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A Walk Among the Tombstones

Lawrence Block

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Extract

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A WALK AMONG THE TOMBSTONES

A MATT SCUDDER MYSTERY

Lawrence Block



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ONE

On the last Thursday in March, somewhere between ten-thirty and eleven in the morning, Francine Khoury told her husband she was going out for a while, she had marketing to do.

'Take my car,' he suggested. 'I'm not going anywhere.'

'It's too big,' she said. 'Time I took it, I felt like I was steering a boat.'

'Whatever you say,' he said.

The cars, his Buick Park Avenue and her Toyota Camry, shared the garage behind their house, a mock-Tudor structure of half-timbered stucco on Colonial Road between Seventy-eighth and Seventy-ninth streets, in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn. She started up the Camry, backed out of the garage, triggered the remote unit to close the garage door, then backed all the way out to the street. At the first red light she popped a classical cassette into the tape deck. Beethoven, one of the late quartets. She listened to jazz at home, it was Kenan's favorite music, but classical chamber music was what she played when she drove.

She was an attractive woman, five-six, 115 pounds, built large on top, narrow at the waist, trim in the hips. Dark hair, lustrous and curly, combed back off her face. Dark eyes, an aquiline nose, a generous, full-lipped mouth.

The mouth is always closed in photographs. She had, I understand, prominent upper incisors and a substantial overbite, and anxiety over this feature kept her from smiling much. In her wedding pictures she is beaming and radiant, but her teeth remain invisible.

Her complexion was olive, and her skin tanned deeply

and readily. She already had a start on the summer's tan; she and Kenan had spent the last week of February on the beach at Negril, in Jamaica. She'd have been darker, but Kenan made her use sunscreen and limited her hours of exposure. 'It's not good for you,' he told her. 'Too dark's not attractive. Lying in the sun's what turns a plum into a prune.' What was so good about plums, she wanted to know. They're ripe and juicy, he told her.

When she had driven half a block from her driveway, about the time she reached the corner of Seventy-eighth and Colonial, the driver of a blue panel truck started his engine. He gave her another half-block lead, then pulled out from the curb and followed after her.

She turned right at Bay Ridge Avenue, then left again at Fourth Avenue, heading north. She slowed when she reached the D'Agostino's at the corner of Sixty-third Street, and eased the Camry into a parking space half a block past it.

The blue panel truck passed the Camry, circled the block, and parked at a fire hydrant right in front of the supermarket.

When Francine Khoury left her house, I was still having breakfast.

I'd been up late the previous night. Elaine and I had had dinner at one of the Indian joints on East Sixth Street, then caught a revival of *Mother Courage* at the Public Theater on Lafayette. Our seats weren't great and it was hard to hear some of the actors. We would have left at intermission, but one of the actors was the boyfriend of one of Elaine's neighbors, and we wanted to go backstage after the final curtain and assure him that he was wonderful. We wound up joining him for a drink at a bar around the corner that was absolutely packed for no reason I could fathom.

'That was great,' I told her when we got out of there.

'For three hours I couldn't hear him onstage, and for the past hour I couldn't hear him across the table. I wonder if he's got a voice.'

'The play didn't last three hours,' she said. 'More like two and a half.'

'It seemed like three hours.'

'It seemed like five,' she said. 'Let's go home.'

We went to her place. She made coffee for me and a cup of tea for herself and we watched CNN for half an hour and talked through the commercials. Then we went to bed, and after an hour or so I got up and dressed in the dark. I was on my way out of the bedroom when she asked me where I was going.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I didn't mean to wake you.'

'That's all right. Can't you sleep?'

'Evidently not. I feel wired. I don't know why.'

'Read in the living room. Or put the TV on, it won't bother me.'

'No,' I said. 'I'm too restless. The walk across town might do me good.'

Elaine's apartment is on Fifty-first between First and Second. My hotel, the Northwestern, is on Fifty-seventh between Eighth and Ninth. It was cold enough out that at first I thought I might take a cab, but by the time I'd walked a block I wasn't feeling it.

Waiting for a light to change, I happened to catch a glimpse of the moon between a couple of tall buildings. It was just about full, and that didn't come as a surprise. The night had a full-moon feel to it, stirring tides in the blood. I felt like doing something and couldn't think what.

