

A SERIES OF SMALL, PRECISE CUTS

by Greg Stolze

Part One: Discovery

Joan Crews always had her eyes open for scenes. It helped. It helped her in a lot of ways.

For one thing, she paid attention to her surroundings. As she'd settled into her job over the last few years, one thing that had become very real to her was the importance of that—what the people with the badges called “situational awareness.” Who’s around? What’s happening? Is there something you should look at or listen to? It seemed all too simple (and a little bit “victim blamey”), that bad things happened to people who weren’t alert. But she saw it, and once you saw it, it was hard to stop seeing. Guy who was looking at his phone, clobbered by a bus. Girl, rescued from an abductor she hadn’t heard following her because she had earbuds in. Victims of terrible crimes who couldn’t describe their attacker, because it all happened too fast—a blur, from nowhere, the paralysis of panic, then a departing figure that could be anyone.

She wasn’t looking for crimes, though she did like the idea of being safe. No, Joan watched for landscapes, for buildings or structures that looked interesting against the sky. Ground, then edifice, then the firmament. Something stark and

obviously artificial, with clean lines but complexity. When she found one, she smiled and thought about it. Maybe, after looking both ways and making sure she wasn’t stupidly strolling into peril, she’d pull out her cell phone for a photo.

If an image really worked for her (or on her) she’d come back with the better camera, perhaps a tripod, and get her shot in high definition.

The one she was looking at today, sighting through her camera screen, was an electrical station, and the density of the image gave her some pause. It wasn’t simple, it was a maze of repeating lines, transformer curves, angles of struts and cross-braces rising into the sky, spreading across the ground, screened one behind another in patterns of interference. It was ambitious, but she liked it. She was going to do it. Why not?

Joan made linocut prints as a hobby. Taking a picture was only the first and simplest step.

Before doing linocuts, she’d done woodcuts, but they made her wrist hurt. Moreover, the surface was stiff enough that she was more likely to skate the blade and injure herself. In college she’d taken a watercolor class, and over the years she’d pick

up the brush, put it down, start again and quit again.

(Someone had suggested that most people outgrew their artistic pretensions and she hadn't. Joan thought that was bullshit. It wasn't the reason she divorced him, but it hadn't helped.)

Her college painting teacher wore a lot of scarves and flowing skirts, like a heavier, less-pretty Stevie Nicks, and Joan still had a kind of exasperated admiration for her. Joan had constantly felt like this woman was on the bubble between profundity and braying idiocy. It was always a struggle to know where any given statement would fall.

"Making art is how you sense what the world is, instead of what you are," was one of the statements Joan had decided was profound.

In any event, the years of seeing scenes she liked, and trying to reproduce them in whatever medium... Joan had found that it helped. It helped her spot beautiful things she otherwise wouldn't, even see beauty in things that were commonplace or ugly. It helped her look at paintings and prints and artwork far, far better than her own and get just a tiny thrill of understanding how it was done, how the miracle occurred in the paint or ink.

So when she discovered the power station, she took a picture and started the lengthy process of turning it into a print. It helped.

#

Joan's day job was data analysis and software support, which was not (she knew) something most people found interesting. But she did it for the FBI, which—yeah, just the opposite. Sometimes, meeting someone for the first time, she avoided saying exactly where she worked, because people got the wrong idea. They thought she was a "hacker" intruding into "dark webs," or they asked if she carried a gun, or they assumed she was doing forensics on laptops taken from terrorist cells. She did none of that. She'd gotten hired because she had, through happenstance, been trained on a piece of database software called Xolix by her previous employer (an insurance company) and the FBI had needed someone familiar with the Xolix interface. (Specifically, the interface from a couple rollouts back. Neither the FBI nor the insurance company had paid to upgrade.)

She really had two jobs. One was to make sure the laptops and desktops of the actual investigators worked properly, but that was really secondary. Mostly, Joan searched databases of financial records. One of their cases was trying to identify a perp they called the CKK. It was short for "Craft Knife Killer."

#

Special Agent Mike Roesser always kept his eyes out. He had, in fact, contributed to Joan's ideas about situational awareness. One of his duties on the serial killer task force was to go over reports and see if he could

link them to CKK crimes. He got new reports every day. Americans killed one another a lot.

Most reports could be dismissed as unrelated, even if they got into his roundup due to location, timeline, and a rough victim profile. If someone was arrested, he'd look over the suspect. So far, he'd thrown out every case with a money motive (the CKK was almost certainly stalking strangers for emotional reasons, not financial ones) or a sexual motive (the CKK didn't rape) or a personal motive (they hadn't identified any person common to the three known victims by way of work, church, hobbies, neighborhood, PTA membership or anything else).

A few made it into his "unlikely, but maybe" pile. Those included crimes where the victims were a tight match—white males, usually middle to upper class, usually between the ages of 25 and 65, killed alone—with no strong suspects. Again, he'd deem them tenuous unless there were other factors present.

The factors that would elevate a crime to the point where he got other investigators to look at it included: Killed during abduction but body moved; no sign of struggle; mutilated corpse; messaging; tight forensic discipline; and sometimes, just his intuition.

Naturally, every case with electrocution got examined closely. That was nationwide. Since the media had revealed the CKK's method of choice, there'd been a slight uptick in

electrocution murders, but it was still very, very rare. Murder by voltage required a high degree of premeditation and most people smart enough to assemble a high-wattage killing machine could figure out that using it would probably get them investigated *more*, not less.

Mike had been on the CKK case since the very beginning, examining the victims Joe Markham and Drew Finster. Markham was killed in 2012, Finster two years after, but it was Roesser who'd seen the overlap in method. Finster died in Illinois and Markham in Indiana, so the FBI got involved coordinating the sheriff's department that had jurisdiction in Indiana, as well as the small-town police department in Illinois, and the relevant state police forces.

Roesser was almost sure the CKK had done research and pinpointed regions that were lightly policed, or else had underfunded law enforcement. Even without that, there were a lot of factions and involved parties. Communication was a constant chore.

Almost immediately, a Wisconsin case was proposed as a likely early victim. As far as Roesser was concerned that victim, Carl Sarrantos, was still uncertain. Sarrantos had burns characteristic of a hand-held eletroshock weapon, but had died from smothering. The body mutilation was crude, and the posing was minimal. Still, it could be the same perpetrator with unformed, unrefined methods. Privately, he kept thinking about how, when you make

pancakes, the first one in the batch is always a little sloppy. Regardless, Wisconsin wanted in on the data sharing and speculation too.

There hadn't been any really solid CKK matches in 2015, leading to suspicion that the killer had been locked up for another crime, but Mike thought it could be any number of reasons—got sick, got back on meds, got a new lover, tried to quit for a while... hell, got busy at work and couldn't schedule it. Dr. Beneventi scoffed at that, saying "Compulsives are never too busy. They can always fit it in. You ever meet an alcoholic who quit drinking because he was too busy, hm?" But Mike wasn't sure the CKK was compulsive, either. He was determined to speculate as little as possible.

Whether CKK acted from necessity or just desire, late 2016 had seen an uptick. Morris Daniels (Illinois, December), then Addison Carver in the spring of 2017 (killed in Missouri, body dumped in Illinois), and Gerald Sudlow early in 2018 (killed and found in Ohio).

The investigation had become a full-blown task force long before their fifth state got involved, and Roesser felt just fine about having someone else be the face and brains of the operation. Mike liked being the eyes.

There was nothing like those first hours on a new crime scene, looking for differences, looking for similarities, trying to decide if it was right or not, trying to see if this was another piece for their puzzle or just another false

lead, another one-off, another random act of violence.

It was Mike's favorite part of the job, that first look.

