Special Issue 2010: 1

Creative Writing Project: Crime Fiction
(Edited by Ellen Redling)

Table of Contents

Ellen Redling: Introduction 1-2
Max Dombert: The Heat 3-5
Frank Feil: Jack Johnson: The Last Fight 6-9
Maike Frank: Untitled 10-13
Emily Mae Graf: Inside Sacred Walls 14-17
Jens Konrad: Untitled 18-22
Caroline Kurpmann: Vengeance is Mine 23-26
Luisa Luem: Nightmares 27-30
Marina Machauer: Getting Slim 31-37
Judith Müller: Confessions of the Police 38-43
Nils Müller: Deadly Greed 44-47
Pia Rolli: Teatime 48-49
Alexandra Schirmann: Confessions of an Ordinary Man 50-52
Franziska Schmid: Untitled 53-56
Alexandra Stein: A Serious Crime 57-60
Verena Wulf: Night Flowers in Bloom 61-64
Anja Zimmermann: Successive Events 65-67
Creative Writing Project: Crime Fiction

edited by Ellen Redling

Introduction

This creative writing project suggested itself as part of my course (Proseminar I, summer term 2008) on Late Victorian Fiction, which focused mainly on Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I felt that students who are familiar with the genre of crime stories would not only be able to write their own crime story but also to (re)view it on the basis of the course readings and their discussions with other students.

The preparations for the writing process therefore involved a study of literary writing techniques, which would also enrich the reading of the two authors dealt with in class. We then discussed guidelines on structuring suspense (beginnings, complications and resolutions), setting and characterisations. The students were also referred to John Dale’s “Crime Fiction.”1 On this basis, the students wrote a first draft of their story and presented their work to me. Next they formed groups with four to five peers and discussed the stories of yet another group of students. The students chose their favourite stories and gave reasons for their selections. They also made suggestions for changes. Some stories were read aloud in class and were discussed in plenum. The drafts were then prepared for posting and general viewing on the e-journal. During the course the students were asked to compare their own approaches to the ones taken by either Stevenson or Wilde in their stories.

---

I wish to thank all the students for their efforts and the creativity they invested in their stories and their permission to present them to other students on the website. Many thanks are also due to Frank Polzenhagen, the general editor of this e-journal, who helped me greatly with the formatting of this special issue.

Ellen Redling

<ellen.redling@as.uni-heidelberg.de>

Anglistisches Seminar
Universität Heidelberg
Kettengasse 12
D-69117 Heidelberg
Max Dombert

The Heat

The wind blew hard and cold through the deserted streets of Sunfield. This fall had been unusually rainy so far, but tonight the sky was clear and the air chilly. The moment Jasmine stepped out of Marc’s house, one single cloud began to cover the white moon and the streets seemed even darker than they had before. She buttoned up her coat and turned in the direction of her own place.

Marc had often looked at her with longing in his eyes and they’d both been exchanging glances for months, but there’d always been an understanding between them that nothing was ever supposed to happen. After all, they both knew that their mutual friend was more jealous than any other girl in Sunfield. Since Petty Valentine and Marc O’Riley had started going out together, Petty had made it clear to everybody in town that she would not tolerate any flirtation or even an attempt at it. She loved him madly, and so neither Jasmine nor Marc wanted to hurt her.

When she arrived home, Jasmine took an almost empty whiskey bottle out of the living-room closet and poured herself a drink. She leaned back on her couch and began to think. It should never have happened – that was for sure. But his eyes had been like oceans of desire and the fireside had added such romance to the situation that she could not resist him. She had tried to ask him why he wouldn’t let go of her; why he was doing this, but all he’d done was to close his arms tighter around her neck and kiss her even more passionately...

“...Lips lips lips Marc kissing desire fire love NO don’t please let go of me don’t kiss me I cannot do this go away Petty is for you I’m not NO stay love me breathe with me my heart your heart hands caress down breast stomach back NO NO go away I need to leave don’t cheat it’s unfair NO why not? Marc is a free person Petty doesn’t own him if he wants to he can do what he wants to yeah do what you want do it with me I need to get rid of Petty get rid of Petty get rid...”

When Jasmine woke up, she found herself still sitting on the sofa with the empty glass in her lap. She looked out the window. What had started last night with a single cloud had become a horrifying and heartless mass of weather. A storm chased thick clouds through the air, heavy raindrops fell like stones from the sky, and if the clock hadn’t shown the opposite, one might have thought it was midnight. From time to time there was thunder – still far away, however, but already noticeable. Because Jasmine’s head felt like an air hammer, she got up very slowly, went into the kitchen and took an aspirin. She felt bad. She wasn’t sure what to consider real and what she had just dreamed. But there were those words still echoing in her ears. What were they supposed to mean? She tried to think things over again. Slowly, step by step. Yesterday she went to Marc’s. They started to make out. She couldn’t resist. It was good, very good
indeed. When she came home, she fell asleep on the couch and dreamed weird things. She dreamed of Marc and herself making love and of her conscience and how different she felt about the situation. “So far,” Jasmine thought, “it was not an unusual dream after all that happened last night. But still there are those words that I’m scared of. ‘Get rid of Petty, get rid of Petty, get rid…’ Why do I dream stuff like that?” Puzzled she sat down on the living-room couch again. Was she capable of getting rid of someone? What does it mean to get rid of someone – in what way? And mostly: Why did she dream about getting rid of Petty? She was her friend. And she, Jasmine McFrawd, should be the one to take her hands, eyes and everything off Marc. Marc was not for her, and she was not for Marc. That was a fact. Jasmine got up and picked up her cell phone. Dialing the number she started to feel better. Now she was going to make a clean slate. She would confess everything to Petty; everything starting with the looks exchanged between Marc and her and leading up to the night and the confusing dream. “It’ll all work out,” she thought.

It was getting darker outside when Jasmine went down to the house’s cellar and switched on the sauna. The sauna’s oven started to warm up the air. Thinking about getting in the hot sauna and leaving this disgusting weather with all that fog and clouds behind cheered her up. It would be a good place to tell her friend about the things that happened. They’d both be more relaxed down here in the cellar surrounded by all that wood and the heat than sitting upstairs with the dark black night coming through the window accompanied by the storm and the rain. “Yes,” she said to herself looking at the neatly-stacked wooden pillows outside the sauna and the candles on the window-sill. “This room is an oasis of peace.”

When Petty rang the bell, Jasmine took a few deep breaths and opened the door. “Hey, honey, how are you doing? Come in. It’s cold outside and I’ve just heated up the sauna,” she said and kissed Petty on the cheek. It felt cold. The two women went inside. Was it just her imagination or was Petty really that different? She had this look on her face that scared and frightened Jasmine. What was in the bag she had brought? It looked so heavy. Not like any kind of sauna equipment, but somehow different. “Well,” Jasmine said a little nervously, “why don’t we go down to the basement? I bet you almost froze to death out there.” She made the first step towards the stairs, but noticed that Petty was hesitating. “Come on. I wanna talk to you. But not up here with both of us standing around uncomfortably like that,” she said pointing at Petty who was standing there shivering and wet. “Let’s go and leave this rainy and frightening night for two hours.”

The heat of the sauna could be felt through the whole cellar of the house. Its warmth seemed to cover the two girls as soon as they entered the room. When they had changed and taken towels, Jasmine asked how Petty would feel about a fragrance with herbs and spices in the sauna. “No, no thank you I can’t stand the smell,” she replied harshly. “But I will go to the
bathroom. I’ll be right back.” Petty turned around and went towards the 
restroom. Jasmine was confused. Petty was so different. She behaved like 
she never had before. She didn’t talk. She had this look on her face which 
was so indifferent. And what was in the bag? Jasmine started to become 
afraid of this whole situation although it seemed so harmonious with the 
warm sauna and the burning candles. They were both almost naked and 
nobody would ever reckon anything strange about this moment. Jasmine 
decided to stay calm and to go into the sauna. When she opened the sauna, 
she seemed to be running against a wall. The air was dry and it felt like one 
could cut it with a knife. It almost hurt. She stepped inside and tried 
to relax. With closed eyes, she could hear Petty leaving the bathroom. 
Was there some metal sound? Jasmine opened her eyes. Petty was getting 
closer to the sauna. She was searching for something in her bag. What was 
she looking for? Again there was this sound. What was it? Jasmine could 
see Petty in front of the glass sauna door. In her hands she was holding 
a chain. And a lock. She smiled calmly and the look in her eyes seemed 
to change. It was now somehow satisfied. Suddenly she started to wrap the 
chain around the door knob. Jasmine jumped up from her seat pushing 
dizzy and everything she did seemed to be in slow motion. It was too late. Petty 
had already wound the chain around the door and locked it. “You seem to 
like it hot!” she said stepping back and looking at her work. “Be careful not 
to burn yourself, bitch.” Petty gave one last look at Jasmine and turned up 
the heater...
Blood was running down his face and he felt the cold steel of a Walther P99 in his mouth.

“So this is how it all ends?” Jack thought, looking up at the man with the gun who was sneering at him. It was not his own life he was worried about, but the lives of the two persons sitting in the middle of the old warehouse with terror-struck faces.

“No, you’ve chosen the wrong guy to mess with!” he said and pressed a little trigger inside his pocket...

Two days earlier...

It was a lovely Friday afternoon, and Jack and his partner Alan were hanging out at “Cindy’s Diner” which was across from the FBI Headquarters in Los Angeles. They had been stressful months for both of them, but as Jack used to say: hard work always pays off.

Antonio Escobar had been one of the biggest drug dealers in history. Years ago, Jack had started his investigations on Escobar and after the assassination of his best friend and partner Chris, Jack dedicated his life to hunting him down. Now, almost ten years later, he had finally been able to intercept a large amount of Escobar’s drug deliveries and jail him.

“Two more beers please!” Jack said with a smile to the relatively young waitress who was serving them.

“I’m really glad to see Escobar behind bars. Without people like him, our society is getting at least a bit better. On the other hand, it makes me really sad to lose a good partner like you. Are you still keeping to your plan of leaving the FBI?” Alan asked, downing his first beer.

“You see, Alan, I love my job. But I also love my family. Since Chris’s death I’ve been working day and night on this case, and therefore have neglected my wife and daughter. I’ve promised Sandra I’d quit my work on the streets now and get transferred to a desk job. We’ve already sold our house here and bought a new one in Newport Beach. I really don’t want Alaina to grow up here in downtown L.A."

“I understand you, but...,” they were suddenly interrupted by a rather puzzled looking waitress who was not serving the beer but holding a large envelope in her hands. “There was a very dangerous-looking man,” she stammered, “he told me to give you this envelope with greetings from Fernando.”

Jack’s face suddenly turned pale. He snatched the envelope out of the waitress’s hands and opened it. After reading the contents quickly, his eyes were filled with terror. “Where is the man?” he shouted at her, rising
from his chair. The waitress moved one step backward. “He left the diner immediately.” “Damn it! That’s impossible! This cannot happen!” the normally so tough guy shouted and threw his glass against the wall. Meanwhile his partner had taken the envelope and was staring at the pictures. They showed Jack’s wife and daughter tied to chairs and with guns pointed at their heads.

All of a sudden Jack’s BlackBerry started to ring.

He answered it. “You dirty bastard, how dare you get my family involved in this!”

“Shut up, Jack,” answered the man on the other end with a Hispanic accent. “You shouldn’t have messed with us. It’s too big for a small FBI agent like you.”

“What do you want? Escobar?” Jack asked, trying to calm down. The man on the other end laughed. “Escobar? I don’t care about him. Arresting him was the best thing you could have possibly done. He has reached the end of his career. He used to be brilliant years ago but he doesn’t know how to run the business nowadays.”

“So what do you want, then?”

“You’ve got something that belongs to me. 250 pounds of pure cocaine to be more accurate. I want it back within 48 hours or your family is dead!”

“The cocaine is stored in the police building; you know it’s impossible to get it!”

“You will find a solution to this problem. You have 48 hours, starting now. I’ll call you tomorrow night,” the man said with a cynical undertone and hung up.

Jack had to sit down again. Tons of thoughts were circling through his head. Fernando had joined Escobar’s organisation only 3 years ago. He was the man for the dirty work, nothing more. How did he manage to become the head of the organisation? None of this made sense to Jack, but he had no time to think about Fernando’s promotion. He had to rescue his family.

Saturday night – 11 pm

Outside there was a heavy storm, and Jack and Alan walked down the lonely hallway of the police building. Jack knew that he could not involve the FBI or the police in this business; he had to do this on his own. Although he was glad to at least have Alan at his side. They had never been good friends like he and Chris, but Jack knew he could trust him, and that was important.

“Stop! What do you want here so late?” the guard in front of the room where the cocaine was kept asked.

“FBI. We need to have a look at the coke!” answered Alan.
“I’m sorry but that is impossible without a...” The guard fell to the ground. With a single hit, Jack had taken him out.

“Hurry, Alan. We don’t have much time, and there’ll be more of them.”

They rushed into the chamber, packed the cocaine into two sports bags and left the police building as quickly and silently as they had entered it.

Jack stopped the car in a side street. The rain was still pouring down, and apart from a bum who was seeking shelter under a porch, the streets were empty. Neither of them spoke a word. Time passed by and Alan was almost asleep, while Jack wasn’t able to take a nap for a single minute. At 1 am Jack’s mobile phone started to vibrate.

“You got the cocaine?” Fernando asked.

“Maybe, but first I want to talk to my family.”

He heard a punch and a scream through his mobile phone.

“You are not the one to lay down the rules here, Jack. You understand? Don’t try me on this. We meet at 6 am in the old warehouse on Jefferson Street. Come alone!”

“You son of a...” But again the line was dead.

**Sunday morning – 6 am**

The sun was already rising, and dense fog hung over the whole industrial area. Jack was anxious as he walked towards the entrance of the large old warehouse. The fog, the broken windows and the empty barrels all over the place, it all seemed to him like an abandoned ghost town. With the large sports bags on his shoulders he finally entered the building. It was a big dusty hall. In the middle of it Jack recognised two persons sitting on chairs with Fernando and a guard right next to them. With the sunbeams breaking through the windows, he couldn’t see much of the rest of the hall but he managed to discover an additional person in the back of the building.

“Stay there!” Fernando shouted.

A hulk of a guard came towards him and started to search him thoroughly. He checked the sports bags and gave a sign to Fernando that everything was fine.

“I’ve done what you wanted me to do. Now give me my family back.”

“Jack, Jack, Jack,” Fernando said with a smile, “I’m afraid it is not that easy. You’ve caused so much trouble so far for Escobar, and I don’t think you would let me run my business without interfering. I have no choice here I guess.”

“At least, let my family go. They’ve done nothing to you. It is a matter between us, they have nothing to do with this,” Jack cried out.
“They have seen far too much. But I am a nice person. I’ll have you shot first so you don’t have to see your family getting murdered. Now kill him and bring me the cocaine!”

Jack felt a sudden blow on his head. For a moment he lost consciousness.

Blood was running down his face and he felt the cold steel of a Walther P99 in his mouth.

“So this is how it all ends?” Jack thought, looking up to the man with the gun who was sneering at him.

“No, you’ve chosen the wrong guy to mess with!” he said and pressed a little trigger inside of his pocket.

One second later, one could hear three rapid-fire shots and there was blood running out of the mouth of the guard who was holding the gun into Jack’s mouth. The two other guards also fell lifeless to the ground. When Fernando realised what had just happened he tried to escape but Jack quickly grabbed the guard’s gun and fired two well-aimed shots at him.

“Who made the mistake now? I’ve told you to keep my family out of it. Now you have paid the price. Perhaps you shouldn’t have tried to replace a man like Escobar,” Jack said calmly, walking up to Fernando who was struggling for breath.

Shortly afterwards, Jack was finally able to hug his family. Tears were running down his face and he swore never to leave them alone again. When they walked out of the warehouse, the fog had disappeared and the sun was shining brightly. Jack looked up to the roof of another warehouse and nodded to Alan who waved at him with his rifle right next to him.

THE END
“Where the hell are they?” Cliff asked himself, but he couldn’t really think clearly where his friends might be. It was one of those nights, in which everything was messed up, really messed up. It was actually a usual night for Cliff and his college mates. They met up at Sue’s bar every Friday to drink a fair amount of alcohol, pull girls and just party and have fun together. This time it was too much alcohol for most of them and – as usually happens – one of them got into a fight with some of the other students because Sue’s bar was really popular with many students from the area. In this fight, one of Cliff’s friends got hurt and had to go to the hospital. It was a big chaos, everyone was running around and in the midst of this rush Cliff lost all the people from his group.

