

Second Excerpt from *Myers* by Jeff Lee

With the scrunching sound of tires on crushed clam shells, Myers drives his police cruiser onto the parking pad behind the cedar-shaked cottage he rents on Lewes Beach at the corner of Oregon and Bay Avenues. He looks at his watch. It is almost seven o'clock in the evening, and his stomach growls in protest because he has not yet had supper. Myers sits for a few seconds and stares at the dune, which runs parallel to the shore of the Delaware Bay that is seventy-five feet away from where he sits with the cruiser idling.

Myers inhales a long deep breath of the sea air coming through his open window, closes his eyes, and revisits what had transpired with Joshua Townsend a few hours before. He opens his eyes, shakes his head, and whispers, "Never again."

He sighs as he rolls up the window, after which he turns off the engine, exits the car, and goes to a rural mailbox at the edge of the road. He opens the mailbox and finds a day-old *Morning News*, as per usual, and nothing more.

A gravelly voice from an ancient fixture who sits rocking on the small back porch of the adjacent bungalow observes, "Long day today, eh Chief?"

"A long day, Chester," Myers confirms with some deference to the man's age as well as to Chester's authority as Myers' landlord.

"Glad to see I'm getting a day's work for my tax dollars," Chester intones.

"Have a good evening, Chester," Myers says in a measured way to end the conversation and tramps across the clam shells toward the six wooden steps that lead up to a small back porch.

When he inserts his key into the lock and opens the door, a striped, orange cat appears from the gloom and rubs figure eights against and around Myers' shins before scooting out the open door.

"Good evening, Chester," Myers says in a low voice to the departing cat as he quickly scans the headlines on the front page of the paper, which he just as quickly forgets as he flicks the door closed with his heel.

Myers drops the newspaper on a small occasional table that is positioned on the wall to his right between the door and the stairs to the second floor. He hangs his duty cap on the coat rack next to the cabinet and walks the few steps from the coat rack to a mahogany server in the space that serves as a combined dining and a living space. A wedding present from one of Laura's aunts—a silver tray, streaked dark gray with tarnish—rests atop the server and holds a half dozen bottles of bourbon, whiskey, and rye, all of which have been substantially tapped.

Myers opens a door of the server and without looking, reaches in and grabs a crystal tumbler, another wedding present that is part of a set from his late mother, Paola, whose picture is in a tarnished frame to the left of the tray. He slides the Jim Beam forward and picks it up to check the contents. Nearly empty, he thinks, and opens the side door on the right side of the server. He bends over and extracts an unopened bottle of Jim Beam, which he places on the server top.

After emptying the old bottle into the tumbler, Myers twists off the cap of the new bottle and pours another two fingers worth of the bourbon into the glass. Looking at the image of his mother at thirty, something of a raven-haired beauty with ice-blue eyes she has passed on to her son, Myers raises his glass to her photo, says "Mamma," and knocks back half of the contents of the tumbler.

Myers closes his eyes and contorts his face as the bourbon scorches its way down his throat. After the shiver attendant to its warmth goes through him, he opens his eyes, smacks his lips, and pours

more of the Beam Family product into the tumbler to replace what he has just swallowed. Myers turns and leans against the server, sips the bourbon, and looks across the dining room table at the floor to ceiling bookshelves lining the opposite wall, shelves crammed with bound copies of nearly a thousand books that had belonged to a learned father Myers had not had time to know because he had died when Myers was almost two.

Many of these books Myers has read; a few he has read many times. The reading he has done over the years is one of his guilty secrets, one placed on hold during a World War and a police conflict in Korea, a secret he easily keeps because he is the only person who has ever entered this house.

The glass of bourbon accompanies Myers to a tiny but relatively new kitchen, which has replaced the original that had been installed when Harding was President. He places the glass on the small porcelain drain board and pulls the chromed handle on the refrigerator door. Looking inside, he decides upon two frankfurters currently wrapped in wax paper, which he places on the center of the four-burner gas range that is positioned next to a door leading to a porch overlooking the Delaware Bay.

Myers does not turn on a light because there is sufficient illumination coming through the glass pane in the door, and from the bank of windows that make up most of the back wall of the doily-adorned and mahogany-dominated living space, the accoutrements of which once graced Paola's dining room and parlor, but the main reason Myers does not turn on lights is because he is comforted by the soft edges of shadows.

