

MICK AND AMANDA AND REESA AND CRAIG

by Greg Stolze

There's some old saying about "Don't fight monsters unless you want to become one," but I guess I approached it from the other direction.

Amanda Yang got hold of me one day from out of the blue, and I thought it was just a call to check in on an old man, but she specifically wanted to talk face to face. She said she needed my help. I wasn't going to say no.

I met her at a Denny's, and she'd told me she was bringing a friend named Mick.

Amanda was the same soft, plump, smiling woman in a turtleneck and earth-tone jacket, and sitting next to her was this stretched out guy with long hair and tattoos on his fingers.

"Glen, this is Mick," she said, standing, being the mediator, exactly like you'd expect.

I shook his hand, and he at least had a firm grip. He had two rings—a skull, and some kind of hand-and-eye thing. They were both silver.

He looked me right in the eye and said, "I saw you in a psychic vision." Amanda turned bright red.

"Did you now," I said in return.

###

The first time I killed somebody, it was personal. His name was Ben Silva, I was seventeen years old, and he'd humiliated my dad.

Bennie Silva was my father's bookie and he was one of those extremely loud little guys. I've known lots of short men who weren't pricks, so I'm not saying there was a correlation, but Silva really did seem to have that short man syndrome. Everyone figured he was lightly mobbed up but not *in* the mafia.

Anyhow, what went down was, I'd been late getting my driver's license because of some bullshit with our car and not being able to practice, but then my dad won on some pony and bought our family a second car. It was a clapped-out shitbox, no doubt, but it ran most of the time and I could finally get in the miles and hopefully pass my test. So any time he was even slightly willing to let me drive him somewhere, we'd call it a lesson.

Well, the Broncos were playing that Sunday and dad figured we were low on beer and chips, and as we're in the store picking them up, Bennie Silva cracked wise on my dad about how he'd

better get ready to lose his money. Dad kinda laughed it off, quiet, and said we'd just have to see how it went.

Bennie was a real dick about it. Actually got in Dad's face about some *other* money he owed, and my pops tried to calmly assure him he'd get it, especially if the Broncos didn't make so many turnovers, and Silva got all red in the face and started yelling that he'd better pay win or lose, or else get used to pissing through a stump. And then he slapped him.

Slapped my dad, right in the middle of the potato chip aisle.

"You'll get your money, Ben," my dad said, red as a beet. "I promise."

So, every teenage boy struggles with his father on some level or another, but seeing another man do that was like... I dunno. Like being forced to eat a piece of my own death. It wasn't necessary. It was just Bennie Silva.

I was a weird kid, tall and skinny and glum, and seeing my dad struck like a battered child in front of everyone—and nobody doing anything, least of all my dad, or me—it put my moody quiet brooding side into overdrive.

I never talked my shit out with anyone, I just walked. Walked around the woods by day. Walked around the streets in the evenings. Walked by the river at night. Real late, too. My parents couldn't control me, they both slept like rocks and had early morning jobs to go to, so I could slip out without any real sneaking. Maybe they knew, maybe not.

So that Friday, real late, I couldn't sleep and didn't want to toss and turn, so I got up in the dark and slipped on my shoes and jacket—a Broncos windbreaker, of course—and I went to do some outside moping.

A lot of things fell into line just so.

There was this bar by the river. Not right up on it, but with a weedy overgrown patch between its parking lot and the waterfront. Every three or four years, that grassy stretch would flood completely, so nobody was going to bother building on it, they just put up one of those metal fenders between the grass and the cars, so no drunk would accidentally try to park in the water. There was a little trail along the bank where I'd do my nocturnal perambulations or whatever, and I was on that when I saw Bennie Silva stumble out the back of the bar. It was him, for sure. He stopped under one of the lights, taking two tries to get the zipper on his windbreaker started. He was shitfaced. I was no sophisticate at 17, but even I could tell, he was stumbling. He bumbled his way over to his car and was leaning on it, muttering swear words, trying to get it unlocked, and there was a cinderblock right by my feet.

He didn't see me, he was plastered and trying to outsmart his car keys. I picked up the cinderblock and my head went to a really weird space, you know? I felt like, if I paused even one second to think things through, I'd get paralyzed, and then I'd do something stupid and he'd hear me or *feel* me somehow, and everything would get hectic. So I very carefully didn't think, I slipped my brain into neutral because I could see how things could play out if I got out of my own way a little and let events roll downhill.

My idea was, walk up behind him with that cinderblock, lift it up, and brain him. I did that. It felt like watching surveillance footage on closed circuit... artless, no drama to it, just a tall kid walking up behind a short drunk and smacking a concrete block on his dome.