If Mick Ballou had been in town I might have gone over to his saloon looking for him. But he was out of the country, and a saloon of any sort was no place for me, as restless as I was feeling. I went home and picked up a book,

and somewhere around four I turned the light off and went to sleep.

By ten o'clock I was around the corner at the Flame. I had a light breakfast and read a newspaper, giving most of my attention to the local crime stories and the sports pages. Globally we were between crises, so I wasn't paying much attention to the bigger picture. The shit really has to hit the fan before I take an interest in national and international issues. Otherwise they seem too remote and my mind refuses to come to grips with them.

God knows I had time for all the news, and the want ads and legals, too. I'd had three days' work the previous week at Reliable, a big detective agency with offices in the Flatiron Building, but they'd had nothing for me since, and the last work I'd done on my own hook had been ages ago. I was all right for money so I didn't have to work, and I've always been able to find ways to get through the days, but I would have been glad of something to do. The restlessness I'd felt the night before hadn't passed with the setting of the moon. It was still there, a low-grade fever in the blood, an itch somewhere down beneath the skin, where you couldn't scratch it.

Francine Khoury spent half an hour in D'Agostino's, filling a shopping cart in the process. She paid cash for her groceries. A bag boy loaded her three shopping bags back into her cart and followed her out of the store and down the street to where her car was parked.

The blue panel truck was still parked at the hydrant. Its rear doors were open, and two men had emerged from it and were on the sidewalk, apparently studying something on a clipboard one of them was holding. When Francine passed them, accompanied by the bag boy, they glanced in her direction. By the time she had opened the trunk of the Camry, they were back in the truck with the doors closed.

The boy put the bags in the trunk. Francine gave him two dollars, which was twice what most people gave him, to say nothing of the surprisingly high percentage of shoppers who didn't tip him at all. Kenan had taught her to tip well, not ostentatiously but generously. 'We can always afford to be generous,' he had told her.

The boy wheeled the cart back to the market. Francine got behind the wheel, started the engine, headed north on Fourth Avenue.

The blue panel truck stayed half a block behind.

I don't know precisely what route Francine took to get from D'Agostino's to the imported-foods store on Atlantic Avenue. She could have stayed on Fourth Avenue all the way to Atlantic, could have taken the Gowanus Expressway into South Brooklyn. There's no way to know, and it doesn't much matter. One way or another she drove the Camry to the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Clinton Street. There is a Syrian restaurant called Aleppo on the southwest corner, and next to it, on Atlantic, is a food market, a large delicatessen, really, called The Arabian Gourmet. (Francine never called it that. Like most of the people who shopped there, she called the store Ayoub's, after the former owner who had sold out and moved to San Diego ten years ago.)

Francine parked at a metered spot on the north side of Atlantic, almost directly across the street from The Arabian Gourmet. She walked to the corner, waited for the light to turn, then crossed the street. By the time she entered the food store, the blue panel truck was parked in a loading zone in front of the Aleppo restaurant, and just next door to The Arabian Gourmet.

She was not in the store long. She only bought a few things, and she didn't need any help carrying them. She left the store at approximately twelve-twenty. She was wearing a camel-hair car coat over charcoal-gray slacks and two sweaters, a beige cable-knit cardigan over a chocolate

turtleneck. She had her purse over her shoulder, and was carrying a plastic shopping bag in one hand and her car keys in the other.

The back doors of the panel truck were open, and the two men who had gotten out of it earlier were on the sidewalk once again. When Francine emerged from the store, they moved up on either side of her. At the same time, a third man, the driver of the truck, started his engine.

One of the men said, 'Mrs Khoury?' She turned, and he flipped his wallet open and shut, giving her a quick peek at a badge, or at nothing at all. The second man said, 'You'll have to come with us.'

'Who are you?' she said. 'What's this about, what do you want?'

They each took hold of an arm. Before she could have known what was happening they had hurried her across the sidewalk and up into the open back of the truck. Within seconds they were inside the truck with her and the doors were shut and the truck was pulling away from the curb and into the stream of traffic.

Although it was the middle of the day, and although the abduction took place on a busy commercial street, hardly anyone was in a position to see what happened, and the few people who did witness it had no clear idea what they were seeing. Everything must have happened very quickly.

If Francine had stepped back and cried out at their first approach . . .

