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Bleedout

Joan Brady

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But why did he kill them?

Try as I might, I cannot find an answer that satisfies me. Stephanie assures me that I would understand if I could see him, but I've been blind for a quarter of a century. I cannot make out as much as a man's outline in full sun. And yet even on the first day I met him, he gave off a sense of threat as soon as he entered the room. He was only a boy then, a couple of months short of sixteen, and already a multiple murderer who would have been on death row if not for his age. That could hardly be it though. I was used to murderers. I knew the rattle-clank of chains and leg-irons.

The more I think about it, the more I think it must have been the way he breathed; I swear I could hear his fury at the very oxygen that gave him life as he took it into his lungs and let it go. The Chernobyl meltdown had dominated the radio for almost a week, and I remember thinking, 'Rage is the nuclear core that powers the boy.'

All this intensity failed to tell me why he killed them. It still does.

Twenty years of living with the question, and now I find myself in the absurd situation of a man about to be murdered – without the hope of my answer first.

* * *

A truck approached along Route 97 out of Springfield, Illinois, going towards Petersburg. A slanting, bleak, early-morning sun shone, but there was no warmth in it. This part of America is fiercely cold in winter. The truck slowed as it passed through the gates of Oakland Cemetery and hit the buckled road that is never repaired until spring, then continued over a small rise ringed round with naked winter branches. Persimmons and pawpaws grow here, larch and beech too, and the south fork of the Sangamon River is almost close enough to see.

This is one of the most famous burial places in the country. It's the site of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* and the grave of Ann Rutledge, beloved of Abraham Lincoln, 'wedded to him,' as Masters' poem on her gravestone reads, 'not through union, but through separation'. Edgar Lee himself is buried here. So are his wives, his parents, his grandparents, his nephews and their wives. So are dozens of characters from his poems, Mitch Miller, Lucinda Matlock, Bowling and Nancy Green.

Hannah Armstrong is buried here too. She stitched Abe Lincoln's shirts and foxed his pants; she's the one who told him on the day he was elected, 'They'll kill ye, Abe.' Not far from her lies Chester Gould, who created Dick Tracy. And not far from him, there's Johnny Stompanato, gangster, stabbed to death with a kitchen knife by Hollywood goddess Lana Turner and buried with full military honours under the personal direction of that mobster of mobsters, Mickey Cohen.

Despite such colourful dead and despite one of the prettiest woodlands for miles around, a vast, bulbous water tower is what sets the tone. It's blue and white, and looms over the countryside atop a single spindly stilt, garish, ungainly, intrusive. The graves

look shoddy, even Ann Rutledge's and Johnny Stompanato's. They reek of cheap and cheesy haste, death stashed away as fast as possible: a glance at a shiny catalogue and a quick talk with an oily somebody who promises to handle all the unpleasantness. A few relatives do come to pay a pious post-funeral visit with plastic flowers. But by the time winter gets its teeth in, even these meagre offerings have faded under a coat of grime and dirt.

Beyond the main set of graves, the paved road ends.

The truck slowed to a creep here; a sign on its baby-blue side read P. M. Wurtzel and Son in elegant copperplate lettering. It jounced along a rutted dirt path past a cluster of trees and into a secluded area, a tiny Eden where there was only one grave, different from the others, a delicate, hand-carved stone rather like the ones found in English country churchyards. The dogwood that overhangs it blooms every spring. The truck stopped. Six men bundled out and stamped their feet against the cold.

The ground was solid ice some five to six inches beneath the surface that morning. In olden days, winter corpses piled up in the woodshed until spring and the thaw; these state-of-the-art workmen set up a propane heater – a model specially designed for the purpose – and began defrosting. They powered up a generator for the pneumatic drill, reamed out holes for stakes, erected poles and strung ropes to build a frame. What emerged was a sturdy tent, and how unexpected it looked in the cold landscape, this touch of summer gaiety escaped from the State Fair. It was summertime inside too. Portable heaters warmed the air; brilliant-green AstroTurf covered the floor except where the ground-defroster stood. Chairs stood in orderly rows, a lectern in front of them.

Only then did the crew remove the ground-defroster and begin to dig. But when they finished, the hole was only two feet square

and three feet deep, just big enough to take in an elderly aunt's cat or maybe her Pekinese. More AstroTurf went down into the gap; they patted it into place as cooks might pat dough into an irregularly shaped pie pan and then began to gather up their tools in preparation for the boss's arrival.

This was an important funeral. The press would attend, and the crew sensed excitement in the air.

* * *

My name is Hugh Freyl. I am a corporate lawyer, and I went blind in O'Hare airport only half an hour before the last flight to Springfield.

