of you."

"Fine, let's look at it, then," said Less. "It's 1:17 and there's no word from no pony. Our bag is empty and the clock keeps ticking. This was foul forty-five minutes ago and bad we when ventured past red with no word or sign. If we hit 1:30, we won't have any choice in the matter at all, someone else will make it for us. When that clock strikes 1:30, we're all dead. It's as simple as that."

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"So, while we still have a choice, let's make the most of it," said Least. "It's all so simple, you take the choice you have, and you don't ask the why's or the what fors, you just do it and you go. If there's still a target out there, we find him, take him out, and get on with our job. We're runners. We need a product to run. Where's our target?"

"But we're running already," said Most. "Right now. Don't you see—"

"Shut up, you," said More. "I've heard enough from you and your nonsense. I want to hear more from him—the washout. You know the target, huh? You know so, so much. So answer me this—what are we? Just some simple fools playing simple games?"

"It sounds like one of us is speaking reason, maybe we should all start listening to him," said Just. "We are running already, are we not? Running a circuit, a labyrinth with no end in sight. Isn't there more here than we are acknowledging. I mean look around—a room full of runners with nothing to run. A little odd, don't you think? So many of us with the same specialty? How many times have you worked with more than one, two runners, at the most? And, how many do we have? *Five?* Five here and what—for just one job? That doesn't strike anyone as maybe just a little bit odd."

"Yeah? Well, maybe it was a big job," said More. "Maybe this was the big haul, and one guy couldn't conceal and run all of it at once. We've all done this long enough to know that time is of the essence. More product takes more time, and the only way to cut that down is with more runners."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Fine then, say it was a big job. Say whatever you want. Who here knows the product, then? What did they tell you? *As yet undetermined?* How many times has a job started without a word to what the product was going to be? Come on—what is wrong here? And the tools? How come there's just us and this empty room as bare

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as a tomb? What—was the pony supposed to supply the product *and* the implements to remove the product?"

"He's right," said Most. "He's right, and you see it now. You all see it now. It's there, and in the same place it's been all along—staring us in the face. As if our own reflection in the mirror—ourselves staring back at us."

"*See what?* This is ridiculous. This is absurd," said More. "Ok, ok. Fine, smart guy, well, if you know so much, then you should know why we all are here. You tell us the product. It's not my job to ask questions. You hear me, you scumbag. It's my job to get the goods out. That's my job. This isn't my job—sitting around thinking about how screwed we all are. I get the goods, and I get them out. That's my job, plain and simple, and, it's a job I'm damn good at."

"If you're so damn good at it, how come only half your fancy reds made it out of Paris?" said Just. "It seems that you like to talk about the past, let's talk then. Let's talk about botched runs, misplaced products. Then again diamonds are so hard to hold onto, aren't they? Especially those rare red ones."

"Why, I oughta—"

"Oughta what? So, you deny it? What did happen in Paris, then? You were the runner. You were responsible for the product. What happened to the diamonds?"

"I did my job. Like always," said More. "It wasn't my fault—the pony was hit. I had to make due. They lost three men in that take. The last man to make it to the safe had just a remainder, a small grab, and with the increased scrutiny, we had to make due of a messy situation. They were watching everything, nothing was getting in or out of the whole country without the whole goddamn place coming down on you. We were lucky to

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get one out, and I got five. Five bloody diamonds, you bastard. Because of me, we got five when we should have got none. What's it to you what happened to those diamonds?"

"Nothing. It matters just about as much as what you are worth to me, perhaps to anyone—nothing at all."

"And I suppose you're worth gold and diamonds. I suppose you're some grand hero come to save us all."

"Who? *Me*? Why, I'm just plain vanilla—just as simple as simple can be."

"Could we, please?" said Less. "So we've all missed marks, maybe fumbled products. What does it matter? We're about to miss this mark, and we don't even have any product to fumble. One last time—who's the target?"

"Fine . . ." said Just. "If we are still going to deny what's staring us all in the face, I'll tell you, but I'll let you know this right now—you're not going to like it. The target it's . . . it's one of us."

"Oh, that's it then? The target's here, huh? So, what?" said More. "That makes one of us the pony then? One of us is here to make the hit? That's rich!"