But she didn't. Before she could do anything she was in the truck with the doors shut. She may have screamed then, or struggled, or tried to. But by then it was too late.

I know exactly where I was when they snatched her. I went to the noon meeting of the Fireside group, which runs from twelve-thirty to one-thirty weekdays at the Y on West Sixty-third Street. I got there early, so I was almost certainly sitting

with a cup of coffee when the two of them hustled Francine across the sidewalk and into the back of the panel truck.

I don't remember any of the details of the meeting. For several years now I've been going to AA meetings on a surprisingly regular basis. I don't go to quite so many as I did when I first got sober, but I still must average somewhere around five a week. This meeting would have followed the group's usual format, with a speaker telling his or her own story for fifteen or twenty minutes and the rest of the hour given over to general discussion. I don't think I spoke up during the discussion period. I'd be likely to remember it if I had. I'm sure there were interesting things said, and funny things. There always are, but I can't remember anything specific.

After the meeting I had lunch somewhere, and after lunch I called Elaine. Her answering machine picked up, which meant either that she was out or that she had company. Elaine is a call girl, and having company is what she does for a living.

I met Elaine a couple of lives ago, when I was a hard-drinking cop with a new gold shield in my pocket and a wife and two sons out on Long Island. For a couple of years we had a relationship that served us both very well. I was her friend on the job, there to steer her through hassles, and once called upon to pilot a dead client from her bed to an alley down in the financial district. And she was the dream mistress, beautiful, bright, funny, professionally adept, and throughout it all as agreeable and undemanding as only a whore can be. Who could have asked for anything more?

After I left my home and my family and my job, Elaine and I pretty much lost touch with one another. Then a monster from out of our shared past turned up to threaten us both, and we were thrown together by circumstance. And, remarkably, we stayed together.

She had her apartment and I had my hotel room. Two or

three or four nights a week we would see each other. Generally those nights would end at her apartment, and more often than not I would stay over. Occasionally we left the city together for a week or a weekend. On the days when we didn't see each other, we almost always spoke on the phone, sometimes more than once.

Although we hadn't said anything about forsaking all others, we had essentially done so. I wasn't seeing anybody else, and neither was she – with the singular exception of clients. Periodically she would trot off to a hotel room, or have someone up to her apartment. This had never bothered me in the early days of our relationship – it had probably been, truth to tell, part of the attraction – so I didn't see why it should bother me now.

If it did bother me, I could always ask her to stop. She had earned good money over the years and had saved most of it, putting the bulk of it in income-producing real estate. She could quit the life without having to change her lifestyle.

Something kept me from asking her. I suppose I was reluctant to admit to either of us that it bothered me. And I was at least as reluctant to do anything that would change any of the elements of our relationship. It wasn't broke, and I didn't want to fix it.

Things change, though. They can't do otherwise. If nothing else, they are altered by the sheer fact of their not changing.

We avoided using the *L*-word, although love is surely what I felt for her, and she for me. We avoided discussing the possibility of getting married, or living together, although I know I thought about it and had no doubt that she did. But we didn't talk about it. It was the thing we didn't talk about, except when we were not talking about love, or about what she did for a living.

Sooner or later, of course, we would have to think about

these things, and talk about them, and even deal with them. Meanwhile we took it all one day at a time, which was how I had been taught to take all of life ever since I stopped trying to drink whiskey faster than they could distill it. As someone pointed out, you might as well take the whole business a day at a time. That, after all, is how the world hands it to you.

At a quarter to four that same Thursday afternoon the telephone rang at the Khoury house on Colonial Road. When Kenan Khoury answered it a male voice said, 'Hey, Khoury. She never came home, did she?'

'Who is this?'

'None of your fuckin' business is who it is. We got your wife, you Arab fuck. You want her back or what?'

'Where is she? Let me talk to her.'

'Hey, fuck you, Khoury,' the man said, and broke the connection.

Khoury stood there for a moment, shouting 'hello' into a dead phone and trying to figure out what to do next. He ran outside, went to the garage, established that his Buick was there and her Camry was not. He ran the length of the driveway to the street, looked in either direction, returned to the house, and picked up the phone. He listened to the dial tone and tried to think of someone to call.

