

FICTION

UNTIL GWEN

Your father looks down at the gun in his hand. "This going to fire?"

BY DENNIS LEHANE

.....

Your father picks you up from prison in a stolen Dodge Neon, with an 8-ball of coke in the glove compartment and a hooker named Mandy in the back seat. Two minutes into the ride, the prison still hanging tilted in the rearview, Mandy tells you that she only hooks part-time. The rest of the time she does light secretarial for an independent video chain and tends bar, two Sundays a month, at the local VFW. But she feels her calling—her true calling in life—is to write.

You go, "Books?"

"Books." She snorts, half out of amusement, half to shoot a line off your fist and up her left nostril. "Screen-plays!" She shouts it at the dome light for some reason. "You know—movies."

"Tell him the one about the psycho saint guy." Your father winks at you in the rearview, like he's driving the two of you to the prom. "Go ahead. Tell him."

"Okay, okay." She turns on the seat to face you, and your knees touch, and you think of Gwen, a look she gave you

once, nothing special, just looking back at you as she stood at the front door, asking if you'd seen her keys. A forgettable moment if ever there was one, but you spent four years in prison remembering it.

"... so at his canonization," Mandy is saying, "something, like, happens? And his spirit comes *back* and goes into the body of this priest. But, like, the priest? He has a brain tumor. He doesn't know it or nothing, but *he* does, and it's fucking up his, um—"

"Brain?" you try.

"Thoughts," Mandy says. "So he gets this saint in him and that *does it*, because, like, even though the guy was a saint, his spirit has become evil, because his soul is gone. So this priest? He spends the rest of the movie trying to kill the Pope."

"Why?"

"Just listen," your father says. "It gets good."

You look out the window. A car sits empty along the shoulder. It's beige, and someone has painted gold wings on the sides, fanning out from the front

bumper and across the doors. A sign is affixed to the roof with some words on it, but you've passed it by the time you think to wonder what it says.

"See, there's this secret group that works for the Vatican? They're like a, like a ..."

"A hit squad," your father says.

"Exactly," Mandy says, and presses her finger to your nose. "And the lead guy, the, like, head agent? He's the hero. He lost his wife and daughter in a terrorist attack on the Vatican a few years back, so he's a little fucked up, but—"

You say, "Terrorists attacked the Vatican?"

"Huh?"

You look at her, waiting. She has a small face, eyes too close to her nose.

"In the *movie*," Mandy says. "Not in real life."

"Oh. I just—you know, four years inside, you assume you missed a couple of headlines, but ..."

"Right." Her face is dark and squally now. "Can I finish?"

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"I'm just saying," you say and snort another line off your fist, "even the guys on death row would have heard about that one."

"Just go with it," your father says. "It's not, like, real life."

You look out the window, see a guy in a chicken suit carrying a can of gas in the breakdown lane, think how real life isn't like real life. Probably more like this poor dumb bastard running out of gas in a car with wings painted on it. Wondering how the hell he ever got here. Wondering who he'd pissed off in that previous real life.

Your father has rented two rooms at an Econo Lodge so that you and Mandy can have some privacy, but you send Mandy home after she twice interrupts the sex to pontificate on the merits of Michael Bay films.

You sit in the blue-wash flicker of ESPN and eat peanuts from a plastic bag you got out of a vending machine and drink plastic cupfuls of Jim Beam from a bottle your father presented when you reached the motel parking lot. You think of the time you've lost, and how nice it is to sit alone on a double bed and watch TV, and you think of Gwen, can taste her tongue for just a moment, and you think about the road that's led you here to this motel room on this night after forty-seven months in prison, and how a lot of people would say it was a twisted road, a weird one, filled with curves, but you just think of it as a road like any other. You drive down it on faith, or because you have no other choice, and you find out what it's like by the driving of it, find out what the end looks like only by reaching it.

Late the next morning your father wakes you, tells you he drove Mandy home and you've got things to do, people to see.

