

Girl, Vanished

No green flash at dawn but the sun was warm and affable, staining the sea with a bloody wound that the sea ignored. Along the boundary of the broad Atlantic, sheets of froth churned across the sand, lapping at my ankles and scooping under my feet, tilting me into my next unsteady step, another single step but no thousand-mile journey today—not for me, anyway. Dreams I couldn't remember had chased me out of bed, so I set up shop at the concrete tables outside of Vic and Shelley's Beach Café and waited for the tourists to show up.

I had some props in my pockets and, sure, up my sleeves and down my pants and by mid-morning I'd made a few tips with some easy effects: restoring torn bills, vanishing a salt shaker or two, turning ice water into cold beer (always a favorite). A girl in a dark red one-piece just watched. She seemed young to be on her own; sometimes it's hard to tell. During a lull she walked over.

"I don't understand how you do that," she said. Fine hair, the color of dry sand, wisped across her face in the sea breeze. Eyes of aquamarine, deep-shadowed with something like exhaustion. With the ocean behind her, I thought of Botticelli's Venus, maybe her little sister—

but stressed and sleepless, damaged in a way that can make some guys feel protective, some predatory.

Shelley had wandered over from the snack shop and stood between me and the girl. She's a dish too, but just barely—her skin reminds me not to forget my sunscreen. "Jude's full of tricks," she told the girl. "Watch out for him."

"I'm always good," I said. "You know that."

"You know what I mean." A gang of college guys clamored to the snack bar, all hairy legs and loud voices. A potential audience but not ideal: too cocky and too broke.

"You've got customers, Shelley," I said.

"Yeah. Twelve ice waters, just watch. Look, Jude," she said. "Vic doesn't want you doing the headless bird thing around here. It freaks people out and they don't eat."

"I always put it back on."

"I know. And I like hearing the girls scream too. But just don't."

I slashed a finger across my arm and jabbed my palm. "How about the spike in the hand? Or the bleeding bicep?"

Her tongue glistened on her cracked lips. She goes for the gory ones. "Wait till Vic runs after supplies. I'll let you know when." She ambled across the sand to serve her juvenile delinquents.

"Maybe this afternoon sometime," I called after her. "I left the sharp stuff at home this morning." She waved over her shoulder.

The girl had been listening quietly. "I don't understand how you do that," she said again.

I gave her the usual patter. "The human mind is a powerful mystery."

"Can you show me?"

“Sit down,” I said. She carried a small white bag with red hearts. “Do you have a pencil in there?”

“No. I might.” While she looked I patted my pockets, but it’s better if the mark has her own. “Here’s one,” she said.

“Hold on to it.” I ripped a page from a spiral pad. “Here, write down a three-digit number. Don’t let me see it.” Sky and sea blurred at the horizon; the bloody sunrise had left no scar. Rain would come soon. “Ready?”

“No,” she said. “Turn around.” I sat with my back to her and waved to Shelley, who was wiping down the aluminum shelf where people ordered drinks and sandwiches and ice cream. She raised an eyebrow at me but didn’t smile. The guys had wandered off with their ice water.

“Okay,” the girl said. She hid the paper with both hands.

“Give me the pencil,” I said. It was yellow, well-chewed, and short. “Think about your number. Look at me.” Her eyes had darkened with the sky. Heavy eyes for a kid, smudged with fatigue.

I frowned at my blank pad and made a few quick motions with the pencil. “I don’t know if I got it. Your thoughts are too murky. Here, you can have your pencil back.” She put it in her purse. “Let me see what you wrote,” I said.

She held up the paper: **16**

I tried to look amazed. “You only wrote two digits. I thought I was misreading you.” I showed her the pad. I’d written: **16?**

Her eyes widened, as I expected, but she surprised me by sobbing once. “I don’t understand anything,” she said.

“Hey, don’t cry about it, kid.”

A sudden gust ruffled my pages and blew her hair into her eyes. “I don’t feel good.”

“Maybe you should call your parents.”

“They’re at the Seaview. It’s crazy there. The police are—”

“That’s a long way from—the police?”

