

Red-Handed

I first read about Emma's murder on Sunday, the day after, on Fox 4. The next morning I was in the office before most, as usual.

My editor, Mark Madsen, had hired me as a part-timer six months before. I'd resolved to demand a full-time position by the end of the month. An itinerant journalist can only subsist on eggs and beans for so long.

"Mornin' Jay," he called to me from his corner office. His tall, heavysset frame seemed to absorb the rays of a rising blood-orange summer sun. "Got a second?"

"Sure," I said. I tapped with my knuckles the glossy family photos stapled to the empty cubicles as I tread toward his office.

He shut the door. "Sit, sit. Getcha anything to drink? Coffee?" Madsen rarely allowed precious time to be wasted with platitudes, so I sensed some aberration was afoot.

"Thanks, but I'm okay."

He nodded—a swift, truncated jerk of his head—and glared at me, mandible extended so that his peppered stubble seemed bent on reaching out and slashing me. It was a look I'd seen directed at interns with sloppy or late copy, or both, but he'd never aimed it at me. Perhaps he was harboring some long-concealed disgust.

"I got something for ya, and I'm afraid you aren't going to like it. We need someone on that murder out in Nevada." Madsen's jaw remained distended.

I nearly gagged from the sudden swelling in the back of my throat. But I didn't. I willed my face to obey a mold of equanimity. "And you want me to cover it," I said.

Madsen's head jerked down again. He dropped into his chair, air gasping out from the cushion as he did so. He glared at me from across his desk, strewn with paper piles following some form of organization privy to Madsen and Madsen alone. His hazel eyes squinted behind a chute of steam rising from a coffee mug held aloft but untouched, at least by his lips.

“You saw what that Blunt girl’s murder did for The Pitch last month. We can’t leave another one of these just dangling out there for the taking.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, you’ll do it?”

“I’ll do it,” I said, as though an alternative existed.

“Excellent. Now we need you to dive deep here. Figure out what the poor girl was like. Make us adore her. I’m sure her parents will be reclusive, but try a teacher or the grocer or even the damn mailman. It’s a small town—somebody who knew her will have something to say.

“I already booked you a hotel in Nevada. If you leave now you’ll be there in time for the presser.”

So that’s how I found myself driving back to Nevada, population 8,800 xenophobes, a bastion of tobacco-spittin’, pious goodness clinging to the sweet familiarity of small-town living even as modernity closed in.

It also happened to be my hometown. Maybe Madsen had found out and thus chosen to send me, thinking I’d have some sort of rapport with folks. He’d be wrong, of course. In the past seven years I’d spent all of one night that far south of Kansas City, and the visit had been short-lived.

The murder itself was watered down in the police department’s release:

A nine-year-old female walking home from a friend’s house in the 2600 block of Schug Avenue did not arrive home Saturday night. Twelve hours of searching with the assistance of two County Sheriff’s K9 Units and the Nevada Citizen Force commenced.

Early Sunday morning, NPD received a tip about the discovery of a young female’s body in the church cemetery. NPD Officers and County Sheriff’s Deputies responded to the scene at the Nevada Methodist Church at 7:45 a.m., and found the remains of the missing girl.

An investigation is ongoing.

They never think to look in the most obvious places, I thought.

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Half the town attended the press conference. The other half, with school being canceled, was surely at home with the children, wringing their collective hands raw on account of the weekend's terror.

The men, for there were only a handful of women present, reeked of sweat and snuff and mostly didn't recognize me or pretended not to. The ones who did nodded knowingly, perhaps thinking I'd come all the way back just to pay my respects. I wondered vaguely if they'd remove the tins of Skoal from their back pockets before sitting.

The conference was held in the high school gymnasium. The forlorn hoops made for sporty specters. A detective walked beneath one and across the floor to a podium, her heels and a cacophony of camera shutters a stark removal from the echoing basketballs and squeaky gym shoes of my memory.

The detective, perhaps nervous from the cameras, stood rigidly. But after a heavy breath and audible *ahem*, she surprised me by speaking authoritatively, if banally.

The ten minutes included no appeals to the Lord, another surprise, but did include an admonition to keep guns—loaded ones—always within reach. The detective's dark hair was pulled back so tight that I could see the jagged pattern of hair growth across her forehead. I pictured tugging on her bun, pulling it impossibly tighter.