Here's what you know about your father above all else: people have a way of vanishing in his company.

He's a professional thief, a consummate con man, an expert in his field—and yet something far beyond professionalism is at his core, something unreasonably arbitrary. Something

he keeps within himself like a story he heard once, laughed at maybe, yet swore never to repeat.

"She was with you last night?" you say.

"You didn't want her. Somebody had to prop her ego back up. Poor girl like that."

"But you drove her home," you say.

"I'm speaking Czech?"

You hold his eyes for a bit. They're big and bland, with the heartless innocence of a newborn's. Nothing moves in them, nothing breathes, and after a while you say, "Let me take a shower."

"Fuck the shower," he says. "Throw on a baseball cap and let's get."

You take the shower anyway, just to feel it, another of those things you would have realized you'd miss if you'd given it any thought ahead of time—standing under the spray, no one near you, all the hot water you want for as long as you want it, shampoo that doesn't smell like factory smoke.

Drying your hair and brushing your teeth, you can hear the old man flicking through channels, never pausing on one for more than thirty seconds: Home Shopping Network—zap. Springer—zap. Oprah—zap. Soap-opera voices, soap-opera music—zap. Monster-truck show—pause. Commercial—zap, zap, zap.

You come back into the room, steam trailing you, pick your jeans up off the bed, and put them on.

The old man says, "Afraid you'd drowned. Worried I'd have to take a plunger to the drain, suck you back up."

You say, "Where we going?"

"Take a drive." Your father shrugs, flicking past a cartoon.

"Last time you said that, I got shot twice."

Your father looks back over his shoulder at you, eyes big and soft. "Wasn't the car that shot you, was it?"

You go out to Gwen's place, but she isn't there anymore. A couple of black kids are playing in the front yard, black mother coming out on the porch to look at the strange car idling in front of her house.

"You didn't leave it here?" your father says.

"Not that I recall."

"Think."
 "I'm thinking."
 "So you didn't?"
 "I told you—not that I recall."
 "So you're sure."
 "Pretty much."
 "You had a bullet in your head."
 "Two."
 "I thought one glanced off."

You say, "Two bullets hit your fucking head, old man, you don't get hung up on the particulars."

"That how it works?" Your father pulls away from the curb as the woman comes down the steps.

The first shot came through the back window, and Gentleman Pete flinched. He jammed the wheel to the right and drove the car straight into the highway exit barrier, air bags exploding, water barrels exploding, something in the back of your head exploding, glass pebbles filling your shirt, Gwen going, "What happened? Jesus. What happened?"

You pulled her with you out the back door—Gwen, your Gwen—and you crossed the exit ramp and ran into the woods and the second shot hit you there but you kept going, not sure how, not sure why, the blood pouring down your face, your head on fire, burning so bright and so hard that not even the rain could cool it off.

"And you don't remember nothing else?" your father says. You've driven all over town, every street, every dirt road, every hollow you can stumble across in Sumner, West Virginia.

"Not till she dropped me off at the hospital."

"Dumb goddamn move if ever there was one."

"I seem to remember I was puking blood by that point, talking all funny."

"Oh, you remember that. Sure."

"You're telling me in all this time you never talked to Gwen?"

"Like I told you three years back, that girl got gone."

You know Gwen. You love Gwen. This part of it is hard to take. You remember Gwen in your car and Gwen in the cornstalks and Gwen in her mother's bed in the hour just before noon,

naked and soft. You watched a drop of sweat appear from her hairline and slide down the side of her neck as she snored against your shoulder blade, and the arch of her foot was pressed over the top of yours, and you watched her sleep, and you were so awake.

"So it's with her," you say.

"No," the old man says, a bit of anger creeping into his puppy-fur voice. "You called me. That night."

"I did?"

"Shit, boy. You called me from the pay phone outside the hospital."

"What'd I say?"

"You said, 'I hid it. It's safe. No one knows where but me.'"

