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THE TRAVELER

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The Traveller

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1 The reasons behind

Detective Barren's obsession

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She dreamt uneasily.

She could see a boat adrift, first in the distance, then suddenly closer until she realized that she was on the boat and surrounded by water. Her first thought was panic, to search about her and find someone to tell the important news that she was unable to swim. But each time she turned to look, her perch on the edge of the boat grew more precarious, and the wave action would sweep the small craft upward, balancing momentarily on wave edge, then falling away, sickeningly, bouncing her about, out of control. In her dream she looked for something solid to hold on to. As she seized the mast of the boat and clutched it with all the strength she could muster, an alarm went off, ringing, horrible, and she knew that it was the sound made when the boat sprung a leak and that she was moments from finding seawater lapping at her feet, tickling her with terror. The alarm continued to blare and she opened her mouth wide, ready to call or shout in fear for help, struggling as the boat rocked around her. In the dream the deck pitched abruptly and she cried out, as if to her sleeping self, Wake up! Wake up! Save yourself!

And she did.

She gasped wildly, spinning from sleep-state to wakeful-ness, sitting up suddenly in her bed, her right arm shooting out and seizing the bedstand, something solid amidst the vaporous fears of the dream. She realized then the telephone was ringing.

She cursed to herself, rubbed her eyes, and found the

telephone on the floor by the bed. She cleared her throat as she answered:

"Detective Barren here. What is it?"

She had not had time to assess the situation. She lived alone, without husband, without children, her own parents long since passed away, and so the idea that her telephone would ring in the midst of the night did not hold any particular terror for her, as it would have for so many people who are unaccustomed to late-night calls and who instantly would have foreseen the telephone ringing in the darkness for precisely what it was: terrible news. And, being a detective by trade, it was not unusual for her to be summoned at night, police work by necessity often taking place beyond banking hours. That was what she fully expected, that for some procedural reason her capabilities as a crime-scene technician were needed.

'Merce? Are you awake?'

'Yes. I'm fine. Who is it?'

'Merce, it's Robert Wills in homicide, I . . .' He let his voice trail off. Detective Barren waited.

'How can I help you?' she asked.

'Merce, I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this . . .'

She had a sudden mind's eye picture of Bob Wills sitting at his desk at the homicide office. It was hard, harsh, open office, illuminated with unforgiving fluorescent light that was always on, filled with metal file cabinets and desks that were colored orange and to her mind seemed stained with all the horrors that had passed so casually in confession and conversation over the desktops.

'What?'

For an instant she felt a rush of excitement, a kind of delicious fear, far different from the dream-panic in which she had been immersed. Then, as her caller paused, an emptiness formed in her stomach, a kind of vacuum sensation, that was instantly replaced by a rush of anxiety.

'What is it?' she asked, aware that there was a touch of this new sense in her voice.

'Merce. you have a niece . . .'

'Yes, dammit. Her name is Susan Lewis. She's a student at the university. What is it? Has she been in an accident?'

But then the realization struck her: Bob Wills in homicide. Homicide. Homicide. And she knew the nature of the call was.

'I'm sorry,' he was saying, but his voice seemed very distant and for an instant she wished she were back in her dream.

Detective Mercedes Barren dressed swiftly and headed across Miami's licorice late summer night toward the address she'd written in a hand she thought was possessed with someone else's emotion. She'd felt her own heart racing, but seen her hand steady, scratching numbers and words on a pad. It had seemed to her that it was someone else who had finished the conversation with the homicide detective. She had heard her own voice hard and flat requesting available information, current status, names of officers in charge, facts about the crime already known, options being pursued by detective. Witnesses. Evidence. Statements. She persisted, trying not to be put off by Detective Wills' evasion and excuses, recognizing that he wasn't in charge, but knew what she wanted to know, and all the time thinking that she was screaming inside, filled to explosion with some beast emotion that wanted to twist her into a single sob-shout of agony.

She would not allow herself to think of her niece.

Once, as she steered the car up on to the interstate that cuts through the center of the city, blinded for an instant by the headlights of a semi-tractor trailer truck that had pulled in horrifyingly close, a horn sounding raucously, she had fought off the sudden fear of a crash and discovered that she had replaced the sensation with a picture of herself and her niece some two weeks beforehand. They had been sunning by the pool in the small beachside apartment building where Detective Barren lived and Susan had spotted her service revolver sticking awkwardly out of a beach bag, silly and incongruous amidst towels, suntan lotion, a frisbee, and a paperback novel. Detective Barren

thought of the teenager's response: she'd called the revolver 'gross', which was, to the detective's mind, an absolutely apt description.

'Why do you have to carry it, anyway?'

'Because technically we're never off duty. If I were to spot a crime, I would have to react like a policewoman.'

'But I didn't think you had to do that anymore, not since . . .'

'Right. Not since the shooting. No, I'm a pretty tame policewoman now. By the time I get to a crime, everything is pretty much over.'

'Yuck. Dead bodies, right?'

'Right. Yuck is right, too.'

They'd laughed.

'It would be funny,' Susan had said.

'What would be funny?'

'To get arrested by a policeperson wearing a bikini.'

They'd laughed again. Detective Barren had watched her niece rise and dive into the opaque blue pool of water. She'd watched as Susan had effortlessly swum submerged to the far end, then, without rising for air, pivoted and snaked back to the edge. For one instant Detective Barren had felt a twinge of lonely youth jealousy, then let it pass, thinking, Well, you're not in such bad shape yourself.

The younger woman hung on the edge and asked her aunt: 'Merce, why is it that you live next to the ocean and can't swim a lick?'

'Part of my mystery,' she replied.

'Seems silly to me,' Susan had said, slipping from the pool, the water glistening, flooding from her thin body. She continued: 'Did I tell you I've decided to major this fall in oceanographic studies? Slimy fish for sure.' She'd laughed. 'Spiny crustaceans. Massive mammals. Jacques Cousteau, movie over.'

