



**Beyond the
Envelope:**

Mr. Star's Story

Stephen J. Galgon

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STEPHEN J. GALGON

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Beyond the Envelope: Mr. Star's Story

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Beyond the Envelope:
Mr. Star's Story

—STEPHEN J. GALGON—

For Dad and Greg

She raised her hand.

One

Henrietta

2003 - New York City

It smelled like rusted metal and wet cardboard and wasn't much bigger than a refrigerator, but the tattered blankets on the bottom helped insulate her from the cold concrete floor. If she had a dime for every person that just walked right passed her ...well, she might have enough to get to safety. Someplace safer than a New York City subway station at least. At least her "home" was mobile. She'd been moving about like a hermit crab from shell to shell for so long, she wasn't sure she'd know what to do with anything else, even if someone put the money directly in her hand.

She'd forgotten so much, remembered so little. Everything she knew was in her cardboard box. It wasn't much, but it was *her* cardboard box. The last one hadn't lasted nearly as long. She'd gotten lucky with this one. Nice and sturdy. The blue envelope tucked in the corner held her...valuables. Yes, that was it! *Valuables!* She rolled the word around in her mouth. It was an important word; if only she could grab onto what it meant. She looked at it, resting her head on the pile of rags she'd woven into a pillow...before...when was it? A long time ago....

She was tired. So very tired. She lifted her hand idly to caress the beautiful blue envelope. She'd bring it to her, lie with it next to her.

A sudden jostling to her corrugated palace brought fear into her belly. She propped herself up onto an elbow, at the ready to flee if she was discovered.

The envelope was in her hands. She looked at it and then back at the thinnest of walls, which usually kept the world out. There was a word written on the cardboard. Big letters in black

marker. She remembered words. Words were the things that meant something. That said something. What did this word say? T--E--R--R--... *Terry*.

She looked back at the envelope. It had something to do with that word, Terry, didn't it?

But what? Was it a name? A place? Why was it so important that she had written it on her own cardboard wall? It was even circled numerous times which meant it had to mean something.

The screech of an incoming train rang in her head and her box vibrated as the ground shook beneath her. The thud of footsteps and sound of voices was terrifying. She needed help. But who could help her? *Who?*

Her son would help her. Of course he would. Her son... Terry! *Wait. No.* He was gone. Terry was gone. Her memory clicked away. Terry was gone. Her only son.

“Terry!”

She screamed his name out loud, but the shrill squealing of the train on the tracks leaving the station snuffed out her voice like a tiny flame.

Four years earlier

Henrietta Rawlings sat patiently at her kitchen table. It was a rare occasion in her household, but she had company, the young man from...

She drew a blank and furrowed her brow. It was happening more and more in recent days. His snappy dressing reminded her of her late husband somehow. Oh, the way that man strutted

around in his finery. Like a proud peacock. This one didn't have the swagger, but he sure was easy on the eye. His mother clearly brought him up right, too, knew the importance of manners. Things like that were sorely missing these days, if you asked her. And she needed the help, too. Why, he washed the dishes and took out the trash without her even asking, and fixed her leaky sink that time. About her son's age, if she had to guess. They'd be great pals. That is, if Terry ever came 'round to visit.

The man poured her a glass of water and began sorting the pills. "Thank you," she said, ever conscious of her own upbringing. Her mama had taught her well. She wanted to say more. Her thoughts moved faster than a cat after a mouse, but her words never managed to reach her lips in the way she heard them. She formed the words carefully as her speech therapist had taught her.

"Did I ever t...tell you that y... you reminded me of m... my son, T...Terry?"

She took the pills from the man's extended hand, even the big red-and-yellow one that made her gag. She couldn't remember the last time her son had even been there. It was possible he and this man were nothing alike. Such a wonderful boy her son was. She'd reluctantly agreed to name him Terrence for her late husband's father, like all the Rawlings men before him. Her son's namesake was a drunk and a womanizer to boot. It pained her that her sweet boy would be forever linked to such a scoundrel, but family traditions were not something so casually abandoned. So to the world he was Terrence, but he was always her Terry and she so loved the way that sounded.

"Yes," the man offered with a half smile, warm yet reserved. Then he paused to add "many times."

