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Opening Extract from...

Soul Murder

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Friday, October 1st. 12:15 p.m.

Franco Patrese hadn't been inside a church for ten years.

Ironic, then, that his first time back was straight into the mothership itself; Saint Paul Cathedral, center of spiritual life for close on a million Pittsburgh Catholics.

The bishop himself had insisted. Gregory Kohler had first gotten to know Franco's parents when he, as a young priest, had helped officiate at their wedding. He'd taught Franco and his sisters in the days when priests and nuns could still be found inside the classroom, and over the years had become family friend as well as pastor.

Now he'd offered Franco and his sisters the cathedral. You didn't turn the bishop down, not if you were a good Catholic; and Bianca and Valentina had certainly kept the faith, even if Franco hadn't. Besides, they needed all the seats they could get. Half of Bloomfield – an area of the city so Italian that the parking meters are painted red, green and white – had come to pay their respects to Franco's parents.

Alberto and Ilaria Patrese had been killed five days before. Alberto had gone to pass a truck on the freeway at exactly the moment the truck driver had himself pulled out to overtake an eighteen-wheeler. The collision had flipped the

Patreses' car across the central reservation and into the path of three lanes of traffic coming the other way.

They hadn't had a prayer.

The police had come to Franco first, as he was one of them: a homicide detective, working out of the department's North Shore headquarters. When two uniformed officers had approached Franco's desk, he'd known instantly that someone in his family was dead. He recognized the expression on those officers' faces as clearly as if he'd looked in a mirror. He'd had to break similar news many times. It was the worst part of the job, and by some distance. Nothing rips at people's lives like the death of a loved one.

Franco had found the immediate aftermath unexpectedly bittersweet. There'd been tears, of course, and shock giving way to spikes of anger and confusion; but there'd also been rolling gales of laughter at the hundreds of family stories polished and embellished down the years. He'd kept himself occupied with death's legion of petty bureaucracies: police reports, autopsies, certificates, funeral arrangements, contacting relatives long-lost and far-flung. Busy meant less time to think, and less time to think meant more time to be strong, to make sure everyone else was bearing up all right, to deflect even the slightest gaze away from himself.

He was doing it even now, during the funeral service, sat in the front pew with his sisters either side of him and his nephews and niece tucked solemnly between the adults. Determined to be the rock on which the waves of grief could crash themselves out, Franco pulled Valentina close, ruffled the children's hair, and squeezed Bianca's hand when her jaw juddered and bounced against the tears.

The last notes of 'Amazing Grace' faded, and the congregation sat as Kohler climbed the steps to the pulpit. He was in his sixties, with a mane of hair that would have been the envy of a man half his age. The hands he raised as though

in benediction of his flock were large and strong, and they did not shake.

Franco tuned out. He heard the grateful laughter when the bishop said something dry and affectionate, but he was miles away, thinking about the things he wished he'd told his parents while he'd still had the chance, and about the things he was glad he hadn't told them. They hadn't known everything about his life, and he had no illusions that they should have done so. He knew they'd loved him, and nothing was more important. But he knew too that loving people meant protecting them.

Somewhere in the distance, Kohler was talking about God, though it was not a God Franco believed in any more. As far as he was concerned, his parents' death had been blind chance, nothing more. Wrong place, wrong time. Why them? Turn it round: why *not* them? You were born, you lived, you died. Mercy and justice and compassion weren't divine traits; they were human ones, and by no means universal. If you didn't believe that, Franco thought, working homicide would soon change your mind. Religion was just a polite word for superstition, and superstition was just a polite word for fear.

Franco hooked a finger inside his collar and pulled at it. He felt suddenly short of breath, and his skin was clammy.

When Bianca looked at him, her face seemed to swim slightly in his vision before settling. Her eyebrows made a Chinese hat of concern and query.

'Is it hot in here?' he whispered.

She shook her head. 'Not for me.'

Franco's ribs quivered with the thumping of his heart. He stood on unsteady legs, stepped over Bianca's feet and walked quickly down the aisle, looking neither left nor right till he was out the huge main door and into the shouty, safe bustle of students from the nearby university ragging each other and putting the world to rights.