That's excellent,' said the detective. 'You've always loved the water.'

Right.' She sang, 'Oh for a life of the sun, the sand, the deep blue sea and fish guts for me.'

They'd laughed again.

She was always laughing, thought the detective, and she accelerated through the night. The explosive whiteness of the downtown night lights burst beside her, illuminating the edges of the great buildings as they rose up in the Southern sky. Then Detective Barren felt a great rush of heat in her heart, choking her, and she forced herself to concentrate on her driving, trying to wipe her mind free of memory, thinking, Let's see, let's find out, trying not to connect the scene she was heading toward with the memories in her brain.

Detective Barren turned off Route 1 and drove through a residential area. It was late, well past midnight and closing rapidly on dawn; there was little traffic and she had hurried, filled with the emergency sense of speed that accompanies any violent death. But a few miles short of her destination she slowed precipitously, until her nondescript sedan was barely crawling down the empty streets. She searched the rows of trim, upper-class houses for signs of life. The streets were dark, as were the homes. She tried to envision the lives that slept behind the ordered suburban darkness. Occasionally she would spot a light burning in one room and she wondered what book or television show or argument or worry kept the occupant up. She had an overwhelming urge to stop, to knock on the door to one of these houses with their meager sign of life, to stop and say, Is there some trouble that keeps you awake? Something that probes at the memory and heart and prevents sleep? Let me share.

She turned the car onto Old Cutler Road and knew the distance to the park's entrance was only a few hundred yards ahead. The nighttime seemed to permeate the foliage; great melaleuca trees and willows hid blackness in their leaves and branches, stretching over the road like enveloping arms. She had the eerie sense that she was entirely alone in the world, that she was a sole survivor heading nowhere in the midst of an endless night. She could barely make out the faded white lettering on the small park entrance sign. She was startled when an opossum ran in

front of the wheels of her car, and she slammed on her brakes, shuddering with fear for an instant, breathing out harshly when she realized that the animal had avoided the tires. She rolled down the

window and could smell the salt air; the trees around her had shrunk in stature, the giant palms that ~~rode the edge of the highway~~ replaced by the tangled and gnarled branches of waterfront mangrove. The road curved sharply, and she knew she would be able to see the wide expanse of Biscayne Bay when she emerged.

She thought at first that it was moonlight glistening on the bay waters.

It was not.

She stopped the car suddenly, and stared out at the scene before her. She became aware first of the mechanical noise of powerful generators. Their steady rhythmic thumping powered three banks of high-intensity lights. The floodlights delineated a stage cut from the darkness at the edge of the parking lot, peopled with dozens of uniformed police officers and detectives, moving gingerly through the unnatural brightness. A row of police cruisers, an ambulance, white and green crime-scene search wagons were lined up on the fringe of the stage, their blue and red emergency lights throwing sudden strobes of color onto the people working within the parameters of the floodlights.

She took a deep breath and headed toward the light.

She parked her car on the rim of activity and started to walk to the center, where she spotted a group of men gathered. They were staring down at something that was obscured from her vision. She knew what it was, but this was an appreciation of experience, not of emotion. The entire area had been encircled with a three-inch-wide strip of yellow tape. Every ten feet or so a small white sign had been hung from the tape: police crime scene do not enter. She lifted the barrier and slipped underneath. The motion caught the eye of a uniformed officer, who swiftly moved to intersect her path, holding out his hands.

'Hey,' he said. 'Ma'am, you can't go in there.'

She stared at him and he stopped. His hands dropped.

Exaggerating her movement by pacing it slowly, she

opened her purse and produced her gold shield. He glanced quickly at it, then backed off rapidly, muttering an apology. But her arrival had been noted by the men in the center of the scene, and one of them quickly broke from the crowd and moved to block her.

'Merce, for Christ's sake. Didn't Wills tell you not to come down here?'

'Yes,' she replied.

'There's nothing here for you.'

'How the hell would you know?'

'Merce, I'm sorry. This must be ...'

She interrupted him furiously.

'Must be what? Hard? Sad? Difficult? Tragic? What do you think it must be!'

'Calm down. Look, you know what's going on here, can you just hang on for a couple of minutes. Here, let me get you a cup of coffee.' He tried to take her by the elbow and lead her away. She shrugged off his grip swiftly.

'Don't try to steer me away, goddammit!'

'Just a couple of minutes, then I'll give you a complete briefing ..."

'I don't want a goddamn briefing. I want to see for myself.'

'Merce . . .' The detective spread his arms wide, still blocking her vision. 'Give me a break.'

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She spoke in a clipped, deliberate fashion.

'Peter. Lieutenant Burns. Two things. One, that is my niece lying there. Two, I am a professional policewoman. I want to see for myself. Myself!'

The lieutenant stopped. He looked at her.

'All right. It will only be a few minutes now before the medical examiner completes his initial inspection. When they put her on a stretcher, you can come over. You can perform the official identification then if you want.'

'Not a few minutes. Not on a stretcher. I want to see what happened to her.'

'Merce. For Christ's sake . . .'

'I want to see.'

"Why? It will just make it harder.'

'How the hell would you know? How the hell could it make anything harder?'

A sudden flash of light burst behind the lieutenant. He turned and Detective Barren saw a police photographer moving in and out of position. 'Now,' she said. 'I want to see now.'

'All right,' said the lieutenant, stepping aside. 'It's your nightmare.'

She marched past him quickly.

Then she stopped.

She took a deep breath.

She closed her eyes once, picturing her niece's smile.

She took another deep breath and carefully approached the body. She thought: Remember everything. Fix it in your mind. She forced her eyes to scan the ground around the shape she could not yet look at.