It was already really late and he was tired, so he planned to go home because he knew that tomorrow he would have to study hard for an upcoming exam. But a look into his wallet told him that taking a taxi wasn’t an option. And he wouldn’t be able to take a bus in the next five hours. So the last possibility to get home was hitchhiking, even though in almost every newspaper lately there had been warnings that hitchhiking should be avoided at all costs. A cruel serial killer was at large and, up to now, the police didn’t have a clue where he was. He had committed five brutal murders, and all of his victims were women. One of his “trade marks” was that he sexually abused the women before cutting their stomachs open and then dumping them somewhere in the wilderness.

“I don’t care,” Cliff thought. “I don’t think some serial killer would rape an alcohol-smelly guy like me, and the police also presume that the killer is hiding himself far more east.” So Cliff walked down Glenwood Street straight to the highway where he thought the chances were higher that someone would stop. He had been standing there for an hour when finally a black Chevrolet stopped. Cliff had almost given up and had already thought about where he could sleep out there. Now he was very relieved that he didn’t have to do this since it was freezing cold outside and the 20-mile-walk home would definitely be too long.

The guy who stopped seemed nice when Cliff opened the car door. He had some country music on, and on the back seat a woman was half sitting, half lying. She was covered with a blanket and seemed to be asleep. The only thing Cliff recognized when he was plonking himself into the car seat was a strange smell, kind of sweetish sour, but that could have been him since some guy had dropped a beer bottle right in front of him at the bar. “Thanks so much for stopping; I need to go to Bridgetown. Could you just drop me off at the second exit?” Cliff said to the man who had introduced himself as Bill. Bill looked like a cowboy; he wore some washed-out jeans with brown boots and a red shirt. His face seemed dirty and scruffy; he surely hadn’t shaved for quite some time. He had big
eyebrows, his eyes were really small and he was smoking a cigarette. “No problem. You don’t need to thank me, I am glad to have some company.” He had a deep voice and laughed in a way that, as Cliff thought, sounded strange. But this feeling soon went away when the two men started having a conversation, which made Cliff feel a little more comfortable. They talked about the last football match and about the best player.

The guy was driving really fast; Cliff noticed that the signs were passing by at an enormous speed. He couldn’t see the speedometer, but they must have been going 80 miles per hour at least.

As the conversation continued, Cliff felt very dizzy and his head began to hurt like hell. When he had gotten into the car, he had felt ok, but when he tried to concentrate now he couldn’t manage. “Do you have some water maybe?” Cliff asked the guy: “I am really thirsty and I am actually feeling kind of dizzy. You are driving really fast. Not that it is usually a problem for me, but it is just the alcohol tonight, you know.” “Yeah we’re really in a hurry.” The man looked somewhat nervous now. “There might be a water bottle on the back seat. Have a look. But don’t wake her up!” His voice changed a bit, and while he was speaking, he was being very definite about it, as if something worried him. Cliff also wondered why they were in a hurry. The cowboy had first told him that the two of them were actually just driving home from some friends’ house. Well, maybe he was just in a bad mood because his girlfriend was sleeping all the time or something, Cliff thought.

He turned his head and tried to look at the back seat. Again, the feeling of dizziness came over him. The girl in the back seemed to be a really deep sleeper. They hadn’t talked quietly and she hadn’t woken up once. Cliff thought that she was beautiful-looking. She had dark blond hair which partly covered her face. A blanket was spread out over her body, and apart from her head, Cliff could only see her feet. In a corner there was a water bottle and he reached for it, but it was hard to get. He had to turn back around again and look straight ahead. The dizziness was getting worse. When he tried hard to put his hand back to get the bottle, he accidentally touched the blanket. It felt somewhat wet. Finally, he held the bottle in his hands, he brought it to the front, but when he was just about to open it, a cold shock came over him. His hand was full of blood!! He wondered if he had cut himself, but it was too much blood for a little cut and he couldn’t see anything on his hand. Again, he turned around to see where the blood came from, and while he was running his hand over the woman’s blanket, the blood in his veins started to freeze. The blanket was soaked in blood. Cliff hadn’t realized it at first because the colour of the blanket was a mixture of red and brown. He carefully lifted it up a little but very quickly put it down when he felt his stomach turn over: She was sitting there naked and her whole body was gashed.

At this moment, thousands of things were circling in his head. And all of a sudden, he realized that HE WAS SITTING IN THE CAR OF A
KILLER!! What was he supposed to do now? What had the man done to her? What would he do to him? “Stay calm, Cliff, stay calm,” he thought to himself. He tried to turn around and acted as if nothing had happened but it was hard, so hard, to stay calm. His hands were shivering, and he had to pull them closer to his body. “Did you find the bottle?” the killer asked all of a sudden.

“Nn... no, no , I am actually not thirsty anymore. Could you just let me out here, I really need to get out. I forgot something at the bar, I need to go back!” Cliff said in an assertive tone, trying not to show his fear. His heart was beating really loudly. “No you can’t get out here; we’re in the middle of nowhere,” the killer responded. He still did not seem to realize that Cliff had just discovered his nasty secret. “Let me out, right now, otherwise I will call the police!” Cliff screamed furiously. And he tried to open the car even though they were going really fast, but the door was locked. He tried again and again, but then he cringed and stopped. Cliff felt something cold on his temple and at this moment he knew what kind of situation he was in. The killer was holding a gun to his head. “NO, you won’t. Don’t move and don’t scream. It is useless anyway. And you don’t want to get killed, do you?” said the killer slowly, almost whispering it into his ear, but knowing exactly what he was doing. “Too bad for you that you are sitting in my car! I will explain it to you in a second and you won’t do anything apart from what I tell you to do! Otherwise you will soon be lying next to that slut on the back seat, ok??” Cliff just nodded; he wasn’t able to say a single word. He was horrified, but at the same time he knew that his only chance of getting out of this situation was to do what the killer wanted him to do. “You might have heard of me on the news. I am the one the police are looking for: The man that has killed five women and as you have already discovered the sixth one is on my back seat. I stopped for you because I needed someone to help me cross the border. Here’s the thing: If you do what I tell you and we cross the border without any problems, you might have the possibility of staying alive. I mean, I am only interested in women anyway!” And his big nasty smile and laughter almost made Cliff throw up. The killer continued: “You wrap that bloody blanket around your arm and then you pretend to be seriously hurt and that you quickly need a doctor. They will let us through since I am just the nice guy who is driving you to the hospital. It is really easy so don’t play any games with me.” “This is never going to work,” Cliff replied. “They will catch you, you nasty scum!” “Oh just shut up. You will help me, you little bastard, otherwise you are dead!”

Cliff’s hands were sweaty and cold, and he had just one thought: Getting out of this car alive! He needed to give the border patrol a hint but what could that be? He was confused. Nothing would work, and if the killer found out, Cliff would be a dead man. But suddenly one idea came to him that could perhaps work. He knew that his cell phone was still in his pocket. He cautiously started to put his hand in his right pocket. Maybe he
could write the word “help” on his display and drop his phone at the border control. Maybe that would raise their suspicion and they could rescue him, maybe.

Soon they reached the border. The line wasn’t really long and it didn’t take too much time until it was their turn. Cliff was frightened, incredibly frightened. Only one policeman was checking them and -as ridiculous as it may sound- he let them through without any delay. Cliff only had to open his door in order to show him his hurt arm, he pretended to cry a little and they could go on. While doing all this, he tried to pull his cell phone with the text that could save his life out of his pocket and to drop it on the ground at the moment when the killer started the engine. For one second, he was a little anxious because he thought that the killer had realized what he was doing, and he took a deep breath when they drove on. The only thing he could do now was wait since he didn’t know what this creepy guy was really planning to do with him. “Hopefully, they will get the message on my cell phone,” he thought, but all of a sudden he turned extremely pale. He looked down at the floor of the car. His cell phone was still lying there!!!! How could that have happened? Just when he was trying to carefully pick it up, the killer was faster than him…
It was seven thirty in the morning and I was staring out of the cab’s window, amazed at how active the city was at such an early time of the day. Every once in a while I glanced nervously at the cab driver, who, like most cab drivers here, was chewing betel nuts. They are a very common and legal drug in many Asian countries and are said to have a stimulating effect that gives these cab drivers the ability to work long hours without needing any sleep. The traffic was relatively calm, but it was still difficult for me to relax, since I could see beads of sweat on the driver’s forehead in the review mirror. Sweating is one of the side effects of this drug, and I wondered how capable of driving he was, since he probably hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in months. But then again, neither had I. I had only come to Taibei a month before, and I hadn’t got used to life here yet, nor to the food or the heat.

I closed my eyes, leaned back and did my best to enjoy the air-conditioned cab ride to one of Taibei’s many Buddhist temples, called Longshan temple – The temple of the Dragon’s Mountain. I still couldn’t believe what my boss at the Harold Tribune had told me. Just thinking about it made my blood run cold. Last night a girl had been found dead in front of the main gate of Longshan temple.

When I opened the door, the heat and the humidity was even worse than I had expected. The moist and hot air took my breath away. I paid the driver and said thank you in Chinese, one of the few words I had learned to pronounce during my month’s stay. He gave me a big smile, showing his red-stained and rotten teeth, another side-effect of the betel nuts which I found most repelling, said something like, “ok, ok, bye-bye,” and drove off.

While walking towards the temple’s entrance, I remembered what my boss had told me when he had called me this morning. He had warned me that neither the Chinese police nor my fellow Chinese reporters would be glad to see me at the scene of the crime. The Chinese police prefer to feed foreign reporters pre-prepared bits of information, spoon by spoon, everything already chopped up in small, easily-digestible little helpings.

Keeping this in mind, I entered through the temple doors and was glad to see Jenny, my translator, whose real Chinese name is still difficult for me to pronounce. She was a pretty little thing, bright, too, and has been of great help to me during this month. I especially appreciated her quiet nature and her way of reflecting on things before speaking. Her English was splendid, which was surprising since I was told that she had never studied abroad.

Inside the temple walls there were many police officers talking to reporters. Buddhist temples have an inner courtyard and one main temple building in the center. I went to stand underneath the roof in the shade. I was not used
to the heat and my shirt was sticking to my skin, and the extreme smell of incense was making me nauseous. So there I stood in the shade, taking a close look at my surroundings, while Jenny went to speak to the head police officer who was trying to answer questions from reporters working for Chinese newspapers. There were some monks at the far end of the courtyard burning incense and chanting Buddhist sutras. Their humming voices were singing tunes that sounded as though they were suffering from great misery and were covering all the hectic rush caused by policemen and reporters with a heavy blanket of sadness. The smoke from the incense turned the crime scene into a foggy and obscure scene.

Surrounded by some policemen on the opposite side of the courtyard, I could see a man and a woman, presumably the victim’s parents. While the mother was answering questions put to her by a policeman who was busy taking notes, the father was sitting somewhat to the side, staring at his feet. His gaze was full of pure terror and shock.

There was an elderly lady sitting on a small chair nearby praying while repeatedly throwing two small pieces of wood in front of her. Curious, I walked over to her. When she saw me looking at her she smiled. “You are from America, yes?” I was startled to hear her speak English to me. “I went to America, too,” she explained, still smiling, “when my husband was still alive.” I asked if she had known the dead child. She answered: “Yes, she was a very sweet girl. She often came to play with me when her parents were here. She never liked the monks. For some reason she was scared of them, maybe because they have no hair.” She laughed heartedly at these memories, but sighed and seemed to be staring into empty space while saying: “Nothing is like it used to be. Terrible things happen. Even a sacred place like a temple has no future. Mr. Wu is a good man. His donations have kept this temple alive. And now fate lets something so cruel happen to him. The poor man lost his first wife. He was lucky to find such a beautiful new mother for the girl. Everyone was so happy for them.” I nodded, but before I could think of anything comforting to say, Jenny returned.

The policeman had told her that the body of the young girl had been discovered by the head monk when he had opened the front gate to the temple this morning at five o’clock. The police were immediately notified, and they came with her parents. When Mrs. Wu saw the body of the little girl, one of the policemen had heard her utter under her breath: “Thank goodness!” Jenny saw my puzzled look and explained. Mr. Wu was one of the richest men in town, so there had always been a great interest in his private life. When his second wife got pregnant 6 months ago, the tabloids spread the word that there was finally going to be a male heir to Mr. Wu’s large and successful business. Mr. and Mrs. Wu had been frequent visitors of Longshan temple praying, lighting incense and donating money in the hope of getting a baby boy.
When a young nurse revealed to the newspapers that Mrs. Wu’s unborn child was going to be another girl, the press wrote terrible things about Mrs. Wu, starting rumors on why, in spite of her generous donations and persistent worshipping, the gods had denied her a baby boy. During the past weeks there had been many articles about their family problems, mostly complaints coming from neighbors who had heard Mrs. Wu scolding the little girl. Her resentment towards the girl was well-known in Taipei.

I took another look at the mother still surrounded by policeman. Now I noticed her pregnant belly that she caressed with her left hand, while holding onto the chair with her right.

I decided to pass by and take a look at the adjoining rooms of the temple. They mostly contained various Buddha statues. “How come there are so many Buddhist statues?” I asked Jenny. “They all serve different purposes. This Buddha here is in charge of studies. I used to come here when I had important exams at university to burn incense.”

Then we entered a room whose inner walls made quite an impression on me. After my eyes had adjusted to the gloomy light inside, I saw what seemed to me to be a billion Chinese characters written on small wooden panels hanging on the wall with small electric lights beside them. Jenny explained that these were all names of people that had donated money to this temple. The more money you spend the bigger the panel. She pointed towards the Wu family panel. It was placed in the third row from the top and was larger than most panels. I was taking a closer look, when we heard voices coming from the next-door room. It was very quiet in the room we were in, so we could hear the voices clearly although they were quiet and obviously not intended to be heard. I could see Jenny’s face turn pale. I left the room right at that instant and headed towards the nearest water fountain I had spotted earlier and had been eager to go to from the very second I had set foot in this temple. I was just about to drink from it when the door to the other room was opened and out stepped Mr. Wu. Nobody seemed to be paying any attention to him, since most of the policemen were trying to calm down the reporters, and the others were surrounding Mrs. Wu, giving her their undivided attention. I started drinking when I could hear footsteps coming out of the room and then hastening by me. I didn’t raise my head from the fountain until he had passed me. But then I caught a glimpse of him. It was one of the monks that had been chanting before, and he seemed to be tucking an envelope into his robe.

I went back to where I had left Jenny. She was still standing absolutely still and had a terrified expression on her face. I grabbed her arm and led her outside across the courtyard and towards the main gate. Nobody seemed to notice us except for the old lady sitting in the shade, who bade us farewell with a slight nod and a smile filled with sorrow.
Jenny and I didn’t speak a word until we reached a nearby park and sat down on a bench in the shade. We sat there in silence for a while. We both knew what the newspapers of Taibei would be saying tomorrow: “Second wife of the successful Mr. Wu gone mad.” Mrs. Wu had murdered her step-daughter in order to ensure that her own daughter, still in her belly, would get the heritage that had been promised to her and tossed the poor girl’s body on the ground in front of the temple gates in a fury. The temple was the place into which she had put all her hopes and her dreams. She had entrusted it with her money to worship the gods in order to have a son. Now that she was to have only a girl, the heritage would be given to the firstborn child.

I turned to Jenny, who was staring at the ground. I put my hand on her shoulder and told her what I had seen. She kept shaking her head, staring straight ahead. Finally she told me what she had heard. She said it in a low voice and without looking at me.

“...I warned you this was going to happen. It’s your own fault. If you cherish the life of your wife and unborn child you should not underestimate us again...”

I took a deep breath and said out loud what we were both suspecting.

Mrs. Wu despised that sweet little girl, without a doubt. She had her reasons, too. But she didn’t murder Xiao Li and throw her body on the ground in front of the temple doors. Mr. Wu had been blackmailed by probably one, possibly several monks, into paying large sums of money to the temple. Mr. Wu is known to having been one of the most important sponsors of this temple for years. Because their existence is threatened by the weakening support for temples these days, the monks were desperate. Even though they had warned Mr. Wu, threatening to kill his daughter, Mr. Wu had probably underestimated the state of desperation the monks of Longshan temple were in.

Childrens’ instincts go far beyond their reason, and in this case Xiao Li was right to be afraid of the monks of Longshan temple, since they meant to harm her.