She only nodded, the effort to speak too much of a drain. She would have told him that they were just about the same height and build. That her son Terry was the varsity goaltender for his hockey team in high school. That he was agile, quick, and, according to his coaches, able to track the puck better than anyone they had ever seen. That his teammates called him “Slink” because they said he had a slinky where his spine was supposed to be. She would have told him that her Terry still held the school record for most consecutive shutout minutes with 427:33. More than seven straight games without letting up a goal.

She liked to think that Terry had learned his work ethic from her, but his passion was all his own. Something he steered all the way to college and a Division 1 scholarship at Northeastern. Some called him a pioneer, but that might be a bit much. After all, there were other black hockey players out there. Grant Fuhr had made it to the NHL. And in the same year Northeastern had its magical run to the Frozen Four. That was during Terry’s junior year, when being on the ice was all that mattered. That chapter of his life ended way too soon. Still, he’d stayed strong, hadn’t he? And kept up his regimented fitness routines.

She shifted her aching body on the chair. There was no getting around it. She was just plain old and decrepit to match. Terry had gone on to pursue a finance degree, impressing her with his drive. He was smart--she’d known that all along--but seems all he’d done was replace one playing field for another. He always said he was off to run the world.

The man sat down next to her. He looked serious. He picked up her hand, papery thin, blue veins rising above the skin. For a moment she felt afraid. Then she looked up into his eyes, which held compassion... and something else.

Two
Mr. Star

For me, every day was pretty much the same. Light housekeeping, pill dispensing. Nothing unusual, nothing that challenged my abilities--at least not the physical ones. It was knowing she'd probably never recognize me as her son again that screwed with my head. I still hadn't fully accepted it yet, I guess. Maybe I never would. How was it possible that moving back to the house where I grew up, to the room where I'd slept for 18 years, couldn't break through that addled mind of hers?

I missed my New York apartment, yet I didn't change a thing about the decor in my bedroom here, which was still the room of a teenager. Exactly as I'd left it when I went off to college. All four New York Islanders Stanley Cup Champion pennants dangling in chronological order from the ceiling. Goalie Billy Smith's poster still thumbtacked above my captain's bed. The October 1990 issue of Playboy still tucked under the mattress. Even my old Mac collecting dust on my pressboard desk. I'd been presumptuous enough to believe my presence in the familiar setting would bring her back to me, back from the abyss. But months later, I still knew almost nothing about what went on in her head. It required tremendous restraint on a daily basis to keep me from grabbing her by the shoulders and screaming "I'm your son, dammit! Snap out of it!" It was a tightrope walk and I was losing my balance.

"It's me, Mom," I finally said. "Terry."

I'd managed to get in a quick shower before our daily rituals, although I still need to change my tattered T-shirt and Northeastern gym shorts for a suit. "I'm just going to change now, Mom," I said. "After that I'll be leaving for work." Every day...same chores, same words. I was losing hope that she'd ever look at me with love in her eyes again instead of blank benevolence.

It's not her fault. It's the disease. That's what the doctors keep reminding me after every appointment. It became my mantra, but it didn't make the sad ache I felt any easier to blot out. Maybe it was like putting the same puzzle back together again each day, only with different pieces missing each time.

I held her hand for a moment. Then, with a sigh, I let it fall back into her lap. Maybe tomorrow.

I tucked in the blanket around her brittle frame and turned away.

"Terry?"

"Mom?" I turned back. "Yes! Yes, it's me. I'm here, Mom, I'm here."

In her smile was the light of recognition. "Terry. It *is* you!" she said. "It's been ages! Come... give your old m...mama a...a b-b-big hug, now. How...how are you, s...son?"

I knelt and opened my arms. The comfort of her embrace reminded me why I was sleeping in a twin bed on Long Island instead of my penthouse on West 13th Street. Please, I prayed, let the day never come that I have to learn to live without these hugs. The day I became a stranger forever.

Money was never an issue once I'd been released from all my college debt. Even before recruitment to the Circle. Penthouse apartments in the City don't come cheap, and the one in my building had been owned by some movie mongul before me, which should give you some idea of the price tag and why I was holding onto it. Long Island to NYC by train every day wasn't my

idea of a pleasant experience, so I'd originally paid for a service to do the bulk of the work caring for Mom, and kept them on retainer for those times I couldn't make it back from work in time. At least that's what I'd convinced myself early on. Right about the time that she'd filled the dishwasher with hand soap.