Sandy dirt and leaves. Nothing that would produce a solid shoeprint. With a practiced eye, she estimated the distance between the parking lot and the location of the shape — she couldn't, in her mind, speak body. Twenty yards. A good dumping distance. She tried to think analytically: There was a problem. It was always easier if the — again her thoughts were staggered and mentally she hesitated — victims were discovered in the location where the homicide took place. Invariably there would be some physical evidence. She continued to scan the ground, hearing the lieutenant's voice behind her. 'Merce, we searched the area very carefully, you don't have to . . .' But she ignored him, knelt, and felt the consistency of the dirt. She thought: If some of this stuck to the shoes, we could make a match. Without turning to see if he was still there, she spoke out loud, 'Take earth samples from the entire area.' After a momentary pause, she heard a grunt of assent. She continued, thinking, strengthening strength, until she was next to the shape. All right, she said to herself. Look at Susan. Memorize what happened to her this night. Look at her. Look at every part of her. Don't miss anything. And she raised her eyes to the shape. 'Susan,' she said out loud, but softly.

She was aware of the other people moving about her, but only in a peripheral sense. That they had faces, that they were people she knew, colleagues, friends, she was aware, but only in the most subliminal fashion. Later, she would try to remember who was there, at the scene, and be unable.

'Susan,' she said again.

'Is that your niece, Susan Lewis?' It was the lieutenant's voice.

'Yes.'

She hesitated.

'It was.'

She felt suddenly overcome by heat, as if one of the spotlights had singled her out, covering her with a solid beam of intense brightness. She gulped a great breath of air, then another, fighting a dizzying sensation. She remembered the moment years earlier when she'd realized that she was shot, that the warmth she felt was the lifeblood flowing from her, and she fought with the same intensity to prevent her eyes from rolling back, as if giving into the blackness of unconsciousness would be as fatal now as it would have been then.

'Merce?'

She heard a voice.

'Are you all right?'

She was rooted.

'Somebody get fire-rescue!'

Then she managed to shake her head.

'No,' she said. 'I'm going to be okay.'

What a silly thing to say, she thought.

'You sure? You want to sit down?'

She did not know who she was talking to. She shook her head again.

'I'm okay.'

Someone was holding her arm. She snatched it loose.

'Check her fingernails/ she said. 'She would have fought hard. We may have a scratched-up suspect.'

She saw the medical examiner bend over the body, gingerly lift each hand, and, using a small scalpel gendy

scrape the contents under each nail into small plastic evidence bags. 'Not much there,' he said.

'She would have fought like a tiger,' Detective Barren insisted.

'Perhaps he didn't give her a chance. There's severe trauma to the back of the head. Blunt instrument. She was probably unconscious when he did this.' The doctor motioned at the pantyhose that were wrapped tightly around Susan's throat. Detective Barren stared for a moment at the bluish cast to the skin.

'Check the knot,' she said.

'I already looked,' said the doctor. 'Simple square knot. Page one of the Boy Scout Handbook.'

Detective Barren stared at the pantyhose. She desperately wanted to loosen it, to put her niece at rest as if by making her look as if she were only sleeping it would be true. She remembered a moment when she was growing up. She had been very young, no more than five or six, and the family dog had been hit by a car and killed. 'Why is Lady dead?' she'd asked her father. 'Because her bones were broken,' he replied. 'But when I broke my wrist the doctor put a cast on it and now it is better,' she had said. 'Let's put a cast on Lady.' 'But she lost all her blood, too,' said her father. 'Well,' the child in her memory said with insistence grown of despair, 'let's put the blood back in.' 'Oh, my poor little child,' said her father, 'I wish we could. I wish it were so simple.' And he'd wrapped big arms around her and she sobbed through the longest of childhood nighttimes.

She stared at Susan's body and longed for those arms again.

'How about the wrists?' she asked. 'Any signs of restraint?'

said the doctor. 'That tells us something.'

'Yeah.' said a voice from the side. Detective Barren didn't turn to see who was speaking. 'It tells us this creep conked her before he had his fun. She probably never knew what hit her.'

Detective Barren's eyes scanned down from the neck.

'Is that a bite mark on the shoulder?'

'Probably,' said the medical examiner. 'Got to check microscopically.'

She fixed her eyes for an instant on her niece's torn blouse. Susan's breasts were exposed, and she wanted to cover them. 'Swab the neck for saliva,' she said.

'Did it,' said the doctor. 'Genital swabs, too. I'll do it again when we get to the morgue.'

Detective Barren's eyes slid down the body, inch by inch. One leg was flung over the other, almost coyly, as if even in death her niece was modest.

'Was there any sign of laceration to the genitals?'

'Not visible out here.'

Detective Barren paused, trying to take it all in.

'Merce,' said the doctor gently, 'it's pretty much like the other four. Mode of death. Positioning of the body. Dumping ground.'

Detective Barren looked up sharply.

'Others? Other four?'

'Didn't Lieutenant Burns tell you? They think it's this guy the papers are calling the Campus Killer. I thought they'd told you . . .'

'No . . .' she said. 'No one told me.'

She took a deep breath.

'But it makes perfectly good sense. It fits . . .' And her voice trailed off.

She heard the lieutenant's voice next.

'Probably his first of the semester. I mean, nothing is certain, but the general pattern is the same. We're going to assign the case to him so the task force can work it — I think that's best, Merce?'

'Right.'

'Seen enough now? Will you come over here and let me tell you what we've got and what we haven't got?'

She nodded. She closed her eyes and turned away from the body. She hoped that they would move Susan soon, as if by pulling her out of the underbrush and dirt that it would start to restore some humanity to her, lessen

somehow the violation, diminish somehow the totality of her death.

She waited patiently next to the cars belonging to the crime-scene search specialists and the evidence technicians. ~~They were all people she knew well, the night shift in the same office she worked.~~ Individually, they all broke off from their duties within the yellow tape area and spoke to her, or touched her shoulder or grasped her hand, before going back to processing the scene. In a few moments Lieutenant Burns returned with two cups of coffee. She wrapped her hands around the Styrofoam cup he held out to her, suddenly chilled, though the tropical night was oppressively warm. He looked up at the sky, just starting to fade from dark, creeping gray light marking the edges of morning.