I accompanied Jenny to a cab and told her I would call her the next day. I could see she needed to rest. It was almost noon, and the sun was burning down on the city. Nevertheless I decided to head home on foot. A walk would do me good. One thing was certain: my article for the Harold Tribune would differ quite a bit from the reports in the Chinese local newspapers. I had a lot of work ahead of me.
Biggs was standing at the staff entrance, leaning on a garbage can, watching the brightly colored skyline and smoking his long-yearned-for, end-of-night-shift cigarette. His job disgusted him, his life disgusted him; he was even disgusted by himself. Always waking up with a terrible cough producing a yellowish brown black slimy something, having leftover pizza for breakfast, worrying where he could get the money for his hobby, or watching TV until it was time to go to work. Selling strange-looking burgers to impatient, mostly overweight customers, always smiling, always saying thank you and goodbye... His so-called friends often told him that he smelled like a deep-fryer despite his occasional showers.

He turned right and flipped away the cigarette, watching the ember swirl through the dark when he suddenly felt something cold touch his throat. Before he could realize anything else, his world turned into a blur of pain, just as if he had never known anything else. He looked down, feeling something warm running down his chest. Is this my blood? Am I dying? He tried to turn around, to look his murderer in the face but saw nothing but blurry blackness, closing in from all sides. His legs failing, he dropped to his knees. He saw something white, a hand holding a shiny object. The dragon-shaped tattoo on the back of the hand was the last thing he could focus on before he fell into a puddle of his own blood, his heart pumping out the last bit of life onto the street at the back of a fast-food diner.

Stephanie James was the first journalist to arrive at Huntington Corner Brigadier, the crime scene. Her contacts within the police were excellent. Not only because she knew how to play her cards – her female ones – pretty well, but also because she worked with the detectives, at least with the smart and charming ones, instead of just trying to have the best story. She was tall, blond and blessed with enough sex appeal to enchant a Jesuit monk. After ordering the photographer to take pictures from every angle, Stephanie looked for the detective in charge. “Hello, Steph,” a sonorous but arrogant voice said from behind her. “I was wondering when you would come.” There were not many people that were quickly given permission to call her ‘Steph,’ and detective Taylor was not necessarily one of them. She always wondered how he could afford those expensive suits he wore. But the quality of his clothing could not make up for his lack of style. “Hello, detective,” she replied, smiling. “What a pleasure to know you are working on the case. May I ask you a couple of questions?”

The middle-aged man approached her, and she had to focus heavily to avoid flinching because his horrible aftershave made her feel sick. “You know that I don’t approve of your methods, don’t you? But I guess I owe your for giving me the last bit of information needed to catch that son of a bitch who raped those two women some time ago.”
“Thank you. So, tell me about the dead guy. His throat was slit, right?”

“Yes, that is correct. His name is Biggs Arnolds. He worked at the fast food diner over there. His wallet and watch were stolen. It seems like the murderer was waiting for him, hiding around the corner over there,” he said, pointing in the direction of a small side street.

“Doesn’t this seem to be too much of a coincidence that another man got killed not even three blocks from here just a couple of weeks ago?” the young woman asked.

“I know what you’re driving at but this murder could just as well be a simple robbery.”

“Yeah, well thanks detective. I’ll inform you about any unusual news, okay?”

“Thanks Steph, I appreciate your working with us.”

‘Robbery! What kind of robber waits for a guy that works at a fast-food diner to rob him? I need to talk to the victim’s family...’

Thanks to the phone book and Biggs Arnolds’ rather unusual name, Stephanie now stood in front of a run-down apartment building at the other end of town. The names on at the doorbells told her that Biggs’ sister lived in apartment 362. The journalist stood in front of the door, her heartbeat racing because she was about to disturb a mourning sibling. She knocked and said: “Mrs Arnolds? This is Stephanie James from the TC Chronicle. I know this is hard for you, but I really need to ask you a couple of ques...” The door was opened and detective Taylor appeared.

“You are slowing down, Steph. I had expected you to arrive here before me. I guess I overestimated your qualities,” he said, grinning. “I... well, advised Mrs. Arnolds not to talk to you – so that she can mourn in peace. Good day, Steph.” The detective left and Stephanie could now see the woman sitting at the kitchen table. “Mrs Arnolds, I believe I may have come across something that the police hasn’t taken into consideration in its narrow-mindedness.”

“Leave me at once or I will call the detective!” Stephanie had no choice but to do as the woman wished...

The next day, Stephanie was flipping through her notes from the previous day when suddenly the phone rang. “Hello?” “Hello, this is Amanda Arnolds, the sister of...” She burst into tears before she could finish the phrase. “Please, I need to talk to you – in private.”

“Okay, meet me at Charity Station, at the green spider statue, at three this afternoon. We’ll just talk, okay?”

“Thank you,” was the only thing Steph could make out from the answer uttered in pure desperation.

On her way to Charity Station, Stephanie kept thinking and rethinking about Biggs’ sister’s strange behavior. ‘Shit, it is almost three. I guess I gotta
run!’ She arrived a couple of minutes late. A bulk of people was standing around the statue, something quite common because a lot of people arranged meetings and dates at this place. But there was something strange about the bulk. Normally, the people would look around in all directions for the people they expected. But this was not the case now. It seemed as if everybody was staring at the same spot. ‘Oh no, please God, don’t!’ She almost flew through the mass of people. She was now in the eye of the hurricane of people and found almost perfect silence there. Amanda Arnolds was lying on the ground with a red stain on her chest that became larger from instant to instant. Her eyes were open. She moaned when she saw Stephanie. A gurgling sound came from her throat as she tried to speak. A fine red drop ran down her cheek, down to her right ear. Using what seemed to be her last bit of strength, she grabbed Steph’s hand and put something inside it. The gurgling sounds grew stronger and it seemed like every muscle in the dying woman’s body became tense. Moments later, Stephanie heard the sound one more time before Mrs. Arnolds’ head slowly bent to the right – she was dead.

Afterwards she tried to make the police officers believe her story: “No, I was here by accident, just on my way to my brother. What, Arnolds? Is that the sister of the murdered man from yesterday? No, I saw nothing and heard nothing – except a dying woman.” Stephanie was in desperate need of a couple of drinks. She gulped three glasses of scotch before she was ready to look at the object handed to her by Amanda. There were two pieces of paper, both looking like they had had a ride in the washing machine. After carefully unfolding them, the two pieces of paper seemed to be identical and hard to read. A logo, a black dragon seemed to twine around an oval-shaped black-outlined object. It was the logo of an illegal gambling association. ‘Gee, I really don’t want to remember this part of my life.’ About eight years ago, a friend of hers took her to one of these gambling events. She was excited and played the whole night – she even ended up with a little more money. The foundation for her addiction was laid that night – and it took her several years to overcome it. One sheet was clearly signed by Biggs Arnolds – the other signature looked familiar, as well. It was impossible! The man murdered three weeks ago had the same name! So much for coincidence... They must have known each other – they probably had gone gambling together – and they had both signed a promissory note. ‘I guess I now know the motive.’

It was 10:30 pm. She sat in a bus and was on her way to the docklands. She had had to call in some favors in order find the time and location of the next underground gambling event. She had decided to wear the small black silk dress which had gotten her into the police ball – without having an invitation. She enjoyed the almost air-like touch of the expensive fabric on her skin; the two months’ salary was well spent on it. At the next stop,
a man got on, and he gave her a feeling of fear and excitement, almost to the extent of making her panic. He was tall, and even though he was dressed all in black, she could clearly see his muscles. His masculine face was partially covered by the hood of a black pullover, his eyes shielded by reflecting sunglasses. His right hand had a tattoo in the shape of a black dragon on it, the same she had seen on that promissory note. Adrenaline was pumped into her system and she thought about the options she had. She could take out her BlackBerry and send a message to detective Taylor. But could she trust him? ‘Well, I wouldn’t stand a chance against a gambling syndicate, would I,’ she thought bitterly as the man walked by her seat and looked at her with a disgustingly lustful smile. She wrote a quick email explaining her situation to the detective. The closer they got to the docklands stop, the more her anxiety and her fear, which started taking control over her thinking. She felt that man staring at her! Her heartbeat increased, she started to sweat and she could hardly fight the urge to turn around to find out what the man was doing besides visually seducing her. She closed her eyes, trying to calm down. With an explosion of dread, she was brought back into the seemingly shrinking inside of the bus when a voice with an Eastern European accent told her to get up and to walk slowly but steadily to the exit and to leave the bus at the next stop. A dragon tattooed hand was put on her neck from behind to enforce these instructions. Stephanie obeyed, her body shaking in horror. They left the bus one stop before her original destination. The man made the frightened woman walk towards a decaying warehouse. After they entered, he forced her to go to the second floor into what must have been a manager’s office. ‘Oh Jesus, please, let that incompetent detective find me!’ Something hit her on the head and gracefully let her move over to a state unconsciousness that was free of horror and fear...

“Wake up, Steph,” a strangely familiar voice said. She opened her eyes and felt a burst of pain coming from her head. She tried to reach for it but her hands were tied to a chain hanging above her head. She tried to walk but realized that she was hanging about one feet above the ground. The pain of the rope cutting into the soft skin of her wrists became worse than her headache and in a bizarre way helped her to return to reality a little further. ‘That voice... had the detective found her? Oh thank God! I got away this time!’ A hard slap to the cheek made her open her eyes and look into her savior’s face. “Oh detective, I am so glad to see you! Thank goodness, you save...” A black-hooded figure walked around the corner and produced an amused smile. Taking off his reflecting sunglasses, his fanatic gaze fell upon the tied-up woman.

“Finally, I’ve got you, you little whore. You put my brother in prison!”

Stephanie did not understand and looked at Taylor for help. But his face was in no way kinder than the other man’s.
“Good God, girl, do you know what trouble you’ve been to us? Why couldn’t you just let go? You are such a pretty thing, it’s a shame, really.” He walked around her and she could feel him looking lecherously at her body.

“Damn it, help me! You’re the cop, save me!”

“You don’t understand, do you. Well, let me make it simple. Cops don’t earn much. Not enough for a decent retirement, at least. That had to be changed! I made a deal with the Solovyov brothers. I protect their business, and they pay me 15 percent of the profits. Everything went well; in fact, I found out that you used to be a gambler, too! So you basically paid for my new house in Mexico, thank you,” he said with an amused expression on his face.

“So, what do you want? Why are you doing this?”

“Well, Stanislav’s brother is in prison now. Because of you. Because you had to dig out the evidence against him in the rape case. Who cares about some unimportant bitches getting laid? You did. And Stan here is quite upset with you, you know. But he is also a business man and he is thankful that you saved him the trouble of chasing you. Maybe he will grant you a slow death as a sign of his gratitude.”

Stanislav Solovyov drew his knife. Holding it in the hand with the dragon tattoo, he walked toward Stephanie James, who screamed in dawning awareness of the terrible fate awaiting her...
Caroline Kurpmann

Vengeance is Mine

Isabella sighed. She had been to the international students' office with her best friend, Nicky. Actually, Isabella had only accompanied her because she wanted to go to Scotland next year. However, she had seen the brochures and catalogues about Australia and New Zealand, which aroused her curiosity, and she had taken them along.

At the Star Café she leafed through the catalogues while drinking a hot chocolate. She marked the most interesting information and began daydreaming. After her intermediate examination she could go to Australia or New Zealand for a year. Work and Travel – that fascinated her most. She did not get very far with her daydreaming. Robert entered her mind, who would never agree to her plans. Yet again, he would threaten to commit suicide if she attempted to leave him. That saddened her. At the beginning of their relationship he hadn’t seemed so strange. He had changed by degrees. She erupted in anger when she thought about him and his cruel behaviour.

Nicky once had asked her why she was still with him, because she knew that Isabella's love had vanished. Even though she was her best friend, she couldn’t tell her the truth. A year ago he had really tried to commit suicide. It had been the most dreadful day in her life. She thought back on what had happened. They had had an argument and she had had enough. She had wanted to stop it and had shouted: “I’m leaving you!” There was a moment’s silence. Then he had rushed off and she had heard the bedroom door slamming. She was standing in the living room confused and startled about her decision. She didn’t mean it, did she? A small voice in her head started explaining to her what had changed for the worse and that a parting would be the best. She had considered how to convince Robert that a separation would be the best for both parties. She had doubted a calm conversation would be possible. She was proved right when she opened the bedroom door. He was lying on the bed, an empty package of pills beside him. She rushed up to him and felt his pulse. It was low, but he was alive. She called his best friend Tom, a doctor, and described the situation briefly. Within a few minutes, he arrived at their apartment building. She was so shocked that she wasn’t even able to cry. Tom examined the package and instructed her to bring some towels and to lay them on the bed. He tried to make Robert throw up and it worked. “Do we need an ambulance?” she asked. But Tom replied: “That’s not necessary anymore. It would only cause a lot of problems. We should spare him that trouble.” She only nodded instead of insisting on advising him to do the opposite. She went out of the room and sat down on the sofa. After a while Tom came out of the bedroom and sat down beside her. “Don’t worry, Isabella. Robert will be fine; it won’t have any consequences for his
health.” He didn’t ask her what or why it had happened. That should have puzzled her, but she didn’t pay any attention to it.

On her way home she remembered what Robert had said to her when she had entered the bedroom: “Look what you’ve done to me. Are you satisfied now?” Upon hearing this she had burst into tears, stammering excuses and trying to defend herself: “That’s not true! I never intended to do you any harm! You’re being unfair!” But he wasn’t listening to her. In the end she gave up, unable to fight for the truth.

She was so deep in thought that she didn’t realise somebody was calling her name. It was Tom. “Could I have a word with you, Isabella? It is important.” She looked at him, bewildered, but nodded. “I’m leaving to practise medicine in the USA, and I want you to learn the truth.”

Isabella eyed him suspiciously and asked: “What truth do you mean, Tom?”

He only responded: “Let us go to the park and talk about it.”

She unlocked the door and was relieved when she noticed she was alone. Robert was still at work. She made herself some green tea and sat down at the kitchen table. She had to think about what Tom had told her. While she savoured her tea, she was making plans. She would go to Australia for a year, and she would enjoy it without wasting too much thought on Robert. “Thank you, Tom. Thank you for coming clean with me,” she whispered. She really was grateful.

Then she heard his keys. “Isabella? Where are you?” Robert called.

“In the kitchen,” she replied.

He came into the kitchen smiling from ear to ear. “Have a look at what I have brought along!” he said, waving a catalogue in his hand. “You’ve always wanted to go to Australia, and I thought of us going there on holiday during your semester break this year. Well? What do you think?” She glared at him without saying a word. He was waiting for a straight answer. So she did him the favour: “No,” was her curt refusal.

“Pardon? Are you serious? But you always wanted to!” Robert couldn’t believe it.

Once again she tried to explain it to him: “That’s not the same. I don’t want to go on holiday there. That would be too short a stay. I wouldn’t have the chance to get to know the people nor their customs.”

He looked at her with narrow eyes: “That’s typical of you – you and your egoism.” Another unfair slap in the face for her. But she just laughed at his words and that confused him. He got angry and left the kitchen without a word.

“Now it’s my turn, you little bastard!” murmured Isabella. “I’m not going to play your foul game any longer.”

During the next weeks Isabella made all the necessary preparations, like applying for a work permit and to take off two semesters, getting the required vaccinations and providing all of the important contact addresses. Robert didn’t realise what was going on. He was offended by her refusal
and hardly talked to her. She didn’t mind at all; on the contrary it simplified matters. Little by little, she took her clothes and all her necessary things to the basement where she packed her two suitcases. Nicky fetched them and kept them in her flat. Isabella knew she could rely on Nicky, no matter what, and she was more than grateful for that. She would spend her last night at Nicky’s flat and would “surprise” Robert with a call from the airport without waiting for his answer. That was their plan, but Isabella had another one, which she kept secret.

On the last evening before her departure, she had dinner with Robert without mentioning her meeting with Nicky. She washed the dishes and put them in the cupboard. Leaving the kitchen she said to Robert: “I’m going into the basement to get my suitcases.”

“What for?” he questioned immediately.

“To get packed,” she remarked laconically.

“What do you mean by that?” She could hear his voice getting nervous.

“I’m flying to Australia and want my luggage packed in time.”