Eventually, though, the guilt of not being there for her got the best of me. Sand was slipping through the hourglass and I was squandering it. And for what? The pursuit of a fatter bank account?

I looked at my watch. The suit could wait.

"Terry, son," she was saying, "tell me about your game. I'm so sorry I couldn't make it. You won, right?" I hadn't played hockey in a decade or more.

"Sure, Mom. We won. Another shutout."

"That's m-m...my boy. So p...-proud of you!"

Music to my ears. She gave me a big smooch on the cheek, the kind I'd have wiped off faster than a mosquito on my nose when I was young. Now, a full-grown man, I yearned for them the way I yearned for a normal life.

I'd never have either.

I let the moisture linger on my face until it evaporated.

As I stood I remembered the throw pillow in the trash can, the contents of the silverware drawer on the sofa, and an empty toilet roll on the coffee table: typical detritus of a failing mind.

"I'll just take the trash out," I said. "I'll be right back."

I was heading out back with a full hefty bag after returning the throw pillow and silverware to their correct locations when I heard the garbage truck. Why was it I could remember the price of every stock I followed but could never remember trash day? I tossed the bag into the rubber receptacle on wheels and quickly maneuvered it along the unkempt pathway to the curb, making it just in time before the behemoth passed us by. The man in the truck tipped his hat to me. I nodded back.

I wheeled the empty trash can back up the path. A blue envelope was perched on the doorstep leaning against the screen door.

Shit! They can't be serious!

RAWLINGS was written across it in thick black letters, just like the one before.

I hadn't asked for the first one.

I grabbed it and hurried inside to hide it from Mom, an irrelevant instinct and one of the few blessings that came with her illness. Even if she saw it, she'd quickly forget its existence in a matter of minutes, even seconds.

I checked on her. Out like a light, able to snooze anywhere, anytime.

I shut my bedroom door, the one ravaged by time, sticky tape, and other misadventures, harder than I meant to, hoping it wouldn't wake her. The force dislodged the "Islanders Fan Parking Only" sign from its tack on the door. For a second I had to remind myself I wasn't about to make that phone call to Tonya Adams, the way I did sophomore year of high school before I understood the word "rejection."

I sat on the bed to read and pulled the letter out of the envelope.

Mr. Rawlings, the member assigned to you has been reported dead at 11:04 PM. By the rules of the Circle, information on your new target is enclosed. - The Circle

I looked down at the photo provided. *Shit.*

Mr. Fingers was both brutal and cunning in his pursuits. He wasn't one to suffer fools and definitely didn't suffer new recruits. I pictured my finger in his little velvet box and my stomach turned.

An idea blossomed. If I choose not to hunt him, there'd be no reason for him to pursue me, right? Maybe that was the way to survive the unthinkable.

My body sagged. Even I knew better than that with Mr. Fingers involved. Still, anything was worth a try. I walked over to her chair, she was still sleeping. I covered her with an extra blanket and whispered in her ear. "Love you ma. I'll be right back."

I headed into the City after a shower, shave, and a quick debrief with Brenda from the All Ways Care service, who assured me she'd take care of everything. Mom didn't so much as twitch when I left.

Inside Taskers I saw nothing I hadn't come to expect from my weeks as a member. Once in the back parlor, I immediately took a seat in a comfortable armchair. Ms. Mantis was celebrating. Seems she'd gotten the drop on her would-be assassin and I had her to thank for this turn of events. *Thanks for nothing, Ms. Mantis.* Now Mr. Fingers was my problem.

The festivities slowly abated. The members in the room got back to their regular activities, leaving none other than Mr. Fingers himself making his way to the card table on my right. He leaned back in his chair and raised his legs to cross them on the table top.

“And you all think I’m the sick one around here,” Mr. Fingers offered to the air.

Was he talking to me?

Either way, I nodded, hoping to keep him going. Mr. Fingers loved to talk.

“Look, rookie, I get it. Cutting off a finger may not be everyone’s cup of tea. But letting a guy get lucky and then bumping him off while he’s got his pants down? That’s downright cold-blooded.”

He might have a point. Ms. Mantis was known for enlisting the help of various, uh, professional women to lure her targets and would-be killers into screenplay-worthy positions of compromise.

“Sure puts a damper on one of the major perks around here,” he continued.

