

TWO SHORT STORIES

by inky

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Suitcases of the Silenced

I reckon it started with the girl, little Lilly Durant, back in the fall of that year when the leaves hung like bloody hands from the cottonwoods along the creek. She was twelve, sharp as a hawkbill knife, with eyes that caught the light like river quartz. Lilly lived in a clapboard building down by the rail yards in a town called Bitter Crossing—folks called it that on account of the alkali water that soured your gut. Her pa was the watchman there, Johan Durant, a man with hands like leather mitts from years of oiling locks and sweeping dust. He kept the place tight as a miser's fist. That afternoon, Lilly walked home from school under a sky the color of hammered lead. She entered the building at quarter past three, her books clutched like a shield. The grainy eye of the watchman's camera caught her trailing after a woman—a tall, shadowed figure in a long coat, moving like smoke through the dim hall. They say the woman, Dora Benning, had no roots in that town, just drifted

in like a dust devil, renting a room from her sister upstairs. Dora called to the girl, sweet as poisoned honey, and Lilly followed, innocent as a lamb to the shear. Inside that room, evil unfolded plain as a wanted poster. Dora made the child strip and wash, then took her pleasure in ways that blacken the soul to tell. When Lilly fought, Dora bound her mouth with silver tape that gleamed like sin, choked the breath from her young throat, stabbed her fierce with a box blade till the floorboards drank red. She hacked the head free, wrapped the pieces in burlap, and dragged the lot down to the cellar in the dead of night. Come midnight, a tramp stumbling from the hooch tents found the trunk—a scarred travel case, heavy as judgment—dumped in the hollow by the tracks. Inside, the girl, folded like laundry, mutilated and still. Johan saw it on the footage at dawn and raised the cry. The law came with lanterns and bloodhounds, but the trunk told the tale. They took Dora easy; she cracked like dry earth, confessed it all with eyes flat as a snake's. The papers blared it for a week: Girl's Body in

Basement Trunk—Fiend Confesses Butchery. But Lilly? She faded quick, just another clipping yellowing in some archive drawer. Folks shook their heads, crossed the street from the Durant place, and got on with scraping a living. They forgot she was worth more than headlines—worth a whole heaven, that girl, with dreams of books and horses yet unridden. The law hanged Dora slow in the spring, but it didn't mend the hollow in Johan's chest. He took to the bottle, muttering about prophets silenced young, voices crying in the wilderness that no one heeds. Lilly, he said, was like John the Baptist—pure, pointing the way, cut down by Herod's hand before the light came full. I listened to him once in a roadhouse, his voice gravel over whiskey. “She saw the dark coming,” he said. “Warned us all, and we let her go quiet.” Years rolled like wagon wheels over that dust. The rails rusted, Bitter Crossing grew into a sprawl of neon and ticky-tack, but the echo lingered. Then came Stella Pierce, out east in the timber country, where the pines claw the sky like black fingers. Stella was no child; thirty-one, lithe as a

whip, with hair like autumn fire and a face that sold dreams on the glowing screens. They called her an influencer, whatever that means—a modern herald, preaching beauty and grit to the faceless hordes. She had a dog, a golden hound named Morrow, and a feed full of light: poses in the sage, sermons on mending hearts, calls to rise above the mud. It was after a Christmas hoedown in Grazel Flats, that raw November night in ought-twenty-five, when the devil circled back. Stella shared a ride home with a gal pal, stepped out into the frosted air of her stairwell under a moon like a chipped plate. She tapped out messages on her phone: Creep in the stairwell. Dark figure shadowing. Last words from a voice that reached millions. Neighbors heard the ruckus—thumps like furniture wrestling, a muffled cry. They spied Pete Marlow—that's what they called him, the bouncer from the juke joint, broad as a barn door with eyes like bad debts—hauling a rolled rug from the building, sweat gleaming on his neck. Pete was her cast-off man, a Slovenian stray who'd latched on like a burr. She'd told folks she