#

it was time to play the waitress game again

she liked that "waitress" had "wait" right there in the name and it never took long to find someone she could do it to

or someone she should

but the overlap, should and could, that was something else entirely

that was a numbers game

clive, she could do clive any time she wanted

clive liked and trusted her, at least enough

clive came in every afternoon at three and got coffee, clive was a grandpa but not in a home, she knew all about clive who would talk and talk and talk

she barely spoke—"know what'cher havin'?" "top y'off?" "everything awright?"—and barely got tipped and barely got noticed but clive had learned her fake name and asked about her

she told lies, one word lies, and clive forgot them, then asked again anyway

clive wouldn't do

the asshole in the blue shirt would have been perfect but he'd only come in once and never again

the guy in the carhartt overalls
who'd called her "sugar tits"

the bad-tipping college kid who
did that swipe-right dating app on his
phone while his girlfriend was in the
bathroom

any of them would have done,
done just fine, but they were one-offs

she had to be patient

it was easy

she'd killed enough that it was
easy to be patient, which wasn't at all
how it had gone for Geoffrey Dahmer
or Richard Ramirez or John Wayne
Gacy or any of the others she'd read
about

maybe it was different for men

maybe it was different in the age
of cell phones and social media

for her, having a one-timer smack
her ass, or stiff her on the tip after
acting like a turd, or yell at her over
nothing and try to get her to cry, or
whisper something filthy or
threatening when she bent down to
give them food

well she still hated that shit

but it was easier to take, knowing
that she could kill them

if only they'd make a habit of
coming to the diner

but diners were complex habitats
and getting the rhythm of one took
time

last time she'd played the waitress
it had been four months on the job
before she spotted drew finster, who
complained about everything, had to

have it just so, had to be asked how
everything was but not when his
mouth was full, didn't like it if you
spoke to him too soon, didn't like it if
you took too long

drew finster gave a 15% tip on a
low-end diner check if the service
was perfect

if he could find anything to bitch
about at all, no tip

but he started coming more and
more often when she wouldn't rise to
his bait

when she didn't try to please him

when she didn't confront him

he came every few weeks, lunch
and dinner

then a regular lunch thing

then a regular lunch twice weekly
when he had her schedule figured
out

drew finster with his rush limbaugh
bumper sticker and loud crass jokes

he'd been easy

it was easy with the waitress play
but honestly, she didn't like
waitressing much

she didn't like laying back and
waiting for them to come to her

it meant more when she saw them
in out in the streets, in a city, on the
road

that way was a better discovery

but she'd been at the diner
playing the waitress for three months
when she noticed a man with a red

beard and black hair who came in every thursday for lunch

one time when she was bringing his check she heard him grunting

“listen, you cunt, you do it or you’ll be good and goddamn sorry” into his cell phone and thought he might be a good pick

Part Two: Prep

Everyone had their cell phones out, but Mike Roesser preferred an unmediated look. He'd pulled a staff car and driven with their crime-scene guy and their autopsy doctor. At the last minute, Dr. Beneventi had tagged along. Halfway there, she insisted on switching drivers during a piss-break. "None of us want you highway hypnotized," she said, and he decided to keep his powder dry for an argument that mattered. He'd stared out the window a little, then pulled his ball cap over his eyes and dozed, wishing Dr. Beneventi would step on it a little.

"We got an ID yet?" he asked the local detective, after dropping off their medical examiner, getting to the scene, and getting past the pleasantries.

"Nossir," she replied, glancing briefly back towards the site. "We don't think it's anyone local."

Mike grunted. "Where'd you find it, please?"

She nodded and led him into an abandoned barn.

"Teddy Morrows has the next farm over," she told him as they strode over tramped-down straw and drying grass. "He saw circling birds, y'know? And he's had a dog run off, family pet, so he thought it might be, y'know, that."

"Right," Mike said. "He goes to the barn. These his tire tracks?"

"Yessir. When he called us to say there was a body, we told him not to touch anything, not to drive off. So these here are his. We put up a cordon. No one got closer'n that since we took the scene over. We marked his footprints too, and ours."

"Mm, good, good."

"Abandoned area, unattended... it fits," Dr. Beneventi said.

"Yeah, I was reading about your... your guy, the Electrocutitioner?"

"That's the media name," the crime-scene expert said.

"We refer to the perp as 'the Craft-Knife Killer,'" Mike said. Gave her a brief, tight smile. "The CKK for short."

"Like the BTK," she said. Mike shrugged.

They walked through the place where the door used to be, one side of the wall sagging and collapsing.

"Is this place safe?" Dr. Beneventi asked, looking up at the missing roof.

"It's been standing for years," the detective replied, unconcerned.

"Where was the body posed?"

"I don't know I'd say 'posed.' It was..." she gestured at a rotted out pile of timber planks, like old pallets or tabletops. "It was there."

"Was there any kind of container?"

"Wrapped up in plastic," she said. "Like old tarps or drop cloths. The, the

transparent kind, y'know? Thicker than a dry-cleaning bag."

The FBI team exchanged glances. The crime-scene guy had his phone, was screwing the magnifier on its lens. "Local CSIs been out?"

"Of course. Though as soon as we saw the chest, we thought it might be your CKK," the cop replied.

"So it said 'never you cunt' on it?" Mike asked.

"Big letters," she answered.

"Much cruder than we've seen in the past," Dr. Beneventi murmured, looking at the photos on her phone.

"Think it's someone different? A copycat?"

"Not necessarily a one-for-one copycat," she said, frowning. "The media age, ideas are just... in the air. With the CKK's publicity, there's an uptick in corpse-mangling nationwide. People kill and write a message, because they want to muddy up the issue or... or just because they like the idea and wouldn't have had it on their own."

"Now, your perp..." the cop said. "He's strictly travel? He uses a place, then leaves?"

"That's our theory," the psychiatrist replied. "Considering the victims we have a high confidence in... they're very widely dispersed. We think we have a migrating killer, perhaps a truck driver or other itinerant... someone who gets a cursory familiarity with a place, or several

places, strikes in one, leaves the body in another."

"Right," the cop said. "Right... I read how most of the victims were from big places, but they were found outside the cities."

"Our guy's smart," the crime scene guy said, crawling over the planks with a high-intensity flashlight.

"Making a guy disappear is, in some ways, a lot easier in a big city. But once a body drops, there's cameras everywhere, not to mention eyewitnesses. Better to grab your victim, kill him, play with the body for a month or two, then dump him somewhere he might not get found for another week, or month, or longer. There's this... *paranoid* obsession with controlling the forensics."

"Not paranoid if the FBI is after you," the cop muttered.

"We think part of the CKK's gratification pattern is to make the crime scene as difficult for us as possible. No hair, no fiber, no fingerprints, no *errors*," Dr. Beneventi said, hugging herself. "Probably reads a lot of true crime, watches a lot of procedurals."

"That why you don't have any people to talk to or pictures to show around?" the detective asked.

"Not yet." The crime-scene guy frowned. "Everyone drops the ball eventually."

"Usually the CKK dismembers, and contains the body better," Mike said. "We've found them in oil drums, big plastic storage containers, heavy-

duty garbage cans. All off the rack stuff you could get at any Wal-Mart, sealed up with care to keep out the flies and coyotes."

"So maybe this is someone different?"

"Could be. But our victim's a white man, age between 25 and 65, message cut on the chest, pattern on the back, left in a desolate place separate from where the kill and abduction took place." He shrugged. "That's a lot of red flags. If the autopsy says there were preservation efforts, no struggle..."

"Electrocution?"

"Especially that. It's a very weird way to kill."

That was when the cop's cell phone rang, and she excused herself to answer it.