“She’s cornered the market on women,” I acknowledged, just to have something to say. I used to like sports analogies. But these days it was all about money. The great equalizer in the craziness that had become my life. Instead of Power Plays and Empty Netters, it was hostile takeovers and cornering the market. That--and murder--were the only game now.

Mr. Chemist’s ears perked up at the market talk. Dollar signs flashed in his hooded eyes. He got up and walked over. “Women, am I right, fellas?” he said. “Can’t live with ’em, can’t kill ’em...unless they’re in your envelope.”

Mr. Chemist's bad joke broke the tension I hoped only I was feeling. Sitting across from Mr. Fingers puts even the most seasoned Circle members on edge, let alone the new recruit assigned to kill him.

He clipped off the end of a new cigar and lit it. "Never go near a broad without a full background check." he said.

"Mr. Fingers, where's your sense of adventure?" Mr. Chemist playfully asked.

"I'll have a sense of adventure when Mantis is in a body bag," Fingers said. "I have my own way of scratching that itch. I didn't need the Circle to get laid before, and I don't need it now."

By most standards Mr. Fingers was an attractive man in his late-thirties, so it probably wasn't an idle boast. The term might even be lady-killer, but that would just be too easy.

"Do tell," replied Mr. Chemist. "Seems to me, variety is the spice of life."

Mr. Fingers looked at him coldly.

"Go figure," Mr. Chemist said, leaning over to me. "Mr. Fingers doesn't kiss and tell." He gave Mr. Fingers' shoulder a pat and left to rejoin the other members, plainly choosing to ignore the fact that Mr. Fingers' shoulders had become rigid at his remark.

It was in that moment of braggadocio I heard something I knew I wouldn't want to unhear. A lead.

Everyone knows Taskers is the safe house and, like all safe houses, I presumed, sanctuary to all within its walls. Outside? All bets were off.

I pushed open the door to the street, my senses already on alert, to find both it and the sidewalk surprisingly empty. New York sidewalks are never empty. Goosebumps warned me, but not soon enough. I'd been struck in the thigh before the door had fully closed. *Shinobi and his damn throwing stars*. The pain seared hot. Blood spurting from the back of my leg. I fell to the ground, avoiding by inches the next two projectiles that came my way.

My hockey reflexes kicked in. The killer had taken a chance about which way I'd turn out the door. Luckily for me, he'd chosen wrong. I dodged the next three stars that flew. The irony was not lost on me: a goaltender using his reflexes to avoid rather than deflect. The errant projectiles landed in Taskers' wooden door. One dislodged the "s" from its post, causing it to dangle. I grabbed two more protruding from the wood and prepared for the next wave of attack. I still couldn't pinpoint the attacker's location, but I knew for a fact it was Mr. Shinobi, one of the more efficient members of the Circle. Between him and Mr. Fingers, I couldn't catch a break.

As I quickly tied my shirt around the wound, my mind raced. I reached back toward the door handle just as I remembered it opened outward. I wouldn't be able to back into safety without taking my eyes off my surroundings or my back from the wall. Without knowing Mr. Shinobi's whereabouts I was helpless to defend myself. *Challenge the shooter. Cut off the angle.* Great advice for success on the ice, but here? Big in the net only meant a bigger target for Shinobi's various ninja weaponry to rip me to shreds.

There!

On the fire escape across the street at the corner. I trained my eyes and moved a few inches to get to the handle. A second later another throwing star sliced through my hand. I groaned. The thing hurt like hell. It had to come out. Now.

Don't think about it. Just do it. Like ripping off a Band Aid.

I took a breath and removed it with a hard wrench, willing myself not to pass out. It was time to hit the street before I lost any more blood. A pool had already formed on the ground. I cradled my mangled right hand in my left.

A shadow fell over me. *Shinobi.*

"Sore wa kōeideshita." It has been an honor.

Shinobi reached for his waistband to unsheath his Katana. He aimed it in my direction. At such close quarters I was a goner.

The star I'd removed from my own dripping flesh was still in my hand. I lunged and stabbed Shinobi in the calf. He let out a silent scream and dropped his blade. Surprised by this turn of events, I gathered the little energy I had left and rose to one knee to stab him on both sides of his neck with the stars he himself had thrown. It was then I saw that he was bandaged in several places, likely from other recent wounds.

He'd been weak.

I didn't care.