Monday, October 4th. 8:12 a.m.

The police department offered Patrese two weeks' compassionate leave.

He took two days, and even those didn't really count, given that they were both at the weekend. So he was back at his desk first thing Monday morning, to the unsurprised but good-natured exasperation of his homicide partner, Mark Beradino.

'Sheesh, Franco. You don't want your fortnight, I'll take it.'

Patrese laughed, thankful that Beradino knew better than to kill him with kindness.

Physically, Beradino was pretty nondescript. Five ten, 180 pounds, hair graying but still pretty much all there, and features which were bang-on regular. He was no Brad Pitt, but nor was he a Michael Moore. You could walk past him in the street without noticing; even if you did notice, you'd have forgotten him five steps later. He'd have made a great spy.

But he was a detective; a hell of a detective, in fact.

As far as Pittsburgh Homicide was concerned, he was practically an institution.

He'd been there since the early eighties – most of his clothes looked as though he'd bought them around that time – and he was known on both sides of the law as a good cop. A tough

one, sure, one who thought cops should be cops rather than politicians or social workers, but an honest one too. He'd never taken a bribe, never faked evidence, never beaten a suspect up.

Not many cops could say the same.

He and Patrese had been partners for three years – itself a vote of confidence in Patrese's ability – and in that time they'd become friends. Patrese was a regular guest at the condo in Punxsutawney which Beradino shared with his partner Jesslyn Gedge, a warder at the State Correctional Institute in Muncy. Both Beradino and Jesslyn had been among the mourners in Saint Paul's.

'But since you're here,' Beradino continued, 'make yourself useful. We just got a case. Domestic dispute, shots fired, man dead. Zone Five.'

There are six police districts in Pittsburgh, numbered with the complete absence of discernible logic that's the hallmark of the true bureaucrat. Zone Five covered the north-eastern corner of the city; East Liberty, East End and Homewood.

Nine times out of ten, an incident in Zone Five meant an incident in Homewood.

Homewood was Pittsburgh's pits, no question. Homicides, aggravated assaults, weapons and narcotics offenses, prostitution arrests; you name it, there were twice as many in Homewood as in any other neighborhood. It was one of the most dangerous places to live in all of Pennsylvania, and that was saying something.

It was half an hour from police headquarters on the North Shore to Homewood. Patrese and Beradino drove there in an unmarked car; no need for lights or sirens, not when the victim was dead and the uniforms had the scene secured.

You could always tell when you were getting close. First came one splash of gang graffiti, then another, and within a couple of blocks these bright squiggles were everywhere: walls, houses, sidewalks, stop signs.

Our turf. Back off.

Then the pockets of young men on street corners, watching sullenly as the cop cruisers came past; then the rows of abandoned buildings, swallowing and regurgitating an endless stream of vagrants, junkies and whores; then the handful of businesses brave or desperate enough to stay: bars, barber shops, convenience stores, fast-food joints.

Wags from out of town liked to call Patrese's city 'Shitsburgh'. He usually jumped down their throat when they did – he loved this city – but when it came to Homewood, even Patrese was forced to admit that they had a point.

Tragedy was, it hadn't always been like this.

A century and a half ago, Homewood had been *the* place to live. Tycoons like Westinghouse and Frick had kept estates here. Businesses boomed, a trolley system was built, and people couldn't move in fast enough.

And so it stayed till after the Second World War, when the city planners decided to build the Civic Arena downtown. In doing so they had to displace thousands of people, mainly poor black families, who'd been living in the Lower Hill District nearby. Most of them moved to Homewood; and, sure as sunrise, most of Homewood's whites upped sticks and left, fleeing to suburbs further out. The few middle-class blacks who could afford to follow them did.

Then came the riots, here as everywhere else during the civil rights era. With the riots came drugs and gangs with names that sounded almost comic: Tre-8s-Perry and Charles, Sugar Top Mob, Down Low Goonies, Reed Rude Boyz, Climax Street.

Nothing comic about what they did, though. Not then, not now. Drugs and guns, guns and drugs. It was a rare gangbanger who died of old age.

Up ahead, Patrese saw a crowd of people spilling from the sidewalk on to the street. A handful of cops held them back. Across the way, two more police cruisers were pulling up.