“Of course I can and I will. I’ll be right back.” With these words she left the flat. She knew exactly what was going to happen and because of that she took her time. In the basement she got her hand luggage and put on her coat and gloves. It was an advantage to live in an apartment building. Nobody cared about what was going on in the hallway or which neighbour entered or left the house. Nevertheless she had chosen a time when there was little chance of meeting anyone. She went straight to the bedroom after entering the flat and there he was: lying on the bed again, an empty package of pills beside him. She suppressed a smile. This time she wouldn’t help him. It was too late anyway. “Sleep well!” She walked away and pondered the truth of what Tom had told her: “Isabella, I’m so sorry, but I have to tell you that Robert made a fool of you. His ‘suicide’ was staged. Wait! Let me finish!” She had wanted to say something but had shut her mouth and had listened. “I wasn’t in on the secret. But I knew it at once when I saw the package of pills. An overdose would never have killed him. It would only have caused nausea and a vicious headache.” She had been shocked and unwilling to believe him. But what reason could Tom have to tell her lies? None, she was convinced. She had made some inquiries anyhow, which had brought certainty. It really had been a bluff.

But Robert wasn’t the only one who was able to acquire medical knowledge. The detailed explanation of poison which was unverifiable because of the body’s decay had been highly interesting and useful. Kathryn had thought that Isabella needed the knowledge for one of her stories and had been very pleased that Isabella had contacted her for information. She had even shown her the different vials, but Kathryn had not realised the disappearance of one little vial.
It’s never wrong to have a pathologist as a friend, Isabella mused on her way to Nicky’s. She threw that little vial and a disposable syringe into one of the bins which stood on the pavement waiting for the dustmen, who would come early in the morning to empty them. Nobody would miss Robert during the next two weeks as he had taken a holiday. Maybe the neighbours will notice the horrible smell of decay sooner or later, Isabella thought maliciously. She enjoyed her last night at Nicky’s to the fullest and was looking forward to the great adventure: *Work and Travel* in Australia.
She bent down to lock up her bike.

The clock struck eleven. Wonderful, she thought. Did these people realize she had a private life? Another hour of unpaid over-time work, another night with an aching back and on top of that, another cold night with an icy wind blowing.

She sighed and pulled her coat tighter around her body.

As she started walking up to her flat, a gust of wind shook the bushes, and suddenly the woods seemed to come alive: crackling, crunching, whispering.

Instinctively, she looked around.

Most of the people in the grey blocks of flats had probably already gone to bed, and only in a few rooms could you see the bluish light of TVs flickering.

A shiver went down her spine and she quickened her pace.

Clunk, clunk, clunk, her shoes sounded on the hard concrete.

Clunk, clunk, clunk, the echo came back from the grey walls of the buildings.

Was she alone?

She slammed the front door shut and leaned her back against it from the inside, breathing hard, feeling little beads of sweat build up on her forehead.

Then she became angry with herself. What utter nonsense! Of course she was alone. Who the hell should be there? Nobody else was out in the street that late, nobody else was working at that time on a Saturday night, she thought bitterly.

Suddenly she felt very tired and climbed up the five steps to her flat on the first floor.

She kicked the door open and total blackness welcomed her. Oh yeah, of course, her two flatmates had gone home for the weekend. She threw her bag on the floor and quickly switched the light on. She didn’t like dark rooms. You never knew what could sneak up on you.

She smiled. How stupid she was! Of course nothing would sneak up on her, because nothing was there. It had never been a problem spending a night alone in her flat, so why make a big deal out of it this time?

At that very moment she heard a loud noise coming out of her room. She stood still for a few seconds, paralyzed, just listening and waiting for what would happen.

Nothing. Silence.
She didn’t move but her thoughts did. A cheap movie was playing in front of her eyes: a man in dark clothes climbs up the balcony and waits for a while to make sure that nobody is home. After everything remains silent in the flat he breaks the lock, opens the door and quickly sneaks in without anyone noticing it. He starts looking for money and finds some in the top drawer of one of the writing desks. He goes on and is just about to put a laptop into his backpack when the door gets kicked open and someone comes in.

In shock, he drops the laptop which crashes on the floor like a bomb.
A million thoughts run through his head. What should he do? Where should he hide? He can’t avoid going through the hall, he will be seen, there will be cries of fear, people waking up, police chasing him. He will have to make the person remain quiet…

She took a deep breath and stepped forward. She felt as if her heartbeat would wake up the neighbours.

Usually she was quite proud of her imagination, but today it wasn’t any help to her. Come on, girl, don’t be such a damn coward! Pulling herself together she went into her room and saw right away that a couple of books which had been standing on the edge of her writing desk had fallen down to the floor. Her heartbeat calmed down. She walked over, picked up the books and looked around the room. Everything was tidy and peaceful, as always.

Of course it was, she thought, annoyed. That was what the stupid headlines in the daily newspapers did to you. They made you aware, they made you worried, they made you paranoid.

For God’s sake, was she a grown-up woman or a 6-year-old child? She let down the blinds, grabbed her pyjamas and went into the kitchen, switching on the lights in every room of the little flat. A bit of light couldn’t hurt, could it?

The hot water felt unbelievably nice on her aching body. She could have stayed under the shower for ages; it was just marvellous.

Looking at her toenails, she decided to paint them red tomorrow. She grinned. Yes, that would be a good thing to do on a free Sunday. Maybe she could also go jogging and do some exercises for her back. Feeling very pleased with herself, she took a huge handful of shampoo and started massaging it into her hair.

She stood there with her eyes closed and although she had turned off the tap, single drops were coming out of it. Hitting the bottom of the shower, they seemed to be unrealistically loud, like little stones falling onto a metal floor.

Suddenly she felt very vulnerable and helpless, standing there, naked, with shampoo running down her face, forcing her to keep her eyes
Wild images were coming to her mind: he’s been observing her for quite a while now.

He knows when she comes home from university and when she goes to work.

He knows that she usually takes her shower in the evenings because sometimes, when the blinds are not shut yet, he can get a glimpse of her bare skin, for just a few seconds until she puts her pyjamas on.

Yes, he knows a lot about her and he likes her looks. Her blond hair tied up in an untidy knot, her well-shaped figure and her lively blue eyes, smiling unknowingly at him sometimes when she sees him in the supermarket.

So often he has imagined these eyes, wide open, staring at him, horrified, her pretty face white with fear and tonight his dream would come true.

For a couple of minutes he waits in front of the bathroom door, listening to the sound of water, enjoying his excitement and longing for her body until he can’t resist the temptation anymore. He opens the door quietly and, welcomed by the lovely smell of her shampoo, he approaches the shower...

She opened her eyes so abruptly that she went blind for a couple of seconds. Rubbing her eyes, she tore back the shower curtain and looked around in panic, prepared for the worst, ready to fight him.

Not until a few seconds had passed did she feel her muscles relax.

Nobody was there of course.

Everything was still except for the little stones falling onto the metal floor.

She was so tired now that it took a lot of discipline to dry her hair and brush her teeth. Her eyes were still burning from the shampoo that had got into them, although she had tried to wash it out with cold water, swearing and hating herself for the power her imagination had over her.

You’re such a silly goose, she said to herself grumpily. That is what happens when everyone watches those bloody horror movies. They should be forbidden; they just give sick people nasty ideas and they scare normal people to death.

Shaking her head, she went into her bedroom and closed the door behind her. Usually she didn’t lock it but today she turned the key around and tried twice if the door was really locked. A bit of security wouldn’t do any harm, would it?

She lay awake in the dark, listening to the sounds of the house; the crackling of the wood, the flushing of a toilet in a flat upstairs, the ticking of the clock on the wall and the wind whistling outside. From time to time, her muscles tightened and she listened hard: did she hear steps in the hall? No, of course not.

She is standing on her balcony, smoking. It is a lovely night in July and the temperature is just right. Not cold, but a nice, refreshing breeze is blowing.
She is amazed at how much her flowers have grown since she planted them in March. Especially the sunflowers have changed a lot. It is so peaceful and quiet, it is just one of those moments when you feel happy and content. But then suddenly the atmosphere changes.

A man comes around the corner. He is about forty meters away, but he turns his eyes in her direction and starts walking towards her. He is not running, but he is taking big steps and he seems to move in slow motion.

He is coming closer and closer, and she knows that he is dangerous. Her head knows perfectly well what to do: just go in and lock the door behind you, then you are safe.

But somehow she cannot do it. She is just standing there, watching him come closer and closer, but she cannot move. She doesn’t see his face, the picture is blurred, and he is only ten meters away now.

She panics, she desperately tries to move her hand towards the door, but it’s hopeless, she is paralyzed, and he is only five meters away now.

He is on the balcony, he is only a few steps away. She wants to scream but no sound comes out of her open mouth.

He is there.

She woke up, sitting straight up in bed, breathing hard, feeling the blood rush through her body.

She had been dreaming. A nightmare.

Her eyes focused on the locked balcony door and she sank back on the bed, enjoying the moment of release. Nothing had been real. Everything was all right. Thank God.

When she got up for breakfast she found that the door to her room was locked. She remembered the foolish fears and dreams she had had the night before and wondered what the hell had come over her.

Everything was so safe and peaceful now with the sun shining in through the windows.

Smiling at her own stupidity, she unlocked the door and stepped into the hall.

She was on her way to the kitchen when she suddenly felt the breeze of fresh morning air on her skin. Confused, she looked around and froze, unable to move, just staring at the scene in front of her.

The balcony door of her flatmate was wide open, the birds were singing happily and the laptop, which had still been on the table last night, was gone.
Her eyes look like the eyes of a doll. The light of the early dawn is shimmering on the salty water that wets them, but they are lifeless. Because Ann Rowfield, the woman in front of me, is dead.

Fagan takes the cover sheet away, bends over her naked body and whistles. Seamus Fagan is my partner. He’s a small, red-haired Irishman who doesn’t know when to shut up and who swears too much. I like him, though, because he doesn’t ask too many personal questions and accepts I don’t want to talk about it dammit. And I don’t interrupt him when he’s going on about his family stuff, so we get along pretty well. We make a strange couple, because I am tall with dark curls and more the silent, thoughtful type, while Fagan is loud and has no taste in music. Now, his grey suit almost blends in with the small waves of the sea. The air smells salty and the light of the sunrise gives a soft and warm look to the scene. It would be really nice if there wasn’t a dead woman lying on the beach. Fagan turns back to me, scribbling in his notebook. “Definitely no accident, Cart. Looks like someone tried to cut up every bloody piece of skin the girl had.” I step closer and take a look at her body. Even though I’m used to all kinds of disturbing sights, it’s hard not to throw up. The body of the girl is full of cuts and scars. The water has opened the wounds, and there are worms and algae in most of them. Her body is white and soft from the water, and her dead doll eyes stare at me almost accusingly. She used to be so pretty...

I pull out a copy of a photograph with some descriptions and compare it to the body in front of me, even though there is no doubt about her identity. Ann Rowfield. Prison Psychiatrist. 1.65 meters tall. Dark brown hair. Hazel eyes. Last seen on Thursday, March 5th. Reported Missing.

“I didn’t know you were such a girl, Carter,” Fagan mocks, when I have to choke again. “Shut up, Fagan!” I bark, harder than usual, and turn my back on him and the body. I don’t have a problem with corpses, but I overreact on female ones. Long story behind that...

My brown shoes kick away some sand as Fagan and I walk over to our colleagues and the guy that found the body. It’s a pale, blonde boy, who’s shaking. I don’t know if it's due to the shock or due to his wet clothes. One of the officers shakes his head at us and shrugs when he sees us coming. No news there. When we pass them, I can hear the boy stammering, “I just wanted to rescue her an’ I swam an’ she didn’t move an’ when I reached her she was all...,” but the scream of a seagull cuts off his last words.

“Fuck, I hate this shit. Sick fucking murdering bastards. I hate shit like this. Fuck... Don’t you regret transferring from your sweet little Birmingham to
this pit of insanity?” Fagan asks when we’re in the car, driving back to the police station.

I just shrug. “Sometimes. But what other police department would employ a loony like you?”

He only grimaces at me. “You are way too confident about your own mental state, Carter.”

“Ann Rowfield.” It’s the next morning in the police station and Chief Harper’s voice cuts through the tired silence like a blade. He throws a folder on the table and sits casually on one corner. “She wasn’t raped, just almost cut in pieces. Her wounds are not deep, so the killer was obviously trying to keep her alive. Probably to get information. I don’t need to say any more, because it’s exactly the same as the Sarah Teagan case one-and-a-half weeks ago. No evidence whatsoever because of the water.” He throws another folder at the table and taps his finger angrily at the paper. His eyes burn furiously underneath his thick black eyebrows.

“The only connection between the two girls that’s really obvious is that they are both connected to Jerry ‘Slim’ Teagan. Slim got out of jail a few months ago. He was supposed to stay in for another two years but he ‘helped’ us with some information on the local Mafia. Sarah Teagan was his sister, his only living relative, and Ann Rowfield was his psychiatrist in prison. We are pretty sure that the killer used the girls to get information about his current whereabouts.”

I raise my hand. Eight pairs of eyes look at me. “What was Slim Teagan accused of? Why should someone look for him?”

“He worked for the Mafia, so we don’t know all of his felonies, but he was accused of several shootings, a robbery and two threats of arson, because the owners didn’t want to pay protection money. One of them went wrong and a whole hotel burnt down to the ground.”

Harper clears his throat. “I don’t care about Slim Teagan, but we have to catch this killer before he gets hold of someone else who might know where Slim is hiding. My money is on the Mafia, because he got three of them in jail and they might still be pissed about it; but it could also be a shooting victim or the ruined hotel-owner. Maybe they even hired someone... Carter and Fagan! You two go and meet with Boris and his crew – get their alibis and check them for lies. We’ll try to find some more connections Slim made before he went to jail.”

Fagan manages to complain the whole 30 minutes it takes to drive to Boris’ well-known place of residence – a pub in the dodgy part of town. It’s pouring, and even though the wipers are working, I can hardly see more than a few meters ahead. The rain drums an insane rhythm on the windshield of our car, which reminds me of an old Sinatra song, but I can’t
remember the melody, because Fagan is moaning the whole time. “Why is it always us, Cart? Why not someone else? We could have interviewed the nice hotelier – someone with fucking manners. YesSir, NoSir, I don’t want trouble, Sir. We could have stayed in the warm station. But Harper sends us out to the bloody Ruski like cattle. We’re so dead, Cart... When we go in there and they are just taking care of a body or some shit, I don’t know, they’ll shoot us both within seconds. We’re so fucking dead, Cart...”

I stop the car in front of the ‘Black Shepherd’ and roll my eyes. “Do you want to stay in the car and listen to the radio while I go in and do the grown-up part of the police job, Seamus?” I know he gets pissed when I treat him like a child, but it’ll help him find his balls.

“Fuck you Carter,” he hisses, but I know I got him. He gets out of the car and slams the door shut. I’ll probably have to buy him a beer afterwards, but at least don’t have to go inside all by myself.

Inside the pub, in a separate corner, we find Boris. A big Russian who looks like his head is too small for his body tries to block our way, but Boris gestures towards us. “Wanja, please. Officers, what a pleasure. Sit down, sit down.” I take one of the uncomfortable chairs and seat myself on the opposite side of the table. Boris is a man of about sixty with white hair, a cheesy gold necklace and a wolfish grin. I feel the urge to growl so he knows I’m not his prey, but I just put on a smile similar to his. At the table there are eight other people; I’ve seen some of the faces before – as suspects at the police station. They stare at us, but more amused than daunted. Before I can start asking questions, Boris starts to talk. “I’m sure you want to talk about the murders and the women. But no one from my crew would do that. That’s not our style, you know... I have a daughter myself, Ivanka.” He puts his arm around a woman about 30 years old, with skin like snow and ice blue eyes with dark black eye shadow around them. She just stares at me, as if I was an insect she would like to crush under her high heels. Boris laughs. “And why should I kill innocent women?”

Fagan’s tongue slips in at the wrongest of all wrong moments. “Maybe because they are connected to fucking Slim Teagan, the bloody snitch? Don’t tell me you don’t want to get back at him.” At the mention of Slim’s name, the whole room starts mumbling. A clap of Boris’ hands and they become silent. Boris’ accent is strong, and it’s even stronger now that he’s upset. “I understand,” he growls. “Yes, I would give a lot for this information, but I wouldn’t kill girls for Slim. He’s not that important, and I have my own methods to get him.” I clear my throat. This is the tricky part. “I’m sure you understand, I still have to take up your evidence and have to know where you all were when the murders happened.” Boris curses in Russian and English but is willing to let us interview the people in the room. We don’t get any information. All our suspects have done this a couple of times before and their answers are almost identical: Haven’t seen them – Don’t know them – Were in the pub when the murder happened – everyone else can confirm it.
After I’m done talking to my last suspect, Ivanka, she smiles at me. “You won’t find him. When even my father can’t find him, you won’t in a hundred years.” Her voice is dark and has only a slight accent, but her words are cold. “Can I smoke now?” she asks and lights a cigarette without waiting for an answer. The fire of the lighter and the smell of burning paper make my head spin. The flame seems to get bigger and bigger and strange pictures show up before my eyes. I cough and press my palms against my forehead.