'Do you want to know?' he asked. 'It might be better, all around, if you just. . .'

She interrupted quickly. 'I want to know. Everything.'

'Well,' he started slowly. She knew he was trying to assess in his own mind whether sharing information with her would hinder the investigation. She knew he was wondering whether he was dealing with a policewoman or with a half-crazed relative. The trouble, she thought, was that he was dealing with both.

'Lieutenant,' she said, 'I merely want to help. I have a good deal of expertise, as you know. I want to make myself available. But, if you think I'll be in the way, I'll back off...'

'No, no, no,' he replied quickly.

How simple, she thought. She knew that by offering to not ask questions she would get permission to ask every one.

'Look,' the lieutenant continued, 'things are pretty sketchy so far. Apparently she and some friends went out to a bar on the campus. There were a lot of people around, a lot of different guys hanging about. She danced with a number of different guys, too. About 10 p.m. she went outside to get some air. She went alone. Didn't come back in. It wasn't until a couple of hours later, just about

midnight, that her friends got worried and called the campus cops.

'Just about the same time a couple of fruits down here in the park just getting it on in the bushes over there stumbled on the body . . .'

 He held up his hand. 'No. They didn't see or hear anything. Literal stumbled, too. One of the guys fell right over it. . .'

The body, she thought. It. She bit her lip.

'Girl disappears from campus. Body gets discovered in a park a couple of miles away. It wasn't hard to put one and one together. And we've been here since. Her purse had your name in it. That's why you were called. Your sister's kid?'

Detective Barren nodded.

'You want to make that call?'

Oh, God, she thought.

'I will. When we clear here.'

'There's a pay phone over there. I wouldn't want to make them wait. And it's likely to be awhile before we finish . . .'

She became aware of the growing dawn light. The area was steadily losing its nighttime blackness, shapes taking form, becoming distinct as the darkness faded.

'All right,' she said.

She thought how utterly mundane and hopelessly banal the act of telephoning her sister and brother-in-law was. For a second she hoped that she did not have a quarter to put in the pay phone's slot, then she hoped that the telephone would be out of order. It was not. The operator answered with routine brightness, as if immune to the hour of the day. Detective Barren charged the call to her office. The operator asked her when someone would be there to confirm accepting the charges. Detective Barren told her someone was always there. Then she heard the electronic clicking of the number being dialed and suddenly, before she was ready with the right words, the phone was ringing at her sister's house. Think! Detective Barren thought. Find words! And she heard her sister's voice, slightly groggy with sleep, on the other end of the line:

'Yes, hello . . .'

'Annie, it's Merce.' She bit her lip.

Merce! How are you? What's . . .'

'Annie. Listen carefully: It's Susan. There's been a . . .'

 she fumbled. Accident? Incident? She just barreled on, oblivious, trying to keep her voice a professionally calm, even, flat tone. 'Please sit down and ask Ben to get on the line . . .'

She heard her sister gasp and then call to her husband.

In a moment, he joined the line. 'Merce, what is it?' His voice was steady. Ben was an accountant. She hoped he would be as solid as numbers. She took a deep breath.

'I don't know any way of telling you this to make it easier, so I'll just tell you. Susan is dead. She was killed last night. Murdered. I'm sorry.'

Detective Barren suddenly saw her sister, some eighteen years earlier, immense with pregnancy, a week from delivery, moving uncomfortably through the oppressive July heat that hung unforgiving over the dry Delaware Valley summer to sit at her side. Detective Barren had tenaciously clutched the flap of the honor guard captain had bestowed on her, her own mind black, empty, reverberating with the chaplain's words, blending with the crisp sound of the rifle volley fired over the grave. She'd had no words for any of the family or friends who'd sidled up self-consciously, wordless at the incongruity of someone as vigorous and young as John Barren dying, even in battle. Annie had settled herself on the couch next to Detective Barren and when no one was watching, or at least when she thought no one was watching, had taken her sister's hand and placed it on her great stomach and said with heartbreaking simplicity, 'God took him unfairly, but here's new life and you shouldn't leave your love

in the grave with him, but give it to this child instead.'

The child had been Susan.

For a moment, Detective Barren smiled at the memory, thinking: The baby saved my life.

And then, suddenly, swirling back into reality, she heard her sister's first sob of broken motherly anguish.

Ben had wanted to take the first flight to Miami, but she was able to dissuade him from that course. It would be simpler, she told them, if she made the arrangements with a funeral home to ship the body back when the medical examiner finished the autopsy. She would accompany Susan's body back on the airplane. Ben had said he would call a local funeral home to co-ordinate plans. Detective Barren told them that they would probably hear from the newspapers, perhaps even the television. She recommended that they co-operate; it was much easier, she said, and the reporters would be less likely to get in the way. She explained that preliminary indications were that Susan was the victim of a killer who had prowled the campuses of Miami's various colleges the past year and that there was a task force of detectives assigned to the cases. Those detectives, she said, would be in touch. Ben had asked if she was sure about that killer, and she said nothing was certain but that it appeared to be the same. Ben had started to bluster, angry, but after spitting out a few words of rage, he'd stopped, lapsing into a continual stunned acquiescence. Annie said nothing. Detective Barren guessed that they were in different rooms, and that it would not be until they hung up and turned to face each other that full despair would hit them.

'That's all I can tell you for now,' Detective Barren said. 'I'll call later when I know more.'

'Merce?' It was her sister.

'Yes, Annie.'

'Are you sure?'

'Oh, Annie . . .'

'I mean, you checked, didn't you? You're certain?'

'Annie. I saw her. I looked. It's Susan.'

'Thank you. I just needed to know for sure.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Yes. Yes. Of course. We'll talk later.'