“I know. I walked like forever.”

“What about the police?”

“They’re looking for someone at the hotel. A killer. I got scared.”

“Look, do you have a cell phone?”

She squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them. “I lost it.”

“Why don’t you go ask Shelley for a Coke or something. Maybe she’ll help you.”

“I’m tired,” she said. “Is there somewhere I can lay down?”

#

She gave me such a sad look that I took her to my place, one block in, one story up, the center apartment in a quiet complex. I showed her the bathroom and while she was in there I looked through her bag. The stubby pencil, two quarters, a dime, and a paper clip. No cell phone. A plastic wallet held a few dollars and a library card, but the driver’s license window was empty. When I heard the toilet flush I put everything away, but she didn’t come down the hallway.

I found her in the bedroom, curled on her side under the sheet. Her eyes were open, just a little, but she didn’t move when I walked in and her breathing didn’t change. I left her alone for now.

When she came out an hour later, her hair was flat on one side.

“Feel better?” I asked. She looked at me like I’d spoken in tongues. “What’s your name?”

“Prude,” she said. Which matched her library card.

“So, are you?”

“God, like I never heard that before.” She yawned without covering her mouth and walked around the counter into the kitchenette. “I’ve done bad things.”

“I’ll bet. Kept a library book past the due date?” She didn’t answer. “I’m Jude.”

“I know.” She took a Diet Coke from the fridge and popped the top. “We rhyme.”

“How old are you, Prude?”

She drank deeply and wandered to the jalousie windows overlooking the parking lot. I leave them cracked open when I can stand the heat. The leaden sky was heavy with moisture. I felt the pressure changing but the rain was holding off.

Prude belched. “Sixteen,” she said.

“And you don’t have your license yet? Or did you lose it, too?”

“Whatever.” She downed more of the cola. “Why did you say that?”

It was my turn not to answer. “If you’re feeling up to it, let’s get you back to your parents.” She stared out the window for a while and I looked at her and tried to remember being that young—three or four lustrums ago.

“Can you really kill a bird and bring it back?”

“It’s complicated,” I said. She didn’t have much of a figure, but I decided she was dangerously cute. “You don’t have much of a figure, but you’re dangerously cute.”

“Fuck me,” she said, stepping back from the window. “The police are here.”

I looked out the window as the cruiser lurched to a stop. Two cops climbed out. “Your parents must have raised an alarm.”

“Can you vanish me?”

Sixteen years old and the sheets still warm? “You know, that’s not a bad idea,” I said. Car doors slammed below. “Can you be very very quiet? I mean breathe-through-your-mouth quiet?”

She nodded. “Just vanish me.”

“Okay. Under the table.” The teakwood and cypress end table in the corner by the sofa was a little too big for the room. But it was just the right size for the mirror wedged diagonally between the table legs.

“They’ll see.”

“Not if you stay very still.” I slid the mirror out to reveal the space behind it.

She put her Coke on the counter next to her bag. “I have to pee.”

“No time, Prude. Go.” She crawled under the table and I slid the mirror back in place. Her bag on the counter caught my eye and I shoved it behind the mirror just as three sharp raps echoed through the room.

#

I picked up Prude’s drink and swung open the door. I knew the two cops, Larry and Justine. They had a regular beat along A1A. Plus I knew Justine from other times.

“Hey, guys. What’s up?”

“Hey, Jude. How you doing?” Larry was tall and he looked past me into the room.

“Same as ever. What’s going on?”

Justine took over. “Jude, there’s a young girl wandered off from the Seaview. Couple of people saw you talking to her on the beach.”

“Yeah, red one-piece suit, real cute kid?”

“That’s right. You didn’t bring her up here, did you?”

“Here? Lord, no. We talked for a while and then she headed back toward the hotel.”

“Mind if we come in?”

“Why not? Things are kind of messy.”

They stepped in and glanced around the room.

“Look, Jude,” Justine said. “I need to make a quick search. So we can say we made sure.”

“Yeah, that’s okay. You know where everything is.”

She gave me the stink eye and wandered off into the bedroom.