Fagan touches my shoulder lightly from behind. “You’re alright, Carter?”

“I’m just tired,” I say and try to shake the haunting pictures from my mind.

Fagan grins. “Good. Because I just got a call from the station. They are pretty sure that this girl might know where Slim is.” He hands me a piece of paper with an address on it. “Aleus. That’s just two streets away from here…” Ivanka must have stood up and is suddenly behind us. “Can I go now, officers?” she asks, anger resonating in her voice, and I don’t think it’s a good idea to take advantage of Boris’ hospitality any longer.

When we reach the house of Grace Aleus, the rain has stopped, and Fagan gives me the last bit of information. “Grace Aleus is Slim’s daughter. We couldn’t find her in our files because she uses her mother’s last name. But he is registered as her father on her birth certificate and even sent her money on a weekly basis until she turned fourteen. She lives with her legal guardian, her aunt Betty Aleus.”

“How old is she?”

Fagan browses through his notebook. “Close to turning twenty-one. She won’t need Aunt Betty any more then.”

We get out of the car and ring. An elderly spinster dressed in grey opens the door just a bit. “Betty Aleus? I am Officer Carter and this is Officer Fagan,” I say while Fagan smiles like a jerk. “We really have to talk to you and your charge Grace.” I show her the badge, and she finally opens the door and leads us to a small salon decorated with too many pictures of kittens. The old lady calls out “Grace!” in a shrill voice, and a few seconds later a delicate and charming girl walks in. Her clothes are simple, but her green cat eyes glitter at me under shiny blond hair that falls down to her shoulders. She smiles when we shake hands, and I hold her hand a little longer than usual. Aunt Betty takes her arm and pulls her towards the kitchen. “Come on, girl, let’s get some tea and cookies for the officers.”

When Fagan and I are alone, I turn to him. “I interview the girl and you Aunt Betty,” I say.

“What!? No way! Why do you always get to interview the gorgeous women and I end up with the old hags?”
I grin at him. “You think Aunt Betty isn’t a gorgeous woman? By the way, Fagan, you’re married, and I’m just trying to keep you from temptation.”

A few minutes later, I’m standing on the red and white chess pattern of the kitchen floor, Grace sitting only one or two meters away at the kitchen table. “I haven’t heard from my father since the last cheque came on my fourteenth birthday. Of course, I read the newspapers and knew that he was in prison. But I wasn’t touched. He left me and my mum when I was a child. They were never married, you know?” I just nod. “Are you married, Detective Carter?” The question comes out of nowhere.

I respond in a rather confused manner. “Err… No. My wife died years ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I just nod. “Did you have children?”

Her question cuts deep and I shut my mind to the dark memories. “I think we are done here, Ms. Aleus. You said you didn’t have any contact with your father, and no one except the police knows you’re related to him. Consider yourself safe. If anything suspicious occurs, call me.” I hand her my card and leave the kitchen.

My thoughts are still occupied with the past when we are back in our office at the police station. “You were a little bit rough on Ms. Graceful, huh?” Fagan awakens me. “I know you can’t handle dead women, but I thought you did pretty well with living ones. The girl really liked you when you went into that kitchen, but when you came out...”

I sigh. “I know, but... this is a murder case, and I don’t need distractions, even if they’re as sweet as Aunt Betty’s chocolate cookies. And she’s way too young for me anyway.”

“You can’t afford to be picky at your age, Cart.”

I growl and pick up the ringing phone “Yes?”

Aunt Betty’s thin voice gasps at the other end. “Officer! I know I shouldn’t... I usually don’t touch Gracie’s stuff, but...” She catches her breath. “I was so concerned, and I think she wasn’t a hundred percent honest with you. I found a stack of letters in her room and another letter in the letterbox. From him! I recognized the handwriting from the cheques, because he always used to put these odd little dots on his ‘i’s. I have to show you. According to the postal stamps, they were sent within the last three months. I opened them, and in them he says that he wants to meet her. I think Gracie might be in danger – Hold on a second, the doorbell is ringing. Maybe you could just come over...”

At her last word I’m already in my coat and telling Fagan about the call. “We have to go back. The girl has had close contact with Slim during the last few months.”

“Damn.” We rush over to the Aleus’ house and find the front door wide open. “Shit!” Fagan cries out, and both of us run towards the
entrance. We find Aunt Betty lying motionless on the hall floor, next to her a shattered porcelain kitten. Fagan kneels down beside her. “She’s breathing, so she’s just unconscious.” He is shaking her carefully when we hear a shrill scream from the living-room. I start running up the stairs and even though it’s only a few meters away, it feels like miles to me. I push the door open, and I can see Grace pressed against the wall with blood on her forehead, and standing in front of her... Ivanka. “Tell me, or I will... Shit!” she screams when she sees me and points her small silver pistol at me. I take one step in her direction. “Stay there, officer or I’ll shoot you. And this little whore will tell me where Slim is. Why did he tell her? Why didn’t he come back to me?” One step closer. “Didn’t I give up everything for him? He said he would marry me when he came out and now he’s gone.” Tears begin to run down her cheeks, the hand in which she is holding her revolver starts to shake. Another step. I see Fagan appear in the doorframe, stopping abruptly at the sight of Ivanka’s weapon. “I even gave him information about my father’s business so we could be together, and now he told this underaged girl where he is? Who are you anyhow?” She points the pistol back at Grace. “His affair? A prostitute? I don’t care, because he is my man, you get it...” Fagan nods at me and says, “Hey Lady, calm down. We all have our problems, there’s no need to get...” I jump over the intervening two meters and thrash the distracted Ivanka to the floor, her pistol sliding out of her reach. Fagan picks it up and points it at Ivanka. “...violent,” he finishes his sentence, while I’m trying my best to handcuff the struggling woman.

“Aunt Betty has called the police. They will be here in a minute.”

When my colleagues take Ivanka away, who’s going on about being innocent, Grace flies straight into my arms. “You... you rescued me. You saved my life,” she stammers. I hold her slim body lightly in my arms and I can feel her little heart pounding against my chest. Over her shoulder I see Fagan explaining to Aunt Betty the whole situation.

“Ivanka had a relationship with our good ol’ Slim. She must have visited him in prison, and he promised to marry her when he got out. She couldn’t wait, so she even betrayed her father by giving Slim details about his business. Slim got out, and Ivanka was sure he would go away with her and start a new life. But after the trial, he was nowhere to be found, and our girl was going insane. She took out every woman Slim ever trusted – his sister and his psychologist – and tried to force them to reveal his whereabouts. She almost got Grace and would have tortured her, too. You called at the right time, Ma’am.”

We leave the Aleus’ house almost an hour later. Both women are still shocked and look a little bit pale, but I think they’ll be okay. When we leave, Grace seems as if she wants to say something, but Aunt Betty pets her on the arm and she remains silent. I punch Fagan against his shoulder. “Another victory for justice and goodness!”
I’m home in my living-room reading Poe. It’s close to midnight, but I still can’t sleep. I’m not really able to concentrate either, so I go into the kitchen to make some tea. My doorbell rings. Fagan? I leave the kettle and put on my grumpiest face to welcome him, but when I open the door it is Grace, who is standing shaking on my doorstep. “Officer Carter, I... I need to talk to you. Aunt Betty will be mad if she notices that I sneaked out, but it’s really important to me. Please let me in.” Of course I ask her in, and we take a seat in the living-room, where I hand her a cup of tea.

“What’s the matter? You seem really serious about this.”

“It is. I... I’m sorry that I lied to you. I know, I should have told you that my father wrote to me and that my lying put me as well as you in grave danger. But after all... He’s my father. He’s the only parent I have. I just wanted to apologise.”

“I understand. But are you going to tell me where your father is?”

She laughs. “I like you, Officer Carter, but I promised my father never to tell a soul about him.”

I smile and stand up. “Come on, I want to show you something.”

I lead her down the stairs and open my wooden cellar door to let her pass through. The room is small with a single light bulb, several boxes and some big plumbing pipes on the wall.

“What’s in those boxes?” she asks.

“Old memories. My wife’s clothes are still in there.” She walks over and pulls out one of Elle’s blue linen dresses and holds it against her chest.

“I could fit in it,” she says, with a strange little smile. “I think you would like my father, if you met him. He’s not such a bad person after all. He was just... with the wrong people. And he never hurt anyone seriously.”

This is just too much. I come closer and closer, push her body towards the wall with the thick pipes, leaning against her. My mouth is only inches away from hers. “How dare you say that?” I whisper, angrily.

She gives me a puzzled look. “I thought...”

“I don’t give a fuck what you’re thinking. I’m sure you know that your father burnt down a hotel, because he is a complete idiot when it comes to fire. But did you know that...” I gulp, but there’s no turning back. “…my son and my wife died in that fire? That I carried their burnt bodies from the ruins? That he took everything I had?” Only when I hear the echo of my voice in the small cellar do I notice that I’ve been screaming.

I can see tears running down her face and she sobs, “Please let me go ...,” but it doesn’t touch me anymore. I take off my belt and tie her arms to one of the plumbing pipes. I turn my back on her, but I can still hear her crying. I take out my knife and whisper, “He’s going to burn like they did. He’s going to suffer like I did. All the things I had to do...” I turn around and hear flickers in her green eyes when they catch sight of the blade. I put my hand over her mouth because her screaming annoys me. The blade touches her skin almost gently.

“And you will tell me where he is.”
10.37 pm. The doorbell rang. Jason Hames had just fixed himself a wonderful dinner consisting of spaghetti and some old ketchup, which he had found at the very back of the fridge. He went to the doorbell panel and pressed the buzzer without checking over the intercom who it was.

He lived on the 8th floor of an apartment block and somehow had never had any interest in the people coming and going since he had moved in a month ago. His social welfare agent had found this flat for him and by now he had actually gotten used to all the parties and drunken people in the block. On several occasions people had vomited or even slept in front of his door having lost every sense of orientation.

Going back to his small kitchen, he was wondering which movie he could watch while enjoying his dinner. Suddenly, he heard an irritating noise coming from the staircase. It sounded like someone running up the stairs and hammering against the doors of the other apartments. But this was nothing unusual. Then he heard the doorbell ring a second time. The buzzing sound indicated that the door had been opened by someone else. “This is going to last the whole evening,” he thought to himself. The second person seemed to be racing up the stairs as well but without knocking at the doors. He could hear another few desperate attempts of someone trying to get into other flats on the upper floor and decided to check what was going on. It was nearly 11 p.m. and the person outside was yelling and causing a hell of a noise. Looking through the spy hole of his door, he realised that the light hadn’t been switched on. “That’s strange,” Jason thought and tried to make something out in the dark. Now, he could see a heavy person making his way to his door. The shadow hammered against his door. Standing right next to the intercom, Jason was paralysed for a few seconds.

“Pleeease let me in!” “Anybody there?!” “Pleease I need help, for God’s sake let me in, please!”

Jason stood behind the door and could hear the man’s desperate cries but immobilized as he was he could not move a finger. After a few seconds the guy turned around, and ran out of sight, beyond the range of the spy hole.

Jason heard a shot. Something was falling down the stairs.

“Was that a gunshot?” Jason asked himself. “Oh my God, did someone just shoot this guy? He was trying to shake off his pursuer and I didn’t let him in. He is dead. It’s my fault.” But as soon as the thoughts of his guilt had come they also disappeared making room for his analytical and objective mind. “Someone ought to call the police,” he thought. Not having moved since the guy had appeared in front of his door, Jason finally decided to do something. He went to his balcony to get some fresh air. Taking a deep breath, he listened to the movements of the Liffey, which
calmed him down a bit. Suddenly, the sound of a door banging open carried through the chilly midnight air and he realised that it was in fact the main entrance of his block. For a few moments nothing happened but then he saw a very tall man in a shiny silver coat walk over to the other side of the street. The man carried what looked like a black heavy sack on his shoulders and continued to make his way to the river. Jason couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The guy threw the sack into the river and ran away.

Inspector O’Reilly was sitting across from Jason at the kitchen table with his notebook lying open in front of him.

“Mr Hames, can you precisely recall what you heard or saw in the past hours?”

Jason had cleaned up the table and his dinner was now standing on top of the fridge. He was getting really hungry. The police had been with him for about an hour now, asking him the same questions over and over again. It was annoying, and despite the fact that he had told them the story three times, they still seemed to be looking for some missing piece of information. He wanted to go to sleep but then again he thought that he wouldn’t be able to find much sleep tonight anyway.

“Well, uhm. The door bell rang and I pressed the buzzer to open it, without checking over the intercom who it was.”

The inspector looked at him suspiciously but continued: “Do you know who opened the door when the doorbell rang the second time?”

“No, well I mean I’m not quite sure coz I thought I’d heard the sound of a buzzer, comin’ from maybe the 6th floor. It definitely didn’t come from the lower floors.”

“Alright, sir. I think we have our information now. Thank you for your co-operation and be sure not to leave the town, we might want to contact you sooner or later.”

“Sure. That’s all then?” Jason looked at his kitchen clock and was surprised that it was nearly 3 a.m.

While Jason was still wondering how it had gotten so late, the police left and drove off.

“Should he call his father?” Jason looked at the clock again. Inspector Hames was a retired police inspector, but still kept up quite good contacts with his former colleagues. He should really call him tomorrow. Jason decided that he wouldn’t get the sleep he needed so urgently, grabbed his jacket and went to his local pub.

The chief of police called Inspector Hames in the early hours of the morning. “Good mornin’, John. What’s the craic?2 I hope I didn’t wake you. Sorry to bother you, but I thought you should know that there was a murder at your son’s house yesterday. Don’t worry, James is fine but

---

2 Craic: Irish for “fun.”
apparently he’s the only one who saw the murderer run away. Oh, and by the way, the victim is a certain Mike Baleys. I think you remember him?”

John Hames sat in his living room, not knowing what to think. My son, he thought, he shouldn’t be involved in this case. “Yes, I remember Mike, but be sure not to tell anyone anything about this. We had an agreement.”

“Sure, but try to keep your son out of this! Changing the subject, I was wondering what you’re up to next Sunday. My wife and I plan to spend the day in Portmanock and we can probably take Constable Macmillan’s yacht. Would you like to join us?”

“Yeah, why not, I don’t think Aoife3 has any plans.”

“So, that’s settled then! Alright, just be sure to take care of your son. See you then next Sunday. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Jason found his mobile lying under the bed, wondering how it could have possibly gotten there, and answered the call from his father. His father sounded more worried than usual and they agreed to meet at the Sunday café.

Arriving at the agreed café, his father greeted him: “Your mother’s been complainin’ you haven’t called her lately.” Typical, Jason thought, what else would she do. “Well, she knows I’m quite busy but I promise to give her a call in the next couple of days.”

“The chief inspector called me this morning to inform me about the murder yesterday. Why did you prefer the flat from the social welfare agency and didn’t even consider moving in with us? Then this wouldn’t have happened.”

Jason was used to this kind of conversation, but this time there was a murder case involved and he didn’t want to lose any time. Ignoring his father’s question, Jason said: “Have they found the body yet? Do they know who the murderer is?”

“Jason, you know that even if I had this information I wouldn’t be allowed to tell you!”

Jason went on: “Who’s the victim?”

Jason could see from the look on his father’s face that he was getting uncomfortable.

“Mike Baleys. But that’s about all I can tell you. It’s just because the chief of police and I are such good friends that he recognized your name in the file and was naturally worried about you.”

“But, Dad, you don’t know what I’m going through right now! Not only did I witness a murder but I also left the guy standing in the hallway. If I’d let him in, it could have saved his life.” Jason could not believe that his father was not going to give him any further information; he had always told him when there was something going on.

---

3 Aoife is the Gaelic version of Eve.
“I know. But for now you’re safe and you did the right thing.” His father moved to another subject. They continued with small talk about family matters for the next half hour until his father finally said that he had to leave because he had another appointment.

Three days later Jason went down to the police station to help his father get rid of some old files. He had declined at first but then thought it might be useful because he might be able to gather some information about the case. He was greeted by the local guard commander, who, knowing he was the son of Inspector Hames, admitted him without further delay.