'Ben?'

'Yes, Merce. I'm still here. We'll talk later.'

'All right.'

'Oh, God, Merce . . .'

'Ann.ie?'

•Oh, God.'

"Annie, be strong. You'll have to be strong.'

'Merce, please help me. I feel like if I hang up the telephone with you now, it will be like killing her.
Oh, God. What is going on? Please. I don't understand.'

'I don't understand either, Annie.'

"Oh, Merce, Merce, Merce . . .'

Detective Barren heard her name fading. She knew that her sister had let the telephone slip from her hand to the bed. She could hear tears and it was like listening to a heart break. She remembered high school watching a football practice; as she stood on the sidelines, one of the players had been struck awkwardly. The sound of the leg snapping had risen above the noise of bodies thumping together. She'd seen one of the other players get sick as the coaches and trainer rushed to the stricken boy. For an instant she expected to hear the same cracking sound. She held the telephone in her hand momentarily, then, gently, as if trying not to disturb a sleeping child, replaced the receiver on the hook. She stood still, listening to her own heart. She swallowed deeply, then flexed her arm muscles once, twice. Then her legs. She could feel the skin, muscle, and tendons stretch and contract. I'm strong, she thought. Be stronger still.

It was midmor'ning before Susan's body was finally removed. Detective Barren had remained on the fringe of the crime scene, watching the orderly collection of evidence, Uniformed policemen kept a steadily growing crowd of the curious far back, for which she was grateful. The Miami news media had arrived early, ubiquitously insinuating themselves into the scene. The television cameramen had photographed the activity while the reporters had busied themselves questioning Lieutenant Burns and some of the other detectives. She knew it was inevitable that one of the

reporters would eventually hear of her connection to the body, and that it would become prominent in the retelling. She decided to simply wait for the questions.

She had turned away when two medical examiner's office technicians had gingerly slipped Susan's body into a black bag. She walked over to where Lieutenant Burns was standing, speaking with a pair of nattily dressed detectives in three-piece suits who seemed oblivious to the gathering muggy day heat. When he saw her approach, he turned and performed the introductions.

'Merce. Detective Barren. I don't know if you know detectives Moore and Perry from county homicide. They head up this Campus Killer investigation.'

'Only by reputation.'

'Likewise,' said Detective Perry.

They all shook hands and stood awkwardly.

'I'm sorry to meet under these circumstances,' Detective Perry said. 'I've been a fan of your work. Especially on that multiple-rape case.'

'Thank you,' said Detective Barren. She had a brief vision of a pockmarked face and misshapen nose. She remembered poring over some two dozen case files again and again until coming up with the link that had led to the arrest. The heavily muscled rapist always wore a stocking mask. Almost every victim said she was aware he suffered from severe acne on his back. A dermatologist had told her that people with acne on their back are generally scarred on the face as well. But she had thought the mask was to hide something else. She'd begun hanging out at the local gymnasiums and health clubs. More of a hunch than a probable cause. At the 5th Street Gym on Miami Beach, a place where aspiring boxers' dreams mingled freely with the sound of speed bags thumping, she'd spotted a short, powerfully built, lightweight, heavily pockmarked on the back and face, with a badly broken nose and a distinctive red scar that twisted down his cheek.

'Never underestimate intuition,' said Detective Perry.

'Except it doesn't do much with a judge when you need a search warrant.'

They all smiled hesitantly.

'So how can we help you?' Detective Perry said.

'Was there anything discovered underneath the body?'

'Nothing of obvious value. There was one odd piece of paper.'

'What was it?'

'Actually a fragment. It looks like the top part of the type of tag they put on your luggage handle when you check your bags at the airport, only considerably larger. Some kind of tag, anyway.' He held up his hand. 'No, there were no markings on it. It was just the top quarter, the rest was torn away. Also, there was no way of telling how long it was there. She could have been put on top of it. Just a piece of trash, I think.'

She thought of her niece lying amidst the refuse. She shook her head, trying to clear the thought.

'What are you going to do now?' Detective Barren asked.

'We're going to work the nightclub, see if we can find anyone who noticed someone talking with her following her . . .'

 The detective looked at Detective Barren. 'It'll take some time.'

'Time is not relevant.'

'I understand.'

He paused.

'Look, detective. This must be impossible for you. I know that if it was one of my sisters I'd be going crazy. I'd want to blow the guy away myself. So, as far as I'm concerned, you can know whatever you

want about the investigation, as long as you don't try to get in the way or do our job for us. Is that fair?"

Detective Barren nodded.

"One other thing," Detective Perry added. "If you get ideas, bring them to me directly."

"No problem," Detective Barren said. She wondered if she were lying. She thought for a moment. "One question. This is the fifth, right? What's the status of the others? Can you make somebody on an earlier case?"

The detectives hesitated, looking at each other.

"Good question. We got some leads. A couple of good

ones. You come in in a couple of days, we'll talk, okay? After you get a little settled, huh?"

Condescending bastard, she thought.

"That's fine," she said.

She left the men still conversing and walked back to the evidence trucks. A thin, ascetic-looking man was checking the numbers written in black Magic Marker on plastic bags against a master list on a clipboard in his hand. "Hello, Teddy," she said.

The man turned to her. He had large bony hands that seemed to flap about. "Oh, Merce. I thought you were gone. You don't have to be here, you know."

"I know. Why does everyone keep telling me that?"

"I'm sorry. It's just that, well, no one really knows how to react. I guess you make everyone nervous. We're not accustomed to being affected by death, you know, and this, well, seeing you, makes it less of a job, more a reality. Does that make any sense?"

"Yes." She smiled at him.

"Merce. I can't tell you how badly everyone feels for you. Everyone has worked real hard on the scene. I just hope there's something here that will lead us to the creep."

"Thanks, Teddy. What have you collected?"

"There's not too much. Here's the list."