"What do you think?" Roesser asked Dr. Beneventi.

"It's atypical," she said. "Sloppier. Less... 'just so.' Perhaps our killer is degenerating, getting overconfident and losing focus. Or maybe there was some kind of interruption. Then again, it might be someone different altogether."

"I don't like all that uncertainty, Minka," he said.

She gave him one of her rare, extremely pretty smiles. "We just got here. I'm sure I'll have a higher grade of uncertainty for you by tomorrow. Especially once the autopsy's in. If this was a cross-chest electrocution, it's almost certainly ours."

Roesser grunted. He turned to the crime scene guy, who was now looking at the drag marks leading to the woodpile, comparing them to photos from his phone.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I gotta check my notes, but I think the stride's different."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. The CKK puts something on to muffle footprints, probably just bags over boots. This guy's done the same thing, but the divots are deeper and farther apart... I *think*. It's in the notes, the CKK's stride walking backwards dragging a burden and how deep the heel marks were. Though, of course, there's a lot of variables—how soft is the dirt, the weight of each particular corpse. You drag a heavier body, you take shorter steps."

"Sure."

The detective returned, putting her phone away. "We have a tentative identification," she said, "And cause of death seems to be impalement."

Mike and Minka exchanged a look.

#

red beard the thursday regular started sitting in her section when she didn't respond

first, she didn't respond to his brusqueness

"know what'cher havin'?"

then she didn't respond to his rudeness

“top y’off?”

then she didn’t respond to his
coarse jokes about her looks, her
weight, her stupidity

“everything awright?”

eventually he came right out and
snarled “what’er you, retarded?” right
in her face

she remained expressionless for a
moment, then said “so that’s a no on
more coffee?”

and he laughed

“you’re all right... for a crazy bitch”

laugh laugh laugh

she found out his name off his
credit card and watched his car out
the window

she went to the public library and
checked him out online

she followed him in her
nondescript pickup truck, not the
Murder Car, which she drove to work
sometimes but told people was her
brother’s

she found out he worked at the
train yard

while he was working there one
day she smashed out the window of
his car and got his address from the
insurance documents

there was a handgun in his glove
compartment

she stole it because it seemed like
the sort of thing a window-smasher
would do

then she cut it apart with a
hacksaw and threw the pieces in an
assortment of storm drains

he was very angry that thursday,
and exceptionally rude

she realized she’d made an error

he was on edge

alert

unarmed

angry

ready to lash out at someone

all the things she didn’t want

he needed to be calm

off guard

confident in his safety and
superiority

so she had to wait, and every
insult, every tip-stiff, every snotty
comment, every little speck of abuse
was worse, not just because they
were insults and abuse, but because
she had caused them

they were doubled—the obvious,
top-level irritation of being yelled at
and demeaned and just taking it, was
multiplied by the knowledge that
every day he was cross and shitty was
another day that he wasn’t letting
down his guard, wasn’t relaxing,
wasn’t getting ready for the big
surprise

but in time, he got out of it

he got his car window fixed

he got bored being mean to her
and said nothing at all ever

that was the sign

she had become invisible to him, an inconsequential detail of his life, seamlessly integrated into his routine, as unconsidered as the handle he yanked to open the door at work or the key he turned in his honda's ignition

she followed and watched and made notes in a shorthand so personal and brief that no one could ever figure it out

when she could predict his life fully, he was ready

and so was she

#

Joan always felt a little guilty when she used a computer to help her make linocuts. The *right* way (she supposed) would be to look at the photo she'd taken for reference and then sketch onto the linoleum in pencil, separating out the color layers by eye and mind, but she just couldn't make herself do it. Too risky.

Ever since the invention of the camera (she'd been told) the central question of art was no longer one of "fidelity to the image." No mere human could match a camera—or, if they could, there were damn few of them and what was the point? What was the point of training and practicing for *literal decades* to get good enough that you could be photorealistic, over the course of hours and hours, for one image? A device, available so cheaply that they made disposable ones, could be photorealistic *instantly* and, potentially, *thousands of times*.

No, once the camera reached its potential, strict realism was passé.

But Joan didn't really care to compete with the machine. She was more interested in cooperating with it. After all, that was where her paychecks came from. Xolix by itself couldn't find the meaning in the data by sorting it, any more than Joan herself could sort the data until meaning came clear. Together, they could do something neither could do alone.

She'd heard an article on NPR about chess matches that weren't human vs. machine, but team-driven—one human and their chess program of choice against another. As she vaguely recalled it, a computer and a person together could almost always defeat a computer alone, or a person alone.

Maybe she was misremembering, but it made her feel better about importing her photo of the electrical station into an art program and creating a layer that was just the sky.

Another layer was for the darkest black lines. She made the layer, and traced the lines with a pen on a tablet. (The art pad had been her Christmas gift to herself the year the FBI hired her.)

Beneath the black layer and the sky layer, she did blocks and stripes and irregular shapes in gray, covering anything on the photo that wasn't white, or sky, or black.

It all took hours. Content, drowsy hours that felt in no way "artistic." She

just had a set of simple tasks, uncomplicated but plentiful. To draw or paint from the picture would be to consider every stroke or line in context with the others, but tracing over it on the computer was forgiving and tranquil—after all, if she got the angle visibly wrong or scrawled a shape badly, she could simply hit ‘undo.’ She loved ‘undo.’

Having zoomed in on the image enough to break it into a series of lines and blocks and forms, she had eliminated everything that spoke to her aesthetically about it, and that was why she was able to copy it with a mindless, bovine lassitude. She could quit any time she wanted because nothing was at stake. She could work for months on a single image, no pressure. No one would care.

After weeks of hours here and there, she could turn off the bottom layer in Photoshop—the photograph. Sitting on top of it was the grey forms where color had been, under the black lines and the blue sky. The gaps between were a pure white. Three layers, four colors (or three colors and a plain background). It looked like the picture, but simplified, clean and vivid.

It was good enough. Time for the hard part.

#

Driving back from Iowa, Dr. Beneventi let Roesser take the wheel the whole time. The autopsy doctor had opted to catch a flight later with

airline miles, and the crime scene guy was napping in the back seat.

The victim was Raymond “Pharaoh” Kurlanski. He had felony convictions for drug possession and illegal discharge of a firearm within city limits, along with a lot of misdemeanors and known connections to an Iowa biker gang. They’d found evidence of a struggle, including defensive wounds and foreign skin particles under his fingernails. He’d died in a fight, clawing at someone who was stabbing him in the back—someone who continued to stab him after he was dead, someone who carved a message in his chest before calming down.

Still a murder, but not their murder. The DNA from the fingers was probably a nail in somebody’s coffin. The trio in the car had seen thousands of murders in their combined experience, and any of them would bet on a quick arrest and a strong case with Kurlanski. The kind of people who stab a drug-peddling biker to death and then mutilate the body tend to have their DNA in databases. It wasn’t a sure thing, but Mike liked the odds.

The same odds said this was very, very unlikely to be relevant to the CKK investigation.

“Can you slow down please?” Dr. Beneventi said as the sun started to set.

“Not eager to get home?”

"I'm not eager to get wrapped around a telephone pole. Or to watch you badge the highway patrol to get out of a ticket," she replied, then added "I'm getting a headache."

"There might be aspirin in the glove box," Roesser said. "For sure there's some in the first aid kit in back, but we'd have to pull over..."

"No, no, I took something from my purse. Aspirin never worked on my headaches," she replied, staring out the window. She sighed.

"Something wrong, Minka?"

"No, I... I guess I feel disappointed, and I recognize it's an irrational feeling, but it's still difficult to put away."

"Disappointed how?"