"Wow," you say. "I said all that? Then what'd I say?"

The old man shakes his head. "Cops were pulling up by then, calling you 'motherfucker,' telling you to drop the phone. You hung up."

The old man pulls up outside a low red-brick building behind a tire dealership on Oak Street. He kills the engine and gets out of the car, and you follow. The building is two stories. Facing the street are the office of a bail bondsman, a hardware store, a Chinese takeout place with greasy walls the color of an old dog's teeth, and a hair salon called Girlfriend Hooked Me Up that's filled with black women. Around the back, past the whitewashed windows of what was once a dry cleaner, is a small black door with the words TRUE-LINE EFFICIENCY EXPERTS CORP. stenciled on the frosted glass.

The old man unlocks the door and leads you into a ten-by-ten room that smells of roast chicken and varnish. He pulls the string of a bare light bulb, and you look around at a floor strewn with envelopes and paper, the only piece of furniture a broken-down desk probably left behind by the previous tenant.

Your father crab-walks across the floor, picking up envelopes that have come through the mail slot, kicking his way through the paper. You pick up one of the pieces of paper and read it.

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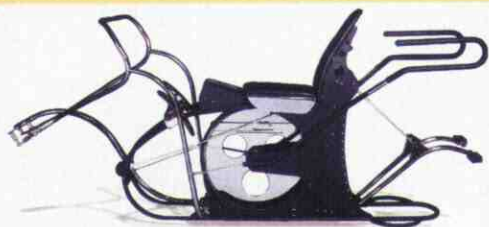
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6. Becoming a ROM enthusiast and trying to persuade friends.
7. Being ignored and ridiculed by the friends who think you've lost your mind.
8. After a year of using the ROM your friends admiring your good shape.
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closed a SASE to help facilitate this process. I hope to see you someday at the airport!

Sincerely,
Jackson A. Willis

You let it drop to the floor and pick up another one.

To Whom It May Concern:

Two months ago, I sent a money order in the amount of fifty dollars to your company in order that I may receive an information packet and sample test so that I could take the US government test and become a security handler and fulfill my patriotic duty against the al Qadas. I have not received my information packet as yet and no one answers when I call your phone. Please send me that information packet so I can get that job.

Yours truly,
Edwin Voeguarde
12 Hinckley Street
Youngstown, OH 44502

You drop this one to the floor too, and watch your father sit on the corner of the desk and open his fresh pile of envelopes with a penknife. He reads some, pauses only long enough with others to shake the checks free and drop the rest to the floor.

You let yourself out, go to the Chinese place and buy a cup of Coke, go into the hardware store and buy a knife and a couple of tubes of Crazy Glue, stop at the car for a minute, and then go back into your father's office.

"What're you selling this time?" you say.

"Airport security jobs," he says, still opening envelopes. "It's a booming market. Everyone wants in. Stop them bad guys before they get on the plane, make the papers, serve your country, and maybe be lucky enough to get posted near one of them Starbucks kiosks. Hell?"

"How much you made?"

Your father shrugs, though you're certain he knows the figure right down to the last penny.

"I've done all right. Hell else am I going to do, back in this shit town for three months, waiting on you? 'Bout time to shut this down, though." He holds up a stack of about sixty checks. "Deposit these and cash out the account. First two months, though? I

was getting a thousand, fifteen hundred checks a week. Thank the good Lord for being selective with the brain tissue, you know?"

"Why?" you say.

"Why what?"

"Why you been hanging around for three months?"

Your father looks up from the stack of checks, squints. "To prepare a proper welcome for you."

"A bottle of whiskey and a hooker who gives lousy head? That took you three months?"

Your father squints a little more, and you see a shaft of gray between the two of you, not quite what you'd call light, just a shaft of air or atmosphere or something, swimming with motes, your father on the other side of it looking at you like he can't quite believe you're related.

After a minute or so your father says, "Yeah."

