Stillriver

Andrew Rosenheim

One

AS HE HAD driven north through the high orchard country he had seen the last sliver of sun slip into Lake Michigan, but here enough light remained for him to make out the birch tree on the corner of the lot, the towering twin maples next to the house, the long expanse of white pine boards and green-shuttered windows that was the house itself. And a patrol car in the drive.

He parked his rental car and got out slowly, stretching after the drive from the little airport in Muskegon and looking around for a minute before going inside. The rough ryegrass (they had never had a silky lawn) was high – why hadn't his brother been round to cut it? He looked across at the Wagners', and was surprised to see four cars parked under the cedar trees there. Then he remembered it was now a bed and breakfast. Tourists up for Memorial Day, hoping that, like a rare restaurant meal served ahead of expectation, summer would come early to dispel this wet, cold weather. There was no sign of the Wagner twins.

He heard the back door groan as it opened, then slammed shut, and he turned round to see Jimmy Olds standing on the porch. He was in blue-grey uniform, and had the crescent moon shades of a motorcycle cop pushed back on his head, covering the top of his balding forehead. He was an improbable policeman – short, skinny, quite the opposite of his predecessor, Jerry Dawson, who had been a bear-like barrel of a man, an exmarine well over six feet tall and very tough with it.

'Hey Jimmy.' He was trying to sound friendly but could tell his tone was merely resigned.

Jimmy nodded. 'Michael.'

Michael walked to the porch and climbed the steps to shake hands.

'You've had a long trip,' said Jimmy.

'You could say that.'

'Europe, right?' Pronounced Yurp. 'How long you been over there?'

'Almost six years.'

'You must like it.'

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Michael looked across the street, this time at Bogles. The front yard was surprisingly tidy. He nodded absent-mindedly. 'It pays the bills,' he said.

'That's what counts,' and they both nodded in mild agreement at the banal correctness of this. They were silent for a minute and Jimmy looked down at his black leather boots. 'Well,' he said, lifting his chin. 'I expect you want to go inside.'

He followed Jimmy in, staring at the walnut grip of his holstered pistol. Jimmy's father had been a local builder, not very successful, one step up really from a handyman. After high school Jimmy had joined him, until the day he announced to his father's chagrin that he had passed the necessary exams and was joining the state police in Fennville. When Jerry Dawson died of cancer Jimmy had become the town's policeman – actually, now one of three of them, since despite a virtual absence of serious crime, Stillriver's governing council, flush with tourist property tax, had decided the community was underpoliced. Although Jimmy was the senior officer, there was a morose quality about the man, an air of mild disappointment, as if he had expected that by stepping into Jerry Dawson's shoes his feet would grow correspondingly. They hadn't.

They walked through the kitchen, which had always been the cosiest room in the house, with its wood-burning stove, and the radio tuned to Blue Lake while his mother bustled around and Michael sat after school reading the Chronicle. After she'd died, the room assumed a colder, functional air. His father would come in and make supper quickly, Michael and Gary would join him when the meal was ready and the trio would eat methodically – meat, vegetable, and potato; or stew, rice and salad; sometimes just plain stew – seated around the soft-pine kitchen table, talking only occasionally. Gary and he would do the dishes, then quickly go their separate ways, like a pair of cats let out of their carrier basket after a trip to the vet. In the rack by the sink now there was a plate, a glass, knife and fork – the only sign of his father's last supper.

He followed Jimmy into the dining room, a large square with an old-fashioned, heavy-looking mix of dark wainscoting and cream plaster walls, like the interior of an early Frank Lloyd Wright house. An old oak table and matching chairs were grouped in the middle. When his mother was alive they would sit down formally for supper and, at weekends, for lunch as well. But now the table was bare, and dusty from disuse.

On to the living room, again tidy but cold: three soft armchairs, a sofa the colour of groundfall plums, and a maple rocking chair formed a circle around the Mojave rug. Behind the sofa stood the mahogany grandfather clock, ticking with a metronomic resonance. It was an heirloom from Michael's mother's family that his father had wound religiously each Sunday evening. Michael made a mental note to wind it in two days' time – it seemed wrong even to contemplate winding it sooner.

Then to the stairwell, on one side of which was the small study where his father had taken to sitting, reserving the living room for company. Michael was pretty sure that lately there had not been much of that.

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Jimmy stopped at the bottom of the stairs. 'You know he's not here any more, right?'

Yes, of course he'd realized that – it had been almost two days since they'd found his father – but Jimmy's bluntness unnerved him. 'He's in Fennville now,' Jimmy went on. 'At the hospital.'

They climbed the steep stairs and Michael gripped the thin rail of the banister, worn smooth by years of little boys' hands sliding along it. The stairs had been daunting when he was little – one family legend had him pitching down them head first, aged three, only to be caught at the bottom by his father. Another time he saved my ass, Michael thought wearily.

On the landing Jimmy turned left but Michael went right. Jimmy called out to him: 'He wasn't in the master bedroom.'

'I know.' His father had moved to the spare room at the back of the house during the last month of his wife's illness, and when she had died he hadn't moved back. So why am I going here first? wondered Michael. Maybe to feel some hint of his mother's past presence in the house – there was virtually none in the cold rooms downstairs; maybe somehow to ready himself for the fact that, with his mother long dead, now his father was gone, too.

He opened the door slowly and looked in. The light outside was fading fast, but he could make out the big double bed with its high mahogany headboard, and his mother's oval dressing table, where her set of ivory brushes was lined up carefully. Then he softly closed the door and walked down the hall to Jimmy, who was waiting outside the back bedroom.

'Did Henry usually sleep back here?' Jimmy asked.

'Once my mother died.' Michael sounded formal even to himself.