"I was hoping we'd find some clue, find a way to the CKK. Find the error he always speaks of," she said, jerking her thumb at the backseat.

"Mm."

"Aren't you a little let down?" she asked. "I don't doubt you want to clear this case as much as anyone."

"I try not to get my heart set on stuff," Mike said. "We did a good day's work. Whoever did this guy, he's probably getting caught. One less killer on the streets."

"They would have done just as well without us."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe their coroner was an ancient political appointee who wouldn't have

spotted the DNA, or wouldn't have tried as hard without an FBI doctor standing over his shoulder."

"That is a... remarkably cynical take on optimism," she said, and laughed a little.

"If the CKK never kills again, that's a win, isn't it?"

"Even if we never make an arrest? Never give closure to the Markhams and the Finsters? That's a *win*?"

"OK, call it a draw. Still better than nothing. We keep the pressure on. Our perp is probably a solo, right? We have a whole team. So even when we don't have a name or description, we're keeping the CKK locked down pretty tight. Five victims is bad, but you know our guy is obsessed with controlling the clues. You know this. That kind of uptight control, that's why we're seeing one murder a year instead of one a month." He shrugged. "Playing defense isn't exciting, but it's something."

"Yeah, you're right, you're right," she said. "I don't want the CKK to kill again. I want an arrest without having to wait for another crime, which I know is unrealistic."

"No," Roesser said. "Someone could see something. Someone could remember something. Something completely random could break our way. You just have to keep at it."

She sighed once more.

"You just have to be prepared," Roesser said, staring down the highway at the shadow growing before him.

Part Three: Transfer

she'd found out that redbear's name was ronald watkins and that he played on a softball team sponsored by a bar called the red roller

he was divorced and had no kids, which was good

kids wouldn't have saved him

but still—a good thing

ronald watkins needed to find out something bad about her without her telling him

she started talking to the cooks and busboys and other servers about her sick brother

she played it up

sighs

crankiness

anxiety

withdrawal

they made the usual small, abortive gestures of sympathy

they asked if there was anything they could do without making any actual suggestions or offers

she waited for ronald to be rude to her in front of one of them

waited for the gossip

it took four weeks of looking worried and saying she didn't want to talk about her brother before ronald took the bait

she actually spilled coffee on him and he leaped up calling her a bitch

she burst into fake tears and ran off to the kitchen, but she could hear lynette, the oldest waitress and most talkative, dress him down and mention the brother

the brother

she'd never had a brother

they all thought they knew about her brother fred, who sometimes let her use his car and now was so ill

when she came back he didn't apologize

"sorry if you got upset, but you gotta pay attention to what you're doing," he said

she just pretend-sniffled

inside she had a big wide smile

the kind of smile her face would never make any more

ronald was ready

primed

ripe to fall

#

Joan's least favorite part of the linocut process was image transfer. It just wasn't easy to get the image off the computer and onto the linoleum. She'd gotten mailing stickers and printed on those, but then you had to go through the paper *and* the surface underneath. The edges got ragged and the glue fouled up her cutter.

What she did now was print the images, each layer, in pure black. She did it one at a time and as soon as it was out of the laser printer, she'd run it to the bathroom where she had the block waiting, along with a bottle of acetone.

She wasn't crazy about the acetone. For one thing, the fumes were foul and made her head hurt. For another, it evaporated so fast that it was hard to position the linoleum quick enough to loosen the ink and move it from the paper to a new surface. The first time she'd tried, she'd just wiped it on and the ink barely moved. Now she poured it and slapped the paper up against it before it had time to disappear.

When the acetone-soaked paper was positioned on the lino, she'd tape it in place by wrapping the edges around to its back side. The linoleum she bought from art stores had a rough fabric there, so the tape didn't catch well, but it didn't have to stick long. Just long enough for her to dab more acetone on the back to soak through, until it was transparent and she could see the ink through the paper.

She rubbed it then, a process parallel to the final steps of printing. She had an old tin spoon, a random carryover from her college apartment, which she used to burnish paper for these sorts of ink transfers. She rubbed hard, trying to make sure she got everywhere, but the paper was weakened by its soak and was always at risk of tearing or slipping.

It was a frustrating and unrewarding process, not to mention smelly. But she felt more confident shifting the computer's perfect shapes imperfectly than she would have trying to just copy them by hand.

#

the key was to cringe
the key was to be sad
ashamed
underplay it though
she didn't present weakness to him, no
she let him feel he'd figured out her weakness
her dismay
the story for Murder Day wasn't complicated
she staged it earlier, a fake wound to the hand, easily come by in a restaurant kitchen
she bandaged it herself
made sure it looked bad but not so bad she couldn't work
she ignored the sympathy from lynette and the kitchen staff, waiting for redbear d ronald
when he arrived, she served him, subdued, obedient, just as he liked
this was the show, her command performance, enacting the role of 'whipped waitress' with exacting subtlety
he didn't even know he was the audience

he didn't even know why he was
in a good mood

she asked to leave early, just
about the time he was finishing his
meal

of course the boss agreed

it was a light night and he'd seen
her work through being sick and tired
before, she wasn't a charmer but
neither was she lazy

so he agreed and she went out to
the parking lot just as ronald was
paying at the till

she waited by the Murder Car,
parked around the side where no one
would see

he came out and she called his
name

hesitant

miserable

so weary

people who wouldn't get it,
wouldn't understand, they might ask
how she could so carefully select a
man who was a bully, an asshole, a
real shitheel, and then base an
abduction plan on his willingness to
help her

they don't understand the misery

her misery was his catnip

his lure

hearing her voice reluctant and on
the edge of tears, there was no way
he could resist

he could not help seeing her at
her low ebb to smirk at her sorrow

"ronald could you please help
me?"

he got to be superior

he got to be exasperated, but
good-natured

he got to shake his head ruefully at
her feminine haplessness as he asked
what it was and listened to her
mumbled, half-coherent story about
promising one of the cooks some tools
her brother owned

(her dead brother)

(the grief angle was crucial)

with a amiable sigh he looked in
the yawning trunk, looked at the big
square rubberized box with steel
handles on opposite sides

it was right by the lip, all he had to
do was grab those handles and lift, so
he tried

he stopped

his hands crackled, the knuckles
popping as his grip went white

a sound escaped his mouth as his
diaphragm muscle locked tight, and
she gave a little giggle

she reached under the bumper,
where she has installed a switch, and
carefully turned it off

the box was attached to the floor
of the trunk and inside was a battery
repurposed from a prius, wired to the
handles

grabbing the handles completed
the circuit

enough power to propel a
subcompact down the road coursed

from ronald watkins' left hand to his
right, straight through his heart

ronald slumped and almost fell
back

she'd parked on a slight incline

all the others fell straight in but he
fell back

she could get him in, she thought,
but it would take time and now the
clock was ticking tick tick tick she had
to move fast but not rush because
rushing was when you made mistakes
and mistakes slowed you down

she darted forward before he
could fully collapse, lifting and
pushing, and in he went

she reached in her pocket for fine
leather gloves and put them on

no evidence

no evidence

then she checked his pulse

it seemed quiet, but she could not
afford any errors

she peeled up an eyelid and
looked

touched

no flinch

dead then

she slammed down the trunk and
drove away

(she'd bicycle back to the diner
the next morning, early)

(she'd have on too-big rubber
boots and a hairnet under a stocking
cap, wearing clothes from a

secondhand store that she'd never
worn before and never would again)

(she'd drive away his car without
readjusting the seat and leave it in
the parking lot of the red roller bar)

(then bicycle away)

tonight, though, she was going to
be busy

just a couple blocks away was an
unlit vacant lot where she stopped,
frisked him for his phone, and
smashed it before throwing the
fragments into a storm sewer

after that, she took a deep breath,
then got in the car, bracing herself for
a three-hour drive

she wasn't going to her little
waitress apartment

she was going to her studio

#

"Did you know that two of the
victims' ex-wives were suspects?"
Mike asked.