Your father told you once you'd been born in New Jersey. Another time he said New Mexico. Then Idaho. Drunk as a skunk a few months before you got shot, he said, "No, no. I'll tell you the truth. You were born in Las Vegas. That's in Nevada."

You went on the Internet to look yourself up but never did find anything.

Your mother died when you were seven. You've sat up at night occasionally and tried to picture her face. Some nights you can't see her at all. Some nights you'll get a quick glimpse of her eyes or her jawline, see her standing by the foot of her bed, rolling her stockings on, and suddenly she'll appear whole cloth, whole human, and you can smell her.

Most times, though, it's somewhere in between. You see a smile she gave you, and then she'll vanish. See a spatula she held turning pancakes, her eyes burning for some reason, her mouth an O, and then her face is gone and all you can see is the wallpaper. And the spatula.

You asked your father once why he had no pictures of her. Why hadn't he taken a picture of her? Just one lousy picture?

He said, "You think it'd bring her back? No, I mean, do you? Wow," he said, and rubbed his chin. "Wouldn't that be cool?"

You said, "Forget it."

"Maybe if we had a whole album of pictures?" your father said. "She'd, like, pop out from time to time, make us breakfast."

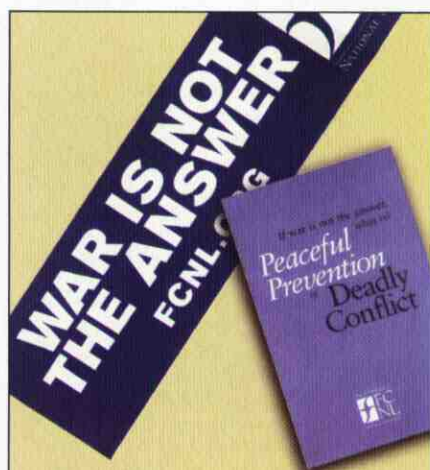
Now that you've been in prison, you've been documented, but even they'd had to make it up, take your name as much on faith as you. You have no Social Security number or birth certificate, no passport. You've never held a job.

Gwen said to you once, "You don't have anyone to tell you who you are, so you don't need anyone to tell you. You just are who you are. You're beautiful."

And with Gwen that was usually enough. You didn't need to be defined —by your father, your mother, a place of birth, a name on a credit card or a driver's license or the upper left corner of a check. As long as her definition of you was something she could live with, then you could too.

You find yourself standing in a Nebraska wheat field. You're seventeen years old. You learned to drive five years earlier. You were in school once, for two months when you were eight, but you read well and you can multiply three-digit numbers in your head faster than a calculator, and you've seen the country with the old man. You've learned people aren't that smart. You've learned how to pull lottery-ticket scams and asphalt-paving scams and get free meals with a slight upturn of your brown eyes. You've learned that if you hold ten dollars in front of a stranger, he'll pay twenty to get his hands on it if you play him right. You've learned that every good lie is threaded with truth and every accepted truth leaks lies.

You're seventeen years old in that wheat field. The night breeze smells of wood smoke and feels like dry fingers as it lifts your bangs off your forehead. You remember everything about that night because it is the night you met Gwen. You are two years away from prison, and you feel like someone has finally given you permission to live.



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Jack Hannah in *You Will Not Taste Death: Jesus and Epicureanism* recognizes the notes as chronologically ordered and correlative with the skeletal history used in the *Gospel of Mark*. Hannah provides all the text of *Thomas* and all Marcan context, and upon this develops a narrative about Jesus that is tenably historical.

This *historical* Jesus based his teaching on the Epicurean philosophy; e.g. in place of Judaism's practices of fasting, praying, almsgiving, and obeying food laws, this *historical* Jesus said, "Tell no lie and do not do what you hate."