Benny flopped down to his knees, dropped his keys and said, "What the...?" He twisted to look up at me and I didn't like that. I still had the block. After knocking him on the head, it had kind of rebounded and I was holding it over my chest. Easy as could be to just move it over his face, let go of one side so that edge swung down, and let its own weight pull it into him. I didn't power it down like dribbling a basketball or anything. I just let it fall onto the bridge of his nose, scraping down his face, his crummy little mustache, cracking onto the front teeth of his opened lower jaw.

That did it for him. I don't know if he died right then or just got knocked out, but when he fell still, I started thinking real thoughts again, not just going through the motions of "Oh, I guess this is what's happening."

I realized I might well have killed him. If I didn't, he'd be after my ass for sure. If I had, well, cops and gangsters would have questions. I looked around, right and left. Nobody in sight.

I heard later that some woman he'd been seeing had broken it off with him, told him she was moving to St. Paul that Monday. Maybe that's why he got so drunk. Maybe that's why he was so shitty to my dad. Can't say for sure. Nobody seemed to know who this woman, his girlfriend, was or had been.

So the first thing I figured was, I'd better get rid of the murder weapon. Walked down to the path by the river, bushwhacking through the thigh-high grass, and hucked it out as far as I could—two swings, a-one-and-a-two. It went pretty far, I guess. Fifteen, twenty feet? Probably still there today.

It started to rain right about then, a little light drizzle. Good luck to me, I think. Probably kept me from panicking. Somehow, having that cold sensation, that one thing I knew I couldn't change, it grounded me a little. It would go on to rain all night, getting heavy and steady. I'm sure that rinsed away some evidence.

I went back to Bennie and grabbed him by the ankles. Getting him over that gray metal guardrail was the hardest work of the whole thing. If he'd been big, I never could have done it, they'd have found his body and maybe I'd have wound up in juvie or a psych ward. Or maybe not. Anyhow, I wrestled him over it, then dragged him through the weeds to the edge of the water and pushed him out into it. Actually went in knee deep to shove him into the current. Since it was the rainy season, the water was pretty fast. Because it was already raining and I was already wet, I figured I might as well go out far enough to float him downstream a ways.

I went back to his car and found his keys. That gave me pause. I thought about moving it, to further obscure where shit had gone down, but I wasn't confident in my driving. Instead, I pulled my sleeve over my fingers, picked up the keys and stuck the obvious car key in the door lock.

Then I went home, left my muddy sneakers on the porch, and stuffed my soaking clothes deep into my laundry hamper.

Next day? Nothing. I walked by the bar and his car was gone, which made my heart throb as I thought about what that might mean, that he'd recovered, driven home, was certainly going to kill me. But he didn't.

Day after that? More nothing. Nobody was talking about him being missing—he wasn't a guy with a lot of friends or a wide social group, outside the gamblers he serviced.

It took three days for anyone to find his body, which had made it a whole mile and a half downstream. People whispered about a mob hit, a revenge thing, a drunk tumble into the water, even suicide.

Cops didn't care. He was a scumbag with a laundry list of petty convictions. They never even talked to my dad, let alone me. Since he was such an annoying, piss-ant shithack, loads of people had a little motive. But nobody had a serious motive, more than anyone else.

There was one rumor that he'd been secretly Jewish, and then something something, and then they killed him? But no one had a real firm handle on what "something something" was supposed to be or who "they" were. The question of his life and death kind of faded out.

###

"Look, I know it's hard to believe," Amanda said to me in that Denny's, after we'd ordered our flapjacks and coffee. "Mick's the real thing though. He's known stuff it was... just impossible for him to learn other than through... you know..."

"ESP shit," I said. She winced and he laughed.

"I don't blame you for being a skeptic," he said, "Not even for a minute. But come on. There's weird stuff out there. You've had experiences you can't explain, right?"

"No."

"Not one? I mean like... like a real strong deja vu right before a car accident, or you guessed something really crazy about someone and it was 100% right?"

"No."

He opened his mouth and closed it again, then cocked his head to the side. "You've led a very different life from me. That's cool though." He laughed.

I smiled back, just a little. "So. I got some questions."

"I bet you do," Mick said, grinning. It was half charming and half shit-eating.

"What I want to know is what you saw," I said, jutting my chin at him, "And what you need," I said, nodding at Amanda.

"I saw Amanda in her office, talking to a clean-shaven guy with a Marines tattoo on his arm and a scar on his chin."

“That’s me?”

“From the description, I thought he was talking about you,” she said, and I squinted at her. It’s hard not to be suspicious of people, and I supposed she could be working some kind of long con, telling him about my tat so I’d say “Wow, yeah, he’s for sure the real psychic deal!” but... come on. There are thousands and thousands of guys my age with that tattoo. The shops near Twentynine Palms base probably have inkers who can do it in their sleep.