The officers held themselves tense and watchful, as well they might. Cops here were the enemy, seen as agents of an alien and oppressive ruling class rather than impartial upholders of law and order.

Patrese and Beradino got out of the car. A few feet away, a young man in a bandana and baggy pants was talking urgently into his cell.

'Yo, tell cuz it's *scorchin'* out here today. And this heat ain't from the sun, you know wha' I'm sayin'?'

He stared at Patrese as he ended the call, daring Patrese to challenge him. The police call it eye fucking, when an officer and a criminal stare each other down. As a cop, you can't afford to back away first. You own the streets, not them.

Patrese and Beradino pushed their way through the crowd, flashed their badges at one of the uniforms, and ducked beneath the yellow-and-black stretched taut between two lampposts.

It was a three-story rowhouse, the kind you see all over Homewood, set slightly up from road level with a veranda out front. Every homicide cop with more than a few months' experience had been inside enough of them to know the layout: kitchen and living room on the ground floor, couple of bedrooms and a bathroom on the floor above, and an attic room with dormer windows under the eaves.

A uniform showed Patrese and Beradino upstairs, briefing them as they climbed.

The deceased was J'Juan Weaver, and he'd been no stranger to the police, the courts, or the prison system. He'd lived in this house with Shaniqua Davenport, his girlfriend, and her (but not his) teenage son Trent.

Shaniqua and Weaver had been running for years, though with more ons and offs than the Staten Island ferry. Before Weaver had been a string of undesirables, who between them

had fathered Shaniqua's three sons. Trent was fifteen, the youngest of them. His two elder half-brothers were both already in jail.

You'd have been a brave man to bet against him following suit, Patrese thought.

The uniform showed them into one of the bedrooms.

It was twelve feet square, with a double bed in the far corner. Weaver was lying next to the bed, his body orientated as if he had been sleeping there, with his head up by the end where the pillows were.

The shot that killed him had entered at the back of his head. Patrese could see clips of white bone and gray brain matter amidst the red mess.

Weaver had been a big man; six two and 200 pounds, all of it muscle. There were a lot of sculpted bodies in Homewood, most all of them from pumping iron while inside. Free gym, three hots and a cot; some of them preferred to be inside than out.

'Where are the others?' Beradino asked.

The uniform showed them into the second bedroom.

Shaniqua and Trent, both cuffed, were sitting next to each other on the bed.

Shaniqua was in her late thirties, a good-looking woman with a touch of Angela Bassett about her and eyes which glittered with defiant intelligence.

Trent had a trainer fuzz mustache and a face rounded by puppy fat; too young to have had body and mind irrevocably hardened by life here, though for how long remained to be seen.

They both looked up at Patrese and Beradino.

Beradino introduced himself, and Patrese, then asked: 'What happened?'

'He was goin' for Trent,' Shaniqua said. 'He was gonna kill him.'

That was a confession, right there.

'Why was he going to kill him?'

Silence.

An ambulance pulled up outside, come to remove Weaver's body. Beradino gestured for one of the uniforms to go and tell the paramedics to wait till they were finished up here.

Trent looked as though he was about to say something, then thought better of it.

'We got reports of an argument, then shots were fired,' Patrese said. 'That right?'

'That right.'

'What was the argument about?'

'Oh, you know.'

'No, I don't. What was the argument about?'

'Same kinda shit couples always argue 'bout.'

'Like what?'

'Usual shit. Boring shit.'

'That's not an answer.'

Above their heads, the ceiling creaked.

The detectives might have thought nothing of it, had Trent's eyes not darted heavenwards, involuntary and nervous.

Patrese felt a sudden churning in his gut.

'Who's up there?'

'No one,' Shaniqua said quickly. Too quickly. 'Just us.'

One of the uniforms moved as if to investigate. Patrese raised a hand to stay him, and then slipped out of the room himself.

Up the stairs, quiet as he drew his gun; a Ruger Blackhawk, single action revolver, .357 Magnum caliber, four and five-eighths-inch barrel, black checkered grip.

Surprise was on his side. *Use it.*

He found her, alone, in the attic bedroom.