"Is it, now?" said Just.

"Hey, now. What is this—"

"What's the big idea—"

"What the hell—"

"*Shit*—"

"He's got a gun," said Most. "See—I told you. I told you all, but you just wouldn't listen. None of you would listen. Oh, but we all knew. We were all just so blind, so blind."

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"Well, we'll all see soon enough," said Just.

"Hey, what is this? Some kind of shakedown?" said More. "*You*—You're just here to wipe the slate clean. You were just waiting. All along, just sitting, waiting, and now, the pony didn't show, so you are just going to erase. Is that it? That's it, *isn't it?*"

"Cool it. Cool it, will you?" said Less. "Let's not lose our heads. We can't lose our heads, we just can't. Listen, what the shit is going on here?"

"Well, I think it's obvious, isn't it?" said Just. "So simple, it was there all along. Like the man said, some times some things go wrong. They can't have loose ends. They're not in the business of loose ends."

"That's it?" said Less. "That's all? Hey, now—hey, what are you doing? Put that gun down. We're all the same here, aren't we? We're all just the same, more or less. You're one of us. We're all together. We can fix this—"

"Enough talking! I've had just about as much of this as I'm going to take," said More.

"Come on, now. Keep yourself together, man—"

"Stop it, you hear—"

"*Hold him—*"

BANG

BANG BANG

Something, a movement, pure force and aggression, a springing out, bursting forth with anger and fear, leapt into the center of the room, searching out the gun and its accomplice, but meeting only a quick deadly rejoin from the long dark figure still nestled away in the corner, awakening an eruption of noise and fury, a fluttering flurry cascading

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here then there, then motionless altogether, leaving the room more at a halt, more alone than at the very start with six wild eyes bewildered and frantic, searching the trails of blood left behind, running the ground, flowing in the wake of the retreating chaos.

"*Oh, God,*" said Most. "Oh, God. The game's up. We're all up. We're finished, aren't we? Don't—don't just stop there. If this is it, this is it. We knew it, we just refused to face it, but I'm ready. I don't care, anymore. I don't. I want it. I want it all to end. I did it. It was me. *Oh, God.* It was me. Don't you see?"

"*Shit.* What is this madness?" said Less. "Put the gun down. Stop sputtering this madness. He's not moving. *He's dead.*"

"Oh, God. *Oh, God.* Why did I do it—why did any of us do it?" said Most. "I knew I shouldn't have, but it seemed so . . . so *simple*. Oh, God, why? After all, we were the runners. Sometimes, things go wrong, and you can't always control the product. Oh, God. I mean, you know it. We all know it. *Oh, God.* Just do it, man. Just clean up the loose ends, already. It was me. You hear me? It was *me*—in Barcelona. They made the hit. It was more, though. I hadn't planned it—at least, not at first. It was just what happened, and it seemed so bloody simple. It was supposed to be two paintings, but after they made the hit, they found three, and things went wrong. I had to think fast. *Oh, God.* Forget it—I got them out. I got them all out. I did my job, and I deserved it. You weren't there. *You don't know.* So maybe a few reds went missing from Paris, a painting from Barcelona, they still got what they wanted. They got more than their share. What about *us*? It was *us* out there, not them. Oh, God. Just do it, already. Just wipe your slate clean. Oh, God, do it or I'll do it for you—"

"For Christ's sake—"

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"Stop—"

BANG

Broken, another body, bloody now, utterly spent, crumpled to the cold expanse of floor.

"So, that's it, then?" said Least. "We messed up, then. All of us—we muddied the waters, and you're here to make the hit. Wipe the slate clean, and start again."

"*Jesus*. What is this?" said Less. "You just killed two men. If you're here to kill us all, than get on with it, will you? I won't beg. I won't pander to some higher power. Wipe it clean. Get on with it."

BRRRRRRNNNGG, BRNG, BRNG, BRRRRRRNNNNGGGGG

"I hope you don't mind, but I believe this one's for me," said Just. "Hello . . . Yes, it's done . . . the hit's been made . . . No, it's done . . . I'm certain, we have what we wanted. The product is secure . . . Yes. Ok . . ."

