

Excerpt from *The Innocents*

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The air feels steamy to Myers, thick like the jungles he remembers from the Philippines, air that is still, air that rejects perspiration so that it remains on the skin and soaks one's clothing and makes one think, as does Myers, why in the world one wears anything in such a place, much less a jacket. He loosens the necktie that is a regular part of his uniform, unbuttons the top button of his shirt and, extending his chin and twisting his neck, slips his forefinger behind the tie knot and tugs at it.

It is so quiet that Myers can hear a slight hum of traffic from far off. Sunlight coming through the overarching branches of the big trees that surround the clearing dapples the bowed and still rain-wet grasses. A persistent deerfly lands on his cheek, and with a quick slap that stings his skin, Myers puts an end to the pest.

He scans the clearing and wonders why he is there, what it is he thinks he might find.

It is a few seconds before he realizes he has been staring at the place where he had first seen the reflection of the Moyer girl's eyes. I wonder how she is doing, he thinks, and not for the first time compares her with Dorothy: Patsy is taller because she is at least two years older than he remembers his daughter having been; Patsy is almost as pretty, and he is certain just as innocent and just as unworthy of the hand life has dealt her.

The jacket he is wearing is one he has not worn for several months. Without intent, he slides his hands into the side pockets and feels a rediscovered and crumpled

pack of cigarettes in the left pocket and a book of matches in the right. Myers removes the pack and looks at it. Chesterfields. With some difficulty, he extracts a cigarette that has a slight bend in the middle and runs the length of it beneath his nostrils, inhales the scent and can taste the want he feels.

“What the hell,” he says as he straightens the fag and puts it to his lips.

He pulls out the matchbook, strikes a match, and draws the smoke deep into his lungs. The smoke burns his throat and he coughs. He looks at the cigarette, mutters “fuck” and drops it. The lit end hisses where it lands in the wet grass.

Myers looks down at the now wetted cigarette, and in a spot of sunlight next to it, sees something tiny and glistening on the ground. He drops to one knee, picks up a twenty-two-caliber shell casing and examines it as he rolls it back and forth between his thumb and middle finger. He drops the casing into his shirt pocket and duck-walks in a slow circle looking for more, which he finds and drops into the same shirt pocket.

It is when he spies the fifth casing that he hears the sound of feet pushing to a deliberate rhythm though the rain-bent grass. His head snaps toward the sound, and he sees Vivian Peterman walking toward him, her eyes focused on his face, her expression unreadable.

Sweat has pasted strands of hair against her forehead and wetted the ends of strands that have fallen against the bare skin on her shoulders. The no-frills, print sundress she wears is damp and clings to her thighs in a way that causes Myers to glance at them as she advances, but it is

the uncertain message in the eyes boring into him that demand his attention. He stands and waits.

She is twenty feet from him and still advancing, her thighs and breasts swaying to the measured cadence of her pace when she says, her voice low and hoarse from too many cigarettes, "I saw your car."

He does not answer. She continues to approach until she is close enough, if she wishes, to reach out and touch him with her fingertips.

"I saw your car," she whispers; her eyes have not left his since they first connected.

Seconds pass. She lowers her head and murmurs, "Chief, I..."

When she looks up, Myers sees clarity in what her eyes are conveying. He remains mute as she takes a quick step forward, grabs the lapels of his jacket and pulls him toward her. Her eyes close, her head lists to the right, one arm encircles his neck, a hand presses against his chest, her lips find his.

The hand on his chest now wraps around him, and Myers feels her breasts and belly pressing against him, notes the firm yet somehow tender feel of her lips against his, stares at her closed eyes, and feels a fear rise within his chest, not from the pressure of her lips or body but from the vulnerability her closed eyes suggest. Her lips become more insistent, a hand slips into his hair and presses his head toward hers, and it is when he realizes he has parted his lips to receive the tip of her tongue that the fear usurps control.

He places both hands on her shoulders and pushes her away, the gentleness of those hands surprising her almost

as much as the escaping lips of this man. Her eyes are open, her brows arched in uncertainty, but only for a second. She understands, blushes, turns, and runs toward the path that will lead her away from this forbidden place.

Her strides are graceful, even though purposed for escape; her open hands slice the dense air in time with her quick pace as the skirt of her sundress billows out behind her. Myers, frozen in place, watches her run until she has disappeared among the trees.

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