Larry’s eyes never stopped moving. Officer Sherlock. “So what did you and the girl talk about?”

“The usual. She asked how I did the bits. I did her a mentalist thing.”

“Huh. Pick up any good brainwaves?” The shower curtain rasped and I pictured Justine in there sliding it back, minus the uniform. Well, wearing the gun belt. “Jude?”

“Uh, what? Is she in some kind of trouble?” Larry didn’t answer. My closet door creaked; wire hangers jangled. “Hey, I heard the police were looking for some killer at the Seaview. What’s up with that?”

“Yeah. Even fugitives take vacations, I guess.” He walked over to the window and looked at the sky. It was barely noon but the daylight was being swept away by a pitiless darkness that seemed to want in.

“Maybe she got scared. With cops around.”

Justine came into the room. She looked at Larry and shook her head. “Thanks for not being a prick about this, Jude. She didn’t give you any idea where she was going?”

“No, but she went north. Like back to the hotel.”

They both looked at me as if I might say something else. In the silence I could hear Prude breathing. Or maybe it was the ocean.

“If you see her again, call us, okay?”

“Sure.”

They started to leave when there was another knock. I opened the door and a small buff woman with dark neat hair, dark neat clothes, and a dark neat scowl flashed a burnished gold badge. “Mulholland,” she said and nodded to the officers. They seemed to know her. “May I?” She entered before I could answer. “I got a call that you guys were checking out a possible witness.”

“Jude, Detective Mulholland is from South Dakota,” Larry said. “Can I use your bathroom?”

“Is this about the girl?” I asked. “Or the fugitive?”

“Let me ask the questions,” Mulholland said.

Larry tapped my shoulder. “Where is it?”

“Down the hall on the left.”

The apartment was getting darker and Justine turned on the end table lamp. Making herself at home. The low-watt bulb only made the rest of the room seem dimmer.

“You look tense,” Mulholland said.

“A little. Cops can do that, right?”

“Calm yourself, Mr. Jude.” She opened her notebook. “This shouldn’t take long.”

“It’s just Jude.”

“Oh, like Kreskin? I met him once.”

“But less amazing,” Justine said. She smiled at me but Mulholland didn’t.

“The human mind is a powerful mystery,” I reminded everyone.

Thunder shook the walls and I saw the mirror quiver under the table. The room exhaled as the tropical low rolled in and lashed the jalousies with sheets and torrents. Justine cranked the panes shut. “It’s raining like a motherfucker,” she said. “Water water everywhere.” She turned from the window. “Hey, Jude, you got any more Coke?” Mulholland glared at her. “I mean like Diet Coke?” The rain spattered the sills, the toilet flushed, and I heard a whimper from the direction of the sofa.

Mulholland’s head snapped up and she scanned the room. “What was that?”

“What?”

“I heard someone.”

“Neighbors,” I said. “Thin walls. I don’t even notice anymore.”

Larry came back into the room tugging at his uniform and he and Justine got Diet Cokes from the fridge—“What the hell, I’ll take one too,” Mulholland said—and we had a regular party with tops popping and fizzing all over the apartment. Larry dropped heavily on the sofa and set his can on the end table when he wasn’t slurping from it. He belched discretely while Mulholland ran me through my story again. I didn’t have anything new to say but it took a while to convince her. Finally it was over and I got them out.

I’d barely closed the door behind them when the end table lurched and the mirror canted. Prude stumbled out, tripping over her purse, and blurred across the room with a moan.

The apartment door opened and Justine looked in. “Jude, if you think of anything else about the girl, call me, okay?” she said. “Or call me anyway. You’ve still got my cell, right?”

Before she could look around, I touched her face and kissed her. “I’ve missed you,” I said. I danced her out into the corridor without knocking her down and we kissed a little more. “Now get out of here before something happens that I’ll regret.” She started down the hall when

we heard a toilet flush somewhere very close, almost as if the sound came from inside my apartment. She stopped but I forced a smile and waved her on. "I'll call you later," I said. "Go."

