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Written by James Thompson

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JAMES THOMPSON

Lucifer's Tears

A V O N

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For Nat Sobel and Judith Weber

And, as always, for Annukka

1

The baby kicks against my hand and rouses me from my nap. Kate and I sleep spooned up. Her head in the crook of my shoulder, my head buried in her long red hair. Her tall, pale body pressed against mine. My hand draped over her, resting on her pregnant belly. Kate doesn't stir. As she's gotten further into her pregnancy, she sleeps deeper, and I sleep lighter. Now that she's eight and a half months along, I barely sleep at all, just doze under the surface of waking consciousness. The sonogram said we're having a girl.

I pull on a robe, wool socks and slippers, light a cigarette and go out to the balcony of our Helsinki apartment. Illuminated by streetlights, snow pours through the dark in wet, blinding sheets. Fierce wind buffets me, blows up under my robe, freezes my nuts, takes my breath and makes me laugh. I hang on to

the rail to keep from being blown off to the sidewalk below. It's minus twenty Celsius.

My home, Finland. The ninth and innermost circle of hell. A frozen lake of blood and guilt formed from Lucifer's tears, turned to ice by the flapping of his leathery wings. I limp back inside. This kind of cold makes my bad knee go so stiff that I drag my left leg more than walk on it.

My head is splitting. I hobble to the bathroom, shake a couple paracetamol out of a bottle, chew them up to make them work faster, stick my mouth under the spigot and chase them with water. I don't know why I bother. They don't help anymore. The migraines started not long after Kate miscarried the twins a little over a year ago, and have gotten worse over time. I've had the same headache without a break for almost three weeks now. It's starting to make me crazy.

I sit in a rocking chair by the bed and watch Kate sleep. As Dante's Beatrice was his object of unconditional love, Kate is mine. Kate: my cinnamon-haired, fair-skinned snow queen. Kate: my beautiful American. Since I met her, Kate has been my beginning and my end. For me, there is only Kate.

Pregnancy has made Kate more radiant than ever. I feel a pang of guilt for our dead twins, and wonder again if I caused her to lose them. I wonder if she thinks about them as often as I do, and if she blames me for their loss. Kate begged me to give up the Sufia Elmi case. She said the stress was too much for both of us. I refused.

I managed to solve the murder, but the attrition rate was

high. Five dead bodies piled up before the case was over, including my friend and sergeant Valtteri and my ex-wife. Two women were widowed and seven children left fatherless.

And I was shot in the face. The bullet left an ugly scar, which could have been corrected with minor plastic surgery, but I refused. I wear it as a symbol of my guilt for failing to solve the case sooner. I could have spared all those people so much death and misery. In my mind, I see Valtteri pull the trigger. His blood and brains spray across the ice. The shot echoes around the lake. He looks at me with dead eyes and falls. His blood stains the pearl-gray ice and looks black in the murky light. I still refuse to talk about it. Kate believes I suffer from traumatic shock.

I pursued the Sufia Elmi case to the exclusion of everything and everyone else. Even Kate. She miscarried two days later, the day after Christmas, and lost the babies. I blame myself. I believe the stress I caused her sparked the miscarriage. I've never told Kate about my guilt, can't make myself vocalize it.

Kate was unhappy in the Arctic Circle, in my hometown of Kittilä. She wanted to move to Helsinki and start over. As a reward for solving the Sufia Elmi murder, I was decorated for bravery and offered the job of my choice. I lived in Helsinki years ago, but left for a reason. My memories of this place are bad. Still, I owed Kate this, so we moved here and I took a slot in Helsinki homicide.

Kate's brother and sister, John and Mary, are arriving from the States tomorrow evening. She hasn't seen them for a few years, and I'm glad she has the opportunity, but they're going to stay for weeks, to see Kate through the final days of her pregnancy and help out after the baby is born. Who the hell does that? I never heard of a family doing such a thing. I can't say it to Kate, but I don't want them here. It will change the dynamic of our household. And besides, I want Kate all to myself during this intimate time. I don't need any help taking care of my wife and child.

After a while, I go back to bed. I slide my arm under her head and she turns toward me, gives a sleepy little snort, then wakes up enough to look at me and grins. 'Want to make love to me?' she asks.

'Yeah,' I say. 'I do.'