'Jesus Christ,' he said out loud. He put the phone down and yelled, '*Francey!*'

He dashed upstairs and burst into their bedroom, calling her name. Of course she wasn't there, but he couldn't help himself, he had to check every room. It was a big house and he ran in and out of every room in it, shouting her name, at once the spectator and the participant in his own panic. Finally he was back in the living room and he saw that he had left the phone off the hook. That was brilliant. If they were trying to reach him, they couldn't get through. He

hung up the phone and willed it to ring, and almost immediately it did.

It was a different male voice this time, calmer, more cultured. He said, 'Mr. Khoury, I've been trying to reach you and getting a busy signal. Who were you talking to?'

'Nobody. I had the phone off the hook.'

'I hope you didn't call the police.'

'I didn't call anybody,' Khoury said. 'I made a mistake, I thought I hung up the phone, but I set it down alongside it. Where's my wife? Let me talk to my wife.'

'You shouldn't leave the phone off the hook. And you shouldn't call anyone.'

'I didn't.'

'And certainly not the police.'

'What do you want?'

'I want to help you get your wife back. If you want her back, that is. Do you want her back?'

'Jesus, what are you—'

'Answer the question, Mr. Khoury.'

'Yes, I want her back. Of course I want her back.'

'And I want to help you. Keep the line open, Mr. Khoury. I'll be in touch.'

'Hello?' he said. 'Hello?'

But the line was dead.

For ten minutes he paced the floor, waiting for the phone to ring. Then an icy calm settled over him and he relaxed into it. He stopped walking the floor and sat in a chair next to the phone. When it rang he picked it up but said nothing.

'Khoury?' The first man again, the crude one.

'What do you want?'

'What do I want? What the fuck you think I want?'

He didn't respond.

'Money,' the man said after a moment. 'We want money.'

'How much?'

'You fuckin' sand nigger, where do you get off askin' the questions? You want to tell me that?'

He waited.

'A million dollars. How's that strike you, asshole?'

'That's ridiculous,' he said. 'Look, I can't talk with you. Have your friend call me, maybe I can talk with him.'

'Hey, you raghead fuck, what are you tryin' to—'

This time it was Khoury who broke the connection.

It seemed to him that it was about control. Trying to control a situation like this, that was what made you crazy. Because you couldn't do it. They had all the cards.

But if you let go of the need to control it, you could at least quit dancing to their music, shuffling around like a trained bear in a Bulgarian circus.

He went into the kitchen and made himself a cup of thick sweet coffee, preparing it in the long-handled brass pot. While it cooled he got a bottle of vodka from the freezer and poured himself two ounces, drank it down in a single swallow, and felt the icy calm taking him over entirely. He carried his coffee into the other room, and he was just finishing it when the phone rang again.

It was the second man, the nice one. 'You upset my friend, Mr. Khoury,' he said. 'He's difficult to deal with when he's upset.'

'I think it would be better if you made the calls from now on.'

'I don't see—'

'Because that way we can get this handled instead of getting all hung up in drama,' he said. 'He mentioned a million dollars. That's out of the question.'

'Don't you think she's worth it?'

'She's worth any amount,' he said, 'but—'

'What does she weigh, Mr. Khoury? One-ten, one-twenty, somewhere in that neighborhood?'

'I don't—'

'Something like fifty kilograms, we might say.'

Cute.

'Fifty keys at twenty a key, well, run the numbers for me, why don't you, Mr. Khoury? Comes to a mil, doesn't it?'

'What's the point?'

'The point is you'd pay a million for her if she was product, Mr. Khoury. You'd pay that if she was powder. Isn't she worth as much in flesh and blood?'

'I can't pay what I don't have.'

'You have plenty.'

'I don't have a million.'

'What do you have?'

He'd had time to think of the answer. 'Four hundred.'

'Four hundred thousand.'

'Yes.'

'That's less than half.'

'It's four hundred thousand,' he said. 'It's less than some things and it's more than others. It's what I've got.'

'You could get the rest.'

'I don't see how. I could probably make some promises and call in some favors and raise a little that way, but not that much. And it would take at least a few days, probably more like a week.'

'You assume we're in a hurry?'

'*I'm* in a hurry,' he said. 'I want my wife back and I want you out of my life, and I'm in a big hurry as far as those two things are concerned.'

'Five hundred thousand.'

See? There were elements he could control after all. 'No,' he said. 'I'm not bargaining, not where my wife's life is concerned. I gave you the top figure right away. Four.'