He handed her the clipboard and her eyes scanned the page:

1. Blood sample area of v's head
2. Blood sample area of v's crotch (see diagram)

3. Saliva sample v's shoulder

4. Swabs v's genitals
5. Swabs v's shoulder (bite mark see diagram)
6. Dirt sample A (see diagram)
7. Dirt sample B (see diagram)
8. Dirt sample C (see diagram)
9. Fingernail sample v right hand (see diagram)
10. Same, left hand (see diagram)
11. Unknown substance/leaf
12. Possible clothing sample
13. Trace blood on leaf
14. Cigarette butt (see diagram)
15. Cigarette butt (see diagram)
16. Used condom
17. Used condom
18. Unused condom in foil (Ramses brand)
19. Beer can (Budweiser)
20. Coca-Cola can
21. Perrier bottle (6 oz)
22. Uninown substance in tin foil wrapping
23. Unknown substance in plastic bag
24. Film box Kodacolor Instamatic film
25. Film box Kodacolor Instamatic film
26. Box end Kodak 400 black/white film for negatives
27. Used Cutter Lotion 5 1/2 oz

28. Sea and Ski lotion 12 oz

29. Crushed package (empty) Marlboro cigarettes

30. Woman's handbag (contents listed separately)

31. Woman's wallet (victim)

32. Woman's earring

33. Tag end paper color yellow origin unknown (under body)

'What about the condoms?' she asked.

He shook his head. 'Merce, look at this stuff. It's the kind of stuff you find in any picnic area. The unknown stuff appears to be like tuna fish. And the condoms seem old, probably several days, just guessing. And look at the diagrams. Except for the skin and blood samples, all this junk was collected at least a couple of feet away. It's the kind of stuff you might bring along for a little time in the sun, not a killing in the middle of the night.'

She nodded.

'Is this painful? Do you want to . . .'

'Yes.'

'That's what I figured. Anyway, until we really get the stuff into the lab we won't know, but it seems to me and just about everyone else that she was dropped here. Probably the creep pulled his car up and just dumped her a little ways away. When we get the guy's car, that's where we'll put him away. There's got to be blood, skin, the works inside it. Can't hide that stuff. But workable evidence from this scene? We can hope, but I wouldn't count on it.'

She nodded again.

'I'm not saying anything you don't know.'

'That's right.'

She handed the list back to him and stared at the rows of plastic bags, carefully lined up in the back of the wagon. She didn't really know what she was looking for.

'What's that?' she asked, pointing at one bag.

'That's the last item on the list. Some kind of yellow tag. It was found under the body.'

He handed it to her. She searched through the clear plastic, turning the frayed piece of paper back and forth beneath her scrutiny. What are you? she wondered. What do you mean? What are you trying to tell me? Who put you there? She had the sudden urge to shake the small piece of paper viciously, as if she could force it to talk back to her. I will remember you, she said to the paper. She looked up at a

the collected items. I will remember all of you.

She was overcome with how crazy she was. She put the plastic bag into the back of the wagon.

She thought she seemed silly. She knew that it would take some time to process the scene, knew the likelihood of some relevant piece of evidence was minimal. She flushed suddenly, turning around. She saw the detectives getting into an unmarked car. A police photographer was in the distance, taking long shots. The medical examiner's truck was pulling out of the rear of the lot; she saw the television cameramen lined up, getting a picture of the exit. She was overcome with a sense of helplessness, as the carefully constructed police-veneer that had guarded her throughout the long morning was slipping away, as the crowd of technicians, detectives, and curious began to dissipate. She felt a sudden vulnerability, as if all she would be left with was her emotions. She caught a gasp forming in her chest, working its way up her throat. Breathing hard, she turned away and walked back to her own car, feeling the blast of built-up heat flood out as she opened the door. She quickly slid behind the wheel and closed the door. She sat in the broiling interior, letting the warmth penetrate her resolve.

She thought of Susan. She thought of her dream. She wanted to scream to herself, as she had in the last moments of sleep. Wake up! Save yourself! But she could not.

The lady in the flower store had eyed Detective Barren oddly and finally asked, 'Is there some special occasion or event that these would be for?' Detective Barren had hesitated before replying, and the lady had continued, blithely, 'I mean, if these are for a co-worker or secretary, then I might recommend one of these floral arrangements. Are they for a shut-in or an invalid? A bouquet like that would look nice. Someone in the hospital perhaps? We find that hospital patients love to receive small plants — you see, they enjoy watching the plants root and grow . . .'

'They're for my lover,' said Detective Barren.

'Oh,' said the woman, slightly taken aback.

'Is there something wrong?'

'No, it's just unusual. Usually, you see, it's the men who come in for flowers, roses generally, for their wives, uh, companions. This is a change.' She laughed. 'Some things never change in the world no matter how modern we get. Men buy flowers for their women friends and wives. Not the other way around. They come into the store and stand rather self-consciously in front of the refrigerated display, staring for a moment at the flowers as if hoping there would be a sign, a something, that said: Buy me for your wife. Or girlfriend. And not young men, either. Young men today don't seem to understand the value of proper flowers. Sometimes I think we have grown too — I don't know — scientific. I mean, I expect they'll want to send computer-written Valentine's cards soon enough. But it's always men, dear, not women. No, I don't believe I've ever had a woman come in and . . .'

Detective Barren looked at the woman, who stopped speaking in mid-sentence, hesitated, then continued.

'Oh, dear,' said the woman. 'I'm making rather a fool of myself, aren't I?'

'A little,' Detective Barren replied.

'Oh, dear,' the woman said again.

'It's all right,' Detective Barren said.

'You're kind,' said the woman. The detective watched as she brushed a strand of gray hair off her forehead and composed herself. 'I'll try again,' said the woman. 'How may I help you?'

'I'd like to buy some flowers,' said Detective Barren.

'For someone special?'

'Of course.'