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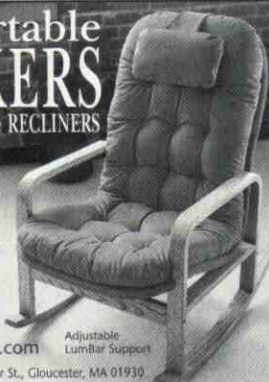
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This is what few people know about Sumner, West Virginia: every now and then someone finds a diamond. Some dealers were in a plane that went down in a storm in '51, already blown well off course, flying a crate of Israeli stones down the Eastern Seaboard toward Miami. Plane went down near an open mineshaft, took some swing-shift miners with it. The government showed up, along with members of an international gem consortium, got the bodies out of there, and went to work looking for the diamonds. Found most of them, or so they claimed, but for decades afterward rumors persisted, occasionally given credence by the sight of a miner, still grimed brown by the shafts, tooling around town in an Audi.

You'd been in Sumner peddling hurricane insurance in trailer parks when word got around that someone had found a diamond as big as a casino chip. Miner by the name of George Brunda, suddenly buying drinks, talking to his travel agent. You and Gwen shot pool with him one night, and you could see his dread in the bulges under his eyes, the way his laughter exploded too high and too fast.

He didn't have much time, old George, and he knew it, but he had a mother in a rest home, and he was making the arrangements to get her transferred. George was a fleshy guy, triple-chinned, and dreams he'd probably forgotten he'd ever had were re-discovered and weighted in his face, jangling and pulling the flesh.

"Probably hasn't been laid in twenty years," Gwen said when George went to the bathroom. "It's sad. Poor sad George. Never knew love."

Her pool stick pressed against your chest as she kissed you, and you could taste the tequila, the salt, and the lime on her tongue.

"Never knew love," she whispered in your ear, an ache in the whisper.

"What about the fairground?" your father says as you leave the office of True-Line Efficiency Experts Corp. "Maybe you hid it there. You always had a fondness for that place."

You feel a small hitch. In your leg, let's say. Just a tiny clutching sensation

in the back of your right calf. But you walk through it, and it goes away.

You say to your father as you reach the car, "You really drive her home this morning?"

"Who?"

"Mandy?"

"Who's ... ?" Your father opens his door, looks at you over it. "Oh, the whore?"

"Yeah."

"Did I drive her home?"

"Yeah."

Your father pats the top of the door, the cuff of his denim jacket flapping around his wrist, his eyes on you. You feel, as you always have, reflected in them, even when you aren't, couldn't be, wouldn't be.

"Did I drive her home?" A smile bounces in the rubber of your father's face.

"Did you drive her home?" you say.

That smile's all over the place now—the eyebrows, too. "Define home."

You say, "I wouldn't know, would I?"

"You're still pissed at me because I killed Fat Boy?"

"George."

"What?"

"His name was George."

"He would have ratted."

"To who? It wasn't like he could file a claim. Wasn't a fucking lottery ticket?"

Your father shrugs, looks off down the street.

"I just want to know if you drove her home."

"I drove her home," your father says.

"Yeah?"

"Oh, sure."

"Where'd she live?"

"Home," he says, and gets behind the wheel, starts the ignition.

You never figured George Brunda for smart, and only after a full day in his house, going through everything down to the point of removing the dry-wall and putting it back, resealing it, touching up the paint, did Gwen say, "Where's the mother stay again?"

That took uniforms, Gwen as a nurse, you as an orderly, Gentleman Pete out in the car while your father kept watch on George's mine entrance and monitored police activity over a scanner.

The old lady said, "You're new here,

and quite pretty," as Gwen shot her up with phenobarbital and Valium and you went to work on the room.

This was the glitch: You'd watched George drive to work, watched him enter the mine. No one saw him come back out again, because no one was looking on the other side of the hill, at the exit of a completely different shaft. So while your father watched the front, George took off out the back, drove over to check on his investment, walked into the room just as you pulled the rock from the back of the mother's radio, George looking politely surprised, as if he'd stepped into the wrong room.

He smiled at you and Gwen, held up a hand in apology, and backed out of the room.