was done with him, summer past, but he wouldn't quit. Wouldn't let the sun set on his claim. He ambushed her there in the cold, they fought fierce over the ending, and he squeezed the life from her throat with hands made for breaking chairs. Stuffed her into a suitcase—black leather, the kind salesmen tote lies in—tied it shut with his belt. Drove it cross the border line into the Slovenian scrub, that tangled wood near Majsperk where the wind whispers old grudges. Buried it shallow under pine needles and rot, then torched his red buggy in a casino lot to cover tracks, thinking fire cleanses all. She missed a picture shoot come Monday. Her photographer rode out to the apartment, found Morrow whining alone, bowl dry. Phone tossed in the brush like trash. The law fanned out with drones humming like locusts, sniffers questing the wind. Pete bolted to his kinfolk's, but they pinned him quick, dragged him back in irons. He stonewalled at first, lips sealed tight, but the hours ground him down. Cracked like Dora before him. "I did it," he said, voice flat as a grave marker. "Strangled her

in the heat. Show you the spot.” They followed his lead to the woods, dug up the suitcase under a sky spitting snow. Stella inside, bruised and broken, but still she, worth every star in that firmament. The papers howled again: Influencer’s Body in Border Woods—Ex Confesses Strangle and Dump. Another clipping, another fade. Coworkers spoke of her fire, how she pulled folks from the pit with her words. Neighbors recalled her laughing off Pete’s shadow. But the world scrolled past, chasing the next flicker. Johan Durant heard of it up in Bitter Crossing, older now, liver-spotted and leaning on a cane carved from creek driftwood. He rode the bus east, stood at the grave they scratched for Stella in the potter’s field. “John and the Christ,” he muttered to the wind. “Lilly cried the warning, pointed to the light. Stella was the light herself— influencer, they called her, spreading gospel on glass panes. Both silenced in trunks, prophets stuffed away like soiled linen. But worth? Lord, they were worth the whole damn frontier.” I was there that day, the law dog who chased both

shadows—Dora’s ghost and Pete’s flame. Seen too many hollows filled with the young and the bright. Ain’t no poetry in the blood, but there’s poetry in the worth. Every soul’s a deed to eternity, notarized in the book up high. These two, Lilly and Stella, they ain’t just newsprint ghosts. They’re the grit in the oyster, the pearl forming slow. Their stories ride the wind eternal, reminding us: heed the cry in the stairwell, the figure in the scrub. For everyone’s worth the fight—the long ride, the hard dig, the final reckoning under the pines. And when the suitcase opens at the judgment, it’ll empty light, not shadow. That’s the true grit of it.

The end

SHAKESPEARE IN EIGHT HAIKUS

The earth gives no water.

The corporation takes all.

The machine is hungry.

Kaito Sato came back from the Water Wars with one less son than he'd left with. OmniCorp gave him a parade down the Central Artery, past the dry fountains and the corporate ration depots.

Employees, their loyalty scores boosted for attendance, lined the route.

His eldest, Kenji, rode beside him in the armored limousine. Behind them, a company truck carried Ren's flag-draped box. The crowd fell into a mandated silence as it passed.

CEO Jiro Yamamoto waited on the steps of the OmniCorp Spire, his smile as polished as the chrome facade. Beside him stood his son, Riku, and Riku's wife—a woman named Akari with eyes like a still pond. Kaito had known her father, a brilliant hydro-engineer. He had also known the girl's grandmother, a severe, ancient woman the corporates had listed as a "Cultural Heritage Asset" but whom the people in the lower sectors simply called the Witchdoctor. She had died the year before, but her presence still clung to Akari like a scent.

"Director Sato," the CEO said, extending a manicured hand. "The Corporation honors your sacrifice."

Kaito ignored the hand. "It wasn't the Corporation's sacrifice to make."

"The aquifer raids you led secured our quarterly projections. The Board is... grateful."

"We brought back prisoners. The ones who poisoned the filtration plant in Sector Nine."

Yamamoto's smile didn't flicker. "A regrettable situation. But our new merger with the Aqua-Syn syndicate requires... reconciliation. Public executions are bad for brand synergy."

Kenji stepped forward. Kaito put a hand on his arm.

"My son was nineteen," Kaito said, his voice low and dangerous.

"I know," the CEO replied, his gaze flicking to Riku. "I have a son, too."

Kaito looked past him. Riku met his gaze with the vacant smile of a man who'd never wanted for anything. Akari's eyes, however,

were locked on Ren's coffin, her lips moving in a silent, desperate chant.

"Yeah," Kaito said. "I noticed."

The contract is signed.

White silk covers a sharp blade.

Roots begin to rot.

The corporate apartment was a sterile box in the OmniCorp residential wing. Kenji took Ren's old room. That night, Kaito listened to his son's muffled sobs through the soundproofed walls.