'Ah, let me suggest roses. They are perhaps the least original selection, but the most trustworthy. An always loved, which, of course, is what we are buying flowers for.'

'I think that would be nice,' said Detective Barren.

'A dozen?'

'Excellent.'

'I have red, white, and pink?' This was a question. The detective thought for a moment.

'Red and white, I think.'

'Excellent. And some Baby's Breath to set them off, I would imagine.'

'They look lovely.'

'Thank you.'

Detective Barren paid and the woman handed her the box. 'I get a little crazy,' said the woman.

'I beg your pardon?' replied the detective.

'You see, I end up spending most of the day talking to the flowers and plants. Sometimes I forget how to talk with people. I'm sure your, uh, friend will enjoy those.'

'My lover,' said the detective.

She clutched the flower box under her arm and tried to remember how many years had passed since she'd been to John Barren's grave.

The early September air had not even the slightest intimation of fall. Instead it hung heavy with residual summer heat, liar's blue sky broken with a few huge white clouds; a day for lazing about on August memories, ignoring the January inevitability of the Delaware Valley, with its snow, cold winds off the river, ice, and frequent visitations of what

the natives called slush storms, an unfortunate mingling of ice, sleet, snow, and rain together in a

impenetrable, chilling, slippery impossibility. One of those storms, thought Detective Barren with a small smile. ~~She had been caught outside, battery dead, boots soaked.~~ When she finally returned to her home, empty, cold, alone, she had vowed to start over somewhere warm. Miami.

She placed the flowers on the passenger seat of the rental car and drove out of Lambertville, across the bridge over the river to New Hope. The town, filled with the quaint, the precious and the upscale stretched out on either side of the river; in a few moments she had left it behind, travelling slowly through the warm afternoon, down a shaded road, toward the cemetery. She wondered for a moment why the family had ever moved closer to Philadelphia when it was so pretty in the country. She had a sudden picture of her father, learning of his appointment at the University of Pennsylvania, swinging her mother like some buckaroo at a square dance. He had taught mathematical theory and quantum mechanics; his intelligence daunting, his worldliness absent. She smiled. He would not have understood for an instant why she was a policewoman. He would have admired some of the deductive reasoning, some of the investigative tactics, some of the apparent precision of police work, but he would have been confused and dismayed by the truths of the profession and the ever-present rubbing up against evil. He certainly would not have understood why his daughter loved it so, though he would have admired the basic simplicity of her devotion: that it was the easiest way to achieve some good in a world filled with — in her mind she hesitated, as she had so often over the past few days — filled with creeps who kill eighteen-year-old girls suffused with life and promise and future and goodness. Detective Barren drove on, the warm memory of her father sliding away in the shadows, replaced by a sketchpad in her mind, and her imagination trying to draw in the features of a killer. She almost missed the entrance to the cemetery.

Someone had placed a small American flag on John

Barren's grave, and for a moment she wasn't sure that she wanted it there. Then she relented, thinking If this gives the local VFW some satisfaction, who am I to refuse it? That was what gravesites and memorials are for, she thought, the living. She could not look at the headstone and the parched grass that covered the plot and envision John below in a coffin. She caught her breath suddenly at the memory:

Remains nonviewable.

The coffin had a tag on one handle. It was probably supposed to be removed before she saw it, but she had seen.

In her unruly grief she had puzzled at the tag.

Remains nonviewable.

She had thought first, strangely, that it meant that John was naked, and that the Army, in a silly, foolish, masculine way, was trying to protect everyone from embarrassment. She had wanted to say that to the men surrounding the coffin. Don't be so stupid. Of course we saw each other naked. We delighted in those moments. We were lovers in high school, in college, on the night he was drafted and in the hours before he took the bus to basic training, and constantly in the two short weeks of leave before he went overseas. In the summer, down at the Jersey Shore, we would sneak out after our parents had gone to bed and meet in the moonlight and roll naked in the sand dunes.

Remains nonviewable.

She'd considered those two strange words. Remains — well, that was John. Nonviewable — well, that meant she couldn't see him. She wondered why. What had they done to him? She tried to ask, but discovered that a young dead Ban's bride didn't get straight answers. She'd been hugged instead and told that it was all for the better, and told it was God's Will and war was hell and any number of things that, to her mind, didn't seem to have a great deal of relevance to the issue. She had begun to grow impatient and increasingly distraught, which only made the military Ben and family men all the more frustrating in their denial. Finally, as her voice had started to rise and her demands

grew more strident, she'd felt a hand clamp her arm tightly. It had been the funeral director; a man she'd never seen before. He'd looked at her intensely, then, to the surprise of her family, led her into a side office. He had sat her down, businesslike, in a chair across from his desk. For a moment he shuffled papers, while she sat, waiting. Finally he discovered what he was searching for. 'They didn't tell you, did they?' he asked.

'No,' she said. She hadn't known what he was talking about.

'They just told you he was dead, right?' That was true. She nodded her head. 'Well,' he said brusquely, then suddenly slowing, 'you sure you want to know?'

Know what? she wondered, but she nodded again. 'All right,' he said. Sadness crawled into his voice. 'Corporal Barren was killed while on routine patrol in the Quang Tri province. The man next to him stepped on a land mine. A big one. It killed your husband and two others.'

'But why can't I . . .'

'Because there wasn't enough of him left to look at.' 'Oh.!

Silence filled the room. She didn't know what to say. 'Kennedy would've got us out,' the funeral director said. 'But we had to kill him. I think he was our only shot. My boy's there now. God, I'm scared. It seems like I bury another boy each week. I'm so sorry for you.' 'You must love your boy,' she said. 'Yes. A great deal.' 'He wasn't clumsy, you know.' 'I beg your pardon?'

'John. He was graceful. He was a beautiful athlete. He scored touchdowns and he made baskets and home runs. He would never have stepped on a mine.'

She thought of the old children's rhyme: Step on a crack, break your mother's back. Step on a mine, break my heart for all time.