Gwen looked at the door, looked at you.

You looked at Gwen, looked at the window, looked at the rock filling the center of your palm, the entire center of your palm. Looked at the door.

Gwen said, "Maybe we—"

And George came through the door again, nothing polite in his face, a gun in his hand. And not any regular gun—a motherfucking six-shooter, like they carried in westerns, long, thin barrel, a family heirloom maybe, passed down from a great-great-great-grandfather, not even a trigger guard, just the trigger, and crazy fat George the lonely unloved pulling back on it and squeezing off two rounds, the first of which went out the window, the second of which hit metal somewhere in the room and then bounced off that. The old lady went "Ooof," even though she was doped up and passed out, and it sounded to you like she'd eaten something that didn't agree with her. You could picture her sitting in a restaurant, halfway through coffee, placing a hand to her belly, saying it: "Ooof." And George would come around to her chair and say, "Is everything okay, Mama?"

But he wasn't doing that now, because the old lady went ass-end-up out of the bed and hit the floor, and George dropped the gun and stared at her and said, "You shot my mother."

And you said, "You shot your mother," your entire body jetting sweat through the pores all at once.

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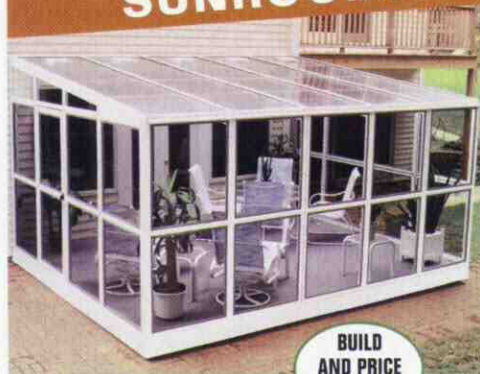
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"No, you did. No, you did."
You said, "Who was holding the fucking gun?"
But George didn't hear you. George jogged three steps and dropped to his knees. The old lady was on her side, and you could see blood staining the back of her white johnny.
George cradled her face, looked into it, and said, "Mother. Oh, Mother, oh, Mother, oh, Mother."
And you and Gwen ran right the fuck out of that room.

In the car Gwen said, "You saw it, right? He shot his own mother."

"He did?"

"He did," she said. "Baby, she's not going to die from that."

"Maybe. She's old."

"She's old, yeah. The fall from the bed was worse."

"We shot an old lady."

"We didn't shoot her."

"In the ass."

"We didn't shoot anyone. He had the gun."

"That's how it'll play, though. You know that. An old lady. Christ."

Gwen's eyes were the size of that diamond as she looked at you, and then she said, "Ooof."

"Don't start," you said.

"I can't help it, Bobby. Jesus."

She said your name. That's your name—Bobby. You loved hearing her say it.

Sirens were coming up the road behind you now, and you were looking at her and thinking, This isn't funny, it isn't, it's fucking sad, that poor old lady, and thinking, Okay, it's sad, but God, Gwen, I will never, ever live without you. I just can't imagine it anymore. I want to ... What?

Wind was pouring into the car, and the sirens were growing louder, an army of them, and Gwen's face was an inch from yours, her hair falling from behind her ear and whipping across her mouth, and she was looking at you, she was seeing you—really seeing you. Nobody'd ever done that, nobody. She was tuned to you like a radio tower out on the edge of the unbroken fields of wheat, blinking red under a dark-blue sky, and that night breeze lifting your

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R	O	L	L	G	P	U	M	P	S	U	P
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H	E	P	C	A	T	I	P	R	O	B	E
Y	L	E	O	N	V	E	G	E	T	A	L
C	O	R	R	A	L	S	T	T	R	G	S
A	V	S	I	S	E	D	I	T	I	O	N
R	E	M	A	R	R	Y	E	A	V	O	M
B	R	O	N	X	A	U	R	S	I	N	E
O	S	O	D	I	S	H	O	N	E	S	T
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S	E	E	R	S	R	E	S	E	A	T	S