In the morning, a Corporate Liaison arrived with a tablet and a proposition.

"A restructuring," the liaison said. "A merger of assets to solidify

the new partnership. Your son, Kenji, will be contracted to Akari. Riku has agreed to a dissolution of his union. No children. The paperwork is efficient."

Kaito sipped his premium water ration. "She's not a stock option."

"She is a asset in the Yamamoto portfolio. This union—the union of our Head of Security and the CEO's family—projects stability. It calms the markets."

Kenji said yes. What else was there? The contract was signed in the OmniCorp atrium. Akari wore a white corporate suit. Her hands trembled.

Riku watched from the VIP level, his face a mask of bland amusement.

As Kaito left, Akari caught his arm. Her grip was fierce. "My grandmother's dlo mo," she whispered urgently. "The salt water. And her potet—the figure. They are in my quarters. The

corporates catalogued it as 'folk art.' Do not let them dispose of it.

It is the only thing that grows in salted earth."

Later, Kaito found the small, biometric-locked case among her transferred assets. Inside, a gourd vial of dark water and a small, sinister wooden figure that felt unnaturally warm. He remembered the old Witchdoctor's warning, given to him years ago when he'd provided her with security detail: "This power is not for vengeance, Kaito Sato. It is for balance. To use it for hate is to make a weapon that never stops firing." He stored it with his service weapon. The request felt like a tactical order.

A hunt in dry fields.

The scorpion's tail is raised.

Trust is a weak word.

The CEO hosted a "synergy retreat" at the exclusive Geothermal Gardens. Riku found Kaito by the artificial waterfall.

"Hell of a perk, isn't it?" Riku said. "The water bill for this place could feed a sector for a month."

"Your father talks about efficiency," Kaito replied.

Riku laughed. "He talks about what the shareholders want to hear. Speaking of perks... Akari. I hope your boy appreciates her. I could send him a data-slate of her... preferences."

Kaito's hand tightened on the railing.

"We're having a team-building exercise," Riku continued. "Out in the reclamation zones. Kenji should come. Akari loves the outdoors. She and I used to go all the time." He smiled. "I'll have the invitation sent to his terminal."

They left at dawn in a corporate rover. By noon, Kaito's instincts screamed. By evening, he was bypassing security protocols to access

the CEO's penthouse.

The rover returned at midnight. Only Riku and his security detail, clothes torn.

"Raiders," Riku said, perfectly rehearsed. "We were overwhelmed. We had to retreat to preserve corporate assets."

"Where is my son?"

"Separated in the chaos."

"Where is Akari?"

Riku's face feigned anguish. "Taken. It was... horrific."

Kaito moved faster than the security detail could react. He slammed Riku against the rover's hull, his forearm against the younger man's throat. He saw the scratches on his neck, the human bite mark on his shoulder.

"You're lying."

CEO Yamamoto emerged, enraged. "Sato! Stand down! He's in shock!"

Kaito looked at Riku, at the smug terror in his eyes. "Yeah," he whispered. "I'm looking."

The well returns mud.

A silent scream in the throat.

Now, the old magic.

They found Kenji two days later, catatonic, dehydrated. He didn't speak for three days. On the fourth, he whispered, "They held me. Made me watch."

"Watch what?"

But Kenji was gone.

They found Akari on the sixth day. Her tongue was surgically removed. Her hands, amputated. A corporate-branding iron had seared one word into her forehead: NON-COMPLIANT.

Kaito went to her in the corporate med-bay. She was awake, her eyes burning with a cold fire. She blinked once for yes.

"Riku did this."

Yes.

"His team assisted."

Yes.

She looked at her bandaged stumps, then at Kaito, her head jerking toward the door. A low, guttural sound escaped her ruined mouth. It was not a plea. It was an operation order.

He brought her the case.

With her bandaged arms, she gestured for the vial. For them. Then she nudged the wooden figure toward him. She looked

toward the Spire's apex, toward the CEO's penthouse, and bared her teeth in a silent snarl. She was not asking for balance anymore. She was demanding the weapon.

Kaito understood. The Witchdoctor's warning echoed in his mind, but he silenced it. The mission parameters had changed. This was scorched earth.

Salt water on skin.

The dead remember their names.

The balance comes due.