'The room's been sealed. I'll open it, but don't touch anything. We had the state police in and they've done the forensics – dusting fingerprints mainly – but they may want to come back.' Jimmy peeled back a thick ribbon of yellow adhesive tape. Then he turned the door knob and, reaching in, switched the light on.

There was an armchair of cracked brown leather by the window, with a reading lamp on an adjacent small table. His father's clothes from the day still lay on a wooden kitchen chair near the closet: trousers folded on the seat, his shirt hooked over the uprights of the chair like epaulettes on a store window mannequin. The closet door was open, and Michael could see a few pairs of shoes neatly lined up, some shirts on coat hangers, a fading sports jacket doubtless bought at Vergil's in Fennville. There was an old man's smell in the air – of clean but ageing clothes, of foot powder applied after a bath.

He was avoiding the bed to his right, but eventually forced himself to turn and see what was there. Not his father, he knew, and no longer any bedclothes. 'They've stripped the bed,' he commented flatly.

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'They took the sheets away for analysis.'

'Analysis?'

Jimmy sighed. 'Blood. They need to make sure it was just your father's blood.'

'Oh.' He hadn't thought about the blood. 'Was there a lot of it?'

'A fair amount,' Jimmy said quietly.

'Tell me,' he said, keeping his back to Jimmy, 'was there any sign of a struggle?'

'If it's any comfort, Michael, I doubt he knew what hit him.'

'So he was asleep when it happened?'

'Well, he had sat up in the bed. We're pretty sure of that.'

'How do you know?'

'Because he got hit right on top of his head. If he'd been lying down he wouldn't have got hit that way.'

'And that's what killed him?'

Jimmy was silent for a moment. 'He got hit more than once.'

Since he'd first been told, on his mobile phone as he sat in a rowboat inspecting the beam encasing under Anfernachie Bridge, through the hours and hours of travel that got him here, all Michael had been able to imagine was his father's body, inert on the bed. It was the stillness of the image, a snapshot, which held firm in his mind's eye.

But now he could visualize his father startled from sleep, sitting up in surprise, turning towards the door and seeing, seeing exactly what? His killer? Heading towards him, weapon already raised, perhaps already descending – which would leave just enough time for his father to understand that he was about to be hit, about to be killed, in fact. Just enough time to feel the bone-shaking panic of a man about to die. Christ.

He had seen enough. He turned around and faced Jimmy. 'What did he get hit with?'

Jimmy shrugged. 'We don't know. So far there's been nothing. No prints, no sign of forced entry—'

'He never locked the back door.'

'The doctor thought it might have been a lead pipe. Something heavy.'

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'Doctor Fell?'

Jimmy shook his head. 'He's retired. There's no doctor in town now. This is some guy from Burlington.'

As they left the room Michael switched off the light and closed the door, then watched as Jimmy patched back the strip of yellow tape. They went down the stairs and walked through the ground floor until they again stood under the covered porch side by side as rain and mist came down in a fine, almost invisible mix. The air felt moist and heavy, and the lights from the Wagners' house seemed to quiver like buoys bobbing at sea.

'Is Gary coming by?' asked Jimmy.

Michael shook his head. 'I told him to come round in the morning.'

'Come here?' Jimmy sounded surprised.

'I'll sleep here tonight. I don't imagine they want to kill me, too.'

Jimmy looked so shocked at this that Michael almost laughed. 'Don't worry, I'll lock the door.' But then suddenly his studied diffidence dissolved. 'Who would have done this, Jimmy?'

Jimmy took a stick of gum from his shirt pocket, unwrapped it and popped it in his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully for a few seconds. 'They told me to ask you, did your dad have any enemies?'

Me, when I was a mixed up kid, he wanted to say, but instead replied with exasperation, 'Jesus Christ, Jimmy, he was a retired schoolteacher.'

'Told 'em that. Taught me three years running. Or tried to anyway.'

'So what do they think – he flunked Oscar Peters twenty years ago and made a lifelong enemy?'

'Oscar's dead.'

Oscar Peters had been the town's closest approximation to a village idiot. 'You know what I mean.'

Jimmy said nothing and when Michael spoke again, his voice was softer. 'All right. I know what they're thinking. Obviously somebody didn't like him. But I can't think of anyone obvious. How could I? I haven't been here in six years. Anyway, when was the last murder in this town? I've never even heard of one.'

Jimmy looked pensive. 'There was Andy Everitt.'

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'That was a mercy killing, as you know perfectly well. He just put her out of her misery. What did he end up serving anyway? Two years?'

Jimmy shrugged. 'Something like that.' He chewed some more on his gum. 'Ronald Duverson tried to kill somebody once. That I know for a fact.' He turned and looked blank-eyed at Michael.

Michael heard his heart start to thump like thunder in his ears. He tried to sound calm, almost nonchalant. 'Is that right?'

Jimmy nodded. 'But he's in Texas now. Safe and sound.'

'How do you know?' He tried to keep the urgency out of his voice.

'Because he's sitting in the penitentiary. Down there he did manage to kill somebody.'

'Well, that rules him out,' Michael said, his voice pitched high enough for Jimmy to look at him again. 'Seems to me,' he said, his natural deeper tones reasserting themselves, 'that you're looking for a loony.'

'Or fanatic.'

'Meaning what?'

'Hang here a minute.' Jimmy walked down the porch steps and went to his patrol car. When he came back he held a heavy black flashlight in his right hand. 'Come look at this.'

Michael followed him around to the side of the house, where a bough of the peach tree extended almost to the wall. He could smell the incense of the cedars that, mixed with mulberry trees, formed a hedge separating the lot from the Jenkinses next door. Jimmy stopped and swung the flashlight's beam on to the white boards. Michael moved closer to look.

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