"What?" Dr. Beneventi said.

"Markham and Carver," he said.
He was paging through crime scene
reports, as he often did. "In each
case, the cops went straight to exes."
Papers rustled. "In one case... on
advice from Markham's sister. The
other, it's a neighbor. Said Carver and
his ex-wife fought all the time."

A line appeared right between her
eyebrows as she asked, "What are
you suggesting?"

"They both had alibis—Carver's ex
was way out of town, that one's
airtight. The former Mrs. Markham...

lived a couple towns over but no sign that she broke her usual schedule. But it could be a point of connection. You suppose there's any tie between them?"

"The ex-wives, you mean?" asked the crime-scene tech, who'd just walked in with a tray full of coffees.

"Maybe just one person in common hears them complaining about their men and decides to make them a target."

"Wait," Dr. Beneventi said. "One victim, not those two but another I think... he had a domestic violence charge, right?"

More papers shuffled. "That was Daniels," Roesser said.

"Maybe we're looking at some kind of... avenging-angel fixation," she said. She started picking at her lower lip with a fingernail. "Do you think...?"

"What?"

"The CKK might be a woman?"

"Sure," Mike said, while the crime-scene guy said, "Probably not."

"Why not?" she asked, rounding on him.

"Because math," he said. "In the serial killing statistics, men outnumber women four to one, right? And ladies are far more likely to operate in a medical field or to strike at intimate partners than this sort of... fixed ideal victim type stranger-stalking. It's guys—specifically white guys—who feel they have the luxury of making a philosophical statement on other

people's bodies. Women just want revenge, or any power they can grab. It's outside the model."

"So's electrocution," she retorted. "A lot of CKK behaviors are atypical. CKK has made no distinction between rich and poor, which means this isn't just someone taking the easy way and looking for victims who won't be missed."

"Probably why we haven't made an arrest," the crime-scene guy muttered. "Between Twitter and Facebook, there aren't that many people who won't be missed any more."

#

Joan frowned down at the transfer.

It was the sky plate, which was the simplest of the three. There were only a few small areas where the blue of the sky was to be enclosed by black lines, or the gray spaces, or the white absence. Mostly it was all one irregular piece, stretched across the top and partway down each side. But the transfer was sloppy.

Parts that had been all dark on the page were splotchy, faded or just inklessly blank. It didn't really matter, she wasn't going to *forget* and cut those spaces out by mistake but still. It annoyed her.

She'd printed out another copy of the sky layer from Photoshop, this time mirror-flipped so that it looked the way the transfer *ought* to. She looked at the crisp, sharp lines on that print,

then at the faded, sketchy ones on the linoleum.

She pulled out a laundry marker and mindlessly darkened parts that needed it, filling in the hesitant exchange, then switched to a roller ballpoint to go over the edges, but she didn't do it very long. She decided to knock off, pour a glass of wine, and watch a *Cheers* rerun on Netflix.

#

she listened to the talking heads as she drove dead redbear d ronald to the studio

'lifetime piling up' was her favorite song though she supposed anyone who knew would guess 'psycho killer'

she stopped partway there for gas and (in the far, dark corner of the parking lot) to turn over the corpse and keep the blood from settling

she got a monster energy drink after flipping ronald, but even that didn't keep her from yawning for long, didn't keep the dark road from seeming to unspool like a smear of time

she kept nodding and eventually she had to pull off into a truck stop and set her cell phone to wake her in forty-five minutes

she could not afford to get pulled over with her materials in the trunk

hell no

so she fitfully twitched in the Murder Car front seat, worrying that the very dim lightbulb on the license plate might be too bright and let the

numbers be visible, or might be too dim and get her pulled over

she kept the vehicle filthy so that the dirt obscuring the plates wouldn't look out of place and, besides, she didn't want to expose the wiring between the trunk and the switch under the bumper to the water of a car wash

hell no

she wouldn't have said she slept, but somehow the alarm startled her when it went off, a thin lance of sound and adrenaline cutting the fog of exhaustion and caffeine crash

she checked to make sure no one was watching, then popped the trunk and gave the cooling body another turn

she drove on

the studio was a house the middle of nowhere

though it was less nowhere now than two decades ago, when she'd inherited it

then, there'd been no light except sodium orange dots from an illinois state highway, leading to its mile-long farmhouse driveway

that and the stars

now the town to the east was creeping closer, a giant wal-mart was past the horizon, its white security lights blaring upward all night long

she hated it, in a mild and unconsidered way

but as she pulled in she felt a second wind

this was the good stuff
getting things done

making good memories for this
shitty farm house, wallpapering over
the boredom and tedium and chores,
making the house something other
than the site of a miserable childhood
full of swine and reproachful lectures

the barn was falling apart, and the
hog house had collapsed long
before, but she kept the machine
shed in low-key good repair

she had to do everything herself
but she wasn't afraid of a little hard
work

growing up on a marginal pig farm
had taught her how to fix a lot of
things herself and, of course, wiring
was no problem

but the major carpentry, the
roofing, that was a caution

she could patch it, but she knew
that without a tearoff, the house was
going to keep rotting, and rot faster
than it already was

but then she'd have to have
people out, and she did not want to
have people out

push come to shove, maybe she'd
just burn the fucking place to the
ground and find a new studio

but all those were concerns for
other days

tonight belonged to ronald

in the machine shed, she had a
walk-in refrigerator she'd gotten
cheap from a failed restaurant,

installed on a cement floor she'd
poured herself

the floor was a little cracked and
uneven, but that was OK, she'd just
caulked around its base to keep the
cool air in

bolted to its ceiling was a hook on
a pulley

sitting outside the cold room was a
pile of blue, ten-liter storage
containers with white lids

she backed into the shed, right up
to the fridge, and got on nitrile gloves
from her glove compartment

when she opened the trunk, she
stood back to avoid the worst of the
scent

ronald hadn't started to rot—not in
three hours—but his sphincter had
relaxed, as they all did

with brisk, clinical movements she
pulled off his shoes and put them in
one of the bins, then the socks

next the belt, loosening his jeans
ugh, she hated this part

the pants were easier to pull off by
the ankles, they went into the bin too,
but not before she checked the
pocket and pulled out his wallet

no keys

no keys?

he must have them in his jacket,
she thought

the underpants next, with a curled
lip

she used his worn boxers to roughly
wipe up the mess

later she'd pull the carpet out of her trunk to wash it, and to replace the plastic liner hidden underneath, cut to go around the electrocution box

now though, this was ronald time

sturdy rope around his cold ankles, nice and tight, figure eights, then individual loops, then cross-knots for security

didn't want him to fall, feet slipping out like that fat fucker morris daniels

hell no

that'd been a real mess

so once his legs were secure, the hook went on and she pulled him out of the car and into the fridge

ronald wasn't so big, it was work but she could do it by hand

(growing up on a farm, you find out how hard you can work)

not like morris daniels

him, she'd eventually had to tie the rope to the car's trailer hitch and slowly, slowly pull forward until he got hauled up

ronald though, she could just drag and cleat the rope, then repeat until he was suspended head down over the concrete

a storage bin went under him, and then she pulled off his coat and—carefully!—unbuttoned his shirt

wouldn't do to have a button fly off

no

no evidence

when he was naked and suspended, she changed gloves, got a craft knife, and made two diagonal cuts at the throat, digging for the carotid arteries

she wondered what sort of liquid would come out

the state of dead blood depended on a lot of factors, she'd learned—addison carver had bled freely, she figured he must have been on an anticoagulant

sometimes you got sludge

sometimes yellow serum separated out

all down to temperature, individual biology, time elapsed

she didn't really care that much

he'd hang and bleed for a few days in the cold and be in shape for the next stage, limb removal

she didn't have strong feelings about limb removal

she could do it because she'd helped bleed and butcher hogs from the ages of 12 through 21

the cops chasing her probably thought chopping off the arms and legs meant something, but all it meant was that she'd have parts she could carry without strain

tonight though, all she did with the arms was get some twine and tie them up to the hook

keeping them higher than the neck, for drainage

she paused after tying them

things were going well

ronald was no longer the man
who'd been such a pest, he was just
a series of meat problems to solve

she changed gloves again,
throwing the old ones in the bin with
his pants and shoes and shit-stained
undies

then she felt around his jacket for
the keys

but she didn't find them

frowning, she checked his shirt, but
it didn't even have pockets

where were his keys?