He was as stoic in death as he'd been in life, a man of few words and even fewer expressions. He flailed silently for several agonizing seconds as his jugular drained of blood.

When it was done his body lay motionless.

The gravity of what I had just done made me ill.

I would never again be free to leave the Circle's orbit.

Inside, covered in blood, I caused a small commotion for the members. Apparently, that had been the first attack ever directly outside the safehouse, or even in its vicinity. Well within the rules, though, and, as it was put to me, a brilliant tactic. They actually seemed disappointed that they hadn't been the ones to think of it themselves.

My "naming ceremony" took place within moments. They didn't seem to care that I was oozing blood and in pain. No one offered to help--or even supply a clean shirt. It would be nice to think they were simply too impressed to notice, but we all knew that wasn't the case. Mr. Vice proposed the name "Mr. Star" which was unanimously accepted. Whatever. It didn't matter what they called me as long as I got the next two days off to start healing my wounds in my own safehouse on Long Island.

My thoughts quickly returned to Mr. Fingers' innocuous comment from earlier. There must be somewhere he spent his leisure time. Frequent visits to a brothel, most likely. It'd go against my initial idea of lying low, but maybe, just maybe, I could take him down and get my 30 days off to get things squared away on Long Island. It was worth a shot. Opportunities like that wouldn't present themselves all that often. One way or another, I had a serious decision to make as to how to proceed with the rest of my potentially very short life.

As it stood I had forty-eight hours. A lot of time and no time at all to plan a killing. Forty-eight hours that would be better spent with my mother before the inevitable happened. Before one of us never returned.

The guilt was something I lived with. Barely. In the early stages it was easier to slough off the forgotten names and faces, the stove left on long after the cooking was done. That's what they called old age. But deep down I knew that when I had the opportunities to spend real time with her, I squandered them by trying to rebuild her memory with silly flashcards and children's games.

But I would never have those moments again. A painful fact that would haunt me for the rest of my life. Ironic. The "rest of my life" might be no longer than it took to speak the words and before you knew it my index finger would become the next trophy in a killer's leather case. I didn't want to look too deeply into the difference between myself, self-described as someone "forced to kill to stay alive" and a sadistic bastard like Mr. Fingers who appeared to relish each pursuit. It was too disturbing, and wouldn't help me do what I had to do.

It would be a blessing if my mother finally, permanently, deleted my existence. That way she wouldn't be forced to remember burying her only son over and over again.

Three

The Plan

We were playing checkers on the coffee table and watching *The Price is Right*. It was a good day. I did my best to hide my bandaged hand from her and between my efforts and the disease, she was never the wiser that something was amiss.

Bob Barker was offering up a box of fabric softener for a contestant. “\$4.79,” shouted Mom at the screen. “Anyone who p-p-pays more than \$4.79 f-f-for fabric softener is a-a-an idiot!”

I laughed, reveling in her lucidity. “Highway robbery,” I agreed.

“Total w-w-waste of...of m-m-oney.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, mom,” I said.

They watched as a cardboard hiker accompanied by yodeling music walked up a mountain toward its goal of the cost of the fabric softener, then pass it by two full dollars. It comically toppled off the edge of the cliff to the sound of a trombone’s *whomp-whomp*.

“I t-t-old you,” Mom said. “That m-m-man h-h-had n-n-o idea....”

She was tiring. I’d put her to bed when the show ended. “It’s your turn, Mom.”

But she pushed aside the checkerboard and instead withdrew a folded, stained sheet of paper from the pocket of her robe.

“What’s that?”

“This is for you, s-s-son,” she said.

I waited.

“Now, I know I haven’t b-b-been m-m-yself a lot l-l-lately, but—”

“Mom, it’s okay. You’re tired. It can wait until tomorrow.”

“No!” She looked at me. “M-m-y m-m-memory is not what it used t-t-to be. Sometimes I f-f-forget things. Th-that’s why I n-n-need t-t-o show you this. B-before I f-f-orget where I p-put it.”

“Okay, Mom. Don’t get upset.”

I took the paper and unfolded it. It was a letter. To me. Dated the day I was born. On hospital stationary.

Mom closed her eyes and spoke slowly. “I wrote y-you this... this l-l-letter when they t-took you to the nursery for...for the first time. I always w-w-wanted you to see it after I p-p-passed, b-but I th-think it’s...it’s t-t-time.