At the time, I was deep into the hydra-headed litigation spawned by the merger of Michigan Genetic and Westman-Boyle. There was $800 million at stake, and the route to this pot of gold was littered with class-action suits, accusations of covert premiums, secret share deals, illusory poison pills. No corporate lawyer can resist a case like this, and I had just about mastered enough of the detail for a plan of action to emerge.

I cannot imagine why I should have felt abruptly restless. Nor can I imagine why I left the safety of American Airlines' business lounge or why I wandered out into the concourse or why I sat down there in among the bustle of people. But the last thing I saw was Terminal Two's high-vaulted ceiling. I looked up at it, then rested my head in my hands and closed my eyes. When I opened them again . . .

Not a thing. Nothing. A blank screen.

My beautiful Rose had migraines; she had described the blind spots that preceded them – and always went away. I told myself to be calm, to wait it out. I told myself this too would pass. But even as I mouthed the words, I bolted off my chair, stumbled, half fell, reached out, caught hold of somebody, started to babble.

'Please help me. I do not know what's—'

The somebody shook me off.

I stuck my arms out in front of me – there were people everywhere, I could hear them – and yet somehow, magically, there was only empty space around me, eye of the storm, pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey at a children's party. I lunged out and managed to snag a passer-by.

'You've got to help—'

'Let go.' It was a man. I had him by the coat, and he yanked at it.

'Find me a doctor.' I could hear pleading in my voice. 'Please help me to—'

'Let go of me!'

'I need a—'

'Just let go, huh?'

'I cannot see. I know there's a medical station by the—'

'Sure, sure. Wait here, huh?'

And he was gone. I waited. Nobody came.

I caught hold of a woman next. She escaped with a shriek. I caught another. She listened and disappeared. I got a man who found me a place to sit down before he disappeared too. I sat there for . . . I could not possibly say. It seemed hours. I did not dare get up. My legs felt gelatinous; I knew I would never find my way to another seat.

And then she came to me: 'You okay, mister? You're looking kind of peaked.'

It was a wavery voice, impossible in a young woman, but not weak or aged either; when she left me – ostensibly to find that elusive doctor – it did not cross my mind that she would come back any more than the others had. And yet five minutes later I had a whole medical team around me.

'Where's my good Samaritan?' I said to them. 'Please. I must thank her. I must speak to her.'

'Don't you worry none,' came that wavery voice. 'This here's a doctor. He's gonna fix you up. You gonna be okay.'

'I hardly know . . .' I had not wept since I was a boy; I was so grateful that tears poured down my cheeks. 'How can I ever thank you?'

'No need for that, sir. Anybody'd have done the same.'

* * *

At ten-thirty, just as the workmen packed away the last of their tools, the media began to arrive at Oakland Cemetery. WICS-TV had come from Decatur where there had been mysterious attacks on three McDonalds in a single week; the CNN crew had travelled overnight from Biloxi and a story on the run-ups to the Miss Winter Orange beauty contest. Video technicians wielded shoulder cameras, filming this grave and that vista; audio technicians tested microphones; interviewers jockeyed for position. Print and radio reporters arrived with notebooks, tape recorders, still cameras.

All were in place by the time the President of P. M. Wurtzel Funeral Home arrived. The son and heir of the original P. M. Wurtzel himself was fresh-faced, aggressively young, pink-cheeked, athletic if somewhat overweight, a Bible-belt product of vitamins and virtue. He bowed for the cameramen, who dutifully filmed him and the box he carried so decorously, a small, highly polished wooden thing decorated with a filigree design in polished brass.

At eleven, Springfield's matriarch, Becky Freyl arrived in the family Lexus SUV and got out, helped by the substantial Lillian, her cook and companion. Microphones, interviewers, tape recorders rushed forward. Cameras rolled and clicked. At eighty-seven, Becky was tall and fine featured, as intensely feminine as the Southern belle she had always been, but she ruled this town with the sharp wit and the painfully sharp tongue that had whipped it into shape sixty years before when she arrived from the big city of Atlanta to marry into the Freyl family of Springfield.

Interviewers began talking even before they reached her.

'What about the investigation, Mrs Freyl? What about David Marion?'

'Is Marion still in custody? Four days is a long time to hold somebody without a charge. Can you comment on that?'

'Do you think they've got the right man?'

'Do *you* think he killed your son?'

Becky did not flinch. She stared them down with an old-fashioned school marm's cold disapproval, not the slightest attempt to cover her face or avert her eyes. No hint – beyond pursed lips – of the pain they were causing her. Composure this imperial is rare. These crews had never run into it before, and they fell silent in front of it, awkward, sheepish, uncertain.