###

The second time I killed somebody, it was a responsibility. I’d sleepwalked through high school with so-so grades and no sports, so college was out, but the Marines were always hiring. We had to kill at least 50,000 Iraqis, or else the 9/11s would win, or something. I’d stood over a fryolator long enough to think nothing could possibly be worse than working fast food. I was wrong.

Knowing I had actually gotten away with murder got me through some tough times in boot camp, along with being right in the middle. The gung-ho moto motherfuckers got lots of ass kicking so they’d realize they weren’t Captain America. The real weaklings who barely got in, they got it too so they might be hypnotized into thinking they *were* Captain America.

If nothing else, I was really good at operating while sleep deprived.

I did my bit in the sandbox as a turret gunner and I didn’t see much action. But one day we were booking down the highway in a high-speed convoy when someone popped a mortar at the end Humvee. They got right between last and next-to, so nobody flipped or got pancaked, and then we were all opening fire on the Republican Guard vehicle jamming away overland.

Except me. I don’t know, I wasn’t looking back and I was taken by absolute, complete surprise, so while everyone else reacted like a blender with only two settings—“off” and “frappe”—I looked around. I saw someone on a motorcycle heading the other direction, but from the same place. Just one guy on it, unarmed, on an off-road dirtbike.

I had a grenade launcher, so I stitched a line at him, dialed it in and wiped him out. Everyone else got the armored vehicle dudes. There wasn’t much left of any of them.

I cooked off more rounds in various engagements, but none where I could say for absolute certain that I smoked some dude, not like the motorbiker. So maybe I killed more than one person overseas. It doesn’t feel like I did. I don’t know.

That one was so easy, I’m not sure it counts.

Maybe I didn’t even do it from responsibility. When I think back and consider my motivations, it was probably the paycheck. Arguably, that was a murder for hire.

###

“OK, so what do you need? You said you needed my help, Amanda. What help?”

“I... I have a client who’s being hurt.”

I folded my arms. “Ain’t there social services for that?”

“I don’t think they can help. It’s not a *person* doing it, it’s... it’s something else.”

I gave this Mick guy a flat look and he raised his hands. “Look, I’m not saying paranormal phenomena are *common*, they’re not falling from the sky like rain, but almost everyone believes in something. You talk to damn near anyone and they’ve got their ghost story, or the lucky guess, or the coincidence they can’t explain.”

“Except me.”

“Maybe it just hasn’t happened *yet*,” he said.

“Please,” Amanda said, putting her hand on mine. “It’s a little girl. I know the foster parents, they’re not doing this, it’s hurting them too. It...” She bit her lip, and looked around blinking, before leaning in and lowering her voice. “I was in session with her, and out of nowhere she just *shook*, and fell over. There was a palm shape on her face, from nowhere. I heard it!”

“Heard...?”

She was blinking back tears. “I heard it slap her. I didn’t imagine this!”

“OK, I... guess. But what am I supposed to do about it?”

“I don’t know! We tried a priest, we got some kind of... of *spirit remover* from Koreatown but she just shook her head and refused payment.”

“So then you looked up psychics in the phone book?”

Mick guffawed. “I’m unlisted, buddy. Amanda’s my therapist too.”

“I didn’t tell him,” Amanda said.

“He saw me in a vision.”

“OK, OK, let me see if I can get anything.” And just like that, he put his fingertip on my forehead and closed his eyes.

###

Third time I did a murder, it was political. His name was Craig Barnes and we worked for the same police department.

Yeah, after I mustered out from my minimum Marines commitment, I went into law enforcement. Used the GI bill to get a community college Criminology degree, which I don’t think I ever used once. My grades were better than in high school though. Maybe I got smarter.

As a cop, I mostly did traffic, I was a good fit for it and liked it.

OK, so there's this guy K.L. Williams. Police trainer, expert, wrote a book on cop shit. His theory is that in a typical department, 15% of the cops are good cops—go into it for the right reasons, want to serve and protect. A like number are bad cops, got into it for a shiny badge and permission to hurt folks. The remainder act good or act bad depending on who's with them at any given moment.

Craig Barnes was in that bad segment. First off, he was on the take. Not hugely, just a little beak-wetting here and some free lunches there. Enough to buy a nice boat, but not anything where he had to get himself a launderer or an offshore account. Mostly just greasy twenties in a sack and free lap dances to overlook violations at the local titty bar. Not great but, you know, hardly a mortal sin. Nobody really cared.

There was this other officer who ran against Barnes during the union elections, and he dirty campaigned so hard, she wound up transferring, moved herself to a whole other state. She was, I reckon, in the good cop portion.

So Craig Barnes was our union rep and that just made him more bulletproof. I didn't like him much, but around that time I started dating Reesa and had other things on my mind.