From the cabinet above the sink, he extracts a can of Campbell's pork and beans, opens it with a can opener lying on the drain board, and pours the contents of the can into a pot that, until he flips it over, has been resting bottom up on a tea towel. The bourbon calls, and after Myers takes a sip, he places the pot on the stovetop. He slides open a box of barnburners and strikes the matchhead of one of them against the side of the box, waits a second for the flame to grab hold of the matchstick, turns a knob on the front of the stove, and smelling the pungent odor of mercaptan, places the flame next to the burner, which flares.

Myers turns down the gas until the burner flames are tiny blue petals and slides the pot of baked beans over them. Retrieving a frying pan from the drawer beneath the oven, he uses a teaspoon to scoop a gob of bacon grease from a jar on a shelf above the range and drops the soft, light-gray lump into the frying pan. He puts the hotdogs into the frying pan and uses a paring knife to score them with the intention of waiting until the beans start to simmer before lighting the burner under the frying pan.

Again, the bourbon calls. Myers swallows what is in the tumbler and returns to the server. He fills the glass, puts it on the dining room table, and walks back to the kitchen to give the beans a stir. When he sees telltale bubbles at the pot edge, he lights another burner, slides the frying pan over it, and watches the bacon grease melt. After stirring the beans a few times, he uses the paring knife to turn the hotdogs in the sizzling grease until the scored edges of the hot dogs lift and char.

When Myers decides dinner is ready, he deposits the contents of the pan and pot onto a platter. Grabbing a fork from a drawer next to the sink, Myers takes the platter to the dining table and places it on the only place mat on the table before retrieving a bottle of Heinz ketchup from the refrigerator. He sits facing the bank of windows that provides a view of the dune and the bay beyond and proceeds to pound the bottom of the ketchup bottle until a deluge of ketchup spurts onto the hotdogs, which he cuts into inch-long bites. As he eats his dinner, random events of the day cross his mind, but nothing seems to stick, not even what happened with Joshua Townsend.

In time, Sarah's image appears among the remembered events, her pretty eyes staring into his, the tawdry makeup somehow appealing to him at that moment. He stares out of the windows at nothing but sees Sarah, watches her with anticipation, her expression coy. He wonders, will she?

"Will I what?" a voice that is not hers asks. He hears his reply, "You know," to which she replies, "No, I don't." Myers persists, "You do know ... do it ... please," and she does: she unbuttons her blouse and frees her breasts from her bra, and then she speaks, but not with the tones he has just heard. It is the voice he knows from the car radio, "Over easy, Chief, or sunny side up?"

He starts at the taunting tone of the question, shakes his head, blinks his eyes to be sure the images are chased from thought, whispers "Jesus Christ," and empties the tumbler.

Without forethought, he stabs a piece of hotdog with his fork and another bite of food disappears, but he could not swear that he was responsible for it. A few snippets of conversation with Principal Moore arise; unusual man that, like a character in a movie, Myers decides, and in another second, he does not remember he has reached that conclusion.

The slide show in his mind flickers ahead. He remembers an old woman beeped at him today, and he feels his skin prickling from embarrassment. He did make the kids laugh at the beach. Nice. But as he scans the crowd, what he sees in his mind's eye reaffirms his belief that they are clueless, and again, his skin prickles from shame when he considers and accepts that some of the laughter was inspired by what he had done to Joshua Townsend.

The food on Myers' plate is disappearing, but he is not conscious of it.

The small crowd at the beach is swaying, like waves in Baltimore Harbor that have traveled down the Patapsco, risen against the bulkheads, and reflected back up the river, at times complementing and at other times diminishing newly arriving waves, but the waves are moving much slower than memory says they should, pulsing to some unheard rhythm. A girl in the pulsating crowd turns her face toward him and stares into his eyes. He remembers he talked with her today; a quiet voice effervesces from the bottom of his thoughts to acknowledge flirting with him is a more apt interpretation. The quiet voice wonders why he is reading something in her luminous eyes that was not there earlier, but he ignores the voice and focuses on what the eyes are offering.