"Evil has touched this community, but I promise you, this monster will pay for his sins," she cried at one point. And then, after a heavy pause, she shuffled her notes loudly on the podium.

"Any questions?" she asked with a glare, daring someone to speak. She was likely the sole woman in town with male subordinates, and that to me was the reason for her newfound clout.

"Ms. Meyer," I blurted out. "Does your department have a timeline for releasing the victim's name?"

Detective Shauna Meyer grasped her notes more firmly, seeming to recognize me immediately. We'd graduated in the same class, and I'd

once asked her out in a text, back when cell phones were beginning to give courage to cowards. She declined, also in a text, but I harbored no ill will.

“We’re not releasing the victim’s name,” she said shortly, her voice biting and her lips a flat line. “If there are no further questions, I have a murderer to catch.” She turned her back on the clamoring Fox 4 reporters and clacked away toward the girls’ locker room.

The men cheered. Some put what must have been salty fingers into their mouths and whistled shrilly. Between the whistles, I noticed the dirt caked beneath their fingernails was immune to sneering lips and stringy saliva.

I jumped up and trailed after Shauna, entering the girls’ locker room without hesitation. I caught her amid two rows of lockers, some of them ajar and revealing colorful sports bras and black spandex left inside out.

“Shauna, wait.”

She stopped and turned. “What do you want, Jay? You’re not even supposed to be in here.”

“I need a quote.”

“So you can further torment a grieving family?”

“People need to know about this. A story may prevent another murder.” I’d practiced the line a dozen times in my mirror on the drive down, trying to get the tone just right. My delivery, I think, was passable: sympathetically concerned but not overtly so.

“Everybody that needs to know about it already does.”

“So you think the murderer is from here? A resident?”

“We’re exploring all leads.”

I stared silently at her.

“Jay, what do you want me to say? A little girl was cut up into pieces and placed around the cemetery with what appears to be careful attention to detail—”

“Christ, Shauna.” I feigned surprise with hijacked eyebrows.

“You haven’t heard this yet? The whole town knows. We found a hand on Hans Graham’s headstone. Feet against Diedre Foote’s. Teeth half-buried in the grass over Bob Higginbotham.”

I took out my notepad. “The dentist. I didn’t know he died,” I lied.

“You’ve missed a lot since you left. And look, I don’t want to be quoted in any of this junk you and your friends are writing. It’s nice you’re back, but this town doesn’t need any more grief than it already has.”

Behind pre-marital sex, an association with the media was the surest way to be stigmatized in Nevada. I’d first realized this while working on my senior project in the slaughterhouses on the edge of town. *Why you askin’ questions ’bout these things? They don’t concern you. Git on home.*

“Shauna, I’m here to do a job, just like you. I’ll do everything I can to stay out of your way and let you do yours, but I ask for the same in return. The more that people know about this, the better equipped they’ll be to help you catch this freak.” Another rehearsed line.

“Fine, Jay. Fine. We can meet after the search. It’ll be dark by the time we’re through, though.”

“Perfect. Will it be on the record?”

“Whatever.”

She turned to go.

“Shauna, wait. If you already found the girl’s remains, what else are you searching for? Do you have a lead?” I kept my voice steady.

“We didn’t find...all of her. The bastard took some of her teeth with him. He may have buried them off the cemetery grounds, and if he did I intend to find them.”

I swallowed. “How do you know a man did it?”

“Come on, Jay. I’ve read some of your shit from the city and seen even more of it on TV. You should know better than anyone that these bastards are always men.”

She turned to go. I paused at the door to linger amid the metallic yet sweet aroma of young girls’ lotion-rubbed sweat.

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I sat in my Civic in the church parking lot longer than I should have, longer than was reasonable for someone feigning sanity. I went

into a sort of trance, relishing the baking humidity that seeped in through the vents and soon bloomed in the car like some flameless conflagration.

Flashes of Saturday night lingered interstitially, situated in the unspoken and feral places of my mind, far removed from reason. I tried to cling to them, but they grayed as I closed my eyes, like the fragments of a dream after waking.

At the scene of the grizzly crime, the investigators embarked first on their search into the woods. Before they left they'd insisted residents and reporters wait for twenty minutes before following behind. The residents then, sneering with gratuitous bravado, insisted that the reporters wait twenty minutes before following them.

The separate search parties, fanning out in waves from the cemetery, reminded me of ripples stealing out over the surface of water after a body hits it.