My dear sweet Terrence Lorenzo Rawlings -

Today is the happiest day of my whole life. I never knew what love was until the moment they put you in my arms. I have so many hopes and dreams for you, because as I look at you I see the most perfect little boy there ever was. You are destined for greatness. I can’t wait to watch you grow into the amazing man I know you will be. Whatever you go on to do, know that I love you and I am proud of you.

I promise, no matter what happens, I will always be here for you.. Smile your beautiful smile and the world will smile back at you.

All my love forever,

Momma

I couldn’t breathe. I wrapped my arms around her and wept.

“Now, n-n-now, T-t-Terry, my...my sweet,” she said with a laugh. “It’s n-not sup-posed t-t-to make you...cry.”

Maybe not. But one of us suffered from Alzheimer's and the other was a killing member of the Circle. Who wants to place bets on who'd be the first to go?

I wanted another 30 days with my mother.

There were no two ways about it. Mr. Fingers had to die.

Fortune favors the bold. At least that's what I used to tell my clients for the better part of a decade when they asked my advice about a particular investment. The same logic should apply to pursuits within the Circle. I hoped I wasn't blowing smoke up my own ass this time. My conversation with Mr. Fingers and Mr. Chemist gave me an idea. Mr. Fingers had no use for the women in and around the Circle--or any woman, apparently, but more so after the arrival of Ms. Mantis. He had "other methods of gratification." This was the key to his demise, I was sure of it.

The paperwork in the newest envelope said that every Wednesday Mr. Fingers visited the Roosevelt Hotel at 4:30 PM. I was expecting there to be a key, but there wasn't. I did know that he never paid for a room on these weekly jaunts and that, according to the time-stamped surveillance photos, he generally exited several hours after his arrival.

The break I was looking for was right in my lap. Wednesday was in two days, more than enough time to use my furlough to stake out any security obstacles and plan my attack.

I visited the hotel on both Monday and Tuesday. There was no formal security presence in the lobby that I could see. I'd booked a room for the week so my coming and going didn't seem overly suspicious as I scoped out the building's cameras, alarmed doors, and occasional

staff shortcuts. I needed to access the room Fingers would be in, or at least the name of the woman who booked the room.

With no mention of a woman's name in the envelope, I was on my own. Using the limited tech skills I had, I toyed with the computer system the hotel was using to search for the number of unsold rooms remaining. Eighty-three rooms available, more than I expected. All I had to do was buy out all the rooms but one. Leave Mr. Fingers and his companion with only one option left for their weekly transaction. The Circle's endless piggy bank was coming in quite handy.

On Wednesday morning, I made Mom's favorite breakfast: poached eggs on rye toast with a side of bacon. We sat and laughed together over the meal. I administered her morning medication with a tall glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. Before she'd even taken it she'd begun to fade. Time was running out. She'd been laughing with a stranger all morning. I had to take care of my assignment today to provide the attention she required over the next month.

I tried to kiss her good-bye but she recoiled.

I stepped back quickly. It's not her fault, it's the disease, I reminded myself. "I should be back early today. Why do you say we go to the Ice Cream Cottage?"

"Oh, that would be... lovely," she said, beaming at the idea. "You know w-w-when my s-s-son Terry was little, all he ever w-w-wanted was c-c-coffee ice cream."

Some memories never faded. "With white... white chocolate ch-chips of all... all things. I never knew where... where that came from."

“Let’s give it a try today, for old times’ sake,” I said, and waved goodbye.

I turned back just before I reached the car. “Stevie from All Ways will be here at 10,” I said just to prolong our communication. “I gave her a key yesterday. I wrote it all down on the pad on the table. I also gave her a note to read to you in case you forgot about the pad, okay?”

She shook her head *yes* and scoffed a bit at the babying.

“I gotta go, mom,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”

Time to go kill a man.

Four

The Execution

I checked into my hotel room on the seventh floor and sat stewing in the desk chair. How do you get into the right frame of mind to kill someone? To do it deliberately, with intent. To know this is what you were setting out to do and you were actually going to carry out the act. All those times I told myself to “kill it” on the ice, it had never once been more than a figure of speech.

Hadn't it?

Shinobi's attack was so fast, I didn't have time to think about whether or what if. This time I'd run through every scenario in my head. Planned out every intricate detail. It sickened me to the point where I'd thrown up my lunch, but I was ready. As ready as I'd ever be to do what I needed to do to stay alive.