Pregnancy and the attendant hormonal changes have lent a sharp edge to her libido, and despite the migraines, I'm happy to accommodate. I suffer an irrational fear that sex will hurt our child, and take her more gently than she might prefer. Afterward, she lays her head on my shoulder, continues her nap.

I wait until I'm sure she's asleep again, before I move. She likes it if I stay awake in bed until she's asleep. It makes her feel safe. I have the night shift, check the clock. It's seven p.m. I have to be at work in an hour. I take a shower and dress. Kate is still asleep. I pull back the blanket, kiss her belly and cover her up again on my way out.

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As I drive to Pasila police station, the streets are almost empty. I use my Saab for a winter play toy in the snow, cut the wheel hard to make the car slip sideways, accelerate to straighten it out again. Reckless endangerment.

2

It's Sunday night, ten p.m. I'm working the graveyard shift, usually the province of rookies. I may have only been in homicide for a little while, but counting my time spent as a military policeman while doing my mandatory service in the armed forces at nineteen, I have twenty-two years in law enforcement. The slight of being assigned these bullshit shifts isn't lost on me. I'm working with Milo Nieminen, the other new guy, recently promoted to detective sergeant. My status in Helsinki homicide is further reinforced.

Rauha Anttila, age seventy-eight. Found dead in her sauna by her son. Said son couldn't take it and left. A lone uniformed officer watches over the house, waiting for us to arrive. I dismiss him. Milo and I are alone in her apartment. We don latex gloves, walk through the bathroom and open

the sauna door. I'm not sure if Milo can take it either. He makes gagging sounds, is on the edge of vomiting.

Milo and I haven't really gotten to know each other yet. He's in his mid-twenties, on the short side and thin. His hair is shaved down to stubble. Under piercing dark eyes, he has shadowy circles that look permanent.

'You could try a face mask,' I say. 'Some cops use them in these situations.'

'Does it help?'

'No.'

I estimate that Rauha has been dead for about ten days. Her sauna is electric and has a timer on it with a max of four hours, so she didn't cook too long, but the heat set the process of decomposition into action faster than normal. Her body has passed through the bloating period and is toward the end of the black putrefaction stage. She's taken on a darkish green hue. Her body cavities have ruptured and gases are escaping. It must have been worse a couple days ago, but the smell of decay is overwhelming.

Milo looks a little better, must be getting used to it. 'Jesus, why didn't a neighbor call this in days ago?' he asks.

'The sauna door was closed, and so was the bathroom door. Most of the stench passed through the sauna stove-pipe and out the roof. They probably smelled something, but just thought it was a dead mouse or something in the ventilation.'

The formation of gases in her abdomen has driven fluid

and feces out of her body. The gases moved up into her face and neck and caused swelling of her mouth, lips and tongue. Her face is disfigured, almost unidentifiable. Water blisters have formed on her skin. Milo screws up his courage and moves in for a closer look.

‘Watch out,’ I say.

‘For what?’

‘Vermin. They’ve been laying eggs in her for days.’

Rauha is slumped over, lying on her side. Milo makes an effort to examine her. He moves Rauha, tries to look under her for possible signs of violence. Water blisters burst and run. Rauha’s skin is stuck to the sauna’s wooden seat, slips through his fingers and comes off. Maggots wriggle out of her ass and drop squirming onto the bench.

I watch him try to be tough. He shudders but keeps going. He moves her head. Scalp slides off her skull. He jerks his hands away in disgust. I suppose because he can’t think of anything else to investigate, he uses a tongue depressor to look in her mouth for an obstruction of her airway, a sign of intentional suffocation. When he opens it, little newborn wasps fly out from between her teeth into his face. He loses it, starts to flail and bat at them.

‘Warned you,’ I say.

He glances at me and turns away fast. If we stay here in the sauna with the body, he might break down. I spare him the humiliation. ‘Let’s do the legwork,’ I say.

We search Rauha’s house for medicines, prescriptions,

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hospital documents, anything that might clue us in as to why she died. Nothing stands out. When we finish, I call Mononen, the company that transports bodies for us. The dispatcher says we have about forty-five minutes to wait.

We sit in the kitchen, at opposite sides of Rauha's table, bowls of stale cookies and rotten fruit in between us.

'Want a cigarette?' I ask.

'I don't smoke.'

Milo stares at the bowl full of moldy oranges and black bananas.

'I take it this is your first bad one,' I say.

He nods without looking up.

'Don't worry about it,' I tell him. 'It gets easier.'