Going through some of the files he suddenly stopped. There was a picture on the very first page of a file called Baleys957. The fascinating thing about the picture was the person standing in the centre: a tall man with a silver coat. Jason was confused and stunned. That was the guy he had seen in the street. But even more shocking was the identity of the person standing right next to him. It was Inspector Hames. His father was standing right next to the murderer! He did not know what to make of it.

He went over to his father. “Dad, the guy on the picture with the silver coat is the one I saw throwing the victim into the Liffey. That’s the murderer!” Inspector Hames looked at the picture and then looked back at his son. “There are many silver coats in Dublin. Are you sure it’s the man you saw?” “I’m one hundred percent sure. And you’re standing right next to him. You can’t fool me Dad, you know who that is and I’m telling you this is the exact same person I saw that night.”

Mr. Hames looked doubtfully at his son, cursing himself for having brought him down here.

“Well, son, if he’s the murderer I sure should tell the chief inspector. I think I’ve had enough of the files for today anyway and you shouldn’t be in here without me.” His father was kicking him out. Why did he act so strange? That guy was the murderer, he had never been more convinced of anything. Making his way out of the station, Jason passed the guard commander and saw his father whispering into a phone.

Five hours had passed since the incident at the police station. Jason was on his way home, walking by his favourite café, thinking of the times when he and his old man had had more time for each other, drinking beer and having a good old laugh together. He took a look at their usual table at the far right end of the café without expecting to see anyone when, all of a sudden, he saw his father again. Walking towards the table he stopped halfway, recognizing the coat which was hanging over the chair of the man sitting next to his father. “You bastard,” he yelled, pointing at the man. “I saw you kill that man and now you’re bribing my father into hushing up the murder. You fuckin’ bastard should be in jail.”

“Pull yourself together before you start doin’ anyone injustice! Sit down and stop cryin’ out random things in public!” his father ordered.
“But...,” Jason tried to object but his father pulled him into the chair.

“This is Mr. Gibson,” said his father, introducing the two.

“I know bloody well who that is!” said Jason, still speaking agitatedly. “I recognized the coat and I saw the picture of him today in the file.”

“Listen,” said his father. “I really didn’t want you to get involved in this. But since you’re here now and there’s no way around it let me tell you what happened and assure you that this man has committed no criminal offence but is worthy of bein’ a free man.”

Gibson, who had been sitting at the table in a very stoic way, opened his mouth for the first time.

“Hang on, John, let me clear this up.” Turning to Jason, he asked: “Do you have any clue who the man was that – as your father informed me – rang your doorbell, so intensely seeking protection from me that night?”

“He was an innocent soul, that I’m sure of,” replied Jason, “and you killed him.”

“Would you think that a person who is capable of cold-bloodedly killin’ an innocent man can possibly be innocent?”

“What do you mean?” said Jason furiously.

“Jason,” said his father. “There is something that happened at the time I retired.”

“What are you talkin’ about?” asked Jason, even more annoyed.

“A conspiracy at the police station,” replied his father.

“You remember seeing a picture of Mr. Gibson’s coat in the files you put into order today, didn’t you?”

“Well, yes of course, but...” But his father already went on to say: “This man who rang your doorbell 4 days ago is the murderer of Ryan Bates. I don’t know if you remember him, but he was a good friend of mine and happened to be Mr. Gibson’s friend as well.

Hames hesitated but decided to go on: “Jason, I asked Mr. Gibson to kill him because he was still alive and free and Ryan’s death had never been avenged.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Jason, breathing heavily.

“I understand,” said Mr. Gibson, looking at him intensely. “Every criminal should be convicted for the crime he has committed, but this man was out on the prowl.”

“But why shouldn’t the police convict him?” asked Jason.

“Mr. Baleys was a very powerful man and the Garda Síochána were quite satisfied with their compensation,” said his father.

Jason couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He had always trusted policemen, especially since his father was one of them. Jason could not get his head around the fact that his own father had not opposed murder but even ordered it. He detested him. He stood up and was about to leave

---

4 Garda Síochána is the name of the Irish police.
when Mr. Gibson held on to his arm and whispered into his ear: “My role was to harm no one apart from the one whose crime had to be punished. My job, Mr. Hames Junior, was to show that money can get you anywhere, including the grave.”
…he fell down the staircase. And after his body had hit the landing, he did not make any further movements or sounds.

It was a cold and dreary late October morning; heavy rain was pounding down onto the city. The clock radio went off, and slowly, the person under the bedcover started to move. He got up and got ready, had breakfast and left for the tram stop. His first class of the day was translation, so he headed through the rain towards the English Department. On reaching Chain Alley, he could see an enormous group of people trying to make their way to the department. What was going on there? He fought his way in, up the staircase and through the seemingly endless group of people. Finally, after reaching the first landing and pushing away some more excitedly talking students, he could see what had happened. There she was, lying headfirst on the landing, her legs and hip on the bottom stairs, blood dripping from her eyes, ears and mouth – she was dead. He could not remember her name right now, but her face had burned itself into his mind: she had been a member of the Fachschaft and had led a group on his Freshers’ Day. Somebody said her neck was broken and that it seemed as if she had fallen. A feeling of nausea overcame him, so he turned around quickly, and just as he wanted to climb down the stairs again, he felt something under his right foot. He looked down and saw the key to one of the library lockers downstairs. Somebody must have lost it. He picked it up and put it into his pocket. The best thing to do would be to give it back to the staff at the reception desk; they would hang up a notice, and sooner or later the owner would get it back. He went downstairs, but when he walked towards the reception desk curiosity grabbed him. He tried to ease his conscience: he could first take a look at the contents of the locker himself; maybe he knew the person who had lost the key and could give it back to him or her himself; why bother the library staff? He got around the wall and to the lockers. The key’s bracelet had number thirty-five on it, so he bent down and opened the right one. Inside it were a bag, a bottle of water and a folder. He had a look into the bag and was left with a shock: Julia. That was her! That was the woman lying dead on the landing. Now that he read the name he remembered it. He was stunned. She must have lost the key when she hit the floor after her fall. He took the folder out of the locker and put it into the bag. He had to leave, get away from the spot. He took the bag and headed for the common room instead of the main entrance, in order to avoid being jammed by the never-ending stream of fellow students rushing in to see the dead body. As more and more students came into the building, even the way to the common room was a struggle. Finally, he reached his destination, opened the back door and stepped out. At last: fresh air! He took two deep breaths and managed to pull himself together again. The sky
was only a grey mass, depriving the world of all its daylight and brightness, leaving it bleak and inhospitable. It was still raining and a biting wind was blowing. In the distance he could hear the wailing of the police. He zipped up his jacket and looked around. There was no one else. All classes would be cancelled that day, he was sure of that, so there was no point in staying. As he turned to leave, he saw a dark shape in the backyard of the department. When the person saw him he quickly moved away from the building and into the street. Since the weather was so bad, he could not see him very well, and the figure was soon out of sight again; nevertheless, he had been able to identify his face. He was also a member of the English Fachschaft. He had seen him before at the “Anglisten”-party, which he had organized. To him, it seemed that the dark shape was moving around nervously, and as if his presence had disturbed him in some way or other. He took another look at the bag he had just got out of the library locker: he was about to make some interesting discovery. He trembled with excitement.

When he got home, he was soaked to the skin, so he changed, made himself a cup of tea and sat down on the couch. There were strange things going on at the English Department, and he really wanted to find out what they were. It was time to shed some more light onto this. He decided to take a closer look at the papers he had got out of the locker. Carefully, he took out the folder and started reading. As he scanned through the pages, he was struck by a feeling, a mixture of lack of understanding and surprise. The pages in the folder were the English Fachschaft’s balance sheets for all their past “Anglisten”-parties. The balances contained every single item of earnings and costs concerning the parties. Over the past couple of years, the Fachschaft had organized several of these, and all of them had taken place at the same location and had always cost the same amount of money. Somehow, these constant factors felt strange to him. He was not into economics at all, but still he knew that factors and situations changed from time to time: prices for drinks change, as well as rents for locations, and above all, people normally grant discounts or special conditions when working together on a regular basis. But nothing of that kind appeared in these balances. He got up, grabbed his jacket and was out again.

He got to the location where all the former “Anglisten”-parties had taken place and went inside. On being asked what he wanted, he introduced himself as a new member of the university’s English Fachschaft and said he wanted to talk to the manager about organizing another party at his place and about whether it could be carried out under the same conditions. His request was quickly granted, and the manager met him in the club’s office immediately.

“Of course, my friend. No problem at all. The same conditions: you don’t pay rent; we keep the money earned.”
He felt as if he had been struck by lightning. He said goodbye, assuring the manager that the Fachschaft would contact the club for further details. He left; walking to the tram stop, he was overcome by a feeling of dizziness caused by the discovery he had just made. Slowly it dawned on him what had happened. The Fachschaft’s balance sheets had stated costs for the club rent for every single party they had organized. Furthermore, costs for drinks, food and cloakroom had been listed as well. But none of these had ever been paid; the balances had been manipulated: they showed a balanced account after each and every party due to the money that was earned by selling tickets for the party at university. But if no rent had been paid then the Fachschaft – he had to calculate in his head for a while – had earned about 15,000 euros. And poor Julia must have been the one who no longer wanted to play that game and who wanted to tell the public. That must have been it. He stopped dead on the spot with an expression of terror on his face: it was murder! Julia had not fallen down that staircase, she had been pushed! He was just about to solve a murder case. What was he to do now? Tell the police. He had to tell the police about this. He had evidence proving his case... but who had done it? All the members of the Fachschaft would eventually be convicted, at least for complicity. But who had actually pushed Julia? No, not only pushed Julia – who had intentionally killed her? He could not be the one to prove that. This would be the police’s task.

He copied the whole folder in the nearest copy-shop, put it in an envelope and threw it into the police’s letterbox in Rohrbacher Street.

He knew Julia’s boyfriend and knew where he lived, so he got together the stuff he had taken out of the locker and made his way to his place.

He rang the bell. A few seconds passed, but then he was let into the house. The boyfriend’s flat was on the second floor, and as he reached it, he could already see him standing in the doorway, waiting for him. It did not seem as if he had been crying, but surely he already knew...

“What do you want?”

“Oh... em, I’m a fellow student of Julia’s. I’m really sorry about...”

“Yeah, yeah, can I help you?”

“Em, I just wanted to give some of her stuff back to you. I thought you might wanna have it.”

He gave him the bag.

“Where did you get that from?”

“I found the key to her library locker at the English Department. When I opened it, I knew whose stuff it was.”

The boyfriend paused for a second.

“Was there anything else in that locker?”

“It’s strange that you ask: actually there was. It contained a folder belonging to the Fachschaft.”
He could see an expression of pain flashing across the man’s face. The boyfriend took two steps towards him and pushed him... he fell down the staircase. And after his body had hit the landing, he did not make any further movements or sounds.

…rustling… the news. Fraud at the university – on Monday, October 29, the police has solved a grave case of fraud. The English Department’s Fachschaft, which is the students’ representative body, is supposed to have embezzled enormous sums earned through professionally organized parties. During the course of the investigations, two cases of murder have come to light, as well, but have not yet been solved. However, evidence was passed on to the authorities anonymously. The person who gathered it is still unknown and is strongly advised to report to the police immediately… rustling…
How persistent this stain was! She was wiping roughly with a small white cloth, but it didn’t change its ugly colour at all. A dark red stain on a lilac-coloured carpet! What a horrible sight! It seemed to stare at her and hold her up to ridicule. But she would win by finding a solution, as she always did. Maybe with a dash of orange oil and a little curd soap. Yes that would work. After succeeding in wiping it out, she felt a huge surge of relief and was sure that she now deserved a slow cup of tea, which would give her a rest. It was 3.30 pm, time for preparing the tea. She walked over the polished brown floorboards in the dining room to the big old cupboard, which she had inherited from her mother, the wife of a renowned apothecary, and which smelled slightly of rotten wood. She had also inherited a china tea set ornamented with red roses seeming to wind around the cup and ending in a little lovely gold seam. In earlier times, she was famous for her first-rate tea parties. But whom could she invite now? All of her friends had died, and the new neighbours weren’t able to appreciate this old tradition. Neither was James, she thought while she was arranging the footed cups on the white saucers, setting the spoon behind the cup and one red linen napkin to the right side of each of two sets on the dark reddish brown mahogany table. He always used to say what an incredible waste of time these parties were while having to listen to the hags she called her friends chattering incessantly. He had only been interested in his job and his science magazines, but he had never had any feel for their social status and the obligations it brought along with it. Indeed, he hadn’t been a lousy husband. She never dared to judge her husband in that way. That would cast a poor light on her qualities as a wife. As her mother had constantly sermonized, all is for appearances’ sake. Her mother, who had been a very clever woman, had taken to James at once.

Looking at the mahogany table, she remembered him quite well, sitting there in the opposite wing chair almost exactly twenty years before and drinking his last cup of tea, a strong, smooth black tea with two thin lemon slices and...

The doorbell rang. How impolite to ring at this particular time! On the way to the door she heard the voices of men talking outside. She opened the door and looked into the faces of two young men in police uniform. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Glove. This is Constable Morrison, and I’m Constable Johnson. We’re sorry to disturb you, but we have to talk to you about your husband. Could we come in, please?”

“Yes, of course. Please, come in,” she said, smiling. She opened the door wider to let them in, pretending not to look at all displeased. She led them into the parlour and offered them each one of the huge red armchairs. After an uncomfortable moment of silence, Morrison cleared his throat and
broke the silence: “Due to the last will of your husband, as you know, the University has been using his body...um...for medical research. A certain Professor Carstairs called us this morning. Apparently, new findings about the...um...cause of his death have been made. We have instructions to take you to the Professor’s laboratory. He can explain it better to you.”

Mrs. Glove slowly smoothed down her skirt. Suddenly, she asked, nearly unaffected: “Would the two gentlemen like some tea?”

The constables looked at each other, surprised at this unexpected reaction but didn’t want to hurt the feelings of this old woman. So they nodded and thanked her. She stood up and walked as elegantly as her age allowed her to the kitchen. The water for the tea was already on the stove, waiting to boil. She switched the hob on, then went into the dining room, back to the cupboard, opened the left drawer and took out a tea chest. She took a small bottle out of it and brought it back to the kitchen, where she got the tea ready to be served. Finally, she poured a little bit of the bottle’s contents into the teapot, which stood on the prepared tray. It wouldn’t have been proper to fill the cups before serving. As a good hostess, she couldn’t change the order of the etiquette. After carrying the tray to the mahogany table in the dining room, she led the policemen to the table, which was laid out.

“You have a wonderful house, Mrs. Glove,” said Johnson, admiring the fine furnishings.

“Thank you very much,” she replied. She was just about to offer them their seats when Morrison chose the wing chair opposite to her. “Please, take the left one. It was the favourite chair of my husband. I hope you’ll understand,” she said emphatically.

“Oh, I’m sorry... sure,” stammered Morrison, whose smile was wiped off his face by the vigorous tone of the old woman. She certainly didn’t want to sit opposite an obviously ill-mannered man while drinking out of the same cup her husband had drunk his last tea out of.

The police report of the Glove case

Ipswich: On 20 September 1985, three people were found dead in Mince Lane Street 15. They were clearly identified as Constable John Morrison and Constable Gary Johnson, as well as Mrs. Katharina Glove... According to the forensic report, they died due to cardiac arrest, which was initiated by the active agent digitoxin from the plant “digitus purpurea” (coll. foxglove). It led to strong disorders of the cardiac rhythm and to cardiac arrest in the end...
What a day! I said to myself. The chilly air of a cold night in November made me shiver as I walked down the street from the bus stop to my house in Harley Street. I had to stay all day in the office, arranging tedious hotel bookings for the up-coming trade show and smoothing away difficulties about missed telephone calls. My brain felt like a mashed potato and all I wanted was to go home as quickly as possible and to rest my reddened eyes and my tense back and to get rid of this weird feeling I had about something that I could not explain.

When I reached the front door of my house this strange sensation grew stronger and I had the feeling that someone was standing behind me, but when I turned around there was nothing but a cat sitting on the other side of the street with these white and reflecting eyes gazing at me. Was I so tired that my mind played such tricks on me? I certainly was, so I rummaged around in my bag for my keys, but I just could not find them. I tipped over the entire contents of my bag and spread everything on the ground – still no keys. I swore and could not believe that I had left them at work, but since my head was a mess that day it was not absurd at all that I was now standing there staring at the clutter at my feet and at the lock of the door. Could it be? Was that my key dangling down from the lock? Certainly it was, as it had the fish-clinger attached to it that I had bought at Camden Market two years ago. If I had not been that tired I would have pulled myself together and retraced my actions, but I just could not stick to the point and accepted the fact that the hard week had dulled my brain.