Mr. Fingers' paramour would be in the room directly above mine in the only room I hadn't booked. When the housekeeping crew arrived to ready the room, I heard the door opening and closing, as well as their muffled conversation. Thank God for poor sound insulation.

Over the next few hours, I walked myself through the events about to unfold, reminding myself that simple was best. Mr. Fingers always arrived at 4:30. I would let him have his fun with the woman, then wait for her to excuse herself to the bathroom. Women, at least those in her line of work, always had something to “take care of” afterwards, at least that's what I'd heard and was assuming (relying on). If I got lucky, I'd have her safely out of harm's way and Fingers in the thick of it. I was clear about one thing: I didn't want innocent blood on my hands, lest I wish to share the same fate as the infamous Mr. Spade character Mr. Lion secretly told me about.

At 3:49 I heard the door above me open and shut. The escort. I wondered idly what Mr. Fingers' alias would be, what name the escort had been told to call out in the so-called throes of passion. For the money you'd expect nothing less than some pretty convincing screams, right?

Less than an hour to go. My nerves were shot and I was jumpy, like an addict jonesing for his next fix. Even my hands were trembling.

Shit! Was it going to be like this for another 41 minutes?

I was so full of nervous energy I must have fidgeted with the bandage on my hand a dozen times. Then I tried reciting the Gettysburg Address. The first time I tried that trick was before my first playoff game in high school when my teammate Jackson, a senior and team captain, told me it would calm me down. We both knew the words. Heck, everyone in that school did. You didn't get a passing grade in Ms. Quint's class without a flawless recitation of the Gettysburg Address. It worked, and we won, despite letting up a soft wrister in the opening minute.

Four score and seven years ago.

A door above opened. Bathroom.

Our forefathers brought forth onto this continent a new nation.

The toilet flushed.

Conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition.

The bathroom door opened again. Was that the hair dryer or just the fan?

That all men are created....

The door was opened and closed. Muffled conversation. Mr. Fingers was in the room.

Equal.

It was time.

I took the silenced pistol out of the bag and checked it for the 10,000th time. Locked and loaded. *Do they say that about pistols? God there's so much I don't know about the taking of a life.* From my surveillance of the building in the days prior, I knew the security cameras on the eighth floor had one viable blind spot, conveniently outside Mr. Fingers' door. Housekeeping wouldn't be there again until the morning unless called directly. I'd rented out every other room on the eighth floor. There would be no interference; no sound, no action from anywhere else. I hoped.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and took the stairwell up one flight. I knew what they were doing in the room. I didn't plan on hearing it. I'd wait for the bathroom sounds. However long it took.

Indistinct chatter. Glasses clinking. Music. Frank Sinatra? Really?

Four score and seven years ago.

The escort got right to work. Right down to business, huh, Mr. Fingers?

Our forefathers brought forth onto this continent a new nation.

Low grunting.

Conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition.

I put my hands over my ears and focused on the new birth of freedom. The irony was not lost on me.

Murmurings. Door opening, door closing.

Someone was in the bathroom. Fingers or his conquest? It was a toss up.

It was also now or never.

I took the keycard I'd swiped from the cleaning crew and eased it down into the lock. You'd think they'd spend more on security around here for the rates they charge. The click sounded like the crack of a whip to my ears and I prayed it wouldn't be heard over the music, a low crooning. Tony Bennett now?

I waited, heard nothing but the music and the sounds of the shower running.

I took a breath and pushed the door open an inch over the thick carpet.

I breathed out quietly, steeling myself for the inevitable. Whatever that was.

The shower was still on. The bathroom door, still closed. I moved into the room in a crouched position. Six feet from the bed. Four. Two.

There he was. The bullying misogynist lowlife himself. Naked, on his stomach. Not a pretty sight. So damn sure of himself he'd even dozed off. I myself had barely slept since my induction. How could he sleep knowing someone was out hunting him? That it could happen anywhere, anytime?

I heard the seconds ticking away in my head. The shower turned off. I was sweating.

It had to be now. *Four score and seven years ago...*

I cocked my pistol...

Our forefathers brought forth onto this continent a new nation.

Mr. Fingers jerked at the sound.

Conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition.

He made a move to turn over.

That all men are created equal.

I pulled the trigger.