where the hell were his car keys?

she took a deep breath to keep
herself composed and carefully went
over his clothes again, making sure
she hadn't somehow missed them

but no

so then she went over the trunk,
taking out the carpet and the plastic
and shaking them out under the lights

no keys!

she'd been taught something
called "four square breathing" as a
calming technique, you breathed in
for a four count, held it four, exhaled
for four, then let yourself be empty for
four

she did that

it didn't feel like it was helping

the anxiety

the anxiety was getting her

the keys could be a clue

if someone found the keys, that
was a clue that he'd vanished from
the diner, not the red roller bar

she searched the car, the machine
shed, but the keys weren't there

the keys weren't there

ultimately, after twenty minutes on
her knees scanning every inch of the
floor for them, she concluded that
they must be back at the restaurant

she paused in the front seat of the
Murder Car briefly, collecting her
thoughts, enumerating the steps she
had to take to prep the body, to
keep it secure, to prevent it from
being found, to prevent it from
spoilage, to keep *any clues from
getting out*

then she carefully gathered his
clothes, her gloves, and the plastic
liner from the trunk, sealed up the bin
and took it out to burn with a
blowtorch

that calmed her more than the
breathing

by the time she'd doublechecked
everything

(still no keys)

ronald had been dead about four
and a half hours

she had to get back, find those
goddamn keys, and move the truck
to obscure where he'd died

that meant three more hours on
the road

it was just after midnight

she'd planned it as an all-nighter but the anxiety, it drained her, it made her so weary

this was supposed to be exhilarating, fun, a triumph, a thumb in the eye to all those assholes who'd held her down

instead it just felt like pulling a double shift for no pay

she almost cried as she pulled away from the studio, but she'd forgotten how

#

"Assume the CKK's a woman," Dr. Beneventi said. "What does that change in our approach?"

"Not much," Special Agent Roesser replied. "It's still a matter of combing the scenes, imagining goals and motivations, building a profile of the victim commonalities."

"Let's look at that last one," she said. "A woman kills men. Why?"

"Because we suck?" the crime-scene guy suggested, rolling his eyes.

"Well?" she responded, turning her chair to face him. "The CKK started before 'Me Too' but female resentment at male entitlement has been seething for a while. Wouldn't it explain the acceleration in 2016?"

Mike stroked his chin. "Maybe."

"Especially since some of the victims have a... troubling history with women. Hell, what if she just kills men who catcall her?"

"Jesus, there's a profiling nightmare," the CSI muttered. "A

suspect pool of 'every women ever mistreated by a guy' is... it's..." he threw his hands in the air.

"Let's say 'unwieldy,'" Roesser replied. "Look, instead of imagining thoughts we can't know, let's look for something concrete, something that makes leads. The electrocution angle, that has to narrow things a lot."

"Electricians are 97% male," Joan said quietly, from the corner where she ran database queries.

"...nice," Roesser said.

"How about electrical engineers? Or electrical engineering graduates?" Dr. Beneventi asked.

"Hm..." Joan hammered her keyboard for a bit, frowning. "Ballpark, there's one woman engineer for every seven men, but it changes a lot by age bracket and by type of engineering—more women do software engineering than electrical or mechanical. I can get you harder numbers by end of day."

"I don't think we need them," Mike said. "If the CKK is a woman, we're going to find her by following the electrician or electrical engineering threads, not just gender... we have to look at the overlap."

"Bad news is if you go by the stride length, we're looking for an average-sized woman, not an unusually short man," the crime-scene tech said, frowning at his charts.

"Still..." Mike said, sitting back and staring at the folders full of case files. "Still."

#

driving back to the diner she tried to think, tried to plan, but could barely keep her eyes open

ultimately she had to sleep, had to pull in to the dark end of another roadside gas station parking lot, lock all the doors, tilt back the driver's seat and have a nightmare

it was a real bitch-kitty too, one of those nightmares that feels perfectly real and fools you into thinking you're awake

in the nightmare, someone got into the Murder Car with her and started to rape her

and

the irony was overwhelming, that she'd put herself at risk of this by being in a dark truck stop parking lot in the pit of the night

that she would fall victim to a lawbreaking monster because she was in a place that would appeal to lawbreaking monsters because she was a lawbreaking monster

she woke up gasping, hands hooked like claws, mind whirling with how she could tell her attacker to wait a minute, she had money in a box in the trunk, all he had to do was lift it out

but no

wait

just a dream, now she was awake with her heart thudding and veins coursing with adrenaline

she blinked, and gassed up with trembling hands before getting back on the road

when she finally reached the diner at four am she'd stopped by her waitress apartment and cleaned out everything that could identify her

it wasn't hard, she kept all that shit in a single duffle, always ready to run

she had the rubber boots on, too big and stuffed with newspaper, any footprints she left would be obscure and inaccurate, especially since she wrapped them in plastic bags to distort anything distinctive in their tread

everything had to be considered

every move the cops would make had to be anticipated and forestalled

that was central

so she was gloved and hairnetted and had her rubber boots on when she forced the back door of the diner

thirty minutes until the prep crew got there to start making coleslaw and bracing themselves for the morning rush

thirty minutes to find those damn keys with a red-lensed flashlight that wouldn't take away her night vision

she got on her knees and scoured the booth where asshole ronald, who was still making her life suck even after his murder, had sat and always sat

they weren't on the floor and they weren't in crease of the leatherette

seat and they weren't idly forgotten
on the table

well of course they weren't on the
table, if they'd been there they would
have gone in the lost and found,
which she checked next

when the keys weren't there, she
checked around the cash register
because, hey, maybe they fell out

hissing curses, she bolted to her

when he pulled out his wallet to pay,
but no, nothing, no keys

she checked the men's room,
maybe they fell out while he took a
shit but she found nothing

the alarm on her phone went off

she'd set it for twenty-five minutes
so she could get away before Carlos
and Yasmin arrived

car and fled

Part Four: Incision

Dr. Beneventi, Special Agent Mike Roesser, and Joan Crews all had other cases, of course. The CKK case hadn't gone cold, exactly, but it was certainly cooler months after finding Gerald Sudlow's torso, limbs arranged around it like chevrons, with the phrase "OUR ONLY PERSONALITY IS DEEDS" carved on the dried flesh of his shaved-clean chest, and the back incised with a repeating floral pattern reminiscent of Georgian wallpaper. They'd deep-dived on Sudlow's life, associates, data, all of it, seeing what was in common with Finster and Carver and the others, what was unique to him. Always looking for the strange commonality that would break the case open and, so far, not finding it.

So instead they worked on other interstate murders, or kidnappings, or in Joan's case kept laptops working and scoured financial data.