'Would you kindly let me pass?' she said then. Her voice carried only a whisper of a Southern accent.

The questions erupted again.

'You get them cameras out of here,' Lillian said, taking over. 'You know you ain't supposed to talk to her. You *know* that. What's the matter with you anyhow? Ain't you got no respect for nothing? You bother her with one more question, and that's the last one you ever ask in this town, you hear me?'

The flock retired in disarray, and Becky resumed her stately progress up the AstroTurf path towards the tent.

Once inside, she turned to P. M. Wurtzel's President. 'And you are?'

He cleared his throat to emphasize his illustrious name. '*I* am P. Morrison—'

'Yes, yes. The undertaker,' she interrupted.

He bowed. '*Bereavement Consultant*, Ma'am. At your service.'

Becky frowned at the vulgarism, looked around her and noted the little box that P. M. Wurtzel's President had placed on the

chair his crew had set beside the freshly dug opening in the ground. 'What's that?'

'We have been privileged to place the deceased's mortal—'

'A jewellery case? You've put my son in a jewellery case?'

'Oh, no, no, no. No, no. This is the very finest in our top range for loved ones who have been cremated. You yourself chose—'

'What is he doing on a folding chair? Hugh hated chairs like that. They wobble. Take him off at once.'

P. M. Wurtzel's President was flustered. He blushed. He shifted from one foot to the other. 'I'm afraid the workmen broke the altar when they—'

'Do you always blame your shortcomings on other people, young man?'

'Oh, no, Ma'am, I assure you—'

'Can you not at least cover it with some of that' – she gestured at the AstroTurf – 'that hideous material?'

Over the next few minutes, cameras recorded snippets of other mourners as they arrived in cars as elegant as Becky's and climbed the AstroTurf path to the tent: lawyers, doctors, bankers and their wives, the cream of society, members of that most exclusive of clubs, the Springfield One Hundred – some of them with a full five generations of Illinois history behind them. But when Senator John Calder arrived, cameras surged forward.

'What about the future, Senator?'

'What do you think of the Governor's Mansion, Mrs Calder?'

'What about Governor Szymankiewicz? When are you going to start getting him out of there?'

Everybody said John Calder was going to be the next governor of Illinois. The election was a year away, but Szymankiewicz didn't stand a chance next to Calder. *Everybody* knew that. How could it be otherwise? Nobody could pronounce that tongue-twister of a name.

The press had gleefully dubbed the poor man 'Sissy'. Besides, John Calder was the one who had the Freyl fortune and the Freyl connections behind him. Even more important, he was Springfield's own son; he'd been born and educated with other local kids. He'd giggled over bowls of garlic-laden chili at the Dew Chilli Parlor and got drunk at dances at the Country Club. He'd worshipped at the feet of Libby Jennings, high school sweetheart, and crashed his father's car into a motel out near White Oaks Mall. Then to top it off, he'd come back from law school in Chicago to practise in the town just like Springfield's most famous lawyer, Abraham Lincoln. And like Lincoln, John Calder was one of those rare figures whom the camera loves. Practically every picture of him ran, no matter how mundane the setting. Which is to say that whatever John Calder did was news. Whatever his young wife did was news too; in this cold graveyard she clung to his arm and smiled adoringly up at him. She was elaborately coiffed, dressed in multiple layers of mourning, hatted and veiled. A reporter from the *Illinois Times* noted all this into a tape recorder. Sometimes Mrs Calder made her own clothes; as soon as the press discovered one of them, women all over the state employed seamstresses to copy her.

The Senator wore a sombre overcoat and a stiff collar; nobody should look too comfortable at a funeral. 'This is no time for speculation or politics,' he said. 'I am here to mourn my friend and to do what I can to support his family through this terrible hour. Hugh Freyl was a great American. His death is a blow to the country and to freedom itself.'

It was an eminently quotable speech: short, to the point, emotional but not sloppy: it would make the opening slot on evening news programmes throughout Illinois. The cameras followed the Senator into the tent. His head was bowed. His pace was reluctant but brave. Perfect.

Inside, the Calders embraced Becky, who bore up under their tributes with rigid shoulders and a straight back, just as she had borne up under the attentions of lesser mortals. All the seats in the tent were full. The minister arrived last, tall, thin, decorous if a little pinched – the cold perhaps. His ears and nose were a startling pink. He whispered to Becky, held her hand, whispered some more, went to the lectern, opened his prayer book and began.

'"Man, that is born of woman, hath but a short time to live and is full of misery. He cometh up and is cut down like a"—'

And who should walk through the opening to the tent but David Marion himself.