A pause, then a sigh. 'Ah, well. Silly of me to think I

could get the better of one of your kind in a business deal. You people have been playing this game for years, haven't you? You're as bad as the Jews.'

He didn't know how to answer that, so he left it alone.

'Four it is,' the man said. 'How long will it take you to get it ready?'

Fifteen minutes, he thought. 'A couple of hours,' he said.

'We can do it tonight.'

'All right.'

'Get it ready. Don't call anyone.'

'Who would I call?'

Half an hour later he was sitting at the kitchen table looking at four hundred thousand dollars. He had a safe in the basement, a big old Mosler that weighed over a ton, itself set in the wall and screened by pine paneling and protected by a burglar alarm along with its own lock system. The bills were all hundreds, fifty in each banded stack, eighty stacks each containing five thousand dollars. He'd counted them out and tossed three and four stacks at a time into a woven plastic bushel basket Francine used for laundry.

She didn't have to do the laundry herself, for God's sake. She could hire all the help she needed, he'd told her that often enough. But she liked that, she was old-fashioned, she liked cooking and cleaning and keeping house.

He picked up the phone, held the receiver at arm's length, then dropped it in its cradle. Don't call anyone, the man had said. Who would I call? he'd demanded.

Who had done this to him? Set him up, stolen his wife away from him? Who would do something like that?

Well, maybe a lot of people would. Maybe anybody would, if they thought they could get away with it.

He picked up the phone again. It was clean, untapped. The whole house was free of bugs, as far as that went. He had two devices, both of them supposed to be state of the

art, ought to be for what they cost him. One was a telephone-tap alert, installed in the phone line. Any change in the voltage, resistance, or capacitance anywhere on the line and he'd know it. The other was a Track-Lock, automatically scanning the radio spectrum for hidden microphones. Five, six grand he'd paid for the two units, something like that, and it was worth it if it kept his private conversations private.

Almost a shame there hadn't been cops listening the past couple of hours. Cops to trace the caller, come down on the kidnappers, bring Francey back to him—

No, last thing he needed. Cops would just fuck up the whole thing beyond recognition. He had the money. He'd pay it, and he'd either get her back or he wouldn't. Things you can control and things you can't – he could control paying the money, control how that went to some degree, but he couldn't control what happened afterward.

Don't call anyone.

Who would I call?

He picked up the phone one more time and dialed a number he didn't have to look up. His brother answered on the third ring.

He said, 'Petey, I need you out here. Jump in a cab, I'll pay for it, but get out here right away, you hear me?'

A pause. Then, 'Babe, I'd do anything for you, you know that—'

'So jump in a cab, man!'

'—but I can't be in anything has to do with your business. I just can't, babe.'

'It's not business.'

'What is it?'

'It's Francine.'

'Jesus, what's the matter? Never mind, you'll tell me when I get out there. You're at home, right?'

'Yeah, I'm at home.'

'I'll get a cab. I'll be right out.'

While Peter Khoury was looking for a cab driver willing to take him to his brother's house in Brooklyn, I was watching a group of reporters on ESPN discussing the likelihood of a cap on players' salaries. It didn't break my heart when the phone rang. It was Mick Ballou, calling from the town of Castlebar in County Mayo. The line was clear as a bell; he might have been calling from the back room at Grogan's.

'It's grand here,' he said. 'If you think the Irish are crazy in New York you should meet them on their own home ground. Every other storefront's a pub, and no one's out the door before closing hour.'

'They close early, don't they?'

'Too bloody early by half. In your hotel, though, they have to serve drink at any hour to any registered guest that wants it. Now that's the mark of a civilized country, don't you think?'

'Absolutely.'

'They all smoke, though. They're forever lighting cigarettes and offering the pack around. The French are even worse that way. When I was over there visiting my father's people they were peeved with me for not smoking. I believe Americans are the only people in the world who've had the sense to give it up.'

'You'll still find a few smokers in this country, Mick.'

'Good luck to them, then, suffering through plane rides and films and all the rules against it in public places.' He told a long story about a man and woman he'd met a few nights before. It was funny and we both laughed, and then he asked about me and I said I was all right. 'Are you, then?' he said.

'A little restless, maybe. I've had time on my hands lately. And the moon's full.'

'Is it,' he said. 'Here, too.'