"What's that mean? *The hit's been made?*" said Less. "We're still here. You just said, *the product is secure*. There's no product. There's no pony, you said so yourself. If the hit was here, where was the product?"

"It's really so simple, isn't it?" said Just. "The hit has been made, and the product is still here. Just like always, the target and the product are in the same place. You two are the product, or rather the skills you still possess. The company, they're not interested in senseless bloodshed. They are interested in turning a profit, in securing valuable product, and to do that they need runners with a very particular skill set. A skill set, which has already been stated, that you both possess."

"What about them?" said Least. "What makes us so special?"

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"Nothing," said Just. "We really are all the same, aren't we? I'm not killing for the sake of killing. Is that what you think this is? Someone threw some dice and decided that they should die and you should live? I was sent here to collect the product just like always. You know just as well as I do, sometimes not all the product can be saved, so you save what you can and cut loose the rest. You clean it up, and move on. They had a mess on their hands—they had too much product that was getting too loose, too out of control. So they sent me, to put it back right, to save what I could before all of it was lost."

"So, what, they wanted you to kill two of us, for what? To make a point that they could," said Less.

"No, to make the point that they should," said Just. "I'm here to make the process more efficient. To wipe the slate clean, so we can start again, but to start again, you have to have something to start with. Today is the end of your life, gentlemen. Tomorrow, you start a new one. You both died in this room, just as I did, two years ago after my product disappeared into China. Two years ago just after Hong Kong, I was called to a job here. When I got here, I found five other runners. Two of us left that day. Listen, we are runners, we run the product or we don't. You've been alive this long, been running this long, because you are the best of the best. You run. You keep running. Anyone sitting still long enough is better off dead, anyways."

"So, we keep running and for them. That's it. That's all the choice we have?" said Least. "What if we just walk away? What if we're done?"

"Then you're done," said Just. "What does it matter? You'll die just like everyone else. Maybe they'll come for you. Maybe they won't. What does it matter? Maybe tomorrow, maybe when you are an old man, alone in some sad room. Maybe you'll die of

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cancer in twenty years. Maybe you'll die of a bullet to the head next week. Who's to say? But you'll die. We're all the same. Eventually we all stop running, sooner or later."

"What about the reds from Paris or the missing painting? Aren't you going to ask me about Belarus? Don't you care about London?"

"London's in the past. Belarus was in your old life. Tomorrow is your new life."

"Do you think I took the product? Or him, did he run the London job into the ground? Did you, in Hong Kong?"

"I never was in Hong Kong. That runner died, remember? He wasn't perfect, no, but who is? We can all learn from such failures, can we not?"

"So, that's it, then? We just go on like nothing happened," said Least.

"No, I would go on like everything happened, the whole world and everything in it happened. I would go on, but more so, more fierce, more alive. I would go on more than ever before."

"Then let it be done. Let's leave this all behind. I can accept that, at least," said Less. "I can accept another day to run."

A moment passed with no indication of its doing so. The blood red phone sat, as if a disused vestige of some previous life, still and silent, much like the two muted bodies sunk below, underneath the sea of their own spilt fluids. Slowly, a new moment eclipsed the first as the shrouded black hands enclosed in the pale blue sky of the clock struck 1:30. No visible movement, no audible noise, no frantic bewildered eyes made claim to welcome its pronouncement. Some new peace awakened then, as if the dawn, speaking itself into the barrenness between the walls. Nothing stood to argue against.

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One man, dead and reborn, turned, grasped the knob on the door, and rent open the entrance of that suffocating sarcophagus. A light of a new world broke in on that morbid enclosure of death and repose as an infant exited the bloody womb of his grisly making. Another moment later, the stone of the door rolled back over the opening to the tomb abandoned behind.

There within, two men yet stood still. A gun dangled at one side. One man breathed deep then exhaled, looked around then back within. After a moment there remained nothing more to say, save the only thing he had left inside. His lips opened, and all that was left exited out into the room.

"Everything's just so trivial, then?" said Least. "Just black and white."

"More or less," said Just. "Just like ourselves—a *reflection* of ourselves—merely some small measure of simple."