#

I double-locked my apartment door and wedged the mirror back in place under the table. Prude set her purse on the sofa and studied the illusion from a few different angles.

"So that's how you vanish somebody," she said.

"It's a way."

"You know, I can understand that. I thought it was some kind of magic trick, but it's just a mirror."

"The cops didn't find you. To them, you were vanished."

"I guess. And what about the mind reading? How did you know I wrote 16?"

I usually don't reveal my secrets. But I walked her through it anyway. She almost smiled. "Okay. I get it. It's not like, magic. It's like paper, and pencils, and real stuff. It can make sense."

"You don't smile much, do you?"

She turned to the window. "I was going to walk into the ocean. Things were too confusing. But I was afraid it would hurt."

"You mean kill yourself?"

"Life sucks."

"It can't be that bad."

She stared into the rain. "It's bad," she said.

"What, does your dad abuse you or something? You know, you can go to the cops, social services—people can help if you ask."

“Yeah, the cops. No, my parents are okay. A little weird. We weren’t even supposed to come here but they wanted to. For me, they said. Like a special treat. Like a special wish, but I didn’t wish it.”

“Are you sick?”

She barked a laugh, a harsh sound muffled by the darkness of the room. “I wish,” she said. “Thanks for helping me. I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Again? You should get that checked.”

“It’s none of your business but I’m on my period.” She picked up her purse and went down the hall. “It’s just blood.” I heard the click as she locked the door.

I cranked open the jalousies and sat and watched the rain stop and listened to the slow distant heartbeat of the surf. Something was wrong. When I perform, I misdirect my audience to hide the truth. And now someone had done it to me. I felt the dissonance but I couldn’t grab it.

The harder I tried, the slipperier it got. The sky began to lighten and I felt the answer fading out. Okay, think. Go back to this morning. The sand under my feet, the sun blood red, sailor take warning. The tourists, the easy effects. Prude on the beach, the curious woman-child, the suit the color of drying blood, a heart-covered purse. Shelley, cute and crunchy, a tasty tart left in the oven too long; likes to hear the smooth girls scream—freaking at the headless bird, at the spike through the palm, at the razor-sliced bicep—but not today, I left the props at home. Then Prude in the apartment, sleeps with her eyes open, sad little girl, sad little purse with a library card and not much else. Then the police outside, The Vanished Girl, two cops, then three, the thunder, the rain, the whimper, the thin walls, the cops leaving, the race to the bathroom, the purse on the floor—Justine’s back again, then gone. Prude wants to walk into the sea, end it all,

little girl, grown woman, needs the bathroom again, hearts red with blood, the blood, the curse, the purse.

The purse.

#

I know a thing or two about locks, especially those in my own home, so the bathroom door slowed me down not at all.

She looked up and said “Get out of here, pervert.” But the thin lethal jaws of the straight razor poised over her wrist compelled me to stay.

“Don’t do it, Prude,” I said.

The razor drifted in predatory circles above her forearm. “Where’s a good spot?”

“I need that for my act. You’ll ruin it with your gristle and bone.”

“You don’t ruin it when you cut your muscles.”

“It’s a trick, girl, don’t you get it? Like the mirror. Like the mind reading. Nothing’s real except what you can make other people think.”

“No, some things are real,” she said. “Like how if a bird really dies, for real, you can’t make it alive again. And how you can read my mind about cutting myself and come crashing in to save me like some kind of creepy superhero. Unless you really are a pervert.”

“Why can’t I be both?” I said.

“Your jokes are stupid.”

“Come on. I’ll show you some things you’ve never seen before. Real secrets.”

She stopped waving the blade over her skin. “Show me how to cut myself?”

“Maybe,” I said. The straight razor descended. “Wait. Yes, if you want.”

She turned her arm and scraped a few fine hairs from her skin with the cutting edge. Somewhere in the stratosphere the sun finally defeated the gray, and in the suffused light I saw the tremor of a pulse at her throat. The light flared brighter still, bouncing off the tile and chrome and porcelain, and she blinked and set the razor by the sink.

“Thank you, Prude,” I said. She looked at me with such anger I stepped back.