Remains nonviewable.

'Hello, lover,' she said. She took the flowers out of the box.

Detective Barren sat on the gravesite, with her back against the headstone, obscuring her husband's name and the dates of his life. Her eyes were lifted toward the sky; she watched the clouds meander across the great blue expanse with what she thought was an admirable purposelessness. She played the children's game of trying to guess what each cloud's shape was like; she thought of elephants and whales and rhinoceroses. She thought that Susan would have seen only fish and aquatic mammals. She

allowed herself a pleasurable fantasy, that there was a heaven up beyond the clouds and that John was waiting there for Susan. The idea comforted her some, but she felt tears forming in the corners of her eyes. She wiped them away swiftly. She was alone in the cemetery. She thought that she was fortunate that her behavior was decidedly ungrave. She felt a small wind that cut an edge off the heat, rustling the trees. She laughed, not in humor but in sadness, and spoke out loud:

'Oh, Johnny. I'm almost forty and you've been dead eighteen years, and I still miss the hell out of you'

'I guess it was Susan, you see. You were dead and she got born and she was so tiny and helpless and sick. Boy. Colic and then respiratory problems and God knows what else. It just overwhelmed Annie, you see. And Ben, well, his business was just starting and he worked all the time. And so I just got caught up in it. Sitting up all night so that Annie could get a few hours' sleep. Rocking her. Walking her. Back and forth, back and forth. All those little baby tears, you see, all the pain and hurt she was feeling, well, I was feeling too. It was as if the two of us could cry together and feel a little better and think if it

hadn't been for her, I don't think I would have made it. You big creep! You had no right to get yourself killed!'

She stopped.

She remembered a night, crammed together in a small bed in his dormitory room when he told her that he had refused to submit his request for a student deferment from

the draft. It wasn't fair, he'd said. All the farm boys and ghetto kids were getting slaughtered while the lawyers' sons went to Ivy League schools in safety. The system was unfair and inequitable and evil and he wouldn't participate in the evil. If he got drafted, so be it. If he passed his physical, so be it. Don't worry, he'd said. The Army won't want me. Troublemaker. Anarchist. Rabble-rouser. I'd make a lousy soldier. They'd yell charge and I'd ask where and why, and how come, and why not over there and let's take a vote. They had laughed at the improbable picture of John Barren leading a group in discussion on whether to charge the enemy or not, arguing pros and cons. But her laughter hid a great misshapen fear, and when the letter that began with greetings from the president arrived, she'd insisted they get married, thinking only that she had to have his name, that it was important.

'Susan got better,' Detective Barren said. 'It seemed to take forever, but she got better. And suddenly she was a little girl and Annie was a little older and less scared of everything and Ben's job wasn't so hard and I guess it was okay, then, just to become Auntie Merce because she was going to live, and I guess I knew I was too.'

Detective Barren suddenly choked on her thoughts.

Oh, God, Johnny, and now someone's gone and killed her! My baby. She was so much like you. You'd have loved her, too. She was like the baby we'd have had. Doesn't that sound trite? Don't laugh at me for being a sentimentalist. I know you, you were worse than me. You were the one that always cried in movies. Remember Tunes of Glory? At the Alec Guinness festival? First we saw The Ladykillers and you insisted we stay for the second feature. Remember? After John Mills had shot himself and Guinness goes a little crazy and begins to do a slow death march in front of the other men of the mess. The bagpipes were, faint and you were sitting there in the theater with tears just streaming down your

face, so don't call me the emotional one. And in high school, remember, when Tommy O'Connell couldn't shoot against St Brendan's and he threw you the ball and you went straight up, the whole place screaming or holding

their breath, championship on the line, thirty feet from the basket? Nothing but net, you said, but every time I brought that up, you started crying, you old schmooze. You won and it made you cry. I guess Susan would have cried, too. She cried over sick whales that beached themselves and seals that didn't have the sense to flee from hunters and seabirds covered with oil. Those are the things you would have cried over, too.'

Detective Barren took a deep breath.

I'm crazy, she thought.

Talking to a dead husband about a dead niece.

But they've killed my love, she said to herself.

All of it.

Detective Barren showed her badge to a uniformed officer sitting at a desk, monitoring all the visitors to the Dade County Sheriff's Office. She took the elevator to the third floor and followed her memo to the homicide division. There was a secretary there who made her wait on an uncomfortable plastic couch. She looked about her, noting the same blend of old and new office equipment. There was something about police work, she thought. Even when things are new, they lose their shine almost instantly. She wondered if there was some connection between the grime of the job and the never-clean atmosphere of police offices. Her eyes strayed to three pictures on the wall: the President, the Sheriff, and a third man she didn't recognize. She stood and approached the unfamiliar picture. There was a small plaque beneath the portrait of a smiling, slightly overweight man with an American flag in the lapel on his jacket. The plaque was tarnished bronze. It had the man's name and the inscription 'killed in the line of duty and a date two years earlier.

She remembered the case; he had been making a routine arrest, following a domestic that had been a homicide. A drunken father and son in Little Havana. A subject murder, the easiest of homicides: the father was standing over the body, sobbing, when the police arrived. He was so distraught that the uniforms simply sat him in a chair,

without handcuffs. No one had suspected that he would explode when they tried to take him out, that he would seize a gun from a policeman's holster and turn it on them. Detective Barren remembered the funeral, thinking of the full-dress uniforms, folded flag, and rifle salute, so much like the one she had known earlier. But what a silly way to die, she thought. Then, thinking again, she wondered what was a useful way to die. She turned away swiftly when Detective Perry entered the room.

'Sorry to keep you waiting,' he said. 'Let's go to my office.'

She followed him down a corridor. 'Cubicle, really. Work space. We don't really get a real office with doors anymore. This is progress, I guess.' She smiled and he motioned her toward a chair. 'So?' he asked.

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