I didn't want my co-workers involved in my love life, but Barnes coincidentally showed up to the same concert I was at with her, and the next day at work he started asking me about "that hot piece of Italian ass" he saw me with.

"We go out sometimes," I told him.

"Hey, for cops, one time is enough, you know? Like, the Barnes door's open and the bull is coming out!"

"Uh huh."

He looked at me like he was trying to decide if I was stupid.

"You ever hear the one about those new Italian tires? Dago round and round, until dago flat, and then dago wop wop wop." He laughed.

"I don't get it," I said.

"Jesus."

"No, really, explain it to me."

He just shook his head and left the locker room. I went to write some tickets.

Next time I saw him, he was walking past some working girls who'd been picked up. One of them saw him and turned pale, she gave a little shiver and I knew. He wasn't just talk.

Of course, any time one of us did anything bad, Barnes threw himself and the union into it, so everyone else was starting to feel bulletproof like him. Everybody I pulled over to ticket looked scared and resentful—more than usual, even.

He started to remind me of Bennie Silva, honestly. So I started thinking “Well?” and I started watching him.

Most people will show you how to kill them, if you watch close enough.

I mentioned his boat, right? Sometimes he’d take his buddies out and go fishing, and sometimes he’d go by himself. It wasn’t hard to find where he had it parked. Or tethered, whatever. In its slip.

He had a beer he always drank, an IPA from some local hipster douche. “Imperial Vapor Stout.” The cop bar started stocking it at his suggestion. Maybe he was in business with the brewer, or maybe he just liked it. I don’t know. It only came in bottles though.

I shoplifted a capper. (It’s easy to shoplift a lot of stuff, if you’re a cop.) It’s like a squeeze-tool you use to seal up beer bottles. Got some Imperial Vapor a little way into fishing season. Barnes always was out the first weekend with other fishing cops, as long as the weather was good. After a few weeks or a month at most, he’d come in after everyone else was done talking about it, with some big brag-worthy catch. Maybe he was a really good fisherman. Or maybe he just got them from a store and lied. I wouldn’t put it past him.

Finally, I got some of his Vicodin. He’d done something to his back, got a scrip, and kept it in his locker for after duty. While he was busting someone’s chops and not looking, I snagged the bottle and dumped about a third of what was there into my hand, then pocket. Easy.

I took those Imperial Vapors, ground up his vikes real fine, opened the bottles carefully, put the dust in them, then re-capped them. Getting them on his boat was just another after-midnight walk along another dark waterfront. His boat was locked, but come on. It’s not like a house. I found a hatch I could pop with a multitool. I slipped in that way, which was not easy because I’ve gained a lot of weight since I was a seventeen-year-old killer. Though, hey, I bet I could huck a bloodstained cinderblock a whole lot farther, so that’s something. Anyhow, I got in, put the doctored beers in his fridge, took the ones that were already there and dropped them in a dumpster on the way back to my car. Not like I was going to drink them. I gave IPAs a fair chance and I just don’t like all the hops.

I had a pretext ready if someone saw me farting around with his boat door or hatch, I had my badge, but nobody saw anything and nobody said anything. Next day, he went fishing, drank some beers, passed out in the sun, and died of heat prostration. It was an unusually hot day. They didn’t even do an autopsy. Why would they?

That was about the time I got serious with Reesa, stopped buying her earrings and necklaces and started shopping for rings. Date to girlfriend to fiancée to wife, it all went along pretty smooth. Her dad didn’t like me, but he was a turd. Owned this furniture shop that couldn’t make expensive fancy stuff, just bland practical chairs and tables that people could get elsewhere for half the price. He treated Reesa like her whole point of living was to make his life easier, made her drop college when her mom died so she could mop his floors and cook his fucking braciola every Sunday. Selfish bastard.

He didn't like it when I asked Reesa to move out, so I had to shitplate him—nothing official, just mentioned his make and model and license number to the guys, and suddenly he can't drive to the lumber yard without getting pulled over on some ticky-tack offense. I didn't like doing it, but some people you just can't reach with words, you know?

He died years after I married Reesa, but I had nothing to do with it.

###

I pulled back from Mick, who surprised me by smelling nice—soap and some kind of aromatic. But he opened his eyes and said “Got nothing. Sorry man. Sometimes the radio doesn't tune nothing in.”

“How convenient,” I said.

“C'mon man, don't be sarcastic. You know it's not convenient and if it was, the military would have weaponized it by now, or else you'd be disputing your monthly bill with the psychic equivalent of Comcast.”

I snorted.

“Mick is sure you can help us. Please,” Amanda said.

“Why me?”

Mick gave a broad shrug. “Dunno. But you're what the, like, psycho-space showed me, so you're up. And I mean, come on, *nobody* is exactly qualified to deal with invisible child abusers. It's not like the cops are going to do anything.”