“Don’t even say that,” she said. “I don’t owe you anything.”

#

I stored the razor in the medicine cabinet and watched her in the mirror. “You know I’ve got to take you back,” I said.

“Maybe I could stay. I could be your, you know—like do your act with you.”

“My assistant? You’d be great. The boys would be all over you.”

“Not your assistant. That other word. Like a princess.”

My princess. My face burned, but I knew what she meant. “Apprentice.”

“Let’s do that, really. You can disguise me and vanish me when you need to.”

“Listen, Prude. The next time the cops come, they’ll bring their CSI tools. They’ll find your hairs somewhere—like in my bed, you know?—your fingerprints, something. A mirror won’t fool them again and then I’ll be in jail.”

“I’ll visit you,” she said, and smiled at last. And sunshine drenched my world.

“Thanks. Come on.”

“You said you’d teach me some more tricks.”

“Okay, a couple. Then you’ve got to go back.”

We started at the kitchen table. With sunlight infusing the apartment and the casual touch of the breeze through the windows, things almost seemed normal.

“If you can’t read minds, how did you know what I was doing in the bathroom?”

“The way you were talking. Life sucks and everything, and blood. And then I remembered your purse. There weren’t any kojaks or pontoons or anything in it so you were lying about your period.”

“How do you know what’s in my purse?”

“I looked before. When you were asleep.”

“That’s rude,” she said. “You act like a nice guy, but you’re a big phony.”

“That’s kind of what I do.”

“Nothing’s real to you. You fake everything.” She was adorable with her jaw set, her neck blotched with heat. I wanted to pat her head and take her picture.

“I get your point.”

“Call that lady cop to come and get me. She sounded nicer than you.”

“Mulholland?”

“No, the one that said it was raining like a motherfucker—and you’re not amazing.”

“All right. I know who you mean.”

“But you have to show me some of your stupid fake tricks first.”

So I taught her how to levitate a cup, how to teleport a quarter, and how to make toothpicks jump with the power of the mind, and I showed her some flesh penetration techniques that leave no lasting damage—or at least not much, if you do them right—and she was a natural. When it was over I gave her my old legionnaire’s hat and my Walter Mercado T-shirt to wear over her swimsuit and we hiked back to the beach tables at Vic and Shelley’s.

#

The ocean never changes but it's never the same either. When Shelley saw us together she brought us ice cream and told me quietly that if I didn't call the police, she would. I used my cell to make the call while Prudence teleported quarters across the tabletop, losing control a few times and beaming them into the sand, but getting the hang of it.

Justine was still on duty when she answered her cell. "Jude, I didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"Yeah, well. I found the girl."

I heard her say something to Larry, and then she was back. "Where are you?"

"She's a little scared. I promised her a nice lady cop would come for her."

"Yeah, yeah. Where?"

"Vic and Shelley's. I came back after the rain and she was hanging around again." I winked at Prude but she just rolled her eyes.

By the time Justine and Larry showed up a few minutes later, Prude was teleporting a quarter for a kid who gazed at her like she was a goddess. Justine touched her shoulder and sat down next to me. "That's your T-shirt she's wearing, Jude. I was with you when you bought it." Larry had stopped to chat with Shelley.

"Yeah. She was cold and I had it with me."

"You never take it out of your closet. You told me it was a collectible." Her eyes narrowed as if she were conjuring images from her search of my apartment.

"Mrs. Cleaver, you look lovely this afternoon," I said quickly. I touched her hand and she jerked it away.

"Stop it," she said, loudly enough for Shelly and Larry to look our way.

"Why did we ever stop hanging out?"

“You know why, bogus boy.”

“But you really are pretty,” Prude said. “I knew you would be.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Justine said. I remembered this side of her, the quick fire.

“You have a nice voice. Are you going to take me to my parents?”

“We’re waiting for another lady. Then we’ll see.”

“Oh, that Holland detective?”

Justine stared at her. “Prude, you’re nice and dry. Where were you this afternoon during the storm?”