But they still had weekly lunch meetings and Roesser, in particular, kept picking at it.

"What if we went back-to-front?" he asked, over a tuna-salad sub.

"What do you mean?" Minka asked. She'd gotten something called 'the oriental salad' and was unenthusiastically pulling the onions out of it.

"The time between abduction and body discovery," Mike said, "It's *months*. So, if the CKK is still active

and on schedule, the victim has probably already been taken."

"That's grim," Joan murmured. She'd gotten grilled cheese.

Mike shrugged. "What I'm saying is, there were investigations into Finster and Daniels and the others, missing-person cases, before their corpses turned up. So we might steal a march on our perp if we start looking at abductions *now*. Maybe we find a couple likely victims and start backgrounding and looking around so that when the body drops, we're already in the blocks and can sprint right away."

Joan shrugged. "OK, if you like. So... search for missing persons, white males in our age span, in our five states?"

"For a start. Break 'em out geographically, see if anything looks weird."

#

one way or the other, she figured, there was nothing much for it but to keep on

thousands of people disappeared every year, she knew this, and he was an unmarried adult man, so there was a good chance no one would give a shit

at least, not right away

part of her wanted to just bury him, incomplete, and find someone else to kill and turn into a canvas

but...
 she couldn't bring herself to do it
 she couldn't waste ronald after
 putting up with so much to get him
 she was falling prey to the sunk-
 cost fallacy, she knew this, but now
 that she finally, *finally* had the
 materials, she was desperate to work
 so she pattered around the studio
 while waiting for him to dry out,
 waited for her process to turn his flesh
 into a decent surface—one that
 wouldn't tear like markham or wrinkle
 and pucker like finster
 she shaved his chest, which wasn't
 nearly as hairy as finster had been,
 ugh
 the nipples came off while she was
 doing it but no matter, that had
 happened before, she still had a
 smooth, flat surface running between
 those two holes, from the collarbones
 down to the shortribs before it started
 to swell around his gut
 rather than a phrase, she was
 thinking this time she'd just do the
 word "responsibility" in a stylized,
 vinelike script, three letters on each
 line

RES
 PON
 SIB
 ILI
 TY

or else, as a pun, "response ability"
 with two letters per line except for the
 "ili" portion, that could kern thinner

RE
 SP
 ON
 SE
 AB
 ILI
 TY

maybe she'd put a little
 decorative line between the words
 she hadn't decided
 plenty of time to make up her
 mind
 first, to warm up, the simpler part,
 the reverse
 this time she was going to recreate
 an ersatz-japanese wallpaper pattern
 on his back, a series of half circles
 nested into each other, repeating in
 staggered rows
 it looked like lines and lines of
 waves on the sea
 when she put the knife into his
 back and made the first cut, she
 exhaled and relaxed for the first time
 in what felt like a year
 this was it
 she made the angled curve on the
 top, then repeated it underneath,
 excising a crescent of skin about two
 inches across
 another crescent came out
 beneath it, smaller
 then an even smaller third
 then she put the tip of the knife
 under that smallest bow and spun it

gently to make a small circle, like a period at the end of a sentence

that was the shape, like a hand-fan, about two inches wide and one tall

with a work surface roughly eighteen inches square, that meant she'd ultimately carve 162 fans

684 lines and dots

the mathematical recurrence of it all reassured her

narcotized that persistent post-murder anxiety

it helped

#

Joan had an old athletic sock full of dried rice. Before cutting linoleum, she put the sock in the microwave for two minutes to get it good and hot, and she made sure to have a few ragged old washcloths between the lino and the steaming hot stocking before letting them sit.

She'd learned the hard way that if you just put it straight on, the moisture from the sock would loosen the ink on the linoleum, and it would smear. This was particularly true since so many of the faint or blotchy or incomplete lines and forms on the surface had been gone over with a ballpoint or sharpie to make up for her failure to get a perfect transfer.

After a few minutes of getting warm, she pulled off the heat, dabbed the art plate's gray face, and started to follow the edges of the ink with her lino-cutter. It was teal,

plastic, and had a screw-top into which a variety of cutting heads could be inserted. She hardly ever used anything but the fine-point, which was v-shaped and made the thinnest lines. For areas where she had to clear out a lot, she scored the surface with a craft knife and then used a chisel to chip out the matter.

As Joan worked, she made compromises, simplifying the form when a line she'd put in the computer, and then drawn with a ballpoint, proved too thin or delicate—either for her tool, or her motor control, or the tolerances of the material. Sometimes thin bits broke off. Sometimes a bit of white was narrower even than the finest point. And sometimes she slipped.

At first, it had frustrated her that she'd start with this very precise photo, which would be simplified in the computer, then transferred imperfectly, then crudely altered as she made her incisions. But now she believed it was exactly the point—the humanity of the limits pared down excess and left the least amount of image that could still be that image. She'd read, hesitantly, about the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*, the notion that crudeness and process were essential to art, happy accidents to acknowledge and celebrate, instead of flaws to be ruthlessly excluded in pursuit of perfection.

After photos, everyone knew perfection was only for machines, after all.

Part Five: Charge

she leaned close to ronald and
sniffed, deeply

yeah

it smelled like meat, body, leather,
soil... but not like decay

with daniels, she'd unplugged the
fridge, let him get to ambient
temperature, and then had put ants
on him

when the ants weren't interested,
she knew she'd gotten it right

she'd found a place to pose
ronald long before she'd killed him,
researching on a public library
computer for bankrupt rural indiana
industrial sites

there was a peachy one just three
hours away, an abandoned soybean
processing plant

now that ronald was ready, she'd
put the torso in a fifty-gallon industrial
garbage bin, plastic lined, taped shut
firmly when he was entombed in it

the hands she'd positioned into
the surya mudra, each thumb
positioned on the back of the ring
finger

she'd taken a yoga class long ago
and had been told putting her hands
in this form for half an hour a day
would help her lose weight and
reduce her anxiety, which she had
found to be utter bullshit

to get ronald's fingers in the
anxiety-reducing gesture, she had to
sew the skin surfaces together

it was funny to her

she'd been to the soy plant
several times, getting inside with no
difficulty whatsoever

she wasn't the only one either, to
gauge by the condoms, beer cans
and graffiti

that was fine

she didn't mind sharing

she liked the idea of horny teens
finding ronald and making an urban
legend

would they tell the cops, admitting
to their parents they themselves had
been drinking and fucking and
trespassing?

(response ability)

or would they hide the evidence
of a horrid murder just to protect
themselves?

she knew which one she thought
likely

(actually, she figured they'd tell
their friends and someone would
make an anonymous phone call,
putting this action firmly in a moral
gray zone along with almost
everything human beings did)

anyhow, she planned to put the
sealed garbage can right in the
middle of a relatively clean, open
area

the four plastic containers with the rest of ronald—one for each arm, one for each folded, severed leg—would be arranged around the can, arms on the side, leg boxes stacked one atop the other to form a sort of X

she'd considered putting them in another room, as if they were canopic jars, but she didn't think people would get it

too obscure

the mudra, you could just look that up online, after all

she'd place it and then enjoy a period of pleasurable anticipation, waiting for the news items, 'the Electrocutoner strikes again!'

inevitably, the pleasure would give way to worry, as she double-thought about leaving a clue during the presentation, or that her efforts wouldn't get found at all

but no

she had to be patient

it had always worked, every time so far

it wasn't perfect, but she was improving

and it was so much better than doing nothing

#

Charging a plate with ink and printing it—that was the fun part.