“I was a police officer for twenty-five years,” I told him.

“So you know what I'm talking about,” he replied.

I blinked, and wondered what it would be like to go through life with such unconsidered confidence. Just... walking down the street, certain that everyone agrees with you.

“Her house is close by,” Amanda said.

We didn't even have to drive.

Reaching the spot, it looked entirely like the home of a pair of prosperous middle-class foster parents. “Hate Has No Place Here” sign in the yard, shrubs a little shaggy, driveway looking like it could do with a new layer of blacktop. But the house wasn't sagging, the roof had been replaced recently and the yard wasn't the worst one on the block.

The mom was at home, short and pretty in a batik blouse and a very large twist-out. She looked like she'd been stressed for a while, but she smiled worriedly at Amanda, and then her brow furrowed a little at Mick.

“You look just like Mick Peltier,” she said, with a different smile, pleasant but slightly confused.

“I get that a lot,” he replied, and then introduced me by name as if we were old buddies. She shook my hand but kept glancing back at him.

“Jessa’s upstairs,” she said.

“Have there been any more... episodes?” Amanda asked.

“So far so good,” and the foster mom’s catalog of smiles brought out a new one, hopeful yet wary.

“You know her?” I asked Mick’s back as he followed Amanda up the steps.

“No. I used to be famous though. Dream Void?”

“Huh?”

“After your time, maybe. You know that one Ford commercial? They licensed one of our songs for that.”

“Oh.”

Then we met the little girl Jessa, and I’d seen the type. Not real often on traffic, but I’d come in the precinct and see a kid wrapped in a patrol car blanket, holding one of the teddy bears the department bought by the dozen. The kids were all different but all had this distant, traumatized stillness. Removed from the home due to whatever, or survivors of accidents, or just lost too long and real scared, they all had that look, like something came along and knocked the childhood out of them. Jessa was listlessly drawing outside the lines of a coloring book, maybe eight years old or maybe a short, skinny ten. She brightened a little when Amanda came in.

“Hey Jessa. How are you? I brought some friends with me, nice men.”

“Yo, I’m Mick,” Peltier said, squatting easily beside her. “Wanna see a trick?”

She nodded. He pulled up his sleeve, revealing a tattooed skeleton on his forearm. It was holding a cigar in one hand, lifting a top hat in the other, and it had a speech balloon with “You’re gonna die, dude!” in it. Real child-appropriate.

“Mick,” Amanda said, but then he started flexing and rolling his fingers, and the skeleton started to dance. There’d been an ancient drunk Marine I met in the fleet, a quartermaster who had a faded out hula girl in the same spot, he could make it dance too. Jessa giggled.

I took a look around her room. Pretty basic. Two bunk beds. Toy chest. Disney this and that everywhere. Half-opened closet. I peeked inside it and shouted.

There was a man there. Swarthy guy with a scarf and a greying beard, dressed in khaki.

“*The hell are you doing here?*” I bellowed and I couldn’t grab him. I mean, my hands came up and went forward but then I didn’t get him by the arm, or the throat, or by the collar. I didn’t. I don’t know why.

“What’s happening?” Mick was on his feet. Amanda had picked up Jessa and scooted out the door. Smart gal.

“Don’t you see him?”

“Naw man, I don’t see nothin’.” Mick had a real quiet, intense look and he wasn’t watching the bearded intruder, he was staring at *me*, like the problem was *me*.

The guy in the closet reached up, put his thumbnail on my forehead right at the hairline, and pulled down hard. I tried to push his hand away, but I didn’t. It wasn’t like my hand passed *through* his, or like it was immobile, or like it lost strength or... or anything. It just failed to happen. He ran his thumb down the top of my face like he was yanking a zipper, and it hurt.

“Ow!” I yelled, reasonably enough.

He walked past me. He didn’t push me or squirm or have to contort himself but I somehow wasn’t in his way in the least, even though I’m hardly petite and the closet opening wasn’t huge. He moved by me, like everything was his way. I can’t explain it.

“Dude, you’re bleeding,” Mick said, and then the guy from the closet smacked him. Big strong backhand with windup, and Mick didn’t even see it coming. I heard it though, and he felt it.

“*MotherFUCKER!*” he shouted and, yeah, I could believe he was in a rock band. Kid had a set of lungs on him.

The closet guy turned and smirked and it was Bennie Silva. Then he casually walked out the door.

“Oh no you don’t,” I said, and followed.

###

I guess after Barnes you might technically call me a serial killer, if you count the guy in Iraq as a homicide rather than an act of war. Whatever state he’s in now, I’m sure he doesn’t give a damn. I never felt like a serial though. Anyone who’d put that label on me, I can only picture them as some nerdlinger pushing their eyeglasses up their nose and saying “Well *technically* anyone who commits three or more homicides separated in time, one of which is on U.S. soil...”