He has read eyes like this before, knows what they want, what they intend. Her face fills the frame of his vision, a flawless face with a mouth forming something more powerful than a smile, yielding the same message that is in her eyes, the message that he understands only too well, and then a movement in the periphery of his vision chases it all away: the eyes, the mouth, the invitation. It is Chester the cat pacing back and forth on the outside sill of the windows in front of him, stopping now and again to stare at his benefactor, waiting for Myers to read the message in *his* eyes.

Even though Chester's message is different, Myers understands it, knows its origin is as primeval as the message in the girl's expression. With both hands, Myers rubs his own face, especially his burning eyes that stay closed after he stops rubbing them. He draws a deep, deep breath, holds it, tries to retrieve the mental moment with the girl, and failing, thinks, *what the hell is wrong with me?* He exhales as he stands, remembers to pick up the tumbler, goes to the door to the porch, and opens it for the cat.

"Not much going on out there this evening, eh Chester?"

Chester stands in the doorway for a few seconds, turns his head toward the porch as though debating what he wants to do.

"I know how you feel my friend. Nothing going on in here either."

Chester maintains his position, slowly swishes his tail, and steals a furtive glance at Myers.

“Come on Bud,” Myers demands. “In or out.”

Chester makes his decision, butts his head against Myers’ shin, and repeats the figure eight ritual inside the door. Myers responds with rapid rubs along Chester’s back near his tail with the flat of his hand; Chester lifts his head, closes his eyes, and purrs. Myers closes the door, stops at the server to top off the tumbler, and heads to the kitchen to open a can of cat food. As Chester hunkers down to dinner, Myers returns to the table to finish his now cold hot dogs and baked beans, which he does. Leaving the empty plate on the table, he sips the Jim Beam as he walks to the sofa in the living room.

Storm clouds are darkening the sky to the north of Lewes, and Myers sits in the glowering darkness of his home, sipping the bourbon, staring at the stairs leading to the second floor, trying to decide whether or not he will fall asleep where he is or go up to his austere bedroom. As he recognizes the bourbon’s warmth numbing his limbs, he closes his eyes and feels Chester settling onto his lap. This, he knows, is not a poet’s solitude, but solitude it is. For better or for worse, in sickness and in health, he is committed to it without a vow but committed, nonetheless. Take off the uniforms I have worn for twenty years, he thinks, and here it is, stalking me, waiting for me to lower my guard so it can tug me into the middle of nothing, this swirling void of loneliness I float near always, except when I’m cop, sergeant, chief.

Husband? Father? Son? For each of those roles, he considers, there was something more than a connection with a uniform, a persistent connection that left little choice but to avoid touching the swirling edge of the void; he acknowledges being loved as a husband, a father, a son provided the energy he needed to avoid that swirling edge of isolation, which now appears to be drawing him very near. A voice in his head asks, “Was it worth it to have loved and been loved if this is where I’m going to end up, disconnected and drowning?” To which Myers whispers in reply, “fucking bullshit,” then takes a long, slow sip of the bourbon until the tumbler is empty, and declares, “Just bullshit. Lonely is where I *want* to be.”

When he places the empty tumbler on an end table, Myers feels Chester’s forepaws kneading his thigh, perhaps born of the cat’s longed-for memories of kittenhood, and it prompts Myers to scratch the cat’s head. He is rewarded with purrs, which replaces the painless, joyless, illusion of a void with a pleasant sensation of being connected to something living, even though, he realizes, it is a twelve-pound cat. Some part of him wants to relent to the freedom of feeling nothing, but the connection with Chester will not let it happen; instead, his thoughts turn to the churning currents surrounding the maelstrom, that roiling sea that is his life with its responsibilities that he cannot escape, its personalities that cloy, and with the outcomes of others’ decisions that make his life much more difficult than it needs to be.

The last thing he feels before sleep comes is a sense of futility in wishing he can escape from the murky turbulence of loneliness because he realizes it is where he is, between the void of loneliness and the connections that come from his being a public servant, a resigned pack animal that wants its heavy burden removed from its back, a mule plodding forward hoping for the comfort that comes from a belly full of carrots but knowing the thwack of a big stick is a far more likely outcome.

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