Kaito had allies, former special ops who now worked the black market. They acquired Riku's security team. But Kaito didn't process them. Not yet.

In a disused sub-level maintenance bay, he conducted the ritual he

had pieced together from the old woman's teachings. He didn't know the words, so he used a corporate mantra. "For the good of the company," he intoned, pouring three drops of the ancient, briny water onto each man's forehead. "For increased productivity. For total asset utilization." He was not praying to a god; he was filing a work order with the universe itself.

Then, he began the processing. The work was clean, precise, and horrifying.

The head chef of the executive dining suite owed him a debt. He looked at the vacuum-sealed packages.

"Director... this is..."

"High-grade protein. For the executive gala. The CEO requested something... authentic."

The chef paled. "The debt is paid after this."

"The debt is paid."

The feast is served cold.

Guests who cannot leave the table.

A new secretary.

The merger gala was the event of the quarter. The air hummed with the sound of deals being made.

Riku ate greedily. "Incredible. Is this real beef?"

"A limited resource," Kaito said. "For our most valuable assets."

CEO Yamamoto gave a speech. "To growth! To synergy!"

"To the bottom line," Kaito echoed.

They drank.

When Riku reached for more, Kaito stood. "A toast. To Riku's dedicated team. They've been fully integrated into the corporate

structure." He tossed the forensic photos onto the table.

Riku stared. Comprehension turned his face to ash. "That's... that's the... security detail..."

"The meat you're eating," Kaito said calmly. He placed the wooden figure, now inscribed with Riku's name, on the table. "And this is not a severance package. It is a reassignment of your human resources."

Riku nearly vomited. The CEO screamed for Corporate Security.

As they seized Kaito, he flicked a speck of grave-dust paste onto Riku's lapel.

Then the doors to the gala burst open. Not from security.

Goro, Riku's head of security, stood there. His skin was a deathly grey, his eyes open but devoid of any light, any self. He did not shamble like a corpse; he moved with the hollow, efficient gait of a machine. The dlo mo and the ritual had not brought him back to

life. They had hollowed him out, creating a vacant vessel, an eternal employee. A zombi.

He walked past the screaming guests, his focus absolute. He did not attack Riku. He simply took a position behind his former master's chair, standing at a perfect, silent parade rest. His purpose was not to kill, but to serve. To be a perpetual, visible monument to Riku's crimes.

A second one appeared, then a third. They did the same, forming a grey-faced, unblinking honor guard around Riku, who was now weeping, trapped in his chair.

Kaito didn't struggle as security dragged him away. The hostile takeover was complete. The soul, the final asset, had been processed. The Witchdoctor's warning had been correct: the weapon had been fired, and now it was a permanent, dreadful feature of the landscape.

The machine accepts

All flesh, all grief, all anger.

The output is clean.

The corporate tribunal was swift. The charge: Gross Misallocation of Corporate Assets. The sentence: Liquidation. His body would be processed for nutrients and bio-mass. Total asset recovery.

Kenji visited him in the holding cell. "They're liquidating you."

"I know."

"Was it worth it?"

"No," Kaito said. "But it was necessary."

The liquidation chamber was all white tile and steel. The

technician was a kid. "The neural inhibitor will render the process painless. Any final words for the corporate record?"

Kaito thought of Akari's burning eyes and the old woman's grim face. "Tell my son to short OmniCorp stock."

The world dissolved into static.

"Liquidation complete. Assets tagged for redistribution."

And then nothing but the hum of the machinery, the system, working.

The new director

Sits in the old, empty chair.

The system is fed.

Kenji was offered a promotion to his father's old position. He accepted. There was nowhere else to go.

He now works in the office adjacent to the CEO's suite. Through the soundproof glass, he can see his brother's tormentor. Riku Yamamoto sits at a desk, his title now "Executive Vice President of Legacy Operations." He is impeccably dressed, fed, and hydrated.

He is also never alone. Three grey-faced men with dead eyes stand behind him at all times. They do not eat, sleep, or speak. When Riku must move, they move with him, a perfectly synchronized, silent entourage. They are his eternal staff, his perpetual reminder. The ultimate in corporate loyalty and efficiency. The system found a use for everything, even for the damned.

Akari was never found. Some say she walked into the arid wastes, finally free. Others whisper she became a story, a weapon waiting for the next time the machine grows too hungry.

Everything was being used. Nothing was wasted. Not even the

soul.

THE END