I think serial killers are mostly corpse fuckers, pardon my French, and the only people who benefit from saying different are the Thomas Harrises of the world writing books where brilliant murder artists play cat and mouse games with the cops. And hell, we’d play! Cops would LOVE to track down a no-shit heinous monster, we would LOVE to get sent taunting clues and connect pictures with string on a big bulletin board. The good cops might like it less than the bad ones, because they’d understand on an uncomfortable level that the victims were *real*, were *people*, and were *suffering*. But the bad cops and the middle 70%? Game on, please! It would be engaging and fascinating in a way that domestic disturbances and car theft and indecent exposure

rarely are. If they caught the guy (it's almost always a guy, let's be real here, and usually almost always a white guy) they'd be *heroes*.

Even the good cops love to be treated like a hero.

The so-so cops would be able to do their mild bad shit, catching a sweetheart deal here and there, letting the hot chick off on the speeding ticket, and still go home at night thinking they made a difference 'cause they were on the force that caught the Lip Taker or the Chair Rail Killer or whatever catchy name the media used. The bad cops would become more bulletproof and get greater access and have fewer questions asked. They might be *happier* with some murderous sex perv at large, keeping people distracted from their petty corrupt bullshit.

The serial killers don't want to play though. They *don't* want to engage the police, by and large, unless they're Dennis Rader or the Zodiac—both of whom, I'll point out, were writing their mocking letters in the 1970s, before DNA tests and cheap cameras the size of a quarter. Note how Rader got away with it for decades, until he decided to relaunch his shit in the 21st century and got popped within a year.

So I'm not a serial killer. I don't want to fuck corpses. I'm not so angry I go into fugue states. I'm not sure there's a category for me, and that's not just the ego that wants to think I'm special and unique. I'm an opportunistic murderer when I get sufficiently annoyed.

Most people think they want to kill somebody, but almost nobody really does. According to *whatsisname*, the army psychologist, Grossman, 97% of people have a visceral revulsion to the very idea of taking another human's life. They can take pleasure in imagining it, but the real thing is entirely different. However, 3% are natural born wolves or some shit, they're missing that line of code that says homicide is icky. They can slit a throat or smash a head in without it bothering them more than shoveling heavy snow.

It seems likely that's the category I'm in.

Grossman, working for the army, of course he wants to figure out how to make the 97% more like the 3% and eventually took his dog-and-pony killology show on the road to cop shops across the country. Telling police to consider every encounter as a possible life-ending showdown, reminding them that everything they do on the job is an armed engagement (because they're armed!), playing up that "I'd rather be tried by twelve than carried by six" culture... I dunno, it's crazy to me, and I'm probably what they want. Most of us who got born with broken brains never kill anybody because *it's a big hassle*. I don't want to trivialize it, but it undeniably is. It's also a tragedy when a human life gets cut short and their potential goes unrealized or whatever, but if you really don't give a rip about the ethics and morals, doing murder's a nuisance. The whole society and structure of laws is built around making it a terribly inconvenient way to cope with your disputes.

So after Barnes, I put it on pause, largely because I got married. I don't want to play into that "a good woman's love redeems a villain" song and dance because I know I'm responsible for my actions and choices. I don't want to fuel a bunch of incel dickheads deciding it's not their fault, they gotta kill 'cause they can't get their pole rolled. But when you're a single guy, the calculus is different from when you're married and have two sweet daughters aged 3 and 6.

Reesa, Beth and Mary were the best. There's nothing else to say about it. If you're reading murder books and trying to stay hip, you've probably got this idea that killing someone is better than a dozen stacked orgasms, that it's this supreme expression of power, that it's a godlike sensation or some such. I suppose for some people that's true. It would explain why they go through the bother. For me, it was never more fun than hauling the trash to the curb, nothing to compare to watching Beth run after a frisbee in the yard.

As a husband and dad, I had better things to do than kill anyone. I didn't even kill the woman responsible for their deaths.

We'd moved. Reesa got a job as an office manager in a different town, where her old man couldn't call us every time he needed his skid-marked undies laundered. I got a job there and even cleaned up *my* act, went more by the book and less by my gut. Still on traffic, very slowly climbing the ladder 'cause I was nobody's first choice for leadership, but they had to throw me promotions now and then or else the other cops would lose hope. It was fine. Reesa ran a tight ship at her job, the money was all right, our insurance was good, the girls were healthy, I was thinking of shifting over to do school resource, and then my wife and daughters died.