She was flat on her back; half on the floor, half on a

mattress which looked as though it could break new grounds in biological warfare. She was wearing a bra and cut-off denim shorts. The rest of her clothes lay in a pile on top of her right hand, which was hidden from view. Track marks marched like centipedes down the inside of her arms. No wonder Shaniqua and Trent hadn't wanted the cops to find her.

And she was white.

Homewood wasn't a place for white folks.

A few of the more enterprising suburban kids might cruise the avenues in late afternoon and buy a few ounces on a street corner before skedaddling back home and selling it on to their friends at a tidy profit – half the amount for twice the price was the usual – but they stayed in their cars the whole time they were in Homewood, if they had any sense. They didn't walk the streets, and they damn sure didn't go into the crack dens.

So this one must have been desperate. And Patrese knew what all cops knew; desperate people are often the most dangerous.

'Hands where I can see 'em,' he said.

Her body jerked slightly, and instinctively he jumped, his finger tightening on the trigger to within a fraction of the pressure needed for discharge.

Close, he thought, close.

His heart hammered against the inside of his chest.

He was scared. Fear was good; scared cops tended to be live cops.

She opened her eyes and regarded him fuzzily.

Perhaps too fuzzily, he thought.

Was she shamming?

Cops had been killed in these situations before. Places like this, you were on your guard, *always*. It wasn't just the guys with tattoos and biceps who knew how to shoot.

'Lemme see your hands,' he said again.

She stayed perfectly still, looking at him with an incurious blankness.

This wasn't the way people tended to react, not when faced with an armed and armored cop. Sure, there were those who were too scared to move, but they tended to be wide-eyed and gabbling.

Not this one.

Patrese felt a drop of sweat slide lazily down his spine.

Why won't she co-operate?

Two possibilities, he thought.

One, she was so bombed that she didn't know who she was, who he was, where they were or what he was saying.

Two, she wanted him to think all the above, but she was in fact perfectly lucid, and trying to lull him into a false sense of security.

The pile of clothes next to her moved slightly.

She was rummaging around in it.

'Hands. *Now!*' he shouted, taking a quick step towards her.

A flash of black as she pulled something from the pile, bringing her arm up and across her chest.

Patrese fired, twice, very fast.

She was already prostrate, so she didn't fall. The only part of her that moved was her arm, flopping back down by her side as her hand spilled what she'd been holding.

A shirt. Black, and cotton, and nothing but a shirt.

Everyone seemed to be shouting: uniforms barking into their radios, paramedics demanding access, Shaniqua bawling out Trent, Trent yelling back at her.

To Patrese, it was all static, white noise. He felt numb, disconnected.

Should have taken the fortnight's leave, Patrese thought. *Should have taken it.*

Whether he'd followed procedure, or whether he could have done something different, he didn't know. There'd be an inquiry, of course; there always was when a police officer shot someone in the line of duty.

But that was for later. Getting down to the station was their immediate priority, both for questioning Shaniqua and for tipping Patrese the hell out of Homewood.

Beradino took charge, quick and efficient as usual. He told the uniforms to stay in the rowhouse with Trent until back-up arrived to deal with the girl in the attic. Then he and Patrese took Shaniqua down the stairs and out through the front door.

'Don't tell 'em *shit*, Mama,' Trent shouted as they left the bedroom.

She looked back at him with an infinite mix of love and pain.

The crowd outside was even bigger than before, and more volatile to boot. They'd heard Patrese's shots, though they didn't yet know who'd fired or what he'd hit. When they saw Shaniqua being led away, they began to jeer.

'I ain't talkin' to no white man, you hear?' Shaniqua yelled. 'I was born in Trinidad, you know? Black folks don't kiss honky ass in Trinidad, that's for damn sure.' She turned to one of the uniforms on crowd control. 'And I ain't talkin' to no Uncle Tom neither.'

'Then you ain't talkin' to no one, girl,' someone shouted from the crowd, to a smattering of laughter.

Trent was standing at the window, one of the uniforms next to him. For a moment, he looked not like a gangbanger-in-waiting, but like what he was; a frightened and confused teenager.

'I'll be back, my darlin',' Shaniqua shouted. 'I love you for both. Just do good.'