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Across. 1. A + M(ERIN)D 6. LAG + OS (rev.) 11. TROLL (double def.) 12. P(UMPS)UP
13. CO(QUE)ITE (octet anag.) 14. HE(PC)AT 16. ROBE (anag.) 17. VE(GET)AL 18. CHOR(A)LES
23. SEDITION (anag. and pun) 24. RE + MA(R)RY 28. BRO(NC)S 29. URSINE (anag.)
30. HE(DON)ISTS 31. RE(S + EWE)D 32. F(R)EE 33. SEERS (homophone) 34. RESEATS
(anag.) Down. 1. ARCH + Y 2. MORSE + L 3. LO(PER)S 4. IGUANAS (anag.) 5. D + U + TIES
7. POE + TASTER 8. S + COT 9. PLUM + BAG + O 10. SPIE(L)S 15. CARRIE + DON
19. O + VERSE + A 20. STORIED (anag.) 21. R(I + VIE)R + A 22. HARBORS (anag.)
23. ERAS + ER 25. MOUS(S)E 26. S + TONE 27. METES (hidden)

bangs was her, for Christ's sake, her, and she was laughing, her hair in her teeth, laughing because the old lady had fallen out of the bed and it wasn't funny, it wasn't, and you said the first part in your head, the "I want to" part, but you said the second part aloud: "Dissolve into you."

And Gentleman Pete, up there at the wheel, on this dark country road, said, "What?"

But Gwen said, "I know, baby. I know." And her voice broke around the words, broke in the middle of her laughter and her fear and her guilt, and she took your face in her hands as Pete drove up on the interstate, and you saw all those siren lights washing across the back window like Fourth of July ice cream. Then the window came down like yanked netting and chucked glass pebbles into your shirt, and you felt something in your head go all shifty and loose and hot as a cigarette coal.

The fairground is empty, and you and your father walk around for a bit. The tarps over some of the booths have come undone at the corners, and they rustle and flap, caught between the wind and the wood, and your father watches you, waiting for you to remember, and you say, "It's coming back to me. A little."

Your father says, "Yeah?"

You hold up your hand, tip it from side to side.

Out behind the cages where, in summer, they set up the dunking machine and the bearded lady's chair and the fast-pitch machines, you see a fresh square of dirt, recently tilled, and you stand over it until your old man stops beside you, and you say, "Mandy?"

The old man chuckles softly, scuffs at the dirt with his shoe, looks off at the horizon.

"I held it in my hand, you know," you say.

"I'd figure," the old man says.

It's quiet, the land flat and metal-blue and empty for miles in every direction, and you can hear the rustle of the tarps and nothing else, and you know that the old man has brought you here to kill you. Picked you up from prison to kill you. Brought you into the

world, probably, so eventually he could kill you.

"Covered the center of my palm."

"Big, huh?"

"Big enough."

"Running out of patience, boy," your father says.

You nod. "I'd guess you would be."

"Never my strong suit."

"No."

"This has been nice," your father says, and sniffs the air. "Like old times, reconnecting and all that."

"I told her that night to just go, just put as much country as she could between you and her until I got out. I told her to trust no one. I told her you'd stay hot on her trail even when all logic said you'd quit. I told her even if I told you I had it, you'd have to cover your bets—you'd have to come looking for her."

Your father looks at his watch, looks off at the sky again.

"I told her if you ever caught up to her, to take you to the fairground."

"Who's this we're talking about?"

"Gwen." Saying her name to the air, to the flapping tarps, to the cold.

"You don't say." Your father's gun comes out now. He taps it against his outer knee.

"Told her to tell you that's all she knew. I'd hid it here. Somewhere here."

"Lotta ground."

You nod.

Your father turns so you are facing, his hands crossed over his groin, the gun there, waiting.

"The kinda money that stone'll bring," your father says, "a man could retire."