Here's how it happened. They went to visit grandpa. I didn't go because I didn't want to see him and he didn't want to see me. I know Reesa hated this, but she was OK with me "having to work" because she *also* hated it when her dad and I just sat around glaring shit-eyes at one another for a whole weekend. The girls, young as they were, picked up on it and hated it, and when your kid's unhappy, it puts a roof over how much you can enjoy yourself. To hear Reesa tell it, when the girls were with him, her dad reinvented himself. Like, he wasn't *acting* like a loving man who put family first, he seemed to really believe it, without question, that he was like that and always had been. People are funny.

So the three of them bundled up and went to see grandpa, and there was an accident. Claudia Espinoza lost control of her sport-ute, ran our mini-van off the road and it probably would have been just fine if it hadn't happened right by an overpass, if Reesa and the girls hadn't been forced into the abutment.

I guess Reesa and Mary died right away. Beth... not so much.

I was too sad to get angry, and Espinoza looked shocked and horrified in all the pictures I saw of her. We never met face to face. I don't know. She'd had a glass of wine with dinner, but she blew under the legal limit. Maybe she was going a little fast for conditions, but she stuck around, tried to do first aid, told the State Troopers everything honestly, didn't try to get out of it. It was just an accident. My job, you know? Accidents and bad driving all the time. I knew people who drove worse than Claudia and got off with warnings, people who drove better and killed themselves or other people.

She did some stuff wrong, but not enough to get killed over, otherwise I'd have to murder... shit, so many people. It makes me tired, even now, thinking about it. Without Reesa and the girls, then, I could barely get out of bed, let alone stalk and assassinate someone.

I got time off and everyone brought me casseroles and whatnot, and when I was back on duty I didn't write many tickets—I'd go on duty and stare over the highway for hours, come off and

have no memory of the whole day. They desked me, and there I could at least go through the motions OK.

My grief counselor was Amanda Yang. I told her everything, except for about being a murderer of course. She helped a lot.

About a year after Reesa died, I retired from the department and got an even easier job teaching court-mandated traffic school. That, plus a part time gig as a driving instructor, and I could sleepwalk through my working days. Weekends went by in a daze of ESPN, streaming TV, and weed. Now and then a hooker, though it usually made me really sad.

So that's where I was at, brain in neutral and waiting for God to send me a heart attack, when Amanda showed up again and asked for my help.

###

“What’s going on?” The foster mom looked freaked. “Oh, your head!”

I could feel blood trickling down and along the side of my nose. The thing—Bennie Silva’s ghost for all I could tell—was unhurriedly going down the hall, opening doors and peeking inside.

“It’s fine. Get the girl and get out.”

At that moment, Amanda came into the corridor, Jessa in her arms, looking pale and disturbed.

“OK, let’s sort this shit.” It was Mick, of course, looking pissed as a cat in a dirty toilet, hand print reddening handsomely on his face. “I may not be able to see you with my eyes, dickbag, but hide from *this!*”

God as my witness, he squeezed his eyes shut and dramatically pressed his forefinger tips to his temples.

The thing turned to him and now it was Craig Barnes. Sure. Of course. It—he?—gave Mick that wiseguy look I’d gotten real sick of seeing, and Mick made a noise. It was like a... meep? A shrill sound, but soft. Maybe a whimper.

I looked back at him and saw his jeans darken at the crotch as he sank to his knees, but he hadn’t peed himself. It was blood, like the leakage from his eyes, nose and ears.

“No no *no no no*...” he sobbed, and keeled over into the fetal position. To give him credit, yeah, that was when I became convinced he was for-real psychic.

Craig Barnes turned back, reached out, and gave Jessa’s hair a healthy yank. She screamed. I mean, of course she did. I screamed when he hurt me, and I’m a big strong multiple murderer.

Amanda shoved past him, holding Jessa out to the foster mom, saying “Take her!” She was making towards Mick when I said, “Amanda, stop! Don’t move!”

She looked at me, eyes wide.

“Move left!” I barked, and she took a hesitant step. “No, *my* left, that way!”

She did, just as the thing made to move by her and reach for Jessa again, and as she got into its way, it bounced.

It gave way to her.

It had to get out of her way.

It didn't get its way with her.

“Grab!” I shouted. “Turn that way! Like this!” I said, making a circle hug with my arms.

And damned if my old grief counselor Amanda Yang didn't get a bearhug on the ghost of Craig Barnes/Benny Silva/probably the dude I smoked on the motorcycle.

“What...? *What...?*”

“You got the thing, Amanda, can you feel it?”

“What is it?”

“Can you feel it?”

“Kinda?” The figure was squirming, shifting, pushing, but it wasn't having much luck moving her.

“Crush it!”

“I can't!”

“Then sit on the floor!”

Foster mom and Jessa de-assed the area, Mick was still moaning and rocking, it was just me and Amanda and this man-shaped ball of bad mojo.