First, Joan chose her sky. For the first few prints, she was going to do a typical sky—the basic blue ink mixed with a little white to keep it from looking artificial, and a little black to

keep it from being painfully bright. She blended them crudely with the end of a wooden chopstick, because at last, precision didn't matter. Every ripple, every minor distortion of color, would look *natural*, would make it look *more* like a real sky instead of an artificial representation. She mixed the ink, rolled it, and deployed it onto the carved up linoleum face. Then she squinted, grabbed a rag, and dabbed away the little inkspots in the deep parts that were supposed to be blank.

Taking a breath, she cautiously centered it on a piece of paper and pressed down. Then she slid her hand underneath and flipped it over, all the time careful not to let it shift around and smear.

Once it was paper-side-up, she took her tin spoon and burnished the back, pressing hard so that the ink would stick. She made horizontal strokes, and vertical ones, and then a series of circular ones, until she could see vague impressions of the form beneath on the white paper surface.

Biting her lower lip, she peeled it off.

Not bad.

The next print, she did without reloading the plate. This would give the ink an irregular depth, a texture and surface something like old, faded denim. It was even more random and uncontrollable and, in her mind, therefore even more beautiful.

#

“Ronald Watkins and Vera Chambers,” Special Agent Roesser said. He was reading a long list of names from missing persons cases in their five state search area. Joan was running searches on them, and she looked up frowning.

“Why is she on there?” The rest of the list had been solo men in their targeted group. Vera was the first woman.

“Hm... well, they both were last seen at Big Roscoe’s diner outside Indianapolis. His vehicle was still there the next morning. Looks like...” Papers rustled. “Yeah, his ex-wife called it in after he stood her up, she went to his house, got a neighbor to let her in, then called his work and found out he hadn’t been in for a couple days. When they found his car, they talked to the people at Big Roscoe’s and found out they were the last to see him. Also, they mention that their waitress—that’s Vera Chambers—was there that night. She’s been gone without explanation since.”

“Maybe they just ran off together?” Joan hesitantly said.

Mike shrugged. “Could be. Run ‘em, let’s see if they’re buying stuff on credit cards or posting on Facebook.”

Joan started the Xolix query, then went on to the next few names before an alert popped up.

“Huh,” she said. “Can you read me Vera Chambers’ social?”

Mike paged back and did.

“She died four years ago.”

“Excuse me?”

“Vera Chambers is dead.”

“Oh.” He nodded. “So we have an identity theft. That’s interesting. Still could be your star-crossed romance though. Hell, if anyone’s going to suddenly go AWOL from work and run off with a guy, I’d put my money on the gal working under a stolen name.”

Mike read some more names and Joan ran some more searches, but the only one that had any details beyond “this person stopped being where they were supposed to be” was Ronald and Vera.

So agent Roesser started checking social media, only to find that Vera had nothing—at least, not under that name. But the next day, he found a picture of her, in the background of a co-worker’s Instagram photo. He frowned and then started asking everyone else in the task force how busy they were.

“I think I’ve seen ‘Vera’ before,” he said. “I want sort every photo from every source on the other victims.”

No one groaned, but no one smiled. There were thousands of photos. Maybe tens of thousands. The computers would help a lot, but he was still ordering up a lot of toil.

Joan and Mike stayed after quitting time and then started again the next day. Three more hours after lunch, Mike said, “I think this is her.”

It was a poor photo, a still from a security camera at the gas station where Morris Daniels had made his

last purchase. It was a middle-aged, portly woman in jeans, a baseball hat, and a long coat. It was grainy and far off, as she'd apparently parked in a distant corner of the otherwise-empty lot. Mike had noted it as mildly interesting because her behavior wasn't entirely normal. She'd parked far from the gas station, walked past it

without going in, and hadn't come back past a camera. Nor had she purchased anything there.

He looked at her, and at the woman who'd been called Vera Chambers, then turned to Joan and said, "Let's dig."

Part Six: Completion

When Joan found the killer, it wasn't quick. She didn't even realize she'd done it, at first.

It was a Xolix database search, starting with the huge pool of licensed electricians and electrical engineering graduates. A thin pie-slice was pulled out—women only. That segment was subdivided by age, eliminating the few who were too old and the larger number who were too young. The field was so racially homogenous that she nearly decided not to bother removing nonwhites. In the end what had been a colossal, imponderable number was merely very large.

Mike typed up a query letter and printed off a copy for every instructor at every institution, along with copies of the still from the gas station, the instagram pic with her in the background, and the police artist sketch they'd made from coworker interviews.

Joan, meanwhile, started constructing a facial-recognition search to sic on publicly available image records from the many, many schools where "Vera Chambers" could have learned how to build an electric death machine.

She set the search running, then went home to make some prints and watch the new episode of *The Good Place*.

When she got back the next day, there were 217 possible matches. She looked through them and, about halfway through, called in Mike.

"I think that's her," she said. "Mary Mustaigne."

Mike looked closer. "Mary Mustaigne," he whispered. "Let's see where you are now."

#

The last layer of the print was tricky, because she had to line it up with the two previous, when they might not be exactly aligned with each other. Sometimes the black lines had little white spaces instead of being tight against the blue sky. Sometimes they overlapped with the ashy-green color she'd picked for the middle-range plate, for the forms that were neither white nor black nor sky. Sometimes it all seemed to vibrate, the image falling apart.

Every linocut could print maybe 20-30 times before the surface started to degrade. Lines became wavy, or held the ink sloppily. Bits would crumble, or details would swell, and eventually she'd quit because the late prints were visibly worse than the early ones. Or, to be honest, she'd get bored with the image.

But out of every batch, there were a few she loved, and with the power station, she got one where the sky was beautifully faded against the

mute mid-grade colors, where the black was crisp and unsmudged, where everything lined up close and perfect.

It looked like the picture, and it looked like the original scene, but it also had feeling to it neither did. As far as Joan was concerned, it wasn't as good as reality, or as good as an accurate photograph.

It was better.

#

she took a break from inscribing ronald's front and left the shed to stretch her back and shoulders, and that's when she saw them

it was just a tiny movement, far off

maybe a glint off a telephoto lens or sniper scope, though she had to think that anyone coming to get her would be federal, and they'd have polarized optics

maybe it was just that she'd grown up there, spent so much time there, that even the difference of someone in a dark jacket hiding in a roadside patch of maples stood out

maybe she'd been watching for so long that she had senses beyond most of humanity

for all the good it would do her

they'd arrived, they were watching and now they'd seen her

she could try to run, but surely she was surrounded

she looked up into the sky to see if they had a surveillance plane above

her, but if they did, it was too small and far for her naked eye

maybe just a drone the size of a model

or maybe they had the whole property surrounded by dozens of officers, had a whole pack of suvs at that fucking wal-mart, waiting to roll out and corner her

she could try to hole up in the house, but she wasn't a siege kind of gal

the doors were just old wood

the walls were sturdy but nothing special

she didn't have a dozen guns and crates of ammo

none of that waco bullshit

she supposed she could just kneel, put her hands on her head, and wait

instead, she went back into the studio

they came for her pretty quick after that

a voice through a megaphone telling her that it was the fbi, telling her to come out slowly, showing her hands

she continued her work

she was almost done with the 'y' in 'ability

(she'd decided to go for the pun)

the line between words wasn't as frilly and elaborate as she'd have liked, and that last 'y'... she wished she could have decorated its tail a little more

but when the amplified voice told
her it was her last chance to come
out before they forced the door, she
sighed and picked up the torso

it was done enough

she carried ronald's bloodless
body to the door like a bag of
groceries, turned the door handle
with her hand and nudged it open
with her hip

"i suppose you're wondering what
the meaning of all this is," she asked,
and then a mass of people in
bulletproof vests clumped around her,
grabbing her arms and flinging her,
hard, to the ground

she sighed

there would be plenty of time to
explain later