Before I went upstairs I drowsily opened the mailbox and pulled out three letters which I assumed to be just odd bills. After I unlocked the door to my apartment and slammed it behind me I slipped off my coat and bag – too tired to hang them up –, trudged to my kitchen, grabbed a bottle of water and went to my living room. There I realized that I still had those three letters in my left hand; so I just flung the stack onto the small wooden table in front of me and looked for the remote to indulge in some trivial programme. I flicked over several channels which did not intrigue me at all; so I decided to watch the late night news, since I had not even read the newspaper this morning due to time pressure. The woman behind her desk was wearing an odd jacket which looked far too big for her. I was staring at the screen, hardly noticing anything she told me about tax increases and the latest case of a cruel rape in Whitechapel close to where I worked. My eyes were too tired and my brain was too packed with thoughts about the next day to follow the news and I decided to go to bed.

The next day, when I was woken up by the alarm clock, I felt as if I had not slept at all. I could hardly open my eyes and lurched into the bathroom, switched the light on and had a look in the mirror. There I stumbled as I saw I was still dressed in my work clothes. I looked down at
myself, slightly bugged about the situation, but laid the blame on the overtiredness from the previous night. The only thing that surprised me were the mud stains at the hem of my trousers and the remains of dirt under my finger nails – but I did not bother about it any further and got ready for work.

The week dragged by and I was so loaded with work that I could hardly think of anything else. On Friday, however, I was lucky not to work overtime, because my colleagues could cope with the last bits and pieces to be arranged for the trade show. I was relieved as I almost felt like dropping dead on the spot. As usual, I took the bus back home and planned to get some ready-made food and some bottles of wine for the weekend from Tesco’s before going home to sleep. The bus was crowded with people all wanting to go home to their families and have dinner, but I was lucky to get a seat in the very back. At the next stop the doors of the bus opened and, although I was almost about to fall asleep, all of a sudden I was wide awake. There was a young and shy-looking woman stepping in dressed all in black with her ash-blond hair tied back in a queue. Her bony features and her humped posture reminded me of a younger version of my stepmother. I despised my stepmother. She was of no importance to me. I did not care for her or for what she did. Yes, I can claim that I truly hated her. What she did to me in my childhood was unforgivable. I was happy not to be in touch with her anymore and to lead my own independent life. I almost had forgotten about her, but now that I saw this woman on the bus all the terrifying memories overwhelmed me. But this was not the first time that I had felt this subliminal pain. Not long ago I had had the same odd sensation that made my stomach convulse. When was it? I tried to concentrate and dug in my memory until I remembered when I had felt the same way: it was just last week after work and before I had this weird incident with my keys.

All the rumination made me ever so tired and I must have fallen asleep soon afterwards as I eventually woke up not knowing where I was. I tried to figure out where the bus was going and if I had just missed my stop, but the area we drove through did not look familiar at all to me. It actually looked quite threatening judging by the run-down façades and the scarcely lit streets. I went to ask the bus driver but suddenly stopped before I got to the front. My eyes were riveted to the sign above my head: number 67 going from Waterloo to Homerton. What the hell was that? I was sitting in the wrong bus which was taking me far away from home. Did I not take the number 26 after work? Was I too tired AGAIN and had mixed up the lines like I had done with my keys? I was about to panic and just thought that I urgently needed a holiday. There was no explanation for this at all but my utter tiredness and confused head. At the next stop, I got off the bus and had a look at the timetable and my watch. It was half past midnight! I could not believe my eyes. Therefore I had been on the bus for
more than six hours. No doubt I had been tired, but how come I slept for over six hours on a bus not realizing it was the wrong one?

Eventually I got back home around two o’clock in the morning but could not find my keys again. So I kept ringing the doorbell of my neighbour, who had a spare key to my house in case of an emergency. After several minutes a window opened and I explained that I had forgotten my keys at work. He laughed at me and threw his spare key down to me.

My body felt as if I had been rolled over by a lorry and my head ached like hell. All I could do was to go straight to bed. The next morning I dragged myself into the bathroom, but when I looked into the mirror I shrank back: it was not my face staring back at me, but a blood-smeared visage. I had an ugly laceration above my right eye and knew that this was the reason for my tremendous headache, but could not remember at all how it happened.

What was wrong with me lately? I had always been in control of myself knowing what to do and where to go. But now I was looking in the mirror seeing a battered face, which gawped back at me with numb eyes. It took me a while to manage to take a shower and patch up my wound. The headache did not stop the whole day although I took one aspirin after another. All I did for hours was press a bag of ice cubes against my right eye and stare into space.

In the evening I felt slightly better and decided to order a pizza and to watch the news and some random game show on TV – not to get overworked. The newscaster was again wearing her odd beige jacket and I followed the segments just absent-mindedly sipping my glass of wine and wondering if I should go and see a doctor tomorrow. Then something caught my attention. The newscaster read out loud that a brutal crime had taken place the night before near Shadwell. A young woman, 28, had been raped and almost killed by a middle-aged man, but could free herself after she had hit his head with a bunch of keys attached to a clinger – a fish-clinger…
Julie unlocked the door and a strange feeling overwhelmed her. The tasteless porcelain vase her husband had given to her as a birthday present lay shattered on the floor.

“Darling, are you home?” she called out. She stepped forward and froze on the spot when she saw bloody handprints on the doorframe. “Pete?!” She was shaking all over when she slowly tried to push the door open, but it didn’t move very far. Hesitantly, she stuck her head through the gap in the door. Julie stumbled backwards at the sight of her husband’s body. Panic consumed her and her pulse rose. She took a step forward and kneeled down next to her husband. “Pete? What’s wrong with you?”
He was lying face down on the floor, so she tried to turn him over. As she felt his cold body, she realized that he was dead. A feeling of shock overwhelmed her at the sight of what looked like her gun on the floor next to him. Carefully she took a closer look at it. Yes, it was hers! Julie was totally confused and shocked. What the hell was it doing there??

Her first thought was that her husband’s dangerous business was finally paying him back. She had always cursed him for dealing with drugs, but on the other hand, she enjoyed all the luxury it brought. In fact, money was the only reason she had married that old bastard. And that is what the police would conclude if they found Julie’s gun.

Trying to calm her nerves, she gripped her phone and dialled Heath’s number with trembling fingers. He was the only person she could depend on to help her out of this mess.

He answered immediately.

“Hey Julie. Do you miss me already?”

“Shut up. I need your help right now. Come over to my house as quickly as possible.”

“Are you crazy?? What about your husband?! He’d kill me if he found out about us.”

“That doesn’t matter any more. Come over immediately.”

Ten minutes later Heath and Julie were staring at Pete’s bloody corpse.

“Tell me what to do, Heath. You’re the one who has experience with such things.”

Heath looked at Julie, puzzled, and asked: “What do you mean? We have to call the police. They’ll check everything and find out who the gun belongs to.”

“That’s exactly what we can’t do, sweetheart, because this is MY gun!”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier that you were planning to kill your husband??”
Julie stared at him and couldn’t believe what she had just heard. Of course she had thought about getting rid of Pete before, but although she loved money, she wouldn’t kill for that.

“Believe me, if I had planned to kill Pete I would’ve told you so you could’ve done the dirty work.”

“But Julie, if it wasn’t you, who was it?”

“Well, I guess one of his drug pusher friends. Pete mentioned that he owed them money.” She sighed. “But that doesn’t solve my problem; it’s my gun lying next to my dead husband!”

Heath looked at her in an alarming way: “Honey, that’s not your main problem any more. I’m afraid that they’ll be chasing after you now. They’ll first take all your money and then kill you. These people are nothing to fool around with!!”

A shiver ran down her spine as she realized the whole extent of her situation. Not only would the police believe that she had killed her husband, but Pete’s murderers would also want to kill her. In panic she looked at Heath. He tried to talk with a calm voice, but she felt how nervous he was: “Julie, we need to get you out of the city. Your life is in danger here. You better get all your money out of the bank and then you will hide at our old meeting place. Do you remember our little house at the lake? Go there and wait for me. I need to deal with some things before we leave the country. But Julie, don’t forget to get rid of your gun before you go there, so no one will draw false conclusions!”

Julie looked at him, puzzled, but she nodded silently. Everything had happened so fast and she felt like she was losing control over the situation. He touched her face, kissed her goodbye and left. She stood there totally confused and shocked. Was this really what she wanted to do? Julie did not know what was right or wrong at that moment, but she also couldn’t think of a better plan. So she had to trust Heath and start packing all her things so she could start her new life with him.

Heath was walking down a dirty, narrow road when he called his old colleague from the London police department.

“Hey Walt, this is Heath. I need to find out what happened to my client, Pete Cooper. You know, he had me checking up on his wife. He suspected that she was cheating on him. I had an appointment with him today, so I drove over to his house. When I reached the house, there were police everywhere, but they wouldn’t say anything. Can you explain what’s going on there?”

“Pete Cooper is dead, Heath. He’s been shot, and whoever did it was stupid enough to leave his gun at the crime scene. I’m pretty sure that we’ll find the murderer soon. And what did you say? His wife was cheating on him?”

“Yes, she was cheating on him all the time. She had an affair with some other guy. Where is she now, by the way?”
“Well, that’s the problem. We’re looking for her everywhere, but I’m confident that we’ll find her soon.”

Julie was standing outside the little house at the lake. When she took a deep breath, she could feel the fresh, clean air flowing into her lungs. It was already getting dark and the forest was foggy, which gave her a strange feeling of security. She remembered all the good times she had enjoyed with Heath here. Julie feared that he wouldn’t show up and that he would leave her alone with this mess. But could he do that to her? She did not know. The only thing she knew was that she was nervous as hell. It was already completely dark and Heath still had not shown up. Then she saw a dark silhouette hurrying towards the house. Was this one of Pete’s drug-dealing friends? Her heart started beating very fast. But as she recognized Heath, she felt very relieved.

As he hugged her he whispered: “Everything will work out, darling.”

“I know, because you’re here now.”

Julie felt his warm body lying next to her and suddenly she felt so tired. It didn’t take long before she fell asleep.

When Julie woke up the next morning, she could feel the warm sun shining on her eyelids. She enjoyed the temporary peace. After a moment she turned over to wake up Heath because they needed to leave soon. As she opened her eyes, she was shocked: Heath was gone. A feeling of panic overwhelmed her. But then she calmed herself down and searched for a reasonable explanation for why Heath wasn’t lying next to her. He must be somewhere outside enjoying the sun. Yes, that would be a reasonable explanation. She looked around in the little room and discovered that all his clothes and everything else he had brought with him had vanished. When she hustled out of the house, she realized that his car was gone. Heath, that little coward, had left her alone with this mess. She was angry, sad and desperate at the same time. What should she do now? The only possibility was to leave England on her own. Julie hastened back inside to get the money and all her things. With trembling fingers she felt the cold bedcover under her pillow. She couldn’t believe it; all the money was gone! Before she could think about what to do next, she could hear the police sirens. A moment later someone was knocking on her door.

On a small island somewhere in the Caribbean, Heath could feel the warm sand under his feet. He was sitting in a canvas chair enjoying the beautiful ocean view. Satisfied, he looked at a photo of his little sister, who was smiling back at him in her warm and caring way.

With a content expression on his face he said: “Now everything’s fine, Catherine. Pete won’t sell any more drugs to innocent kids like you. I know it was not your fault. The only one who is responsible for your
death is Pete. But anyway, he won’t be hurting anyone any more. My plan went really well.”

He leaned back in his chair and ordered a Whiskey Sour.
When she was driving home after what had seemed to be a normal, boring work day, Caroline Cox did not realise that her day was not over just yet. She arrived at home and put some macaroni and cheese into the microwave. This was one of those evenings when she felt lonely. She ate microwave food and sat in front of the TV the whole evening long until it was time for her to go to bed because she had to get up early the next morning. But tonight she was called at two o’clock in the morning to the Wetmoore’s house in order to visit the scene of a crime. ‘What kind of crime could that be? Surely, their cat has run off again, or Dave’s had a couple of drinks too many and needs a lift. Nothing really serious has happened in this suburb,’ Caroline thought. When she reached 18 Burrow Street, she could not believe what she saw and could only imagine what must have happened. In front of the house were the undertaker’s car and a van with the CSU logo. Caroline parked her car next to them and went into the house.

She walked upstairs and saw that the Wetmoore’s bedroom was a mess. The bedside lamps and the window had been broken, the bed sheets had been ripped apart, the dressing table had been destroyed and amid this complete chaos, the body of a dead woman with a slashed throat was lying on the floor next to the bed. Mrs Wetmoore had been cruelly murdered. Caroline tried to suppress the feeling of nausea emerging from her stomach. She had not seen a corpse for more than ten years and especially not someone she knew. She asked one of the CSU guys what had happened and if there were any witnesses. He could only tell her that the dead lady’s husband was the one who had found her like this and had called the police.

Mr Wetmoore was sitting in the living room crying desperately. Caroline walked over to him, handed him a tissue and said: “Hello Dave. It’s me, Caroline. Caroline Cox. Oh, Dave, I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do for you?”

Dave answered: “Maybe you could call the kids and let them know what happened?”

“Sure, I will. Dave, I’m really sorry but I need to ask you some questions if you don’t mind.”

“Go on then.”

“Dave, where have you been tonight?” Obviously this was the wrong question to start with because Dave blurted out: “Are you kiddin’ me? I’ve been sittin’ here cryin’ me heart out because of me wife and you have got the guts to ask me where I was? I?”

Caroline blushed slightly because of this sudden emotional explosion and went on: “Dave, please, calm down. I’m not accusing you of anything. It’s just... I have to find out what happened here tonight.
That’s my job, and I need your help. Anything you know might be helpful.”

Dave blew his nose, moved around in his chair and began: “Well, I went to the pub. I was playin’ poker with me friends just like every Tuesday. Susan stayed home. Said she didn’t feel well, wanted to lie down. And when I returned home, all the lights were still switched on. She usually never leaves a light on late at night. Then I walked up to the door. It was unlocked. I thought there must be something wrong. I walked into the house screamin’ for her, but she didn’t answer. I walked upstairs and into the bedroom. I saw the messed-up bed and the broken window. When I was walkin’ around the bed I saw Susan lyin’ on the floor. I fell to me knees, turned her over and… I… I had her blood on me fingers… and… I… I was freakin’ out. Called you guys and since then I’ve been sittin’ here.”

“OK, thank you, Dave. That will be enough. If you remember anything else, let me know, alright?”

Dave replied: “Yes, thanks.”

Caroline turned around and was about to leave the place when a man she did not know entered the house. “Excuse me, Sir. You can’t come in here. This area has been sealed off by the police,” Caroline pointed out.

“I am the police, lady. My name is Conrad Carter, detective police department. And now excuse me, please. I’m looking for the local detective.”

“I am the local detective, Caroline Cox,” she replied emphatically.

Conrad said: “Oh, that’s you? My boss sent me here because he thought you might not be able to cope with the situation. He mentioned something that must have happened ten years ago …”

Caroline interrupted: “Oh, stop it! I can deal with this situation perfectly well. And now let me do my job and leave. I don’t need your help. Wait, where are you going?”

Conrad had left her standing in the hall and was making his way upstairs to have a look at the scene of the crime. The corpse had been removed, and when Caroline also reached the bedroom, Conrad was already looking around, trying to find some sort of evidence.

He was walking from one end of the room to the other looking at the wooden floor and thinking intensely. Caroline was standing at the door and staring at him. She did not know what exactly he was doing there, so she said: “What are you doing? There is nothing to be found that hasn’t already caught the CSU guys’ attention.”

Conrad replied: “Look and listen!” He crossed the room again, but Caroline simply shook her head in ignorance. Conrad explained to her: “As soon as I get close to the small carpet on that side of the bed pay attention.” So, Caroline listened carefully and at that point, as Conrad had mentioned before, there was something strange. She could not pick up what it was exactly but it sounded as if there was something underneath the floor. She looked at Conrad in disbelief. He said simply: “Well, I think
there is something your CSU guys didn’t notice. See, as soon as I step onto this plank it sounds hollow.”

“Right, that’s what it is. It’s hollow. Then let’s see what is beneath it.” Conrad moved the little carpet to the side, got down on his knees, took out a Swiss army knife and tried to lift the plank he had been standing on. He scratched on the plank’s edge but nothing happened.