Amanda sat with a grunt, and tipped over as the thing struggled, trying to brace its feet. I was at them in two steps, fist balled up and snarling, ready to punch this goddamn manifestation back into Mick's psycho-space. But I didn't.

I couldn't.

“Shit!”

“What do I dooo?” Amanda wailed.

“Turn that way! Get on top of it! That's it, get on top, sprawl your legs!”

“What?”

“Don't let it go! Just hold on!”

Have you ever tried to talk some nice middle aged lady with a Masters of Social Work through a wrestling match in real time? It's not easy.

“You’re on his back, Amanda! Push forward! That’s it, roll, try to get facedown on top of him! You’ve got it!”

I huffed my way around so I could look at them, Barnes’ face writhing to change into Silva, Amanda consternated.

“Listen to me, you have him pinned, you’re on his right arm, hug that up behind his head... off that way, yeah! Get in a straddle, there, one knee on either side, sit down on him *hard!*”

“I don’t know what I’m doing!”

“Amanda, you feel that thing you got with your right hand? Grab it with your left too, good, bring it over here,” I said, putting my palm near the floor.

The thing immediately humped three inches over and bit the pinkie side of my hand.

“Sum*BITCH!*”

It had a tight bite and was worrying at it but I kept guiding Amanda.

“Hold tight and lean back as hard as you can!”

“ALL RIGHT!”

When she popped its shoulder out, it released my hand to scream, and the sound it made was nothing human. It was like steam, like an angle grinder, like a drillbit hitting a hidden nail inside a piece of wood.

“You busted his arm!”

“Oh God!”

“No, that’s a good thing, you heard it, it’s hurt, we can finish this Amanda! We can end it today!”

“What do I do?”

“Push down its shoulder, good!”

It screamed more. I couldn’t tell if she was literally praying as she said “Oh God!” again.

“Slide your hand forward, palm up, there, good, push in, yeah! That’s its chin, you have its chin!” Its unhurt left arm pawed at her, but as when I tried to hit it, it apparently... couldn’t.

“Yeah, how you like *that*, Mr. Fucker-man? Amanda, get your other hand on its chin too, just like the first, great, bring them together, lift up,” I said, modeling the movement with my hands.

“It’s stuck!”

“That’s good, we want that, now turn it, rotate it like... yeah, just like that, mm hm, now just one more thing, just like the arm, you have to jerk back real sudden as hard as you can...”

“I don’t...”

“*Do it for Jessa! One! Two! Three! Go!*”

With a wail, she obeyed and broke the thing’s neck.

###

After Amanda killed it, she could see it. It didn't look like anybody any more. It was blank, like a mannequin. It was cold... had a texture like the inside of a potato, no features. Not even the teeth, though you could see the indentations on the bottom of my hand. (Up top, the teeth had broken through.)

Once I caught my breath, I went and looked for Jessa and the foster mom, told them it was safe and gone and OK, asked if they had disinfectant, some butterfly bandages, maybe a tarp or an old shower curtain or something we could use?

After bandaging my hand, I trudged back up the stairs with an old, paint-stained drop cloth and some duck tape. Mick was out of his fetal crouch and Amanda was dabbing at his bleeding apertures with a paper towel.

"Are you OK?" she kept asking.

"Ugh, my eyes are clearing up... look at this shit, my nail-beds are bleeding," he said, holding up his hands. Sure enough, blood was seeping around the periphery of his fingernails. "I look like an Alice Cooper video."

"Toenails too?" I asked.

"Feels like." He grimaced, revealing that his gums were also oozing. "Fuck this." Over Amanda's protests, he stumbled to his feet. He took a deep breath and stretched. "I saw what it really was, you know."

"Like that?" I asked, pointing to the thing on the floor. It was already looking less like a person.

"No," he said, and his eyes were haunted. For just that second he reminded me of Jessa, of all those kids with the blankets and bears. "No, it didn't look like that."

I started wrapping it up. "Can you describe it?"

"Not with words." He pulled a bandana from somewhere and started wiping his hands. "Maybe... maybe music..."

"I don't need to know that bad," I said, tearing off more duck tape.

"What are you going to do with it?" he asked.

"I dunno. Haul it to the dump?"

"What if it comes back?" Amanda asked.

"It won't," Mick said. "I saw. It's done." He turned to me and squinted. "I know how come you can see it, too."

"Do you now," I replied, and met his gaze.

He looked away first. “If you don’t want it, I’ll take it,” he said.

“Take it? Why?”

“Are you kidding? Tangible materialization of a psychic phenomenon? Why *wouldn't* I take that?”

For a moment, I just stared at him.

“You’ve led a very different life from me,” I finally said. “That’s cool though.”