I kept my eyes on the ground and walked quickly, trying to stay apart from others. Soon enough I caught up with the residents, who combed the overgrowth with half-bent bodies. Madsen, if he could see me, would hound me to get them talking about Emma. But stepping back onto the grounds, soft from the heat and an overnight rain, had put me in a taciturn mood.

The search lasted all day, as Shauna said it would. Though exhausted and chafing, I did take solace in the unease of those around me. As the day dragged on, the chatter morphed from that of stoic optimism to an increasingly sardonic babel, perhaps fueled by a desire to drown out the more savage noises of the wheezing cicadas and sharply snapping sticks underfoot.

I returned to the parking lot alone as night ascended, stepping over headstones as I went. My Civic rattled down the gravel drive, crunching along crudely, not unlike the abrading sound of teeth in a leather pouch being kneaded beneath sanguine fingertips.

Shauna texted me the name of a restaurant—a cheap Mexican one with festive lights shaped like jalapeños strung over the windows. I found her inside at a booth, the table sullied with rice kernels and a bold ring of water left by a previous patron.

I sat down across from her. “Find them?” I asked.

“Find what?”

“The teeth.”

“Oh, no. We gave the dogs the scent from the ones over Higginbotham’s grave. They would’ve found them if they were out there. He must’ve taken them with him.” She slid a menu closer to me and peered into hers, obscuring the lower half of her pretty face. She seemed less tense than before, in the locker room. Perhaps the strenuous hunting had calmed her.

She looked up at me from behind her menu. “You gotta be hungry after today.”

“Starved,” I said.

She offered to share a large platter of chicken-and-steak fajitas. The dish arrived, sizzling and steaming. We ate slowly, our rapacious bites abbreviated by shared memories of high school.

“Do you remember that time you asked me out in a text?” she asked, her bean-splattered fork suspended in midair. She looked at me searchingly.

“Sure.” I took a bite, buying time to conceive of more to say. “I’m still working on getting over that.”

Shauna laughed, her entire body quivering. A bit of goopy beans fell from her fork and landed in her lap, which only served to startle her long enough to draw air for another bout of laughter. “I’m sorry, but it was so *lame*. You have to admit it was lame.”

“I was nervous,” I said simply.

“Yeah, I get that. Not a lot has changed either, it seems.” She paused, gazing at me longer than any other chaste Nevada woman would dare to. “I almost forgot! You still have to interview me.”

“True.”

“Do you always butter up your sources like this before hitting them with questions?”

Her blunt word choice, *hitting*, caught me off guard. I thought I’d been in control of the evening: not showing too much interest in the details of the investigation, averting my eyes from the pouch bulging in my pocket, averting my eyes from her pale skin.

But suddenly I was at a loss for words. The good girl from high school who'd become the good detective was smiling hungrily at me, the unknowable journalist returned.

"No," I finally answered. "Sources usually just open up the first time I ask."

"Well maybe I'm playing hard to get."

I swallowed and noticed every sensation in the process.

She continued, "Why don't you come back to my place for the interview. I don't think I should describe in public," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "how we have next to nothing in this case—no leads, no suspects, no witnesses of any kind.

"You can follow me. It's not far."

I took a last sip of water. "Okay," I said.

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Late that night, tangled with Shauna amid that carnal odor I've always likened to sun-ripened mud, I dreamed Emma back to life, her flesh unscathed and her dimpled smile framing crooked teeth.

I was not bewildered, for though the lucidity of the dream startled me, I maintained the visceral sense that the little girl reaching out to me could only be the work of some apparition. I took her small golden hand in mine and rubbed the downy softness of her wrist.

"What's your name?" she asked me.

"I'm Jay."

"I'm Emma. My birthday's soon. I'm gonna be ten."

She stepped back, relinquishing my hand to study me. "So how old are you? Like, fifty?"

"I'm twenty-seven."

"Wow. My Mama's almost forty. She says not all birthdays are fun, but I think she's lying." She picked at a strand of white ribbon tied loosely about her waist. "Well I better get home 'fore Mama gets mad." And with that she started to skip away, the hem of her pink dress fluttering maddeningly.

But then she stopped and looked back over a sun-browned shoulder. “Bye!”

“Bye, Emma,” I said, and as my lips formed the last syllable of her name, I felt an unburdening, relieved of what few and fallow seeds of contrition I’d been harboring.

I called out to her, “Be sure to come see me again.”

She said, “I will,” and left.