Caroline had crossed the room and was kneeling opposite to him. While Conrad was still trying to get the plank to move she was looking around and saw something that looked like a hole in the plank next to the one Conrad was kneeling on. She pointed it out: “Look, right there next to you is a hole in the plank. Looks like a keyhole, doesn’t it?” Conrad replied: “Well, that is a keyhole. So there must be a key somewhere that fits the hole.” They were both trying to look for a key in the messed-up room. Caroline even had a look under the bed and there it was. A tiny bag with a key inside had been taped to the bottom of the bed. Caroline took it off and handed it to Conrad. He looked at her in surprise and immediately tried the key to see if it fit. It did, and when he turned the key in the keyhole, a trapdoor in the floor sprang open with a creaky sound. They opened the door completely, and there were stairs leading down into the darkness. Caroline took out her torch and lit the staircase.

“Where does this way lead to? What do you think?” Conrad asked.

“I have no idea. But I’m sure we will soon find out.” The two detectives began descending into the gloomy unknown. When they reached the bottom of the seemingly endless staircase, a low tunnel opened up in front of them. Caroline led the way with the torch and saw the tunnel parting ahead into two tunnels.

“Which way shall we take?” she asked.

“I’d say we go left,” Conrad suggested.

“Why?”

“Because if you look into the right hand tunnel it doesn’t seem as if it was used quite frequently. Do you see the cobwebs everywhere?”

Suddenly Caroline jumped to the side and screamed: “Ahhh.”

“What’s wrong?” Conrad asked.

“A rat. There was a big rat,” Caroline said.

“You are afraid of rats?” Conrad asked incredulously.

“Oh, I hate those little creatures,” Caroline answered curtly.

“But this little creature might have helped you make your decision. It went straight for the left-hand tunnel, so there must be a way out. Rats usually choose paths they know and that lead outside. So let’s move on.”

They turned into the left-hand tunnel and, after a while, reached the end of it. They stepped outside and were standing right in the middle of a forest.

“Where are we?” Conrad asked.

“Since there is no other forest in this area apart from Little Woods, I guess we are right in it,” Caroline explained. While they were looking
around, they made out a little, dimly-lit hut not far from where they were. They walked towards it, and when they reached the shed, they saw a knife lying on a log with red stains on it. Could this be the murder weapon? Caroline and Conrad were both thinking about this question when suddenly...
There he was. He heard a knock. Was it a knock? It was like the sound of
cold metal being hit against something, somewhere far away. What was
that? He couldn’t see anything; he was blindfolded. There was a sweet
odour in the air, heavy and sticky, something he had never smelled before,
something that must have come from a different place or even a different
time. It almost made him faint. He felt nauseous. Sweat was running down
his cheeks, and yet he was shivering to the core. It was a cold that went
deeper than the iciest winter storm that had ever crept through every crack
and every gap at this time of the year. His head hurt. Where was he?
He heard a squeaking, maybe of a door? Then he heard someone coming
close to him, breathing heavily.

Mr. Bloomfield entered his office. He was a little late this morning. The
streets were icy, and he had had to shovel the snow off the driveway
so his wife and children could leave the house without slipping. This
morning’s exercise had put him in a good mood, and the knowledge that
this would be his last day of work before the Christmas holidays made him
feel even more delighted. This was going to be an easy day, times were
quiet before Christmas. He would only do some paperwork and probably
leave early so he could surprise his wife and take her out for dinner. Their
children would stay at their grandparents’ for the evening, maybe even
overnight if he and his wife decided to stay out longer. He took off his coat
and went over to his desk. The drawer stood wide open. Had he forgotten
to lock it last night? No, he was sure he had closed it properly. He went
through his papers. Nothing was missing. But what was that? He dis-
covered a small envelope underneath the pile of old files and accounts he
had intended to throw out a long time ago. “To Mr. Bloomfield,” it said,
nothing else, no address, no name, no nothing. He would ask John, his
secretary, what this was all about.

“Mr. Scott, John, has anyone been in my office this morning?”
“No, Sir, not as far as I know.”
“Well someone must have been in here. The drawer of my desk
stood wide open even though I am absolutely sure I locked it last night
before I left. You were the last one to leave the office, weren’t you?”
“Yes indeed, Sir. But I assure you I haven’t seen anyone coming in
who is not supposed to be here.”
“Well. And are you sure you locked the back door?”
“Yes, Sir, I am absolutely sure. However, isn’t it on Thursdays that
the cleaners come?”
“Yes, I believe that is so, why?”
“Wasn’t yesterday a Thursday? I mean, I don’t intend to blame
anyone. I was just thinking...”
“You mean..?”

“Oh, I don’t mean anything Sir, I was just thinking...”

“No, I completely trust Ms. Chandrika5.”

“Well, Sir, the time before Christmas is always very busy. Maybe you just had other things on your mind when you left last night.”

“Yes, maybe you’re right.”

“If you insist, though, I could ask Ms. Chandrika if she saw anyone.”

“No, John, don’t, there’s no need for that, but thank you. I don’t want to upset anyone, and I don’t want her to feel she’s being accused of anything. I guess you might be right. I probably did forget to lock it myself.”

Mr. Bloomfield went back into his office. Still a little confused, he thought it was maybe just a joke or a little Christmas surprise planned by his wife. She sometimes did unusual things like that to pick on him and to shock him a little. She always said that this would keep things interesting and prevent him from growing old too quickly.

He put the letter aside and started putting his desk in order, finally throwing out the old papers and putting the files – mostly solved cases – in the archives. By the time the clock struck twelve, he started to get a little hungry and decided to go to the new Punjabi restaurant around the corner for lunch. He put his coat on, locked the door behind him and went out in the street. It was cold, grey and windy. He pulled his collar up and made his way through the snow-covered streets.

The restaurant was busy. He sat down at a table in a corner at the very back. Having ordered, he opened the newspaper to take a look at the daily news. He was just leafing through when an article caught his eye: “Dead Body Found in Thames.” At that moment his food was served, so he put the paper to the side and decided to read the article later. He didn’t want to spoil his meal with anything of that kind anyway. He remembered the envelope he had found in his drawer that morning. He had put it in his coat so he could read what his wife had prepared for him during a quiet moment. Picking at his food, he opened it now and started reading. But this was not his wife’s hand. His wife had the neatest handwriting he had ever seen; this one reminded him more of the handwriting of a drunkard or of an old person, quite scrawly and hard to read. “Dear Mr. Bloomfield,” the letter began, “I believe that what you will read here might be of great interest to you.” He became nervous. He looked up, glanced around to see if someone was watching him. For a split second he caught the sight of a man who seemed to be piercing him with his eyes. He looked around again, but the man was gone. He was confused. What was happening here? He called the waitress over to him and paid his bill. He rushed back to his office; he couldn’t read the letter in public, he had to read it when he was alone. A bad premonition came over him. John was

5 “Chandrika” is an Indian name meaning “moonlight.”
out for his own lunch break, fortunately, so he hurried into his office, locked the door behind him and sat down at his desk again. He took out the envelope, stared at it, and then, with trembling hands, took out the letter.

“Dear Mr. Bloomfield,” he read again. His eyes couldn’t focus on the small letters in front of him. He looked at the bottom of the page. “Mr. Bloomfield, we all know that the world the way it is presented to us is nothing but a farce. Sometimes angels are witches and prayers are curses; and to some people the moonlight at night is the brightest and happiest part of the day, and that is when law becomes crime and the vitality of the life-spending water turns into the source of death and the helping hand of murder. When the moonlight is drowned in the black river, then the time for justice has come. God’s eyes see everything, and so do mine.”

There was no signature on it and no hint as to who could have written it. He was sweating, sweating and shivering at the same time. He thought of the article in the newspaper. “Dead Body Found in Thames.” What was this person trying to say? What kind of a hint was this? Was this… after all…?

Even though he had intended to go home early this evening, he had to find out what was behind these mysterious lines. If they meant what he thought they meant, then he would have to find the writer of the letter, or have the writer find him. After all, even if he wasn’t on the right track – which he was hoping – it was still his job to follow these hints.

He waited until five o’clock when the sun set. His wife didn’t expect him until seven, so he still had enough time. It was dark outside and the streets were still emptying. He stopped a carriage and told the driver to take him to the old tavern down by the river. “That is quite far away, Sir, and the conditions out there are crazy! Don’t even like to go down this bumpy road in the summer time, but now that the road’s all icy –”

“I’m sure we’ll find a way to agree on this. And now go!” Apart from a constant mumbling of curses the driver didn’t reply to this. About half an hour later they arrived at their destination. “Keep this,” Mr. Bloomfield said and got out of the carriage. “Oh, Sir, thank you, Sir, this is very generous, Sir!” But Mr. Bloomfield didn’t turn around and only trudged through the muddy snow straight ahead toward the dim lights that gave away the presence of the tavern that was hidden behind a row of trees.

He already regretted having come here. He was anxious; he shouldn’t have come here, not ever again. He opened the door to the tavern and the smell of beer, joss sticks and hard work welcomed him. He was befuddled already just from the smell. He went over to the bar and ordered a drink. Nobody seemed to have noticed him. “Hey Steward, honey,” said the woman behind the bar with her strong gypsy accent, bending forward just enough so he could smell her breath. “Haven’t seen you in a while.” She smiled, and her rotten teeth showed. “Where have you been? I missed
you, honey. First I thought you and Chandrika had eloped.” She laughed loudly, almost hysterically, and then suddenly turned serious. “But then they found her in the river, not too far from here. What did you do to her?”

“Oh, keep your mouth shut, you crazy old woman!” he cried, “I don’t even know what you’re saying! I don’t even know this girl!” He got up and stumbled towards the door. He had to get away from here, away from this scum. He would go home to his wife and children and have a nice Christmas with a tremendous dinner and music and candle light and these people were not keeping him from it!

Suddenly he felt something hit his head. Everything went black. He didn’t know how much time had passed when he woke up.

He heard a knock. Was it a knock? It was like the sound of cold metal being hit against something, somewhere far away. What was that? He couldn’t see anything; he was blindfolded. There was a sweet odour in the air, heavy and sticky, something he had never smelled before, something that must have come from a different place or even a different time. It almost made him faint. “When the moonlight is drowned in the black river, then the time for justice has come,” he thought. Maybe it was better this way.
I found myself sitting in my room. It was raining. It always was. Seems like you can’t get rid of this gloomy weather at all. As far as I can remember there has been no such thing as daylight for about a month now. Anyway, I was sitting on some boxes. Don’t know who put them there. I rented this shit hole some time ago. They used it as a store room. Why they stopped? What do I know. At least they sold it dirt cheap. Opposite the window there was some huge neon sign lighting up the room. Quite a good thing as I couldn’t find out how to tap the wire yet. The colours where really hurting the eye. As if you’d really pay more attention the gaudier it was. It said something like buy it and you’ll be happy. I bought it and I wasn’t.

So I was sitting there, waiting. She was never on time but it was worth waiting for her. It really was. I lit another fag. The smoke hit that sticky, wet air surrounding me. Thinking. For better or worse. But you shouldn’t stop. No matter where it gets you.

A bug was sitting in some corner, eating. I could see it as the neon ad lit up and I wondered what eatable thing it found in here. I couldn’t remember having anything. I heard some shrill sounds coming from further down the city. I looked out of the window but naturally couldn’t see anything. A second bug walked in the direction of the first. Seems like food is quite rare in here, isn’t it? This was larger than the other one and somewhat nasty. As it reached the first, it immediately attacked it. But it wasn’t the grub it went for, it was the bug itself. After some struggling and odd noises it started eating it up. That was what nature is like. One moment you feel safe and the next you’re gone. Anyway, if it was some other way around you probably also wouldn’t make anything out of it. So why worry? The nasty bug was on its way creeping along the wall. There was water dripping out of the wall’s cracks. And the bug, as if unconquerable, went straight in some puddle. With effort it managed to walk on but became slower and finally stuck somewhere in the middle. I wondered what a stupid thing it was and watched its agony for a while. I threw my fag into the puddle and watched it expire. Fortunately, as it turned out, the bug could grab it which increased its chance of surviving. Its shell reminded me a lot of that jewel attached to some box I found on my way home a few days ago. It was a wooden box about the size of a cigarette package. I saw it lying near some garbage and only noticed it due to the opal, at least that is what I believe it to be, which was reflecting the moonlight. As I picked it up, I discovered it was locked. So I took the box home and tried to open it in various ways but it wouldn’t open. I decided to keep it though. The bug had crawled out of the puddle and hurried to hide somewhere. Quite understandable, if you ask me.

There was a knock at the door. Finally my girl seemed to have arrived. There was a second knock. Just as I got up to walk towards the
door it was smashed in. There stood a huge angry-looking guy. Just walking in and helping himself, he started going through my stuff, opening several boxes and throwing stuff on the floor. “What is it with you?” I asked surely a bit surprised. He didn’t answer. There was nothing else I had expected. But nice try. Giving the impression of being done, he walked over to me and all of a sudden struck his head against mine. I went down. “Don’t talk if you’re not asked to,” he said in such a calm voice that I was close to losing it. But as I lay there on the ground, half unconscious, I had no choice but to listen.

“That box you have there. You’ll bring it to this address.” He threw a piece of paper into my face. “And just in case you think you’re smart or something and won’t do it, have a look out of the window. That man is here only to watch you. Your job will be done by midnight. Otherwise he’ll come to visit you. Maybe also with some friends. Anyway, you’ll regret it.” Then he left. Still I couldn’t get a clear view of what was going on and I think as I relaxed with him leaving I finally lost consciousness. The next thing I can remember is me grabbing hastily that piece of paper and searching for the clock. It was already quarter past eleven and forcing myself to go to the window I saw that that bastard wasn’t lying. I lit another fag, wondering if they had done anything to my girl. But she was a smart thing and could avoid getting into trouble. That address was quite some distance away and with my nose bleeding I didn’t feel much like using the subway or seeing anybody at all. I had to do something. Thinking, again.

How can they know that I had that box? Wasn’t it by chance that I found it? And what could possibly be in there? If it was that important to get it to the address why didn’t that sod just beat me up to get the thing? How can I manage to get out of here?

It was no use wasting any more time so I took that cursed box being more curious about its content than ever and tried to sneak outside because I didn’t feel safe anymore. I was just a few steps on my way when someone shouted “Isn’t that the wrong way? If I were you I’d better hurry.” I turned round to see my watchman smiling at me quite oddly. He seemed to be looking forward to doing things to people. “I’ll be right behind you just in case you lose your way,” he added. So I started out walking through filthy alleys with rats scurrying by. It wouldn’t stop raining. I always could hear footsteps following me. The air was stuffy.

Finally I reached some shabby construction of what used to be a home to people but now was more of a dosshouse. Some windows were broken, the paint was coming off, water seemed to be dripping all over the place and you could hear the police sirens quite steadily. What in the world could be that important to bring it here? I turned round and looked sceptically in the direction of where my guard could be. He stepped out of some dark corner and gave me a menacing sign to go in there. It really was a dusty, scruffy, crappy place. But I just would go in there, hand the box to
someone, wouldn’t even wonder if it was something, and then I’d be out. No matter what comes they can’t blame me anymore. I’ll do their stupid job.

As I finally reached the fourth floor I knocked at that very door hoping to be out a minute from then. No one opened. Of course not. Always when things could be easy they’re not. I knocked again. Nothing. I lost my temper and kicked the door in. Ironic, as it was.

There was simply dim light and the odd smell was still there. I had to make my way through some garbage. No one replied to my “Hello.” As I was just in the mood to put the box down at any place and leave, I noticed someone on the sofa. That drunken idiot didn’t appear to be expecting me. I went over to try to wake him up but then noted something was not quite right. I approached to see that his eyes were open and he had no pulse. I felt sick immediately and hastened out. That was too much for me. I used the fire escape and ran as fast as I could without knowing where to go. This surely was a trap. Even if it wasn’t they would blame me. I ran till I didn’t know where I was anymore. What should I do now? And what made me so sure that trying to explain wasn’t a way to save myself? I stumbled along, in thoughts and mindless at the same time. Instinctively, as it turned out, I reached my place. But from a distance looking at it I identified some more strange guys sifting through the territory. Some of them armed. My heart was beating in a way I had never heard before. As quietly and invisibly as I could I sneaked off again heading for the harbour. What should I do? I had to tell someone. Or just leave? I started to write a letter to my girl. I would leave it at that bar we used to go to. But could I go there at all? The police? My fingerprints were all over. And that way I would be traceable.

A ship was just docking. What if I got on it and disappeared for a while? Would they find my girl? And me? I had to make a decision.