He makes eye contact. 'Does it?'

I lie to make him feel better. It doesn't get easier, it's just that people get used to anything over time. 'Yeah.'

'We haven't examined her,' he says.

'Sure we have, as best we're able. They'll have to shovel her out of there, and if she's a crime victim, the autopsy will turn it up.'

I take a coffee cup from Rauha's cupboard and run a little water in it so I can use it for an ashtray, then sit back down and light a cigarette.

'The other homicide members don't like me,' Milo says, 'and now I investigate a routine death and act like a pussy.'

I dislike the sharing of emotion from strangers. It's a sign of weakness and makes me uncomfortable. But he needs to

talk and I don't think we'll be strangers for long, so I give him what he needs and let him open up. 'You just got your homicide cherry busted,' I say. 'Don't be so hard on yourself.'

He only stares at the rotten fruit again, so I prod him. 'What makes you think the team dislikes you?'

He sits back in his chair, taps out a cigarette from the pack I set on the table and lights it.

'I thought you don't smoke,' I say.

'I quit. I guess I just un-quit.' He takes a couple drags, and I see him hit by the rush of satisfaction that only un-quitting smoking can give.

'They had a "welcome to the new guy" party for me a couple days ago. Bowling and then drinking. They think I'm an oddball geek brainiac, not a detective.'

I was on duty, couldn't attend the party. I know a little about Milo from the newspapers. He was promoted over others with long-standing careers marked by accomplishment, so it's easy to understand resentment toward him. Milo is smart, a member of Mensa. He got his job on the homicide unit because as a patrol officer, he solved one case of serial arson and two cases of serial rape. They weren't his investigations. He did it for fun, as a hobby, by triangulating the likely areas of residence of the criminals. Once within a third of a mile, once within two hundred yards, once to the exact building.

'What makes you say that?' I ask.

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The dark circles under his eyes look like charcoal smudges. He smirks. 'Because I'm a people person, and my extreme powers of empathy allow me to look into the hearts and minds of others.' This makes me laugh, and he laughs a little, too. 'Believe me,' he says, 'I could tell they don't like me.'

'How did you solve those cases that got you promoted?' I ask.

'A couple psychologists-slash-criminal-profilers developed a computer triangulation program. Police departments are reticent to use it because it's expensive, and because a lot of cops are convinced that their brilliant crime-solving techniques, also known as hunches, are superior to scientific method.'

'If it's so expensive, how did you get it, and how come I didn't hear how you did it?'

'I pirated the software, and since I stole it, I lied about it.'

I laugh again. He's odd, but I have to admit, he's an entertaining little fucker. 'You're one up on me,' I say. 'I didn't even get a "welcome to the new guy" party.'

'They don't like you either,' he says.

'Is this more of your people-person intuition?'

'After they got drunk, they bitched about you. The team doesn't trust you because you got a job in an elite unit for political reasons. That's not supposed to happen. You shot one man and have been shot twice yourself. That speaks of carelessness. You got medals for both those fuckups. That

pisses them off. As an inspector, your pay grade is higher than the rest of us detective-sergeants. You make more money than we do. That pisses them off even more. They don't want to work with you. I remember hearing the phrase "dangerous Lapland redneck reindeer-fucker."

I thought they were just standoffish because I'm new and haven't proven myself yet, that it will pass when I do prove myself. Maybe I was wrong.

'Actually,' Milo says, 'Saska Lindgren said some good things about you. He told the others he thought they should give you a chance.'

Saska is half Gypsy. An outsider by race. It stands to reason he would be more receptive to someone like me. According to many, including my boss, he's one of Finland's best homicide cops. He's served as a UN peacekeeper in Palestine, worked for the ICTY – the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia – investigating war crimes, executions and mass graves in Bosnia, and identified bodies in Thailand after the tsunami of 2004 that devastated the region. The numerous certificates of achievement lining the walls of his office attest to the many educational police conferences he's attended worldwide. He's also one of Finland's leading experts in bloodstain-pattern analysis. Additionally, he's involved in many works that benefit the community. He's such a do-gooder that, up to now, I found him annoying. Maybe I'll try to readjust my opinion.

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‘Since we’re the black sheep,’ Milo says, ‘by default, we may find ourselves working together a lot.’

The guys from Mononen show up for Rauha Anttila’s body. We watch them scrape up her corpse – then we move on.