Blood and brain matter sprayed everywhere. I choked back the urge to vomit again.

This isn't the time! Mess or no mess, I had earned my 30 days of freedom.

The bathroom door opened. I swung around, pistol at the ready. Prostitute or no prostitute it was my life or hers.

Holy shit!

Mr. Fingers?

What the--

Who the hell was the man in the bed?

One moment of hesitation on my part and Mr. Fingers was on me. He tackled me to the ground. His fists made contact over and over again. It was more than self defense. This felt personal. Each punch connected with a grunt of rage laced with agony. My face and ribs were on fire. He'd surely beat me to death with his bare hands right there if I didn't do something. But what? How do you think straight when you're being punched in the face, head, and gut?

In a tiny corner of my mind I heard my mother's voice. *You can die right here, Terry, or live to see another day. It's up to you.*

My eyes were blinded by blood, but my left hand had located the lamp base that had crashed onto the floor. If I could just...

Mr. Fingers saw the move and delivered a blow directly to my bicep. My arm instantly recoiled. Suddenly there was a towel wrapped around my neck. Fingers began to squeeze.

I couldn't breathe. My face felt bruised and battered. Several ribs must be broken, and my lungs were filled with a lot more than air.

Looks like this is the end, Mom. I'm sorry to disappoint you. I'm sorry we won't have more time together.

Through the slits that were once my eyes I watched Fingers' enjoyment as he choked the life from my body. His focus. Determination. Pain. *Pleasure.*

The lamp was closer now. I made a final grab for it, swung it backwards, and smashed it into his head. His death grip lessened long enough for me to find a shattered chunk of glass that remained. As his fingers tightened again, I lifted it once more and struck a second time. The sharp edge of the glass cut deeper into my already wounded hand as I plunged the shard into his cheek. He went down. I had to get out there. Fast. He might be dead, he might not, but I was too weak to continue the fight. Live to fight another day. That's the motto, right? Fingers was at least momentarily incapacitated, so it had to be now.

I crawled toward the door and attempted to open it but couldn't grasp the knob; there was too much blood on my hands that it slipped from their grip. I was paralyzed with fear, trapped in a room with a sadistic killer hell bent on revenge. A quarter revolution was all I needed and I couldn't even manage that. Ninety degrees standing between me and safety.

Over my shoulder I heard Fingers gathering his energy and attempting to rise to his feet. I turned to look, and what I saw was haunting: Mr. Fingers pulling the glass from his own face with nothing more than a slight grunt of discomfort. Then he turned and hardened his gaze on me. We both knew I was trapped.

He marched towards me like a demonic robot, unwavering from his pursuit. When he arrived at the door I was still feebly trying to escape the hell I had created for myself. *I'm sorry, Mom. I failed you.* Mr. Fingers grabbed me by the hair on the back of my head, held back my neck and growled. The foam and blood collecting in the corners of his mouth quickly turned to droplets and sprayed across my face. With the very glass he'd removed from his own cheek, he stabbed me in the stomach. An intense, sharp pain shot through me instantly and I struggled to breathe.

I looked from my wound to the face of the man who put it there. The face of the man I couldn't kill. The last face I would ever see in the world. I liked to think I would have been noble in this moment when it inevitably came. Instead I wept. I wept for myself, but also for my mother. All the things I wanted to do for her. To help her. To make sure she would be okay.

Fingers removed the glass from my stomach with a smile, allowing my blood to spill onto the floor. He secured my hand to the floor with his foot and hacked away at my index finger. I didn't even have the presence of mind to feel that pain. After a few stabs and swipes it was done. He held it in his hand and showed it to me. The whole time he never said a word, simply smiled.

He carelessly tossed my finger into the adjacent bathroom and readied for the final blow. I closed my eyes. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of looking at him as he took my life. I held them shut and prayed one final prayer for Mom. I prayed that today was the day. The day that the disease took over. The day she forgot I existed at all and she would never have to know the pain of losing her son. I prayed and prayed.

Please.

Please forget me, mom.

I love you. I'll be right b---

This story is dedicated to the caregivers.

They are parents, brothers and sisters.

Spouses, sons and daughters.

Grandchildren, family and friends.

When you were called upon, you didn't hesitate.

You raised your hand.

*Your love, devotion and compassion,
even in the face of profound heartbreak and insurmountable adversity,
inspires us all.*

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