“Some hotel down that way.” She pointed north. “I walked up by the pool and sat under a canopy. Then I decided to come back here and ask Jude to help me. He seemed nice.”

“Right. And he gave you his T-shirt?”

“The hat, too. I was a little chilly after the storm. It rained like a motherfucker.”

Justine’s eyes shifted between Prude and me. She started to say something when we heard a car squeal to a stop on Briny Avenue. Car doors, three, bam-bam-bam, and Mulholland came marching around the snack bar looking too hot in her dark suit—tropical hot, South Dakota hot, just *hot*—and I thought, my god, my world is bursting with beautiful women. I wondered if someday I’d regret that I never settled down with my one true love, whoever she might be, sorry at last for being the big phony that Prude says I am.

For now, I finished my ice cream, always so sweet and so creamy.

Mulholland was not alone. Right behind her were the parents, faces pale and pinched, slogging through the sand in unscuffed sandals and store-fresh tourist garb. Prudence stood when she saw them and picked up her purse but her arms hung loose when her mom hugged her. Then

Mom held her at arm's length and frowned at the wise coiffed countenance of Walter Mercado on her T-shirt. Dad touched her desert hat and smiled a little. "Gnarly," he said.

Prude seemed to relax in his direction. Then the cops all decided their work here was done, for now anyway, and they rounded everybody up to move out. As they began to leave, Prude stopped and looked at me. I didn't know what she was thinking but I figured I must be some kind of hero to her. She touched her temples as if she were reading my mind.

"Jude," she said, "you don't know shit," and she turned and walked off with her captors.

#

She was right. But I found out shit that evening.

I met up with Justine after her shift and she told me the story over dinner and drinks. When we got to my apartment later, she turned on the late news and I heard it all over again.

The news anchor said that earlier that evening police had captured the fugitive, a sixteen-year-old South Dakota girl who had crashed her car last month—texting while driving—killing her passenger, who was also her classmate and best friend. A South Dakota judge had confiscated her license and left her in parental custody with orders to stay in town pending a hearing, but her parents, who somehow saw the judge's edict as more or less a suggestion, took her on the family vacation they'd planned before the fatal crash. The judge sent the police in pursuit. They caught up with the young outlaw that morning at the Seaview but she slipped away and apparently wandered the Florida coastline for much of the day before being apprehended, oddly enough, performing street magic at a Pompano Beach snack bar.

I didn't notice that Justine had disappeared sometime during the news until she walked in from the bedroom hallway with a dangerous look on her face.

"Justine," I said.

“You shut up,” she said quietly. “I’m not through with you. Maybe.” She walked soundlessly out the door and then slammed it so hard my ears popped and the TV shut off.

The phone rang but I didn’t recognize the number. When I answered no one responded right away.

#

“It’s me,” she said.

I didn’t know what to tell her. “How did you get my number?”

All I heard was silence and I glanced at the end table, imagining her crouched there, quiet and scared. “The human mind is a powerful mystery,” she said.

I felt myself smiling. “You know, I don’t know what to tell you, Prude.” I carried the phone into the bedroom to look for whatever had pissed off Justine.

“Just about today.” She sounded older. “What we did. At your apartment.”

“What about it?” I guess I’d almost gotten lucky with Justine because she’d turned back the bedspread.

“I can’t talk,” she said. “Just tell me something. Anything you want.”

It was a small stain, nearly dried by now, in the broken shape, almost, of a heart. With blood, the trick is to rinse it away quickly. “Dear Prudence,” I said. “I have a bit where I bring a dead fly back to life and I can reanimate a beheaded bird, but kid, it isn’t magic and your friend isn’t coming back.”

I could hear her breathing. “I know,” she said. “I know that. I just hope . . . oh, Christ.”

“You hope what?”

“Never mind. But you know what, Mr. Jude?”

“What.”

She hung up and I stared at my silent phone. As I put it in my pocket it signaled an incoming text. She sent me just one line: *C U L8R*

I ripped the sheets off the bed feeling smug and self-destructive and slept on the sofa that night. The next morning I was up early again but this time the sun was white hot and I couldn't look at it.