"To what?" you say.

"Mexico."

"To what, though?" you say. "Mean old man like you? What else you got, you ain't stealing something, killing somebody, making sure no one alive has a good fucking day?"

The old man shrugs, and you watch his brain go to work, something bugging him finally, something he hasn't considered until now.

"It just come to me," he says.

"What's that?"

"You've known for, what, three years now that Gwen is no more?"

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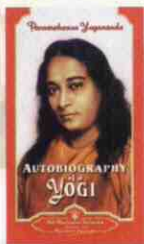
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"Dead."
"If you like," your father says. "Dead."
"Yeah."
"Three years," your father says. "Lot-ta time to think."
You nod.
"Plan."
You give him another nod.
Your father looks down at the gun in his hand. "This going to fire?"
You shake your head.
Your father says, "It's loaded. I can feel the mag weight."
"Jack the slide," you say.

He gives it a few seconds and then tries. He yanks back hard, bending over a bit, but the slide is stone.

"Krazy Glue," you say. "Filled the barrel, too."

You pull your hand from your pocket, open up the knife. You're very talented with a knife. Your father knows this. He's seen you win money this way, throwing knives at targets, dancing blades between your fingers in a blur.

You say, "Wherever you buried her, you're digging her out."

The old man nods. "I got a shovel in the trunk."

You shake your head. "With your hands."

Dawn is coming up, the sky bronzed with it along the lower reaches, when you let the old man use the shovel. His nails are gone, blood crusted black all over the older cuts, red seeping out of the newer ones. The old man broke down crying once. Another time he got mean, told you you weren't his anyway, some whore's kid he found in a barrel, decided might come in useful on a missing-baby scam they were running back then.

You say, "Was this in Las Vegas? Or Idaho?"

When the shovel hits bone, you say, "Toss it back up here," and step back as the old man throws the shovel out of the grave.

The sun is up now, and you watch the old man claw away the dirt for a while, and then there she is, all black and rotted, bones exposed in some places, her rib cage reminding you of the scales of a large fish you saw dead on a beach once in Oregon.

The old man says, "Now what?" and tears flee his eyes and drip off his chin. "What'd you do with her clothes?"
"Burned 'em."
"I mean, why'd you take 'em off in the first place?"

The old man looks back at the bones, says nothing.

"Look closer," you say. "Where her stomach used to be."

The old man squats, peering, and you pick up the shovel.

Until Gwen, you had no idea who you were. None. During Gwen, you knew. After Gwen, you're back to wondering.

You wait. The old man keeps cocking and re-cocking his head to get a better angle, and finally, finally, he sees it.

"Well," he says, "I'll be damned."

You hit him in the head with the shovel, and the old man says, "Now, hold on," and you hit him again, seeing her face, the mole on her left breast, her laughing once with a mouth full of popcorn. The third swing makes the old man's head tilt funny on his neck, and you swing once more to be sure and then sit down, feet dangling into the grave.

You look at the blackened, shriveled thing lying below your father, and you see her face with the wind coming through the car and her hair in her teeth and her eyes seeing you and taking you into her like food, like blood, like what she needed to breathe, and you say, "I wish ..." and sit there for a long time with the sun beginning to warm the ground and warm your back and the breeze returning to make those tarps flutter again, desperate and soft.

"I wish I'd taken your picture," you say finally. "Just once."

And you sit there until it's almost noon and weep for not protecting her and weep for not being able to know her ever again, and weep for not knowing what your real name is, because whatever it is or could have been is buried with her, beneath your father, beneath the dirt you begin throwing back in. ▀

Dennis Lehane is the author of seven novels, including Mystic River (2001) and Shutter Island (2003). He is currently working on a novel set during the Boston police strike of 1919. He lives in the Boston area.

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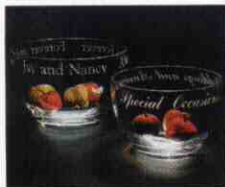


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